

## **Chapter 8:**

### **Going Beyond the Text: Informant Interpretations of Theme**

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Key findings related to the theoretical considerations of Theme and the choice of Theme in the corpus have been outlined in Chapters Three, Five and Six. In this chapter, the second set of data collected in the research is reported on. The discussion of findings presented in this chapter goes beyond simply applying a theoretical linguistic model to text; instead, it combines the results of text analysis (presented above) with informant interpretations. Building on earlier work undertaken in the EWM and CPW projects, where extensive interviews were conducted with business informants, the aim was to elicit and explore informant interpretations of specific linguistic realisations within chosen texts.

The chapter illustrates the way in which users of English workplace texts perceive two such texts, and what an SFL analysis can say about the texts. This component of the study set out to investigate what users of workplace texts thought when considering the way in which the language in two texts makes meanings. More specifically it sought to discover how the choice of Theme affected interpersonal relationships in these texts, and might be expected to do so in texts generally. One text, Memo 13, is an authentic text taken from the corpus; the other text, Memo 13A, is a constructed text taken from pedagogic material developed in Phase II of the CPW project. Further details of these two texts can be found in Chapter Seven.

The need to involve participants who regularly produce, receive and implement texts of the type being studied is emphasised by Bhatia (1993a), Berry (1996), Davies et al. (1999) and Louhiala-Salminen (2002), among others. The inclusion of qualitative interview data from informants who are regular users of English workplace texts helps to support the findings of the text analyses, as well as to bring about a sensible and meaningful integration of both the data and the researcher's interpretations to facilitate analysis and derive conclusions. In order to tap the resources that informants constitute and gain an insight into their views about the way in which language makes meaning in the two texts, focus group interviews were conducted with 26 informants. By including the interpretations of informants who are familiar with workplace texts it was hoped to reach a clearer understanding of how EFL professionals and business people view the meaning-making going on in these texts, allowing the study to explore some interesting questions, such as:

- 1) What are the linguistic features which different groups of informants view as being salient in negotiating the interpersonal meaning between the writer and intended reader?
- 2) How do different groups/individuals interpret and react as readers of the texts?
- 3) Were groups/individuals sensitive to any specific generic constraints which were perceived to influence the texts?
- 4) In what way were the groups/individuals sensitive to the interpersonal meaning construed through the choice of Theme in the texts?

Through a detailed analysis of two sample texts and the analysis of data collected in informant interviews, this chapter is intended to provide responses to these questions as well as a triangulation of the findings discussed in Chapters Five and Six. (Triangulation is discussed in detail in Chapter Four). Viewing the data from multiple perspectives should enhance our understanding of the way in which meaning is made in workplace English texts. The present chapter further adds to the quantitative and qualitative approach inherent in the text analyses presented in Chapters Five and Six.

The texts and the informants' initial reactions to these texts are presented in Section 8.1. In addition, in Section 8.1 a more detailed discussion of informants' interpretations of different features related to thematic choices is presented. This is followed by the informants' views of the impact of the texts' layout on issues such as readability, which are outlined in Section 8.2. The relevance and implications of these findings in the context of the present study and for its wider ramifications are reviewed in Section 8.3.

### **8.1 Linguistic choices and informant interpretations**

This section discusses the lexico-grammatical choices of the two sample texts from an SFL perspective, supported by the informants' comments about these specific features. As Iedema points out:

To appreciate the constructive power of administration and its language, we need to 'unpack' the discourse, i.e. go into the grammar and show how the features of administrative language contribute to its power over social organisation.

(Iedema, 1995:134)

The 'unpacking' in the discussion which follows incorporates two levels, namely informant interpretations and linguistic analysis. In the focus group interviews with the informants, systemic-functional linguistic terms were not used as many of the teachers and business informants involved were not familiar with such terms. However, for the purpose

of illustrating the way in which the language models meaning, the informants' comments are discussed in relation to an SFL theory of language. It should be noted that although Iedema (1995) above refers to administrative language, he is discussing memos, or what he calls directives, within a workplace setting.

#### 8.1.1 Sample texts

Two texts were chosen because, as outlined in Section 7.2.4, they are similar ideationally, both being memos to office staff dealing with the issue of filling in time sheets. Memo 13 is an authentic text from an accounting firm, and Memo 13A was created as teaching material for a unit entitled "Focus on appropriacy and audience" (Aldred and Offard-Grey, 1998:40). Memo 13A was specifically written by textbook material writers to compare the language and appropriateness of Memo 13 with Memo 13A and to model "better" writing.

The related material in the textbook includes a number of tasks aimed at sensitising the student to language choice, interpersonal relations and appropriate register. In this unit Aldred and Offard-Gray state:

The "tone" of a document should reflect the relationship between the writer and the reader. Getting the tone right is about selecting language that is appropriate to the purpose of communication and the reader.

(Aldred and Offard-Gray, 1998:40)

The two texts were ideal choices since one is an authentic workplace text and the other a constructed teaching resource. The field was almost identical, so the key variables leading to different meanings being made were the language choices and the layout of the two texts. Informant interpretations of the two texts were very different and the differences may be assumed to be associated with these two variables. This made the texts particularly interesting from an analytical perspective, as it was possible to study the way in which the linguistic choices within the two texts on the same topic construed different meanings for their readers and produced different reactions in their readers.

#### 8.1.2 Initial reactions of informants to Memos 13 and 13A

Even though the texts are similar, the effect they have on readers is very different. Both texts include a statement that acts as a Command, which in this instance is an instruction to the reader to take some form of action to ensure that time sheets are submitted by the *appropriate* date and completed accurately.

The teacher informants' initial reaction to Memo 13 indicated a high degree of consensus. On a number of occasions during the initial reading, Memo 13 induced laughter and sniggers from these informants followed by outbursts such as: *Screw it up, put it in the bin! How rude!* (TI2), *even if she's God, you still can't speak like that!* (TI5), *grumbling, she's grumbling a lot* (TI4). The teachers' general feeling about the text was that this memo would invoke a negative reaction from the intended reader, causing the reader to be alienated. One informant summed this up by saying that *on one hand, you have to assert your politics and at the same time what makes people feel OK, comfortable with you, so I think this is not a very good memo. It's a bit too negative, it's too authoritarian, and it's not very easy to read* (TI12). Another informant added that *she's threatening people just like when you are a little boy, threatening somebody to do something* (TI13).

The initial reaction by the business informants was not as clear-cut. Many of them believed that Memo 13 was not as strong as Memo 13A. On the whole the business informants believed that the procedural listing in Memo 13A created a serious impression. They emphasised that they thought Memo 13 was *too mellow* (BI6); *that the writer was trying to make them not feel bad about the memo* (BI5); *that she [the writer] is just giving us the suggestion but not an order* (BI5); and that *the tone is better [in Memo 13] than the first one [Memo 13A], so more useful, sounds like the writer can be approached if there's a problem* (BI3). The participants in three of the four business informant groups generally agreed that Memo 13 was more personal and even a little friendlier.

By contrast, the teacher informants on a number of occasions remarked that the tenor of the two memos had changed and they thought the writer of Memo 13A appeared to be more *friendly*. For example, one teacher informant commented:

*Well it's much improved... you know a lot of the accusing and threatening text is taken out. You know... even though the content has not changed essentially, but the tone you know... is much more, you know just err... much more, you know... it's not friendly yet but it's at least business-like, you know... it's just more proper.* (TI6)

This was summed up by another teacher informant who stated that *the writer seems to want err... to signal a friendly relationship* (TI7). However, one of the business informants agreed with the teachers and stated *if I was given this kind of memo [Memo 13] I'd laugh* (BI10). The teacher informants generally felt that there was an overuse of *you should*. However, a majority of business informants thought that although the tone of Memo 13

was more positive, they preferred Memo 13A because it was more business-like, more formal, as it was more like a procedural document with a step-by-step approach. In addition, time played a deciding factor, as the business informants believed that Memo 13A was less wordy and it would not take too long to read. It should be noted that the differences in the initial reactions of the two groups could primarily be attributed to the different language backgrounds of the two groups, i.e. all the business people spoke Cantonese as their native language, whereas some of the teachers' native language was English.

The two memos obviously elicited quite distinct reactions from different readers. In summary, the general opinion of the teachers was that Memo 13 was written in an inappropriate manner for a workplace memo, whereas the business informants on the whole thought that it attempted to be friendly and that while it might take them some time to read, generally they did not have any problem with it. However, some of the business informants changed their views when focusing on the language of the memos in more detail in subsequent readings and discussions. Memo 13A on the other hand was seen to be more business-like by both groups although some of the business informants pointed out that they thought it *sounded angry*. Generally it appeared that the two texts evoked different impressions in the informants' minds, which begs the question as to what linguistic choices caused the messages to be interpreted in different ways.

After commenting on and discussing their initial reading of the memo the informants were asked to read it for a second time and to consider the way in which the relationship between writer and intended reader was established through the linguistic choices made in the texts. After this second reading the informants discussed in detail the way in which they interpreted specific features of the texts. The key findings arising out of the in-depth discussion of linguistic features by the informants will be compared with the lexicogrammatical and genre analysis of the texts.

### 8.1.3 How meaning is made: informants' interpretations

As noted above, ideationally the two memos are very similar, in that they are both concerned with the process and procedure that staff need to follow to complete and submit time sheets correctly and by the appropriate date. However, as shown above, the two texts produced different readings by the two groups of informants and appeared to construe different meanings for them. In this section the presentation and discussion of an analysis

of both the generic stages in the memos and the lexico-grammatical choices made in them as well as of the informants' interpretations lead us some way to understanding the way in which different meanings are made. The two texts vary dramatically in the language they use to realise their purpose, in the presentation of the information, in the layout of the memos and in the reactions they produced in different readers.

From this analysis of the texts it is obvious that there are major differences in the structure of the two memos. The initial stages of the two texts are quite different, with Memo 13 beginning with a negative tone expressing the purpose for writing, as shown in Example 8.1 below. In comparison, in Memo 13A the writer starts, as it states in the memo, by *drawing* attention to the particular issues, as shown in Example 8.2. These initial stages in the structures of the two memos appeared to strongly influence the informants, who considered the opening sentence in each an important interpersonal resource. The informants' reactions to the opening sentence is a response to what Martin (1992a) calls the hyper-Theme, defined as "an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among strings, chains and Theme selections" (Martin, 1992a:437). The hyper-Themes in the two memos are:

**Example 8.1**

I have spent a lot of time on time sheets because you have not properly filled them in and in some cases none were submitted by the due date.

Memo 13, clause complex 1

**Example 8.2**

I would like to draw attention to the correct procedure for submitting time sheets and remind staff of the importance of submitting them by the due date.

Memo 13A, clause complexes 1 and 2

The informants placed considerable emphasis on the way in which the first clause complex construed the interpersonal relations for the following message. The hyper-Theme was seen to establish the tenor for the information which followed. As one business informant stated, Memo 13A *starts with drawing attention to the correct procedure* (BI2). On the whole Memo 13A is seen to be more distant and less personal than Memo 13, which was viewed as construing a tenor where *you* are in the wrong. One teacher informant noted that the memo writer communicates *I have the power here and you have mucked up! It's very clear right from the start the "I" and "you" right through, it's actually telling people right from the start what level of power they have in this*

*relationship* (TI5). Another teacher informant commented that in Memo 13 *everything is building up from the first sentence* (TI11) and a business informant stated that *maybe due to the effect of the introduction I know the writer is very angry* (BI11).

The comments made and the informants' continuing discussion suggest that the informants' reaction to the text was initially produced by the hyper-Theme and then reinforced by the linguistic choices made throughout the text, including of course the choices of Theme.

#### 8.1.4 Informant interpretations and choice of Theme

The analysis of extended Theme in Memos 13 and 13A, tabulated below, shows that the personal pronouns *I* and *you* predominate in Memo 13, and although they are also present in Memo 13A, they are less numerous.

**Table 8.1 Extended Themes in Memo 13**

	Marked Theme	Extended Theme	Subject/Theme
1.			I
2.			You
3.	If you are expected to be on leave on the due date,		you
4.	If you are at the client and are not able to submit one by hand,		you
5.			All time sheets
6.	Please note that		she
7.			and she
8.			Time sheets
9.			All columns and rows
10.			It
11.			The due date for submission
12.	For those reviewers who are using Cabs pro,		you
13.			A copy of the unconfirmed time sheet
14.	On the next working day after the due date,		you
15.	Please ensure that		Amy
16.			I
17.			Any incorrect or incomplete time sheets
18.			A record
19.			and [this]
20.	I sincerely hope that		I

**Table 8.2 Extended Themes in Memo 13A**

Extended Theme		Subject/Theme
	Marked Theme	
1.		I
2.		and [I]
3.	Please [will you] note	the following:
4.	[Please [will you] note]	(i) The due date for submission
5.	[Please [will you] note]	(ii) Engagement codes
6.	[Please [will you] note]	(iii) All columns and rows
7.	[Please [will you] note]	(iv) Anyone who is visiting a client
8.	[Please [will you] note]	(v) Anyone who is going to be on leave
9.		Reviewers [[using Cab Pro]]
10.	[[Reviewers using Cab Pro must ensure that]]	time sheet
11.	[[Reviewers using Cab Pro must ensure that]]	Amy
12.		All staff
13.		Efficiency
14.	I would remind staff that	inefficiency
15.		and [inefficiency]
16.	Finally, please note that	Amy
17.	I trust that	I

The personal pronouns *you* and *I* realise 44.4% of all Subject/Themes in Memo 13, whereas in Memo 13A *you* does not realise a Subject/Theme at all, and *I* only realises 18.8% of all Subject/Themes, including one ellipsed realisation. In Memo 13 the use of the personal pronouns *you* and *I*, which realise speech roles, is quite marked compared to the use of proper or common nouns such as *the due date*, *reviewers using Cab Pro*, which realise ‘institutional human participants’ and ‘material entities’, in Memo 13A. (‘Institutional human participants’, ‘material entities’ and ‘concepts’ are all nominal groups; these are defined and discussed in Sections 4.4.4 and 5.3.5). The writer of Memo 13 chooses to thematise *you* whereas the writer of Memo 13A thematises institutional entities. Modal responsibility, usually by the person or thing responsible for carrying out the actions, is thereby moved in Memo 13A from a real (identifiable) person onto institutional entities, such as *anyone*, *all staff*, *engagement codes* and *reviewers*. It is this linguistic perspective provided by a lexico-grammatical analysis of the texts which helps us understand the way in which Memos 13 and 13A gain the different kinds of resonance with the informant readers.

It is in institutional texts, Iedema (1995) argues, that the ‘must-ness’ of a text is ‘backgrounded’ through the use of linguistic devices such as grammatical metaphor, passive voice and nominalisation, and by using facts, both real world facts and grammatical facts, as outlined by Halliday (1994:264). All are used to realise control. These linguistic devices are also implicated in the findings reported in Chapters Five and Six, in that material



entities and other concepts were chosen as the extended Theme for many of the memos, letters and reports. Iedema (1995, 2000) refers to this process as ‘demodulation’, with the writer

de-emphasising the proposer as well as the proposee by shifting modal responsibility onto institutional entities, onto metaphorical realisations of the must-ness of the Command, or by nominalising the requested action.

(Iedema, 1995:137)

However, it is precisely the lack of demodulation in Memo 13 which is perhaps one of the main causes of alienation felt by some of the readers. Some informants interpreted Memo 13 as a personal attack, where the choice of *you* was signalling that the reader was put in a position of wrongdoing. On the other hand, those who held such views believed that the depersonalised choice of Themes in Memo 13A allowed the information to be presented in an un-emotive manner and the intended reader would not feel as though they were necessarily in the wrong. The teacher informants generally felt that Memo 13 was a little too personal as it included a number of personal pronouns, and modal finites mainly in the form of *you* and *should* in thematic position. As pointed out by a number of teacher informants, *along with the you there is also the repeated use of should so the two together, “you should” makes the writer sound very err... aggressive and authoritative (TI8)* or, as another informant said, *You should do this, you should do this is like pointing the finger, very directly accusing people (TI4)*. The informants on a number of occasions pointed out that there were other choices available to the writer: *It’s weird, people in the workplace seldom use the term you should do this (BI10)*. Both groups of informants suggested that the writer could have used passive voice, for example, or displaced the modal responsibility away from an individual to a more implicit company or to procedural elements, and that such choices of Theme would have improved Memo 13. The informants here are expressing a preference for demodulation in this context. This perhaps has ramifications for discourse analysis in general, for both SFL and Critical Discourse Analysis CDA. Those preferring demodulation, it could be suggested, are happy to take a compliant role, following, as Iedema calls it, “procedure and control”. Presenting information in this manner allows for texts which impart procedures to be read and acted upon speedily. Whether the readers are aware of the notion of “control’ is an issue which perhaps needs to be investigated further. Within the field of applied linguistic, therefore, there may be a need to discuss such features as demodulation and to make explicit how

they are controlling the action of others. A discussion of such linguistic features in workplace language pedagogy would help readers be aware of such methods of control, as well as illustrating to writers ways in which control could be construed within the text. Perhaps in Memo 13, whose writer is a non-native speaker of English, linguistic features such as demodulation have never been introduced to the writer and this is perhaps one reason why she construes her message in this manner.

However, as noted previously, a few of the business informants believed that the use of *you* and *should* was an attempt to reduce the distance between the writer and intended reader and that the writer was trying to be more *friendly*. Referring to the use of *you should*, one business informant stated that Memo 13 was *not as strong and clear* [as Memo 13A] (BI4).

A closer look at the use of the references to *you* in Memo 13 - a plural *you* meaning *all staff* - indicates that it even includes the staff who usually complete and submit the time sheets on time. The choice of *you* appears to be over-used and perhaps contributes to what one informant called a *nagging* feeling found in this text. The choices of *you* and *I* would be the unmarked choices of Theme in Memo 13, a (pseudo) dialogic text. Many of the informants' comments as to why Memo 13 was interpreted as being *unfriendly*, *clumsy*, etc., could be linked to the choice of *you* and *I* as well as the fact that these features are commonly found in thematic position and are thus seen to be the 'point of departure' for the text. This is supported by both groups of informants who believed that *you and also the use of I is very inappropriate* (TI9), with another adding that *if you are representing the company it is not that common to put I in a sentence* (BI7). They felt that although the Subject chosen has interpersonal meaning in the choice of *you* and *I*, for this particular context the use of personal pronouns was too familiar, which resulted in a negative feeling where the *you the reader(s)* was being reprimanded. The informants were suggesting that they would have preferred a more de-personalised message, which they could perhaps read as an institutionalised text rather than a personal assault.

It was suggested by most of the informants that Memo 13A was more acceptable because the modal responsibility for the proposition expressed in the clause/clause complex is not *you* but rather *engagement codes*, *anyone*, *reviewers*, etc. In such instances the modal responsibility is therefore moved from the proposer *I* or proposee *you* to a position where the action of the verb is predicated on a Subject which takes on a more prescribed institutional entity, as suggested by Iedema (1995). The writer of Memo 13A avoids a

personal attack by choosing more depersonalised Subject/Themes, such as *efficiency* (clause complex 13) and *the due date for submission* (clause 4). Demodulation in Memo 13A leads to two of the groups referring to a lack of emotion compared to Memo 13, with one informant saying that *the relationship um, between the writer and intended reader is much better, because um, um, no more factors of that kind of emotion are included* (BI10). However, one business informant pointed out that she believed the writer in this memo appeared *very angry* (BI6), while another informant from the same group said that he thought this memo was *very strict* (BI4). However, the writer of Memo 13 chooses on a few occasions to use nominal groups which infer some form of negativity. Instead of stating the procedures, the writer uses a prefix to emphasise wrong actions and who is to blame, e.g. *a copy of the unconfirmed time sheets* (clause 12) and *any incorrect or incomplete time sheets* (clause complex 16). Both these nominal groups construe some form of negative meaning, e.g. *unconfirmed*, *incorrect* and *incomplete*, which reflect a negative evaluation by the writer. Although the majority of informants believed that Memo 13A developed a better relationship with the reader, a minority, who were nonetheless highly vocal, did not.

The choice of Theme and process (realised by the main verb) reflects a hierarchical relationship between writer and reader. The recipients of Memo 13 have expectations placed upon them in the form of mental processes, e.g. the writer is *expecting*, *noting*, *ensuring* and *hoping*. The writer here is doing all of the mental processing and the intended reader is required to comply with the writer's demands. The mental processes are related to the writer and the material processes are related to the reader, as if stating *I'll do the thinking and you do the work*. By contrast, the writer of Memo 13A places no expectations on the reader, and instead chooses rather demodalised linguistic features which are depersonalised. As summed up by one teacher informant when referring to Memo 13: *The writer seems to be assuming a lot of power in terms of relationship, perhaps she thinks that she is higher above, she has all the authority to command, I mean to threaten people and to instruct people* (TI7). Theme is thus seen to be pivotal in the development of the relationship between writer and intended reader. In addition, Theme appears to be packed with both ideational and interpersonal meaning. A more detailed analysis of the ideational metafunction would be likely to reveal a number of interesting points.

### 8.1.5 Textual and interpersonal Themes

Textual and interpersonal Themes (realised by Modal Adjuncts) were rare in both memos. However, although there were only two textual Themes, both in Memo 13A, the informants' comments and an analysis of the extended Theme show that certain other linguistic resources were being used to realise the interpersonal meaning.

There are two textual Themes in Memo 13A, *and*, which is part of the Theme in clause complex 2 *and [I would like to remind] staff of the importance of submitting them by the due date*. The second textual Theme is *finally* in clause complex 16, *finally, please note that Emily has been instructed not to fill in time sheets over the phone as this is not her responsibility*. As pointed out above, in Memo 13A clause complexes 1 and 2 realise the hyper-Theme, and the informants believed that this initial sentence helped establish the *tone* for the text. In Memo 13 the hyper-Theme accuses the reader of not following proper procedure, whereas in Memo 13A the hyper-Theme draws the reader's attention to certain matters and reminds them to do certain things. In Memo 13A the writer is joining two clause complexes through expansion in a paratactic clause complex with the textual Theme *and*, which on the surface appears more controlled and balanced than the clause/clause complex in Memo 13. In Memo 13 the independent clause *I have spent a lot of time on time sheets* is developed by a second and third expansion clause *because you have not properly filled them in and in some cases none were submitted by you*. The message emphasises that the reader is to blame, whereas in Memo 13A the opening clause complex seems far calmer and less accusatory.

The second textual Theme *finally* is signalling that the memo is coming to a close. However, the clause complex introduced by *finally* is not the end of the memo, as the writer adds a final reminder as the ultimate close to the memo.

There was a low frequency of occurrence of Modal Adjuncts in the full corpus; of the 1,486 main clauses/clause complexes, only 4.7% included a Modal Adjunct as part of the Theme. (Modal Adjuncts are discussed in detail in Section 5.2). While there are no Modal Adjuncts in thematic position in the main clauses/clause complexes of Memos 13 and 13A, 16.6% (Memo 13) and 12.5% (Memo 13A) respectively of dependent clauses occurring initially had a Modal Adjunct Theme. In support of the findings reported in Chapter Six, the two sample memos here demonstrate that interpersonal meaning is being construed through choices in the marked part of an extended Theme. (Extended Theme is outlined in

Section 3.5). Thus, there are instances where the dependent Theme should be a doubly coded marked Theme, firstly because the dependent clause is found in initial position and secondly because a Modal Adjunct is found in the Theme. Modal Adjuncts are far more frequent in the Theme of the dependent clauses in these two texts compared to the main clauses of the corpus in general. The informants also recognised the importance of these features and their effect on the interpersonal relationship between the writer and intended reader. This was evident in the extensive debates over the interpretations of *please*, found in the marked Themes of the two texts.

The informants suggested that the tenor of the texts was probably strongly influenced by elements such as *please*, i.e. by Modal Adjuncts. For example, the majority of the teacher informants felt that *please* in Memo 13 was *empty* and possibly *sarcastic*, whereas in Memo 13A it was seen to be purely formulaic. It was suggested that perhaps the writer of Memo 13 had added a *please* to try and temper her text: *Probably when she's writing she suddenly realises she is very, very tough, and trying to be nicer, she puts in a "please". But this really doesn't help at all because she's been scolding you for a long time, and the please is coming too late* (TI4). Similarly, in Memo 13A *please* was viewed as an empty attempt to be polite, and that rather than being polite, the word *please* was seen to be inconsequential. This interpretation was exemplified by one business informant who stated that *even though in the first memo there are some "pleases" I suppose they are kind of an angry please, but in the second one umm... due to the building up of the paragraphs the writer wants to draw our attention... therefore I think it is a neutral please* (BI11). Thus the discussion of similar linguistic items in both memos, and how these items combine with other items within the clause and beyond the clause to make meaning, shows that different interpersonal meanings are established by the system of choices made within the lexico-grammar.

#### 8.1.6 Extended Theme and meaning

The choice of extended Theme in the two memos was very influential in determining the way in which the informants construed interpersonal meanings. Both texts have a number of extended Themes, as shown in Tables 8.1 and 8.2, with 31.3% (Memo 13) and 25% (Memo 13A) respectively of all clauses/clause complexes having an extended Theme. The proportion of extended Themes in the two memos is reflective of the number found in the main corpus (33.0%). There is quite a difference between the number of realisations in the

two memos, with Memo 13 having two projecting clauses, two enhancing clauses and one Circumstantial Adjunct, and Memo 13A having four projecting clauses, which is the only type of extending Theme occurring in Memo 13A. However, it is the role played by the extended Themes rather than the number of realisations which makes a difference in the two memos.

The most significant role in the construal of meaning in the two memos is played by the projecting clauses, which are of interest for their expression of modality. Modality is said by Halliday to refer to the “area of meaning that lies between yes and no” (Halliday, 1994:356). Halliday analyses modality as falling into two types, namely ‘modalisation’ (the ‘indicative’ type), where the modal finite refers to ‘probability’ and ‘usuality’; and ‘modulation’ (the ‘imperative’ type), where the modal finite construes meanings of obligation and inclination. The projecting clauses in both memos, namely *please [will you] note that* and *please [will you] ensure that* (Memo 13), and *please [will you] note, I would remind staff that, finally please note that* and *I trust that* (Memo 13A), incorporate some form of modality. The modal operators *ensure, note, would, will* and *trust* are of the ‘modulation’ type, construing meanings of obligation. These projecting clauses project the writer’s opinion that it is the reader’s obligation to carry out the required actions.

The use of the projecting clause in Memo 13A *I trust that* was seen to carry a high negative modal meaning. *I trust* was seen to be an emphatic choice, one teacher informant stating that *I trust sounds like, you bunch of blithering idiots I don’t want to have to tell you again* (TI3). The word *trust* was also equated with the sound of *a head master telling a school boy off* or, in the words of a business informant, the use of *trust* is *probably stronger or even ruder* (BI4) than the linguistic choices in Memo 13.

In addition to the projecting clauses, Memo 13A also has clauses/clause complexes that could be interpreted as having an ellipsed projecting Theme. As shown in Table 8.2, clauses/clause complexes 4-8 and 10-11 were analysed with an ellipsed projected Theme of *[please will you note]* and *[reviewers [[using Cab Pro]] must ensure that]* respectively. As pointed out by Tadros (1985), listing, for example where a colon is used to list a whole set of recommendations, is seen to be inherently interpersonal. It is particularly interpersonal in Memo 13A where a colon is used to introduce what should be *noted* or what *must* be carried out. (Listing, or numeration as Tadros (1985, 1994) calls it, is discussed in detail in Section 5.3.4). Memo 13A also has a far greater number of ellipsed Themes, represented in Table 8.2 by being enclosed in square brackets, than Memo 13. It is perhaps

these ellipsed Themes, where the writer chooses to omit a Theme, which create the less direct and less personal feel of Memo 13A.

Two of the extended Themes in Memo 13 are realised by enhancing hypotactic clauses, namely *if you are expected to be on leave on the due date* and *if you are at the client and are not able to submit one by hand*. Both of these enhancing clauses are conditional: positive, where the writer is pointing out that if you are aware of these conditions, then you should still be able to submit on time. This repetition of *if you* is perhaps what reinforces the teacher informants' view that Memo 13 sounds as if it were *nagging*.

A third extended Theme in Memo 13 is realised by Circumstances of time *on the next working day after the due date*. It could be suggested that the writer is placing the precise time in thematic position to emphasise the importance of the timing of submission, and that it is unequivocally set. If the reader then forgets to submit their form by the *due date*, it is their own fault because the date of submission has been emphasised in part through the special status assigned to it, i.e. through being Theme. However, the informants did not comment on these particular features.

## 8.2 Informant interpretations of text layout

All informants agreed that the layout of the two texts played an important role in aiding their understanding. Even though a few of the business informants, as noted above, thought the relationship between writer and reader was more friendly in Memo 13, when asked which version they would prefer to receive, all said they preferred Memo 13A. This memo was seen as being far more *business-like*, providing the reader with a tick list to follow, and *easy to read* (BI5); the informants commented that if the reader needed to refer to it, information could be found *quickly*. Memo 13, on the other hand, attracted fewer complimentary comments: *you'll get lost* (BI3), *takes time to interpret* (TI14), *you have to read it again and again* (BI1) and *it's more like a personal letter* (TI6). As many have pointed out, in business 'time is money' and clarity and conciseness are essential characteristics of workplace writing (Davies et al., 1999). Thus the informants' preference for a bulleted, point-form style, with the information presented in note form rather than in a complete clause/clause complex was fairly predictable. Many of the informants suggested that Memo 13 appeared *dense* and is really not what is expected in workplace correspondence today, saying that *the layout doesn't make it accessible* (TI8). They thought that Memo 13 would take time to read, whereas Memo 13A could be scanned

within minutes and the necessary information extracted. However, one business informant added that in Memo 13A *the way she presented the bullet points, it's like rules... and the second one [Memo 13] is like a letter, the tone is a little bit milder* (BI9).

To sum up, the relationship between writer and reader realised through the choice of Theme and especially the choice of the Subject/Theme demonstrates a major shift in the extent of modal responsibility placed on the reader. In Memo 13 it is the *you* who is modally responsible for *not* filling in forms properly, submitting them on time, or being in the office, and including the stern *you* are expected to *fully comply with the above procedures especially for those who have been with the firm for over one year*. This helps explain why the teacher informants see Memo 13 as being *aggressive* and *accusatory*. On the other hand, thematic choices are the reason why a few business informants viewed Memo 13 as *friendly* and *seeking sympathy*. On the whole, the business informants tended to be less concerned with the interpersonal meaning of the Themes and viewed the texts in a more pragmatic manner. While Memo 13 triggered a varied and lively discussion with opposing interpretations of the texts, Memo 13A, due to a greater degree of demodulation in the choices of Theme, was thought to be *less aggressive* by the teachers and more *neutral* and *straightforward* by both the teachers and the business informants.

### 8.3 Discussion

These findings suggest that there is a great deal to be learnt by working with specialist informants. One of the most revealing findings was that the business informants viewed the texts far more pragmatically as a directive than the teacher informants. The business informants appeared to be responding more directly to the ideational rather than the interpersonal features of the texts. In addition, perhaps the fact that the teacher informants are responsible for teaching and establishing 'good' writing practices, and that the language of a memo is the 'content' of their lessons, could explain why the teachers were so adamant that Memo 13 was an inappropriate text. However, there is still an anomaly since a few of the business informants believed that Memo 13 represented a writer who was trying to adopt a *friendly* style. As pointed out by Scollon and Scollon (1995), the intended meaning of a text can never be fully controlled and ethnic cultural factors are less important than others, such as gender and organisational culture. The small study emphasises issues raised by SFL, which believes that language cannot be understood without including an acknowledgement that cultural issues are an integral and implicit feature of the system of



language as meaning (Painter, 2001). The findings illustrate that there are differing views held by two distinct groups of informants. This raises concerns and highlights the fact that the audience may interpret the text differently from what the author intended because a text “is jointly constructed by participants in communication” (Scollon and Scollon, 1995:6).

The informants all agreed that the language that aided their interpretation of the texts was directly linked to thematic choices. Firstly the hyper-Theme in the two texts established a very different tenor. Secondly the use of *you* and *I* as opposed to ‘material entities’ *engagement codes, all columns and rows, etc.*, reinforced the tenor established in the hyper-Theme. This in part explains why Memo 13, where the writer opens the memo with a personal statement, was by many seen to be both a *blaming* and *nagging* text. In comparison, the hyper-Theme in Memo 13A was seen to be more business-like *drawing attention* to correct procedure. The two texts construe the interpersonal very differently. The concept of hyper-Theme (Martin, 1992a), and the extent to which it establishes the interpersonal, must await another study.

Extended Theme was also seen to contribute to the interpersonal nature of the text in other ways. The enhancing clauses in Memo 13 are, at a more delicate level of analysis, conditional: concessive clauses, and ‘concession’ especially, reflects the negative interpersonal relations developed throughout this Memo. In addition to these enhancing clauses, the Circumstantial Adjunct in the extended Theme may also be viewed from a linguistic perspective as restrictive and creating a situation where there is no room for mistakes or questions. Finally, the Modal Adjuncts in the extended Themes were noticeably marked compared with those in the Theme of the main clause. Modal Adjuncts, an explicitly interpersonal linguistic resource, realised an interpersonal Theme in 14.7% of the marked Themes in the two memos, which is nearly proportionally four times more frequent than Subject/Theme in the entire corpus (3.6%). This finding supports the suggestion that writer viewpoint is realised in the marked part of an extended Theme.

The findings from this small study support Berry (1996), who asserts that the “most frequent judgements of professionals in business and industry have to do with (a) (im)personality and (b) clarity of text structure” (Berry, 1996:9). The discussion in this section has shown quite clearly that the informants in this study were highly motivated to discuss the feature ‘personality’ inherent in the language of the texts. Clarity of text structure and readability of the text, influencing how much time it would take to

comprehend a text, was the second major concern influencing the informants' views of the texts.

The amount of time it takes to comprehend a text is considered closely related to the length and layout of a text. In general there was a consensus that all informants preferred the layout in Memo 13A as it allowed quick scanning, partly through providing the reader with a *step-by-step procedure to follow*. As pointed out by Tadros (1985), listing or 'numeration' are linguistic resources which do not necessarily look interpersonal but in fact, as they involve prediction and ellipsis, they involve the reader and increase the interpersonal nature of the text. As pointed out in Chapter Five, ellipsis is used in the corpus memos and reports but only to a limited extent. Further research is needed to investigate the types of text readers prefer in a workplace context, especially regarding layout and style.

Informant interpretations of texts would appear to verify the researcher's interpretations and to add 'credibility' to the lexico-grammatical findings presented in Chapters Five and Six. The views of the informants helped to relate the findings to the intended use of such texts within the context of the workplace. The informants continually stressed the way in which the language of one or the other memo is appropriate or inappropriate in the workplace. They demonstrate in their comments that different language choice causes different readings, and they indicate their preferences for particular language choices for the genre of the memo. The discussions with informants also demonstrate that there are a variety of linguistic choices available to a writer and that different choices will resonate differently with different readers.

The findings have also raised the disparity between the extent and range of differences in the way teachers and business people interpret messages. The teachers' and the business informants' interpretations differed at certain points. Teachers and others outside the workplace, such as researchers, perhaps tend to be overly sensitive to linguistic choices whereas the business informants, who are directly involved in producing and receiving such texts, appeared to take a far more practical view of the way in which language construes meaning. Their concern that a text should be quick-and-easy to read, and their preference for a demodalised form of communication, should be considered when developing pedagogic material. In addition, the informants' views and the findings in this part of the study show that teachers and business informants both view linguistic features realising

Theme as important features in the construction of a message. Theme is viewed by the informants to play an important role textually, ideationally and interpersonally.

These findings question the extent of knowledge required to successfully critique texts and inform pedagogy, as this disparity suggests that teachers are at times oversensitive to linguistic features and more attention should be paid to the way in which the interpersonal is construed in the message. A more detailed approach to collaborating with members of the workplace, for example understanding the processes involved in the construction of texts, the extent of on-the-job training, including taking a longitudinal approach to understanding the way in which ‘good’ writers become ‘good’, may prove to be useful in the development of further research and pedagogy related to workplace English.

The inclusion of informant interviews tends to support the researcher’s account of the linguistic phenomena explored in Chapters Five and Six. The informant interpretations of the texts enforce the notion of ‘reality’, i.e. the way in which authentic users of texts would interpret the meaning of texts (Lynch, 1996:55). The informant data in part corroborate earlier findings related to the important interpersonal role played by Theme in workplace texts, and they also point to the need for further research, e.g. for a more qualitative analysis of individual texts. Further qualitative research could take into consideration the importance of hyper-Theme, what factors informants believe are important for ‘readability’ in a workplace context, the way in which layout and presentation influence a reader’s interpretation of a text and what an ideational and interpersonal metafunctional analysis could contribute to a better understanding of workplace English texts.

The study has shed some light on the different linguistic concerns of teachers and business people about written communication. It has also demonstrated the need for researchers to consult with business informants in order to contextualise a researcher’s understanding, a point also made by Stainton (1993). Finally this chapter has demonstrated that both teacher and business informants were able to discuss the linguistic choices made in the two sample texts, despite lacking a metalanguage to do so.

#### **8.4 Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, two sample texts were analysed with reference to informant interpretations. Due to the small number of texts it was possible to discuss in detail how different linguistic choices by a writer construe different meanings for the reader. The study has focused specifically on Theme, the key system in the textual metafunction, although the systems of

Transitivity (ideational metafunction) and Mood (interpersonal metafunction) are as important in helping to understand the meanings construed in workplace texts. However, as suggested by the informants and reported in this chapter, certain features that are part of the textual metafunction are pivotal for the construction of meaning between a writer and their intended audience. This study suggests that these features are the initial elements in the clause/clause complex, the hyper-Theme of the whole text, the extended Theme and the Subject/Theme. Informant interpretations of the texts have also raised questions about the extent and knowledge required to effectively translate understanding into informed pedagogy. If pedagogy is developed, it should take informant perceptions into consideration, something that will only be achieved through further collaborative research with the workplace.