

TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION AND THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION OF SCAM EMAILS

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Abstract

This study analysed the thematic structure of scam email clauses using Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar framework. The primary objective was to determine the most common thematic structure in scam emails and investigate whether these structures are unique to this type of email. Six categories of Nigerian scam emails were selected for analysis, sourced from personal email spam folders and a consumer-fraud awareness database. A total of 252 clauses from these emails were examined. The results indicated that simple thematic structures were more prevalent than multiple or clausal thematic structures across the Nigerian scam email clauses analysed. Additionally, the study concluded that the thematic structure of a scam email is not determined by its type.

Keywords: Textual Metafunction, Computer-Mediated-Communication, Scam Email

Introduction

This research is concerned with applying Halliday's (1985, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, 2014) Systemic Functional Grammar to examine the thematic structure in scam email clauses. By their nature, scam emails are regarded as forms of persuasive discourse because their authors use a range of persuasion techniques to influence individuals to respond. Scam emails are persuasive discourses because they are speech events that influence someone through language, to manipulate their thoughts or even control their actions.

Email, on the other hand, is a form of Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth, CMC), which is communication that takes place between human beings through the instrumentality of computers and email is a text-based CMC in which participants interact by means of the written word, for instance, by typing a message on the keyboard of one computer which is read by others on their computer screens, either immediately (synchronous CMC) or at a later point in time (asynchronous CMC). Herring (1996) maintains

that a couple of decades ago, this activity was largely unknown outside of a few elite government and academic research institutions and that today, text-based CMC is engaged in regularly by millions of people around the world, an increasing proportion of whom now gain access to the global network - known as the Internet - through commercial providers rather than through institutional mainframes. This constantly developing form of communication has naturally attracted the interest of scholars around the world (cf. Collot and Belmore 1996; Leusky, 2004; Khousainov and Kushmerick, 2005; Lambart *et al*, 2006; Carvalho, 2011) the respective submissions of whom had predicted that the new medium would eventually become as widespread and significant as the telephone.

Collot and Belmore (1996) contend that electronic language is characterised by a set of situational constraints which set it apart from other varieties of English. Messages delivered electronically are neither 'spoken' nor 'written' in the conventional sense of these words. There is an easy interaction of participants and alternation of topics typical of

some varieties of spoken English. However, they cannot be strictly labelled as spoken messages since the participants neither see nor hear each other; nor can they be considered strictly written since many of them are composed directly online. Spitzer (1986) observes that participants in CMC must use language as though they were having a face-to-face-conversation, yet their message must be written.

Systemic Functional Grammar (henceforth SFG), as a “sociologically oriented Neo-Firthian grammar” (Wiredu and Oyelele 1998, p. 15), which is a later version of the Systemic Grammar, examines meaning in language use as an explicit process rather than a concealed mentalist one. It is a theory that aims to match forms to function and meaning to context through its introduction of components of meaning that lay the foundation for a functional interpretation of grammar - representational, interpersonal and textual. These three structures are lumped into one another in one linguistic expression (Downing and Locke, 2006). Systemic Functional Grammar recognises the place of the social situation in language learning and use by focusing not only on the learning and use of sounds and words, but also on the understanding of the structures (grammar) and functions (meaning) in language.

Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004, 2014) reformulation of the theory involves the consideration of the data to be used for an applicable linguistic explanation and this data has to be sourced from either the spoken or written expression of language. The material so derived is known as text and can be examined for linguistic explanation on three levels – substance, form and situation. The level at which the physical aspects of the language are displayed is known as the substance. In speech, for instance, the substance of language is the raw sounds produced (phonic) while the written text has the visual symbols (graphic). The organisation of the phonic or graphic substance into patterns that convey meaning is known as the form. The relation of patterned activity to the non-linguistic features of the situation in which the form is being used is the situation or context.

Theme: Theory, Models and Applications

Halliday (1994, 2004 and 2014) recognises two main features that synchronise to form the ‘textual’

element of the English grammar – structural and cohesive. In the structural feature, ‘thematic’ (which focuses on Theme and Rheme) and information (which focuses on Given and New) are given by him as part of the resources that indispensably give ‘texture’ to any piece of discourse. In the cohesive feature, aspects such as reference, ellipses and substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion are given as choices within the clauses in a text (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The main concern of the present study is the structural part with specific attention to the thematic feature, the component of which is Theme and Rheme. Theme is a property of the textual metafunction of language. It oversees the organisation of information within the clause and, by extension, in the larger text. This function provides discretionary theme choices within the clauses. Garcia (2012) expounds that there is not a universal consensus on the definition of and considerations surrounding the concept of theme, nor have linguists come to share a common point of view on its identification. This is because, theme is functionally rather than positionally defined, Halliday (1994).

Halliday (1967) views the English clause as the domain of three basic syntactic options: Transitivity, Mood and Theme. He gives a cautious use of the term Theme stating that it has both general and specific usages, particularly in the distribution of information in the clause as a message adding that the Theme system has three distinct features namely: information, thematisation and identification. Halliday (2004, P. 211) maintains that discourses contain a linear progression of message frames known as the information units, which are realised by tonality. In other words, it is an order of tone groups the location of which boundaries is specified to within significant limits by the information structure.

Hawes (2010) contends that Thematisation is the organising of a clause into two parts: the theme, or leftmost part, which typically places the various elements in the context as ‘given’ information, and the rheme, or rightmost part, which characteristically contains comment, or ‘new’ information. A speaker or writer must make proper use of theme to present information, discerning in the approved manner, what is given or new for

choices about how particular hearer or reader gets the information so that they are neither bored nor confused.

Green, Christopher, and Lam (2000) analyse texts containing marked Themes as well as how the effects of the markedness on information structure are determined. Their study finds that inappropriate occupation of Theme position by the items under consideration here have a deleterious effect on information structure and that this, in turn, has negative effects on both local and global text coherence. One of the weaknesses of the study is that it tests theme markedness in the English sentences of non-native speakers, whose theme structure choice might have been influenced by their L1 thereby giving outcomes that are not in line with the English theme structure rules, which could affect the markedness on information structure. The study also fails to identify how thematic progression, rather than just theme structure can affect information flow in the clause formations of the subjects.

Muhammed (2007, p. 17) opines that each of these information units is “the point of origin” for the choice of information focus by which one element is selected as focal and the information focus echoes the speaker’s choice of information prominence. She also submits that choices in the information system are realised by phonological features of intonation, those of thematisation by the sequence of elements in the clause while those of identification by certain specific patterns of clause structure. All the same she does not totally agree with Halliday on these submissions. For instance, she does not see reason in Halliday’s ‘rejection’ of the concepts of “Given” and “New” where he claims that the context should always determine the sense in which the term is used. She therefore suggests that each of the units be contextualised into its proper section of the system network, and that a general name be given to encompass all the units in order to make clearer which concept is being referred to. She further observes:

... a problem [in] making the information a part of the theme system” arguing that “Halliday’s presentation of the information unit is based on spoken English [and that] tonality, as a property of speech, should not be mapped on the clause, which

is property of grammar [and if] the theme system concerns the division of clause into theme and rheme, the focus can fall on any of the two parts of the clause [if this is the case] then what is the relevance of making the information unit as part of the theme system?

Consequently, she suggests further that there should be two distinct units of theme and information by recognising information unit as a separate unit of tonality, and that the relationship between theme structure and information should be “coincidental” so that the thematic structure and identification units emerged “since they are essentially the same processes”. Again, Muhammed (2007, p. 17) identifies “a problem that arises with [Halliday’s] recognition of ‘identification’ as one of the three distinct features of the theme and rheme” questioning its being called “special” by him since it has the same function with the thematic structure.

Connected to information is thematisation which is mainly a system of ordering of clause constituents. The ordering is, as already established, in two fragments, Theme and Rheme. Theme is assigned initial position in clause and all that follows is the rheme. Processes are interpreted as a formation of components of three types: the process itself, the participants in that process and any circumstantial factors such as time, manner and/or cause. The Theme is constituted by one and only one of these experiential components. In other words, the Theme of a clause ends with the first constituent that is participant, circumstance or process, which is referred to as the topical Theme (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Muhammed (2007) affirms that the speaker/writer has within certain limits the options of selecting any element in the clause as thematic. In the selection, one of the options is ‘unmarkedness’ and unmarked element in a clause is determined by the mood of the clause. In other words, the choice on whether or not a particular topical theme is marked or unmarked depends on the clausal mood, that is, whether the clause is a declarative, interrogative, or imperative. The significant point to note is that unmarked themes are different for different clausal moods. The unmarked theme is not always the subject, not for all clauses in general, except for

declaratives, and particular kinds of interrogatives and imperatives.

Mellos (2011) demonstrates that Theme-Rheme choices characterise coherence in writing by analyzing the Theme/Rheme patterns in eight undergraduate English-as-Second-Language essays, four of which are evaluated as being high in coherence and four of which are low in coherence. The study finds that the more coherent essays employ dense and complex nominal groups in ideational Themes, a wide variety of textual Themes, and different forms of thematic progression to establish connections between different parts of the text and comment on abstract ideas relevant to the topic. In contrast, the less coherent writing frequently overused unmarked Themes of simple nominal groups or pronouns and Theme reiteration in a way that made the text difficult to follow and appear to lack development. Also, Wei (2013) investigates how intermediate English learners use Themes differently from advanced English learners in their English speeches. The corpus consists of comparable spoken data of intermediate English learners, advanced English learners, and English native speakers. Halliday's (2000) model of thematic organization is used to analyze the gathered data for Theme types and Theme markedness. The results of the study reveal that as the length of time learning English increased, the learners become better at making Theme choices: they display closer performance to native speakers in Theme choices in terms of the frequency of topical Themes, textual Themes, interpersonal Themes, and Theme markedness.

Mellos (2011) and Wei's (2013) studies have been able to relatively examine both thematic structure and thematic progression in their subjects' writings respectively, but the major gap for the present study is that they have not examined thematic structures and thematic progression in persuasive writings of their respective subjects.

Ayoola and Babatunde (2018), applying textual metafunction aspect of the SFL, examine the thematic structure of the language of political parties in Nigeria to determine the influence of the arrangement of words in political advertisements on the target audience through the system of theme. The adverts are broken down into clauses

for thematic analysis and attention is focused on the favourite way each political party organises their message and how thematic structures help to project their ideologies. Findings of the study reveal that majority of the themes used are unmarked, which makes the messages simple for readers to digest. Findings also show that different themes produce different propositions, and the themes equally realise different contexts for the proposition in the clause and different attitude in the reader. One flaw of Ayoola and Babatunde's investigation in relation to the present study is that they examine the metafunctions in a persuasive discourse from an ideological viewpoint rather than from purely functional one. For instance, they study only shows how thematic structures help political parties in organising their messages in order to project their ideologies instead of indicating how these thematic choices and structures influence the respondents' views on the political parties.

Babalola (2018) analyses the thematic structure in written Nigerian Pidgin English. He analyses 40 articles drawn from "Naija Pidgin Blog" and the findings indicate that the rate of recurrence of marked theme is similar to that of unmarked theme. It is also revealed that the frequency of multiple theme is considerably higher than the simple theme. Further revelations from the data is that a simple theme with a simple nominal group structure is more used than a simple theme with a complex structure. The conclusion of the study is that writers of Nigerian Pidgin English employ diverse thematic structures to foreground textual logicity and coherence and that there is disparity in thematic structure between Nigerian Pidgin English and Standard English. One of the strengths of this research is that it compares the theme structure of standard and non-standard English language which gives insight as to whether or not two 'dialects' can actually have variation in their thematisation. However, the study focused on the written form of the language rather than both the written and the spoken, which makes the conclusions somewhat defective.

Analytical Procedure

In this research, thematic structure, an aspect of the textual metafunction, is examined in the clauses of scam emails. The criterion set for selecting which

clause of the email for analysis is the position it appears in the email (at least 2 clauses in the beginning, middle and end respectively). All the clauses are analysed using Halliday and Mathiessen's (2014) Theme-Rheme framework in the examination of their thematic structures while Paltridge's (2012) idea on thematic progression is used to describe their thematic progression patterns.

The procedure applied in the analysis of the scam emails is by first identifying the clause boundaries, which are sequential orderings and ranges of possible groups or phrases that are used for setting theme and rheme structure by using boundary marker. In each of the scam email clauses, analysis and description are given of the thematic aspect (simple or multiple theme) as well as the relationship between the clauses in each of the emails in order to establish thematic progression or pattern in them and how that shapes information flow in these emails.

In analysing the Thematic structures of the scam emails, Halliday and Mathiessen's (2014) theme idea in which three kinds of Themes – ideational, textual or interpersonal are given, is applied. The data is presented and analysed in a tabular form by first indicating the theme-rheme boundary in each of the 252 clauses. This helps in clearly identifying the theme-rheme boundary of each of the clauses which is boldly marked out by a heading in the table. After the boundary is determined, the range of the theme in each clause is identified. A separate column is created each on the table for the simple and multiple themes so that in the end, the study can establish which theme range (simple or multiple) manifests in scam emails clauses. The theme structure is also indicated by placing each theme structure under its corresponding heading in the table, that is, as “textual”, “ideational” or “topical theme”. This also helps in clearly establishing the predominant theme structure in scam email clauses. Immediately below each table, an interpretation of the data is given.

A sample of the analysis is given below using data for one of the scam email types:

Thematic Structure of Inheritance Scam Email

Data	THEME			RHEME
	Textual Theme	Interpersonal Theme	Topical theme	
1	Following the death of my husband late General Sani Abacha, the former Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria		I	have been thrown into a state of utter confusion
2			Security agents in Nigeria	have subjected my children and me to physical and psychological torture
3			My children	are still under detention as well as arraigned before a federal high court in Nigeria
4	As a widow that is so traumatized		I	have lost hope and confidence in anybody within the country
5	And		the government	has not relented in its efforts to completely prosecute my family
6	So		I	Need someone to confide in
7			This	is why I contacted you
8			I	am prince Kufour Otumfou, the eldest son of king Otumfuo Opoku

			Ware II	
9			My father's wealth	includes gold and diamond
10	Before the death of my father King Otumfuo Opoku II		I	was authorized and officially known as the next successor
11	As a result of polygamous family		there	has been a dead luck [sic] over the issue
12			This ugly situation	made me to move the gold and diamond to a safe place
13	If you are interested to buy[sic]			will send you the address of the contact person
14			I	am William Madu, the only son of late Peter Madu
15			He	was a contractor of Federal Government of Nigeria
16	Before he gives [sic]up in the hospital		he	told my mother and I that he deposited USD 9.5 million
17			He	did not let them know that the content is[sic] money
18	Since after my father's death		my uncles	bringing[sic] troubling[sic] my mother with their useless tradition
19	As a result of this problem		my mother	fell to an illness
20			We	have nothing to do than to look for a way to claim the money from the security company
21			I	got your numbers from Chamber's [sic] of commerce
22			I	hope that this proposal will not be an inconvenience or embarrassment to you
23			I	Must not hesitate to confide in you this simple and sincere business
24			My late father	operated his cocoa business in Abidjan Cote D'voire under partnership
25	Unfortunately		His business associates	Poisoned him in order to claim his wealth in a cocktail party held in his honour as the Director of the company
26	When he was poisoned		he	Was rushed to the hospital
27	In the hospital		he	secretly disclosed to me the cause of his sickness
28	Also		he	deposited the sum of USD 22 million with an international bank in Abidjan
29			I	am Kevin Emmanuel, a civil

				servant
30			I	know this proposal will come to you as a surprise
31			We	Have not met before physically or through correspondence
32			I	have no doubt in your ability to handle this proposal involving huge sum of money
33		My father	Alhaji Clifford Emmanuel	was the royal head of my community, Eleme, an oil rich town in Nigeria
34			He	made some money which he left for me as the heir to inherit
35	Due to poor banking system in Nigeria and political instability		he	Deposited this money in vaults with an open beneficiary
36			It	is my pleasure to write to you
37	Being the first son of my father		I	am 27 years of age
38			My father	was a limited liability company of cocoa and gold owner in Johannesburg
39	A week after he came back from Abidjan		he	Was attacked and killed with my mother by unknown assassins.
40	As if he knew he was going to die		he	Disclosed to me that he deposited USD 28 million in a security company in Abidjan
41			He	Singlehanded me the key of the box
42			I	Hope we can discuss modalities of this transaction

(Source: Study data, 2020)

Discussion and Results

The present study investigated the thematic structure and progression of 252 clauses drawn from six scam email categories to establish whether scam email type determines the type of thematic structure they have as well as to discover how thematic progression in such scam email clauses assists in maintaining information flow. In the data on all the categories of scam email analysed, it was observed that there was some degree of appropriate occupation of theme position in scam email clauses, a result that matches Green, Christopher, and Lam's (2000) findings in their analysis of texts containing marked Themes as well as how the effects of the markedness on information structure are determined. The present study, just like theirs, observed that inappropriate

occupation of Theme position by the items under consideration might have a damaging effect on information structure and that this, in turn, has negative effects on text coherence. For instance, in the Inheritance/Dead Relative scam email, it was observed that the authors thematised the aspects they expected would arouse pity in the target reader in all the clauses as in the following examples from Table 1: (themes are italicized, topical themes are written in bold for clarity):

Clause 1: *Following the death of my husband late General Sani, the former Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I* have been thrown into a state of utter confusion.

Clause 4: *As a Widow that is traumatized, I* have lost hope and confidence in anybody within the country.

Clause 10: *Before the death of my father King*
I was authorized and known as the next successor.

Clause 18: *Since after my father's death, my uncles* bringing [sic] troubling [sic] my mother.

Clause 23: *When he was poisoned, he* was rushed to the hospital.

In each of the examples above, the authors had the choice of discarding the textual themes and thematise the topical themes (so that each of the clauses would have started respectively with *I, my uncles, he*) but that would have affected the information structure. Also, if the clauses had been passivised by the authors, information structure could have been affected, thereby rendering the text 'ineffective' in achieving the authors' goal of persuading the reader. Therefore the authors' observed choices of thematic structures might have assisted in persuading the target reader.

In the present study, majority of the themes used are simple, which makes the messages simple for readers to digest. 159 (representing 63.2%) of the 252 clauses were observed to have had simple thematic structures 70 (representing 27.7 %) were multiple themes, while 23 (representing 9.1% had clausal theme structures. This predominance of simple themes was also found in the study of Ayoola and Babatunde (2018) who applied the textual metafunction aspect of the SFL to examine the thematic structure of the language of political parties in Nigeria, to determine the influence of the arrangement of words in political advertisements on the target audience through the system of theme. Their findings revealed that majority of the themes used were unmarked, which makes the messages simple for readers to digest, an outcome that corresponds to that of the present study.

It was also observed that the Thematic choices in the clauses help in providing more coherence in the texts, achieved through features such as the use of deictic (as in the frequent use of personal and demonstrative pronouns/adjectives in the clauses regardless of the scam email type) as well as anaphoric and cataphoric elements (such as the use of pronouns to make reference to persons, things and events already mentioned in the preceding clause). In other words, the present study, observed that coherence in the texts was as a result

of the employment of mostly ideational themes as well as a wide variety of textual themes. This is like the findings of Mellos (2011) which demonstrate that Theme-Rheme choices characterise coherence in writing by analysing the Theme/Rheme patterns in undergraduate English-as-Second-Language essays. However, while Mellos observed a high number of dense and complex nominal groups as theme in his data, the present study observed only a handful of such cases. This can be explained by the fact that the authors of scam emails chose simple thematic structures that are mostly composed of personal pronouns.

It is also observed in the data that simple themes, composed of simple nominal group structures, were used more than those with simple themes containing complex nominal group structures. For example, 54.7% of the clauses in Table 1; 52.3% in Table 2; 69.1% in Table 3; 73.8% in Table 4, 59.5% in Table 5 as well as 69.2% in Table 6 were all found to be simple themes with simple nominal group structures such as personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns and determiner-noun combinations indeed, there are 159 simple thematic structures; 70 multiple thematic structures and 23 clausal thematic structures in the 252 clauses examined. This corresponds to the findings of Babalola (2018) on his analyses of the thematic structure in written Nigerian Pidgin English. He analyses 40 articles drawn from "Naija Pidgin Blog" and the findings indicate that simple thematic structures with simple nominal group structures are more used than simple themes with complex structures.

However, while Babalola (2018) observed that the rate of recurrence of multiple thematic structures was similar to that of simple thematic structures, the present study observes that the frequency of simple thematic structures is considerably higher than multiple and clausal thematic structures. This may be accounted for as signifying that scam email clauses require simple thematic structures such that good logic and coherence can be maintained in the texts to achieve persuasion effect, which, in layman's term, means influencing or manipulating the reader to act in a way that the authors expect them to. Perhaps, the authors understand that using multiple thematic structures may be a distraction

to the reader. This could be true since in all the scam email categories analysed, simple thematic structures were observed to be persistently and preponderantly used.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to provide explanation on the information structure in scam emails. The implication is that it has enabled readers to be familiar with the way thematic structures can assist in easily comprehending the text as well as be aware of the way different thematic choices are realised in different texts. This familiarity can

guide them, through the logical path constructed by the research work, to appreciate how thematic structure enhances connectivity between ideas in texts as well as be aware that the kind of meaning realised by thematic options may differ in accordance with the purpose of the authors.

The conclusion of this study, based on the data analysed, therefore, is that scam emails contain simple, multiple, and clausal thematic structures with the simple thematic structures as the most featured. There is also no relationship between scam email type and its thematic structure

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