'…*AND YES, I* WAS IN THE BUILDING' (9-11-2001): THEMATIC SELECTIONS IN PERSONAL RECOUNTS OF A TRAGEDY

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RESUMO Em lingüística sistêmica, a estrutura temática é vista como o ponto de partida para a manifestação de experiências em uma oração. A estrutura temática é empregada por escritores a fim de prover uma base estrutural para o seu discurso, que pode se relacionar ao que o antecede, ou oferecer uma indicação sobre o que vem a seguir. Este artigo investiga quatro narrativas pessoais do trágico atentado de 9 de Setembro de 2001 a fim de sumarizar como elas são tipicamente caracterizadas em relação às informações contidas em seus Temas. Os resultados demonstram que com relação a características gramaticais e lexico-semânticas, os Temas nestas narrativas são fundamentalmente estruturados para apresentar eventos seqüenciais e priorizar *quando* as coisas acontecem, *onde* os eventos ocorrem e *quem* está envolvido. Com base nos resultados, sugere-se que a compreensão de como o ordenamento de elementos lingüísticos funciona, em diferentes gêneros em inglês, na condução dos leitores e na sinalização e organização de significados, pode oferecer a escritores uma ferramenta importante para criar e gerenciar os significados de seus textos.

INTRODUCTION

Clauses are the cornerstones of spoken and written texts. Each clause carries a message that has two parts, that is, what comes first and what comes last. The terms Theme and Rheme have been used to refer to these two parts. According to Halliday (1994: 37), Theme is the element of a clause structure which "serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned" and it is the "element which comes in first position in the clause".

For writers, the position of information is an important matter – a number of lexico-grammatical choices are motivated by the possibility they offer of placing information in different places in the sentence, with first position receiving particular, and different prominence. I chose to study Theme because there is considerable agreement among systemic linguists (Fries 1992, 1995; Halliday 1985, 1994; Berry 1995; Francis 1989; Martin 1992; Brown and Yule 1983; Butt et al. 2001) that information in first position has at least two important functions: it links up with the previous text and it guides readers' comprehension of subsequent segments. This is particularly relevant to my objective in this paper: to find data that could be used to help students to write different genres in English more efficiently. If writers are aware of the way information is usually organized in initial position within a certain genre, readers should have less difficulty interpreting their messages. Thus, on a micro level, this paper investigates how personal recounts may be characterized in terms of the information typically contained in their Themes, whereas,

on a macro level, it aims to demonstrate that the ability to write one specific type of genre may be extended to writing other genres.

THE DATA AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

Four personal recounts were selected and analyzed in the present study. Three recounts were collected on the internet: `http://attacksonusa.org/`. The first recount was produced by a male who was working *in* the World Trade Center 1 building the moment the first plane crashed. The second recount was produced by a woman who worked on the 24th floor of the 2 World Financial Center, a building that faced the Towers from across West Street. The third recount was produced by a male passer by, and the fourth recount is an answer-email sent by a personal friend who works near the World Trade Center.

Halliday's (1994) Theme categories were selected for the classification of Themes in this study. The unit of analysis was the clause. Apart from the Themes in embedded relative clauses, all other Themes were counted and classified accordingly. The data included 410 clauses made of 3,921 words (as tokens) and 917 words (as types).

HOW INFORMATION IS ARRANGED: THE THEME/RHEME SYSTEM

In spoken as well as in written discourse, clauses have a structure appropriate for the presentation of information. It may be said that each clause has two parts, a Theme (in italics) that comes first and a Rheme that comes last as in example 1 (all examples in this section were drawn from the four recounts mentioned above):

EXAMPLE 1
Police directed everyone north.
THEME   RHEME

There are different kinds of Theme. It frequently happens that the Theme in a declarative clause coincides with the subject as in the above example (Halliday, 1994: 43). If this happens we have an "unmarked" Theme (idem: 43). Nonetheless it is also possible to have another element placed initially in a clause. If this is the case, we have a "marked" Theme (idem: 44) as in example 2.

EXAMPLE 2
Around the 20th floor we started seeing lots of smoke.
          THEME   RHEME

In this example, the starting point of the message is *Around the 20th floor* which is also now another point of information focus. Here the Theme is not the grammatical subject.

Themes can also be categorized according to their internal structure. In examples 1 and 2, we had two 'simple' Themes, but we can also have 'multiple Theme' structures (Halliday, 1994: 52). A simple Theme always has an ideational element in it, i.e. *Police* and *Around the 20ᵗʰ floor*. A multiple Theme has more than one element in thematic position as in example 3.

EXAMPLE 3

Fortunately,	*the flames*	were several floors above us
interpersonal	ideational	
THEME		RHEME

Here the Theme is made of two parts. If we accept *the flames* as the ideational Theme, what then is the expression *fortunately*? As a modal adjunct, the function of *fortunately* is to give a personal evaluation of how the writer was feeling at that moment, i.e. it is an interpersonal element. In addition to the interpersonal and ideational elements in the Theme, we may also have a textual element. An example of this would be the word *and* in example 4.

EXAMPLE 4

…and	*a huge*	*cloud of smoke and dust*	was heading towards me
textual	interpersonal	ideational	
THEME			RHEME

As indicated in examples 3 and 4, there is an order for multiple Themes, that is, textual^interpersonal^ideational (^ means followed by). We can have combinations such as textual^ideational, interpersonal^ideational, or the ideational on its own. We must have an ideational Theme in every case. The other elements are optional. According to Halliday (1994) other types of Theme include:

a) Marked ideational Themes: *Minutes later*, there was a boom.
b) Predicated themes: *It was the first time* that I sat down…
c) Elliptied Themes (indicated by '-'): *I* hung up the phone *and* - ran outside …
d) Clause as Theme: *Waves and waves of people walking away from the devastation* made me feel like I was a refugee in a war.
e) Thematic equatives: *That*'s what everyone said.

METHOD OF DEVELOPMENT

Martin (1992) brings to our attention that the most important work interpreting Theme as point of departure from a discourse perspective has been accomplished by Peter Fries (1981/1983). According to Francis (1989: 201) method of development as described by Fries "can be taken to mean something like *typical* thematic selection – the point of departure most often selected within a text or part of a text". Martin (1992: 434) claims that "[I]n

essence Fries' argument is that the way in which lexical strings and reference chains interact with Theme is not random". In other words, method of development is concerned with the semantic patterns set up in thematic position, the way in which semantic choices for Theme function as an organizing principle of the text.

If method of development plays a crucial role in the organization of discourse, it would be interesting to find out how it is manifested in the language of personal recounts. In the present study I aim at answering one major question:

- What are the *typical* grammatical and lexico-semantic properties of Themes in the personal recounts in hand?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that there are far more simple than multiple Themes in the data. Part of the reason for such difference is due to the fact that 'I' was used 102 times as a participant functioning as subject of the clause, which, in turn, reflects the similarity of the genre with what is found as an 'unmarked' Theme in everyday conversation (Halliday, 1994). The use of multiple Themes also shows that both interpersonal and textual Themes are frequent in these texts. This reflects the fact that in personal recounts we quite often preface our ideational meanings with words whose function are to connect our message to the previous text (e.g. *and*) or indicate temporal sequencing (e.g. *then*), as well as words that present the speaker's own angle on what is being described (e.g. *fortunately*).

Table 1   Simple and Multiple Themes

	No	%
Simple Themes	276	67
Multiple Themes	134	33
Total	410	100

Table 2 shows the number of other Theme types included in the figure above. According to Goatly (1995: 166) marked ideational Themes "occur in declarative mood clauses if an element other than Subject takes initial position in the clause; or in imperative and interrogative moods when an element other than Finite/Verb takes initial position". Most Circumstances coming in thematic position fall into the first category. As we will see below, most marked ideational Themes in personal recounts orient the reader to temporal and spatial location. This is because the primary function of language in recounts is to tell the reader the exact time and place of a past event, hence the preoccupation with temporal and spatial location in thematic position.

Table 2   Number of other Theme types

	No	%
Marked ideational Theme	42	10
Predicated Themes	7	2
Ellipted Themes	45	11
Clause as Theme	16	4

Predicated Themes are examples of what are called cleft sentences (e.g. *It was impossible to tell exactly what was going on with all the smoke*). Ellipted Themes were far more frequent than predicated Themes, and in most cases (83%) what was being omitted was the first person pronoun 'I' (e.g. *I found a phone and '-' called Janna to let her know that I was OK*, where '-' corresponds to the ellipsis of 'I'). What are called dependent clauses can come in a thematic position. If this happens, then the whole clause is the Theme (e.g. *Trying to call anyone proved almost impossible*).

The number of textual themes is much greater than the number of interpersonal Themes as indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3   Textual and interpersonal Themes

	No	%
Textual Themes	118	84
Interpersonal Themes	22	16
Total	140	100

As in most texts, there are plenty of conjunctions functioning as textual Themes. Coordinators (*and, or, but, so*) are by far more frequent (73%) than subordinators (*when, after, because*) in the data.

The interpersonal Themes represent the writer's evaluation of the proposition that is being made. They are part of the writer's involvement in the way the facts are being narrated and include modal adjuncts and certain types of marked verbs. Some of the interpersonal Themes found in the data include modal adjuncts like *fortunately, literally,* and *certainly*, as the following examples extracted from the corpus attest:

Fortunately, the flames were several floors above us and we had time to run down the stairs.
Literally, I tried to get to the best of my senses.
Certainly this was the scariest moment of my entire life.

Interpersonal metaphors (Halliday, 1994) such as *I don't think* and *one of the hardest* were also found in the corpus:

One of the hardest parts was trying to call people.
I don't think the people on the lower floors had any idea to what extent things were going on, and *I don't think* the people on the upper floors had much time to think about it.

If students undertake activities that explore the way Theme and Rheme are used to organize ideational and interpersonal meanings in structuring written texts, they can notice that often a choice of Theme or a shift in thematic progression signals that a text has moved into a next stage. By drawing on Labov's (1972) structure potential for narratives of personal experience - Orientation^Complication^Evaluation^Resolution^Coda – we are able to inform students that in personal recounts the Orientation part is usually constructed with Circumstances of time and place as marked ideational Themes in order to set the story in time and place (e.g. *After about 10 steps, I tripped over a pile of people* and *At the Wall Street train stop, people were covered with papers*). We can also inform students that in the Complication stage of a narrative we are likely to find: (i) time and sequence conjunctions as textual Themes to indicate unfolding events in a temporal sequence (e.g. *When I got there, I saw both towers with enormous gapping holes, engulfed in flames*); (ii) contrast conjunctions (such as *but*) as textual Themes to signal the complication of the story (e.g. *I even tried to give blood at four different locations, but they were overloaded with volunteers*); and (iii) interpersonal Themes (such as *fortunately*) to signal the way the writer is evaluating the events of the Complication (e.g. *I could only find four people from my office, and fortunately all were OK*). Finally, we may also inform students that in the Resolution part of narratives we are likely to find consequence conjunctions (such as *so*) as textual Themes to indicate what has been done to solve previous problems (e.g. *I was scared to death about the chance of new attacks, and so I decided I would go to my folk's place down south*).

Another distinctive feature of Theme selection in the personal recounts under scrutiny is the choice of animate participants. It can be concluded that the point of departure of the message in this genre generally deals with participants as Actors/Sensers/Sayers in the respective clauses. This, no doubt, is related to the nature of Processes which in the case of the personal recounts in hand are material, i.e. *run, grab, call, move, slip, put, bump, stop,* etc; mental, i.e. *see, think, look, know, believe,* etc; and verbal, i.e. *say, tell, talk, ask,* etc. (see Table 4 below). Some examples follow:

I *ran* to the other side of my office and *saw* fire raining down. [Actor:material]
I *grabbed* my bag, palm pilot and juice and headed to the stairs. [Actor:material]
I *bumped* into milk crates. I *stopped*. [Actor:material]
I *saw* the sky grow dark and … [Senser:mental]
I *looked up* into the sky and it was dark from the smoke. [Senser:mental]
First, I must *say* this is one of the most disturbing days of my life. [Sayer:verbal]

Table 4   Participants (people) as Themes

	No	%
"I"	150	69
Common nouns	21	10
Indefinite Reference	18	8
Other pronouns	28	13
Total	217	100

The following are a few examples: Common nouns, *people, police, guy, man*; Indefinite reference, *one, you, someone, everyone, no one*; Other pronouns, *she, they, we*. For instance:

> *People* started *screaming* about the towers (this was about 45 seconds after impact)
> *Police directed* everyone north.
> *The guy with the apple juice put* his arm around me.
> *Someone said*: "It's the army".
> *Everyone called* their wives, husbands and friends and *said*: "Did you see what happened?!?"
> *She asked* why I was carrying a wastebasket.
> *We checked* doors behinds us, left them all opened.

In addition to animate Themes, there are several inanimate Themes. Table 5 gives the statistics for inanimate Themes.

Table 5   Participants (non-people) as Theme

	No	%	
Nouns (things)	40	55	
Abstract nouns	12	16	
"there"	7	10	(as existent)
"it"	7	10	(in predicated)
Verbs	2	3	(imperative)
Nominalized processes (material)	5	6	
Total	73	100	

A significant proportion of the above Themes include nouns (things) related to the scene being recounted. Examples here include *train stop, intercom, apartment, dust, smoke, debris, wind, subways,* etc. For instance:

> *The intercom* told us to go down the stairs.
> *The smoke and dust* were intense – my *eyes* were burning and I was coughing up soot.
> *The wind* was blowing the smoke east, and …
> *The subways* were not running and *traffic* was pretty much at a standstill.

Abstract nouns as Themes include *feeling, thought, determination*, *price, sound, temperature,* etc. Nominalized material processes include examples such as *the running* and *the waiting*. Only two verbs were found in Thematic position which indicates that the use of imperatives is not a common feature at least for the personal recounts in hand. Below follow some examples that illustrate the Themes described above:

> *The feeling* was something akin to someone grabbing you by the shoulders and swinging you back and forth a few times.

The sound of a thunderous BOOM was heard with the jostling and swaying of the WTC 1 building.

The temperature in the stairwell was rising due to the amount of people trying to get out, and *the sounds* of men and women getting nervous didn't help the people trying to cling to their sanity.

The running wasn't very panicked, which helped.

Stay where you are.

Besides the frequency of 'I' as an unmarked simple Theme, one of the most important findings of the present study is the frequency of time and place Circumstances as marked ideational Themes.

Table 6   Circumstances as marked ideational Themes

	No	%
Time	21	50
Place	16	39
Reason	2	5
Other	3	6
Total	42	100

Circumstances as Theme include temporal expressions like *At this point, About this time, After about 10 steps, Minutes later*, and spatial location such as *At 59th street, In the middle of the dead quiet, At the corner of Liberty and Broadway, At about the 60-70th floors*. Other Circumstances include reason, *Since the subways were not running*; manner, *In a bit of a daze*; and cause, *With the first collapse*.

CONCLUSION

As a genre with distinctive field, tenor and mode, the selection of Themes in the language of personal recounts has several grammatical and lexico-semantic properties as shown in the course of this chapter. Due to sample size, the findings presented here are only tentative, which, in turn, calls for further research to be carried out with larger amounts of data.

Nonetheless, we have seen that in terms of grammatical and lexico-semantic features Themes in written personal recounts scrutinized are fundamentally structured so as to present sequential events, prioritizing *when* things happened*, where* events took place and *who* was involved. Thus, in genres organized by time and place, such as personal recounts, using sequencing conjunctions as Themes is the unmarked way to signal the unfolding of events. Once students have mastered these unmarked signs, they can learn to use marked ideational Themes such as Circumstances and Clausal Themes (e.g. *Minutes later …When I finally got of the train*) to highlight particular points of time in the unfolding events.

It is also worth pointing out that it is the distance between writer and reader which determines how much work the language has to do (Eggins, 1994). In the case of personal

recounts, the writer is narrating an activity at a distance, that is, in a different place at a later time, and in this case, the language will have to do a lot of work to reconstitute the activity for the reader.

Summing up, if teachers help students explore how thematic selections enable the organization of different types of texts, students can consciously and strategically draw on this knowledge to organize their own texts. Once students understand how the ordering of linguistic elements across different genres works in English to guide the readers and to signal and organize meanings, they will have gained a powerful tool for crafting and managing the meanings of texts.

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APPENDIX

What follows is the email sent by Joel Norman, who is a personal friend of mine, on September 19th 2001. This is the answer to an email I sent inquiring if everyone was OK after the nightmare of the 11th.

Leo:

Everybody is fine. Thanks for your concern. I arrived downtown around 9:30, which would have been about 25 minutes after the second plane crashed into the twin towers. There were delays all the way down and the train bypassed the Fulton Street Station, which is right near the World Trade Center because of a "Police Action". When I finally got off the train, there was pandemonium. I asked a guy what had happened and he told me that two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center. I looked up into the sky and it was black from the smoke. I walked in the direction of the twin towers and when I turned the corner, saw a group of people at the end of the street all looking up in the direction of the twin towers. When I got there, I saw both towers with enormous gaping holes, engulfed in flames. It was very bad. I knew that thousands of people were in these two buildings that were totally in flames. I watched for fifteen minutes or so and then turned to go to my office to make some calls and arrangements to get out of that area.

I called Janna from the office and told her I was going to come right home. While I was on the phone with her, I saw the sky grow dark and thousands of people started running away from the World Trade Center in a panic. I hung up the phone and ran outside and a huge cloud of smoke and dust was heading towards me so I went as far east as I could. Someone told me that a third plane had hit the WTC and I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. In reality, the smoke was caused by the first tower collapsing.

I was planning on going near the East River (I even thought to myself that I could jump in if there were fires - it was impossible to tell exactly what was going on with all the smoke). The smoke and dust was intense – my eyes were burning and I was coughing up soot. Many people were completely covered in dust and I had a nice coating myself. There was a brief moment when the dust cloud first overtook me that I thought about suffocation. The wind was blowing the dust and smoke to the east and my only thoughts were to get as far north as possible, as fast as I could. I followed the river north until I got to Chinatown and by then was out of the immediate danger of smoke inhalation. People were calm, but everyone was just walking north.

What ensued was a mass migration North away from the Southern side of the island. In the background, the sky was full of smoke - waves and waves of people walking away from the devastation made me feel like I was a refugee in a war. I found a phone and called Janna to let her know that I was OK and to tell her to go buy some food and water, just in case. I then walked nine miles to my apartment since the subways were not running and traffic was pretty much at a standstill. There were many glimpses of conversations that I heard on the walk home - people worrying about friends and family who worked at the World Trade Center, one woman who was crying because she had surely lost her job, many people cursing. But in general, people were relatively calm and orderly, which I'm sure minimized the damage.

Uptown, things have calmed down. Time to let the emergency workers do their job and hope there's nothing more on the horizon.

Joel