

THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN OLD ENGLISH:  
FROM A CLAUSE-LEVEL SYNTAX TO A  
DISCOURSE-LEVEL SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

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RESUMEN

Asumiendo la universalidad de la noción de “Tema”, trataremos de explorar la aplicación de la estructura temática a textos en prosa del inglés antiguo siguiendo los postulados de Halliday en su *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

ABSTRACT

Assuming the universality of the notion of ‘Theme’, we shall try to explore the application of thematic structure to old English prose texts following Halliday’s propositions in his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*

## 1. CLAUSE: HALLIDAY

One of the most challenging horizons of study opened to the researcher of the Anglo-Saxon period is centred on the opportunity to prove how some of the concepts postulated by modern linguists, such as Halliday's notion of Theme, can also be projected to the study of Old English whenever we take into account that present-day linguistic assumptions, such as that of the essential requirement of a suprasentential level of examination defended by discourse analysts (cf. Stubbs 1983), were similarly operating in the earliest forms of the English language.

Despite the fact that Halliday's statements in *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (henceforth IFG) are only presented as a description of Modern English, he defends the concept of Theme as a language universal principle. In both editions of IFG, Halliday writes many tempting paragraphs in which he opens up inviting perspectives for exploration that have been used by many authors (cf. Ronalds 1994; Cummings 1995; Davies 1996; Los 2002) to promote the application of the Theme/Rheme construction to the Old English period.

However, Halliday's implicit alluring suggestions are not deprived of problems and controversies. He (1994[1985], 37) comments on the disposition of the clause as a message as a presupposition that can be extended to other languages, once the differences in the organization each one presents are considered. With respect to this, one of the most widespread and extensive debates that has emerged has been that relating to the role of word order in these structures, this being a very complex subject that, despite many studies (cf. Koopman 1996; Fischer 2000; Fischer et al. 2000; Haeberli 2000; Los 2002) having been carried out, has not yet been able to establish definite results<sup>1</sup>.

The combination of these two factors could be regarded as a matter of mutual enhancement that would make it difficult for us to decide whether it is a question of word order patterns clarifying the issue of thematic structure or the other way around. Whatever the solution, our more specific proposal invites us to turn this double direction into a new idea that contemplates the possibility of mixing the traditional approach to element order as presented by Mitchell's (1985a, 1985b) *Old English*

*Syntax* with the framework of a modern functional perspective as suggested by Halliday's thematic structure<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. CLAUSE: CUMMINGS (HALLIDAY + MITCHELL)

Cummings' (1995) study has recovered Mitchell's syntax, as the representation of what he has termed "philological tradition", and has tried to clarify it under the systemic functional approach, leading eventually to new rules for the thematic structure of the Old English clause under the label of a "systemic reinterpretation"<sup>3</sup>. The first result of his research on some Old English prose works (two sermons by Wulfstan and Ælfric and a narrative text, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) "is an impression that the IFG categories for thematic elements and its predictions for the sequencing of those elements work about as well for Old English as for modern English." (Cummings 1995, 283).

It is important to take into account that by relating the systemic functional analysis of the Old English Theme to Mitchell's element order design, Cummings has proved the usefulness of Mitchell's syntax as a background to the formulation of new systemic rules and as the potential for future development, also confronting, consequently, in some way, Reddick's (1990) stance, who at the beginning of the nineties questioned this work as the optimum procedure for getting at the syntax of Old English on the basis of the limitations imposed on the catalogue of constructions by the level of the clause<sup>4</sup>. However, despite sharing his opinion about the fact that neither Modern English nor Old English present themselves in separate clauses, Cummings himself (1995, 276) stated that "The systemic approach, which is largely due to M.A.K. Halliday, offers [...] a concept of theme/rheme which is primarily focused on the grammar of the clause rather than on the rhythm of the discourse."<sup>5</sup>

Although Cummings' systemic proposal recognizes the interrelationship between word order and thematic structure, also acknowledging the essential role of tradition in this subject, we find it contradictory the exclusion of what he considers one of the basic operating parameters in the language. Clause-level analysis, especially in issues such as that of thematic construction, confines ourselves to a microarea of exploration

that, even in this early stage of the English language, can only acquire its full meaning in conjunction with a suprasentential sphere that justifies the assessment of Old English texts as discourse and not as a medley of disconnected clauses.

### 3. DISCOURSE: MARTIN (HALLIDAY) + CUMMINGS (HALLIDAY + MITCHELL)

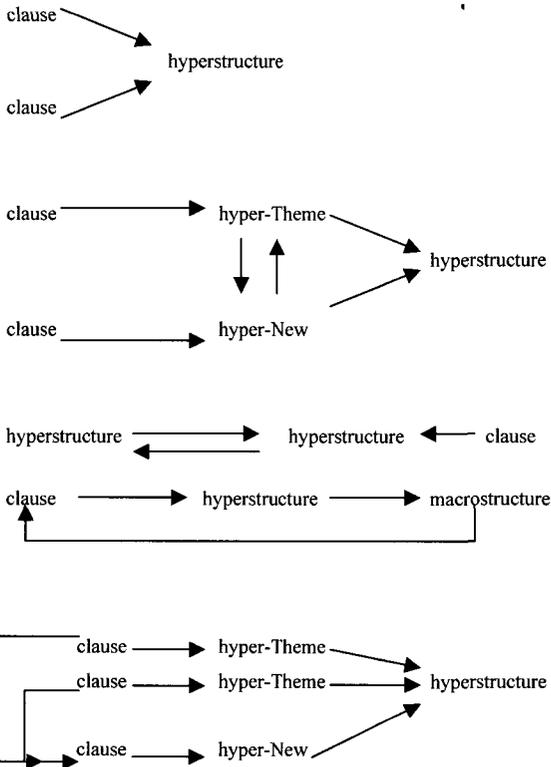
Therefore, our main challenge is to fill the gap found in Cummings' work by proposing the framing of his reformulation within a higher level of analysis, above that of the clause. With this purpose in mind, we could profit from the theories about the method of development of discourse displayed by Martin in *English Text* (henceforth ET) through what he calls hyperstructures and macrostructures<sup>6</sup>.

Relying on the rules of the systemic reinterpretation presented by Cummings, we could go one step further by placing these patterns inside the superstructural framework suggested by Martin. In our case, the value of the thematic structures which Halliday (1994[1985], 67) describes as "the most significant factor in the development of the text" would have a role to play beyond the lexico-grammatical level on which the IFG is centred, emphasizing likewise "the significance of marked Themes as a resource for scaffolding a text's method of development [...]," proposed by ET (Martin 1992, 442), within a superior discourse level. In this way, it would be reasonable to move from Halliday's definition of the textual metafunction as "clause as message" to a new concept of thematic structure as "discourse as message" which taking also into account the involvement of Cumming's rules, could be applied not only to Modern English but also to Old English.

The consistency in the word order typologies determines the marked nature of the thematic constructions produced by the disruptions of this consistency. By means of the marked Themes Cummings (1995, 305) establishes, some parts of the message may be signalled as being of most interest within a network of micro and macrostructural influence and interrelationship. This interrelationship interpretation will allow us to extend the relevance of the thematic element Cummings confines to the

layer of the clause to a whole area of emphatic hyper and macrostructure that, at the same time, would have previously exerted its own determining effect on the many choices opened to the writer of the text to opt for a certain element to be placed in the initial part of the clause.

The choice of this element, or of an entire succession of marked Themes, may be motivated by the intention of the author to guide the development of a particular range of meanings over extensive segments of the discourse, to emphasize a whole hyper or macrostructure, to mark important points of transition in the text or even to create a contrast between the parts of Theme and New of the same superstructure<sup>7</sup>. This being so, some of the possibilities illustrating the complex network or system of influence produced between clause, hyper and macrostructure we might find in the text could be represented through the following diagrams:



Perhaps more fundamentally than in any other aspect of syntax, thematic structure is controlled by a range of interacting motivations where discourse grammar must be taken as seriously as sentence grammar and where the discourse level of analysis proposed here would only represent one of the many factors determining the position of the elements in the text and, therefore, one of the many possibilities of influencing the receiving mechanism of the message, especially in this early stage of the English language<sup>8</sup>. As Fischer et ál. (2000, 145) state, some perspectives of analysis, such as the one we have presented, presume the existence of an unmarked word order and refer to discourse factors as the main motivating force in the change of order, “within the bounds of these options, variations may be motivated by considerations that lie outside the domain of grammar in a strict sense (markedness, social factors, pragmatics, discourse, etc.)”

Since the textual product is essentially a reflection of these social factors and hence the cultural system in which it is embedded, the discourse-level thematic tool established in this paper would represent an important resource serving the persuasive nature of the written text at that period. Perhaps even more than in Modern English, the position of the constituents in the clause and in the whole text was linked to issues of information structure that would allow the author not only to create a discourse but also to shape the mentality of the receiver. Consequently, although the arrangement of elements in Old English, despite many similarities, observes different principles from those which obtain in Modern English, omitting the reference to a discourse thematic structure implies the denial of a working tenet in the language whose role, in that early period, could be more relevant than in present-day English. That enhancement purpose attributed to it makes it difficult to accept, on the one hand, that the issues of word order and thematic configuration were not linked in the creation of thematic constructions in the message, and on the other hand, that this double and merged system was only designed with an exclusive purpose restricted to the layer of the sentence.

One of the most appealing aspects derived from the compilation of all these theoretical statements has to do with the way in which all of them flow into the configuration of a methodological device that fits the purposes of critical discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough 1995; 2001[1989]),

one of the most recently established paradigms within discourse analysis that defends the study of discourse as a tool for the social construction of reality and as an instrument of power and control depending on the ideological factor to maintain social inequality. Considering the extralinguistic reality of the Anglo-Saxon period (cf. Mayr-Harting 1991[1972]), marked by the ideological influence of Christianity and its relationship to issues of social stratification, the assumptions we have discussed in this paper turn the exploration of thematic structure into an appropriate analytical resource that, by means of the strategic position of the elements, allows the writer to “naturalize” the message and hence, assist the manipulative power of the discourse over the receiver<sup>9</sup>.

And more important, besides fitting the critical parameters of power and ideology that also characterize the Anglo-Saxon context, the analytical tool we are presenting accomplishes the two basic axioms of discourse analysis:

to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts [...] (Stubbs 1983, 1).

Nonetheless, having admitted the restriction to the clause level presented by Halliday, the reiterative appeal made by important critical discourse analysts, such as Fairclough, for the IFG as an instrument of analysis, despite achieving the aim of studying language in use in social contexts, has neglected the other basic condition of discourse as language above the sentence. On the contrary, our methodological proposal provides us with the advantages of sticking to the essential principles of discourse analysis from a critical approach applicable to the Old English language and to the circumstances underlining the Anglo-Saxon context.

From this perspective, for example, the initial position of the verb in the clause could be justified by the intention of the author to give emphasis to the actions of those central participants who represent the extralinguistic social elites<sup>10</sup>. By means of their actions, their social relevance might influence the hyperstructural construction of the discourse or even bring about a contrast with the actions of other participants. Sometimes,

the preposing of an object as thematic element may have to do with the aim of the writer to attract the attention of the reader to an emphatic Theme, hyper-Theme or macro-Theme referring to certain aspects of the Christian ideology which the author wants to highlight so as to control the mentality of the receiver<sup>11</sup>.

Despite the long path of further practical research opened by the theoretical statements discussed in this paper, and especially by their presentation as a methodological proposal, to validate the convenience of moving from a clause-level syntax to a discourse-level systemic perspective, an additional course of research also remains to be widened to embrace the many discourse angles affecting thematic structure in Old English, from which the one we have suggested only represents a small contribution to illustrate Reddick's (1990, 382) claim: "we have not inherited from the Anglo-Saxon period a set of isolated clauses [...] What we have inherited are written texts."

In our case, this statement has been given form by accepting some central axioms: Firstly, the functioning mechanisms of the Old English clause as a message need to be examined in the light of a mutual complementary process of the rules of thematic structure and word order. Secondly, Reddick's criticism tried to underestimate the role of tradition as represented by Mitchell, an essential reference point in many studies of Old English. However, Cummings has proved that it is possible to unify, in a second parallel complementing step, the authority of Mitchell's syntax with systemic grammar. And thirdly, our suggestion to improve Cummings' rules through the involvement of Martin's discourse framework exemplifies what would be a whole approach to be taken in the study of the Old English discourse: to make tradition evolve under new perspectives and higher levels of analysis. Any fresh suggestion may provide us with new results in the study of Old English texts, which despite a long history of research having been accomplished upon them, have still much to offer.

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## NOTES

- 1 Nevertheless, considering the background provided by research in this area, there seems to be an agreement on the fact that although the mechanisms responsible for word order are still poorly understood, there is something like a basic disposition in the constituents of the clause on which other patterns have to be considered as variations. Facing some purely syntactic and quantitative approaches (cf. Pintzuk 1995), scholars have also mentioned the importance of attaching a functional view to the explanation of these variations as well as the central role of traditional word order rules as a fundamental tool for the understanding of many other syntactic features.
- 2 In his work "Theme and Information until Shakespeare", Davies (1996, 127) defends the necessity of connection between past and present by demonstrating the appropriateness of extending the systemic distinction Given/New, "whether or not the system of Information was exactly the same in Old English as today." Cummings (1995, 294) had previously claimed that the arrangement of elements in Old English clauses "has been described extensively in a long tradition of scholarship, and any attempt to view the question within a systemic functional perspective must eventually digest the results yielded by more traditional approaches."
- 3 The three basic Old English element orders Cummings (1995) takes from Mitchell (1985b, 957-986) are: S V in a principal clause; V S after an adverb; S [...] V after *and* and in a subordinate clause.
- 4 As Reddick (1990) explained, studies of Old English syntax had been dominated, since the sixteenth-century beginnings, by Latin-based grammars or clause-bound grammars, being Mitchell's its most distinguished manifestation.
- 5 In the same way, Denison (1986), Pérez Lorido (1996) or Fischer et al. (2000) have also defended that factors such as the disposition of the elements in the

sentence do not depend only on syntactic principles, but also on others based on the level of the discourse.

- 6 As Martin (1992, 437) explains, there is a connection between Theme and hyper-Theme: “a hyper-Theme is an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among strings, chains and Theme selection in following sentences [...]” At the same time, a further link with macro-Theme can be established: “On the basis of this definition of hyper-Theme, the term macro-Theme can be defined as a sentence or group of sentences (possibly a paragraph) which predicts a set of hyper-Themes [...]” However, from Cummings’ viewpoint, this relationship between Theme, hyper-Theme and macro-Theme would be broken by the imposition of the clause level.
- 7 By simplifying the dichotomies Theme/Rheme and Given/New into the distinction Theme and New, Martin (1992, 456) explains how the whole text symbolizes the thematic and information structure of the clause: “Macro-Theme, hyper-Themes and clause Themes project forward, scaffolding the text with respect to its rhetorical purpose [...] macro-New, hyper-News and clause News on the other hand look back, gathering up the meanings which have accumulated to elaborate a text’s field.”
- 8 Despite Martin’s discursive contribution in ET, he (2000, 285-292) has later defended the usefulness of Halliday’s thematic configuration to exemplify the role of the textual metafunction: “The flow of meanings in a text naturalizes a reading position for that text, a position which speakers and writers design because of the ways in which they want to act on others.” This statement makes sense, especially, in the Anglo-Saxon period due to the practical and utilitarian purpose of the written texts, whose authors were mainly concerned with the education of the people and the transmission of moral and religious issues. As Mayr-Harting (1991[1972], 255) asserts, monastic circles showed “what monks wanted society to be rather than what it was. But this in itself is worth knowing.”
- 9 Discourse analysis with critical purposes relies on the presumption of naturalization, implicit contents and opacity of ideology, which gives the ideological representations a common-sense status: “A dominant discourse is subject to a process of *naturalization*, in which it appears to lose its connection with particular ideologies and interests and become the common-sense practice of the institution.” (Fairclough 2001[1989], 89).
- 10 According to Cummings’ rules (1995, 305), “In declarative main clauses, marked themes are realized as first topical elements in all instances of Predicator-initial clauses [...]”
- 11 “Another form of marked theme is the topical element [...] which precedes the Predicator-Subject sequence, including all forms of circumstantial Adjuncts and any sort of object.” (Cummings 1995, 305).