

# Theme Selection and Progression: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Study of Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides to die

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## ABSTRACT

A good text must have a cohesion and coherence to be unified. To find the relation within the text, cannot be achieved by grammatical structure. It more depends on the non-structural resources that can be found by analyzing the thematic progression. The Thematic Progression can keep the text a well-organized unity with a clear line of information development and a clear focus on the topic. So, the coherence of a text can be identified through the thematic progression, and also we can analyzed the relationship between Thematic structure and information unit (Given and New). The investigation itself was centered around the Thematic Progression (Theme and Rheme) by Paltridge (2000) and Halliday (1994) and Information Unit (Given and New) by Bloor (1992) and Halliday (1994). The types of thematic progression patterns are reiteration, zig-zag and multiple patterns. The objectives of this research are to identify the types of Thematic Progression patterns and to analyze how Thematic Progression construct the structure of information in the text This paper analyzes Theme Selection and Theme Progression in Paulo Coelho's Novel "Veronika Decides to die" modelling Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The Study of Theme and Theme types and the distribution of Theme in the text play a crucial role in the way a given text is to be organized. The circulation of Theme-Rheme patterns and how it contributes to the general process of text production is known as Thematic Progression. It is centered on finding out how Theme choices and how various Theme Progression patterns make their contribution in order to achieve texture by applying Systemic Functional Linguistics. In order to achieve the purpose, theory of Theme-Rheme of Systemic Functional Linguistics has been applied. Two aspects of Theme in the Textual metafunction are examined: Theme Selection and Theme Progression.

**Key Words:** Systemic Functional Linguistics, Theme, Rheme, Textual Metafunction, Thematic Structure, Theme Selection, Theme Progression.

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## INTRODUCTION

*"great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree."*  
Ezra Pound

Systemic Functional Linguistics has been developed by the linguist Michael Halliday. Systemic Functional Linguistics is the study of relationship between language and its functions in social context. Systemic Functional Linguistics has been described as a functional semantic approach to language which explores how people use language in different contexts and how language is structured for use as a semiotic system.

Systemic functional linguistics is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. Also known as SFL, systemic functional grammar, Hallidayan linguistics, and Systemic linguistics.

Systemic functional linguistics treats grammar as a meaning-making resource and insists on the interrelation of form and meaning. This field of study was developed in the 1960s by British linguist M.A.K. Halliday (b. 1925), who had been influenced by the work of the Prague School and British linguist J.R. Firth (1890-1960).

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a theory of language centred on a notion of language function. It deals with the

language in actual use and focuses on texts in their contexts. Its main concern lies with the ‘dynamic set of choices made available to the speakers of a language to communicate in different social contexts and for particular social purposes.’ [Halliday, 1994]

Systemic Linguistics is an avowedly functionalist approach to language, and it is arguably the functionalist approach which has been most highly developed. In contrast to most other approaches, SL explicitly attempts to combine purely structural information with overtly social factors in a single integrated description. Like other functionalist frameworks, SFL is deeply concerned with the purposes of language use.

Halliday says that language is structured into three bundles of metafunctions – Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual. Each of these metafunctions has its own set of linguistic structures. Ideational metafunction deals with the way how language is used to represent the pattern of experiences. In Interpersonal metafunction, the language is used to express the interaction of the speakers and the listeners. Finally, the third metafunction, i.e. Textual metafunction deals with the effective organisation of the message. Textual metafunction is expressed through the cohesive ties, Theme-Rheme structure, given and new information. In the present study, my focus is on the textual metafunction.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

For this study, clause element serves as the unit of analysis. The first important task is to divide the chosen passages into number of meaningful clauses. The selection of the passages is based on the reasons due to which Veronika attempts to commit suicide. The next step is to fill in the ellipsed participants.

Secondly, Theme choices have been examined by using Theme-Rheme framework. After occurrence of all Theme types are obtained, their percentages are calculated by dividing each Theme type by the total number of clauses.

Thirdly, the analysis of Theme Progression Patterns has been conducted based on the model as depicted in Eggins (2004). Thus, the data analysis for this study has been done through quantitative research.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Systemic Functional Linguistics is used as a framework for the analysis. This paper focuses on the two aspects of theme of Textual Metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics- Theme Selection and Theme Progression. Textual metafunction deals with the way to organize clauses in the form of the message effectively. Within Theme choices, Unmarked Theme and Marked Theme (Circumstantial Adjunct, Complement Adjunct, and Predicated Theme) are taken into account for analysis. In terms of Theme Progression Patterns, Theme Reiteration Pattern, Zig-Zag Pattern and Multiple Rheme Pattern have been analyzed.

#### **Thematic Structure**

Thematic Structure is one of the various structures of clause, which “gives the clause its character as a message” (Halliday, 1994, p. 37; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). The thematic structure of the sentence is divided into two parts: Theme and Rheme. The organizing of the Theme and the Rheme is a crucial aspect in determining whether a text is cohesively organized or not. Theme can also be considered as what Halliday and Hassan (1976) termed as semantic resources which are able to link a sentence to what has gone before. Theme in English is always realized in the first position of the clause (Eggins, 2004; Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). The definition of Rheme is also varied. Halliday (2004, p. 64) defines Rheme as the developed-part of theme, “the remainder of the message.”

#### **Theme Selection**

Theme is divided into three types: (a) Topical or Ideational (b) Interpersonal, and (c) Textual. Topical theme is a constituent in a clause which can be a participant, circumstance or process (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). A topical theme may be preceded by either interpersonal or textual theme or both. Interpersonal theme refers to vocative, modal adjunct, finite verbal operator and polarity adjunct (Eggins, 1994; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004, p. 79) that exists before the topical theme and the theme indicating the point of view being taken in the clause. Further, what count as textual theme are continuative, conjunction, and conjunctive adjunct which also come before the topical theme.

#### **Theme Progression**

Theme patterns play an important role in the connectivity and interrelatedness of texts. The organization of information in texts is determined by the progression in the ordering of utterance of themes and their rhemes.

Theme progression is a salient aspect in the study of Systemic Functional Linguistics as it can function as a cohesive tie. The study of thematic progression has been vastly conducted for various purposes (including revealing the thematic progression in newspaper editorials and in translation texts) revealing the role of thematic progression in cultural (academic) writing system. This paper focuses on investigating the pattern of thematic progression in Paulo Coelho's text.

SFL views language “not as a set of structures but as a network of SYSTEMS, or interrelated sets of options for making meaning” (Halliday, 1994:15, upper case in original). In order to account for this meaning-making potential of language, as introduced in Section 2.7.2, Halliday (1994) proposes three metafunctions at a lexico-grammatical level: ideational – “construing a model of experience” interpersonal – “enacting social relationships” textual – “creating relevance to context” (Halliday, 1994:36) These three metafunctions are drawn on simultaneously whenever language is realised. The speaker/writer can be seen to have made lexico-grammatical choices to represent the world.

### **Theme and Rheme:**

The two choices Theme and Rheme form the major system within the Textual Metafunction. Theme, for Halliday, is the “point of departure; it is that with which the clause is concerned” (Halliday, 1994:37). Theme is seen as a universal element; in every language there is a means for identifying what the clause is about. Halliday defines Theme as a function where a “special status [is] assigned to one part of it [the clause]” (Halliday, 1994:37). In English, Theme is realised by what is placed in initial position within the clause and this initial position gives the Theme a ‘special status’ within the clause. The writer could have chosen a different starting point, but consciously or unconsciously chooses to thematise the problem. The special status given to the initial position in English is not a universal trait. In English the Theme, the ‘point of departure’ for the clause, is also one of the means by which the clause is organised as a message. Theme is the ‘glue’ that structures and binds the ideational and interpersonal meanings. In studies of Theme in children’s writing and in writing in the workplace, the choice and representation of Theme is seen as a crucial element related to the success of a text (Martin, 1985/89, 1992b, 1993b; Martin and Rothery, 1993; Berry, 1995, 1996; Stainton, 1996, amongst others). The belief that an understanding of the way in which Theme works can be usefully incorporated into pedagogy is the motivation behind this and many other studies of Theme. Theme, then, is seen to play a crucial role in focusing and organising the message and to contribute to the coherence and success of the message. Martin (1992b) argues that the choice of what comes first is “a textual resource systematically exploited” to effect different patterns (Martin, 1992b:12). Martin adds that the different patterns and meanings made by the choice of Theme can be manipulated and exploited, consciously or unconsciously, by the writer in order to convey their ‘angle’ or viewpoint. In more recent work, Martin (2000b) and Martin and Rose (forthcoming) suggest that Theme and many other features in a text function to construe the writer’s viewpoint. In Example 3.1, the writer has chosen the problem as the Theme of the clause in order to emphasise its importance. Each choice of Theme represents a different starting point for the message conveyed in the clause. In Example 3.2, the agent you has thematic status within the organisation of the clause, and as the Theme of the clause it carries ‘a special status’.

Rheme is everything that is not Theme: it is the part of the clause where the Theme is developed (Halliday, 1994:37). A message structure in English is comprised of a Theme plus a Rheme. There is an order to the structure: Theme comes first, followed by Rheme, and whatever is placed in initial position is Theme (Halliday, 1994:37). In many instances Rheme is related to New Information, while Theme is related to Given Information. Given refers to what is already known or predictable, while New refers to what is unknown or unpredictable. Halliday elaborates the distinction between Given and New as “information that is presented by the speaker as recoverable (Given) or not recoverable (New) to the listener” (Halliday, 1994:298). Martin (1992a) also points out that Theme is equated with “what the speaker is on about” while New is the structure which is “listener-oriented” (Martin, 1992a:448). Halliday adds that although the two pairs of clause functions, i.e. Theme/Given and Rheme/New, are similar, they are not the same thing. Theme realises the ‘angle’ of the story and the New elaborates the field, developing it in experiential terms (Martin, 1992a:452). Martin (1992a) also adds that Theme is generally restricted to grounding the genre of the text, while the New is not restricted in this way and is far more flexible. Theme gives a special status to a chosen part of the clause – it helps organise the message and plays a crucial role in the success of a text from a reader’s perspective.

It also helps construe the intended interpretation of the clause and the text as a whole. In addition, it is commonly understood that Theme is important since it extends the analysis of a text beyond the grammatical structure of individual clauses or sentences to the unit of text. Theme incorporates, at a higher level, the author’s aims in participating in discourse. Davies (1988) points out that Theme may be seen at a level between the grammatical constraints on allowable sentence patterns, and the high level, goal oriented discourse constraints. (Davies, 1988:179) This highlights not only the choices with which a writer or speaker is faced, but also the constraints that they must observe. Thematic choice must take generic conventions into consideration. For example, in the context of an English

business letter written to an influential client in a very formal organisation within the UK, USA or Australia, it would appear very strange if the writer used Themes such as: as my friend said, yeah it would be true to say, so sorry that I, etc. According to McCarthy (1998), such Themes are found within the context of spoken informal English. They are not commonly expected Themes in formal written workplace texts. As Davies (1988) and Fries (1995a) comment, the writer must take into consideration the ‘real world’ situation in which the reader may receive the information. Concerns related to the genre and the intended audience will influence the choice of Theme. Martin (1992b) notes that the choice of Theme “constructs a particular angle of interpretation on the topic of each text which resonates with other aspects of discourse organisation” (Martin, 1992b:12). Therefore, in the examples above, putting either the problem or you in initial position, and thus making either an abstract nominal group or a personal pronoun – both realising the Subject in their respective clauses – the starting point of the message helps construct, in combination with other features in the text, the ‘angle’ with which the message will be interpreted by the intended reader. There are many resources which help construct the angle of the intended meaning. The choice of the Subject of the main clause, which in this study is analysed as part of Theme, is one resource for organising the message.

### **Types of Theme:**

Theme can either be a simple Theme where only the Subject realises the Theme, or what Halliday (1994:52-54) terms a ‘multiple Theme’, where a textual and/or interpersonal Theme is placed before the topical Theme. Another feature which affects the way in which the Theme is interpreted is ‘markedness’, e.g. by choosing to place another Theme before the Subject of the main clause, this Theme becomes a ‘marked’ Theme. These marked Themes may be realised by a variety of grammatical elements, namely Circumstantial Adjunct, hypotactic enhancing clause, projecting clause and Complement. The Complement is a nominal group that is not functioning as Subject, but could be the Subject if the order were changed (Halliday, 1994:44). Theme, then, is seen to contribute to the construal of a text’s meanings, to the organisation of the ideas in a text, and to a reader’s interpretation of the message. Theme enhances the understanding of language at various levels: clause – Theme helps in understanding the starting point of the message. Theme helps us understand the way in which the message is organised, and it is a major device that helps us understand a text as coherent. Theme helps us understand some of the generic conventions which exist in a given genre. For example, Coffin (1997:218- 9) cites hyper-Theme choices such as “One major effect of World War II”, “Another effect of the war”, “A third consequence of the war” as hyper-Themes of a history text. Theme is valuable both as an analytical tool and a pedagogic resource. As Matthiessen points out, Theme is “a resource enabling the ideational construction of ‘knowledge’ organized into instantial ideational systems” (Matthiessen, 1995:20). At the same time, the textual metafunction acts as an ‘enabling’ resource so that it is possible for each clause to be interpreted (Matthiessen, 1995:20). The analysis of the choice of Theme and, by default, the choice of Rheme, allows the analyst to discuss linguistic choices which are crucial to the organisation, interpretation and construal of meaning.

### **Subject as an obligatory element in Theme:**

The main argument in favor of analyzing the Subject as part of Theme is that the thematic development of a text may be more easily understood (Davies, 1988, 1997; Matthiessen, 1992; Berry, 1995, 1996; and Ravelli, 1995). Berry (1995) argues that it is only when one starts to analyse everything before (but not including) the main verb as Theme that one can clearly show how a text fits together. The writer may wish to include more than one element as the start of the message. Matthiessen (1992) agrees with Berry that “... experiential Adjuncts may pile up at the beginning of the clause and the effect is clearly one of successive Thematic contextualisation” (1992:50). By including the Subject as part of the Theme, Berry and Davies argue that this ‘piling up’ of ideational meaning in the initial part of the clause should be investigated further. An analysis of a text which allows the Subject to be considered part of Theme, whether it is preceded by a marked Theme or not, makes it easier to see its thematic development (and to some extent its lexical chains and cohesive patterns), whereas in Halliday’s mode of analysis, the Subject Theme in cases of a preceding marked Theme is ‘lost’ and consequently, at times, so too is the text’s line of development. Fries, in reviewing the different approaches concerning what should be included in Theme, posits that the inclusion of the Subject “finesses the issue of exactly how Theme and Subject interact” (Fries, 1995a:15). Fries adds that this interaction is difficult to separate in a number of instances where the Subject and Theme are conflated. Ghadessy (1995) argues that since marked Themes, especially Circumstantial Adjuncts in initial position, are frequently New Information, considering these to constitute all of the Theme obscures the development of the text.

An analysis of lexical chains and cohesion does not depend on an analysis of Theme as such an analysis can be carried out without analysing Theme. However, when conducting an analysis of Theme, including the Subject as part of Theme allows the researcher to see the lexical chains, cohesion and all other choices in the Theme which may have occurred, such as a marked Theme choice. Analysing the Subject as obligatorily part of Theme allows us to always see both. The argument in the present study is that Theme can include more than one topical element and that the choice of a second topical element within the clause is a meaningful one which needs to be investigated further.

According to Halliday (1994), Theme is realised by the first element of the clause up to and including the first ideational element. Departing from this, in the present study the ‘special status’ assigned to the starting point of the message may include more than one ideational element, which means by definition the Subject of the main clause will be included in the Theme. In addition, Subjects which are found after the verb of the independent clause will not be analysed. If the Subject of the independent clause has been ellipsed, then the ellipsed Subject will be noted and analysed as ellipsed.

Theme can be analysed as an element of either the clause or the clause complex. Martin advocates analysing Theme in relation to the clause, clause complex, paragraph and text (Martin, 1992a). Whichever unit one chooses to analyse, Fries and Francis (1992) recommend that “the choice of unit must be governed by the purposes of the investigator” (Fries and Francis, 1992:47). The purpose of the present research is to provide information which can later inform pedagogy. Whittaker (1995), whose analysis was also pedagogically motivated, believes that the clause complex or “orthographic sentence” was the best choice for the unit of analysis as it was easily recognisable by students with little or no knowledge of grammar (Whittaker, 1995:107). She added that research into reading considers the sentence as the main unit used by readers to process written texts. The fact that readers with no grammatical background can recognise the sentence as a complete unit is critical, and has led to the adoption of the clause complex as a unit of analysis.

Theme is made up of the Subject of the main clause plus anything preceding the Subject. Theme may therefore include textual Themes, interpersonal Themes, as well as more than one topical Theme. The term Subject/Theme has been adopted in order to establish the obligatory topical Theme. When the Subject is the only thematic element, it is also the unmarked or default choice of Theme. When other topical features are found to precede the Subject/Theme, these are referred to as marked Theme. The distinction made between marked and Subject/Theme, and the idea that marked Theme plays a special role different to the default unmarked Theme have been established. The category of extended Theme, which includes additional topical Themes other than the Subject/Theme, such as clause elements, e.g. Circumstantial Adjunct, Complement, as well ASPECTS OF THEME AND THEIR ROLE IN WORKPLACE TEXTS 89 as dependent enhancing clauses, was introduced in a departure from Halliday’s concept of marked Theme.

The most common approach to identifying Theme in a clause is based on Halliday (1994), who states that “Theme extends from the beginning of the clause and up to (and including) the first element that has a function in transitivity” (Halliday, 1994:53). Thus, according to Halliday (1994), the Theme of a clause “ends with the first constituent that is either participant, circumstance, or process” (Halliday, 1994:52) and Rheme is “the remainder of the message” (Halliday, 1994:67), i.e. everything which is not Theme.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and findings of the paper will be discussed in this section. In the following subsections, we will present and comment on the results of our analysis. Initially, we will explore Theme Choices and afterwards we will discuss Theme Progression Patterns.

### Theme Choices:

#### Unmarked Theme:

The findings indicate that Unmarked Themes (88.6%) take place in a more common way as compared to Marked Themes (35/ 309) i.e. 11.3%. In the category of Unmarked Themes, third person pronoun ‘She’ (115/274) i.e. 41.9% is dominant. The subsequent instance exemplifies Unmarked Themes in the narration.

#### Example: 1 (c.f. Table 1)

Cl. No.	Theme	Rheme
88	She	carefully cleaned the room
89	That she	rented in a convent

The above example 1 demonstrates the technique of author to situate the Third person pronoun i.e. ‘She’ persistently in the beginning position of the clause as Unmarked Theme.

#### Marked Theme:

Within Marked Themes, Circumstantial Adjuncts (28/35) i.e. 80% are the governing category of Marked Theme. Temporal Circumstantial Adjuncts (16/28) i.e. 57.1 % is the most favoured type of Marked Circumstantial Adjuncts.

The following example illustrates Temporal Circumstantial Adjunct.

**Example: 2(c.f. Table 1, Clause No. 1).**

At Twenty Four	Veronika	experienced	everything
Cir:time/Marked Theme	Rheme		

As shown in this example, the writer prefers to make use of the Circumstance of time ‘At Twenty four’ as the point of departure of the message rather than beginning the clause with ‘Veronika’ with the aim to bring into focus the particular time in which Veronika experienced everything.

**Textual Theme:**

Textual Themes are higher in comparison to Interpersonal Themes i.e., (117/309) i.e. 37.8% of the total thematic distribution. The study shows that Conjunctions are dominant category of Textual Themes. Relative Conjunction ‘that’ is prominently used as Textual Theme for 25 times followed by Additive (22), Causal (14) and Adversative Conjunction (12) times. The subsequent instance shows how Relative Conjunction occurs in the text.

**Example: 3 (c.f. Table 1)**

Cl. No.	Textual Theme	Ideational Theme	Rheme
18	---	Veronika	had known since childhood
19	That	her true vocation	was to be a pianist.

In this example, ‘That’ functions as an extension of the previous clause. ‘That’ indicates the connection between two clauses.

**Interpersonal Theme:**

The study of the text reveals that there are overall 6 Interpersonal Themes that counts to 1.94% of the total thematic distribution. Modal Adjuncts that prevail in the text are Mood Adjuncts, Comment Adjuncts, Polarity Adjuncts and Vocative Adjuncts. Mood Adjuncts (62.5%) are the ruling category as compared to other Adjuncts. The following instance exemplifies Mood Adjuncts.

**Example: 4(c.f. Table 2)**

Cl.No.	Interpersonal Theme	Ideational Theme	Rheme
284	Perhaps	she	was even happier.

In example 5, ‘Perhaps’ acquires the meaning of probability. It indicates that something is not definite.

**Multiple Themes:**

The study discloses the usage of three types of Multiple Themes: Textual ^ Topical Theme, Interpersonal ^ Topical Theme and Textual ^ Interpersonal ^ Topical Theme. Multiple Themes counts to 39.4% of total thematic distribution. The order of Textual ^ Topical Theme (113/122) i.e. 92.6% is the highest frequency order. The following instance shows the order of Textual ^ Topical Theme.

**Example: 5**

She	never	excelled	at school sports
Theme	Rheme		

**Example: 6**

and	she	had	never	succeeded	in keeping the peace	at home.
Textual Theme	Topical Theme	Rheme				

As shown in example 5, a clause simply contains Theme and Rheme. The beginning portion of the clause is Theme and rest of the portion is Rheme. On the other hand, example 6 represents the image of Multiple Theme in the clause. When there is more than one Theme except Topical Theme in a clause, then it is come to be known as Multiple Theme.

**Theme Progression Patterns:**

The study reveals the interplay of three types of Theme Progression Patterns. These three patterns are Theme-Reiteration Pattern, Zig- Zag Pattern and Multiple Rheme Pattern. Among these patterns, Theme-Reiteration Pattern is the predominant pattern in the analysis.

**Theme Reiteration Pattern:**

Theme Re-iteration Pattern (116/ 309) i.e. 37.5 % is the most frequently used Pattern as compared to Zig-Zag and Multiple Rheme Pattern. On the other hand, Zig-Zag Pattern occurs in simply 38 clauses that is relevant to 12.2% of the total thematic distribution. In addition to these two patterns, Multiple Rheme Pattern take place only twice in the corpus. Multiple Rheme Pattern has less frequency in narrative text in comparison with Theme Reiteration Pattern and Zig-Zag Pattern. The following illustration deals with the presence of Theme Re-iteration Pattern in the data.

Example: 7(c.f. Table 1)

Theme	Rheme
She	went to work everyday.
She <T-R>	was always keeping to the same timetable.
She <T-R>	was always making sure
that she <T-R>	was not perceived as a threat by her superiors.

Therefore, Veronika is the center of attraction in the text. Although She is frequent in each sentence, yet each sentence supplies the reader with new information about Veronika. ‘She’ symbolizes Veronika in the narrative. The constant recurrence of Veronika acquaints the reader with the main character of the novel. Such Pattern directs the reader towards the method of development of a text.

**CONCLUSION**

To sum up, this study has tested and confirmed that Halliday’s Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics is applicable to the literary genre: Novel. The study reveals that within Theme Choices, the number of Unmarked Themes outweighs the number of Marked Themes. Similarly, in the category of Theme types, Textual Theme has high frequency. In addition to this, Theme Reiteration Pattern is the predominant pattern in terms of Theme Progression Patterns. Thus, these three devices-Unmarked Theme, Textual Theme and Theme Reiteration Pattern help us in configuring genre and in deducing texture.

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