Chapter 1:
Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing acknowledgement that English is the lingua franca of international research and business. As pointed out by Scollon and Scollon,

> When Chinese from Hong Kong do business in Japan, many aspects of communication take place in English. When Koreans open an industrial complex in Saudi Arabia, again, English is generally the language in which business is transacted.

(Scollon and Scollon, 1995:4)

Phillipson (1992), Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Pennycook (1998) among others have documented the extent and influence of the English language throughout the world. For many in the workplace, English is seen as an important element for conducting successful business (Charles and Charles, 1999; Davies et al., 1999; Forey and Nunan, 2002, among others). In Hong Kong, from where some of the data in the present study were drawn, the competitiveness of the business community depends greatly on the quality of its professionals and their ability to communicate within the global economy. Improvement in the quality of communication, and in particular raising the standard of English within the business world, is viewed as being one of the main factors which will help to maintain and enhance Hong Kong's status as an international finance centre. The Government of Hong Kong and educationalists have been involved in making recommendations related to raising the standard of English. For example, the Education Commission Report No. 6 (Education Commission, 1995) recommends that employers should be encouraged to develop suitable language programmes for their employees; that language courses should be made more widely available; and that the Government should work closely with employers and educationalists to raise awareness of language proficiency issues and develop programmes which enhance language proficiency.

1.1   The language of the workplace from an educational perspective

While efforts are made in many countries to provide language training for employees, there have also been many calls from government and educationalists in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia for the language of the workplace to be better integrated into mainstream English language pedagogy in schools and universities. The calls for better

English language resources to aid the teaching of genres related to the workplace have been voiced by those involved in primary, secondary and tertiary education (Martin, 1985/89, 1997; Carter, 1990; Berry, 1995, 1996; Alexander, 1999). For example, Berry (1995), echoing Martin's (1985/89) concern, suggests that what is needed in schools is improved access to "a range of different modes of speaking and writing", i.e. different genres (1995:55). In addition, in the tertiary sector there has been an increasing demand for business English courses by both undergraduate and postgraduate students from a range of different disciplines. Alexander (1999), carrying out research in Europe, points out that the provision of business English courses has proliferated. He adds that students attending business English courses "appreciate the value that is added to their qualifications on the job market by possessing a widely validated certificate in BE [Business English]" (Alexander, 1999:3).

Many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) professionals, like the researcher herself, are involved in English language training related to the workplace. Teaching business English is an integral part of the researcher's role, and forms a large part of the researcher's undergraduate and postgraduate work with students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). At the institution where the researcher works, students from all disciplines are required to take a course in their second year entitled 'English in the Workplace' provided by the English Language Centre. There is also an optional course 'English for Professional Purposes' in the third year. Both courses focus on workplace texts, such as business letters, memos, reports, meetings and job interviews. The demand for business English courses is also evidenced by the large number of both public and private sector courses for workplace English training. At PolyU, for example, there is a 'Centre for Professional and Business English', which is a self-funded division wholly established to provide English language support for the workforce. Workplace English language teaching is further supported by The British Council, which in Hong Kong has a department dedicated solely to the provision of workplace English language training. A large number of smaller businesses and independent consultants also provide language support and training in Hong Kong.

This brief picture of workplace English and its place within the wider community of Hong Kong is probably applicable to many other countries where English, despite not being the mother tongue, is used in the workplace. And in many countries where English is

the mother tongue, educationalists have expressed the need for genres reflecting workplace practices to be incorporated into mainstream education (Berry, 1995, 1996; Davies, 1997; Martin and Christie, 1997; Martin, 2002; etc.). In recent years, within the field of applied linguistics, there has been an increasing number of studies related to workplace English. However, as St John (1996), Swales (2000) and Hewings (2002) point out, the existing body of knowledge is still rather limited compared to many other well-researched applied linguistic areas of study. Although there has been an increase in research related to workplace English, as outlined in Chapter Two, there is still a need for further research to be undertaken. For all involved in workplace language education and training, research into the language of the workplace is an essential requirement for the enhancement of pedagogic resources. Furthermore, research into the language of the workplace will also extend applied linguistics knowledge and understanding related to language practices in this environment.

It was in this context that two funded projects were established, one in Bristol, UK, and one in Hong Kong, to carry out research into the language of written English texts in the workplace. The Effective Writing for Management Project (EWM) ran from October 1994 to September 1995, under the direction of Florence Davies, at that time at the University of Bristol, UK (Davies and Forey, 1996). The second project was the Communication in the Workplace Project (CPW), which ran from September 1995 to June 1996, directed by David Nunan at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong (Nunan et al., 1996; Nunan and Forey, 1996). The CPW project replicated and complemented a great deal of the research undertaken by the EWM project (Forey and Nunan, 2002:205). It was through participation in these projects that the researcher's interest in this area began.

The goals of the EWM and CPW projects were very similar. At a general level both projects were driven by the motivation to inform and enhance pedagogic material related to the workplace. This general concern was addressed by investigating the principal writing requirements of sample populations of members of the business world (Davies and Forey, 1996; Nunan et al., 1996). At a more specific level, objectives were developed which focussed on the processes involved in writing, the documents produced, and the assessment of the extent and nature of English language training needs within the workplace. The methodological tools used to collect data related to these issues were questionnaires and interviews. Each project yielded an extensive collection of data; much of it, for financial

reasons, at present remains unanalysed. The data collected as part of the EWM project include 202 questionnaire responses, 30 interviews with managers and a corpus of approximately 100,000 words of authentic written workplace texts (Davies and Forey, 1996; although no exact figure for the size of the corpus is presented in the EWM related papers). The CPW data include 1,007 questionnaire responses, 30 interview transcriptions, and a corpus of 20,000 words of authentic written workplace texts (Nunan et al., 1996; Nunan and Forey, 1996). The present study analysed the texts collected during the interviews with the EWM and CPW interviewees. Further details of both projects are provided in Section 4.1.

1.2   The shape and direction of the present study

Like many other applied linguistic studies related to investigating language in the workplace, the primary motivation behind the present research is pedagogic. A secondary motivating force is to extend applied linguistic knowledge in the field of workplace English. The research conducted in the present study extends previous work in the area, by acquiring a better working knowledge of how texts are organised and by investigating the choices a writer makes in constructing their text. In order to improve understanding and investigate the choices made, the context, the text and those involved in using such texts all need to be considered in assessing how meaning is made through linguistic choices. Workplace texts, like all other texts, are constructed in a context, and within that context there are a number of constraints influencing the types of meanings made. The text is constrained and influenced by linguistic choices at the level of interpersonal, textual and ideational meaning (more details related to these meanings, modeled through the interpersonal, textual and ideational 'metafunctions' of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), are presented in Section 2.7). The texts analysed need to identify, represent and reflect the language of the workplace. Finally, the opinions, concerns and views of those involved in producing and using such texts need to be incorporated.

The present study aims to consider contextual factors influencing the construction of workplace texts. A corpus of texts was collected, comprising a selection of memos, letters and reports. These texts are the basis of an investigation which focuses on one particular area of meaning – the textual (Theme and Rheme). Theme, one aspect of textual meaning, is analysed in detail in order to understand the function it performs in written workplace

texts. In addition, users of workplace texts, both those involved in using such texts on a daily basis as part of their work and those involved in using such texts on a daily basis as a pedagogic resource, were approached and their interpretations of a sample of texts were collected. The research question underlying this part of the research was:

1) What function does Theme perform in written workplace texts?

This question is general in nature and in order to respond adequately, more specific questions were developed. The subsequent questions developed could be broadly assigned to two areas of investigation, the first being the relationship between genre and thematic choices. The second area of investigation is related to the relationship between Theme and interpersonal meaning and the questions posed are as follows:

2) What evidence is there that the choice of Theme is genre-related?
3) What linguistic resources are used to realise and construe interpersonal realisations through choice of Theme?

In responding to these aims and objectives certain theoretical concerns such as the definition, identification and range of Theme, including the possible features that can be included as part of Theme, need to be addressed. The linguistic resources used to realise features of interpersonal meaning through the choice of Theme need to be identified. The relationship between Theme and the way in which choice of Theme influences the intended meaning of a text also needs to be considered. In addition, the relationship between the choice of Theme and genre needs to be explored. Another interesting area for investigation is how the meanings made through the thematic choices are interpreted and understood by those who use such texts on a daily basis.

Theme was chosen as the focus of the study because of "its relevance to the moment-by-moment focus of a discourse. Theme is especially pertinent to relating written texts to the contexts in which they were produced" (Brandt, 1986, quoted in Vande Kopple, 1991:341). In addition, Theme is important because, as Martin (2000a) suggests, from a textual perspective Theme is used to 'neutralise' power "by weaving together meanings into an apparently seamless whole in order to position the readers and listeners in particular ways" (Martin, 2000a:285). Iedema (1995:40) adds that not only does Theme choice neutralise power, it also explicitly marks the hierarchy in relation to "control in personalised and particulate situations". The present study, through reference to authentic data, analyses how the interpersonal is realised through the linguistic choice of Theme.

The present research, therefore, sets out to conduct a detailed analysis of selected written workplace texts in order to make explicit the language choices realised to make meaning through the choice of Theme. The starting point for linguistic analysis in the present study is that a text's meaning is instantiated in its wording, and the study analyses the meanings made from a lexico-grammatical perspective. Meanings construed through the choice of Theme are examined by conducting a Theme analysis of a small corpus of authentic workplace texts and informant interpretations of such texts. Barbara et al. (1996), Davies et al. (1999) and Forey and Nunan (2002) establish through empirical research the common occurrence of memos, letters and reports in the business world. In recent years, memos may have been replaced in a number of instances by e-mails. However, in many workplace environments written hard copies of memos are still required. In addition, the text of an e-mail may be very similar to a memo. The relationship between memos and e-mails is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. Memos, letters and reports comprise the present corpus. A total of 62 texts, comprising 1,486 independent clauses, are analysed for their thematic choices. Further details of the corpus are outlined in Section 4.3.

In conducting a linguistic analysis of text, the present study adopts a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. The SFL theory of language has been chosen as this view of language permits the analyst to go beyond the structure of the sentence. SFL offers a theory of language where critical features of the discourse can be discussed in relation to the linguistic realisations within and above the clause. As suggested by Martin (2000a), SFL provides

> a technical language for talking about language – to make it possible to look very closely at meaning, to be explicit and precise in terms that can be shared by others and to engage in quantitative analysis where this is appropriate.

<div align="right">(Martin, 2000a:275)</div>

The meaning of the clause, and in particular one aspect of the clause, that of its Theme, is analysed and discussed in detail.

A comprehensive picture of language and meaning will not be achieved purely through text analysis. As Poynton (1993) argues, in order to understand the semiotic nature of text the researcher needs to go beyond the text. With this in mind, the present study not only carries out an analysis of texts at a lexico-grammatical level, it also draws upon the

opinions and interpretations of informants, viz. the users of such texts, regarding a selected sample of texts.

One of the preliminary tasks in the present study was to investigate the extent of research already undertaken which focuses on the language of written workplace English, and in particular research related to Theme choices in such texts. Research related to English in the workplace, and the different approaches used in studying workplace texts, such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), are reviewed in Chapter Two. Theoretical issues related to Theme are discussed in Chapter Three. The primary aim of reviewing the theoretical discussions related to Theme is to establish the most appropriate method for defining and identifying Theme. A major consideration in the identification of Theme is where to draw the boundary between Theme and Rheme. The boundary of Theme, and the constituent elements found in Theme, are also presented in Chapter Three. Once the concerns and issues related to the theoretical foundations of Theme were addressed and the procedures for the data analysis were established, the study could continue along the research path.

The research initially adopted a quantitative analysis of Theme in the corpus. The patterns and functions of Theme were analysed with respect to the three different text types, memos, letters and reports. The emerging findings from this analysis helped to narrow the focus of the research and eventually the study took on a more qualitative approach by applying and interpreting the quantitative findings with reference to single texts. Finally, after analysing and interpreting the texts at a lexico-grammatical level, an additional methodological tool was employed and data were sought in order to understand the way in which language and meanings were interpreted from an insider's perspective. Informants, viz. insiders who use such texts on a daily basis, were involved in reading a selected sample of texts and their interpretations of these texts were elicited. These interpretations assisted the study in the validation and triangulation, by presenting new information and interpretations of Theme choices in workplace texts. The data collected provided support for the findings and assumptions reached through the earlier text analysis and by drawing attention back to informants' judgements, i.e. to those who produce, receive and work with such written texts. Thus in describing the research, the ensuing methodology is presented in two phases. Chapter Four discusses the methodology and texts

from a lexico-grammatical perspective and Chapter Seven from an informant interpretation perspective.

1.3   The principal findings of the present study

The principal findings of the present study are both theoretical and applied. The present study argues with reference to other research in the area that the boundary of Theme should be extended to include the Subject of the independent clause. In addition, the present study found the need to develop terms and labels which could be applied in order to discuss the type of marked Theme realised in the corpus. The study argues that the term 'extended Theme' should be adopted to include a dependent clause or other ideational (topical) material which precedes the Subject of an independent clause.

The principal finding is that Theme plays a key role in developing the interpersonal meaning of a text. The choice of Theme will affect the interpretation of meaning in any given text. The constituent features of Theme, i.e. textual, interpersonal and topical Theme, and the finer distinction between topical Theme and Subject of the main clause, along with marked Theme choices, construe potentially different meanings. The findings suggest that marked Theme (discussed as part of an extended Theme) is a feature frequently found in Theme position in workplace texts. Extended Themes are seen to play an important role in construing writer viewpoint and in helping the writer to organise the message. In addition, the patterns and functions of Theme identified in the present study corroborate the position put forward by Davies (1988, 1994, 1997) and Fries (1995a), who argue that Theme is related to genre and that the genre of a text influences the text's choice of Theme. The analysis of the choice of Subject/Theme is used to illustrate this particular point.

Moreover, a key finding in the present study is that authentic users of texts should be involved in the research process. Thus, informant judgements and opinions related to how the multiple meanings in a text construe the message should be incorporated as a standard text analysis research model.

1.4   The structure of the thesis

This thesis presents a detailed analysis of the function performed by Theme in workplace written English through an analysis of Theme in a corpus of memos, letters and reports, and an analysis of interview data where business and teacher informants offer their inter-

pretations of two sample texts. In presenting the analysis and arguments the study is organised as follows:

A brief picture of the extent of research into workplace language, and in particular the choice of Theme, in written workplace texts is presented in Chapter Two. Differences between distinguishable approaches used to study workplace texts such as ESP and SFL are outlined. The rationale for and benefits in selecting SFL as a model of language on which to base a study are presented and SFL research related to the workplace is reviewed.

An in-depth analysis of Theme, with a focus on the definition and identification of Theme, is provided in Chapter Three. Issues related to where the boundary of Theme should be drawn are reviewed and the position adopted within the present research is delineated. The unit of analysis adopted within the present study is given. The constituent elements of Theme, i.e. textual, interpersonal and topical Theme, are discussed as well as marked Theme and Subject/Theme. Within the choice of marked Theme a distinction is made between Themes being realised by Complements, Circumstantial Adjuncts, hypotactic enhancing clauses and projecting clauses. These structures are also introduced in Chapter Three.

The first of two methodological tools adopted in the present study to collect data is introduced in Chapter Four. The research paradigm within which the present study is situated, the background to the study, the procedure for collecting data for subsequent text analysis, the development of a corpus, the analytical systems developed to analyse the corpus, and the verification of one particular analytical system are discussed in Chapter Three. Finally, in this chapter, the needs and reasons for including multiple research methods are presented.

The findings related to textual, interpersonal and topical Themes in the corpus of memos, letters and reports are outlined in Chapter Five. In addition, it is argued that the choice of nominal group realising the topical Theme of the main clause (Subject/Theme) is an important feature and can be used to encode writer viewpoint. This chapter also situates the importance and relevance of marked Theme, demonstrating that over one third of all independent clauses in the corpus have a marked Theme. The type and function of marked Theme, i.e. whether realised by a Circumstantial Adjunct or a hypotactic enhancing clause preceding the Subject, are analysed and discussed.

Projecting Theme is discussed in detail in Chapter Six. The present study posits three categories which can be used to discuss the projecting Themes found in the corpus. It is argued that the realisations construed through a projecting Theme are interpersonal in nature. Moreover, projecting Theme is seen to construe the status, identity, power and viewpoint of the writer.

The second methodological tool used in the present study is presented in Chapter Seven. It argues that the inclusion of informant interpretations is an essential component of applied linguistic research. The present study contends that there is a need to include multiple perspectives in all research. Informant interpretations enhance the present study by validating and triangulating the other forms of research. The procedures and considerations involved in conducting informant interviews are delineated. The text used to stimulate a discussion, the participants in the informant interviews and the process involved in the interviews are described.

The findings from the informant interviews, in a more qualitative approach, are examined in Chapter Eight. The meanings construed, from the informants' perspective, through the choice of Theme in two selected texts are discussed in detail. The findings from this part of the study reveal that there is a difference in how business and teacher informants view the way in which meaning is made in the two texts.

A conclusion and summary of the key findings are presented in Chapter Nine. Conclusions are drawn and the implications of the study are discussed. In addition, suggestions for future research in the area are also made.