

## Thematic Progression in Christian Written Discourse in Nigeria

Olagunju Ceroline Sade

Department of General Studies, Lautech Ogbomosho, Nigeria

**Abstract:** The study examines the thematic progression patterns in Christian tracts written in Nigeria. Tracts produced by the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Mountain of Fire Miracle Ministries are randomly sampled and all the sentences in the selected tracts are analyzed to show their Thematic Progression (TP) Patterns. The study shows that the Simple Linear and Constant TP patterns are prominent in this discourse. These patterns are associated with speech act functions such as representatives, expressives, directives and commissives, delineating both the field of discourse and the emphasis of the tracts written. The study concludes that a study of thematic progression patterns in Christian written discourse crystallizes the structure of the text and the intention of the writer, culminating in a clearer understanding of the discourse.

**Key words:** Thematic progression, christian, discourse

### INTRODUCTION

The theory of thematic progression is very crucial to the written knowledge of discourse<sup>[1]</sup>. It originates from the Prague scholars and Hallidayan systemic grammarians in the early 70's. the theory of thematisation is central to organization of information in text.

Prague and Hallidayan scholars such as Firbas, Danes, Trubekoy, Mathesius; Halliday, Bloor and Bloor, Eggins see the need to explain what accounts for the internal structure of a clause. Danes<sup>[2]</sup> in line with some other scholars of the Prague school<sup>[3]</sup>, recognized the 'theme' (topic) and 'rheme' (comment) as two parts of the organization of information in an utterance. Firbas defines theme as: "The sentence element or element, carrying the lowest degree of Communicative Dynamism (CD) within the sentence".

Nwogu<sup>[1]</sup>, quoting Firbas<sup>[3]</sup> says it is the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication, to which it 'pushes' the communication forward as it were. Firbas<sup>[3]</sup> states further that

It is obvious that elements conveying new, unknown information show higher degree of CD than elements conveying known information. But even within a sentence section made up entirely of elements conveying new information, the degree of CD are not the same (homogenous).

The assertion above confirms Firbas' definition of theme and rheme earlier stated. Halliday<sup>[4]</sup> defines theme

in terms of its position in the clause structure. It is described as what comes first in the clause, what is being talked about and the point of departure of clause as a message.

Fries<sup>[5]</sup> attaches importance to the semanticity of theme rather than its syntactic position in the clause structure. He points out that if the issue of meaning is considered, theme in the real sense might not mean the point of departure of a clause as a message. Fries<sup>[5]</sup> then defines theme technically and functionally. The technical definition, according to him, is the first experiential element in a clause (process, participant, circumstance) plus any element (s) preceding it. Functionally 'it is the peg on which the message is hung'.

In this study, we shall be considering the progression of themes and rhemes (thematic progression). Thematic progression is a feature of rhetorical coherence. By coherence we mean the interrelatedness of features in a text. Leinonen-Davies<sup>[6]</sup> describes it as the connectivity underlying the surface text. This is the interrelatedness of propositions in a text. Rhetorical coherence can be further explained by the concept of topical development. Two basic types of topical development have been identified viz: Thematic and rhematic progression<sup>[2]</sup>. Leinonen-Davies<sup>[6]</sup> opines that when the theme of an utterance corresponds with the rheme of the previous utterance, topical development is said to be rhematic. He further maintains that if a text exhibits excessive thematic progression, it is likely to bring about rhetorical coherence in text, but if a text exhibits excessive rhematic progression, it brings about rhetorical incoherence in texts.

However, Danes<sup>[2]</sup> defines thematic progression as the choice of ordering of utterance theme, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy as well as their relationship to the hypertheme of the superior text unit (such as paragraph, chapter ...) to the whole text and to the situation. He stresses further that the organization of information in text is determined by the progression in the ordering of utterance themes and their rhemes. Downing<sup>[7]</sup> claims that thematic progression is closely connected with discourse coherence or text connexity. She posits further that a text is defined largely in terms of its semantic coherence.

Therefore, the knowledge of thematic progression is very important to the construction of texts. In the words of Adegbite<sup>[8]</sup> 'a text refers to a unit of language larger than the sentence. It is a functional unit, thus, it incorporates language use'. In recent developments, a text also refers to a spoken or written utterance found in road signs, warnings, poems, conversations and others. A text according to de Beaugrande and Dressler<sup>[9]</sup> is a communicative occurrence and ventures beyond the domain of linguistics proper, while textuality accounts for how a text functions in human interaction.

Moreover, a communicative text according to Leinonen-Davies<sup>[6]</sup> is described as a cohesive, a coherent and informative occurrence which is produced with the intention to communicate and is acceptable as a communicative text by the text receiver. Therefore, there are basic units in the above definition of text that are very germane to our knowledge of text, namely: text, producer and receiver. Finally, the principle we are adoption in this study is very important because it is one of the features that account for the connexity.

**Text selection and analytical procedure:** It is necessary to state here how the texts are selected for the study. At the level of macro selection of texts, the tracts produced by the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Mountain of Fire Miracles Ministries were selected based on the fact that both churches are Pentecostal churches.

Furthermore, at the micro level of text selection, twenty different tracts were selected from each church. These tracts were randomly picked for the study. Thematic analysis of the tracts was done with consideration for the sentences in the tracts. Only the minor sentences were ignored, these sentences being on the rare side.

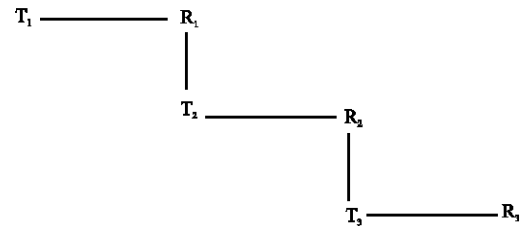
**Framework of analysis:** Thematic progression is a brainchild of the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). The FSP came as a result of the Prague scholars' efforts in providing functional explanations to the grammatical structures in textual materials. Nwogu<sup>[1]</sup> states that the

functional sentence perspective is a model for explaining how information is organized in a sentence or an utterance, discourse or text in accordance with how language functions in situational contexts.

The concept of theme and rheme is very central to the functional sentence perspective. Thematic choice and its progression account for text connexity. The connexity of text has to do with the issue of coherence. And the major prooccupation of the FSP is the coherence in texts in terms of its structure and its semanticity.

However the nucleus of the functional perspective is thematic progression. Danes<sup>[2]</sup> postulates four types of thematic progression. His suggestions which serve as the bedrock of the thematic analysis for this study are illustrated below:

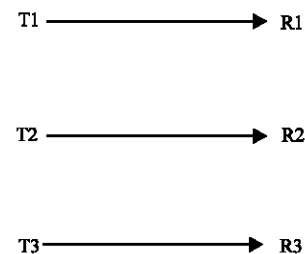
- The Simple Linear TP Pattern: Each rheme becomes the theme of the next utterance. It is represented graphically thus:



Example 1

T <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>1</sub>
He/was proud and boastful that death could never near time	
T <sub>2</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>
One fateful day, death/decided to pay him a visit	
T <sub>3</sub>	R <sub>3</sub>
This man/had failed to understand one basic truth	
(From the MFM Tract)	

**Tp with a constant (continous)theme:** This is the pattern of TP in which the same theme appears in sequence in a series of utterances though not necessary making use of identical wording. Fries<sup>[5]</sup> describes this as a topically linked TP pattern. Danes<sup>[2]</sup> represents it thus:

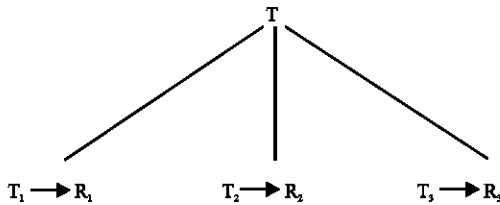


Example 2

T<sub>1</sub> R<sub>1</sub>  
 Sin/ is a week poison  
 T<sub>2</sub> R<sub>2</sub>  
 Each moment spent in sin/is a dangerous moment  
 T<sub>3</sub> R<sub>3</sub>  
 Sin/has eaten deep into the life of many youth today  
 (From MFM Tract)

**Tp with a derived theme:** Themes here are derived from a hyper theme, Fries<sup>[5]</sup> describes a hypertheme as the super ordinate term to which all the themes relate.

Danes represents it thus:



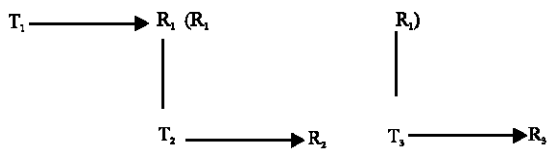
Our example here shall be drawn from Nwogu<sup>[1]</sup>.

Example 3

T<sub>1</sub> R<sub>1</sub>  
 New Jersey/ is that along the coast and southern portion, the north-western region is mountainous.  
 T<sub>2</sub> R<sub>2</sub>  
 The coastal climate/is mildly but there is considerable cold in the mountainous areas during the winter months.  
 T<sub>3</sub> R<sub>3</sub> T<sub>4</sub> R<sub>4</sub>  
 Summers/are fairly hot. The leading industrial production/ includes chemicals...

**The split rheme TP pattern:** Danes<sup>[2]</sup> ascertained that the combination of pattern 1-3 gave birth to the fourth one, which he called the Split Rheme TP.

It is illustrated units:



Our example below is drawn form Olagunju<sup>[10]</sup> to explain the split Rheme pattern.

T<sub>1</sub> R<sub>1</sub>  
 Mr. President Pope/made moves to Monica  
 T<sub>2</sub> R<sub>2</sub>  
 She/ not one resisted and rejected them  
 T<sub>3</sub> R<sub>3</sub>  
 She/often tortures him with timely moves of her marvelous body.

**Speech functions in text:** This study considers the reinterpretation of messages in terms of functions in order to relate TP patterns to the messages. Functions will be applied here to provide a link between the linguistic thematic patterning and the messages of the tracts to be identified in the next section. This will serve as a complement to thematic progression analysis.

Searle discusses five main types of speech functions. These are:

- representatives (giving and asking for information), which are used in making assertions, conclusions and claims
- directives, which are used in commanding, begging, requesting and asking the hearer to do something
- commissives, which require commitment from the speaker, like promising, vowing, offering and threatening
- expressives which concern the psychological states of the speaker such as thanking and welcoming
- declarations which have to do with aspects of declaring, marrying and firing.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The progression of theme in the tracts produced by the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, are considered in this section. The findings show that the Constant theme predominates. The simple linear TP is also observed. The Derived TP and The Split Rheme do not feature at all. The Constant TP that predominates is realized by linguistic elements such as noun (proper, abstract) pronoun (demonstrative, reflexive), adverbial (adjunct of time). Table 1 below shows these patterns and their distribution in the data:

Specific messages are associated with the tracts analyzed. The RCCG tracts emphasize the following messages

- salvation
- Repentance
- Healing and deliverance
- Disobedience of man to God.
- Reconciliation.

The MFM tracts also vary the messages of

- Healing and deliverance
- Destructiveness of the devil
- Appreciation
- Renouncement of sin among others.

**Table 1: TP patterns in the RCCG and MFM tracts**

	Ctp	Sltp	Dtp	Srtp
Rccg	705	110	0	0
Mfm	800	80	0	0
Total	1505	190	0	0

**Table 2: The functions projecting the themes of the selected pentecostal tracts**

	Rep	Dir	Dec	Exp
Rccg tracts	575	165	60	15
Mfm tracts	695	160	15	10
Total	1270	325	75	25

These messages being almost invariable, given the goals of religions world wide, i.e. the fact that across generations, religions ultimately have the intention to convert and offer invitation to a later life, no better option than the predominance of CTP would be appropriate.

The relationship between TP and then general theme of the text is arbitrary but scholars have been able to establish connections between TP patterns and functions in order to link TP to the messages of texts. The RCCG and MFM tracts are characterized by the representatives, directives, declarations and expressives. The commissives did not feature at all in the texts from both denominations. This non-featuring is surprising as one would expect that promises and other forms of commissive acts would be useful in preaching a faith. Yet tracts vary sometimes according to the kind of emphasis intended and they differ from other forms of religious tools such as sermons, religious ads, scriptures, etc which may be loaded with commissives.

Representatives dominate the tracts in both dominations. Directives are next in frequency of occurrence. Declarations come next. Expressives are at the lowest degree of occurrence. The findings cut across both texts. The similarities of their functions can be related to the fact both churches are Pentecostal and this may affect the messages of the tracts.

The functions of the RCCG and MFM tracts are described here in terms of their purposes in serving as bridges that connect the linguistic thematic patterning to the general themes of the Pentecostal tracts analyzed. In RCCG tracts, one of the themes identified is that of salvation. It is observed that representatives and the Constant TP characterize this theme. The theme of repentance is also projected in RCCG tracts via the use of representatives. The Constant TP and the representatives are used whenever repentance is discussed.

Furthermore, the themes of healing and deliverance are projected in the RCCG tracts, through representatives, to emphasize the power of God to heal and to deliver His people from the bondage of the devil. The constant TP is used. The theme of disobedience of men to God is projected by the Simple Linear TP. The sentences that

carry this message are characterized by representatives. The theme of Disobedience of man to God was explained in the section of the RCCG tracts where representatives are used.

The theme of healing and deliverance is explained in MFM tracts. This is projected by the Constant TP. Representatives characterize the section where it is being discussed. For example:

Do you know He can heal all manners of sickness and disease without taking any money from you?

The Table 2 summarizes how the functions project the themes of the Pentecostal tracts.

Generally, the writers of the tracts use proper nouns like ‘God’, ‘Jesus’ ‘Satan’ in realizing the themes of some of the sentences. Wherever these proper nouns are used, they realize the TP patterns in connection with the previous or next sentence. Abstract nouns are also used. Pronouns are also used in the tracts. The use of pronouns cuts across the RCCG and MFM tracts. The categories of pronouns used are first person singular/plural pronouns ‘I’ ‘We’, second person singular/plural ‘You’ and also third person singular/plural ‘She’ ‘He’ and ‘They’. We also have the use of demonstratives, reflexives and a few cases of partitive pronouns like anybody, anyone, etc... These pronouns especially the personal pronouns appear in sequences most of the time and are associated mainly with Constant TP patterns.

Zero themes are also largely used at the tail end of some of the tracts. The themes of these sentences are implied. Furthermore, adverbials are used to precede the thematic elements, thus making the structure of some of the themes to be complex. Also, packing information is subordinate clauses in the rhemes makes some of the rhemes to be lengthy.

The messages pertaining to salvation, renouncement of sin, repentance, disobedience, reconciliation among others are mainly projected through representatives. The expressive functions are mainly associated with the message of appreciation that has to do with emotional feelings. The representatives are realized mainly through the Constant TP.

## CONCLUSION

The work has examined the linguistic patterning in the organizational structure of the selected Pentecostal tracts in Nigeria using the functional approach. It has also been able to find out the link between the thematic patterns and the message projection of the tracts via the functions that characterize the texts.

The study shows that the Constant TP pattern in associated with the RCCG and MFM tracts produced in Nigeria. It is also revealed that the Constant TP is realized mainly by pronouns and nouns. It is obvious from the study that the analysis of themes and rhemes in texts will enhance a proper understanding of topical development of texts.

#### REFERENCES

1. Nwogu, K., 1990. Discourse variation in medical texts: Schema, Theme and Cohesion in Professional and Journalistic Accounts' in Monographs in Systemic Linguistic.
2. Danes, F., 1974. Functional Sentence Perspective and the Organization of the Text' in F. Danes (Ed) Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective. Prague: Academic/The Hague: Mouton, pp: 106-128.
3. Firbas, J., 1974. Some Aspects of the Zechoslovak Approach to the Problem of Functional Sentence perspective. In Danes, F. (Ed.) Papers in Functional Sentence perspective. Prague: Academia.
4. Halliday, M.A.K., 1967. The Linguistic of Literary Texts' In Chatman, S. and Levin, S.R. (Eds.) Essays on the Language of Literature Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
5. Fries, P., 2001. More on thematic structure and revision. Lecture Plan. Culled from the Internet.
6. Leinonen-Davies, E., 1984. Toward textual error analysis with special reference to finish learners of english' exerter: University of Exerter Press.
7. Downing, A., 2001. Thematic progression as a functional resource in analyzing text: Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Adegbite, W., 1991. The functions of language in herbalist-client interaction in yoruba traditional medicine' in ODU: A J. West African Studies, Ile-Ife. Obafemi awolowo University Press, pp: 44-59.
9. De Beaugrande, R. and Dressler, W.U., 1981. Introduction to Text Linguistics. London: Longman.
10. Olagunju C. Sade, 2004. Themes and rhemes in femi Ojo-Ade's The Almond Tree and Dead End. Unpublished M.A. Thesis Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.