Thematic Patterns in *The Economist Explains'* Articles

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Abstract

This study examines thematic patterns in *The Economist explains'* articles and aims to demonstrate how Theme (i.e., the point of departure of the message) and its patterns can facilitate reading comprehension. Ten most recent online articles from *The Economist explains,* a total of 47 paragraphs, comprise the data. Combining Halliday's thematic approach (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) with Thompson's approach (Thompson, 2014), the analysis reveals six different functions that the paragraphs of the articles perform. Each function expresses specific thematic patterns. The patterns capture the core information that is crucial to the understanding of the paragraphs' contents. Thus, the patterns can help promote reading comprehension.

Keywords: theme, thematic patterns, systemic functional linguistics, reading comprehension

รูปแบบใจความหลักในบทความ *The Economist Explains*

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษารูปแบบใจความหลักในบทความ *The Economist Explains* โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์
เพื่อเป็นการสาธิตว่ารูปแบบใจความหลักสามารถช่วยในการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจได้อย่างไร ข้อมูลการวิจัย
ประกอบด้วยบทความ *The Economist Explains* ออนไลน์ จำนวน 10 บทความ มีจำนวนย่อหน้ารวมทั้งสิ้น
47 ย่อหน้า วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยการรวมแนวคิดของฮอลลิเดย์ (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) และ
แนวคิดของทอมพ์สัน (Thompson, 2014) เข้าด้วยกัน จากการวิเคราะห์พบว่าหน้าที่ของย่อหน้ามีทั้งหมด
6 หน้าที่ด้วยกัน ซึ่งแต่ละหน้าที่ก็จะแสดงรูปแบบใจความหลักแตกต่างกันไป รูปแบบใจความหลักแต่ละอัน
จะแสดงข้อมูลสำคัญที่จะนำไปใช้ในการทำความเข้าใจเนื้อหาของย่อหน้านั้น ดังนั้นรูปแบบใจความหลัก
จึงช่วยในการพัฒนาการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจ

คำสำคัญ ใจความหลัก รูปแบบใจความหลัก ภาษาศาสตร์ระบบหน้าที่ การอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจ

1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that the job market has been increasingly and fiercely competitive. Many students are graduating, but jobs are scarce and employers only look for candidates that best qualify. For candidates, glancing at most job requirements one thing remains clear: the specification of English language skills. This means people who are highly skilled at the language will take the lead ahead of others. And if all else being equal, the ones who know the language better are more likely to get a desirable job.

Although the demand on language skills has continued to grow, the number of students and graduates with sufficient language proficiency has kept shrinking. Evidence abounds. PISA reading scores in 2018 show that Thai students scored just 393 points, much below the PISA average of 487 (OECD, 2019; Vathanavisuth, 2019). The EF English Proficiency Index in the last three years has also shown a steady decline in language skills, with Thailand dropping from 64th place out of 100 countries in 2018 to 74th in 2019 to 89th in 2020. These figures are alarming.

There could be a myriad of reasons why the low proficiency occurs—political, socio-economic, technological (social media), pedagogical or personal ones. However, for educators and learners of English, it is better to find solutions to remedy poor reading and writing skills than it is to point fingers. One possible way of building up such skills is by acquiring the knowledge of Theme (Martinez-Insua & Perez-Guerra, 2018).

Theme is the point of departure of the message. It is what the speaker wants to start their message with. Conceptually, each Theme that goes into a text has a function assigned to it. Each Theme also carries meaning and, when viewed together, they form a pattern. This pattern reflects the meaning that the content of the text expresses (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014).

Since understanding the content of the text (the information that goes into building up the text) can play a role in reading success—though

undisputedly the number of words that readers know would also play a part—it is necessary to show how to make sense of text's content using Theme.

Most of the research material and works on Theme to date have revolved around academic texts such as research articles (Leong, 2015; Leong et al., 2018), research abstracts (Alotaibi, 2020) and the like. But reading should not be limited to academic sources. Indeed, quality magazine articles would be more suitable for a study that aims to explain how Theme helps support reading comprehension. For that reason, this study examines patterns of Theme in *The Economist explains'* articles, with the aim of demonstrating how the patterns can facilitate reading comprehension. Two research questions help guide this study:

1. What is the most salient thematic pattern(s) in *The Economist explains'* articles?

2. How can such pattern(s) facilitate reading?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theme: Definition and Functions

The definition of Theme given by Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) is this: "Theme is the element that serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context" (p. 89). The definition focuses on the functions of Theme—what it does and what it means in a text.

In English, a clause (a sentence in traditional grammar) can be divided into two parts: one is Theme; the other is Rheme. Theme tells the listener what the speaker wants to start their message with; Rheme gives the main information that the speaker wants the listeners to know (Thompson, 2014). When the two combine, it characterizes a clause as a message. For example,

<u>Bertha</u> is an automated braiding machine.

In the example, the Theme is underlined and the remaining part is the Rheme. Theme shows what the speaker wants to start their message with, while Rheme tells the audience what Bertha is.

The characteristics of Theme have much to do with what the Theme says and what was said before it. This has to refer back to the locating and orienting function of Theme mentioned earlier. Briefly this function helps guide listeners through an unfolding text making the text easier for them to follow. However, the orienting function interacting with the text produces one interesting effect: it creates a thematic pattern. This pattern builds out of the information arranged in the text. It is safe to assume that the pattern captures the content of the message the speaker wishes to convey.

Indeed, Berry (2019), Chen (2019), Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), and Martinez-Insua (2019), among others, support such an assumption. This is because Theme and its patterns helps readers make sense of the text; it helps them interpret the speaker's message—what she/he wants the listeners or readers to understand.

2.2 Thematic Boundary Debates

Scholars interpret Theme differently. And specific guidelines for thematic boundary—what to include and what not to include in Theme—follow as a result (Forey & Sampson, 2017; Neumann et al., 2017). This means different guidelines have been proposed to suit different works of scholars. Take the work of Martinez-Insua (2019), for instance. She follows Berry's approach in her analysis, stating "Theme comprises all the material that comes up to the main lexical verb of the clause" (p. 218). For example:

As soon as she got home, *she* flipped open her notebook and dashed off a lab report [1].

Berry's thematic guideline suggests that the subject of the clause is included in the Theme. This seems to contrast with Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), who argue that Theme can only be one of the following three: participant (subject), process (verb) or circumstance (adverb). Whichever comes first will be taken as Theme. Using Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) to analyze the same clause illustrated above, the subject will be left out of the Theme, as in:

As soon as she got home, **she** flipped open her notebook and dashed off a lab report[2].

Halliday would consider the dependent clause (*as soon as she got home*) as Theme. Strictly speaking, if the dependent clause is put first there must be a good reason for that. This means the clause could indicate the start of something important. For this function, the dependent clause takes a prominent position, while the subject of the main clause (*she*) is pushed away to the right, thus thematically becoming less prominent. Halliday views the dependent clause, such as the one in the example above, as being marked. And this explains why the subject of the main clause is excluded from Theme.

Such different approaches are understandable. Take the work of Martinez-Insua (2019) as a case in point. She examines the interconnection between the target audiences of medical texts and the variation in choice of Theme. Subject Themes are the primary focus of her analysis. She categorizes these Themes and distributes them along the *contentful-contentlight* scale. The scale indicates the text difficulty or the ease with which texts can be read.

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[1] Theme is underlined. The subject is italicized. The example is invented.

[2] Theme is underlined. The subject is in bold.

The constructs of *contentful* and the *contentlight* are viewed in terms of information reference. *Contentful* is a subject Theme that is usually a noun or a nominal group (noun phrase in traditional grammar). By contrast, *contentlight* are typical pronouns.

Based on the *contentful* and the *contentlight* distinction, she concludes that medical texts written for specialists and literate people tend to be *contentful*, and that texts written for lay persons tend to be *contentlight.* From Martinez-Insua's standpoint, the nature of the work urges the inclusion of the subject of the clause for analysis. In short, the differences in thematic boundary exist and which thematic path scholars choose to follow depends very much on the focus of their study.

2.3 Combined Approach

Scholars can choose a thematic approach that fits their works and that is practical for their analysis. This study combines two approaches when doing the Theme analysis. The first approach is taken from Halliday's work; the other is from Thompson's. Halliday's approach has the most profound impact on systemic functional thinking and related work. A large number of scholars follow the thematic categorizations he has proposed. However, some of Halliday's classifications make Theme analysis a little more difficult than necessary. Thompson (2014) has also pointed this out in *Introducing Functional Grammar.* He takes Theme in a thematized comment as a case in point. A thematized comment is a clause structure that expresses a speaker's point of view on what is about to be said. For instance,

<u>*It*'s amazing how the team</u> manage to come out on top[3].

For Halliday, the word *it* alone is Theme. For Thompson, Theme can go up to the subject of the clause (*the team*). Thompson reasons that

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[3] Theme is underlined. The example is invented

including the comment and the subject in clausal analysis allows him to see text development more easily. Here again, the difference in Theme analysis is on display. But that does not mean one approach is better than the other. Rather, it means one approach complements the other. For this reason, this study merges the two approaches to optimize the Theme analysis and its interpretation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data: The Articles

The data contains ten most recent online articles that appear on *The-Economist-explains* web page (http://economist.com/the-economist-explains). Due to the nature of this web page, topics of interest will vary greatly, ranging from animal breeding to consumer behavior to the environment. However, topics concerning politics and religions will be excluded from the data as these may discuss sensitive matter for some.

The Economist explains provides quality articles for a general audience. Chosen topics are usually ones that most readers think they are familiar with and know well, but actually do not. Accordingly, the articles provide some angles that readers might have never considered before on matters related to the general topics outlined above.

The Economist explains was chosen as a data source because it presents authentic English texts that have good potential for classroom discussion. All of *The Economist-explains* articles were collected in October 2019. The selection process was simple: articles concerning politics or religion would be discarded. The first article that qualified for inclusion appeared on August 7, 2019. Subsequently, another nine articles from July 2019 to February 2019 were chosen along the same lines.

The selection process explains two things. First, there are no articles chosen during the months of October and September, because they were all about politics. Second, topics other than politics and religion dominated the

months of July and February, and that explains why in these two months there is more than one article selected. Table 1 below shows the article code numbers, the title of each article and their publication date.

Table 1

Articles Analyzed in the Study: The Economist Explains (EE)

Code Number	Title	Date of Publication
EE1	What is a deepfake?	August 7, 2019
EE2	What is a tiebreak?	July 16, 2019
EE3	What is Libra?	July 12, 2019
EE4	What is a heatwave?	June 28, 2019
EE5	Why are Indians falling out of love with gold?	May 20, 2019
EE6	How does the World Bank work?	April 9, 2019
EE7	Why are racing pigeons so expensive?	March 27, 2019
EE8	Conservation in the heating world	February 22, 2019
EE9	How dog breeds get recognized in America	February 13, 2019
EE10	Does screen time affect children?	February 7, 2019

3.2 Theme Identification

This study combines Halliday's (2014) thematic approach with Thompson's (2014) approach for identifying Theme within the clause. Following the approach, Theme can be identified by taking all the elements that come before the main verb. The following examples will illustrate this:

Theme	Rheme
A little girl	smiled at me.
Can you	come over and talk about this?
As soon as she got home, Beatrice	flipped open her notebook and dashed off a lab report.

To ease the analysis, the study divides Theme into three groups (Unmarked Theme, Marked Theme and Multiple Theme). Each group comprises sub-types (see Tables 2-4 below). From this point on, all examples are from the data under study. In each example, the number in brackets indicates clause number. The capital letters *EE* and the number that follows indicates the article's code number. Theme is underlined.

Table 2

List of Unmarked Theme

Unmarked Theme	Example
Subject Theme	(131) The salesmen cater to a remarkable level of demand. *(EE5)*
Subject Theme in Clause Complex	(116) Some differences are logical because heatwave warnings depend in part on what residents are used to. *(EE4)*
Interrogative Theme	(288) Are these sets of numbers linked? *(EE10)*

The Subject Theme is the most straightforward and the most-frequently-used Theme of all the types. It expresses people or things involved in some kind of event or activity. It can also announce the topic of discussion. Interrogative Theme simply performs the task of asking a question.

Table 3

List of Marked Theme

Marked Theme	Example
Marked Theme in Declarative Clause	(48) <u>Until recently most grand-slam competitions</u> eschewed tiebreaks in the final set *(EE2)*
Marked Theme in Clause Complex	(186) <u>When put up for sale online, he</u> attracted interest from all around the world, as well as his native Belgium. *(EE7)*
Purpose Theme (*to*-infinitive)	(79) <u>To assuage those worried about letting Facebook into their financial affairs,</u> the firm will decentralise decision-making about Libra. *(EE3)*

The general rule for a marked Theme is simple. Theme becomes a marked Theme when something other than the Subject is fronted. Marked Theme in both declarative clauses and in clause complexes usually signals a referential shift in place or time, or indicates a change in direction in discourse. Purpose Theme, in many cases, suggests some kind of solution to a problem.

Table 4

List of Multiple Theme

Multiple Theme	Example
Thematized Comment	(118) <u>It makes sense</u> to tailor warnings to local conditions. (*EE4*)
Interpersonal Theme	
• modal adjunct	(218) <u>In principle</u>, a parcel of land or ocean containing species of interest could be cordoned off with a physical fence or legislation. (*EE8*)
• projecting clause	(1) <u>Susan Sontag understood that photographs</u> are unreliable narrators. (*EE1*)
Textual Theme	
• conjunctive adjuncts	(289) <u>In short</u>: nobody knows. (*EE10*)
• coordinating conjunctions	(301) <u>But</u> again, those who are unable to sleep for a variety of reasons could also be more motivated to use their screens at night. (*EE10*)

Thematized Comment expresses a speaker's comment on what is about to be said. Textual Theme logically connects a clause with what was said before—which can be a couple of preceding clauses, a part(s) of a paragraph or the whole paragraph(s).

3.3 Data Analysis

The data contained 313 clauses, with 84 simplex clauses and 229 complex clauses. The analysis was straightforward. Themes in the clauses were identified and a number (1, 2 … n) was assigned to each Theme for ease of reference. To detect a pattern, the identified Themes were tabulated in tables (see Table 5 below). The tables were divided into three columns: the first column indicates a paragraph number; the second column shows the identified Themes; and the third specifies the type of Theme. The identified Themes of each paragraph were then read and re-read to get the overall sense of Theme and to look for a pattern.

Table 5 shows an analysis sample of Themes in the data.

Table 5

Analysis Sample of Themes

Par	Theme	Theme Type
3	(13) Tools for editing media	Unmarked
	(14) The power and peril of deepfakes	Unmarked
	(15) Before deepfakes, a powerful computer and a good chunk of a university degree	Marked
	(16) Now some photos and an internet connection	Marked

The sample is from *EE1*, What is deepfake? The abbreviation *Par* means paragraph. Thus, *Par3* means Themes 13-16 are in paragraph 3 of article *EE1*.

4. Findings

This section will first look at the diagram of paragraph functions in the articles under study. It will then show the thematic patterns that go with the functions.

4.1 The Diagram of Paragraph Functions

Most articles contain four paragraphs, but some have five or six. One paragraph may or may not have the same function as the paragraph that comes before or after it. Nonetheless, these paragraphs do their specific jobs and serve one specific purpose: to explain. Below is the diagram of paragraph functions found in this study.

Figure 1

Diagram of Paragraph Functions
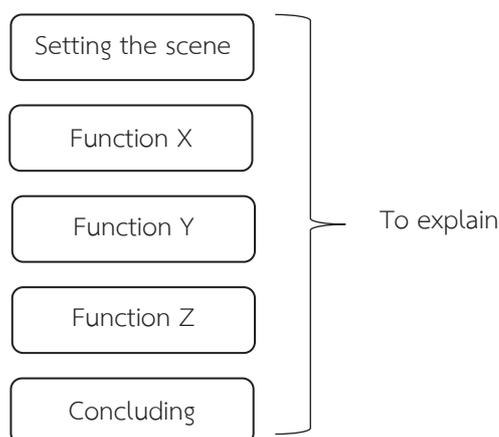
The boxes on the left of the diagram represent the functions of the paragraphs, while the bracket indicates the purpose of the articles. There are six functions that the paragraphs perform. These functions are:

1. Set the scene / F1
2. Give details/examples/reasons / F2
3. Compare-contrast / F3
4. Identify the problem / F4
5. Offer a solution / F5
6. Give views and conclude / F6

The first function (Setting the scene/F1) and the last function (Closing/F6) appear in all ten articles in the data. That means F1 and F6 are formulaic or fixed. But F2-F5, labeled as Functions X, Y and Z in the diagram, are flexible. This means they follow no particular orders and therefore can be altered in any way that fits the ongoing discourse. For example, Article 8 from the data does not have the same sequence as that of Article 9 and 10 (see Table 6).

Table 6

Function Sequence of Article 8, 9 and 10.

(The three articles have four paragraphs each. F1 and F6, the first and the last paragraph,

*appear in all three and therefore are not shown here)*

Article	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3
8	F4	F5
9	F5	F5
10	F2	F3

As seen in the Table, the function sequences of the three articles are different. The same is also true for the remaining seven articles in the data. This confirms the fact that such sequences are changeable and that they occur through the author's Theme choices.

4.2 Thematic Patterns of Paragraph Functions

Function 1: Set the Scene

Scene-setting is the introduction part of the article. It starts with time and the people involved in an event or activity and ends with a question that states the article's main point. The pattern is shown below:
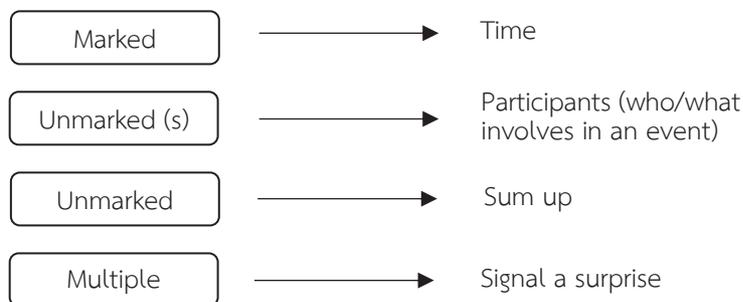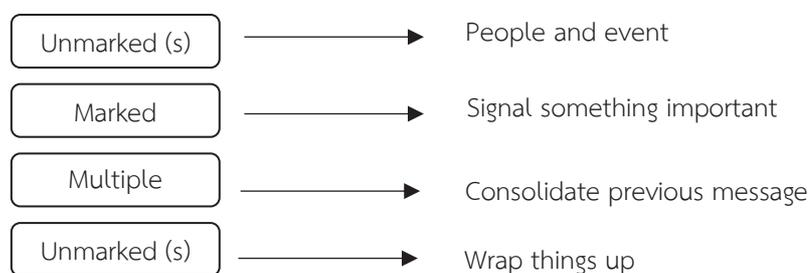

Function-1 Text Sample

The sample is from EE1, paragraph 1 (see section 3.1 for the title of the article). The lined portions show where the pattern appears in the text.

This summer Europe is sweltering in unusual temperatures. Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic have seen record-breaking temperatures for June. France has recorded its highest temperature—45.1C (113.2F)—of all time. Heatwave, scream myriad headlines. But what exactly is it?

From the sample, the opening marked Theme locates the event through time (*this summer*). The following unmarked Themes bring in more participants (*Germany, Poland, Czech and France*) into the event. The summative unmarked Theme (*heatwave*) wraps things up. The multiple Theme (*but*) signals a surprise and marks the main point of the article.

Function 2: Give Details/examples/reasons

As the name suggests, this pattern is used to explain something in detail. An example of this pattern is shown below.

|	
Unmarked (s) →	People and event
Marked →	Signal something important
Multiple →	Consolidate previous message
Unmarked (s) →	Wrap things up

Function-2 Text Sample

The sample is from EE5, paragraph 2.

Start with changing tastes and preferences. Around a third of Indians are 18 to 35 years old. They often prefer to spend their money on electronic gadgets, purchased in monthly instalments on zero interest rates, rather than jewellery. In 2017 consumer electronics toppled gold as the second-biggest contributor to India's national import bill, behind oil. Moreover, the tastes of those who buy gold appear to be changing. Heavy jewellery has given way to lightweight designs, sometimes with lesser caratage. Gold is no longer a sign of wealth but of fashion.

The opening Theme (*Start with*) introduces the topic of the paragraph (*changing tastes and preferences*). The following two Themes (*Around a third of Indians* and *They*) expand the topic. In the middle, two Themes are at work to create a special effect: Marked Theme (*In 2017...*) signals the start of something important—Indians' preference of gold remarkably switched to something else. Multiple Theme (*Moreover...*) reinforces what was said previously. The last two Themes simply conclude the paragraph.

Function 3: Compare-Contrast

A typical pattern is as follows:
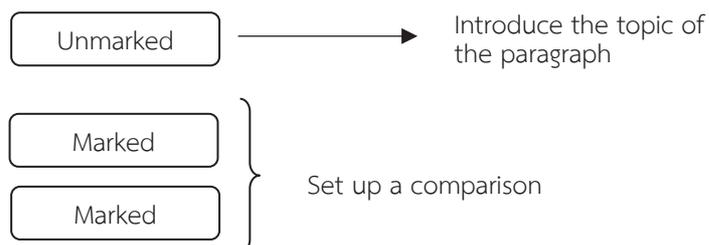
Function-3 Text Sample

The sample is from EE1, paragraph 3.

Tools for editing media manually have existed for decades—think Photoshop. The power and peril of deepfakes is that they make fakery cheaper than ever before. Before deepfakes, a powerful computer and a good chunk of a university degree were needed to produce a realistic fake video of someone. Now some photos and an internet connection are all that is required.

Two marked Themes (*Before deepfake, a powerful computer...* and *Now some photos...*) are arranged for a comparison between what is available now and what was available then.

Function 4: Identify the Problem
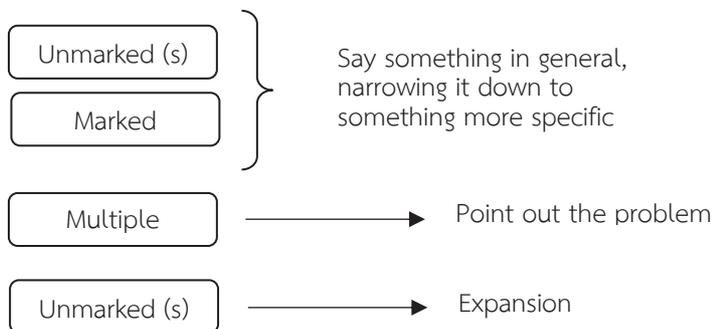
Function-4 Text Sample

The sample is from EE8, paragraph 2.

Conservation used to be simpler. In principle, a parcel of land or ocean containing species of interest could be cordoned off with a physical fence or legislation, and people kept out. Today such areas cover 15% of the world's land and 6% of the ocean. But formal protection is no panacea. A third of all protected areas carry a human footprint at least as deep as that of pastureland; "paper parks", existing in name only, abound. The most pristine reserves are often in places so remote that formal safeguards make little practical difference since people have no reason to exploit them in the first place. Plenty cover arid, mountainous wilderness that is spectacular but inhospitable to life.

The opening Theme states the topic of the paragraph (*Conservation*). The subsequent Theme funnels down to something more specific (*a parcel of land or ocean*), while Marked Theme (*Today such areas*) marks the end of the first segment. The second segment, Multiple Theme (*But formal protection*), indicates what the problem is. The last segment (from *A third of all protected areas...* to *Plenty...*) expands on the problem that has just been identified by Multiple Theme.

Function 5: Offer a Solution/Demonstrate How to Do Something

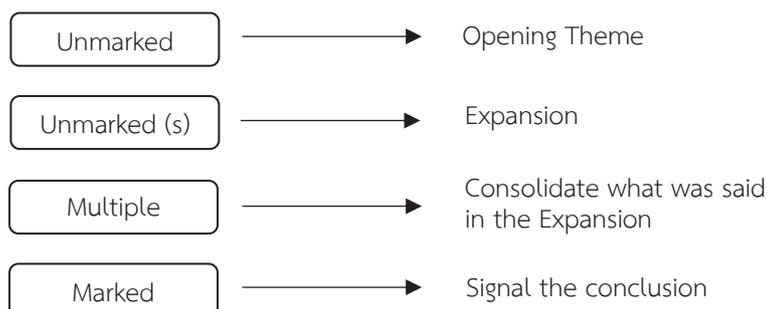|		
Unmarked (s)	→	Opening Theme + step 1
Marked	→	Step 2
Marked	→	Step 3
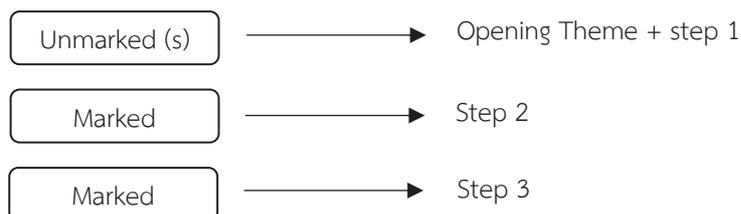
Function-5 Text Sample

The sample is form EE1, paragraph 4.

The production of a deepfake about, say, Barack Obama, starts with lots of pictures of the former president (this, incidentally, means that celebrities are easier to deepfake than normal people, as the internet holds more data that describe them). These photos are fed into a piece of software known as a neural network, which makes statistical connections between the visual appearance of Mr. Obama and whatever aspect of him you wish to fake. If you want to go down the ventriloquist route and have Mr. Obama say things that the man himself has never said, then you must direct your software to learn the associations between particular words and the shape of Mr. Obama's mouth as he says them. To affix his face onto another person's moving body, you must direct the software to learn the associations between face and body.

The opening Theme (*The production of a deepfake*) states the topic of the paragraph. It also introduces the initial step to create a deepfake. The second Theme (*These photos*) completes the first stage of deepfakes. The following two Marked Themes (*If you want to...* and *To affix his face...*) mark the second and the third step of creating a deepfake.

Function 6: Give Views and Conclude

Unmarked	⟶ Opening Theme
Unmarked (s)	⟶ Expansion
Multiple	⟶ Consolidate what was said in the Expansion
Marked	⟶ Signal the conclusion

Function-6 Text Sample

The sample is from EE1, paragraph 6.

The consequences of cheap, widespread fakery are likely to be profound, albeit slow to unfold. Plenty worry about the possible impact that believable, fake footage of politicians might have on civil society—from a further loss of trust in media to the potential for electoral distortions. These technologies could also be deployed against softer targets: it might be used, for instance, to bully classmates by creating imagery of them in embarrassing situations. And it is not hard to imagine marketers and advertisers using deepfake tools to automatically tweak the imagery in adverts and promotional materials, optimising them for maximal engagement—the faces of models morphed into ideals of beauty that are customised for each viewer, pushing consumers to make aspirational purchases. In a world that was already saturated with extreme imagery, deepfakes make it plausible to push that even further, leaving Ms Sontag's "presumption of veracity" truly dead in the water.

The opening Theme (*The consequences of cheap, widespread fakery*) announces the topic of the concluding paragraph. The following two unmarked Themes (*Plenty* and *These technologies*) expand on the opening sentence. The Multiple Theme (*And it is not hard*) indicates the author's comment on the deepfakes, while at the same time reinforcing what was said in the expansion (the two previous clauses).

Marked Theme (*In the world that was already saturated with extreme imagery, deepfakes*) signals the conclusion of the entire article.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Functions of Themes

Themes in this study were divided into three groups: Unmarked Theme, Marked Theme and Multiple Theme. Each group has specific tasks to perform.

For the Unmarked Theme, its typical functions are to introduce the topic of a paragraph or bring in participants (people/things involved in an event) as part of background information to establish the context. These functions are similar with the ones scholars have identified among other types of text (Berry, 2019; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Examples are:

Introducing the paragraph topic

(50) <u>Tiebreaks in cricket</u> are more recent. (*EE2*)

Bringing People/Abstract Things/Events into Conversation

(129) <u>Queues outside Indian jewellery stores</u> become so long that makeshift tents are set up to accommodate the rush. (*EE5*)

The Marked Theme, on the other hand, does the work that creates a "special effect" (Berry, 2019, p. 113; Forey & Sampson, 2017, p. 139). This means Marked Theme flags something up for readers to pay attention to. For example, to compare something, to set up the time frame marking the start of some important event or to signal a solution. Examples of these are:

Making a Comparison

(162) <u>Whereas the fund is supposed to tackle acute crises—currency misalignments, capital flight and sudden shortages of dollars—the bank</u> is charged with tackling chronic long-run problems of deprivation and backwardness. (*EE6*)

Marking the Start of Something important

(140) <u>In 2017 consumer electronics</u> toppled gold as the second-biggest contributor to India's national import bill, behind oil. (*EE5*)

Signaling a Solution

(21) <u>To make the imagery more realistic, you</u> can have the software compete with a copy of itself, one version generating imagery, and the other trying to spot fakes. (*EE1*)

The last type of Theme is the Multiple Theme. Its main task is to logically relate one clause to a chunk of what was said before (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014; Taboada, 2019; Thompson, 2014). In this study, the lexical item that most frequently appeared in the articles is the conjunctive Adjunct *but.* Its typical function is to make a concession. However, most of the time, the word *but* performs the following three related functions: signal surprise; grab readers' attention while kindling their curiosity, keeping them wanting for more; or disprove what was said previously. Examples of Themes doing the aforesaid works are:

Showing surprise while stimulating curiosity

(189) <u>But why have elite birds</u> become so costly? (*EE7*)

Showing surprise while signaling counter-evidence

(301) <u>But again, those who are unable to sleep for a variety of reasons</u> could also be more motivated to use their screens at night. (*EE10*)

5.2 How Are Thematic Patterns and Reading Comprehension Related?

On the surface, the articles are nothing more than just plain, unmarked texts. Beneath these texts, however, there is a set of working mechanisms that help readers understand what they are reading. These mechanisms are Themes. Themes form the patterns that present crucial information that reveals what the paragraphs do and what they mean. In other words, the thematic patterns reflect the paragraphs' functions; the functions explain what all the information in the paragraphs is about. These patterns ultimately represent the message

that the authors want readers to see and understand (Thompson, 2014). Thus, understanding such a message means understanding the content of the paragraph.

In the context of EFL and ESL, it is important to raise students' awareness of Themes as well as their functions and meanings. As Chan and Zhang (2017) state, the ability to observe and recognize paragraph patterns is a trait of "*writerly readers* who have a working knowledge of the distinctive features of the text" (p. 53). Indeed, students need to know not just the meanings of words but the linguistic features—in this case Themes—that contribute to text comprehension. This can be done by pointing out to students how Themes are used in paragraphs and what pattern these Themes create.

Regarding teachers, instruction should be explicit. For example, by explaining the use and the meanings of Multiple Theme. Generally, a combination of two or three thematic elements will form a single multiple Theme. This combination can be:

1. Textual Theme + Subject Theme

(230) *Instead,* **around 140 species between them** get perhaps $150m more than the United States Fish and Wildlife Service actually recommends[4]. (*EE8*)

2. Textual Theme + Thematized Comment

(30) *And* **it is not hard** to imagine marketers and advertisers using deepfake tools to automatically tweak the imagery in adverts and promotional materials[5]. (*EE1*)

3. Textual Theme + Subject Theme of Projecting Clause + Subject Theme of Projected Clause.

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[4] Textual Theme is italicized. Subject Theme is in bold. Multiple Theme is underlined

[5] Textual Theme is italicized. Thematized Comment is in bold. Multiple Theme is underlined.

(202) *That said,* <u>surveys</u> have suggested that **spending plans among the very wealthiest** remain buoyant[6]. (*EE7*)

What teachers need to do is to explain how the components in the combination work and what they mean when they show up in texts. Consider the following short passage as an example to use in class:

(1) <u>The luxury-goods market in China, which includes splurging on expensive hobbies, such as prize pigeons,</u> could be squeezed this year as the US-China trade war rumbles on (2) <u>and consumers</u> put spending on hold. (3) <u>For months manufacturers</u> have warned about weakening demand. (4) *That said,* <u>surveys have suggested that</u> **spending plans among the very wealthiest** remain buoyant[7].

Themes (1) and (2) are about consumer spending. Theme (3), marked temporal Theme, wraps up what was said in the two previous clauses. Theme (4), which is in focus here, is a Multiple Theme. The Multiple Theme contains two different types of Themes within it. The first one is a textual Theme (*That said*); the second one is a subject Theme. There are two subject Themes in Theme (4) though: one is the subject Theme of a projecting clause (*surveys*); the other is the subject Theme of a projected clause (*spending plans among the very wealthiest*).

The striking point of Theme (4) is that the Textual theme (*That said*) is the most important Theme of all. It signals to readers that the following message has the opposite meaning to the one before it. Without this textual Theme, readers will have to spend some time figuring out how clause (4) relates to the preceding clauses.

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[6] Textual Theme is italicized. Subject Theme of projecting clause is double underlined. Subject Theme of projected clause is in bold. Multiple Theme is underlined.

[7] Theme is underlined. Subject Theme in a projecting clause is double underlined. Subject Theme of a projected clause is in bold.

The Subject Theme of the projected clause (*spending plans among the very wealthiest*) takes second place in terms of meaning and its significance. This Subject Theme maintains the topic continuity of the two previous clauses, which is about consumer spending.

The least important Theme of all is the Subject Theme of the projecting clause (*surveys*). Its function is to indicate the source of information. In the example, the source of what is said in clause (4) is from the surveys. How can one know if the Subject Theme of the projecting clause is the least important? A rule of thumb tells us that if it is removed from the clause and the rest still makes sense, then it does not have a significant role in that particular context. Take Theme (4) in the example above as a case in point:

Original clause

1. *That said,* surveys have suggested that spending plans among the very wealthiest remain buoyant.

Clause with subject Theme of projecting clause removed

2. *That said,* spending plans among the very wealthiest remain buoyant.

Clause 2 can still be understood even the subject Theme in the projecting clause is absent. But if the subject Theme of projected clause is taken out, the entire clause would not make much sense, as the following example shows:

Clause with subject Theme of projected clause removed

3. *That said,* surveys have suggested remain buoyant.

The Last thing that teachers have to explain students is the pattern of Theme. The thematic pattern of the short passage above is a compare-contrast one. This is done by two different Themes. The marked temporal Theme

(*For months manufacturers*) wraps up what was said in clauses (1) and (2), while Multiple Theme (*That said...*) signals a contrast with the previous portion, switching the meaning from one direction to the opposite direction. The whole picture from clauses (1), (2) and (3) is that "Consumers will spend less", but clause (4) states "That is not true for some people".

6. Conclusion

The concept of Theme can make plain the meaning of the speaker's message—what the speaker wants to say to the listener. In reading, one way to interpret that meaning is to know the functions that paragraphs of a text are assigned to do. For example, this paragraph describes something in general, another one shows a comparison between two things and so on. This means Themes that go into different paragraph functions express different patterns. Detecting the patterns, thus understanding what all the presented information means, can help promote reading comprehension.

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