The System of Theme in Clauses Related by Subordination

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1. Introduction:

Systemic Functional grammar aims to describe the set of meaningful choices a speaker makes when putting a thought into words. Each of these choices is seen as a resource for shaping the meaning in a particular way, and the selection will have distinct grammatical outcomes as well as a semantic implication. The choices are presented hierarchically, so that early selections restrict other choices. For instance, if a speaker chooses the imperative mood for a clause, the subject is suppressed, when the interrogative mood is selected, the order of the subject and the first auxiliary is reversed.

Systemic Functional Grammar describes three metafunctions, following Halliday's argument that a clause is a realization of meaning potential derived from the ideational interpersonal and textual functions (Halliday, 1976: 24). Interpersonal function labels are assigned to clause constituents in determining the clause's communicative status. The textual structure of the clause includes the functions Theme and Rheme, following Halliday's (1970) theory of information structure. Finally, the ideational function of a

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constituent is its semantic role, described in terms of a small set of labels that are only minimally sensitive to the semantics of the predicate.

This paper deals with the system of theme in English and Arabic subordinated clauses. The theoretical framework adopted is the Systemic Functional model, Halliday's Functional Grammar (1994) in particular. To the best of our knowledge, no attempt has been made to disclose the elements of theme in Arabic subordinated clauses.

The paper aims to highlight the points of similarity and difference between English and Arabic subordinated clauses as far as the system of theme is concerned.

2. The System of Theme:

The textual macro-function fills the requirements that language should be relevant and that it should have a texture that distinguishes a living message from a mere entry in a grammar or a dictionary (Halliday, 2003: 316-317).

The structure of the clause is divided into two parts: theme and rheme. Theme is the point of departure of the clause as a message. It functions as the 'starting point for the message' (Halliday, 1985: 39), the element which the clause is going to be 'about' has a crucial effect in orienting listeners and readers. Theme is one element in a particular structural configuration which, taken as a whole, organizes the clause as a message; this is the configuration Theme + Rheme. In other words, a message consists of a Theme combined with a Rheme (Halliday, 1994: 38). Theme is the starting point of the clause, realised by whatever element comes first and Rheme is the rest

of the message, which provides the additional information added to the starting point and which is available for the subsequent development in the text.

Matthiessen and Halliday (1997: 17) argue that at the clause rank, the major textual system is Theme. The system of Theme sets up a local environment, providing a point of departure by reference to which the listener interprets the message. The local environment, serving as a point of departure, is the Theme; what is presented in this local environment is the Rheme. The clause as a message is thus a configuration of two thematic statuses, Theme + Rheme (Halliday, 1994: 38).

In English, Theme is realised by an initial position and Rheme is realised by a non-initial position (Halliday and Matthiessen, 1997: 17). For this reason, in a declarative structure (John read an interesting story yesterday), [John] is (theme) and [read an interesting story yesterday] is (rheme). The different choice of Theme has contributed to a different meaning and English uses first clausal position as a signal to orient a different meaning of the sentence. Thus, in [An interesting story, John read yesterday] and [Yesterday, John read an interesting story], we start the message from a different point, i.e., to choose a different theme for the clause. As Halliday (1994: 38) mentioned, Theme is the ground from which the clause is taking off. What makes [An interesting story, John read yesterday] and [Yesterday, John read an interesting story] is that they differ in their choice of Theme and they tell us what an interesting story, and what yesterday is going to be about.

Downing and Locke (2002: 223) state that the choice of Theme is important because it represents the angle from which the speaker projects his/her message. The initial element acts as a signal to the hearer, directing expectations regarding the structure that is likely to follow, or about the mental representation of what the message is likely to be. Thus, a Theme which coincides with the subject prepares the hearer for a declarative structure (He can speak English), while presentative 'there' introduces new information to the hearer (There was an accident).

In addition, the choice of the initial element concerns the speaker's assumptions regarding what the hearer knows or does not know (Downing and Locke, 2002: 223). Let us consider:

1. *I can't stand the noise.*
2. *The noise I can't stand.*
3. *It's the noise I can't stand.*
4. *What I can't stand is the noise.*

                              (Downing and Locke, 2002: 223)

In (1), no particular supposition is made about the situation on the part of the hearer, apart from the definiteness of the noise. The second clause implies a contrast with something else (though the people are friendly). In (3), the speaker presupposes a shared belief with the hearer that I can't stand something. The fourth clause, however, restricts what the speaker can't stand among other things imagined by the hearer.

It must be borne in mind that Theme is a meaningful choice and speakers can choose between a marked and an

unmarked Theme. Each clause chooses between unmarked theme and marked theme. The clause which has chosen an unmarked theme will have subject in the first place in the declarative clause, while a clause which has chosen a marked theme will have predicator, complement, or adjunct in the first place (Berry, 1975: 103):

unmarked theme

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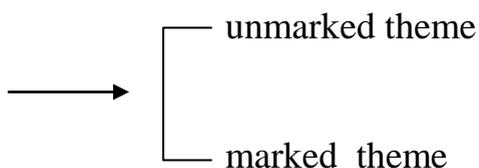
marked theme

The System of Theme (after Berry, 1975: 103)

The clause [I shall see you on Friday] has chosen an unmarked theme, while [On Friday I shall see you] has chosen a marked theme. In the unmarked theme, the subject is the nominal group which functions as subject. However, a theme that is something other than the subject in a declarative clause will be referred to as a marked theme (Halliday, 1994: 44) as follows:

5. Across the river, he found the lost boat.

In (5), the usual form of a marked theme is an adverbial group, or a prepositional phrase which functions as an adjunct in the clause.

Further, a clause chooses between a non-predicated theme and a predicate theme (Berry, 1975: 164; Matthiessen and Halliday, 1997: 17). A clause which chooses a predicated theme encloses whatever occurs in the first place in a construction such as it + part of the verb be + who/ which/ that.

6. *Layla writes the poem.*

7. *It is Layla who writes the poem.*

(6) has chosen a non-predicated theme, while (7) has chosen a predicated theme.

3. *Theme in English Clauses Related by Subordination:*

In English hypotactic clauses, two clauses are identified: the superordinate clause (or the main clause) and a subordinate one. Either the subordinate or the main clause may function as the theme of the complex sentence (Halliday, 1994: 56; Downing and Locke, 2002: 235). Let us consider:

8. *I met Layla when I crossed the street.*

9. *She slept soundly because she didn't hear the news.*

10. *He left after his wife came from shopping.*

I met Layla	when I crossed the street
Theme	Rheme
She slept soundly	because she didn't hear the news
Theme	Rheme
He left	after his wife came from shopping
Theme	Rheme

Fig. (1): Examples of Unmarked Theme

In the examples above, the unmarked order is the main + subordinate clause in which the main is the Theme while the

subordinate is the Rheme. However, the examples illustrate the marked order in which the subordinate clause is thematised. See the examples in figure (2) below:

11.	When I crossed the street	I met Layla
	Theme	Rheme
12.	Because she didn't hear the news	she slept soundly
	Theme	Rheme
13.	After his wife came from shopping	he left
	Theme	Rheme

Fig. (2) Examples of Marked Theme

It is worth noting, here, that the tendency is to place new and important information towards the end of these hypotactic clauses.

In conditional clauses, on the other hand, the subordinate + main is the unmarked order:

14. *If you try hard, You'll pass the exam.*

15. *If you learn word-processing, you will easily find a job.*

In (14) and (15), the conditional clauses [If you try hard] and [If you learn word-processing] introduce the new information [You'll pass the exam] and [You will easily find a job] respectively.

–	If you try hard	you'll pass the exam
	Theme	Rheme
–	If you learn word-processing	you will easily find a job

Fig. (3): Examples of Unmarked Theme in Conditional Clauses

Furthermore, the conjunctions (if) in (14) and (15) above are considered structural themes while the subjects (you) are the topical ones (Halliday, 1994: 57). The point to bear in mind is that the structural theme is any of the obligatory thematic elements listed below (Halliday, 1994: 53):

Conjunctions	
Co-ordinator	and, or, nor, but, so
Subordinator	when, while, before, after, because, if, unless

Table (1): Conjunctions

Relatives	which, who, that
definite	when
indefinite	whatever, whichever, whoever

Table (2): Relatives

The topical theme, on the other hand, is the first constituent that constitutes the theme. The theme extends from the beginning of the clause up to the first element. The first element is called the topical theme. The theme of the clause consists of the topical theme together with anything that comes before it (Halliday, 1994: 53). Hence, (14) can be analysed as follows:

If	you	study well	you	will	pass the exam
Structural	Topical	Rheme	Topical	Finite	Rheme

Fig. (4): An Example of Structural and Topical Theme in Clause Complex

However, there is another possibility of analysis in which the subordinate clause is thematised, while the rest of the clause is the Rheme. Hence, [If you study well] is theme, while [You will pass the exam] is Rheme.

Another example is:

16. She slept soundly because she didn't hear the news.

She	slept soundly	because	she	didn't hear the news
Topical	Rheme	Structural	Topical	Rheme

Fig. (5): An Example of Theme in Clause Complex

The above example poses no problem for analysis. The second possibility depends on intonation; in fact, if it is spoken as a separate tone group, it is part of theme$_1$; if not, it is part of theme$_2$ (Halliday, 1994: 57). The analysis is given in figure (6). It is important to include both to give an adequate picture:

If	you	study well	you	will	pass the exam
Theme$_1$			Rheme$_1$		
Structure	Topical	Rheme$_2$	Topical	Finite	Rheme$_2$
Theme$_2$			Theme$_2$		

Fig. (6): Theme in the Clause Complex

Other subordinate clauses which set up situational framework can be shown in the following examples (Downing and Locke, 2002: 235):

17. As he approached, he could hear the sound.

18. When everybody had gone home, we sat around on the floor.

In (17), the point of departure is the subordinate clause (As he approached), and the Rheme is (he could hear the sound). In (18), the Theme is (when everybody had gone home), Rheme is (we sat around on the floor). It is to be noted, here, that if a main clause is chosen as Theme, this is because of a personal preference (Downing and Locke, 2002: 235). Thus, (17) and (18) above can also be:

17a. He could hear the sound as he approached.

18a. We sat around on the floor when everybody had gone home.

4. *Theme in Arabic Clauses Related by Subordination:*

Arabic sentences comprising more than one clause are joined by subordination. The structure of the Arabic complex sentence is analysed into two parts: a superodinate (main) clause and a subordinate one (Al-Samaree, 1986: 168; 2007: 59).

In Arabic, the subordinate or dependent clause is part of the whole clause, i.e., the dependent clause is subordinated to the independent one (Beeston, 1968: 83-84). Different types of subordinate clauses can be distinguished: Nominal clauses,

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adverbial clauses, relative clauses, and complementary clauses
(Aziz, 1989: 223). Examples of these types are listed below:

19. يقلقني أن السيارة قديمة

(That the car is old upsets me.)

20. جلس حيث جلس والده من قبل

(He sat where his father had sat before.)

21. أعطني الكتاب الذي اشتريتهُ البارحة

(Give me the book which I bought yesterday.)

22. كاد الموكب الكبير أن يصل الجسر

(The big procession was about to reach the bridge.)

In Arabic adverbial clauses, namely of place, time,
cause and condition, the unmarked order is for the main clause
to precede the subordinate clause as in (23) and (24) below:

23. جاء محمدٌ عندما غادر الزوار

(Mohammed came when the guests left.)

24. فشل في الامتحان لأنه كان مريضاً

(He failed in the exam because he was sick.)

عندما غادر الزوار	جاء محمد
لأنه كان مريضاً	فشل في الامتحان
Rheme	Theme

Fig. (7): Examples of Arabic Subordinate Adverbial Clauses

It is worth noting that either the subordinate clause or
the main clause functions as theme of the complex clause.
Thus, the alternative order of (23) and (24) above are:

25. عندما غادر الزوار جاء محمد

(When the guests left, Mohammed came.)

26. ‫لأنه كان مريضاً فشل في الامتحان‬

   (Because he was sick, he failed in the exam.)

which are highly marked.

(Aziz, 1998: 139)

   Furthermore, in Arabic temporal clauses introduced by ‫لمّا‬, the subordinate clause is also thematized:

27. ‫لمّا انتهينا من العمل غادرنا‬

   (When we had finished the job, we left.)

In (27), the subordinate clause (‫لمّا انتهينا من العمل‬) acts as theme. Such sentences represent the normal order. If we put the main clause(‫غادرنا‬) before the subordinate one, the pattern will be marked.

   In Arabic conditional clauses introduced by (‫إن‬) or (‫إذا‬), except those introduced by (‫لو‬), it is usual for the subordinate clause to function as theme (Al-Siyuti, 1951: 1/149; Al-Asterabathi, 1979: 2/282; Al-Zajjaji, 1959: 1/88-89; Al-Mubarrad, 1388: 2/56; Wright, 1971: 220; Aziz, 1998: 139):

28. ‫إن تدرس تنجح‬

   (If you study, you will succeed.)

29. ‫إذا تذهب هناك أذهبُ معك‬

   (If you go there, I shall go with you.)

In (28) and (29), the order is for the subordinate clause to precede the main one, i.e. the subordinate clause is thematised, which represents the normal order. So, the subordinate clauses (‫إذا تذهب هناك‬) and (‫إن تدرس‬) are considered themes, while (‫تنجح‬) and (‫أذهب معك‬) are rhemes.

   As far as the constituents of themes are concerned, the Arabic clause consists of structural and topical themes. The

structural themes include the conditional particles (لو، إذا، إن) (if), the adverbials عندما (when), حيثما (wherever); and the subordinator لأن (because). However, the topical themes express the subjects. If the same subject is used in the first clause, the inseparable pronoun is used in the second clause; otherwise, two explicit subjects can be used:

30.   شعر علي بارتياح لأنه تكلم معي

   (Ali felt relief because he spoke to me.)

In (30), the explicit subject علي (Ali) is considered a topical theme, in the first clause, while the inseparable pronoun (ـهُ) (he) is the topical theme$_2$. See figure (8) below:

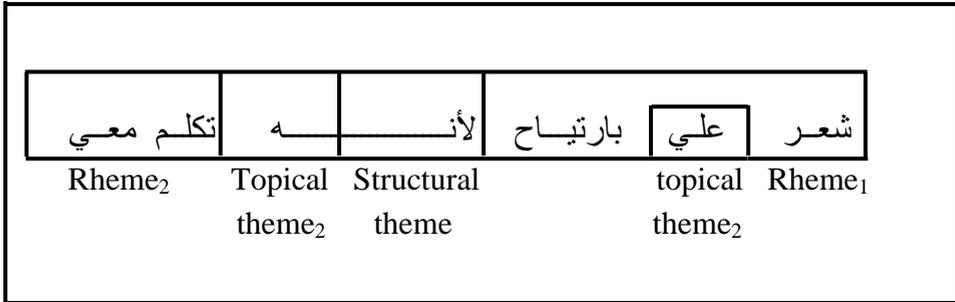| Rheme$_2$	Topical theme$_2$	Structural theme		topical theme$_2$	Rheme$_1$
تكلم معـي	ـــــهـ	لأنـــــ	بارتيـــاح	علي	شعـر

Fig. (8): An Example of an Arabic Clause with the Same Subject

31.   أنهى محمّد القصيدةَ عندما وصل عمر

   (Mohammed finished the poem when Omar arrived.)

In (31), the topical theme$_1$ and the topical theme$_2$ are two different subjects which are explicit. The analysis can be shown below:

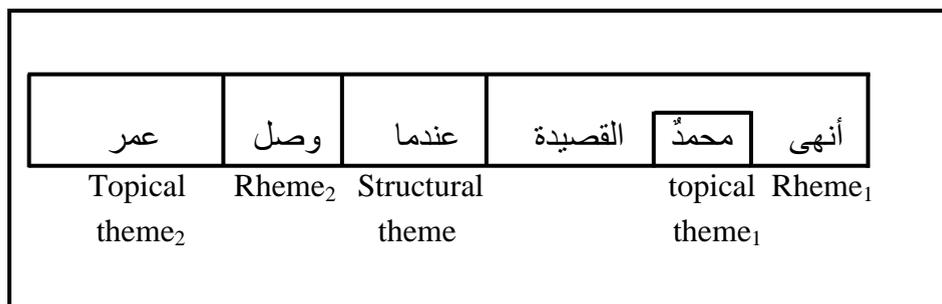| عمر	وصل	عندما	القصيدة	محمدٌ	أنهى
Topical theme$_2$	Rheme$_2$	Structural theme		topical theme$_1$	Rheme$_1$

Fig. (9): An Example of an Arabic Clause with Two Subjects

It is worth noting, here, that in the Arabic unmarked declarative clause, Rheme$_1$ precedes the topical Theme$_1$, except when the structural theme is لأن (because) in which the inseparable pronoun (topical Theme$_2$) comes before Rheme$_2$. Thus, in (30) above the Rheme$_1$ (شعر بارتياح) precedes the topical theme (علي), but the inseparable pronoun (ـهُ) in the second clause precedes the Rheme$_2$. In (31), however, the Rheme (أنهى القصيدة) and Rheme$_2$ (وصل) come before the topical theme$_1$ (محمد) and topical theme$_2$ (عمر) respectively.

5. *Comparison:*

(1) In both English and Arabic, there is a meaningful choice between unmarked and marked theme.

(2) In both English and Arabic subordinate clauses, theme is the starting point of the clause, while rheme is the rest of the message.

(3) In both English and Arabic, hypotactic clauses or clauses related by subordination can be identified. In such clauses, there are two clauses, one of which is the superordinate or main clause, while the other is a subordinate one. (32) is

an example of an English hypotactic clause, while (33) is an Arabic hypotactic one.

32. I did it because he told me to.

33. مشى ببطئ لأن ساقه تؤلمه

   (He walked slowly because he hurt his leg.)

(4) In both English and Arabic hypotactic clauses, the unmarked order is to place the main clause before the subordinate one. Examples (34) and (35) below illustrate this point:

34. He felt well because he went to the doctor.

35. غادر محمّد الحفلة عندما وصل علي

   (Mohammed left the party when Ali arrived.)

(5) Unlike English hypotactic clauses in which either the subordinate clause or the superordinate clause may function as theme, when Arabic subordinate clause is thematised, it is highly marked. Thus, (36a), in English is unmarked, while (36b) is marked, while in Arabic, (37a) us unmarked, and (37b) is highly marked.

36. a. She left when she finished her job.

36. b. When she finished her job, she left.

37. a. اتصلنا بزيد عندما وصلنا

   (We called Zeid when we arrived.)

37. b. عندما وصلنا اتصلنا بزيد

   (When we arrived, we called Zeid.)

(6) Similar to English conditional clauses, in Arabic conditional clauses introduced by (إن) or (إذا), the subordinate clause can be thematised, representing the unmarked order. See examples (38) and (39).

38. *If you have finished eating, you may leave the table.*

39. **إذا/إن تعمل بجد تكافئ**

   (If you do hard, you will be rewarded.)

(7) Unlike English conditional clauses in which either the main or the subordinate clauses can be thematised, in Arabic conditional clauses introduced by (لو), it is unacceptable to thematise the subordinate clause. Thus, both (40) and (40a) are acceptable in English, whereas it is not the case in Arabic.

40. *I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen it happen.*

40. a. *If I hadn't see it happen I wouldn't have believed it possible.*

41. **لو ذهبتَ هناك لقابلتَهُ**

   (If you went there you would meet him.)

41. a.* **لقابلته لو ذهبت هناك**

(8) Arabic temporal clauses introduced by لمّا are similar to English ones in which either the subordinate or the superordinate clause can be thematised. See examples (42) and (42a) below:

42. **لمّا رأيته كلمني عن خططه في المستقبل**

   (When I saw him, he spoke about his plans for the future.)

42. a. **كلمني عن خططه في المستقبل لمّا رأيته**

   (He spoke about his plans for the future when I saw him.)

(9) Similar to English clauses, certain items are considered structural themes which are: the particles (إن), (إذا), (لو), the adverbials (عندما), (حيثما), (مهما), and the subordinator (لأن).

(10) Unlike English clauses in which the topical themes are explicit, in Arabic conditional clauses, the topical themes may be implicit. See examples (43a) and (43b) below:

43. *a. If you come, I will go.*

43. *b.* **حيثما تذهب أذهب**

(Where you go, I will go.)

In (43b), the topical theme is the implicit subject (أنت).

(11) Unlike English, the topical theme may be inseparable pronoun in Arabic:

44. **لما وصل القطار إلى المحطة غادرنـــا**

(When <u>the train</u> arrived at the station <u>we</u> left.)

In (44), the inseparable pronoun (نا) is considered the topical theme.

6. Conclusion:

1. The meaningful choice between unmarked and marked theme can be realized in English and Arabic.

2. In both English and Arabic subordinated clauses, theme is the starting point of departure, while rheme is the rest of the message.

3. In both English and Arabic subordinated clauses, the unmarked order is to put the main clause before the subordinate one.

4. English subordinated clauses differ from Arabic ones in that either the subordinate or the main clause is thematized.

5. Arabic subordinated conditional clauses, especially those introduced by the particles (ان) or (إذا) are similar to English ones in that either the subordinate clause or the main one is thematized.

6. Arabic temporal subordinated clauses are similar to English clauses in that both the main or the subordinate can be thematized.

7. Arabic subordinated conditional clauses introduced by (لو) differ from the English ones in that the subordinate clause cannot be thematized.

8. The structural theme can be identified in English and Arabic subordinated clauses such as if, when, whenever in English; and إن, إذا, لو, عندما, عندما in Arabic.

9. Arabic subordinated clauses are different from English ones in that the topical theme is always explicit in English, while it is sometimes implicit or hidden in Arabic ones.

10. Inseparable pronouns can be utilized as topical themes in Arabic subordinated clauses.

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الملخـــص

يركز هذا البحث على مفاهيم الثيمة والريمة كمصدر لتنظيم الجملة كرسالة في الجمل الفرعية الانكليزية والعربية. وينطلق البحث من مفهوم الثيمة لهاليداي (1994) كعنصر يقع في بداية الجملة الانكليزية. ويهدف البحث إلى إثبات إمكانية تمثيل نحو أية لغة بشبكة كبيرة جدا من الأنظمة، وتنظيم الخيارات في علاقات هرمية. كما يهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على نقاط التشابه والاختلاف في الجمل الانكليزية والعربية قدر تعلق الأمر بنظام الثيمة. وقد توصل الباحثان إلى استنتاج مفاده أن بعض الجمل العربية الفرعية تختلف عن الانكليزية فيما يتعلق بالتبئير. كما تبين بان الثيمة البؤرة تكون ظاهرية في اللغة الانكليزية بينما تكون ضمنية أحياناً في اللغة العربية.

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