Thematic-Structure Analysis of the Section 
Statement of Problem in Proposals

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Rezumat

Lucrarea analizează, cu ajutorul teoriei Temă-Remă, structura informației și coerența în secțiunea Motivația proiectului din cadrul genului Propunere de proiect. Prima parte descrie secțiunea și rolul acesteia în cadrul proiectului; partea a doua prezintă teoria Temă-Remă și diverse tipuri de structuri tematice cunoscute; partea a treia prezintă corpusul și analiza proprie-zisă. Analiza efectuată a identificat atât tipuri de structuri tematice generale, cât și tipuri specifice acestei secțiuni.

1. Introduction

The general purpose of any proposal is to persuade addressees to do something—whether it is to persuade potential customers to purchase goods and/or services, or to persuade employers to fund a project or to implement a program that the addressee would like to launch.

A proposal offers a plan to fill a need; the addressees will evaluate the addressee’s plan according to how well the written presentation answers questions about what they are proposing, how they plan to do it, when they plan to do it, and how much it is going to cost. For any viable proposal, addressees should evaluate the needs and expectations of a particular community, ascertain the importance of the project for them, and use the appropriate materials and language to appeal to them all.

Generally, proposals follow a specific format. Their cognitive structure consists of the following sections: Title, Summary or Abstract, Description of the addressee’s organization, Statement of problem, Project goals and objectives, Proposed
solutions and methods, Evaluation, Program sustainability, and Budget. Additional documents which may accompany proposals are letters of transmittal; qualifications of the project writer(s) and of its implementer(s); presentations of charts, graphs, or illustrations; efficiency studies, etc.

The section **Statement of Problem** (also named **Problem Statement, Needs Assessment, Need for Program, or Problem/Need/Situation Description**) is a key component of the proposal because it is one of the most important parts that influences funding success. In this section, the addressor summarizes the problem, states qualifications for doing the job, reinforces credibility for investigating the problem, and justifies why the problem should be solved or the project funded/undertaken. The section should be supported by evidence drawn from the addressor’s own experience, from statistics provided by authoritative sources, and from literature reviews.

Cognitively, the section consists of two parts: one, in which the addressor specifies the problem(s) he/she wishes to solve, and another, in which the addressor tries to persuade the addressee, that action should be taken to solve that problem. The former is descriptive/informative writing, while the latter is argumentative/persuasive writing. These two types of writing form a coherent section if the information structured so as to preserve consistency with the topic and the logical links between the items.

There are several theories which describe information structure (IS), and which use different terminologies. The basic notions with which they operate are **Theme**-Rheme (Danes), **Topic** (Givon), **Focus** (Erteschik-Shir), **Foregrounding-Backgrounding** (Hopper), **Given-New** (Halliday), **Staging** (Kuno). The theory which can best account for information structure at all levels of discourse (clause and sentence level; episodic or paragraph level; and global level) is the Theme-Rheme theory.

In what follows, we shall define the concepts of Theme and Rheme, and we shall use the concepts to analyse the thematic structure of the section **Statement of Problem**.

### 2. The Theme-Rheme Theory

The semantic organization of the sentence or clause into two parts, the “Theme” and the “Rheme” has long been dealt with in linguistics. Its standard approach considers the Theme to be whatever comes in first position in the sentence; whatever follows it is the Rheme. Thus, every clause has the structure of a message: it says something (the Rheme) about something else (the Theme). Other approaches regard Theme as “aboutness,” i.e. the Theme is what the sentence is about. As such, it acts as a point of
orientation by connecting information to previous stretches of discourse and thereby maintaining coherence.

The selection and placement of an individual Theme of a given clause in a given text is not in itself particularly important; but the overall choice and ordering of Themes, especially in independent clauses, play a significant role in the organization of the text.

Danes (1974) introduced the term *thematic progression* to refer to the way subsequent discourse re-uses previous Themes or Rhemes according to an overall textual plan. Thematic progression relates the way Themes and Rhemes concatenate within a text to the hierarchic organization of the text and ultimately to rhetorical purposes:

By [thematic progression] we mean the choice and ordering of utterance Themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to hyper-Themes of the superior text units . . . , to the whole text, and to the situation. (Danes, 1974: 113)

Danes developed the model of thematic progression and he observed different patterns of matching sentence arrangements. We can describe the three patterns observed by Danes as follows.

*Linear progression:* The Rheme of a sentence becomes the Theme of the immediately succeeding sentence:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
T \rightarrow R \\
T \rightarrow R \\
T \rightarrow R
\end{array}
\]

*Progression with constant Theme:* The same Theme is repeated at the beginning of successive sentences:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
T \rightarrow R \\
T \rightarrow R
\end{array}
\]

*Progression with derived Theme:* Subsequent Themes are derived from a superordinate item at the beginning of a text:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
T \rightarrow R \\
T1 \rightarrow R1 \\
T2 \rightarrow R2 \\
T3 \rightarrow R3 \\
\ldots
\end{array}
\]
In order to preserve consistency and coherence, successive Themes should be related to a single preceding Theme (or hyper-Theme as Danes terms it). According to Danes, the hyper-Theme functions as what would be termed a Topic Sentence in rhetoric—in other words, as the Theme of the paragraph, rather than the Theme of a clause.

Martin (1992) provides his own definition of the term, which is related to Danes's and which he extends to Themes which may occur at different levels of discourse. For Martin

a hyper-Theme is an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interactions among strings, chains and Theme selection in following sentences. . . . On the basis of this definition of hyper-Theme, the term macro-Theme can be defined as a sentence or group of sentences (possibly a paragraph) which predicts a set of hyper-Themes; this is the introductory paragraph in rhetoric. . . . Macro-Themes may be themselves predicted as super-Themes, super-Themes as ultra-Themes and so on, depending on the number of layers of structure in a text. (Martin, 1992: 439-491)

Since different types of writing exist, the use of macro-Themes to predict hyper-Themes, which in turn predict a sequence of clause Themes, will be different and predictable for each type of writing. This internal organization is an important aspect of coherence, and texts which are not based on patterns are less coherent or incoherent.

We saw that the section Statement of Problem is both descriptive/informative and argumentative/persuasive because the addressee attempts to inform the addressees and to convince them to do something. One study has shown that the section follows types of thematic progression particular to descriptive and argumentative writings.

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have identified or suggested particular types of thematic structures for all the rhetorical modes. However, attempts have been made to identify the information structure in narrative discourse (Hopper: 1979). Hopper showed that according to the background-foreground information theory, events in narrative discourse follow the pattern

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{FOREGROUND} & X & \cdots \\
X & \cdots & X \\
\text{BACKGROUND} & Y & Y
\end{array}
\]

**Fig. 1** Chronologic representation of events in narrative discourse

where X’s are events in the foreground, while Y’s, events in the background. Just as the information in narrative discourse follows a particular pattern, there should be an
underlying pattern of development in argumentative and descriptive discourse. According to the Theme-Rheme theory, such a pattern would be distinguishable in the thematic progression; if existent and structured, particular types of thematic progression would account for the coherence of such texts locally, episodically, or globally.

3. Thematic analysis of the section Statement of Problem

Our corpus consisted of 10 proposals summing up 80 pages. For reasons of variety, we studied the proposals from different organizations: city halls, prefectures, and non-governmental organizations. However, they share the same purpose: to address the needs of a particular community, and all required funding from external sources. We previously saw that the cognitive structure of the section consists of two steps: a descriptive one, in which the addressor states the problem, and an argumentative one, in which the addressor justifies why that problem deserves attention. The purpose of our analysis was to see if the thematic structure of the section Statement of Problem develops particular patterns of thematic progression and if there are cases of disruptive or disconnected thematic progression within the section.

The analysis has shown that the patterns of thematic progression in the two steps are of the first two types, linear progression (LP) and progression with constant theme (PCT). Moreover, the descriptive parts follow the LP pattern, while the argumentative ones follow the PCT pattern.

Besides these two patterns, the section also contains a particular thematic structure which we have called Progression with Derived Rheme (PDR). PDR differs from Danes’ Progression with derived Theme (PDT) in that subsequent sub-Rhemes are derived from a superordinate item placed in Rheme position:

![Fig. 2 Graphic representation of Progression with Derived Rheme](image)

The following examples illustrate the pattern (the themes are marked with *Italic*):

*The Committee for Community Problems consisting of representatives of Maguri village* set up the following list of investment priorities for the above-mentioned village:

1. Building a medical center;
2. Introducing running water;
3. Introducing methane gas;
4. Asphalting the road from Lugoj to Maguri;
5. Rebuilding the new kindergarten;
6. Introducing cable TV;
7. etc.

Analyzing this list of priorities, we noticed that the costs of the first four items are extremely high, and that the only proposal which can be taken into consideration due to its compliance with the eligibility conditions is the one we are hereby suggesting.

Example 1. Equal Chances for Roma Children – our translation

Fig. 2 Graphic representation of coherence in the case of Progression with Derived Rheme (Ex. 1)

On the one hand, the situation is regrettable due to a multitude of causes such as:
1. inadequate planning criteria
2. defective execution

On the other hand, the local administrative bodies do not have the necessary funds to build new apartments.

Example 2. Setting up a concept of renovation and modernization of the urban living space—our translation

Fig. 3 Graphic representation of Progression with Derived Rheme (Ex. 2)

The graphic representations of the two examples prove that the pattern contributes to coherence in both texts; in Example 1 all the sub-Rhemes become the Theme for the next sentence, and in Example 2, Themes 1 and 2 are connected through constant
progression. Thus, sub-Rhemes do not disrupt the coherence of the text but support it through details, illustrations, or exemplifications.

Another specific pattern found in the section Statement of Problem is the progression with constant theme from a superordinate element placed in Rheme position at the beginning of a text, which we have called Progression with Constant Theme from Rheme Position (PCTRP):

*The emergence of Internet commerce* led to huge trade opportunities and perspectives. *The infinite quantity of services* shows the place which the Internet will have in the future. *The impressive figures pertaining to the development of e-commerce* are relevant. . . . *The development of software packages* designed for the Internet promoted the use of marketing or sales operations using these electronic means, called, using a generic term, electronic commerce or e-commerce.

**Example 3.** *The Strategy of the General Department for Inland Trade in the Field of E-commerce*—our translation

![Diagram]

**Fig. 4** Graphic representation of Progression with Constant Theme from Rheme Position (Ex. 3)

The difference between this type of progression and PDR (Ex. 1) is that in the case of PCTRP, the Rheme does not develop sub-Rhemes, but Themes in their own rights, which, in their turn, develop other Rhemes.

### 4. Conclusion

The study of information structure in the section Statement of Problem has shown that it uses a variety of patterns of thematic progression at local and episodic levels: linear progression, progression with constant Theme, progression with derived Rheme, and progression with constant Theme from Rheme position. This does not mean that addressors should by all means follow these patterns, but that they should use well-structured patterns to ensure the consistency and the coherence of their texts.

**Sources of Examples**

1. ‘Șanse egale pentru copii romi—reconstruirea grădiniței din satul Măguri’ – project proposal, Lugoj Town Hall
2. ‘Realizarea unui concept de renovare și modernizare a spațiului locativ urban’ – project proposal, ACT—Uniunea de Promovare Economică Banat
3. ‘Strategia Direcției Generale de Comerț Interior în domeniul e-comerțului’ – project proposal, Direcției Generale de Comerț Interior

References