

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The general aim of the present study was to investigate the function Theme performs in workplace texts. Texts typically used in the workplace – memos, letters and reports – were the specific focus. The motivation behind conducting the research was primarily pedagogic. Workplace pedagogy has suffered, according to Martin (1985/9, 2002), Carter (1990), Berry (1997), Christie and Martin (1997), Davies (1997), Davies et al. (1999) and Swales (2000), because the language of the workplace has been under-researched. All these scholars stress that what is required is further systematic investigations into the construction of language and meaning in workplace English. Martin (1985/89, 2002), Berry (1995) and others assert that research into workplace language is an essential requirement for the advancement of knowledge and, more specifically, in the much needed enhancement of pedagogic resources.

In response to recognition of the need for further research into workplace English to enhance language pedagogy, the present study conducted research into one particular area of meaning, namely Theme in written workplace English texts. The study establishes that Theme performs an important role not only in organising the text (textually), but also in construing interpersonal and ideational meanings. Theme, it is argued, is an important device for establishing the relationship between the writer and reader. Furthermore, the findings show that Theme functions to explicitly represent the workplace as de-personalised, with special status being given in the information structuring of the clause / clause complex to inanimate material entities.

In examining the function Theme performs in written workplace texts, a number of other objectives were developed. This second tier of research questions sought to examine the relationship between genre and Theme and between Theme and interpersonal meanings. The objectives were explored through a detailed analysis of Theme in the corpus of 30 memos, 22 letters and 10 reports. In conducting the detailed analysis, different types of Theme (including textual Theme, interpersonal Theme, Subject/Theme and extended Theme) were investigated in order to explore the existence of any patterns within the three text types, and the particular function(s) each feature performed. In addition, the study also analysed in detail the linguistic resources used to thematise interpersonal realisations

through the choice of Theme and the kinds of interpersonal relations so construed. The findings show that the interpersonal was realised by similar features in all three text types. Interpersonal features found in Theme were realised by extended Theme choices and more frequently were of an implicit rather than explicit nature. The interpersonal relations construed through thematic choices were realised by projecting clauses, hypotactic enhancing clauses and Circumstantial Adjuncts found in thematic position. In addition, the choice of Subject/Theme was also found to construe writer viewpoint. All of these features aided the construal of the writer's, and in some cases the organisation's, status, identity and power within the text and within the wider context of the workplace.

The purpose of the present chapter is to assess the extent to which the aims were achieved, evaluate the procedures involved, review the relevance of the outcomes and consider the implications of these findings. In Section 9.1, the theoretical concerns and procedure adopted in the present study are reviewed. A summary of the key findings from the research is outlined in Section 9.2. The limitations of the present study are examined in Section 9.3. The final section in this chapter will consider the study's implications, both theoretical and pedagogic, and propose recommendations for further research.

9.1 Summary of theoretical and methodological issues

In responding to the question, "What function does Theme perform in written workplace texts?", the preliminary task of the present study was to develop a model for defining and identifying Theme. The theoretical issues related to the various features and functions of Theme were reviewed, and consideration given to methodological issues in the analysis.

In presenting the argument for the identification of Theme, i.e. where the boundary of Theme and Rheme should be drawn, the present study diverges from the traditional view of Theme (Halliday, 1994), and argues that the grammatical Subject should be considered as an obligatory element of Theme. The justification for adopting this position is based on the work of Davies (1988, 1994, 1997), Berry (1995, 1996), Fries (1995a) and Ravelli (1995). They all argue that the inclusion of Subject as part of Theme presents the analyst and interested parties with a clearer understanding of the thematic development of the text. By analysing Theme to include everything up to and including the Subject of the main clause, the analyst is presented with a revealing picture of the extent and importance of ideational features found in Theme position. The clustering of ideational information in the initial

part of the clause complex functions to represent the semiotic nature of the workplace as being concerned with material activities and products (see Section 5.3.4).

In the analysis of the constituent features of Theme and the function they performed, it was established that Theme is comprised of textual, interpersonal and topical components. However, due to the inclusion of Subject as an obligatory part of Theme, a need arose to distinguish between Subject as part of Theme and other ideational features which were also found in Theme. It was decided to apply the term Subject/Theme, used by Martin and Rose (forthcoming), in the identification of the Subject of the α clause. Subject/Theme then becomes an obligatory part of Theme. Halliday's term 'marked Theme' was adopted as a functional label to describe ideational features that were found to precede the Subject/Theme. When a marked Theme and Subject/Theme were realised as part of the Theme for the α clause, the combined resources were labelled 'extended Theme'.

The analysis of these constituent features of Theme was conducted as reported in Section 3.3, and the Theme of all α clauses in the corpus of 1,486 α clauses is presented in Appendix II. Establishing the boundary of Theme as described above raised a number of difficulties for trying to show the analysis in a tabular format. As shown in Appendix II, the possible combinations for extended Themes were varied. Halliday (1994) states that the unmarked pattern for Theme is textual ^ interpersonal ^ topical. However, in the present study combinations such as textual ^ marked Theme ^ interpersonal ^ topical, or textual ^ marked Theme ^ interpersonal ^ marked Theme ^ topical were identified. Such choices are indicated in Appendix II. The multiplicity of possible combinations for extended Theme posed some challenges in trying to present the analysis. But once addressed, the analysis served to illuminate the function of extended Theme and the meanings made through this resource in written workplace texts.

Some researchers tend to stop at the linguistic analysis of texts. However, as argued by Creswell (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (1998), Guba and Lincoln (1999), Sturman (1999) and others, the analysis is strengthened by the use of complementary methods. In this study the data is investigated at a lexico-grammatical level from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, and by exploring informant interpretations of texts. Thus the present study follows Berry (1995, 1996), Gibson (1993), Iedema (1995, 1997, 2000) and Stainton (1996). When striving for 'credible', 'transferable', 'dependable' and 'confirmable' research, the researcher's account is only one interpretation of the data. In the present study

the researcher's interpretations were subject to scrutiny and subsequently reinforced or modified by the incorporation of informants' views of the same phenomena.

9.2 The principal findings of the present study

The principal findings of the present study concern both theoretical and practical issues. The key theoretical issue raised by the study suggests that extending the boundary of Theme to include everything up to and including the Subject of the main clause draws attention to the weight of ideational information presented before reaching the Subject of the main clause. The principal practical outcomes relate to the identification of textual, interpersonal, topical and extended Themes. In addition, another integral theoretical issue which conditioned the methodology, was the verification and support of the findings through the inclusion of informant interpretations.

The extension of the boundary of Theme to include the Subject of the main clause reveals interesting ideational patterns in the choice of Theme. Thematic choices in workplace texts are seen to be construing a world where ideational concerns, and especially material entities, are given special status. The findings suggest that the clustering of ideational information within the Theme helps to throw light on some of the reasons why workplace texts are viewed as depersonalised and dense (Iedema, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000).

Iedema, when discussing what he refers to as 'demodulation', states that workplace texts are "dressing it [up] as an ideational state of affairs rather than an interpersonal claim" (Iedema, 2000:50). The present study establishes that the 'dressing-up' of language is achieved in a number of ways. The clustering of Circumstantial Adjuncts, enhancing clauses in thematic position, and the choice of Subject/Theme all add to an 'ideationalised' representation of meaning in the workplace. The interpersonal tends to be made implicit in order to distance personal matters. This reflects the fundamental concerns of the workplace which are basically related to "control and procedure" (Iedema, 2000:49).

Adopting a model of Theme which includes the Subject of the main clause revealed a number of issues related to the choice of Subject/Theme in the present corpus. Primarily, Subject/Theme appeared to be dominated by choices related to material entities. This is to some extent related to modal responsibility. The present study supports Iedema's (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000) as in many cases, the modal responsibility of the Subject/Theme is depersonalised and realised by a 'material entity' or to a lesser extent by a 'concept'. The

depersonalisation and movement from human participants to material entities was reflected in the text type. Iedema (1995, 1997, 1999) states that as a text becomes more permanently inscribed and thus less negotiable, there is also a move from the personalised to the depersonalised in the linguistic realisations of the text. This is true of the present findings, as memos, the most ‘spoken-like’ and the more negotiable of the three text types, had a higher proportion of human participants, compared with letters and reports. Reports, the most formal and ‘written-like’ and the least negotiable of the three text types, revealed a dependency on ‘material products’ as the choice of Subject/Theme.

This ‘concrete’ frame, or depersonalised, contextualised, material world is further established through the dominance of material entities chosen as the Subject/Theme of the α clause. The dominance of material entities in Subject/Theme position is clearly illustrated in the findings presented in Section 5.3. The choice of a nominal group realising a material entity again emphasises the stress on depersonalisation and a loading of ideational information. The onus of the modal responsibility within the clause tends to be placed on material entities. And as argued in Chapter Five, nominalisation is one possible method the writer can use to package information in a complex, incongruent or metaphorical form. The packaging of information through nominalisation is, as maintained by Halliday (1994), Iedema (1995, 1997, 2000), Martin (2000a) and Unsworth (2000), a demonstration of power on behalf of the writer. The writer is clear about the meaning, but due to the complex packaging of the information the meaning may be unclear to the reader. As Martin points out “nominalized language also enables writers to reframe arguments in their own terms” (Martin, 2000a:295). Nominalisation was found to not only realise information in an objectified manner, but was also one choice through which the writer could construe interpersonal meaning. The choice of Subject/Theme was seen to be a feature in Theme where the writer could add evaluative language and, by doing so, influence the interpersonal meaning of a text.

The inclusion of the theoretical term *extended Theme* allowed the present study to present and discuss data which had only been examined to a limited extent in previous studies. The present study borrowed from Davies (1994, 1997) the terms used to explain the function of different types of extended Themes. As suggested by Martin (1992a/b), Davies (1994, 1997), McGregor (1994, 1997) and Stainton (1996), the present study reinforces the

suggestion that not only do extended Themes signal key stages in the text, but they also signal key ideational and interpersonal meanings in workplace texts.

Extended Themes were more prevalent than either textual or interpersonal Themes and played an important role both interpersonally and ideationally. The interpersonal nature of extended Theme tended to be realised by projecting clauses in initial position. Projecting clauses in thematic position were the most frequent type of extended Theme. They functioned to frame the writer's viewpoint and to express either explicitly or implicitly meaning of an interpersonal nature. This corroborates Davies's (1994, 1997) and Thompson's (1994, 1996) views that projection is highly interpersonal in nature. Three different categories of projection were posited: thematised subjective viewpoint, thematised comment and thematised obligation/inclination. These categories are based on previous work in the area by Halliday (1994) and Thompson (1994, 1996).

The present study argues that projection, whether implicit or explicit, reflects the hierarchical relationship between the writer and intended reader. Moreover, the present study suggests that, in general, such subtle realisations of status and power are rarely explicitly taught in pedagogy related to writing for the workplace. The lack of reference to, and discussion of, such grammatical features could cause problems for those uninitiated with practices in written workplace English. For non-native English speakers, the importance and meaning of such grammatical constructions may be completely overlooked.

The ideational nature of extended Themes on the whole was realised by Circumstantial Adjuncts and hypotactic enhancing clauses in thematic position. Both of these grammatical features were seen to frame informational material. As argued in Chapter 5, such Themes seem to occur at key stages in the text and to add weight of an ideational nature at the front of the clause. Special status is given, for example, to Circumstantial Adjuncts of time and hypotactic enhancing clauses of purpose, which frame the argument by legitimising what is to follow. The findings in the present study support and extend the research carried out by Iedema (1995, 1997, 1999, 2000) in finding that these features add to the depersonalised nature of workplace texts. They function to position the workplace as a place where 'things' and 'actions' are emphasised and contextualised.

Extended Themes of Circumstantial Adjuncts and, to a lesser extent, hypotactic enhancing clauses, also construe interpersonal meanings. In some instances they represent

shared experiences through references to intertextual features, e.g. *as spoken, with regard to*. Such intertextual features function to realise both ideational as well as interpersonal meaning. They are framing information and shared experiences (Davies, 1997).

There was only one instance of an extended Theme realising an organisational function in the corpus of 1,486 α clauses. Although there was a relative absence of organisational frames, as argued in Section 5.4.1, Circumstantial Adjuncts as part of an extended Theme could be used to frame the structure of the discourse. In Report 6, for example, a number of extended Themes were realised by location: time, and these location: time Circumstantial Adjuncts were used to structure the text chronologically, thus reinforcing argument by Davies (1988, 1994, 1997), Martin (1992a) and Thompson (1996) that they appear at key stages of the text.

The fact that there was only one extended Theme functioning explicitly to realise an organisational contextual frame reflects specific choices within a genre. Further, that other extended Themes realised by projection, which virtually always realised interpersonal meanings and enhancing clauses, were used to present purpose or cause, i.e. a legitimisation of what would follow, provides evidence to suggest that choice of Theme and genre are integrally related. This supports Davies's (1997) argument that contextual frames are genre-specific. To illustrate this point, Davies (1997) compares the contextual frames found in gardening texts and academic texts. The findings in the present study provide evidence that the choice of Theme is closely linked to genre. This argument is evidenced by the choice, range and type of Theme realised by Subject/Themes, Conjunctive Adjuncts, enhancing clauses and Circumstantial Adjuncts as part of Theme or an extended Theme within the three text types. For example, the finding that Modal Adjuncts were absent from the present corpus sets these particular text types apart from other genres. Although findings by Eggins and Slade (1997) related to Modal Adjuncts are not strictly restricted to Modal Adjunct in thematic position, the findings of the present study can be compared to their findings, which show that Modal Adjuncts occur frequently in casual conversations.

A more convincing demonstration of the relationship between genre and Theme is the clustering of ideational information found in the extended Theme, realised by Circumstantial Adjuncts and hypotactic enhancing clauses construing a concrete frame of the world of the workplace. This is also supported by the consensus of material entities

chosen as Subject/Theme. The Subject/Theme choices appear to provide a clear link between text type and Subject/Theme type. For example, 73.3% of all Subject/Themes in the corpus of reports were realised by a nominal group. Further research into the composition of the nominal group chosen as Subject/Theme would appear to have potential for revealing distinct patterns of pre- and post-modification of nominal groups and to provide an indication of the evaluative position of the writer.

The final part of the study reports business and teacher informants' interpretations of texts. The findings in the present study returned from a focus on lexico-grammatical features to investigate the types of meaning made through choices in lexico-grammar. The findings suggest that there is a great deal to be learnt from working with informants. A lexico-grammatical analysis reveals insightful and detailed findings related to specific linguistic realisations while elicited informant interpretations shed light on contextual considerations and the wider implications of the linguistic realisations.

The informants generally agreed that the interpersonal choices of Theme were critical factors leading to their interpretation of the meaning in the text. The use of extended Theme, and particularly projection, was seen to play a key role in the tenor of a text. Many of the informants believed that the opening clause(s)/clause complex(es), referred to as hyper-Theme by Martin (1992a), were influential in their reading of a text. On the whole, the teacher informants tended to be alienated by the choice of hyper-Theme in Memo 13 and believed the text construed negative interpersonal meanings for the reader. The business informants were not as concerned about the interpersonal features of the text. From an organisational cultural background, the business informants' interpretations aimed at understanding the texts in pragmatic terms and interpreting them to construe meanings related to the 'things' the reader had to do and the 'actions' the reader had to take. A number of other findings discussed in Chapter Eight demonstrate the differences in organisational cultural background and in the reading positions of the two groups. As pointed out by Brown and Herndl, "teachers are members of a language culture and when they recommend ways of writing they are reinforcing their 'own group affiliation'" (Brown and Herndl, 1986:24). The language and the culture embedded within the language are factors which affect the interpretation of texts. The choice of Theme in Memos 13 and 13A was notably very different and elicited different interpretations from individuals within the

two groups of informants, especially in the initial reading of the texts. However, there was considerable consensus about the meaning of certain lexico-grammatical features.

The present study has presented a description of Theme from a quantitative perspective reporting the instantiations of Theme in three text types. It has provided a qualitative discussion where individual texts have been used as the point of departure to discuss the quantitative findings in relation to thematic choices in specific texts. A third perspective was also incorporated where Theme was analysed with reference to informant interpretations of two texts.

9.3 Limitations of the present study

Although a comprehensive picture of Theme has been presented with respect to the corpus of the present study, it should also be remembered that there are limitations to the findings. These limitations are related to the size and composition of the corpus, the type of analysis undertaken and the generalisability of the findings.

Although the present corpus is comparable to a number of similar sized corpora (see Section 2.2.2 for a detailed discussion of ‘small’ corpora) it still remains rather small. However, as Sinclair (2001) points out, small corpora are intended for early human intervention and if the present corpus were extended in size it would make the human analysis of such a corpus impractical. The present corpus analysed three of the most frequently occurring text types written in the workplace (Davies et al., 1999). There are many other texts which could be analysed and which would also provide meaningful insights for the development of pedagogy.

The analysis focused specifically on Theme; an analysis of other features such as the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions would also be of great interest. However, Theme was chosen because, as pointed out above, it appeared to play a key role in realising the other two metafunctions, the ideational and interpersonal, which were seen to be integral features within the choice of Theme. This study supports Thompson and Zhou’s (2000) view that within Theme

the emphasis is on seeing texture and structure as created by interactive negotiation between the writer and reader, rather than simply as the reflection of objective logical relations between propositions.

(Thompson and Zhou, 2000:140)

Theme is seen to play a key role in organising a text, construing interpersonal meaning and constructing an ideational picture of the world.

The consideration of the limitations noted above draws into question the generalisability of the findings. The texts were eclectic in nature, and came from a very wide range of contexts. They were written by both native and non-native speakers of English, who were working in a variety of different organisational settings. The purpose and register of the texts were varied; for example, the memos ranged from spoken-like messages to formal report-like memos. However, the heteroglossic nature of the corpus should be seen as an asset and perhaps as more representative of workplace practices in general. In addition, the informants involved in the study were limited in number and ideally the business informants would have included groups of native speakers of English. However, the interpretations offered by those informants involved did offer insightful readings of the texts. Thus, although further research including more texts and more informants would be necessary in order to claim that the findings were generalisable, it is suggested that the present study does offer a judicious and prudent account of language in the workplace.

9.4 Concluding remarks: implications for workplace language pedagogy

The present study has presented theoretical and practical concerns related to Theme. The findings lend credibility to Martin's (1992a) assertion that Theme is analogous with a wave and that depending on where the boundary of Theme is drawn, the analysis results in different pictures of meaning. The present study, by including everything up to and including the Subject as part of Theme, has presented a picture of Theme in memos, letters and reports where the interpersonal nature of workplace texts, although present and highly influential, is backgrounded in order to foreground ideational concerns.

The practical concerns implicated in the present research are that there are distinguishable patterns in the choice of Theme. Patterns exist and are related to the choice of Subject/Theme, extended Theme realised by projection, Circumstantial Adjuncts and hypotactic clauses. The interpersonal features in Theme are at times made implicit through the choice of projection, nominalisation, and beta^{alpha} constructions. However, even though the meanings are implicit, the choice of Theme reflects the power, status and identity of the writer. The implicit nature of these meanings may create difficulties for those wishing to learn and master written workplace English. This study develops the

existing body of knowledge and offers a detailed insight into the functions and realisations of Theme in workplace texts.

Perhaps, as suggested in Chapter Eight, teachers and researchers tend to be overly sensitive about language issues. Or perhaps it is as Louhiala-Salminen suggests, namely that

As business communication educators we should be humble enough to face reality and admit that it is sometimes totally possible to achieve good results with linguistically poor messages, but – fortunately – there still remains plenty that can be done to improve the efficiency in business writing.

(Louhiala-Salminen, 1996:50)

Although Louhiala-Salminen stresses that educators overemphasise linguistic features, in many cases individuals within the workplace attending training courses, or students learning how to write reports, want to be taught how to write ‘linguistically good messages’. Even if individuals within the workplace take a pragmatic view of the expected outcome of a text, many stress that the use of ‘poor English’ is detrimental to promotion prospects in the workplace (Davies et al., 1999).

For example, the teacher could take an active role in teaching linguistic skills such as projection, nominalisation and construing evaluation within the choice of Theme/Subject. These are just some of the findings from the present corpus that could be incorporated into workplace language pedagogy. This is especially so in the light of Brown and Herndl’s (1986) findings, which illustrated that teachers on communication training programmes were deterring students from using nominalisation. Teachers themselves perhaps, as Berry (1995) suggests, need to become more aware of the linguistic realisations and patterns in workplace texts and the ways in which language makes meaning in the workplace

There is a need from an educationalist’s perspective to aim for high standards. For many, the introduction of workplace texts in pedagogic environments is the first opportunity to see such texts. Also the relative safety of the educational context, excluding the examination or assessment stage, provides for discussions of workplace texts in the classroom which allow those involved to familiarise themselves with such texts, to take risks and ask questions without fear of any negative consequences. Such risk-taking and questioning may not be received in the same manner in the workplace where, as pointed out by Davies et al. (1999), success, popularity and sometimes logical thought are

frequently linked to the ability to write well. Davies et al. (1999) and Forey and Nunan (2002) suggest that a 'trial and error', 'sink or swim' atmosphere dominates learning to write in the workplace. Few courses and little support are offered to those who need to improve their writing (Davies et al., 1999).

The evidence suggests that research into workplace English is still limited and that further research is needed in order to develop better material. The present study offers insight into how interpersonal and ideational meanings are construed within written workplace texts. The emphasis on the outcome of these findings is that the subtle and sometimes hidden interpersonal meanings in workplace texts, meanings to do with status and power, need to be made more explicit for those involved in studying workplace English. In addition, a second prominent feature revealed in the present study is the dependence in workplace texts on ideational resources such as Circumstantial Adjunct, hypotactic enhancing clauses and Subject/Theme choice, which ultimately maintain and construe the workplace as a place of things and activity.

The recommendations from the present study are that further studies focusing on analysing language and meaning in the workplace are required. There is a need to analyse texts from other perspectives to focus on the other metafunctions, i.e. the ideational and interpersonal, and to encourage more textual analysis. The field would also benefit from the analysis of a wider and bigger corpus of texts. In contrast, a more detailed and qualitative explanation of the system of choices in a text would be of great benefit to educationalists and applied linguists. There is considerable applied linguistic research still to be carried out. This study takes one important step in uncovering distinguishable patterns that exist in the choice of Theme. It demonstrates the value of working with informants, and strongly recommends that further research into nominalisation, the choice of Subject/Theme and other linguistic features construing evaluation on behalf of the writer be investigated further. These subtle realisations of power, status and identity need to be explicitly taught. In addition, the present study recommends that choices of extended Theme in workplace texts are analysed further and that cross-genre comparisons be made so that the generic constraints placed on the writer can be made explicit to students and interested parties. Further research into the deconstruction of linguistic features realised by Theme and beyond Theme are crucial considerations which need to be examined further,

and any such research will be beneficial for both applied linguistic knowledge and workplace pedagogy.