



Thematic parentheticals and discourse competence, Mike Hannay, VU University Amsterdam; Maria de los Ángeles Gómez González, University of Santiago de Compostela



Building on earlier work (Hannay & Gómez González 2012), this contribution investigates how so-called thematic parentheticals (henceforth TP), in bold print in (1) and (2), are used in English academic writing by advanced learners.

(1) Alternatively, at the older age (33 months) the children were less likely to point on the sham hiding trials.

(2) By the early 1970s, however, this attitude was changing and Sir Robert Mark, who took over as Metropolitan Police Commissioner, promised to do away with corruption within the force.

We define TPs as any parenthetical element which occurs immediately after an element of the Theme and is anchored by that element. TPs are thus taken to be part of an "extended multiple theme" (underlined) (Gómez González, 1998, 2001: 329ff.). In (1), for instance, the textual Theme (alternatively) is followed by a marked circumstantial Theme, at the older age, which anchors the TP, 33 months, and then establishes a circumstantial framework for introducing the topical Theme, the children. In (2), in contrast, the initial circumstantial element, by the early 1970s, provides a temporal setting for the whole sentence, while the textual TP, however, relates the whole sentence to the preceding discourse by signalling a contrast and prepares the discourse for the introduction of the topical Theme, this attitude.

First, we will refine the categories of thematic parentheticals introduced in Hannay & Gómez González (2012). A basic distinction will be made between theme-oriented and rheme-oriented parentheticals. The former serve an array of functions: they may provide extra information to enrich the theme in descriptive terms; they may clarify an implied

proposition in the initial thematic element, or they may ground the theme in the discourse, thus investing the choice of theme with relevance (cf. Loock 2013). Rheme-oriented parentheticals, by contrast, supplement the initial theme expression to create a complex thematic frame, adding information which guides the reader to interpret the rheme in a particular way.

Secondly, we will also present the findings of a quantitative analysis based on a small corpus of academic texts written by advanced Dutch and Spanish-speaking learners. The analysis will show the extent to which learners use thematic parentheticals in their writing, specified according to parenthetical function, and will be supplemented by a qualitative analysis to gauge the success of the thematic framing. This additional analysis is useful in the light of claims that learners have difficulty with managing the distribution of information, leading to text which is "disconnected and disjointed because there is no clear information structure" (Francis 1989: 220). A second qualitative study will also be conducted relating to segments extracted from the corpus which are characterized by the presence of short single-clause sentences. Our intention is to investigate to what extent these sentences might best be reformulated as thematic parentheticals within either the preceding or immediately following sentence. By identifying the kind of sentence involved here we can formulate advice for training material designed to help learners further develop their discourse competence.

Taken together, our quantitative and qualitative analyses will allow us to characterize the extent to which advanced learners both at bachelor and master levels have developed this specific element of discourse competence. It will be shown that the successful use of thematic parenthetical constructions can thus be seen as a feature of advanced discourse competence, illustrating the writer's ability at the C2 level to "create coherent and cohesive text making full and appropriate use of a variety of organisational patterns and a wide range of cohesive devices" (Council of Europe 2001: 125) (cf. also Hannay 2007). From the point of view of clause combining, incorporating parenthetical information into the running clause allows the writer to distinguish between foregrounded and non-foregrounded information, which otherwise might be expressed as two independent sentences. From an interactional view of theme and sentence construction, thematical parentheticals allow writers "to accommodate audience needs" (Hartnett 1995: 211) providing an answer to the writer's question

"what does my reader need to know for me to successfully build a rheme onto this theme?".

References

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Biographical note

Mike Hannay is Professor of English Language and Linguistics at VU University Amsterdam. He is a member of the Functional Discourse Grammar research community and is a senior researcher in SCIMITAR. He is on the editorial board of the journal *Functions of Language*.

Mike's research is principally concerned with information structure, both within the clause and at the level of the complex sentence. Current work, together with María de los Ángeles Gómez González, focuses on the reader-oriented coherence-promoting functions of information in immediate post-initial position in the sentence.

Alongside his theoretical work Mike does applied research in the area of L2 writing skills and the development of discourse competence, incorporating research findings into advanced training programmes in writing, translating and text editing. Over the last 15 years he has given a range of invited courses and workshops in the Benelux, Germany, Spain and Brazil, including workshops for the translation departments of the European Commission. He is also in charge of the Academic Language Programme at VU University Amsterdam.

Book publications include *English existentials in Functional Grammar* (Foris, 1985), *Van Dale handwoordenboeken E-N en N-E* (English-Dutch and Dutch-English desk dictionaries (editor-in-chief, Van Dale 1988), *Functional Grammar and verbal interaction* (edited with Machtelt Bolkestein, Benjamins 1998), *Effective writing in English* (co-authored with Lachlan Mackenzie, Coutinho 2002), *Structural-functional studies in English grammar* (edited with Gerard Steen, Benjamins 2007), and *Writing in English* (co-authored with Dirk Siepmann, John Desmond Gallagher and Lachlan Mackenzie, Francke 2008).

María de los Ángeles Gómez González is Full Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Santiago de Compostela and Principal investigator of the research team SCIMITAR. Her main research interests include functional and applied linguistics, as well as pragmatics and discourse analysis. María is particularly

interested in the phonetic, morpho-syntactic and pragmatic dimensions of constructions, as well as in the issues of coherence, cohesion and linguistic variation in present-day English and across different languages, text types and genres, mostly adopting a quantitative empirical approach and a (critical) discourse analysis perspective.

Her publications include well over 50 book chapters, book reviews and articles in numerous scholarly journals such as *Applied Linguistics*, *Discourse Studies*, *Language Sciences*, *Word*, *Languages in Contrast*, *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, *Functions of Language*, among others, as well as the following books: *The Theme-Topic Interface: Evidence from English* (John Benjamins, 2001), *A New Architecture for Functional Grammar* (co-edited with Lachlan Mackenzie, Mouton de Gruyter 2004), *Studies in Functional Discourse Grammar* (co-edited with Lachlan Mackenzie, Peter de Lang 2005), *The Dynamics of Language Use: Functional and Contrastive Perspectives* (co-edited with Chris Butler and Susana Doval, Benjamins 2005), *Languages and Cultures in Contrast and Comparison and Current trends in Contrastive Linguistics: Functional and cognitive perspectives* (both co-edited with Lachlan Mackenzie and Elsa González, Benjamins 2008a, b), *The Functional Perspective on Language and Discourse: Implications and Applications* (co-edited with Francisco Ruiz de Mendoza, Francisco González García and Angela Downing, Benjamins, 2014), *Theory and Practice in Functional-Cognitive Space* (co-edited with Francisco Ruiz de Mendoza and Francisco González García, Benjamins, 2014), and *English Pronunciation for Speakers of Spanish. From Theory to Practice* (co-authored with Teresa Sánchez Roura, Mouton de Gruyter 2016).