

**ASPECTS OF THEME
AND
THEIR ROLE IN
WORKPLACE TEXTS**

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ABSTRACT

English is fast becoming the recognised language for research and business. For many in the workplace, English is seen as an important element, both at a personal and institutional level, leading to success in business. Many believe that the available pedagogic workplace material does not accurately reflect the language used in the workplace. There is a call for more research into the language of the workplace, research which can inform pedagogy. In response to this identified need, the present study investigates specific linguistic features found in written English workplace texts.

The study adopts a systemic functional linguistic perspective and focuses on an analysis of Theme in three workplace text types: memos, letters and reports. The aim of the study is to investigate the function performed by Theme in these texts. The study diverges from Halliday's identification of Theme and argues that the Subject is an obligatory part of Theme. In examining the function Theme performs, specific features such as the relationship between Theme and genre and between Theme and interpersonal meaning are explored. The study investigates the linguistic realisations in the texts which help understand the way in which the choice of Theme is related to, and perhaps constrained by, the genre. In addition, the linguistic resources used by the writer to construe interpersonal meanings through their choice of Theme are explored.

The study investigates Theme from two distinct positions. Firstly a lexico-grammatical analysis of thematic choices in the texts is undertaken. Secondly, the study draws upon informant interpretations and considers the way in which certain thematic choices construe different meanings for different types of reader. The methodology adopted is twofold: an analysis of Theme in a corpus of authentic workplace texts comprised of 30 memos, 22 letters and 10 reports; and an analysis of informant interpretations drawn from focus group interviews with 12 business people and 15 EFL teachers. In both sets of data, Theme is scrutinised with respect to textual, interpersonal, topical and marked Themes and the meanings construed through such choices.

The findings show that Theme plays an important role in organising the text, as well as in realising ideational and interpersonal meaning. In particular the findings demonstrate that marked Theme, or the term adopted in the present study 'extended Theme', performs a crucial role in representing the workplace as a depersonalised, material world. In addition, the choice of Subject and extended Theme, realised by projection, are seen to play an important role in construing interpersonal meaning.

The findings from the research uncover some of the functions Theme performs in workplace memos, letters and reports. The understandings reached related to Theme and thematic choices within the workplace genres could be used to inform and improve the pedagogy of writing in the workplace.

Key words: Theme, text, text type, genre, workplace, language and meaning.

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