



FACOLTÀ DI STUDI UMANISTICI  
Lingue e Comunicazione  
Lingua Inglese 2

LESSON 5

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# Thematisation

- Arranging the text, attracting the reader's attention on certain parts (the most important ones for the writer's intentions & for intelligibility).
- The information contained is arranged as to carry the writer's message forward and to focus the reader's attention on some elements rather than others.
- New information is associated to known/ shared information (in the co-text or situational context).
- Known v new information – according to the writer
- The initial part of the clause, what it will be about:  
THEME

# Thematisation



*“A one-cent is the smallest Euro coin”*

(I will tell you about a one-cent; one-cent is the THEME)

*“The smallest Euro coin is a one-cent”*

(I will tell you about the smallest Euro coin:

The smallest Euro coin is the THEME)

The THEME is context-dependent, as the reader has already access to the information offered.

The remainder of the clause, called the RHEME, acts as the new context-independent element, holding the NEW information that is going to be given about the THEME, therefore carrying most of the sentence’s communicative importance



- The theme is context-dependent
- The remainder of the clause is the RHEME, that functions as the new context-independent element – it holds the new info about the theme & carries most of the sentence's communicative relevance (Ulrich 152)
- Theme/rheme – subject/predicate
- The theme *announces* the starting point of the message

When the theme appears at the beginning of the sentences (when it *announces* the starting point of the message) it is considered unmarked \*



(English declarative sentences: subject)

- SVO(A) – Theme-Subject, Rheme-Object, Verb a transition between the two.

IN ENGLISH DECLARATIVE SENTENCE NO OTHER ORDER  
IS POSSIBLE

\*In Linguistics and social sciences, **markedness** is the state of standing out as non-typical or divergent in comparison to a regular or more common form.



- Yes/No interrogative sentences –

The theme is the subject (operator):

*Does Tiffany like football?*

- In wh- Questions, the theme is the wh- interrogative pronoun

*What does she like?*

ENGLISH RELIES ON WORD ORDER AND PHRASE  
STRUCTURE TO INDICATE GRAMMATICAL  
FUNCTION

MUCH MORE FLEXIBILITY IN ITALIAN!!

# Deviation from normal word order



Deviations are possible when a writer wants to foreground some information.

These changes or foregrounding are considered MARKED and whatever is brought to the front of the clause gets promoted to THEME position.

# Deviation from normal word order



- ✓ Fronting – an element different from the subject is moved to the opening of the sentence + an element or the subject is moved to the end of the sentence (MARKED THEME, see also left dislocation):

*“Half-way across the bridge stands David Tripp, aged 43, tunelessly playing a mouth organ”*

*“Mary he had not seen for years, but Claudia he saw again yesterday”*





- ✓ Left & right dislocation – used to foreground elements.
- *Left disl.* to anticipate identification (marked themes):

*Mark she saw the following afternoon, as she was coming out of the supermarket.*

*My aunt, she died when I was 5*

- *Right disloc.* to postpone identification (cataphoric substitute theme related to the postponed theme) – mainly in informal spoken discourse:

*“They were painted by me, these pictures”.*

*He’s a liar, that Mike*

**BOTH LEFT AND RIGHT DISLOCATION MAINLY OCCUR IN INFORMAL SPOKEN DISCOURSE**

# Deviation from normal word order



- ✓ Clefting – division of the sentences into 2 clauses, each with its own verb (anticipatory subject *it* + verb *to be ... that*).

It becomes an empty THEME, but used to give focus to a part of the clause that would otherwise not be marked:

*“It was Mr Smith that I met”*

*“It is I who trapped you into this marriage”*

*“It is you I cannot sacrifice!”*





✓ Pseudo-clefting – *wh-* pronoun becomes the subject to foreground another clause element:

*Sally bought a teapot*

*What Sally bought was a teapot*

- ✓ *What they **were doing** was **arguing** about which train to take.*
- ✓ *What I **can do** is **call** for a taxi.*
- ✓ *What I **did** in the end was **(to) go** home.*
- ✓ *What I **have done** is **(to) write** a letter to the editor.*

# Deviation from normal word order



- ✓ Inversion – subject-verb inversion (mainly with place adverbials moved to the front), subject/operator inversion (with restrictive or negative adverbial):

*“There, sitting at the entrance, was the guard”*

*“Never have I understood less about women”*

*“Not only did I made the wrong suggestion, I even insisted on it!”*

- ✓ End-focus – anything that comes at the end of a clause will be interpreted as the focal element (written discourse):



*"The single most important skill and most undervalued capacity for exercising adaptive leadership is diagnosis».*

"The most surprising news coming out of the convention was not who received the presidential nomination or the terrible riot, **but the vice presidential candidate**».

## ✓ Active/passive voice –

- Active v.: the person who does the action is the subject/theme in the former. **THE DOER/FINDER IS IN UNMARKED POSITION AS THE PERPETRATOR OF THE ACTION**



- in the **passive voice** what matters is not the agent but the person or thing influenced by the verb (scientific and technical writing where: *The focus is on the findings and not on the finders*)

*Penicillin was discovered in 1929*

The focus moves from what or who causes the happening to the happening itself

- Known v new:

*Julia lost her doll v the doll was lost by Julia*

## Double object verbs – text dynamism:



1a- We gave the participants in group 1 the quiz

2a- We gave the quiz to **to the participants in group 1** (end focus given)

1b- The participants in group 1 were given the quiz

2b- The quiz was given **to the participants in group 1** (end focus given).

The difference in meaning conveyed by the two passive forms is closely related to the communicative dynamism of the text.

Of course, the choice of which form depends on the overall text and how the information is arranged.

- Impersonal style. Another effect of using the passive, in contrast with a more personalized form of the passive construction:

**THE PARTICIPANTS WERE GIVEN vs THE QUIZ WAS GIVEN**



- Focus on the verb:

Look for the **emphatic operators do/did signalling** -> a contrast, the rejection of a previous remark in the co-text or context

## EMPHATIC OPERATORS

*He does eat meat, doesn't he?*

- Also emotive emphasis: personal worry, blame or grumpiness

*You said you would phone me!*

*- I did phone you! But you didn't answer.*

*- OK, I didn't phone you, but I did send you a text.*





# Thematic progression

- Communication evolves through the theme/rheme division, alternation, of clauses
- Known -> new = known -> new
- Theme + rheme: communicative dynamism of successive sentences in the text, where the theme carries the lowest degree of communicative dynamism & the rheme drives the communication forward (Ulrich 162)
- Functional organization of the clause in terms of theme & rheme is known as FSP approach (Functional Sentence Perspective, Firbas 1964, Danes 1974)



# Recognizable patterns

- Overall thematic structure and rhetorical purpose of the text
- Thematic progression: the choice & ordering of the theme & rheme in relation to superior text units (paragraphs, chapters) and the whole text (Ulrich 163)



# 1- Linear thematisation of rhemes

T1 -> R1

|

T2 -> R2

|

T3 -> R3

The new house was built by Mr. Jones. He was born in Manchester. Manchester was a city....



# 1- Linear thematisation of rhemes

Poor education is **associated with economic disadvantage.**



**Economic disadvantage** helps to ensure // that the next generation of children is also deprived **of opportunities to better themselves.**



**Since self-betterment** is a constant expectation of our society, those who fail to engage in it will always be at a psychological as well as a financial disadvantage.



## 2- Thematic progression with a constant theme (subsequent themes are related to the first)

T1 -> R1

|

T1 -> R2

|

T1 -> R3

The child was a good boy. He used to play fairly. He went to school .... He ...

Typical of advertising (theme = brand)

## THEME REITERATION/CONSTANT THEME

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*The example of text using this pattern:*

- ***Li Ping** was born in China. **He** was very interested in learning English, and (**he**) always tried to find opportunities to speak English with his friends. When **he** was twelve, **he** could communicate with his foreign friends freely.*

*Or*

- ***Whales** are facing extinction. **The few whales which are left** travel along the coastlines of many countries. **The whales** travel in large groups. **Whales** are large mammals. **They** have a layer of skin, blubber, meat, then, their bones.*
-

## 2- a- Thematic progression w/ subsequent themes derived from a *hypertheme* or *metatheme*



hypertheme

T1 -> R1

T2 -> R2

T3 -> R3

**Sardinia** is the second-largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, after Sicily, and one of the 20 regions of Italy.

**It** is located west of the Italian Peninsula, north of Tunisia and immediately south of the French island of Corsica.

**It** is one of the five Italian regions with some degree of domestic autonomy being granted by a special statute.

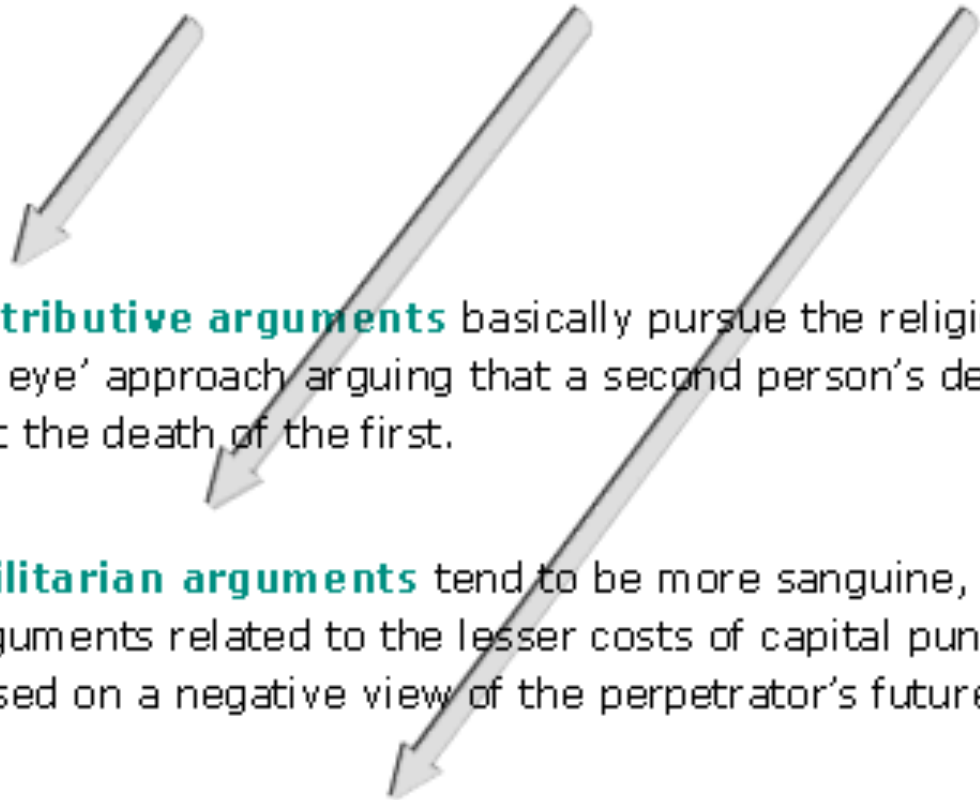
**Its official name, Autonomous Region of Sardinia,** is bilingual in Italian and Sardinian.

**It** is divided .....

# 3- Thematic progression by means of a split rheme



There are **three main categories of argument in relation of capital punishment: retributive arguments, utilitarian arguments and deterrence arguments.**



**Retributive arguments** basically pursue the religiously inspired 'eye for an eye' approach, arguing that a second person's death avenges and cancels out the death of the first.

**Utilitarian arguments** tend to be more sanguine, encompassing economic arguments related to the lesser costs of capital punishment as well as those based on a negative view of the perpetrator's future usefulness to society.

**Deterrence arguments** focus on the use of capital punishment as a preventative measure to dissuade others from committing capital crimes.





## 4- Thematic progression w/ subsequent constant themes related to the first rheme

T1 -> R1

|

T2 -> R2

|

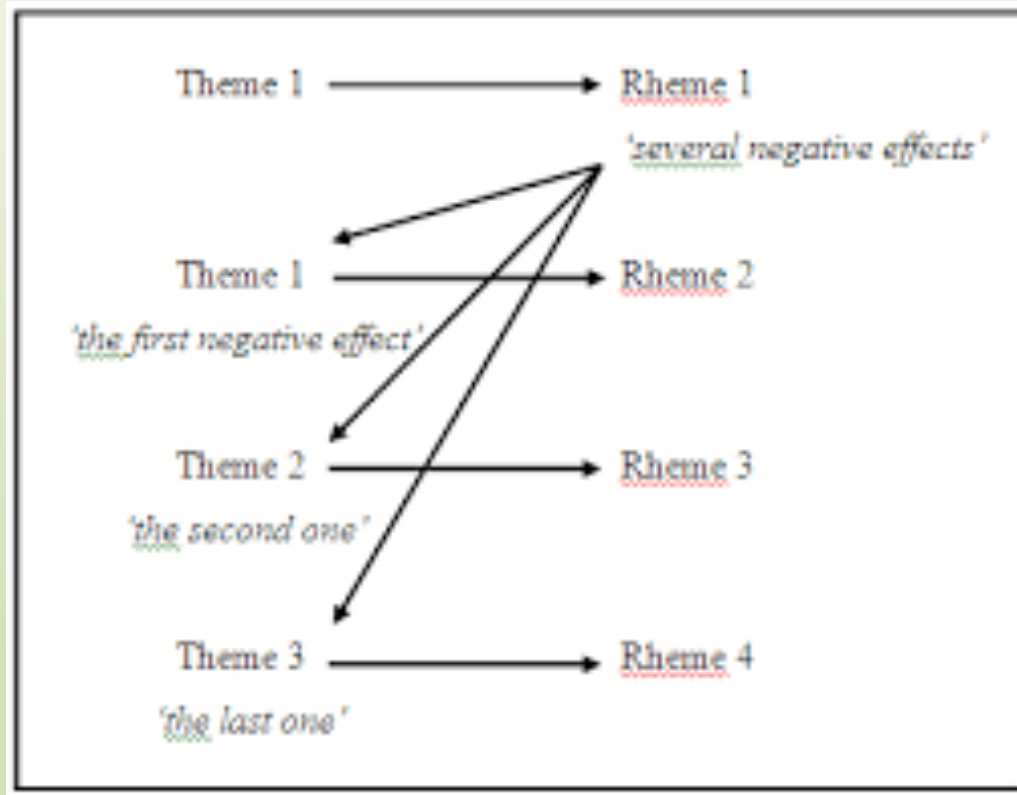
T2 -> R3

|

T2 -> R4

Ex. Kids drink milk. Milk is white. Milk comes from  
COWS. ...

# 4- Thematic progression w/ subsequent constant themes related to the first rheme





## 6- Thematic progression w/ subsequent new themes related to a constant rheme

T1 -> R1

T2 -> R1

T3 -> R1

Ex. Kids drink milk. Poppies drink milk. Adults  
drink milk

Thus, authors decide systematically to foreground certain elements in the text.



Each syntactic variation of theme and rheme is a strategic device on the part of the author to focus the reader's attention on some piece of information rather than on another in consideration of the whole text.

Thematic sequencing depends on DISCOURSE GENRE and RHETORICAL PURPOSES and plays a fundamental role in text construction