

The Status of Theme in Political Interviews: A Case of Native and Nonnative Speakers

Ahmad Amin Rashidifar

English Department, Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shadegan, Iran

Seyed Foad Ebrahimi

Young Researchers and Elite Clubs, Shadegan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shadegan, Iran

Abstract

Theme plays crucial roles in the message function of language. An important question is how speakers deal with thematic choices as textual devices. Few studies have brought their significance into focus. The present study, therefore, investigates Theme development and progression in English media discourse providing meticulous concentration to the political interview as a communicative genre. The corpus comprises 30 video-taped political interviews, a combination of short and long ones (5 Minutes to 1 Hour) about Iran's nuclear program, Iran's latest events regarding the presidential election, events following the presidential election and major controversial issues in the Middle East region. The corpus was analyzed using Halliday's (1994) thematic organization and McCabe's (1999) thematic progression models. The gained results revealed significant differences between the English native interviews and Iranian EFL interviews regarding thematic schemes. The study concludes that speakers must be aware of these tools to employ them efficiently to create more cohesive speeches.

Key words: theme, rheme, thematic organization, thematic progression, political interview

INTRODUCTION

The real-world consequence of failure or success in negotiating ideas is a regular topic in pedagogical, particularly EFL, contexts. In the exploration of the interview, one can argue that interview is linguistic events that are a joint production of interviewer and interviewee. It is, fashioned by their context and nature of the interaction. Also, strength of this form of field studies could be the particularity of the context. Therefore, an analysis of the interviews casts considerable light on how speakers manage their speech and how they realize their ideas and thoughts in a linguistic form in order to avoid any misunderstanding, and how they maintain the coherence and cohesion in their interaction.

A spoken mediated political interview is defined as a dyadic encounter between an interviewer and an interviewee, which is directed at a public audience. Mediatized political interviews represent a dialogue-within-dialogue scenario par excellence. On the one hand, there is dialogue within the actual political interview, which has been referred to as a first-frame interaction (Fetzer 2000), and there is dialogue between the second-frame audience in front of their TV sets and the first-frame encounter in the television studio. The first-frame encounter is interactionally organized by coparticipant-specific employment of the turn-taking system. Regarding its sequential organization, a political interview is characterized by question-and-answer sequences (Fetzer 2005: 290-291). So their communicative contributions are realized in the form of initiation and response.

A primary function-based definition of initial position covering different types of Themes is offered by the concept of Theme zone. Theme denotes the point of departure of clause and relational-semantic 'aboutness' (the speaker's point of departure setting her/his angle on the experience being constructed) syntactically across different languages. For English, the importance of theme zone can be discussed from two perspectives. From a bottom-up perspective, it accommodates the creation of clauses, sentences, paragraphs and texts, and the construction of turn-constructional units, turns and sequences. From a top-down perspective, it helps in the analysis of discourse coherence from a holistic viewpoint (Fetzer 2008a: 1544).

Theme is represented by an inherently dual concept and therefore a relational notion *par excellence*: on the one hand it is anchored to the initial syntactic slot of a clause, and on the other hand it is the "point of departure of the message" (Halliday 1994: 38).

Despite the research boom in the area of thematic organization and thematic progression, speech has been a neglected research territory by researchers, especially in interview contexts therefore, the present study sets out to remedy this situation. Consequently, considering this perceived need, the prime concern of this study is to explore and comparatively analyze the Theme types and Theme patterns of native English and Iranian English speaker interviewees' performances, the most naturally-available speech, with the expectation that the result of this study will contribute substantially and reveal important points to teachers and students of English in relation to the function of Theme and rheme in speech and help students upgrade their command in speech and listening.

METHOD

Corpus

The set of data on which this study is based, comprises 30 video-taped political interviews which are a combination of short and long ones (5 Minutes to 1 Hour): 15 were conducted by native English speakers in which the interviewees were native speakers as well and 15 were conducted by Iranian non-native speakers of English. The

recorded interviews revolved around Iran's nuclear program, Iran's latest events regarding the presidential election, events following the presidential election and major contentious issues in the Middle East region. Some of the interviews were accessed via the internet and the rest of the interviews were recorded directly from TV. The rationales behind the selection of these interviews were three dimensional: (a) they are the most-watched interviews, conducted by well-known interviewers, (b) the topics of the interviews were related, and (c) most importantly, interviews represent a natural mundane everyday speech. They were all transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Instruments

This study used two models for analyzing the data thematically. They are as follows:

Hallidayan (1994) model of thematic organization including:

1. Topical Theme is presented by a nominal group, a prepositional phrase, or an adverbial group.
2. Interpersonal Theme consists of any combination of vocatives, modal adjuncts and mood marking elements, WH-interrogatives and imperative *let's*.
3. Textual Theme includes continuatives, structural elements, and conjunctive adjuncts which relate the clause to the preceding texts.
4. Simple Theme has a topical element in the thematic position.
5. Multiple Theme has the interpersonal and textual Themes in addition to topical Themes in the thematic position.
6. Unmarked Theme is where an element that occupies the Theme position of the clause conflates with grammatical subject.
7. Marked Theme is where an element other than the subject occupies the Theme position.

McCabe (1999) model of thematic progression including:

1. Linear TP: In this pattern, the item in the rheme of the first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause.
2. Constant TP: In this pattern, the item in the Theme of the first clause is also selected as the Theme of the following clause.
3. Derived TP: In this pattern, the item in the Theme of the first clause functions as a hyper Theme, as an element from which the Themes of the subsequent clauses are derived.

4. TP with a split rheme: In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items, then each in turn being taken as a Theme element in subsequent clauses.

Unit of Analysis

Different grammatical units (e.g., clause, orthographic sentences, t-units) have been selected by different researchers to study Theme, according to their purposes. For the purpose of this study, the T-unit was implemented as the unit of analysis. Fries (1994) defined T-unit as "an independent clause together with all hypotactically related clauses which are dependent on it" (p. 318). McCabe (1999) also used T-unit as the unit of analysis since it is the most favorable unit for textual analysis (p. 73). In the same line, Francis (1994) points out that, "analyzing Theme at the level of the T-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in a large amount of text and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of dependant clause is often constrained by comparing features".

Procedure

The procedure applied in this study was, firstly, the selection of 30 interviews and for the sake of drawing the boundaries of research, care was exercised to include interviews that cover the same political incidents. Then, the gathered interviews were transcribed by the researcher and verified by two students pursuing their M.A. in TEFL. Having the data transcribed, the researcher read all the interviews to have better understanding of the interviews which in turn contributes to better identifications of Theme types and patterns. Afterward, Theme types and patterns were identified and the frequency and percentage were calculated. The identified Theme types and patterns were, then, compared and contrasted between two sets of interviews (Native and Non-native).

To ensure the reliability of the analysis and to mitigate the risk of misinterpreting the interviews, four of the interviews, from the corpus, were randomly selected and analyzed by an expert researcher in applied linguistics and agreement was reached upon method of analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion concerning Theme types and patterns are discussed in the next two sections.

Theme Types

The data were analyzed for the frequency of different Theme types and the result illustrated that all the Theme types were manifested in both corpora. In the coming sections results concerning each Theme type is presented and discussed.

Textual and Interpersonal Themes

As in table 1, the results indicated that both interviewees extraordinarily relied on textual Theme more than interpersonal Theme. This seems to be compatible with Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi's (2012), Ghadessy's (1995, 1999), Jalilifar's (2010), North's (2005), and Whittaker's (1995) results.

This finding might tell us that speakers use ample of conjunctions, coordinators and subordinators which function as textual Themes to help listeners to follow the organization of the argument made by the speakers (Ghadessy, 1999 and Whittaker, 1995). Another justification for the use of the textual Theme at the cost of interpersonal sourced from the fact that in the cases where there is more than one interpersonal Theme is used, only one attitude is accentuated; this is not the case with textual Themes. Therefore, it is probable to find two textual Themes that one is internal and gives information about the organization or function of part of the text, and the other external and express logical relations which hold in the world. In addition, Fetzer (2008a) points that, the textual Theme as similar to the interpersonal Theme can be metaphorical. This is sourced from the coparticipant-specific rights and obligations (interviewee's right). She adds that as the interviewer requests the interviewee to provide information and voice opinions, the interviewee has to support her/his information and opinions with relevant arguments and appropriate degree of commitment. As they function as contextualization cues, the semantics of the textual Themes aware the ratified audience about how the communicative contribution introduced by the textual Themes is speaker-intended, and how they are intended to interpret it (2008 a: 1558-1559).

As to the manifestation of the textual Theme in both corpora, the result showed that this Theme utilized more in Iranian EFL interviews (47.16% and 57.85% in English and Iranian EFL interviews respectively). This finding might be that Iranian EFL interviews are more impersonal and objective in nature and more coherent, well organized, and easy to follow. This result might also be due to the place of the textual Theme in the clause. In English native interviews, at least in this study, the textual Themes were more in rheme not in the Theme position, but in Iranian EFL interviews in all cases the textual Themes were situated in the Theme position. In other words, in English native interviews, the textual theme may occur elsewhere in the clause but, in Iranian EFL interviews, they are obligatorily more initialized. Such a tendency might be rooted in the nature of Persian language in which the textual Themes are mostly initialized in the clause.

Analyzing the data in terms of the frequency of the interpersonal Theme indicated a small cross-corpora difference. This Theme manifested in 22.40 % and 19.83% of the total Themes of native and Iranian EFL interviews respectively. This finding supports the result emerged from Fetzer's (2008a) study in which the interpersonal Theme occurred in low proportion (74 cases or 26.33%). She attributed this low occurrence to the formality of the register. The result indicates that native interviews are more

argumentative due to more employment of the interpersonal Themes. The higher tendency of native speaker towards interpersonal Theme might result in more listener-friendly interviews which accounts for mundane every day talk in English (British and American) cultural contexts (Fetzer 2008b: 27).

Multiple and Simple

As illustrated in Table 1, the frequency and percentage of the multiple Theme was more than simple Themes. This finding is in contrast with previous studies conducted by Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012), Gomez (1994), Jalilifar (2010), Martinez (2003), Coffin and Hewings (2003), and Ghadessy (1999), where the simple Theme was predominately used. In Iranian EFL interviews and Native interviews, multiple Theme manifested in 53.05% and 62.5% in turn, while simple Theme used in 46.94% and 37.50% respectively. Great use of multiple Theme at the cost of simple Theme might suggest that there were overt textual and/or interpersonal elements in the majority of the Themes which contributed directly to persuade the listener to listen (Ghadessy, 1995).

However, in interview, which is argumentative in nature, both interviewer and interviewee employ argumentative and persuasive strategies to have their valid claims seems more acceptable to the ratified coparticipants namely the interviewer, interviewee and audience. Multiple theme, in these local contexts, is used most frequently and fulfills crucial communicative functions (Fetzer 2008a: 1551). Fetzer (2008a) adds that the high frequency of the simple Theme is mainly because the interviewee is not producing turns with the function of a request for information. Instead, "s/he produces turns in which the request for information is complied with in an argumentative sequence countering the interviewers request for information that is explainable by the higher number of the multiple Theme" (p.1545). Similarly, Whittaker (1995) states that there is a relationship between the distributions of different types of Themes and the way texts are perceived as expository or argumentative. Expository texts have more unmarked Themes with few textual Themes, while argumentative texts have more textual Themes and/or marked Themes (Multiple Theme) (p.125).

Marked and Unmarked Theme

As to the manifestations of the marked, the result illustrated a remarkable difference between Iranian EFL interviews and English native interviews. Although the frequency of marked Themes in both types was proportionately low, the percentage of marked topical Themes in Iranian EFL interviews was more than two times greater compared to English native interviews (6.02% in Native interviews and 15.76% in Iranian EFL interviews). More employment of the marked Theme in Iranian EFL interviews results in structurally more complex and cognitively more difficult to process interviews. Results with regard to marked Theme in native interviews were somehow in line with Fetzer (2008a) where she found only eight cases (2.84%) of marked configuration of Theme in the native interviewees' speech.

Inferred from the results in Table 1, the unmarked Theme manifested more in the native interviews (93.97% in Native interviews and 84.23% in Iranian EFL interviews). The more tendencies of native interviewees towards unmarked Theme may lead to interviews which are structurally less complex and cognitively easier to process. The result displayed close similarity with Fetzer (2008a). She found 273 cases (97.15%) of unmarked configuration of Theme in her study.

Table 1. Frequency, Percentage and Chi-square Test of Theme Types

	English (%)	Persian (%)	X ²	Df	p
Textual	1080 (47.16)	910 (57.85)	35.466	1	0.000
Interpersonal	513 (22.40)	312 (19.83)	2.522	1	0.112
Simple	1075 (46.94)	590 (37.50)	1.483	1	0.223
Multiple	1215 (53.05)	983 (62.49)	27.440	1	0.000
Marked	138 (6.02)	248 (15.76)	7.847	1	0.005
Unmarked	2152 (93.97)	1325 (84.23)	0.006	1	0.940

Textual Theme Types

In terms of textual Theme types, the results illustrated that both groups of interviewees treated this Theme types somewhat similarly. The most frequently used types were conjunctions (structural) and continuatives at the cost of conjunctive adjunct. That is, interviewees' speeches were identified by the structural elements they extremely utilized.

In the light of the subcategories of textual Theme, conjunctions and conjunctive (discourse) adjuncts, Halliday (1994) states that conjunctions are items which are responsible to tie up a clause to a preceding clause in the same sentence or the same clause complex. But this is not the case in conjunctive adjuncts where they are used to link a clause to the preceding text. While conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts share similar meaning but, they are different in the kind of relationship they create in between the clauses. While conjunctive adjuncts create a semantic relationship with between the clauses, conjunctions create semantic and grammatical relationship simultaneously. Conjunctions link the two parts into a single unit. Therefore, it seems that conjunctions are more important in comprehending and creating cohesive texts (pp.49-50). The results showed that conjunctions or structural elements and also conjunctive adjuncts were used more frequently in Iranian EFL interviews over English native interviews. This might reflect the highly coherent nature of Iranian EFL interviews compared to English native interviews. This might also show the preferences in presenting the information in an unambiguous way using a variety of conjunctions which function as explicit markers of the semantic relations (for example; addition, contrast) between sentences and paragraphs.

In all, manifestation of continuative was low. However, the proportion of continuative in English native interviews was almost two times greater than their Iranian counterparts.

Regarding the English native interviews, the finding was somewhat in accordance with Fetzer's (2008a) findings where she found 35 cases (12.45%) of continuative in native interviewees' speech. According to Halliday (1994), "continuatives are discourse signalers showing a new move is beginning in the dialogue or a move to the next point, if the same speaker is continuing (p. 92)". Therefore, it can be argued that continuatives are signalers of spoken discourse rather than written discourse. The results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Textual Theme Types

	English (%)	Persian (%)
Conjunction	835 (36.46)	767 (48.76)
Continuative	202 (8.82)	70 (4.45)
Conjunctive	43 (1.87)	73 (4.64)

Interpersonal Theme

The most frequent types of interpersonal Themes were modal adjuncts with 462 cases (20.17%) in English native interviews and 294 cases (18.69%) in Iranian EFL interviews. In this regard, McCabe (1999), states that modal adjuncts are the most important means through which interpersonal Theme is realized (p. 229). To Halliday (1994), modal adjuncts "express the speakers' judgments regarding the relevance of the messages" (p.49).

Other types of interpersonal Theme are, *finite operators*, *wh-interrogative* and *let's*, which occurred in a very low proportion in English native interviews; however, *wh-interrogatives* and *finite operators* were almost declined in Iranian EFL interviews. Finite operators comparing with modal adjuncts were infrequently used in both interview types. Finite operators, as Halliday (1994) states, make the proposition finite and give an arguable sense to the text. They tie the proposition to its context. When finite operators are employed in the text, they contribute to the argumentative nature of the text (p.75). When using a higher number of finite operators, the English native interviewees make their speech more argumentative. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal Theme Types

	English (%)	Persian (%)
Modal	462 (20.17)	294 (18.69)
Vocative	35 (1.52)	10 (0.63)
Let's	6 (0.26)	5 (0.31)
Finite	5 (0.21)	2 (0.127)
Wh-Interrogative	5 (0.21)	1 (0.06)

Theme Patterns

The corpus was analyzed for the employment of the Theme patterns namely constant, linear, split Theme, and split rheme. In this study, in line with McCabe (1999), the Themes which require the reader to go back more than two clauses to find an earlier mentioned concept were not counted as thematic patterns. In other words, if links were established over a maximum of three clauses, these links were not considered part of thematic progression patterns. Worth mentioning that, in this study, some of the Themes in both Interview types could not be analyzed in terms of thematic patterns, therefore, they were categorized into a separate group namely miscellaneous Themes.

Considering the above points, the data were analyzed, and the frequency of different patterns of thematic progression in Iranian EFL interviews as well as English native interviews were calculated, and the results are presented in Table 4. In both types of interview, interviewees used somewhat identical patterns. As Table 4 indicated, there was reluctance to use split Theme and split rheme in both corpora. Both groups also preferred constant Theme over linear Theme. Therefore, Constant chain was the most frequent; linear and miscellaneous chains were ranked next; split rheme was less frequent; however, split Theme as well as derived Theme were not utilized by native interviewees. A substantial proportion of Themes were also miscellaneous thematic progression patterns. The gained result was in congruence with Wang's (2007) findings, but in contrast with Fries' (1983), Alonso and McCabe's (2000) findings. Wang (2007) argued that the thematic progression patterns are imposed by the text types. For instance, narrative text often requires the writers to repeat the Theme of one clause into the Theme of subsequent clause (constant pattern) (p. 4). In this regard, Fries (1983) declared that in academic texts, writers need to resort more to create a cross-referential links from the rheme of the clause to the Theme of the next clause. This is imposed by the argumentative nature of the academic texts in which successive ideas are an expansion of the ideas stated in the previous sentences (p. 124). As to the Fries' (1983), Alonso and McCabe (2000) also indicated that the linear pattern makes the text more dynamic. This contributes to the text explanation which lets the writers/speakers to add to points by always moving from given idea to a new one (p. 3).

Linear Theme

As it was mentioned earlier, the frequency of the linear Theme is lower in English native interviews compared to its counterparts (20% in English native and 23.52% in Iranian non-native interviews). This highly frequent use of linear patterns in Iranian EFL interviews might reflect the fact that Iranian interviewees are more argumentative by inclination which makes it one of their propensities. There is agreement among researchers such as McCabe (1999) and Wang (2007) that in complex arguments, an idea in the clause is expressed and explained in the successive clauses. These arguments help us to be fully aware about the sources and targets of the information. This, in turn, contributes to the text cohesion. For this reason, complex arguments require to have a

high frequency of linear links. McCabe (1999) states that this pattern of progression creates a cause and effect relation between the presented ideas and also contributes to the idea development which in turn results in improvement in text cohesion (p.211). Therefore, it can be concluded that one of the characteristics of arguments is the use of high proportion of linear patterns. In contrast, McCabe (1999) argues that the use of the simple linear pattern could ensure the speaker/writers that the listeners/readers are still following them. Therefore, such a following could help in interpreting the intended meaning.

Constant Pattern

At the same time, in English native interviews, constant patterns outrun linear patterns. In other words, constant patterns in English native interview were used in a higher proportion than in Iranian EFL interviews (43.10% and 31.78% in Persian and English native interviews respectively). This pattern leads to simplicity, repetitiveness, and redundancy which may result from continuous application of the same topic. In Wang's (2007, p.7) point of view, this pattern does not contribute to the text dynamism. This means that the employment of this pattern characterizes more static texts. She adds that frequent use of this pattern makes the text to be read like a list and there would be a lack of further expansion of information introduced in the rheme (p. 6).

Split Theme Pattern

In terms of split Theme, it was only employed in English native interviews. Split rheme, however, was used in both corpora, though infrequently. This pattern was used in low proportion vis-à-vis other types of thematic progression patterns. This pattern makes the text logical and coherent. The realization of this pattern in the text contributes to the clear layout of the text to the listener and helps to catch the intended meaning. This pattern makes the text development to move towards being more specific that means as we move through the text the offered information will be more and more specific.

Miscellaneous Pattern

The last point to be stated here is about miscellaneous patterns. According to Wang (2007), the general effect of using this pattern is to create text which lacks in the development of ideas (p.6). In contrast to Wang's (2007) arguments that this pattern hinders the development of ideas, McCabe (1999) believes that

“In no way are all of the Themes in the corpus chained to a previous Theme or rheme in close proximity. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are difficult to process, only that they are difficult to analyze in terms of linking them to one previous point in the discourse in order to say that they belong to one or another chain. These Themes are important to the organization of the discourse; they are only labeled as peripheral in that they are peripheral to the thematic progression patterns” (p.180).

As mentioned earlier, 36.63% and 44.43% of all T-units in English native interviews and English EFL interviews fell into this category. Miscellaneous pattern plays a significant role in the discourse development and due to the ease of access of their references to the listener; this pattern can provide thematic continuity in the speech. Even the clauses are far from the thematic rules, sometimes the listener goes back to more than three clauses to relate propositions together. In addition, in some cases, context compensates for the distance between the clauses by giving the listener the chance to rely on the contextual hints to tie ideas together.

Generally speaking, speakers should be aware of the important role of thematic progression in guiding the listener through the logical paths constructed by the speakers. If little attention is paid to this relationship, the listener may not be able to comprehend the text.

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of Patterns of Thematic Progression

	English (%)	Persian (%)
Linear Theme	458 (20)	370 (23.52)
Constant Theme	987 (43.10)	500 (31.78)
Split Theme	0	1 (0.06)
Split Rheme	6 (0.02)	2 (0.127)
Miscellaneous	839 (36.63)	699 (44.43)

CONCLUSION

The envisaged ultimate goal of the present research was to scrutinize and comparatively analyze different types of Theme and patterns of thematic progression applied in English native interviews and their EFL counterparts to trace the possible similarities and differences between them in a way which will finally equip the speakers to apply those findings in different contexts of language use. Data analysis uncovered that different types of Theme (textual, interpersonal, simple, multiple, marked, and unmarked) and patterns of thematic progression with the exception of split Theme (linear, constant, and split rheme) were utilized in both corpora and their frequencies were only analogous in some aspect across the two groups, and so the differences between them were significant. These similarities could be accredited to the genre similarity. This study in congruence with other studies depicted that some crucial characteristics of the text regarding genre could be provided by the analysis of different types of Theme. This is sourced from the fact that Theme as a textual choice could provide remarkable insights into establishing similarities within and between the genres.

The gained results established that thematic structure can be treated as a powerful and valuable method of speech analysis. It also indicated that for local EFL speakers, this structure allow them to be aware of the importance of the thematic structure in ensuring the effectiveness of the arguments. This structure could also add to building a

more complete profile of political interviews and similar genres, as this structure might be employed differently across the different genres and for different purposes.

The gained findings depict that thematic structure is a significantly effective and valuable tool in speaking. It illustrates how and why speakers make choices from the syntactic structures and vocabulary available, according to the conveyed meaning. It also contributes to increase the connection between ideas in the speech. The results depict the necessity of having knowledge about how thematic structure in terms of organization and progression helps in creation and interpretation of speech. This knowledge could guide the hearer through the logical path constructed by the speaker and ensure the interpretation of the intended meaning (Ventola 1995).

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