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Phasal dynamism and the unfolding of meaning as text

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In this paper I explore the etic category of textuality and the emic category of Theme arguing that while Theme in English may simultaneously signal the point of departure of a clause with respect to the preceding text and also the ‘aboutness’ of the clause in relation to the method of development of a text, this is not necessarily the case with other languages. In particular I consider the rich textual resources of Scottish Gaelic, a verb-initial language with no morphological marking for Theme, to problematise standard treatments of thematicity in languages other than English. I elaborate on Cloran’s (2010) account of Rhetorical Units to present as a hypothesis for further exploration the idea that, while Gaelic and English ground clauses in both space and time, Gaelic is a process-centred language while English is a Subject-centred language and that these differences in the respective characterology of the two languages have repercussions on the process of textualisation and the method of development in each language.

Keywords: Gaelic, Rhetorical Unit, textualisation, textuality, Theme

1. Introduction

In this paper I consider the relationship between textuality as a universal potential of texts and the emically-variable category of Theme as the clausal element most at risk in realising this potential. In doing so I make a distinction between two aspects of textuality: *textualisation*, the immanent production of coherent language, and *texture*, the quality of whole texts as cohesive products. Within SFL accounts of thematicity this distinction is implicitly neutralised as description moves between clause-based and text-

based accounts of language. From a clausal perspective, Halliday (1985: 39) defines Theme as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message... that with which the clause is concerned”. This definition has been widely read as assigning a dual and potentially contradictory function to Theme (see Arús Hita 2007): the first half of this definition focuses on the work of Theme in linking a new clause to the preceding text, and so on immanent textualisation, while the second half focuses more on the result of this work, the signalling of what the clause is about, so opening up the analyses of the post-hoc texture of complete texts in terms of the thematic choices made and their *method of development* (Fries 1995). Arús Hita (2007) argues, rightly I think, that Halliday’s notion of ‘aboutness’ here is not to be mistaken for topicality, and points to the fact that the above definition of Theme was modified in the third edition of the *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2004: 64): “The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context”. I would, however, argue that there is a residual tension between point of departure, suggesting the grounding of the clause as a single message, and contextual orientation, which points to its function in the text as a whole. The point I will develop in the rest of this paper is that while these two functions may largely conflate in a single thematic element in the lexicogrammar of English, this is not necessarily the case for other languages. In the following sections I will first specifically consider problems with the concept of thematicity in Scottish Gaelic before suggesting how the tensions identified might feed into cross-linguistic considerations of textual dynamics and the unfolding of meaning.

2. Theme and textual development in English and Gaelic

An idea can be verbalised in many ways and even the same information can be presented in different sequences and with different prominences so as to facilitate the flow and uptake of the message at the point of delivery. This organisation of the experiential and interpersonal content of messages, individually and in sequences, is referred to in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the textual metafunction of language, and a key resource within this metafunction is thematicity, the grounding of each new message and the sequencing of the concepts that complete it. Messages are realised through the lexicogrammar as clauses, and the grounding element of each clause is referred to as the Theme. The Theme always includes an experiential element (the experiential Theme) and, as a general rule, messages start with information that is in some way given and progress to provide new information, with tonic prominence

towards the end of the clause marking the focal point of that new information (labelled with a capital letter as the New in SFL). However, this is not always the case, as in the second part of example (1), and for that reason Theme, and its counterpart Rheme, are kept distinct from Given and New in SFL theorisation and descriptions.

(1) *Spain is a beautiful country. Many famous artists have lived there.*

Spain	is a beautiful country
Theme	Rheme
Given -----→ New	

Many famous artists	have lived there.
Theme	Rheme
-----→ New	Given

As suggested by this example, for English – which is an “SVO” language – the starting point of the message is predominantly the nominal group functioning as the Subject of the clause.¹ The textual relationship between consecutive clauses, referred to as thematic progression, is defined in terms of the relationship between Theme as the starting point of the new clause and elements of the preceding text, while it is suggested (Fries 1995) that the tracking of Themes over complete texts indicates the method of development of that text as an instance of a particular register. For English, then, both the dynamics of textualisation and post-hoc texture are predominantly centred on the nominal group or, more accurately, the referents that nominal groups index, as illustrated in Text 1, where the experiential Themes are in bold.

Text 1.

We tramped

¹ This is the unmarked Theme for both declarative and interrogative clauses. While clauses may also have interpersonal and textual Themes, and these may play significant roles in the method of development in particular registers, these are optional where the experiential Theme is not. It is fair to say therefore that the nominal group realising the Subject of the clause is the most important element in identifying the method of development of texts.

and [**we**]² trudged over many humps and bumps and hillocks
until **it** was time to stop at the next house.

This was another little cottage that stood high on a hill.

In it lived two bachelor brothers, Roderick and Finlay.

They did not look at all alike.

Finlay was lean and serious

And [**he**] had an air of sophistication about him.

He was dressed in navy serge trousers, waistcoat to match,
and a Kilmarnock shirt.

He was obviously the one in charge of the household duties

And [**he**] soon started preparations to offer us hospitality.

MacDonald (2009: 86)

This emphasis on nominals as thematic extends to the languages other than English (LOTE) analysed from the metafunctional perspective of SFL in Caffarel et al. (2004 [eds.]). All of the languages described in these works are either nominal-initial in the unmarked case and (as with Japanese) or (as with Tagalog) signal thematicity morphologically. In the case of those languages where there is no morphological marking Theme is analysed as the first experiential element of the clause. As with English, therefore, nominals account for the vast majority of experiential Themes, followed by Circumstances, with the verbal element as thematic only in a very small minority of cases. Scottish Gaelic, a language that has not been analysed from an SFL perspective, therefore presents an interesting point of comparison for textuality in that it is verb-initial in unmarked clauses (though this is slightly misleading as it is in fact the Finite element, often but not always conflated with the Predicator, that is the initial element) and carries no inflections that could be analysed as marking thematic status.³

² Ellipted Themes appear in square brackets.

³ Mackenzie (2009), however, is an overview of Gaelic interpersonal structure from a Functional Discourse Grammar (FDG) perspective. It should be noted that what are considered textual functions in SFL fall under the broader category of interpersonal, as the subcategory pragmatic functions, in FDG. In these terms the FDG element *topic* is close to, but not identical with, the SFL category of Theme. However, Mackenzie (2009: 902) concludes that “In Gaelic, there is no tendency for topical material to be fronted, as it is in many other languages, or be given any other sort of ‘special treatment’ that would justify recognizing it as a pragmatic function in the grammar”. While differences in orientation, in particular the clausal focus of FDG, mean that this

When researchers “turn to languages that have not been described at all, or have not been described in systemic functional terms”, Matthiessen (in Andersen et al. 2015: 22) suggests that we need to complement the computer-assisted analysis of texts using existing analytical categories with a return to the more laborious manual analysis and mark-up of the nitty-gritty of texts. In terms of textuality, such a bottom-up analysis of LOTE should not only shed light onto how the resources of languages with radically different structural potentials can be marshalled in order to produce functionally comparable texts but also provide an opportunity to reconsider our conceptions of textualisation and texture generally. This leads to a chicken-and-egg approach to description:

- (i) When analysing for textuality and identifying the functional structures that drive this process we have to move between, on the one hand, our pretheoretical intuitions as “sophisticated and experienced veterans of perception” (Tannen 1993: 20) capable of recognising different methods of development in individual stretches of text, across whole texts and between registers and, on the other hand, objective descriptions based on the functional structures that we are slowly identifying as characteristic of the language under analysis (cf. Caffarel et al. 2004a: xii on positing language-specific features on the grounds that such an analysis “presents a plausible interpretation of patterns that emerge in discourse from different registers”);
- (ii) We both draw on existing categories as identified for other languages, most often English, while developing categories that are specific to the language under analysis. This often involves a process of what Halliday (in Caffarel et al. 2004b: 15) calls ‘transfer comparison’, where emic variations of etic categories such as Subject and Theme are identified and their peculiarities noted. The essential point here is not to fit new grammars to old skins.

Given the lack of morphological marking in Gaelic, the most obvious starting point in an examination of textuality in Gaelic is to explore the default position that Theme, as the point of departure of the clause, is the first element with experiential meaning. This

conclusion is not directly transferable to the discussion of the SFL category of Theme in this paper, the overlap between the two theories would suggest that further dialogue would provide insights here. This is particularly true as the FDG category of topic is more closely related to the original use of *theme* in the Prague School and this paper suggests that a reengagement with these origins would be of benefit to SFL theory.

would mean that for the vast majority of Gaelic clauses, as in Text 2, Theme would conflate with Predicator:

Text 2⁴.

Thòisich an uairsin an rùsgadh,

STARTED/...⁵/THEN/THE/SHEARING

Then the shearing **started**

Agus cha do chòrd sin idir riumsa.

AND/neg. particle/past particle/AGREE/THIS/AT ALL/TO ME

And I didn't **enjoy** that at all

Cha do stad na fir aige seo.

Neg. particle/past particle/STOP/THE pl/MEN.AT IT/THIS

The men didn't **stop**.

MacDonald (2009: 15)

However, while initial Finite/Predicator is the unmarked case, Gaelic has a much richer variety of resources for starting off clauses than English and draws on these resources much more frequently. This is demonstrated in Text 3, the author's own translation of Text 1, which was particularly unremarkable in its almost total use of nominal Subjects as Themes. As well as glossing each word underneath the Gaelic original I have provided a translation that captures the textuality of the Gaelic version as well as I can in English form (what I shall call 'semi-translations'). I have marked in bold the first experiential item from the Gaelic version in both the original and the semi-translation.

Text 3.

Chùm sinn oirnn dhachaigh air monadh is fraoch is cnuic is grobain

KEPT/WE/ON

US/HOME/ON/MOOR/AND/HEATHER/AND/HILLS/AND/HUMPS

We **kept on** home over heather and hills and humps

gus an do ràinig sinn an ath thaigh.

UNTIL/dependent particle/past particle/REACHED/WE/THE/NEXT/HOUSE

⁴ Non-aligned glosses are provided with lexemes in capitals.

⁵ The ellipses mean that the element has no independent meaning but is part of a compound with a single gloss.

until we **reached** the next house.

B'e taigh beag eile a bha seo air bàrr cnuic,

Past copula + IT/HOUSE/SMALL/OTHER/relative/WAS/THIS/ON/TOP/HILL

genitive

'Twas **another small house**⁶ this, on the top of a hill

*agus dà bhràthair a'fuireach ann, Ruairidh agus Fionnlaigh.*⁷

AND/TWO/BROTHER dual/LIVING/IN IT/RODERICK/AND/FINLAY

and **two brothers** living in it, Roderick and Finlay.

Cha robh iad idir coltach ri chèile.

Negative particle/WERE/THEY/AT ALL/LIKE/TO/reciprocal pronoun

They **weren't** at all like each other.

Duine caol, tana a bha ann am Fionnlaigh.

MAN/SLENDER/THIN/relative/past BE/IN⁸/.../FINLAY.

A **slender, thin man** was Finlay.

*Bha e air a dhreasaigeadh ann an deisge gorm, briogais, peiteag is seacaid agus lèine
Kilmarnock.*

WAS/HE/ON/HIS/DRESSING/IN.../SUIT/BLUE/TROUSERS/WAITCOAT/AND/JA
CKET/AND

/SHIRT/KILMARNOCK

He⁹ was after dressing in a blue suit, trousers, waistcoat, jacket and Kilmarnock shirt.

B'e duine sgiobalta stòlda a bh'ann

Past copula + 3sg/MAN/ELEGANT/SERIOUS/relative/WAS IN HIM

⁶ I am treating *b'e* as a purely structural element here.

⁷ Note that this clause has no Finite.

⁸ Denotes that there are two words needed to translate IN.

⁹ I am treating BHA as purely interpersonal, as Finite, here.

‘Twas **an elegant serious man** that was in him.¹⁰

*agus e a rèir coltais a’ coimhead às dèidh an taigh.*¹¹

AND/HE/ACCORDING TO.../APPEARANCE/LOOKING/AFTER.../THE/HOUSE.

and **him**, by all appearances looking after the house.

Thòisich e sa mhionaid air deasachadh aoigheachd dhuinn.

STARTED/HE/IN THE/MINUTE/ON/PREPARING/HOSPITALITY/TO US

He **began** preparing hospitality for us after a while.

MacDonald (2009: 26)

Table one compares the Themes of the two texts according to this analysis, with a third column added to show the first nominal group in the Gaelic version:

<i>Themes in English version</i>	<i>First experiential element in Gaelic version</i>	<i>First nominal group in Gaelic version</i>
We	kept on	We
[we]	Reached	We
It	small house	small house
This	two brothers	two brothers
in it	weren’t	They
They	a slender, thin man	a slender, thin man
Finlay	He	He
[he]	an elegant serious man	an elegant serious man
He	Him	Him
He	Began	He
[he]		

¹⁰ Nominal attributes are usually expressed with the preposition ANN (IN) in Gaelic and I’ve left this in the semi-translation although it is a long way removed from Standard English.

¹¹ No Finite again.

Table 1. Comparison of possible thematic progression in Texts 1 and 3

There are several things to notice here. Firstly, assuming for the time being that Theme in Gaelic is realised by the first experiential element of the clause, then we have two very different methods of development, each with their own sequential logic, for what is essentially the same text as a semantic unit. Alternatively, even if we assume, following English even more closely and without serious theoretical reason, that the first nominal group is likely to be Theme, then we still have a different unfolding of the same text. Thirdly, the semi-translations do not really work as individual clauses in English (though they do resemble caricatures of Celtic English), and it's not at all clear to me how well they read in sequence despite the fact that the Gaelic originals work together effectively to provide a distinctive textuality and cohesion to the extract. One obvious reason for this is that, although these semi-translations keep some of the Gaelic textuality, the structures of English word order mean some of the features of the Gaelic original are lost and the whole picture of the Gaelic message semantics is not captured. It should also be noted at this point that the texts are not marked for Given and New, features that work in tandem with thematic structure in creating textuality, and that this may have some bearing on the relative cohesion of the different versions. The conclusions I draw from these points taken together are that there is more at stake here than simply identifying what counts as Theme in Gaelic: rather, there are issues concerning the whole *characterology* (Mathesius 1964) of the language and the combination of various resources – above, below and alongside the clause – that work together to push the text forward.

One further complicating factor is that in many Gaelic clauses the Finite and Predicator are separated by an experiential element and even appear at opposite ends of the clause, as in examples (2) and (3):

(2) *Bha iad ag innse naidheachdean...*

Past BE¹²/THEY/AT/TELLING/NEWS

They were telling news...

MacDonald (2009: 27)

(3) *Bha an rùm air a chomharrachadh...*

Past BE/THE/SITTING ROOM/ON/ITS/ARRANGING

¹² Following Halliday & Matthiessen's (2004: 111-115) treatment of auxiliary BE as Finite but not Predicator.

The room had been arranged...

MacDonald (2009: 26)

Now, the Finite carries no experiential meaning, so raising three interesting possibilities: (i) that, where conflation occurs, the Predicator is the Theme, but where there is no conflation it is the nominal group immediately after the Finite; (ii) that the interpersonal element of Finite plays the thematic role of grounding the clause as message in Gaelic; or (iii) that Theme in Gaelic is not realised by the first experiential element but is lexicogrammatically marked in some other way.

These are questions I cannot hope to resolve in this paper, but let us keep them on hold while I make a brief excursus to discuss Rhetorical Units (RUs), which I hope will add another angle of analysis which both benefits from and contributes to the discussion of crosslinguistic issues with Theme raised by the Gaelic data. Such a to-ing and fro-ing between concepts and levels of analysis – shunting, in SFL’s technical terms! – can prove a useful analytical method as it forces us to look not just at the inherent functionality of specific linguistic features but also at the function of such functions in a wider context. Involving Halliday’s concept of a “trinocular perspective” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 31, 119), we can look at functional features in their own terms, contrasting them with other features at the same rank, or level of analysis, but we can also consider these functions from above, considering what they contribute to higher level features of language, and from below, in terms of how they are constituted by functional elements at a lower rank. The important point here is that the features are analysed on their own terms, so that Theme, as a clause-rank feature, is *identified* in terms of clausal features, and not in terms of either its contribution to the text as a whole or the constituents that realise it; however, in shunting between ranks, we may find it necessary to refine our clause-rank conception of Theme (grammar is, after all, just language turned back on itself) to capture a functionality that contributes more effectively to our analysis at the levels above and below.

3. Rhetorical Units

Rhetorical Units (see Cloran 2010 for the most recent overview) are semantic units beyond the clause as message (though perhaps coterminous with a single message) and below the text (though perhaps coterminous with it), where a text is defined, following Halliday & Hasan (1976: 1), as a single coherent stretch of language. A single Rhetorical Unit is identified as a stretch of language having a continuity of reference with respect to the semantic categories of Central Entity (CE) and Event Orientation

(EO). The CE is realised lexicogrammatically as the Subject of the clause while the EO refers to the temporality and modality of the message, most often signalled through features of the verbal group. Between them these features, as the name suggests, define the rhetorical purpose of the message independently of experiential features. So, for example, in the following message, “my brother”, as CE, denotes a specific but non-present referent, while the EO is habitual, combining to realise (part of) an Account RU (see Appendix for a full classification of RUs):¹³

(4) *My brother doesn't eat eggs.*

In example (5), in comparison, the CE is a copresent interactant and the EO is concurrent, between them realising (part of) a Commentary RU:

(5) *I am standing here before you today...*

As stated above, RUs are said to extend as long as the CE/EO conjunct remains constant. So, the stretch of text in example (6) represents two RUs, as shown by the boxing:

¹³ As with all SFL terms the capital letter suggests that the metalanguage is designed to reflect normal usage but nonetheless has its own specific meaning in the theory.

(6)

1. Commentary:

I am standing here before you today
as I wish to discuss the events of the past week.

1.1 Recount:

These events led to terrible destruction
and have deeply shocked us all

The two RUs in this case are said to display the structural relationship of *embedding* as the semantic content of the first RU is picked up in the Theme of the first message of the second (cf. Daneš's (1974) linear progression). It is suggested that in such cases the embedded RU fulfils some function within the matrix RU, in contrast with *expansions*, where the second RU is cohesively related to a preceding RU but has no function within it (Cloran 2010: 46). Expansions are realised when the semantic content of the preceding text is taken up in the Rheme of the first message of the following RU, as with an expanded version of example (1) (reproduced as [7]) provided at the beginning of this article:

(7)

1 Account:

Spain is a beautiful country.
It boasts a warm climate and a lively culture.

2 Recount:

Many famous artists have lived in Spain over the years.

This is considered an expansion as by use of this structure the writer is now in a position to talk about artists rather than Spain itself. Note the different ways of boxing and numbering the RUs for embeddings and expansions, reflecting the structural-semantic relations between them.

Two more relationships hold between sequential RUs. There may be discontinuous RUs, where an RU relates back to a stretch of text prior to the immediately preceding one; and there may be cases where there is no link at all between an RU and preceding

text, in which case, following Halliday & Hasan's (1976) definition, we have a new text.¹⁴

RUs thus provide us with a semantic unit above the message (congruently realised as a clause) and they do so in a dynamic and incremental fashion, with units opening up the potential for what is to follow, rather than realising elements within larger hierarchical structures as with, say, Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST; Mann et al. 1992), which seems better suited to the description of planned texts viewed post hoc as products. Cloran considers that RUs are elements in the construction of simple genres (Cloran 2010: 56) and that they simultaneously realise ideational, interpersonal and textual functions.¹⁵ For reasons that are too detailed to discuss in this paper (but see Bartlett 2015) I disagree, seeing them as entirely textual relations. The nub of my argument is that RUs are defined in terms of spatial and temporal (including irrealis) deixis and that these are textual resources, orientating the narrative event in relation to the deictic centre of the speaker's here and now.¹⁶ Returning to Cloran and Hasan's labels, then, I would suggest that Entity Orientation (to be labelled EntO) is a more appropriate term than Central Entity for the spatial aspect of RUs. Returning to my suggestion that for Gaelic the Theme is the Finite element we can now see that such a claim can be supported in some way by the notion of RUs, where Finite, as Event Orientation (relabelled as EvO), and Subject, as manifesting EntO, are both seen as crucial elements of grounding (cf. Langacker 1991 on the grounding function of Finite and Subject). The argument here would therefore be that Gaelic makes the grounding function of Finite thematically salient while English, in the vast majority of cases, focuses on the Subject.¹⁷

¹⁴ There are cases, however, where individual messages may show no overt relation to preceding RUs but where these are serving as preambles, fillers or such like before the text continues in a cohesive fashion.

¹⁵ This appears to be a change from her original position (Cloran 1994: 400) in which she relates RUs to the contextual parameter of mode, thus implying they are textual in meaning.

¹⁶ This is unproblematically recognised for spatial deixis, though the standard treatment of tense in SFL is as an ideational feature (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 335-342). Somewhat contradictorily, however, the system of tense is entered through the system of deicticity in the verbal group network (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 349).

¹⁷ See Halliday & Webster (2014: 185) for a brief discussion of the evolution of the Theme/Subject relationship. Also, see Fawcett (2003) for a detailed argument in favour of analysing Subject in English as a privileged type of Theme.

However, while the classification of individual RUs is a function of their spatial and temporal orientation, the cohesive relations between them are defined, as we have seen, in terms of the experiential semantics of consecutive thematic and rhematic elements. As both these aspects are involved in the description of RUs we will need separate terms to account for them. We can thus recycle the term Central Entity (changing the label to CEnt to avoid confusion) and introduce the term Central Event (CEv) to signify the experiential features of the thematically salient participants and processes respectively. So for example, *elephant* and *elephants* can be classified as the same CEnt (as can *elephants* and *cat*, though at a further remove), while *elephants* and *buildings* would generally not be (though everything is a matter of degree!). Conversely, *elephants* and *buildings* can be classified as the same EntO (Class; see table in Appendix), while *this elephant* and *elephants* cannot, as they are Other and Class respectively.

In this way the (expanded) concept of RUs take us several steps beyond Theme and Rheme when looking at the process of textualisation and dynamicity. Most obviously RUs move beyond the largely clausal orientation of Theme/Rheme structure to consider larger stretches of cohesive text; but they also show how it is not just the experiential semantics of the CEnt that is being used to ground the message as ‘the point of departure’. The EntO, the EvO and the CEv are all also potentially thematic (though not necessarily in English) and the grounding each provides can be maintained or developed, independently or in conjunction, as meanings unfold as text. For example, the text’s temporal orientation (EvO) may continue for several messages even as the experiential categorisation of the CEnt changes. By this approach a series of past actions would appear as an orderly method of development, and would comprise a single Recount, while in standard accounts a constant Theme would not be identified. Such a multiplicity of grounding options captures the ebbing and flowing, the stasis and change that characterises real-time textuality, what has elsewhere, for example by Gregory (1988), been labelled phasal flow.

Despite having come to a point where the descriptions of English and Gaelic can be reconciled (in this area), it is still necessary to recognise the differences and in this regard it would seem a reasonable hypothesis that while time and space are both elements of grounding in all(?) languages, different languages give priority to one over the other as unmarked Theme (space in English, time in Gaelic, see below) while developing different strategies to cater for the grounding in the other area. This suggests

two things: (i) that Theme alone is not enough to describe the process of textualisation – and Firbas’s (1992a; 1992b) notion of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) is a good place to start, as is its uptake in Functional Discourse Grammar (though the accounts in both cases are heavily oriented to nominal reference); and (ii) that the means of accommodating Theme and other features in order to facilitate textualisation both defines (in part) and depends on the characterology of the specific language.

In the following sections I take on board some of the ideas developed here to revisit the concept of Theme structure in Gaelic and then return to considerations for English in light of the suggestions developed.

4. Further evidence from Gaelic

Dealing with Gaelic first it will be necessary to look a little deeper into the grammar to see if there is further support for the idea of an RU-style as opposed to a purely thematic progression.

As stated above, Gaelic is a VSO language or, rather, a Finite-initial language where the lexical verb is conflated with the Finite in simple tenses but placed after the S in compound tenses:

- (8) *Bhuail mi an dorus.*

STRUCK/I/THE/DOOR

F/P S C

I knocked on the door.

- (9) *Bha mi a’bualadh an dorus.*

WAS/I/AT STRIKING/THE/Door gen

F S P C

I was knocking on the door.

- (10) *Bha mi air an dorus a bhualadh.*

WAS/I/ON/THE/DOOR/inf. particle/infinitive STRIKE

F S C P

I had knocked on the door.

The initial status of the Finite in Gaelic offers a suggestion that, in terms of its characterology, Gaelic is an event-oriented language in contrast to English, which is Participant-oriented. In other words, Gaelic focuses on the existential status of an event

which is elaborated in terms of the participants involved in that event, where English focuses on a privileged participant as Subject and makes claims about their involvement (with other participants) in an event. In logical structure the two languages might be represented as follows, where E is event and P is participant:

Gaelic: E (P₁, P₂)

English: S (E, P₂)

Further evidence for this perspective in Gaelic comes from negative existential clauses or those with what would be indefinite Subjects in English:

(11) *Chan eil duine ann.*

Neg. particle/dependent BE/MAN/THERE

There's nobody there.

(12) *Cha tàinig duine.*

Neg. particle/past dependent COME/MAN

Nobody came.

These are better understood, to gloss the suggested logical structure, as “it is not the case that a man was there” and “it is not the case that a man came” respectively, rather than “a man isn't there” and “a man didn't come”. In English however, the existence of the negative indefinite pronoun allows for the focus on the nominal Subject.

Passive¹⁸ forms offer further evidence for the centrality of events in Gaelic:

(13) *Chaidh mo bhualadh.*

WENT/MY/STRIKING

I was hit.

The semi-translation here would be “My striking came about”, which clearly focuses on the event rather than the participants while the realisation of the patient (or Goal in SFL terminology) within the gerundive nominal group makes it still harder to claim thematic status for the participant in such constructions on the basis of a regular form/function pairing rather than a notional conception of topicality.

¹⁸ There are several passive-type structures in Gaelic, those formed with GO are the most common.

Perhaps most strikingly, in the negotiation of propositions it is the process that is central in Gaelic and the ‘subject’ cannot be involved in the incomplete clauses that characterise such negotiation.¹⁹ The grammatical glosses show a clear contrast to English where the Subject and Finite are the central elements of negotiation:

(14) *Dh’fhainneachd e an robh mi deiseil...*

ASKED/HE/int. particle/dependent past BE/I/READY

He asked if I was ready

Thuir mi gu robh,

SAID/I/projecting particle/dependent past BE

I said I was.

agus tha.

AND/present BE

and I am.

Uill, tha mi a’smaoineachadh gu bheil.

WELL/present BE/I/THINKING/projecting particle/dependent present BE

(MacLean 2009: 18-19)

Note that there are no words for YES and NO in Gaelic so that such short forms are necessary in question and answer sequences:

(15) *An tàinig do bhràthair?*

Int. particle/past dependent COME/YOUR/BROTHER

Did your brother come?

Cha tàinig, ach thig.

Neg. marker/past dependent COME/BUT/future COME

No (he didn’t), but he will.

¹⁹ Note that there is no subject marking of pronouns and that in all but a few residual cases there is no subject inflection on the Finite.

There is therefore good reason to suggest that clauses in Gaelic are primarily grounded in time and propositional content rather than in space and nominal content as in English. It is important to note at this point that I am not suggesting that these different groundings are psychologically salient for the speakers of the two languages; it is rather that they form a framework which shapes the functional development of the languages over time (phylogenesis) so providing a different set of strategic resources for the construction of textuality and the moving forward of discourse in real time (logogenesis).

Furthermore, the examples of negotiation in 14 and 15, combined with an almost complete lack of verbal concord, suggests that there is no Subject in Gaelic in either the traditional or SFL senses (in SFL the role in negotiation is key).²⁰ The existence of passive alternatives therefore points to a thematic role for the first nominal in the clause, in contrast to the argument developed so far for the event (as Finite or Predicator) as central:

(16) *Bhuail an duine an dorus.*

STRUCK/THE/MAN/THE/DOOR

The man knocked on the door.

(17) *Bhuaileadh an dorus leis an duine siud.*

WAS STRUCK/THE/DOOR/BY/THE/MAN/distal demonstrative.

The door was knocked by that man.

There is therefore reason to see both the Finite/Predicator and the first nominal group as thematic in Gaelic, an event-oriented language in which Finite/Predicator has primacy – the converse of the English situation, as a Participant-oriented language in which Finite (as Event Orientation) has a degree of thematic status, but with Subject (generally) having primacy. This then accords with the idea developed so far that rather than looking at textual progression in terms of thematic development alone, whether Theme is seen as primarily verbal or nominal in the language under analysis, textual dynamism is a function of both temporal and nominal shifts and individual languages will draw on

²⁰ These arguments are indicative and necessarily brief here and would require a much longer justification in their own right.

different resources to bring different elements into play according to their specific characterology.

Questions clearly arise here as to how this analysis would impact upon an RU analysis of Gaelic, questions which cannot be answered here but which would form part of an agenda for future work in communicative dynamism above, below and alongside the clause. For now I shall return to English to explore in brief some questions with regard to Theme analysis in relation to the RU framework set out so as to suggest potential directions for further research.

5. Return to English

This section discusses some ideas arising from the view that for English, as a participant-oriented language, thematic emphasis is generally on the nominal element, but that dynamism involves both temporal and nominal progression and is a function of stretches of text beyond the clause as message.

An important point arising from this perspective is that Theme need not necessarily function as a feature of individual messages, linking them to the previous text, but can also function to strategically shift the ongoing discourse between thematic areas, or even RU types, in coherent fashion, as in the example discussed previously (7), and repeated here:

<i>1 Account:</i> Spain is a beautiful country. It boasts a warm climate and a lively culture.
<i>2 Recount:</i> Many famous artists have lived in Spain over the years.

This strategy allows the author not just to link the single message “many famous artists have lived in Spain over the years” to the previous text but to move the text on from a discussion of Spain to a discussion of artists. Noticeably, this involves a marked conflation of Theme and New:

Many famous artists	have lived in Spain over the years.
Theme	Rheme

-----→ New	Given
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This can be explained in terms of the shift in topic/RU rather than in terms of signalling unknown experiential information, so providing motivation for similar cases where the New information has previously appeared in the text and is easily accessible to memory, a phenomenon that has led to much spilling of ink. Variations in word order, including the use of passives, can also be accounted for in terms of the spatiotemporal orientation of the text as message rather than the choice of referent as Theme or Subject:

(18) *I can't stand rats.* (Reflection)

(19) *Rats, I can't sand.* (Generalisation).

Such a process can be extended to cover examples where it would appear that texts move through a chain of RUs for purely rhetorical reasons, for the sake of cohesion as much as for any ideational content expressed, as seemingly demonstrated in Text 4, the opening of Barack Obama's first presidential address. Here generic convention demands that Obama starts from a Commentary on the occasion itself and his role in it, but what he really wants to talk about are the political issues of the day. However, rather than jump straight onto such issues, Obama moves through a cohesive chain of embedded RUs (as signalled by the boxing) that take him seamlessly to the nub of his message while also fulfilling the key function of setting present day issues within the mythical history of the American nation.

Text 4.

1.	My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you have bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors.	Commentary
2	I thank President Bush for his service to our nation, as well as the generosity and cooperation he has shown throughout this transition.	
3	Forty-four Americans have now taken the presidential oath.	Recount
4	The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace.	
5	Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms.	.1 Account
6	At these moments, America has carried on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office,	.1.1 Recount
7	but because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.	
8	So it has been.	
9	So it must be with this generation of Americans.	.1.1.1 Action
10	That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood.	.1.2 Comm.
11	Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.	
12	Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age.	
13	Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered.	
14	Our health care is too costly;	
15	our schools fail too many;	
16	and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.	
17	These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics.	.1.2.1 Gen.

Returning to the structural relations of embedding and expansion posited by Cloran (2010), examples such as this suggest that there may be further relations worth investigating. For example, when the embedded RU is rhetorically more central than the RU in which it is embedded it may be useful to think of a framing rather than an embedding relation. Likewise, the semantic as well as structural relations between RUs should be considered, as for example the move from a Generalisation to a Recount might function as a *Specification*.

There is much room for a more delicate classification at various levels of analysis. For example, would an embedded Specification have a different rhetorical function, or move the text on in a different way, from an expanding one? More generally, are there functional differences between embeddings and expansions that pick up on material from the Theme or the Rheme of the preceding message, or from further back in the

preceding RU as a whole? Or where the information picked up on is presented in post-New rather than thematic position in the first message of the new RU?

Taking such ideas further, and on analogy with Firbas's (1992 a, b) concept of communicative dynamism, we might consider if successive messages within a single RU can be analysed as contributing different degrees of dynamism to the RU as a unit, with some messages providing links to given information, others to new, and others functioning more as transitions (cf. Firbas 1992b: 175) between these functional features?

Bringing intonation back into the picture, there is the obvious question of whether intonation paragraphs (O'Grady 2010) are coextensive with RUs, and if not, why not? What is the functional effect of the overlaps and tensions between them? And more generally, how do the two systems of resources work together to push the text on in different ways? As suggested above, this will depend on the characterology of each language under analysis and the constraints and affordances offered by the lexicogrammatical resources each has developed and the potential for interplay between them.

6. Conclusion

Berry (1996) discusses the different approaches to Theme (in English) taken by systemic functional linguists, ranging from Halliday's first experiential element at one extreme to all the clause up to and including the Predicator at the other, an approach which importantly includes the Finite within the Theme. Halliday (1994: 334) also presents an alternative to his strict Theme/Rheme division in terms of peaks of prominence, with thematic prominence in diminuendo across the clause while informational prominence is in crescendo. The approach suggested here is a sort of compromise between both these approaches, with both a Theme and a thematic element, with the nature of Theme itself being language specific and with the different elements of the thematic element contributing to textual dynamism in distinct ways. Thus for English, with its nominal orientation, the Theme itself, the element that provides the primary grounding for the clause as message and which forms cohesive links with other messages, is the first experiential element of the clause, with the Finite and other elements also grounding the message and combining with the Theme to determine the RU of the message. In Gaelic, in contrast, I have suggested that the primary grounding of the clause as message is through the Finite, with nominal and the Predicator working with the Finite as secondary grounding. In both cases, grounding relates to more than

the experiential content of the Theme – a hang-up from analysis of nominal-oriented languages – and is more to do with the spatiotemporal configuration of the clause, its relation to the deictic centre and the rhetorical effect this serves.

This paper has set out to ask some questions about text construction as a process and how users of different languages draw on the different resources at their disposal to reach broadly similar goals following different paths. Few conclusions, if any, have been reached, but hopefully a shadow of an outline of an agenda has been sketched out. To carry out this agenda we need to be cautious of a priori assumptions and of exporting categories from one language to another. We need instead to focus on each language in its own right and continually switch focus between formal and functional features, asking both what sort of forms fill the functions we are focusing on and what functions the different forms fulfil, with neither approach being sufficient in itself for a systematic, exhaustive study, as advised by Fries (2008: 39) in his summary of forty years of research into thematicity and the textual metafunction.

Appendix: Classification of Rhetorical Units (after Cloran 2010)

Classification of Rhetorical Units.

EVENT ORIENTATION CENTRAL ENTITY	HABITUAL	REALIS		IRREALIS	
		CONCURRENT	PRIOR	GOODS/SERVICES EXCHANGE	INFORMATION EXCHANGE
Within material situational setting (MSS)			Recount	Action	FORECAST
interactant	Reflection				
other: person/object	Observation	Commentary			Plan/Prediction
Not within MSS					Prediction
person/object	Account	Report			Prediction
Class	Generalisation			Counsel	

Continuum of role of language in social process:

ancillary [e.g. contextualised] _____ constitutive [e.g. decontextualised]
Action-Commentary Observation-Reflection Report Account Plan-Prediction Counsel Conjecture Recount Generalisation

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