

## A CRITIQUE OF TOPIC AND THEME WITHIN THE FRAMEWORKS OF FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR (FG) AND SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR (SFG)

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**ABSTRACT.** *This paper offers a contrastive critique of FG Topic and SFG Theme. It is here argued that, although, in principle, these two labels receive a semantic interpretation, that is, both entail a relationship of 'aboutness', it turns out that the two terms invoke, in fact, two distinct concepts.<sup>1</sup> FG Topic endorses a referential semantic interpretation which is coalesced with (referential and activated) combining analyses, i.e. salient/given information in the discourse co(n)text and/or the interactants' minds. By contrast, SFG explores the separating category of syntactic Theme, that is, the initial position of the clause as a message, which receives a relational semantic gloss, i.e. 'what the clause as a message is about'.*

*Section 1 outlines the tenets assumed by the offshoots of separating, semantic and combining analyses of Theme/Topic. Section 2 brings FG and SFG face to face with their interpretations of Topic and Theme, pointing out what are felt to be the main deficiencies of the two accounts. These are summarised in section 3 with a view to (1) strengthening the theoretical foundations of both models and (2) suggesting areas for further research on this field, both within and between SFG and FG.*

**KEYWORDS.** *Topic, Theme, separating interpretation (SP), combining interpretation (C), semantic interpretation (SM), Recoverability (Giv<sub>r</sub>), Predictability (Giv<sub>p</sub>), Shared knowledge (Giv<sub>k</sub>), Assumed familiarity (Giv<sub>f</sub>).*

**RESUMEN.** *Este artículo ofrece una aproximación crítica a las nociones de Tópico y Tema, tal y como se entienden en la Gramática Funcional de Dik (FG) y en la Gramática Sistémico-Funcional (SFG), respectivamente. Se parte de la idea de que, aunque en principio ambas etiquetas reciben una misma interpretación semántica, es decir, ambas establecen una relación de aboutness, en realidad estos dos términos evocan dos conceptos bien diferenciados.<sup>1</sup>*

*Veremos cómo la FG adscribe a la categoría Tópico una lectura semántico-referencial que a su vez se identifica con análisis combinadores (referenciales y activados), esto es, con información saliente/dada/conocida en el co(n)texto discursivo y/o en las mentes de los interactantes. Por su parte, la SFG explora la categoría separatista de Tema, es decir, la posición inicial de la cláusula como mensaje, descripción que a menudo recibe una glosa semántico-referencial: "aquello sobre lo que trata la cláusula como mensaje".*

*La Sección 1 esquematiza las tesis defendidas por las aproximaciones a las categorías de Tópico y Tema, clasificadas aquí en tres grupos principales con sus correspondientes ramas: separatista, semántica y combinadora. En la Sección 2 se confrontan la FG y la SFG con el modo en que ambos programas incorporan estos presupuestos a sus aparatos teóricos, poniendo de relieve los aspectos más débiles de ambas exposiciones. Éstos son resumidos en la Sección 3 con un doble fin: (1) fortalecer los fundamentos teóricos de los dos modelos y (2) sugerir nuevas áreas de investigación en este campo, dentro y entre la SFG y la FG.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Tópico, Tema, interpretación separatista (SP), interpretación combinadora (C), interpretación semántica (SM), Recoverabilidad (Givr), Predictabilidad (Giv<sub>p</sub>), Conocimiento compartido (Giv<sub>k</sub>), Familiaridad asumida (Giv<sub>f</sub>).*

## 1. THREE FUNCTIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THEME/TOPIC

Very different positions have been taken on the appropriate criteria for the definition of Theme/Topic and also with respect to its concrete manifestation on the relevant linguistic level (cf. Güblig/Raible 1977; Allerton 1978; Brömser 1982). In Gómez-González (1994, 1995, 1996b) I discuss at some length that these positions can be narrowed down to three different, though not mutually exclusive, approaches:

- (1) *separating* (SP), emphasising the relevance of (*clause*) *initial position* (vs. non-initial position);
- (2) *combining* (C), centred on the analysis of *given information*; (vs. new information); and
- (3) *semantic* (SM), based on the notion of *aboutness*.

With regard to separating and combining accounts, I concur with Fries (1983) that they stem from Mathesius's (1939: 234) definition of *základ*, i.e. "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation" and "that (...) from which the speaker proceeds". Separators separate out the two aspects of Mathesius's definition, the known and that "from which the speaker proceeds", as two interacting, but distinct, choices. Focusing on the latter, they regard the informational structure of the clause as a bipartite construct consisting of a *point of departure*, or *syntactic Topic/Theme*, and the main issue, or *Comment/Rheme*. Further, linking the concept "point of departure" with the *linear quality* of language (i.e. the constraint that words must be ordered into sentences and these into texts according to some organizing principle), and relying solely on morpho-syntactic structure, separators equate (syntactic) Topic/Theme with the *leftmost*, or initial, constituent of the clause.

Combiners, on the other hand, coalesce the two notions implied in Mathesius's account, the known and that "from which the speaker proceeds", into a single axis, assuming that both are two different aspects of the same phenomenon, that is, the Given-New distinction. As a result, combinors identify the category of Topic (or

Theme) with given information (mainly NPs), that is, the part(s) of a message known to the interactants or that can be deduced from the cotext or the context (in contrast with the unknown or what cannot be deduced from the cotext or context, which receives focal (comment or rhematic) status).

In addition, I would argue for the existence of a third approach, the semantic one, according to which Topic (or Theme) (as opposed to Focus, Comment or Rheme) expresses a relationship of aboutness: it indicates “what the message is about” which might be seen as Grice’s (1975) *maxim of relevance* “Make your contribution relevant in terms of the existing topic framework”, that is, make your contribution fit closely to the most recent elements incorporated in discourse.

While separating accounts seem to be fairly homogenous with respect to their theoretical primitives, both combining and semantic interpretations diverge to a larger extent and thereupon home a variety of labels and notions. To my opinion, three main trends stand out in these two approaches. With regard to combining analyses variations depart from three different interpretations of givenness (see Gundel 1988: 211-2), which will be labelled here:

- (a) *relational* interpretation;
- (b) *activated referential* interpretation;
- (c) *contextual referential* interpretation.

The relational combining perspective takes Topic (or Theme) to be Given in relation to Comment (or Rheme), and vice versa (the latter is regarded to be New in relation to the former), crucially, within the domain of *individual clauses/utterances* (cf. Firbas 1964: 272, 210). The activated referential combining interpretation identifies Topic/Theme with the entity or entities which the interactants are not only familiar with, but are also actually attending to (thinking of) at the time of the utterance (cf. Chafe 1976; Givón 1988, 1992; Lambrecht 1988, 1994). And thirdly, the contextual referential perspective analyses Topic (or Theme) as the element that relates the clause/utterance to the discourse cotext or context in which it occurs, so that felicitous topichood (thematicity) is related to four non-coterminous contextual readings of givenness, namely:

- (i) *Recoverability* ( $Giv_R$  = information that is recoverable from the cotext and context) (see Halliday 1967, 1994);
- (ii) *Predictability* ( $Giv_P$  = information that is predictable from the cotext and context) (see Kuno 1972; De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981);
- (iii) *Shared knowledge* ( $Giv_K$  = information that is “shared” by the interactants) (see Clark and Haviland 1977);

- (iv) *Assumed familiarity* ( $Giv_F$  = a gradient notion of given information implying different values of givenness/assumed familiarity) (see Allerton 1978: 147; Prince 1981: 233-37).

With regard to the semantic approach, on the other hand, it is also possible to detect three trends, now depending on the interpretation of aboutness:

- (a) *relational* interpretation;
- (b) *referential* interpretation; and
- (c) *interactive* interpretation.

For the supporters of the relational semantic approach, the clause is a bipartite construct entailing a relation of *aboutness* between a *Topic (Theme)*, i.e. an entity or a proposition that is often related to such psycholinguistic notions as *frame of reference*, *cognitive hook/peg/link*, *background information*, *perspective-taking device*, and a clausal predication, or *Focus (Comment/Rheme)* (Bühler 1934; Halliday 1967, 1994; Lambrecht 1994). The referential semantic interpretation describes Topic/Theme as the referent that establishes a relationship of *aboutness* between individual clauses/utterances and the overall discourse:

- (a) either as determined by the cotext or context (in the *contextual referential semantic interpretation*) and/or
- (b) as processed by the interactants' minds (in the *activated referential semantic interpretation*)

(cf. De Beaugrande 1980; Dik 1989; Van Dijk 1977, 1988; Givón 1988, 1992). Finally, the interactive semantic interpretation suggests that the category of Topic/Theme expresses discourse *saliency/relevance* and therefore cannot be fixed beforehand, but must be negotiated as a *problem frame* in the process of conversing or interacting (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986; De Beaugrande 1992; Yule and Mathis 1992).

Figure 1 below gives an overview of the three approaches posited so far. Firstly, it shows that, unlike separating accounts, both combining and semantic interpretations have relational and referential variations, and that, within the latter, there is a choice between contextual and activated accounts. In addition, Figure 1 indicates that separating and relational (combining and semantic) analyses are message-centred, as opposed to context-centred referential (combining and semantic) interpretations and interactive semantic readings. Significantly, all the latter approaches are allocated to the discourse level, in contrast with both relational accounts, restricted to clause level analyses, and separating ones, allowing for either grammatical or discourse approaches.

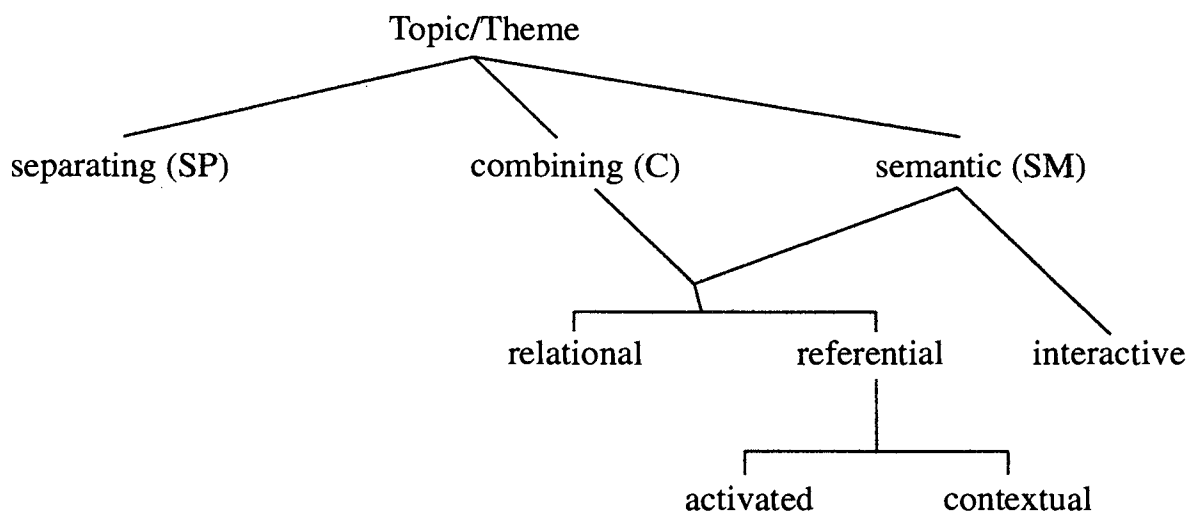


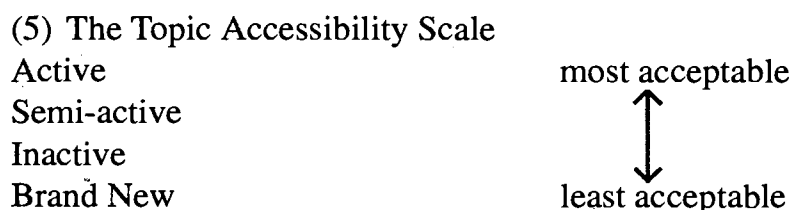
Fig. 1. *Different Interpretations of Topic/Theme.*

## 2. FG TOPIC VS. SFG THEME: A DESCRIPTION

As advanced in the introduction, FG seems to assign Topic a referential semantic interpretation, explaining it in both separating and combining terms. In other words, Topic is described as the *predication-internal* entity, a separating identificational criterion, *about which* the predication predicates something, in relation to the overall *discourse* and as processed by the *speaker/decoder's mind*, a semantic notion. Topical elements are classified into:

- (a) New Topics (NewTops), assigned to either Unused or to Brand New referents, as in Siewierska's (1991: 161 (19)):
  - (1) *There's a man at the door;*
- (b) Given Topic (GivTop), associated with Active discourse referents, as in Dik's (1989: 271 (19) [my emphasis]):
  - (2) *Yesterday I got a phone call from the tax inspector (NewTop). He/The man/The joker (GivTop) wanted me to come to his office, and he/Δ (GivTop) gave me the impression that I was in for some trouble;*
- (c) SubTopic (SubTop), assigned only to Semi-Active referents, as in Haviland and Clark's (1977):
  - (3) *Mary got some picnic supplies out of the car. The beer was warm;*
- (d) Resumed Topic (ResTop), identified with Semi-Active referents assumed to be still peripheral consciousness, as in Dik's (1989: 277):
  - (4) *John had a brother Peter and a sister Mary. Peter ... [considerable episode about Peter]. Now, John's sister Mary, who I mentioned before ...*

The above four subtypes of Topic are placed along Lambrecht's (1988: 147; 1994) scale of Topic acceptability as follows:



where (5) implies the combining tenet that utterances are more likely to be about Active referents than about Brand New referents, because the former are already in the forefront of the addressee's consciousness and therefore can be retrieved more easily.

By contrast, it is here contended that Halliday and the advocates of SFG argue for a relational semantic interpretation of Theme, "what the clause as a message is about", which is identified with the separating notion of syntactic (Topical) Theme, i.e. "the point of departure of the clause as a message", "the element(s) occupying clause initial position, extending up to (and including) the first transitivity<sup>2</sup> constituent in the clause" (Halliday 1994: 56). Accordingly, the *spatial separating metaphor*, *point of departure*, and the *matter semantic metaphor*, *aboutness*, seem to represent two different, but equivalent, glosses of *Hallidayan Theme*<sup>3</sup>, which, for the sake of clarity, I would suggest be cross-classified by the following three parameters (as expounded in Figure 2 below):

(1) internal structure, which distinguishes four *types*<sup>4</sup> of (Topical) Theme:

- (a) *simple* (e.g. *The Queen of Hearts* she made some tarts, *if the duke gives anything to my aunt* it'll be that teapot, Halliday 1994: 39, 56) or *complex* (e.g. *The Walrus and the Carpenter* were walking close at hand, *Tom, Tom, the piper's son* stole a pig and away did run, *ibid.*: 40).
- (b) *non-special* vs. *special* (*viz. predicated* (e.g. *it was [wasn't] John* who broke the window, Halliday 1967: 236), *substitute* (e.g. they don't seem to match, *these colours*, *ibid.*: 239), *reference* (e.g. *Britain* it's all roads, *ibid.*: 241), *identified* (e.g. *what John saw* was the play, *ibid.*: 223);

(2) the metafunctions, which differentiates four *classes* of Themes:

- (a) *simple* (or Topical) vs. *Multiple* (*viz. Topical Themes* preceded by *Textual* and/or *Interpersonal Themes*, e.g. *Well, but then, Ann, surely, wouldn't the best idea* be to join the group? *ibid.*: 55);
- (b) *congruent* vs. *metaphorical*, metaphoric thematic variants of an experiential, textual or interpersonal kind, e.g. *what the duke gave my aunt* was that teapot, *ibid.*: 58;

- (3) the feature of *markedness*, which contrasts *unmarked* with *marked*, or fronted, Topical Themes.

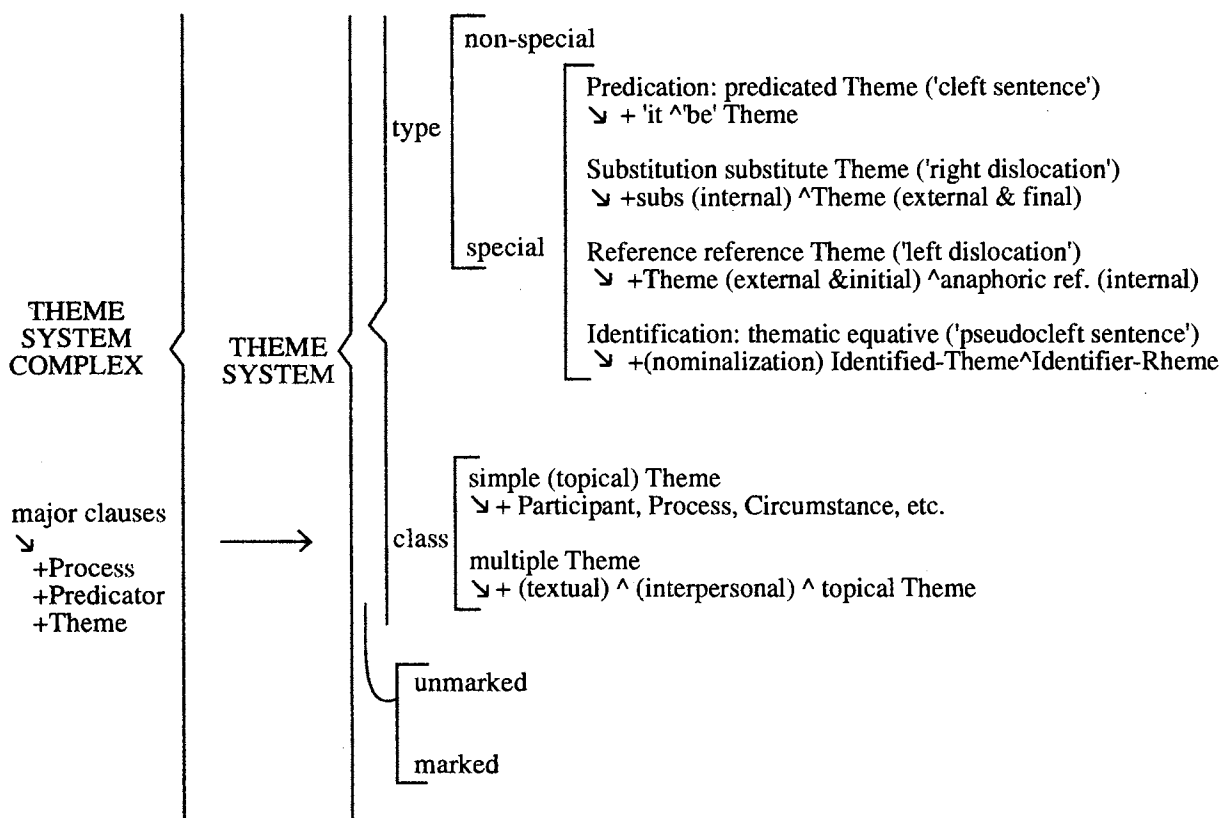


Fig. 2. *The Theme network: primacy delicacy [my network]*

### 3. WEAKNESSES OF FG TOPIC AND SFG THEME

What follows suggests that, as explained in Gómez-González (1996 a, b, 1998), both the combining FG analysis of Topic and the separating SFG account of Theme are pervaded by a number of weaknesses that impede a *functionally adequate* characterisation of these categories in either of the two programmes. On the one hand, the FG approach to Topic comes in for criticism owing to:

- (1a) the inconsistencies emerging from using in a equivocal manner the three functional interpretations of Theme/Topic, i.e. the separating, combining and semantic interpretations (cf. Jiménez Juliá 1981: 340, 342; De Vries 1989: 66-71; Butler 1991: 508; Mackenzie and Keizer 1991 [1990]: 174, 183, 187 ff.; Hannay 1991 [1990]: 133, 138, 140); and, as a corollary,
- (1b) the lack of self-consistency and therefore the debatable functional adequacy of the analysis (cf. Nuyts 1983: 383; 1985: 101-2; Keijsper

1985; Butler 1990: 13; 1991: 507, 511-12; Mackenzie and Keizer *ibid.*: 169, 191 ff.; Hannay *ibid.*: 131, 146).

On the other hand, it will be shown that SFG Theme raises three main debatable issues:

- (2a) the supposedly double-sided nature of the category, which seems to coalesce two distinct notions: (i) the point of departure of an English clause as a message (realised by the first experiential/mood element) and (ii) “what a clause is about”, usually referred to as Topic (cf. Bazell 1973: 201; Firbas 1974: 25, 212; Gundel 1974: 47, 87; Dahl 1976: 48; Creiden 1978: 200; Taglicht 1984: 14; Hudson 1986: 797, 798; Huddleston 1988, 1991, 1992; Siewierska 1991: 149 note 3; Downing 1990, 1991);
- (2b) the allegedly separating standpoint of the analysis (cf. Lyons 1977: 509; Danes 1974: 110-1; Firbas 1974; Chafe 1976: 38; Allerton 1978: 156-7);
- (2c) the problematic identification of the category and the validity of initial position as criterial for thematic status (cf. Hudson 1986: 798; Taglicht 1984: 14; Huddleston 1988, 1991, 1992).

### 3.1. *FG Topic*

With regard to (1a), I would argue that, as advanced, inconsistencies emerge in FG because activated semantic descriptions of Topic are equated with both separating and activated combining explanations. In this respect, I first contend that, though treated as three different pragmatic functions, Topic, Theme and Tail are in fact rendered as different realisations of the same pragmatic function since the three are said to establish a relationship of relevance (*aboutness*). It seems to me that, whereas, as noted above, topical *aboutness* is of a referential nature, Theme and Tail evoke relational *aboutness*. For Theme is described as presenting to the left and external to the predication an entity or sets of entities that the subsequent predication is going to bear upon (e.g. *That guy*, is he friend of yours?, *That trunk*, put it in the car, *As for the students*, they won't be invited, Dik 1978: 132 [my emphasis]); whereas Tail constituents are described as set off from the main predication, typically to its right, as “afterthoughts”, or further specifications, modifications or corrections of (parts of) the previous predication (e.g. He's a nice chap, *your brother*, I like John very much, *your brother I mean*, John gave that book to a girl, *in the library*, Dik 1978: 153 [my emphasis]).

However, this semantic interpretation of Topic (Theme and Tail) programmatically endorsed by FG is pervaded by both separating and combining overtones, which makes its operationalisation not always insightful and sometimes inconsistent. Thus, although Topics seem to be in principle characterised along activated semantic lines (as referents



establishing a relationship of *aboutness* between individual clauses/utterances and the overall discourse as processed by the interactants' minds), ultimately they are elicited by expression rules invoking the criterion of linear ordering (i.e. pragmatic positions), which is posited by separating interpretations. Importantly enough, this practice violates the FG tenet that an interpretation rule cannot be based on an expression rule as formulated for the quasi-productive mode. In addition, it has been noted that FG adheres to a further separating tenet: to wit, the fact that the dependencies between extraclausal constituents (Theme and Tail) and the Predication are claimed to run from left to right, echoing the linear processing of information, that is to say, from the Theme through the Predication to the Tail.

On the other hand, FG equally resorts to contextual factors, addressed by activated combining interpretations, without solving the main deficiencies intrinsic to such interpretations. Hence, with the exception of inactivated/unidentifiable NewTops (identified as a subtype of Focus), Top status is assigned to given information (usually an/the entity which the interactants are thinking of at the time of utterance). Yet, in my opinion, such an assignment does not admit of an easy empirical verification for it appears to invoke six non-coterminous versions of givenness, namely: (1) Recoverability ( $Giv_R$ ), (2) Shared Knowledge ( $Giv_K$ ), (3) Assumed Familiarity ( $Giv_F$ ), (4) Activation ( $Giv_S$ ), (5) Givón's (1988) cognitive domains, and (6) Lambrecht's (1988) scale of Topic acceptability. Besides, these interpretations of givenness seem to be inherently unverifiable because they rely on the speaker/writer's and/or addressee's assumptions and, presumably, there is no way one can have access to them, a problem exacerbated by the fact that what the speaker presents as Given or New might not actually be rendered so by the co(n)text.

By the same token, it remains a moot point how the most topical element can be isolated from the other contextually bound elements, if neither the "one term only" restriction, nor anaphoric reference, prosodic prominence, the Q-/or similar tests, nor placement in initial, or P1, position via R2 appear to provide consistent answers to this question. There seem to exist exceptions to the "one term only" restriction (cf. De Groot 1981; Siewierska 1988: 73 ff.). Besides, in contexts where there is more than one candidate for Topic assignment, the term restriction does not state clearly which one is Topic and which one is not. Secondly, anaphoric reference, the grammatical means used for maintaining Topic continuity cross-linguistically, as such need not indicate topichood, either: anaphors can be used to refer to contextually given or inferable entities which need not be Topics, as in (6) below (from Brown and Yule 1983: 183 [emphasis in original]):

- (6) There was a car approaching the junction, but the driver didn't stop at *the give way sign*.

Thirdly, prosodic prominence, in its turn, seems to be equally vague, despite Dik's observations that Topic may be remarked by prosodic contour. GivTops do not have prosodic prominence (unless contrasted to some other Topic, in which case such prominence does not distinguish them from Focus elements). Conversely, SubTops and ResTops may have some degree of accentual prominence, but this prominence is only "typical", and applies only to spoken language. Fourthly, Dik seems to suggest that a systemic elaboration of (Sgall's 1975) Q-test would bring us nearer to the solution of this problem. However, in my view this test is seriously flawed by insurmountable deficiencies since it merely elicits bound information, even if this procedure is not devoid of problems either. This method does not yet determine the degree of activation or presupposition of the constituents of a message (cf. Weiss 1975: 271 ff.; Daneš 1989: 29). Besides, as observed by Beaugrande (1980: 120), it proves to be an artificial and an uneconomical technique, since (i) in natural discourse answers do not normally repeat information which is directly derivable from questions and (ii) to apply single questions to individual utterances does not seem to be the easiest and most economical way to determine the Topic of messages stretches (cf. Dressler 1972). We are forced then to turn to the fifth and last "special treatment" device to mark the function of Topic, namely: placement in P1 via the rule R<sub>2</sub> included below, which for convenience's sake has been renumbered (7):

- (7) (R1) P1 -constituent → P1  
 (R2) GivTopic, SubTop, Focus → P1  
 (R3) X → P1

In connection with this device Mackenzie and Keizer (1991 [1990]: 193) comment:

One may, of course, object that it is nowhere explicitly stated that Topic elements must go into P1; this is, however, something that must be deduced from what is stated in Dik (1989) about P1 position and from the fact that Topic assignment necessarily involves singling out elements for special treatment [there is only one exception on p. 217 (ex. 18b) Well, the police (Subj.) removed them (Obj-GivTop) from the platform [my emphasis]]. Note, however, that dropping the requirement that Topics must be placed in P1 would mean losing the last possibility of giving special treatment to Topic elements in English.

It is my impression that Mackenzie and Keizer's fears for the applicability of R2 in English are not unmotivated. On the one hand, this rule turns out to be only relatively operational given that:

- (a) some languages may lack a clearly demarcated P<sub>1</sub> position;  
 (b) an element with no pragmatic function may be placed in P<sub>1</sub>;  
 (c) the position may be left unfilled.

Moreover, as Hannay (1991 [1990]: 135) points out, even if it has been decided that P<sub>1</sub> will be filled, R<sub>2</sub> does not stipulate the conditions under which:

- (a) P<sub>1</sub> is indeed filled by a pragmatic element;
- (b) a Topic as opposed to a Focus constituent is placed there (e.g. John and Bill came to see me. JOHN was NICE, but BILL was rather BORing, where “the constituents *John* and *Bill* [the second instance] are emphasised [and so qualify for Focus status], although they have already been introduced and may thus be assumed to be Given Topics to A”, (Dik 1989: 278 (34)) [emphasis in original]);
- (c) whether constituents are or are not in P<sub>1</sub>.

With regard to the second issue (1b) above, it is my impression that the FG approach to Topic, Theme and Tail cannot satisfy the three criteria of functional adequacy it sets for itself, i.e. pragmatic adequacy, psychological adequacy and typological adequacy, as a result of the theoretical gap existing between the speaker’s dynamic forward-looking view of verbal interaction and the static backward-looking perspective mostly adopted by FG analyses, preoccupied with instances of Theme, Tail and Topic (and Focus) assignment in the underlying structure of the clause. It seems that FG is unable to bridge this gap because it rests upon the same paradox that pervades other models such as the Prague generative-functional one, that is to say: to represent Theme, Tail and Topic (and pragmatic functions in general), as systemic variables, or as “autonomous” (i.e. that cannot be derived from co(n)textual variables) logico-semantic rules and, at the same time, to claim that their assignment is to be negotiated by discourse participants. I would suggest that, were we to admit that the assignment of Theme, Topic, and Tail occurs in the underlying structure of sentences in isolation, these should be addressed as formal rules (i.e. logico-semantic), rather than as pragmatic functional rules, which by definition deal with both the syntagmatic oppositions established by the contextualisation of messages and the associative and paradigmatic relations between different structures as they are stored in the memory of speakers and hearers.

From the above the question arises when and where Topic (its subtypes), Theme and Tail (and pragmatic functions in general) should be situated in the (quasi-) productive mode of the model. To my opinion, in order to surmount the above flaw FG should produce a model of verbal interaction that represents all ((extra-)linguistic) parameters of the communicative situation that may affect the speech product (i.e. the linguistic expression as the actual linguistic output of the communication): (i) the pragmatic information and intention of (S) (including her/his assessment of the pragmatic information of (A)); (ii) the (social) context (e.g., Time (T), Place (P), presence/absence of Bystanders, etc.); and (iii) previous verbal cotext. This necessity could be viewed as an argument against the assignment of pragmatic functions in the

derivation of the layered structure of the clause. Instead it suggests the necessity of creating a separate pragmatic module to do full justice to discourse phenomena, the importance of which was already stressed in Dik's (1989: 7) claim that "pragmatics is seen as the all-encompassing framework within which semantics and syntax must be studied...".

### 3.2. SFG Theme

Turning to SFG and issue (2a), i.e. the double-sided nature of SFG Theme, I believe that, whereas most scholars' notion of Topic alludes to different versions of either interactive *aboutness* (i.e. co(n)text-dependent relevance/saliency that must be negotiated throughout discourse) or of referential *aboutness* (i.e. a relationship of *aboutness* established between a clause/utterance entity and the overall discourse), Hallidayan *aboutness* has to be interpreted along relational lines. For, in my view, Hallidayan Theme entails a syntactically coded relation between an entity/proposition, or Theme, and a clausal (complex) predication, or Rheme, which derives from the linear quality of language. Hence, "what a message is about" can be said to be *iconically* coded by *message initial experiential position* (i.e. a Participant, an Attribute, a Circumstance or a Process), unless otherwise syntactically specified (i.e. unless there is some thematic substitute preceding it). It follows then, that, pace most scholars' critiques that Halliday coalesces two different categories, i.e. Topic ("what a message is about") and Theme ("point of departure" of the clause as a message), Halliday could be said to be consistent in treating the matter and the spatial metaphors as two different aspects of Theme, i.e. the relational semantic and the psycholinguistic and syntactic, respectively. And secondly, the label *Topical Theme* could be invoked as referring to relational aboutness and as being applied to the initial transitivity/mood constituent (or the final constituent in substitute Themes). This amounts to saying that the thematic *aboutness* of:

- (a) all-New clauses (e.g. *A girl* broke a vase);
- (b) messages having a non referential item as Theme (e.g. *Nothing* will satisfy you, *You* could buy a bar of chocolate like this for 6d before the War, *There* is a fallacy in your argument, etc.);
- (c) different choices of Mood;
- (d) all sorts of Themes in general;

is to be derived from the *proportionalities* (i.e. paradigmatic and systagmatic relationships) their containing messages participate in, in terms of the grammar and the discourse co(n)texts in which they appear. It should be noted, however, that this "relational separating" interpretation contravenes both Matthiessen and Martin's (1991: 47-8) observation that the Theme of a question "is the piece of information the

speaker assumes the listener can supply, i.e. information that is recoverable for the listener although not for the speaker, and Rheme is the rest"; or Halliday's (1994: 38) statement that Topical Theme corresponds fairly well with the category of Topic, associated in the literature with given information. For it seems to me these two accounts show combining overtones which violate the separating tenet insisted upon elsewhere in the systemic literature, i.e. that Theme, Given and Topic represent three different categories.

Moving on to issue (2b), the general soundness of Halliday's separating approach to Theme raises the question as to whether or not a relational semantic interpretation of Theme iconically coded as a syntactic Theme invokes a structural category or rather relates to a universal principle of organisation of discourse, related to the linear quality of language. In this respect I believe that Halliday's account is vague and, to a certain extent, inconsistent. First, Halliday (1994: 39) explains that clause initial position seems to be the "natural" position for Theme provided that: (1) in any given language the message is organised as a Theme-Rheme structure, and (2) this structure is expressed by the sequence in which the elements occur in the clause. The first proviso implies that there may be languages lacking the Theme-Rheme patterns, which contravenes Halliday's belief that these patterns are universal principles of organisation instrumental to the ideational and interpersonal meanings. The second proviso, on the other hand, suggests that the Theme-Rheme pattern may or may not be expressed by the sequence in which these functions occur, which seems to depend on whether or not a language displays morphological cues that allegedly mark the thematic status of items. This assumption stumbles over the problem that, while none of the postulated Topic markers (e.g. Japanese (-*wa*), Tagalog (-*ang*), and Korean (-*nun*)) can be simply equated with any existing definition of Topic/Theme, yet, from a relational semantic and/or a separating perspective, clause initial experiential position remains a communicatively important position in all languages (although to varying degrees in accordance with the morpho-syntactic structure of specific languages). Therefore, I conclude that, in order to adopt a consistent separating and/or relational semantic perspective, Theme must be identified as a syntactic Theme, i.e. as a clause initial experiential/transitivity constituent, cross-linguistically, rather than be treated as a language-specific (Present-day English) identification criterion, as some systemicists seem to suggest.

A more serious allegation is the last issue (2c), that is, whether or not Halliday and systemicists *demonstrate* (i.e. give some type of evidence, empirical, grammatical or semantic) that the Topical Theme is the cut-off point between Theme and Rheme, and whether or not there is a single invariant meaning attaching to this category. Halliday cites three cues of thematic status, namely: (a) semantic cues, that is, the initial experiential function, (b) syntactic cues, or the initial transitivity element, (c) phonological cues, i.e. the initial tone group. In my view, however, these criteria are not necessarily concurrent. First, if Themes may "stack" within a metafunctional slot,

then there may be more than just one constituent in this and/or the previous functional slots, linked by any type of tactic and logico-semantic relationships. Besides, if as suggested by Halliday, recursive Themes are phonologically coded by tone concord or tone sequences, then it follows that they do not belong to the same information unit either. Furthermore, in spoken (especially spontaneous) speech all sorts of pauses and hesitations could be regarded as legitimate Themes in that they act as the psychological “crutch” on which the speaker relies to continue her/his discourse. Thus, rather than the clause as the basic unit for the thematic analysis of speech, some scholars like Goldman-Eisler (1972) and Romero Trillo (1994) suggest the *Phonemic Clause*, i.e. “a phonologically marked macrosegment which contains one and only one primary stress and ends in a terminal juncture” (Boomer 1965: 149).

On the other hand, Halliday contends that different types and classes of Theme, either marked or unmarked, congruent or metaphorical, involve different types of thematic highlighting. However, as remarked in Gómez-González (1994, 1996, forthcoming), Halliday comments upon the discourse motivations underlying thematic choices only in passing (ch. 3 section 9 “Thematic interpretation of a text” and Appendix 1, 1994: 64-7; 368-391, respectively), centring his attention on how this textual category affects the grammatical structure of clauses in isolation (cf. Butler 1985: 221).

In sum, it seems to me that SFG has not yet provided an incontrovertible criterion to identify the syntactic (Topical) Theme of a message, nor has it yet demonstrated the functional validity of this category from a separating relational semantic perspective, by means of sufficient quantitative and qualitative discourse evidence, across and/or within languages.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

It has been suggested that the labels *Theme/Topic* have received three different, but not mutually exclusive, interpretations: (1) separating, which equates Theme/Topic with clause initial position, (2) combining, identifying Theme/Topic with three kinds of givenness, i.e. (a) relational, (b) contextual in terms of recoverability ( $Giv_R$ ), predictability ( $Giv_P$ ), shared knowledge ( $Giv_K$ ), and assumed familiarity ( $Giv_F$ ), and (c) activated, and (3) the semantic interpretation, for which Theme/Topic entails three different readings of *aboutness*, (a) relational, (b) referential and (c) interactive.

In addition, it has been concluded that, in order to be functionally adequate, FG descriptions of Topic should attempt to overcome the drawbacks inherent in the referential combining interpretations they subscribe to, namely:

- (1) that Topic is not defined directly, but rather it is described:
  - (a) in relation to such elusive concepts as *recoverability*, *shared knowledge* and *saliency* at a discourse level;

- (b) as a discrete value along a scale of topicality;
- (c) as a process of attention activation;
- (2) that syntactic givenness/newness and phonological givenness/newness may not coincide and not enough quantitative and qualitative evidence has yet been provided to analyse systematically the interaction of both realisational tendencies cross-linguistically or in specific languages;
- (3) that the explanatory power of the approach is restricted mainly to NPs, which poses two further issues:
  - (a) how to identify the Theme of messages containing more than one Given NP;
  - (b) whether it is true that only Given NPs qualify for Theme/topical status;
- (4) that all-new messages are devoid of Topics, which leads to counterintuitively imply that such messages are “about nothing”.

By the same token, it has also be pointed out that SFG needs to remove the weaknesses inherent in its separating understanding of Theme by:

- (1) working out an operational criterion that systematically identifies the initial (or final) constituent of a clause as a message;
- (2) demonstrating that clause initial (final) position has some grammatical relevance other than that deriving from the linear quality of language;
- (3) embodying within the same paradigm the wide range of structurally and communicatively heterogeneous constructions that highlight thematic position in order to elicit their functional relevance crosslinguistically.

In sum, the intricacies raised by the numerous and heterogeneous interpretations of “what the clause is about” should be overcome, lest one holds the view that in such languages as English this function should be abandoned, as proposed by Lyons (1977: 505), Comrie (1981: 58), Huddleston (1988) and Mackenzie and Keizer (1991: 192), or else should be regarded as a clearly *intuitive*, and therefore, subjective concept, as suggested by Kintsch (1974: 124), Brown and Yule (1983: 73) and Levinson (1983: x), who claim that participants themselves may not have identical views of “what is being talked about” and this may be judged differently at different points in discourse.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the VIIth *International Conference on Functional Grammar*. The University of Córdoba. Córdoba. Spain. 23th-27th September. 1996. I am indebted to professors C. S. Butler., J. L. Mackenzie., M. Hannay and T. Fanego for their help in steering the project and for their many useful comments and suggestions. Likewise, for the years of financial support which they provided. I also thank the Xunta de Galicia and the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (Dirección General de Investigación Científica y Técnica (DGICYT), grants numbers PB90-0370 and PB94-0619).
2. The transitivity network aims to present the entire lexicogrammar in terms of: (i) *processes*, or all phenomena to which a specification of time may be attached-in English, anything that can be expressed by a verb: event, whether physical or not, state or relation (Halliday in Kress 1976: 19); (ii) *participants*, that is, the linguistic representations of non-human, inanimate, abstract entities, as well as human beings. Involved in the situations; and (iii) any possible attending *circumstance(s)* (or qualities/attributes) of the whole situation or of the participant(s).
3. Cf. Halliday 1967: 212-213, 236-39; 1994: 32-43, Appendix 1: 369, 370, 368.
4. The distinction between *classes* and *types* of Themes is based on Butler (1985: 24), though at that time it was applied to structural units:  
The concept of class, then, takes account of the paradigmatic possibilities associated with particular elements of structure: a class is an abstraction from an inventory of items, all of which share distributional characteristics, in being able to operate at a certain structural element in syntagmatic association with other structural elements. (...) Thus class, defined distributionally, is not to be confused with what Halliday in a later paper (Halliday 1963) calls "type", a grouping based on the internal structure of the unit itself.

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