
Marked Theme in the Reading Comprehension of Advanced L2 English Learners

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Introduction: Yesterday I saw him

According to Barzegar (2013), the way we arrange words in different positions of the clause is essential to communicate in any language. In other words, word order is highly important when creating meaning. Second language learners usually aim to have a clear understanding of how and where to place words, so they can achieve successful communication in the target language. Kessler (2004) found that native speakers and advance language learners of English have a similar level of syntactical knowledge, especially in terms of word order. However, this word-order knowledge does not seem equally applied to different structures and languages. In this regard, Jin (2008) discovered that English speakers have much difficulty in learning marked structures in Chinese. Similarly, Solís Hernández (2006) demonstrated that L2 English learners usually struggle with structures that do not follow the same pattern at all times, especially in relation to adverb placement. She described that most students did not clearly understand the reasons why adverbs in English are placed in different positions of the clause. In my experience, I have noticed that small differences in clause constructions (e.g., “I saw him yesterday” and “Yesterday I saw

him”), can be confusing to L2 learners. This is not only because of the syntactic order, but because sometimes it is difficult for learners to understand the reasons that have motivated a speaker or a writer to select a less common word order construction to communicate a specific message.

Thus, I believe that understanding why native speakers choose to create meaning by producing clauses with less usual patterns can help L2 learners develop better discourse competence. Usó and Martínez Flor (2006) noted that discourse competence concerns all four types of communicative competence: linguistic competence (the ability to construct basic linguistic elements for communication, such as morphological patterns or lexical sources), pragmatic competence (competence to use language appropriately in certain contexts), intercultural competence (understanding of how to interpret oral or written texts in a determined sociocultural situation), and strategic competence (knowing how to continue with the flow of information when breakdowns occur). Accordingly, comprehending why native speakers choose to use constructions with a less usual word order can help language learners

understand and produce the L2 in a more accurate way.

This research will focus on describing situations in which native English speakers prefer to create meaning using unusual word order constructions, specifically in asynchronous communication. Because this research analyzes the writing-reading process of meaning creation, I decided to take a systematic functional approach based on the notions by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) that deal with the text organization. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), language is a goal oriented-activity that can be described in terms of three semantic components, or metafunctions: interpersonal, ideational, and textual. In this study, I mainly focus on the textual metafunction of language that deals with the choices of discourse organization in written and oral modalities (i.e., how language is used in the written discourse vs. an oral interaction), and, more specifically, I look into the conception of “theme” as a point of departure of a clause. In short, this research will examine why some linguistic elements are selected in a clause and how they are comprehended, and the implications of this unusual word order in the reading comprehension of L2 learners.

Theoretical Framework

Functional Grammar and Metafunctions

According to Butt et al. (2000), the ultimate goal of language learning is the production and recognition of the meaning. Therefore, given that language is a goal-oriented activity, language learners must be aware of the three factors described by

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) when producing and recognizing the meaning of utterances: These factors are tenor (the relationship between interlocutors), field (what is going on in the interaction? where is it taking place? when?), and mode (the way language is being used to accomplish a purpose). Based on these three factors, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) proposed the three metafunctions that deal with how language is integrated to formulate messages. These metafunctions are the interpersonal metafunction (i.e., questions vs. commands), the ideational metafunction (i.e., which verbs are preferred over others in certain situations) and the textual metafunction (i.e., a written text vs. an oral interaction). It is important to note that, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), these three metafunctions interact simultaneously whenever language is used.

Theme and Rheme

Along with the idea that the textual metafunction concerns how people organize their messages, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) proposed two elements to describe this metafunction: theme and rheme. Theme is regarded as what comes first in the clause; in other words, theme is the “point of departure” of a clause. This initial position, according to the Hallidayan linguistic approach, gives theme a special status since it provides information about the way people, consciously or unconsciously, construct meaning: Theme usually emphasizes what people consider most important in the message. Rheme, on the other hand, is whatever comes after

theme. For example, in the sentence, *I love you*, theme is *I*, and rheme is *love you*.

Theme can be classified into textual, interpersonal, and topical themes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Textual theme is related to words that join clauses, such as continuatives (e.g., yes, no, well, now), conjunctions (e.g., and, because), conjunctive adjuncts (e.g., in addition), and wh-relatives (e.g., who, where). Interpersonal theme is mainly related to the words that indicate the relationship between participants and the text, such as vocatives and modal adjuncts (e.g., in my opinion, fortunately, surprisingly). Topical theme is the main theme since it is considered to be the first word (or words) to carry meaning. This word can be a participant, a circumstance or a process.

Table 1. Types of Themes

And,	my old friend,	I	love you
Textual	Interpersonal	Topical	Rheme

It is also important to note that, based on the Hallidayan ideas of theme and rheme, other researchers have suggested a wider perspective of this former component. First, Lóres Sanz (2000) depicted theme as the way the writer or reader is trying to “manipulate” the reaction of the receiver of the message towards a particular perspective. For example, theme can be controlled to mitigate the force of news that can be displeasing to the receiver. As for this, she suggested that theme does not only influence the textual metafunction, but also the interpersonal one. Similarly, Meyer (2010) stated that theme has two main functions that occur simultaneously: it

“grounds” the ideas of a speaker or a writer into language, and it also provides a reader or a listener with the orientation about the information to be received. In addition, Hasselgard (2004) noted that the selection of theme helps to build cohesion. That is, he found that themes work together with other elements in the discourse.

Recent studies related to L2 learning and Theme

Although distinguishing boundaries between theme and rheme is certainly difficult, many studies have addressed how this distinction can be beneficial for L2 learning. Wong (2007) conducted a longitudinal case study for six months. In this study, an advanced English learner (IELTS 6.5) who had completed 11 years of English learning was asked to write 48 essays. Wong analyzed these essays based on the distinction of theme and rheme, and found that some of the most common errors were related to the absence of theme in clauses such as “Actually, rather than saying to help the community, not to say that help the domestic people,” a vague theme as in the case of “Secondly, the comfortable lifestyle since motor vehicles have been invented years ago, the convenient transportation changes people,” and an incoherent tie between theme and rheme like in: “...this custom has been practiced throughout the western communities, people’s daily life even in the marriage” (pp. 4-5). Furthermore, this study adopted an action-research approach to improve this student’s writing. The student was explicitly taught the concepts of theme and rheme, and was then asked to write and

correct his essays based on theme and rheme. The researcher reported that this process was tedious and time consuming, but participant's writing skills improved drastically.

Rustipa (2011) qualitatively analyzed the writing samples of 15 Indonesians who were taking a course of paragraph-based English writing. Their proficiency level was not reported. After analyzing the texts collected during one semester, Rustipa (2011) found that most students used the same theme repetitively during their compositions. They also employed a theme zigzag pattern in which they alternated theme and rheme that were commonly used together. Students rarely wrote in a multiple-theme pattern in which themes and rhemes are mixed together. The results showed that students preferred to use the former two patterns because they were the easiest ones to follow. Therefore, Rustipa (2011) suggested that L2 educators need to expose learners to texts full of a multiple-theme pattern so that they can enrich their writing compositions in the L2.

Marked Theme

According to the functional grammar approach (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), themes can also occur in unusual constructions. These unusual constructions occur because a speaker or a writer found a good reason to start a clause that way (e.g., to emphasize meaning to influence the perspective of person who receives the message). Similarly, Flowerdew (2013) suggested that these constructions demonstrate that a speaker or a writer wants to strongly emphasize the

information that has been previously said or written. Thus, the Hallidayan linguistic tradition names these kinds of themes as "marked".

Table 2. Marked Theme

Many years ago I	loved you
Marked Theme	Rheme

Besides meaning emphasis, Qi (2012) proposed that marked theme can be used to accomplish textual and stylistic functions. Also, she stated that marked theme structures can serve "the effects of natural cohesion, symmetrical structure and sequential information flow" (p. 200), and that marked theme can set the setting of a specific situation in the discourse, summarize and contrast information in a more explicit way, and lastly achieve aesthetic purposes.

Marked Theme and Second Language Research

Some studies have addressed the importance of marked theme in L2 learning. In particular, there is one study that observed the relationship between L2 learning and marked theme (Green, Christopher, Lam, & Mei, 2000). Regarding the tendency of Chinese learners to formulate inappropriate marked themes in writing (e.g., "Concerning the assignment, it was very demanding for most of us"), Green et al. (2000) looked for the occurrences of *concerning* and *for* in the thematic position, and connectors (e.g., moreover, furthermore, and besides) in the writing samples of native English speakers and Chinese learners of English. In order to

say that a connector was appropriately used in the thematic position, the connector should be used to “introduce a new topical referent or recall a referent with a relatively remote antecedent” (Green et al., 2000, p. 105). The results indicated that NS and NNS samples have big differences in terms of the way marked themes were used. As hypothesized, NNS tended to inappropriately overuse front devices as marked theme items.

Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) also explored theme markedness. In this study, researchers examined how frequently marked themes are used by L2 learners in their academic compositions. They analyzed the writing samples of 60 university students majoring in TESOL, and divided the students into three groups regarding the time they had been exposed to academic English writing: sophomores (20), juniors (20) and seniors (20). Then participants were asked to narrate three pictorial stories in writing. The students were given 45 minutes for the narrative writing task of each story, and their texts were analyzed using T-units analysis. After performing a chi-square analysis, researchers found that participants’ use of marked theme increased gradually with the time they were exposed to academic writing (sophomore group = 9.05%, junior group = 9.10%, and senior group = 9.90%). With these findings, the researchers recommended that language teachers promote the use of marked themes in writing, because marked themes can help students produce better L2 writing, especially in terms of rhetorical structure.

In sum, although the current L2 literature on theme use provides some techniques to improve writing skills, little attention has been paid to the concept of theme and L2 reading comprehension. More specifically, the relationship between comprehension of marked theme and meaning creation just started to accept the Hallidayan idea that native English speakers produce and understand linguistic items in relation to meaning emphasis, text cohesion, and aesthetic reasons. In this regard, it seems that the functions of marked theme are accepted with a mere assumption that Hallidayan concepts are true, without any empirical evidence. For language teachers, understanding the practical reasons why native speakers choose a specific theme construction can be beneficial to promote a more accurate comprehension and production of L2 learners.

Research questions

- 1) How do native speakers and advanced learners of English understand marked theme clauses when these occur in texts in terms of meaning?
- 2) What importance do native speakers and advanced learners of English grant to word order in terms of meaning in written English clauses?
- 3) What kind of marked clauses, if any, are the ones that native and advanced English learners recognize as meaning-markers in texts?

Hypothesis

Based on the assumptions of Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) and

Flowerdew (2013), I expect that native English speakers recognize marked themes as meaning emphasize. In addition, because Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) suggested that L2 learners would become more familiar with marked theme use with greater exposure to the L2, I expect that advanced learners of English are also able to recognize marked themes as meaning emphasize. Also, based on the studies of Hasselgard (2004) and Qi (2012), I expect that both groups will identify the use of marked themes aimed to achieve coherence, aesthetics, and cohesion in the text. Finally, drawing on the theme descriptions of Lorés Sanz (2000) and Meyer (2010), I hypothesize that a few participants will mention marked theme can draw the attention of a reader towards a particular perspective.

Participants

Participants of this research will be divided into two groups: native speakers and advanced English learners. Both groups will be graduate students studying in the United States at the moment of the research. I expect that the number of participants in both groups will be equal, five participants in each group. Nonnative speaking participants will be required to have the TOEFL iBT score of 100 or its equivalent before participation.

Instruments

A text taken from Wikipedia will be used for this research. The text is a short biography of Mohammad Ali. First, I will give students a biography of Mohammad Ali in which some clauses are deleted.

Participants will then be asked to select unmarked and marked themes to fill the gaps. Also, participants will be asked to justify why they decided to use the marked or unmarked themes to fill the gaps (see Appendix A). Subsequently, participants will be interviewed by the researcher to obtain a deeper insight into theme use (see Appendix B).

Data collection procedures

I will collect data for this research in one day. Both groups will be asked to answer instrument 1 (Appendix A) individually for 15 minutes, followed by a 5-minute break. Then I will interview the participants individually. These face-to-face interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Data from instrument 1 and interviews will be analyzed qualitatively using a content analysis approach. That is, I will initially look for some patterns in participants' answers to set general categories of theme or marked theme choices. Then I will compare individual answers to the general theme/marked theme categories in an attempt to refine the initial categorization. Finally, I will verify that the theme/marked theme categories fit to participants' answers.

Expected results

I expect that both groups (native speakers and advanced learners) are able to support the Hallidayan notion of marked theme that the use of marked themes is intended to emphasize meaning. While I believe that both groups will provide support for this hypothesis, I postulate that advanced English learners will give more

consistent answers since they may have learned language structures in a more explicit way. In addition, I expect that both groups will also support the theme descriptions of Hasselgard (2004) and Qi (2012) that theme choice contributes to text cohesion, coherence, and flow of information. Also, I expect that some of the both groups will also mention that marked themes contribute to the relationship between information and receiver orientation proposed by Lorés Sanz (2000) and Meyer (2010). Finally, based on Qi (2012) proposals, I expect that some of the both groups will identify the use of marked theme structures for aesthetic purposes.

Expected limitations

One of the limitations I find in this proposal is the number of participants (10 in total), for which the findings of this research would not be considered generalizable. In addition, the fact that the participants are graduate students in applied linguistics may influence the results of this research: participants may have developed a deeper language sensitivity compared to other people.

Another limitation concerns the design of the instruments. The set of clauses that show marked themes were explicitly modified for this research, which may reduce the ecological validity of this study. In addition, the interpretation of the questionnaires and interviews will be subjective, and the results of the research may represent a biased perspective of the researcher.

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Appendix A

Instrument 1

Read the text below. It is the biography of the boxer Muhammad Ali. There are some gaps in the article. On the next page, you have two options to fill each gap. Please select which one would fit better and explain why. Note that the 3 paragraphs are part of the biography.

Mohammad Ali

1. _____ .He was an American former professional boxer, generally considered among the greatest heavyweights in the sport's history. A controversial and even polarizing figure during his early career, Ali is today widely regarded not only for the skills he displayed in the ring but for the values he exemplified outside of it: religious freedom, racial justice and the triumph of principle over expedience. He is one of the most recognized sports figures of the past 100 years, crowned "Sportsman of the Century" by *Sports Illustrated* and "Sports Personality of the Century" by the BBC.

2. _____ .
Shortly after that bout, Ali joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name (he was originally born as Cassius Clay) 3. _____ .

4. _____ .He was eventually arrested and found guilty on draft evasion charges and stripped of his boxing title. He did not fight again for nearly four years—losing a time of peak performance in an athlete's career. 5. _____ . Ali's personal courage as a conscientious objector to the war made him an icon for the larger counterculture generation. Ali would go on to become the first and only three-time lineal World Heavyweight Champion.

1)

- a) Muhammad Ali was born in January 17, 1942
- b) It was in January 17, 1942 that Muhammad Ali was born.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

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2)

- a) Ali won the world heavyweight championship in 1964 from Sonny Liston in a stunning upset.
- b) In 1964, Ali won the world heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston in a stunning upset.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

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3)

- a) He converted to Sunni Islam in 1975.
- b) In 1975, he converted to Sunni Islam.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

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4)

a) Ali refused to be conscripted into the U.S. military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War, in 1967, three years after winning the heavyweight title.

b) In 1967, three years after winning the heavyweight title, Ali refused to be conscripted into the U.S. military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

—

5)

a) It was in 1974 when Ali's conviction was overturned.

b) Ali's conviction was overturned in 1974.

Which sentence would you choose? Why?

Appendix B

Interview

1) *Do you think that word order is important in English? Why?*

2) *Do you believe that placing information (i.e., years or specific dates) at the beginning of the sentences changes the meaning of the sentence? Why?*

3) *In which situation would you place information such as years or times at the beginning of a sentence (i.e., In 1993, I went to Paris.)?*

4) *Do you think there's any difference in the meaning of sentences like "Yesterday, I met you" and "It was yesterday when I met you"?*