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6 Arguments for Seeing Theme-Rheme and Topic-Comment as Separate Functional Structures*

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Theme-Rheme and Given-New

The early Prague School of linguistics is known for the concepts of Functional Sentence Perspective, Theme-Rheme, and Communicative Dynamism (CD). Functional Sentence Perspective is essentially what we talk about now as information structure, but the Prague School focused on Theme-Rheme and communicative dynamism. In discussing Theme, Firbas (1964[2009: 260]), citing Mathesius (1939), says, “Mathesius defines the Theme as ‘that which is known or at least obvious in the Given situation, and from which the speaker proceeds’ in his discourse (234),” though later (Firbas 1987) argues that the Theme is not necessarily ‘known,’ and it is not necessarily the initial element of a clause, but it is the item with the lowest degree of communicative dynamism in the clause. That is, “the information conveyed by the theme contributes least to the further development of the communication within the sentence” (Firbas 1987: 138). But it provides the foundation (using Mathesius’s *základ* ‘foundation’) for the information provided in the rest of the clause.¹ He mentions that Daneš (1964) pointed out that Mathesius used three different terms, *východiště* ‘point of departure,’ *téma* ‘Theme’ and *základ* ‘basis, foundation,’ and that

in 1939 Mathesius explicitly stated that the point of departure was not necessarily always identical with the theme (cf. Mathesius 1939: 171, 1947: 235, 1982: 174). Mathesius, however, did not explain the difference between the two. Later he dropped the term *východiště* [‘point of departure’] altogether and used the terms *téma* [‘theme’] and *základ* [‘foundation’] synonymously, in fact returning to a practice he already chose in 1929.

(cf. Mathesius 1929, 1982: 29–38, 1983: 121–142).
(Firbas 1987: 140)

Firbas goes on say that the feature ‘aboutness’ is always part of the Theme (that is, it is the Topic of the clause), but the Theme is not necessarily ‘context-dependent,’ so the two are separate features. The important

thing for us is that Mathesius felt the two parts of the semantic structuring of the sentence were “what is being spoken about” (the basis, foundation) and “what is being said about it” (the ‘core’; Mathesius 1982: 120, cited in Firbas 1987: 144), that is, Topic and Comment, and Mathesius for some time saw this as separate from the point of departure.

Firbas (1964[2009: 265]) argues against another Prague School linguist, František Trávníček, who had argued (1962) that the Theme was the initial element of the clause. Firbas says, “Identifying the theme with the beginning of the sentence, Trávníček disregards both the criterion of the degree of CD and the criterion of known or unknown information.” Firbas also mentions that the linguist K. Boost had a similar understanding of ‘Thema,’ and that a third linguist, Eduard Beneš (1959), suggested a distinction between ‘basis’ and ‘theme’:

By ‘basis’ he understands the phenomenon that ‘as the opening element of the sentence links up the utterance with the context and the situation, selecting from several possible connections one that becomes the starting point, from which the entire further utterance unfolds and in regard to which it is orientated’ (216). The term ‘theme’ would be applied by him to the phenomenon defined by us here as the element(s) carrying the lowest degree of CD within the sentence. We believe this differentiation to be sound. It prevents the student of language structure from mixing up aspects that should be kept separate.

(Firbas 1964[2009: 267])

So here we see at least some Prague School linguists accepting a three-way distinction between what is ‘known’ or not; what is the starting point of the utterance; and what the clause is about and also has the lowest degree of communicative dynamism in the clause.

Michael Halliday was one of the first linguists outside the Prague School to talk about information structure (e.g. 1967b, 1970), and the typology that he outlined influenced Knud Lambrecht (1986, 1994, 2000), whose typology of information structure has become very influential and adopted in, for example, Role and Reference Theory (e.g. Van Valin and LaPolla 1997: Ch. 5).

Halliday distinguishes the status of referents as identifiable or not in the mind of the addressee from the structure of focus and pragmatic presupposition, using ‘New’ and ‘Given’ for the latter concepts, respectively. He states (1967b: 204),

What is focal is ‘new’ information; not in the sense that it cannot have been previously mentioned, although it is often the case that it has not been, but in the sense that the speaker presents it as not being recoverable from the preceding discourse. . . . If we use

the—admittedly rather inappropriate—term ‘given’ to label what is not ‘new’, we can say that the system of information focus assigns to the information unit a structure in terms of the two functions ‘given’ and ‘new.’

This is quite similar to Lambrecht’s definitions of focus, pragmatic presupposition and focus structure (1994: Ch. 5; where he cites Halliday 1967b at length).

Halliday (1967b) identified ‘unmarked focus,’ where all but the Topic or the entire clause is in focus, and ‘marked focus,’ where the domain of focus is limited to a single constituent of the clause. Lambrecht expanded this typology, not only distinguishing broad focus (Halliday’s unmarked focus) from narrow focus (Halliday’s marked focus), but within broad focus distinguishing between ‘predicate focus,’ the most common type of focus, where there is a Topic, and the rest of the clause is a Comment about that Topic, and ‘sentence focus,’ where the whole clause is in focus and there is no Topic. In narrow focus, although all but the single focused element is within the pragmatic presupposition (which is an open proposition), there is also no Topic that the clause is about. Halliday explicitly recognized that there are utterances where the entire clause is in focus (i.e. all ‘New’), yet unlike Lambrecht seems to assume that there is a topical Theme in all clauses (see footnote 23), and this I think has given rise to problems in the analysis of texts.² I’ll return to this later.

Halliday adopts the Prague School conception of Theme-Rheme, though he distinguishes it as a separate functional structure from Given-New (communicative dynamism). He argues that Topic is just one type of Theme (1994: 38). He identifies English Theme³ as the initial element of the clause but states clearly that is not how it is defined; it is defined functionally, in construction with the Rheme, as a message is made up of a Theme and a Rheme, and within that “the Theme is the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off” (Halliday 1994: 38). Matthiessen and Halliday (2009: 65) state, “The system of THEME sets up a local environment, providing a point of departure by reference to which the listener interprets the message.”

From the examples used where the topical Theme is not a nominal group (e.g. Halliday 1994: 39), such as [*with sobs and tears*]Theme [*he sorted out those of the largest size*]Rheme, we can see that the Theme is not always what the clause is about, and Downing (1991) on this basis argues that “what is being talked about” and “the point of departure for the clause as a message” should not be conflated, as “[t]he point of departure of the message is not necessarily what the message is about” (p. 122). McGregor (1992) also argues for a position similar to Downing’s.

Distinct from the system of THEME is the “degree of newsworthiness” (Matthiessen and Halliday 2009: 66), what was called communicative dynamism by the Prague School, “represented as a configuration of Given + New,” the system of information focus (*ibid.*).

So we can distinguish three concepts, Topic-(Comment),⁴ Given-(New), and Theme-(Rheme), though Topic and Theme seem to be collapsed in Mathesius' later view, and in Halliday's view there seems to be the assumption that Theme always includes Topic. What I would like to argue is that there are very good reasons for the Theme being the initial element of the utterance, and that the collapsing of Topic and Theme into one concept is problematic, and so we should separate out three functional structures:

1. Theme-Rheme (where Theme is defined as the beginning of the speaker's utterance, so the structure necessarily always has Theme before Rheme, and does not necessarily include Topic or Given);
2. Given-New (where New is defined as that which is not recoverable from the preceding discourse, and Given is that which is not New (Halliday 1967b, cited earlier); the structure can be New-Given in some languages as a marked pattern and in some languages as the unmarked pattern); and
3. Topic-Comment (where Topic is defined as what the clause is about and Comment as what is said about the Topic; this structure can be Comment-Topic in some languages as the unmarked pattern).

Before I can make my point, though, I need to digress a bit and talk about how communication happens, and why the initial position in an utterance is important independent of being the Topic or not.

The Creation of Meaning

Meaning doesn't exist externally in the world; it is created subjectively in our minds.⁵ That is, even in linguistic communication, there is no meaning in words or sounds; we create meaning from the actions of other people by putting together certain assumptions in which the actions 'make sense.' This includes linguistic actions (speech/writing), as language is not a thing, but a behavior, and many of the principles and cognitive abilities are the same as for other aspects of human behavior.⁶ The inference used to 'make sense' of some phenomenon is called abductive inference (Peirce 1940; called 'inference to the best explanation' in the philosophy of science), and it is how we understand the natural world and how we understand the motivations of other people when they do something. We have a natural instinct to 'make sense' of things, as it is crucial to our survival, and that means trying to hypothesize a reason for some phenomenon, whatever it is. When we observe a natural phenomenon, we take whatever information is available to us and create a context of interpretation in which that phenomenon makes sense to us. When we see another person doing something, we instinctively hypothesize why they are doing it, using abductive inference. In communication we apply this ability to inferring someone's intentions when they want us to infer their intention in performing some action (see LaPolla 2015 for details).

So communication is not coding and decoding, it is ostension⁷ and inference, that is, the communicator doing an action ostensibly to show the desire to communicate, and then the addressee using abductive inference to infer the reason for the person's action, whether it was linguistic, non-linguistic, or both.⁸

Communication can happen with or without language, but language serves to constrain the creation of the context of interpretation in particular ways relevant to the culture and cognition of the speakers. Each language is unique, as it emerges out of the communicative behavior of a unique society of speakers, and so each language will differ in terms of what semantic domains the speakers have constrained often enough for the particular pattern to become conventionalized on the societal level and habitualized on the individual level, and they will differ in terms of how much they constrain the interpretation of a semantic domain if they do so, and they will differ in the particular linguistic mechanisms used to constrain it if they do so.

As perception of a speech act is linear, interpretation is also linear, and this is why the initial segment of the utterance is so important: we don't wait for the whole utterance to be completed before we start creating the context of interpretation; we start building the context of interpretation with the very first word, regardless of the structure of the utterance, and then that context of interpretation influences the creation of the context for interpreting the rest of the utterance.⁹ We anticipate what is to come, and languages can give us clues as to what to expect.¹⁰

Signaling to the hearer what is about to come in the interaction on the part of the speaker and inferring what is about to come in the interaction on the part of the hearer is what is talked about in Interactional Linguistics as 'projection' (e.g. Auer 2005; Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen 2005; Hopper and Thompson 2008; Hopper 2012, 2013). This use of the word 'projection' is quite different from the use of the word in Halliday's framework (for projecting quotes and ideas) and in generative syntax (for consistency in categorization between the lexical item and the larger structures based on it).

Sandra Thompson, a key person in Interactional Linguistics since its inception, in an early paper in the development of the field (1985) explicitly builds on work by Halliday (e.g. 1967a, b, 1968) and Fries (1983) on the importance of initial position in the clause and the function of Theme. She explains the difference between the uses of initial and final purpose clauses in terms of the three metafunctions recognized by Halliday:

the initial purpose clause helps to *guide the attention* of the reader, by signalling, within the portion of the text in which it occurs, how the reader is expected to associate the material following the purpose clause with the material preceding it. The final purpose clause does *not* play this role. In Hallidayan terms, the difference could be stated

by referring to the three functions of language: ideational (content), textual (text-organizing), and interpersonal (pragmatic). While final purpose clauses serve at the ideational level, initial purpose clauses operate simultaneously at the ideational and at the textual levels (Halliday 1973).

(1985: 61, italics original)

Projection in Interactional Linguistics includes both the ability to guess what is coming up in the interaction (anticipating the speaker's intentions), and also the grammatical mechanisms for helping the hearer to make such guesses ("telegraphing" one's intentions, to use the boxing metaphor),¹¹ Typologically different languages allow for different types of projections (e.g. see Tanaka 2000, 2001; Ono and Thompson 2017 on projection in Japanese), and languages differ typologically also in terms of what is obligatorily thematic and what is not.

The clause is seen in Interactional Linguistics as the locus of interaction, as "the clause is precisely that unit which permits significant projectability" (Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen 2005: 485). The same authors (p. 487) point out that "Schegloff (1987, 1996) has proposed that the *beginning of the turn* in English is the key locus for projectability." Hopper (2012: 308) argues that

[p]rojection is what makes verbal communication an open and collaborative affair; as participants develop a sense of where the discourse is going, they tacitly mold it, allow it to continue, harmonize with the speaker's goals, interrupt it with their own contribution, offer supportive tokens of various kinds, or predict when their turn will come.¹²

In the next two sections we will look at the different uses of Theme to enhance that interaction (assist in projection) that English speakers and Tagalog speakers have conventionalized. In English the initial segment influences the creation of the context of interpretation in terms of constraining the interpretation of the mood, such that the addressee can project what sort of interaction the speaker intends to accomplish with the hearer. Like English, Tagalog also makes good use of the clause-initial position to aid the hearer's projection of the speaker's intention, but uses it for somewhat different purposes than English does, and does not generally put the Topic in initial position. Other languages put different elements in initial position to help the hearer project aspects of the interaction salient to the speakers.

The Use of Theme in English

Halliday (1967b, 1994: Ch. 3) showed that speakers of English have conventionalized a particular use of the speaker's starting point (Theme) to

mark the grammatical mood of the clause in the unmarked cases by what appears in the Theme:¹³

Indicative: declarative: The unmarked Theme (the most usual Theme) in English declarative clauses is the Subject, as in (1)–(2):

Theme	Rheme
topical	
1) The boy	lost his notebook.
2) The cup	was smashed to pieces.

Indicative: interrogative: yes/no question: The unmarked Theme in English yes/no interrogatives includes the Finite Verbal Operator (*is, isn't, does, doesn't* etc.—that which embodies the expression of tense and polarity or modality) and the Subject, in that order:

Theme	Rheme
interpersonal	topical
3) Did	you eat yet?
4) Will	he eat the ice cream?
5) Can	I do it?

Indicative: interrogative: WH-word question: The Theme in English question-word type interrogatives is the question word, i.e. that which requests the missing piece of information:

Theme	Rheme
interpersonal/topical	
6) Who	left the cat out?
7) What	are we having for dinner?
8) Where	did he say we are going?

Imperative: The unmarked Theme in English non-negative second person imperatives is the Predicator (the function of *be* in (9)). The unmarked Theme in negative second person imperatives (prohibitives) is *Don't* plus the Predicator (as in (10)). The unmarked Theme in first person imperatives is *Let's*, as in (11).

Theme	Rheme
topical	
9) Be	quiet! (second person Imperative)
10) Don't be	so talkative! (second person Prohibitive)
11) Let's	have lunch together! (first person Imperative)

This system is important and functionally useful because it allows the hearer to project right at the beginning of the clause what sort of interaction is being carried out (assuming congruency between mood and speech

act), and if it is declarative, what the clause is about, and if it is interrogative, what sort of information is being asked for.

The Use of Theme in Tagalog

Tagalog, a Malayo-Polynesian language spoken in the Philippines, is a consistently focus-initial language and so in general the predicate appears in initial position and the information structure is Comment-Topic and New-Given rather than Topic-Comment and Given-New (using Halliday's (1967b: 204) definition of 'New' as what "the speaker presents . . . as not being recoverable from the preceding discourse"; cf. Naylor (1975: 48) on the predicate as New and the Topic as Given in Tagalog). The predicate in most cases marks aspect, realis/irrealis, and often the semantic role of the Topic of the clause, and so when it appears in initial (Theme) position, it allows the hearer to project the situation predicated, its reality status and aspect and the semantic role of the main participant in the situation, the Topic.

Topic here is actually a Tagalog-specific grammatical status, as well as a pragmatic status, as it is an argument singled out for special morphological treatment, and is also what the clause is about.¹⁴ Generally any argument, whether participant or circumstance, can be the Topic of the clause, though usually (but not always) it is one that is identifiable to the hearer, and in many cases the predicate takes a form to reflect the semantic role of that argument.¹⁵ The representation of the Topic argument (if it appears in the clause and is not a pronoun) generally takes either a marker of specificity (*ang*, or *si* with proper names) or a Topic form of demonstrative pronoun plus linker (most commonly *'yung*) to mark it as the Topic. The set of pronouns also distinguishes topical from non-topical referents, with the latter appearing as possessive forms or dative forms, and in the second person singular there is also a special form used when the 2sg referent is focal, and as such it always appears in initial (focus) position. Let's look at some examples of the use of the different Topic-marking affixes (natural examples from my own fieldwork, the conversation 'Making Salsa'; see also Schachter 2008: 337–338, for sets of constructed parallel examples with the same arguments but with different choices of Topic).

12) 1. Jirehel: *Madali lang kasi'ng gumawa ng salsa eh.*

ma-dali lang kasi ang g<um>awa ng salsa eh
 STAT-easy just because SPEC <AT>make POSS sauce EMPHATIC
 "Because making sauce is just easy." (Lit.: "Because one's making of salsa is easy.")

2. Wendy: *Oo, madali lang.*

oo ma-dali lang
 yes STAT-easy just
 "Yes, it's really easy."

3. *Gawin mo lang ketchup,*

gawa-in	mo	lang	ketchup
do-IRR:PT	2sgPOSS	just	catsup

“Just make it with ketchup,

4. *tapos lagyan mo ng tomatoes,*

tapos	lagay-an	mo	ng	tomatoes
finish	put-LT	2sgPOSS	POSS	tomatoes

then you add tomatoes to it,

5. *lagyan mo ng salt and pepper to taste, tapos na.*

lagay-an	mo	ng	salt and pepper to taste	tapos	na
put-LT	2sgPOSS	POSS	salt and pepper to taste	finish	cs

add salt and pepper to taste to it; then (it's) done.”

In this example, the first speaker, Jirehel, refers to the making of salsa using a form (*gumawa*) that includes the Actor-Topic infix *-um-*,¹⁶ but then the second speaker, Wendy, uses the same root in line 3 of the example, but with Irrealis Patient-Topic suffix *-in*, to profile the event from the point of view with the salsa as the Topic. She then follows this in lines 4 and 5 with two tokens of the root *lagay* ‘put, add’ with the Location-Topic suffix *-an*, to keep the salsa as the Topic, but with it now having the semantic role of the location where the tomatoes and salt and pepper are to be added. Notice how there is no overt reference to the Topic in any of Wendy’s utterances (e.g. *’yung salsa* ‘the salsa’ could have been added to the end of each of Wendy’s utterances in lines 3–5, but it wasn’t), yet we can tell what is being talked about (what is the pragmatic and grammatical Topic) because of the marking on the predicate, and this ‘switch function’ referent-tracking system allows us to track a single Topic even while the function of the Topic changes.

In a series of insightful papers, James Martin (1981, 1988, 1990, 1995b, 1996, 2004, Martin and Cruz 2018) discusses several aspects of Tagalog grammar from a Hallidayan point of view. He points out that Tagalog has a “predisposition for loading interpersonal meaning onto the front of the clause” (1990: 36). Interrogative elements, for example, obligatorily appear in initial position (as in (13)); with some interrogative words this is achieved by the use of clefting to isolate the interrogative word as the utterance-initial predicate), the ‘attention-directing’ deictic pronouns (*heto*, *hayan*) and interpersonal Comments such as *mabuti pa* ‘it would be best if . . .’ always appear in initial position, and the marking of negation and modality is also generally utterance-initial, as in (14) and (15). Aside from the immediately initial position, there is a large number of clitics that mark textual or interpersonal meaning that occur in second position in the clause (those in

bold type in (13)–(15)), and the personal pronouns (e.g. *mo* in Wendy’s utterances in (12) and in (15), and *siya*, which is the Topic in (13)) are also second position clitics. (Examples (13)–(16) adapted from Martin 1990: 19, 22, 12.)

13) *Kailan kaya siya tatakbo.*

kailan	kaya	siya	ta-takbo
when	SPECULATION	3sgT	REDUP-run

“When do you suppose she’ll run?”

14) *Hindi pa rin ho ba lumabas si Cory.*

hindi	pa	rin	ho	ba	lum>abas	si	Cory
NEG	NCS	also	RESPECT	Q	<AT>outside	SPEC	PN

“Didn’t Cory leave anyway, sir/ma’am?”

15) *Baka naman gusto mong magkape.*

baka	naman	gusto	mo=ng	mag-kape
maybe	CONTRAST	want	2sgPOSS=LNK	IAT-coffee

“But maybe you’d like to have coffee.”

Martin not only identifies these elements as thematic but also considers Topic phrases at the end of the clause, such as *si Cory* in (14), thematic. This view is also followed in Matthiessen and Halliday (2009).

It is also possible for the Topic or circumstantial phrases and clauses to appear in focus position preceding the predicate, generally linked to the predicate with the particle *ay*, as in (16),¹⁷ which Martin (1990: 20) classifies as having a marked Theme. This construction is usually used for scene-setting or contrastive Topics (cf. Fox 1985), and for narrow focus questions. (See also Naylor 1975: 54ff. on the predicate as the unmarked Theme and anything other than the predicate appearing in the initial position as marked Theme.)

16) *Si Aquino pala ay pinatay ni Marcos.*

si	Aquino	pala	ay	p<in>atay	ni	Marcos
SPEC	PN	SURPRISE	PPT	<RUT>dead	POSS	PN

“Surprisingly Aquino was killed by Marcos.”

In the major theoretical discussions of Theme, from Mathesius (1929) up through to the present, the languages under discussion have been Topic-Comment languages where the Topic appears in initial position, and so there has been an assumption that the function of the initial part of the utterance or clause (the speaker’s starting point) must include presenting the Topic.¹⁸ A language like Tagalog allows

us to see that the starting point of the utterance does not have to include the Topic, yet it is still important as the hearer's starting point for creating the context of interpretation, and for understanding how the speaker facilitates the interaction by structuring the clause in a way that makes it easier for the hearer to infer certain aspects of the speaker's intention.

What I'd like to argue is for defining Theme as the beginning of the utterance. The elements that appear there influence the hearer's projection of what is to follow. A Topic that comes at the end of the clause would not be considered part of the Theme, though the clause-initial Topics would be.

There has been much discussion of the complementarity of the theme-Rheme and Given-New functional structures in English, giving the clause peaks of speaker (Theme) vs. hearer (New) prominence and troughs of non-prominence in a sort of periodic wave-like structure (e.g. Halliday 1979, 1994; Matthiessen 1988, 1992; Martin 1992), and in fact Matthiessen (1992: 42) states that "the textual metafunction is concerned with creating contrasts between prominence and non-prominence in meaning as an aid in the processing of text." As Tagalog consistently has the 'New' utterance-initially (when it is not the entire utterance), conflating Theme and Topic would mean that there is no such wave-like structure in Tagalog, but if we separate Theme and Topic we can say that there is still such a complementary periodicity, but it is Topic vs. New rather than Theme vs. New, which is actually what Halliday meant in talking about Theme vs. New in English, as it is the topical Theme that he felt is the most important in this regard.

This then leaves us with the question of where to draw the line between what I am now defining as Theme and the rest of the clause (Rheme) in Tagalog. In Halliday's analysis of English (1994), everything up to the topical Theme, defined as the first participant, process or circumstance in the clause, is considered part of the Theme, but if in a language like Tagalog the Topic is not part of the Theme, how do we draw the line between Theme and Rheme? In an example like (14), if we follow the rule given for English, then the entire predicate (including *lumabas*, which could be considered an ideational Theme rather than topical Theme) is within the Theme, leaving only the Topic (*si Cory*) outside the Theme.

Evidence for this sort of analysis is the fact that in some cases the initial element and the predicate have to be linked into an overt phrase using the *nal-ng* linker. In such cases, if there are second position clitics, they occur after the first word of the phrase and before the linker, as in (17), where the phrase *pwedeng kunin* 'can take' is interrupted by the 1sg non-Topic pronoun and the question marker, and so the linker appears at the end of the question marker. So if we take the first phrase as the Theme, then we should include the other elements as well, again leaving only the Topic (*yun leaves*) as the Rheme.

17) *Pwede ko bang kunin yun leaves . . . ?*

[pwede	ko	ba=ng	kunin]	'yung	leaves
can	1sgPOSS	Q=LNK	take:UT	that+LNK	leaves

“Can I take the leaves . . . ?”

<https://delishably.com/beverages/How-to-Make-Malunggay-Tea-Home-Made-Moringa-Tea>

In a clause like (16), where the Topic is in initial position, the Theme would just be the initial Topic alone.

It then would not include the particle of surprise *pala*, which might seem counterintuitive given that *si Aquino pala* is one information unit in Halliday’s view (e.g. 1967b). But it might be seen as similar to *unfortunately* in *John unfortunately left before Melanie came*,¹⁹ where the Comment Adjunct would not be seen as part of the Theme.

In a case like line 4 of (12), we could consider the first word, *tapos*, as a textual Theme and the predicator, *lagyan*, as the ideational Theme. But as the other two elements actually form a phrase together with the predicator (*mo* and *ng tomatoes* are both possessive modifiers)²⁰ set off from the Topic (which is left unexpressed by Wendy), we could consider the entire utterance to be thematic, with only the Topic again not part of the Theme.

We also commonly find clauses such as (18):

18) *Kaibigan ito ni Waki . . .*

kaibigan	ito	ni	Waki
friend	this:TOPIC	POSS	PN

“This is Waki’s friend . . .”

<http://cheriepaanashaven-collab.blogspot.com/2013/12/calle-pogi-series-3-lian.html?m=1>

In this clause the Topic comes between the two parts of the possessive phrase ‘Waki’s friend,’ and so if we see Theme as linear, then the whole clause is within the Theme.

On rereading the Prague School writings, it seems we may not need to draw a clear line at all. Their view was that there was a continuous progression, and not a clear break between the two, though there are some cases, such as (14), (16) and (12.4), where we can draw a line. As Geoff Thompson pointed out in his plenary talk at the conference, Theme ‘tails off’ (see also Matthiessen 1992: 50–51). If we take Theme as those elements which aid projection, then we also do not need to draw a clear line, as throughout the utterance the hearer is using what has been said already to project what is to come or the end of the turn.

Separating Theme-Rheme and Topic-Comment

Now, this chapter is not really about Tagalog; I am just using Tagalog as an example. I am arguing for a methodological principle. I want to argue that

we should distinguish between the Theme, defined as the speaker's starting point, and the Topic, what the clause is about. The Theme forms a structure with the Rheme, and the Topic forms a structure with the Comment. In Tagalog the Topic is explicitly marked, and does not depend on position within the clause.²¹ In other languages, such as Chinese, Topic is defined by its position in the clause, and only reference phrases that are clause-initial (in the case of primary Topics) or at least preverbal (in the case of secondary Topics) will be seen as a Topic, and so word order is used to distinguish referents that are Topics (and distinguish primary and secondary Topics) from referents that are not Topics. This means that in Chinese it is being made thematic that allows the reference to a referent to be understood as referring to the Topic of the clause. See the following example (LaPolla and Poa 2006: 278, from *Rúlín Wàishǐ*, an 18th-century vernacular novel):

- 19) (a) *Yuán chāo mò nián, yě céng*
 PN dynasty end year also EXP
chū-le yī-ge qiānshílěilùò de rén.
 emerge-PFV one-CL honest.and.upright ASSOC person

“At the end of the Yuan dynasty, there appeared an honest and upright person.”

- (b.1) *Rén xìng Wáng,* (b.2) *míng Miǎn,*
 person surnamed PN given.named PN

“(This) person was surnamed Wang, and had the given name Mian.”

- (b.3) *zài Zhūjì-xiàn xiāngcūn jūzhù;*
 LOC PN-county countryside live

“(he) lived in in the countryside of Zhuji county,”

- (b.4) *qī suì shí sī-le fùqīn,*
 seven years.old time die-PFV father

“when he was seven his father died,”

- (c.1) *tā mǔqīn zuò xiē zhēnzhī,*
 3sg mother do some sewing

“his mother did some sewing,”

- (c.2) *gōngjǐ tā dào cūn xuétáng-lǐ qù dúshū.*
 supply 3sg ALL village school-inside go study

“to give him money to go to the village school to study.”

This is a very typical stretch of Chinese narrative text. The first clause introduces a new referent in post-verbal (non-Topic) position, then this referent becomes the Topic of the following four clauses.²² A related referent is then the Topic of the next two clauses. The structure of all the clauses except the first is Topic-Comment. The first clause is presentative, a ‘sentence focus’ construction (Lambrech 1994; LaPolla 1995), and so

does not have a Topic (the temporal expression locates the event in time, but is not the Topic of the predication—see LaPolla 1995 for discussion). The clause in (19b.4) involves two parts, a Topic and a Comment, but the Topic is not mentioned and the Comment (the entire line) has the reference to the person who died in post-verbal position, just as in the presentative construction in the first line of this text. In this case the reference to the father appears in post-verbal position not because the father is being introduced for further development as a Topic, but simply to mark it as not a Topic, and so his dying is seen as an event that happened to the Topic of the Clause (Wang Mian) when he was seven years old. What is important is that the father not be interpreted as the Topic of the Clause. This allows for consistency in the choice of Topic, what is called a ‘Topic chain’ in Chinese linguistics. Had reference to the father been before the verb, then the father would have been understood as the Topic, and the statement would have been about him, not about Wang Mian. That would be saying something very different from what the author intends in this stretch of text. Notice that distinguishing Theme from Topic allows us to still talk about Theme in these clauses, even though the Topic is not overtly mentioned, resolving an issue that frequently comes up when scholars try to apply Halliday’s analysis of English Theme to typologically different languages.

Even in English separating Theme and Topic can help us resolve some problems that come up when we try to apply the view that necessarily conflates initial position and what the clause is about. For example, Matthiessen and Martin (1991: 45) discuss the thematic nature of English initial *there* in existential clauses, arguing that “The Theme is one of the elements that realises the feature ‘existential’; it sets up as the point of departure that an Existent will be presented. The new information comes within the Rheme as the Existent.” Martin (1992: 165), says “As unmarked Theme, *there* is anticipatory; it signals that something is coming—namely the new participant at the end of the clause.” Martin (1995a: 306) also discusses this construction in similar terms:

for Halliday the fact that placing *there* first is a systemic choice precisely parallel to beginning a clause with its Subject in any other process type means that *there* is a perfectly ordinary candidate for Theme. The fact that it is not assigned a participant function by Halliday . . . is beside the point; *there* does realise ideational meaning, helping distinguish existential from other relational clauses (cf. existential *there was a record player in the corner*, attributive *the record player was in the corner, wasn’t it?* and identifying *that’s the record player in the corner*).

The function of clause-initial *there* in this construction then is the function of projection that I have been talking about, which I see as different

from Topic. The controversy here is about whether clause-initial *there* can be considered ‘what the clause is about,’ i.e. can be considered the Topic of the clause. If instead of insisting that Theme and Topic must coincide, and also recognize that not all clauses have Topics (see Lambrecht’s notion of “sentence focus” clauses, where there is no Topic, a prime example being existential clauses), then we can just say clause-initial *there* is Theme, that it is helping the addressee project the mood of the clause and the nature of the clause as existential. The clause is not “about” *there*, which is non-referential, though, so *there* is not a Topic, even if it is Subject, and in fact there is no Topic in the clause.²³

In discussing the fact that WH-elements are obligatorily clause-initial in English, Halliday says (1970: 358):

There is no intrinsic reason why the WH-element should be in first position. In many languages, it occupies whatever position in the clause is appropriate to its status in transitivity. Where the WH-element is assigned first position this must be because first position has some independent structural significance as the expression of another function with which the WH-function is typically associated, a function that will automatically be carried by the WH-element if the clause is of the WH-type.

This seems to be recognition that initial position in the clause has a function independent from what the clause is about.

Martin (1995a: 304–305) says, “In defining Theme as ‘the point of departure for the message . . . that with which the clause is concerned’, Halliday is attempting to gloss the rationale for placing information first (Theme) rather than last (as unmarked New).” This makes perfect sense, for English, as English generally has New at the end of the clause, and so the information about the Topic relative to which the New is to be understood should ideally come before it. But in a language where New is at the beginning of the clause, this motivation does not hold. There is still motivation for helping the addressee infer (project) the direction in which the interaction is most likely to proceed, but that is not the same as Topic, what the clause is about.

As Halliday (1967b) and Knud Lambrecht (1994) have argued, the pragmatic status of referents in the minds of the speaker and hearer (what Lambrecht calls identifiable vs. unidentifiable) is a different type of information from that involved in what Halliday calls ‘information focus’ and Lambrecht calls ‘focus structure’ (e.g. Topic-Comment is ‘predicate focus structure’), and so these two concepts also need to be distinguished, giving us three different semantic domains: the identification of referents;²⁴ the identification of what the clause is about and what is being said about it; and the projection of what is to follow in the interaction.

Of course the use of Topics as Themes is highly motivated, as it tells the hearer right away what the clause is about and helps in projecting the content to come (see Fries 1983; Martin 1992), including Martin's (1992) macro-Theme, hyper-Theme and Theme (i.e. macro-Topic, hyper-Topic, Topic), but I am arguing that we need to expand the typology to allow for languages that do not conflate Theme and Topic, like Tagalog, or that allow identifiable Topics to remain unexpressed, like Chinese. The fact that distinguishing between Given and New also helps the hearer correctly project the speaker's intention (the reason for marked focus constructions like clefts), and the fact that Topics are generally identifiable referents, and the fact that speakers often use the Topic as the starting point to allow the hearer to better project what the speaker's intention in the interaction will be, has led to the concepts being collapsed in many theories, but the Tagalog examples where this correlation doesn't happen show that we need to distinguish different functional structures.

Abbreviations Used

1plinclT	First person inclusive Topic pronoun	LT	Locative Topic suffix
1sgPOSS	First person singular possessive pronoun	NCS	No Change of State marker
2sgPOSS	Second person singular possessive pronoun	NEG	negative
3sg	Third person singular pronoun	PFV	Perfective aspect marker
3sgT	Third person singular Topic pronoun	PN	Proper Name
ALL	Allative verb	POSS	Possessive linker
ASSOC	Associative marker	PPT	Pre-Predicate Topic marker (creates a construction with the Topic preceding the predicate)
AT	Actor Topic infix	PT	Patient Topic suffix
CL	Classifier	Q	Question particle
CS	Change of State marker	REDUP	Reduplication of initial syllable for marking imperfective and planned actions
EXP	Experiential aspect marker	RUT	Realis Undergoer Topic infix
IAT	Irrealis Actor Topic prefix	SPEC	Specific referent
LNK	Linker	STAT	Stative predicate
LOC	Locative marker (Tagalog); Locative verb (Chinese)		

Notes

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Prof. Halliday passed away on 15 April 2018, and so I would like to dedicate this chapter to him to show my respect, admiration and affection.

1. The earliest mention of the beginning of the utterance as the ground on which the interaction depends is probably Weil 1844[1887: 29]: “it was necessary to lean on something present and known, in order to reach out to something less present, nearer, or unknown. There is then a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement (*l'énonciation*), properly so called. This division is found in almost all we say.”
2. As Butler (2005) points out, a major difference between Lambrecht's approach and Halliday's approach is that Lambrecht pays much attention to the different ways that focus structure (the morphosyntactic and/or prosodic differentiation of focus and presupposition to aid the hearer's interpretation) is manifested in different languages, while Halliday has only discussed English. This has unfortunately led some of his students to assume that his analysis of English, where focus is most often marked only by prosody, is applicable to all languages, but Halliday, as well as his teacher, J. R. Firth, did not approve of imposing the categories of one language on another; each language must be studied inductively. He once expressed to me his dismay that some had taken his analysis of English and applied it directly to other languages.
3. Following best practice in typology, for language-specific (descriptive) categories and constructions I will capitalize the initial letters of the name of the category or construction, but for comparative concepts I will not capitalize the first letter.
4. Halliday (1967b: 200) states that he does not use the terms ‘topic’ and ‘comment’ “because they have tended to be used in a way which conflates what are here regarded as distinct functions, with ‘topic’ meaning both ‘given’ and ‘theme,’” though he conflates topic and point of departure in saying, “The theme is what is being talked about, the point of departure for the clause as a message” (1967b: 212). I am using ‘topic’ as what the clause is about, which I argue is independent of, though often overlaps with, both ‘given’ and ‘point of departure’ (Theme).
5. In Wendy Bowcher's plenary talk at the conference where this paper was presented, she used the example of a fist, and all the meanings one could ascribe to it; in his plenary talk Geoff Thompson showed a picture that could be understood in different ways. These examples highlight the subjective nature of meaning.
6. As David Butt said about the system networks in his talk at the conference, they are a representation of ‘the flow of behavior.’ I also want to stress, as Ruqaiya Hasan pointed out after my presentation, the assumptions related to language and other cultural aspects that we bring to the context of interpretation are socially constructed, that is, they are social conventions (as well as personal habits), and I do not intend to downplay the social aspect

of language use, but the idea is that our personal understanding of language is simply memories of how we have seen or heard language being used, and how we have used it ourselves.

7. The use of the term ‘ostension’ for a communicative act and some other insights that led to this view of communication and cognition are due to Sperber and Wilson (1986), though the theory presented here diverges in many important ways from Relevance Theory. See LaPolla (1997) for discussion.
8. Halliday (2002: 8) states: “it should be possible in the next decade or two to crack the semiotic code, in the sense of coming fully to understand the relationship between observed instances of language behaviour and the underlying system of language—something that has eluded us up till now, so that we have even turned the two into different disciplines, calling only one of them ‘linguistics’ and labelling the other ‘pragmatics.’” My view is that this split occurred because the Structuralists divorced language from communication and made linguistics solely the study of linguistic structure, but this is based on a problematic notion of how language works (see Harris 1981—even Reddy 1979 did not go far enough in refuting what he called the ‘conduit metaphor’), and so the way to ‘crack the code’ is to realize that there is no code; communication isn’t based on coding and decoding, but on inferring the communicator’s intention in performing a communicative act (see LaPolla 2015, 2016).
9. Cf. MacWhinney’s (1977: 152) view of ‘starting points’: “The speaker uses the first element in the English sentence as a starting point for the organization of the sentence as a whole. Similarly, the listener uses the first element in a sentence as a starting point in comprehension.” Gernsbacher and Hargreaves (1988, 1992) also argue for the importance of initial position, discussing many of the experimental results showing what they call ‘the privilege of primacy,’ how what appears in initial position influences the interpretation of the whole utterance. Kim and Kuroshima (2013: 269) cite a large number of studies on interaction in different languages, and argue that they “demonstrate how turn beginnings serve as a prime location in interaction regardless of the language’s typology.”
10. Cf. Schegloff (1987: 71): “Turn-beginnings project a ‘shape’ for the turn, and they’re in that respect potentially critical elements for a speaker’s recipients, who, in having to analyze the turn as it develops, may need the turn beginning resources as part of the materials for their analysis.” See also Heritage (2013).
11. The ability to use abductive inference to anticipate someone’s future actions, or anything for that matter, is a general cognitive mechanism and not limited to communication. There is considerable psycholinguistic evidence for projection, sometimes called ‘anticipation’ or ‘prediction’ in the psychology literature. See e.g. Altmann and Kamide (1999), DeLong et al. (2005), Bubic et al. (2010), Cohn and Paczynski (2013), Holler et al. (2015), Huettig (2015), Levinson and Torreira (2015), Barthel et al. (2016), Barthel et al. (2017), Sauppe (2016).
12. See Hopper (2011), Obana and Haugh (2015), and Blöndal (2015) for examples of collaborative production of the structures used in communication.
13. Within this system, declarative and polar interrogative clauses are distinguished by the order of Subject and Finite, so the Subject must appear in such clauses in order to mark the grammatical mood. This then gives us a very plausible functional explanation for why English is not a so-called ‘pro-drop’ language, and given the fact that it is a grammaticalized aspect of English, and English is the odd-man out in this regard typologically, it would actually make more sense to call English a ‘pro-retaining’ language.

14. The notion ‘what the clause is about’ is not as straightforward as it might seem, as this can differ between languages. Tagalog has a much richer set of morphosyntactic possibilities for maintaining the reference to particular referents as Topic than English does, and so very often what is the Topic in Tagalog, what the clause clearly is about, will not be the topical Theme or even notional Topic in the English translation (e.g. (12.3–5), where the salsa is the Topic in the Tagalog clauses but cannot be in the English translations in any natural way). English can achieve some of the same results in some contexts using marked constructions like clefts but does not do so to the extent or as naturally as Tagalog does. That the grammatical Topic in Tagalog is what the clause is about can be seen from the fact that “[a]ny predication minus its topic can function as a nominalization understood to denote what would be the topic of that predication” (Adams and Manaster-Ramer 1988: 81).
15. This is not active-passive, but similar to the choice of A construction vs. O construction in Jawarawa, discussed by Dixon (2000, 2004), depending on what is considered to be the Topic of the clause, just with more choices for Topic than just A and O.
16. It happens that in this line the speaker has embedded the relevant clause with the Actor-Topic-marked predicate as the Topic of the main clause (the X in ‘X is easy’), but the phenomenon of Actor-Topic marking is the same whether it is a main clause or embedded. Cf. *Gumawa ng salsa ‘yung lalaki* ‘That man made sauce.’
17. It is also possible to only have a pause before the predicate instead of using *ay*. Tagalog is rigidly focus-initial, and there are also other marked-focus constructions for allowing different elements to appear in initial focus position, e.g. circumstantial elements (which usually occur after the predicate), without using the *ay* construction, e.g. *Sa Martes pa tayo bibili ng mesa* [LOC Tuesday NCS 1plinclT REDUP-buy POSS table] ‘We won’t buy a table until Tuesday,’ a narrow focus construction where the day the table will be bought is the focal information of the clause.
18. This is the problem with non-demonstrative inference, in this case, induction, first identified by Hume (1739): we make generalizations based on our experience, but there is no certainty that future experience will not contradict our generalizations. In this case the scholars only looked at one type of language, and so drew inductive generalizations based on that data, but those generalizations are only valid for that set of data.
19. Assuming this is said without intonation breaks before and after *unfortunately*, which would mark it as a separate information unit.
20. Compare for example, *Kaibigan lang siya ng aking tatay* [friend only 3sgT POSS 1sgDAT+LNK father] ‘He is only my father’s friend,’ with *Tinanong lang siya ng aking tatay* ‘My father only asked him,’ where *kaibigan ng aking tatay* ‘my father’s brother’ and *tinanong ng aking tatay* ‘asked by my father’ are phrases of the same type in Tagalog, though in English we translate them very differently. The fact that they form phrases with the predicate linked by *ng* is why such arguments cannot appear in initial position the way *ang*-marked or *sa*-marked arguments can. See LaPolla (2014) for more on the different types of phrases in Tagalog, and Naylor (2005) and references therein on the isomorphy of referential and predicative phrases.
21. The rare exceptions to this being where *ang* or demonstrative-marked arguments occur in the predicate and so are not Topics, and when unmarked topics occur in initial position in the construction with *ay*. In these cases position in the construction helps identify the element as the Topic. There is also the

- exclamative construction, a referential use in which the pragmatic Topic, if it appears, is not treated as a grammatical Topic but as a possessive modifier, e.g. *Ang ganda ng buhok mo!* [SPEC beauty POSS hair 2sgPOSS] “The beauty of your hair!”—cf. *Maganda ang buhok mo* [beautiful SPEC hair 2sgPOSS] “Your hair is beautiful.” This is also true when the predicate is a property concept modified by the intensifier *napaka-*, e.g. *Napakaganda ng buhok mo* “Your hair is very beautiful.”
22. This is true of Tagalog as well: existential clauses do not have Topics and can be used to introduce referents that will go on to become Topics in later clauses (see Adams and Manaster-Ramer 1988).
 23. Halliday himself, in earlier work (e.g. 1970: 357) argued that all independent indicative clauses have a theme, “with the possible exception of those beginning with dummy *it* and *there*, which may be best regarded as having no thematic element in their structure.” In this he seems to have been influenced more by the sense of what the clause is about rather than the starting point of the utterance. Martin (1983) recognizes that not all clauses in Tagalog have Topics.
 24. This is only talking about the status of referents in the minds of the speaker and hearer, and not the tracking of referents in discourse. The latter is known as ‘referent tracking’ or ‘reference tracking’ (see Heath 1975; Foley and Van Valin 1984: 321–374; Van Valin 1987; Comrie 1989, LaPolla, to appear, on the typology of grammatical relations as referent-tracking devices). Although Tagalog does manifest a referent tracking system in its marking of the semantic role of the argument that is the Topic, as we can see in (12), I am not specifically talking about referent tracking here except as one aspect of the use of Theme in Tagalog for helping with projection.

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