Choice of Theme-rheme in Political News Reports in the Malawian English-Language Printed Media

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Abstract
Researchers on Theme-rheme agree that choices on Theme-rheme are functional and not arbitrary. There is lack of agreement, however, on what motivates the choice. Studies in political discourse claim that the motivation for Theme is ideological while studies in text grammar claim that the motivation for Theme is text-based organisation. What is more, it has been observed that different varieties of English exhibit different patterns of thematic choices. This article uses Systemic Functional Grammar to assess the motivation for choosing Theme and Rheme in political news published in the Malawian English-Language printed media. Data from four newspapers published during the rise to power of Malawi's second state President, Bakili Muluzi, was used to assess the choice of Theme and Rheme. The article argues that Theme-Rheme choices, consciously made or not, are context-dependent and motivated by a number of complex factors.

Introduction

One of the constraints on writers is that they can only write one word at a time and that they must decide how they will order words into a sentence and further into a paragraph. This has been called the "linearisation problem" (Brown and Yule, 1983, p.125). The article uses the term, Theme, to refer to the left-most constituent of a sentence which is also the starting point of the sentence; everything else that follows is the Rheme. Theme and Rheme are two terms which describe the way in which information is distributed within a sentence. The term 'Theme' can be traced back to the work of Henry Weil (1844) who called it the "point of

departure". The term is employed variously (Beedham, 2005) but has been largely adopted in two branches of linguistics, Functional Sentence Perspective (Danés, 1974; Firbas, 1992) and Systemic Functional Grammar (hereafter SFG) (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Fries, 2009). This discussion focuses on the use of the term within SFG.

The work on Theme-rheme within SFG has been greatly influenced by the ideas of Michael Halliday (Halliday, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen, 1994). Halliday (1994) uses Weils's "point of departure" metaphor to define and describe the function of Theme in English. The initial position in the clause is described as the Theme while the non-initial position is described as the Rheme. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (1994), the information in the initial position of the clause sets the local environment by reference to which the listener interprets the message. Taking the cue from Halliday (1994), a number of scholars within and outside SFG (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; van Dijk, 1995), especially critical discourse analysts, conceive Theme as being functional. This article assesses choices made by newswriters in selected newspapers written in English in Malawi. The article addresses the following questions: Do writers consciously or unconsciously choose and manipulate the linear structure of sentences? What are the motivations for the choice for Theme and Rheme?

The news articles used for this study were published during Malawi's political transition in the early 1990s. Multi-party democracy in Malawi was ushered in 1993 through a referendum and in 1994 Bakili Muluzi became the first president in democratic Malawi. The changes in governance systems consequently led to changes in political discourse, both spoken and written. Malawians were able to publicly engage in political discourse of many forms such as scholarly publications, printed and electronic news and other everyday forms of discourse without fear of repression. It is against this background that the study assessed how the freedom of choice is also realised in choice of Theme and Rheme in political news discourse.

Theme and Rheme Identification

SFGs seem to agree on the functions of Theme and its initial position in the sentence. There is lack of agreement, however, on where the boundary for Theme and Rheme can be drawn, especially in complex sentences. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) see thematic status as a cline where two functions are presented as continua and argue that it is misleading to think of a single point where thematic prominence ends. Given that thematic structure is inherently continuous, it is hardly surprising that SFGs disagree about the boundary points of what constitutes Theme (Fries, 2009). However, as Thompson and Thompson (2009) rightly point out, most studies rely on counting occurrences in order to come to certain conclusions. "For purposes of counting, most people who deal with these structural functions do so in a rigidly particular way. If you are going to count you need to make a decision: something is either part of Theme or it is not part of the Theme" (Thompson and Thompson, 2009, p.15).

One area of contention is when a subject which expresses a participant role is preceded by a circumstantial adjunct. The sentences in Table 1 below illustrate the differences in drawing Theme boundaries:

Table 1: Identification of Theme Boundaries

	SFGs	Theme	Rheme
1	Halliday and Matthiesen, Bloor and Bloor	Even though it was raining,	**the men** kept playing Bawo
2	Berry, Davies, Fries, Thompson, Martin	Even though it was raining, **the men**	kept playing Bawo
3	Halliday and Matthiesen, Bloor and Bloor	After that the men	went fishing.
4	Berry, Davies, Fries, Thompson, Martin	After that the men	went fishing

In (1) the "the men" are not part of the Theme in Halliday's approach. This is referred to as the minimal approach to Theme identification. Berry (1996) and others however, argue that circumstantial adjuncts do not exhaust the thematic potential so in (2) "the men" are included as part of the Theme. The thematic potential, according to Berry, is fully realised when the grammatical subject "the men" is included as part of the Theme. This is referred to as the maximal approach in Theme identification. The maximal approach makes sense when one considers that in (3) and (4) the discourse adjuncts "after that" and the subject "the men" are both considered as part of the Theme in both approaches. Berry considers both types of adjuncts as contextual markers. Despite these differences, Fries (2009) points out that neither approach is more correct than the other. It all depends on the goals of the research. The type of elements the researcher is interested in tracing in the texts will determine the approach.

The position of political actors in a sentence is considered significant for discourse analysts who perceive Theme choice as ideological. Tracing the positioning of subjects is thus imperative in this study. The approach by Berry (1996) can thus be deemed more appropriate for the goals of this article. It must be further noted that certain elements such as wh-elements in interrogative sentences are inherently thematic. One needs to tread with care since not all elements that come early in the clause indicate prominence.

A further point about the identification of Theme concerns the level at which the analysis is worked out. While some scholars use clause level analysis, most scholars identify a single Theme for each clause complex centred around one independent clause. The approach follows the formulation by Hunt (1965) who introduced the concept of a minimal terminable unit (hereafter T-unit). Hunt (1965) described T-units as constituents which can stand independently. A simple sentence has one T-unit. A complex sentence with one independent clause also has one T-unit. Compound sentences and compound-complex sentences have more than one T-unit. Below, examples (5) and (6) have one T-unit while example (7) has two T-units:

5. The women baked the cakes.

6. While the women baked the cakes, the men prepared the tables.

7. The women baked the cakes and the men prepared the tables.

Sentence (6) above illustrates how the clause level approach and T-unit approach may lead to two different analyses of Theme. If the analyst is working at the level of the clause, this sentence has two Themes: "While the women" and "the men". However, those using T-unit analysis will identify the whole of the dependent clause "While the women baked the cakes" as the Theme. If the analyst combines maximal approach and T-unit analysis, she/he may go further to include the subject "While the women baked the cakes, the men". In this discussion, the T-Unit is used since it allows the identification of a single Theme in most sentences. The T-unit analysis easily accounts for Theme and Rheme in complex clauses. The maximal approach to Theme will be combined with T-unit analysis.

Sentence (8) below illustrates how the clause level approach and T-unit approach may lead to two different analyses of Theme.

8. As Liverpool picked up the tempo, Everton's rear-guard began
   to lose its shape.

If the analyst is working at the level of the clause, this sentence has two Themes: "as Liverpool" and "Everton's rear-guard". However, those using T-unit analysis will identify the whole of the dependent clause "As Liverpool picked up the tempo" as the Theme. If the analyst combines maximal approach and T-unit analysis, she/he may go further to include the subject "As Liverpool picked up the tempo, Everton's rear-guard". In this discussion, the T-Unit is used since it allows the identification of a single Theme in most sentences. The T-unit analysis easily accounts for Theme and Rheme in complex clauses. The maximal approach to Theme will be combined with T-unit analysis.

Motivations for Theme and Rheme Choice

Work within SFG has explored the nature of the linearization problem

at clause and sentence level. Speakers may choose from various options without paying much attention and as such the choices may be assumed to be arbitrary. However, scholars within SFG have shown that grammar is functional such that grammatical choices, consciously made or not, are motivated by underlying needs of the writer. Thompson (1998) offers a brilliant example of how beginning points may influence interpretation at sentence level.

9. Yellow canaries have been used to test the air in mining for centuries.

10.   Miners have used yellow canaries to test the air for centuries.

11.   In mining, yellow canaries have been used to test the air for centuries.

(Thompson, 1998, p.118-9).

What Thompson did was to start each sentence differently. While the three sentences above refer to the same state of affairs, they are by no means interchangeable. The choice of the beginning point affects the perspective of the state of affairs. In sentences (9) and (10), "Yellow canaries" and "Miners" can be taken to be topics, respectively. The same would apply to sentence (11) where the first constituent in the sentence can be taken to be the topic. It can thus be seen that the choice of what comes first within the sentence may also influence the meaning and may also reflect the writer's viewpoint (Davies, 1988).

In political news discourse, it has been argued that one of the linguistic systems used to reflect opinions is the system of Theme. The choice of Theme is considered significant for manipulation of information in news texts (Akindele & Lawal, 2017; Gomez, 1994; Potter, 2016). The choice of Theme is thus significant and it is considered to be driven by ideologies held by writers and the media institution.

In contrast to the ideological motivations for Theme advanced by political discourse analysts, Theme-rheme has also been the subject of studies in text progression and methods of text development. Theme-rheme choice is one of

the major aspects of "how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event" (Thompson, 2014, p.117). Within this body of research, themes collectively may form noticeable patterns. These patterns are referred to as thematic progression patterns (Hawes, 2010, 2015). The different patterns for combining Theme and Rheme elements into stretches of discourse are essential for cohesion and coherence in writing in English.

Three patterns were originally identified: constant, simple linear and derived progression (Danes, 1974)[1]. The patterns describe how information in the Theme is linked to successive clauses. Constant progression occurs when successive clauses or sentences retain the same Theme. In simple linear, a Theme is linked to the Rheme of the preceding clause or sentence. Derived Theme links Themes not to preceding elements but to co-hyponyms under a single hypertheme which may be explicit or implicit in the text. Hawes (2010) adds to the patterns "constant gap progression". According Hawes (2010), constant gap progression functions as does Danes' constant, but omitting one or more clauses between the first theme and its repetition. It is thus less 'heavy' than Danes' constant progression, which requires that the repetition involve adjacent clauses. Hawes (2010) restricts the notion of 'gap' to constant progression but gapping can occur in all the three patterns. One or two clauses or sentences may not follow the general pattern emerging in a text thereby presenting a gap within a pattern. Rosa (2013, pp.221-222) provides the following examples to demonstrate the three types of patterns.

Constant Progression
Excerpt 1

Oprah Winfrey was born in Mississippi on January 29, 1954. When she was 19 years old, she became the first African-American news anchor on WTVF-TV in Nashville. She began The Oprah Winfrey Show, one of the most popular talk shows in the United States. She got remarkable success in this program. She finally formed a company and bought her own show.

Th1 (Oprah Winfrey) + Rh1;

↓

Th2 (She) (=Oprah Winfrey) + Rh2;

↓

Th3 (She) (=Oprah Winfrey) + Rh3;

In excerpt 1 above, the Theme in the first sentence of the paragraph, Oprah Winfrey, becomes the Theme in all the sentences which follow in the paragraph. In contrast, the Theme in excerpt 2 below keeps changing. The information in the Rheme becomes the Theme in the sentence which follows.

Linear Progression

Excerpt 2

Communication is a process of transmitting a message (1). The message can be delivered through oral or written expression (2). Through writing, people can communicate without limitation of distance and time (3).

Th1 (Communication) + Rh1 (a message);

↓

Th2 (The message) + Rh2 (written expression);

↓

Th3 (Writing) + Rh3;

Excerpt 3 demonstrates the derived theme in which there is one general Theme from which others are derived.

Hypertheme

Excerpt 3

Ecuador is situated on the equator in the northwest of South America. The economy is based on oil and agricultural products. More oil is produced in Ecuador than any other South American country except Venezuela. Bananas,

coffee, and cocoa are grown there. The people are mostly of Indian origin. Several Indian languages are spoken there. The currency is called the Sucre.

Th1 (Ecuador) + Rh1;

↑

[Brief description of Ecuador] → Th2 (The economy) + Rh2;

↓

Th3 (More oil)   + Rh 3;

The Themes in the text are derived from Ecuador: the economy, the oil, the food, the languages and the currency.   These patterns play a text-structuring role. The motivation for the choice of Theme in the above examples from Rosa (2013) can thus be taken to be text based and not ideological. What is more, it has been observed that different varieties of English exhibit different patterns of thematic choices. A comparative study of news published by *The Times* in English in the United Kingdom, and its edition published in English in China, showed fundamental differences between the British-English edition and the Chinese-English edition (Scollon, 2000). Scollon (2000) noted information put at the initial position of the sentence differed despite being produced by the same bilingual writer. The British-English edition placed the main point at the initial position while Chinese-English edition placed the context at the initial position. These differences have also been observed within a single variety of English but in different news editions (Khodabandeh and Tahririana, 2007; Hawes, 2010). Studying news texts of different varieties of English can thus help in illuminating the motivation behind speaker choices in language.

Data Sources

This article draws its data from the period independent and free press was introduced in post-colonial Malawi. The media became a platform for political campaign as well as character assassination. Even though state persecution of

journalists did not end completely with the dawn of democracy, mechanisms were now put in place to safeguard press freedom. News articles which were published during the rise to power of Bakili Muluzi were selected. Newspapers which both supported and opposed Muluzi were allowed within the country, but most of the newswriters during this period had no training as journalists. It is assumed that news was published with no knowledge of conventional or laid down rules and ethics in news writing. It thus may provide new insights in linguistic structure, choice and ideologies.

Sixty (60) news articles published in 1994 were purposively selected from four newspapers based on discourse topic. Articles, whose discourse topic was Muluzi, were sampled from the *Daily Times*, *The Nation*, *The Democrat* and *UDF News*[2]. The selection of the newspapers was based on three factors: political allegiance, regularity of publications and the quality of the press. The *Daily Times*, a daily paper, strongly opposed Muluzi while the other daily paper, *The Nation*, supported Muluzi. Both the *Daily Times* and *The Nation* are quality press. Two tabloids, which were published fortnightly, were also included in the study: *The Democrat* and *UDF News*. *The Democrat* strongly opposed Muluzi while *UDF News*, owned by Muluzi himself, strongly supported him. Table 2 below provides a summary of the data sources for the study.

Table 2: Data Sources for the Study.

Newspaper	*Daily Times*	*The Democrat*	*The Nation*	*UDF News*
Political allegiance	Opposing	Opposing	Supporting	Supporting
Quality	Quality	Tabloid	Quality	Tabloid
Frequency	Daily	Fortnightly	Daily	Fortnightly

Discussion

Theme-Rheme and Ideologies

The first assessment on Theme-rheme choices focused on the overall thematisation patterns in papers with different ideologies. Despite the fact that all texts used for analysis had Muluzi as the discourse topic, the extent of thematisation differed from one paper to another. Figure 1 below illustrates variations in terms of thematisation of Muluzi in the different papers.
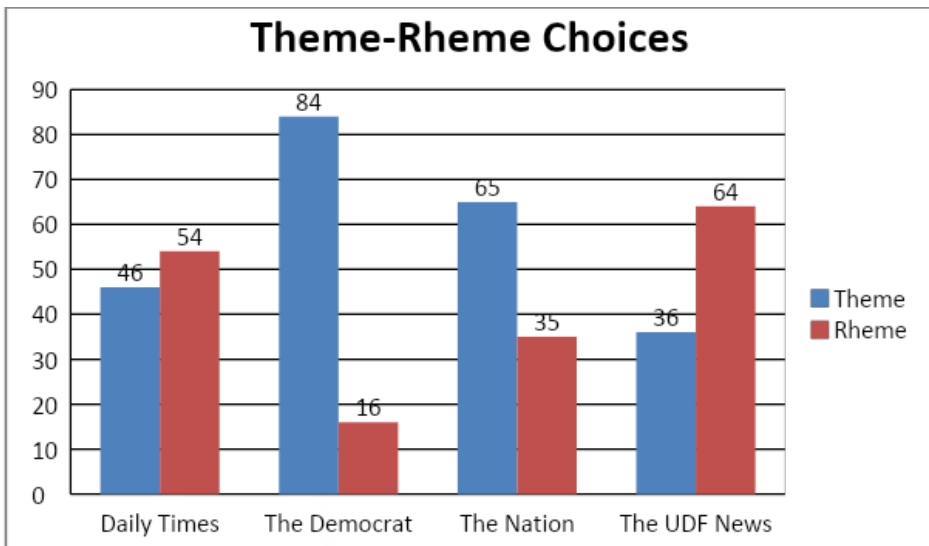

Figure 1: Theme-Rheme choices

It can be observed that between the tabloid papers, *The Democrat* and *UDF News*, there were sharp differences in Theme-rheme choices. The highest level of thematisation occurred in the opposing tabloid press, *The Democrat*, with an 86% occurrence of Muluzi in the thematic positions. On the other hand, the lowest thematisation of Muluzi occurred in supporting tabloid press, *UDF News*, with a 36% occurrence of Muluzi in the thematic position. It can be seen that Muluzi was more prominent in the opposing tabloid press than in the supporting tabloid press.

In an article in *The Democrat*, there were 20 sentences which made direct reference to Muluzi, either by mentioning his name, his role or using pronouns. Of the 20 sentences, Muluzi was put in the Theme in 16 sentences and in the Rheme in 4 sentences. This kind of text organization makes Muluzi more prominent in the text and he is put in the limelight. There is a strong relationship also between topicalisation through choice of headline and Theme-rheme choice. Headlines used in *The Democrat* mostly topicalised Muluzi: "Muluzi's first 60 days", "Eleson Bakili Muluzi and the 100 days of childish leadership", "and Muluzi laughed", "Nakanga versus Muluzi", and "it is Muluzi after all". The relationship between Theme-rheme choice and the headline becomes more apparent when articles from *UDF News*, which rarely topicalised Muluzi, are assessed. Headlines topicalised the party but also mostly focused on negative events of its rivals than activities of Muluzi as observed in the following headlines: "UDF will not quit NCC", "UDF victorious", "Childishness in the NCC", "Dealers in death". Article 1 below, "UDF will not quit NCC", provides an example of how Muluzi is de-topicalised both through headline choice and thematisation.

It must be pointed out that Article 1 also demonstrates differences in personalization of politics in the two papers. While Muluzi is the responsible agent for the actions of the United Democratic Front and the government, *UDF News* does not make Muluzi the responsible agent of the actions of the United Democratic Front.

In Article 1, the barring of people with criminal records to stand for presidency, which would lead to the barring of Muluzi to contest in elections, is discussed. While the gist of the matter was the barring of Muluzi to stand for presidency, direct reference to him is only made in two sentences. In these sentences, Muluzi is placed in the rheme. He is camouflaged by the use of general and indefinite references, "a person", "an individual", "a particular person" or through other forms of non-personalised nominalizations such as the "the criminal records of presidential candidates". However, thirteen direct references are made to the party, the UDF. The de-personalization of political action is also evidenced

UDF will not quit NCC

By Edward Kuuvenji
Gama
&
Noah Chimpeni

WHEN the United Democratic Front (UDF) held a Press Conference at Quality Bearing Services auditorium in Blantyre last week, journalists were made to understand that by walking out of a National Consultative Council (NCC) meeting the week before, over the issue of the presidency did not mean that the UDF ceases to be a member of the NCC.

The Press Conference was chaired by the First Vice President of the UDF, Mr. Aleke Banda. Other officials were Mr. Harry Thomson the Secretary General, Mr. Collins Chizumira, Treasurer General, Dr. Cassim Chilumpha, Publicity Secretary, and Mrs. Nyandovie Kerr, Executive Member.

The UDF top brass told the press that as stated before, UDF members had walked out of the NCC meet-

ing to demonstrate that they were in disagreement with double standards which some members of the NCC were maintaining when making decisions on important issues like the seven years limitation on criminal record for presidential and parliamentary candidates.

They dismissed as very untrue that they had walked out of the meeting because the NCC wanted to scrap the eligibility of the UDF president, Mr. Bakili Muluzi from contesting the presidency.

"As far as we in the UDF are concerned, we know that there was nothing that would stop Mr. Muluzi from standing in the presidential race because we are still using the old constitution which has a seven year limit," said Mr. Aleke Banda.

He said what the UDF does not want, which they term as double standards, is passing decisions that are tailored for a particular person and then next time changing the decision to suit one other person.

Mr. Banda said the UDF will continue to be an active member of the NCC, much that the members were ready to attend any NCC meeting anytime it is called for.

However, it was disclosed at the press conference that the UDF will still insist on the seven year limit on criminal record.

"As a party of principles, we will still fight for the seven year limit on criminal record for the constitution to come. You cannot punish a person forever," said Dr. Cassim Chilumpha.

On the question of age limit the UDF said that they will not fight for a limit on age. "We do not want to have a constitution that is aimed at an individual. It is up to the person concerned to know that he or she is old," said Mr. Collins Chizumila. The UDF executive also said that although the NCC has no credibility in the eyes of Malawians, the UDF will still continue to take NCC talks seriously.

(*UDF News,* 24th March, 1994).

through the use of non-specific nominals such as "the UDF executive", "the UDF top brass" and plural pronominal markers "they" and "we", unlike in *The Democrat* where there is direct reference to Muluzi.

It can thus be concluded from the above observations that there is a tendency to avoid putting Muluzi in the limelight in *UDF News*. The Theme choice confirms observations made by other researchers on Theme-rheme choices in relation to "our" versus "their" negative actions. Figure 2 below illustrates the relationship between thematisation and type of action in the tabloids. Muluzi is mostly put in

the thematic position for his negative actions in *The Democrat* with an occurrence of 52%. In *UDF News* there is an absence of Muluzi's negative actions. 90% of his actions are portrayed using positive processes.

While the portrayal of negative actions confirms observations done by other scholars on Theme-rheme choices, the portrayal of positive actions does not confirm the "us" versus "them" hypothesis. A total occurrence of 10% of Muluzi's actions were positive in *The Democrat* but these actions were not backgrounded using the Rheme position. Instead, they were put in the thematic position. Similarly in *UDF News*, even though 90% of his actions were positive, 60% of these were placed in the Rheme. This shows that other factors other than emphasizing positive actions must have influenced the Theme-rheme choices.
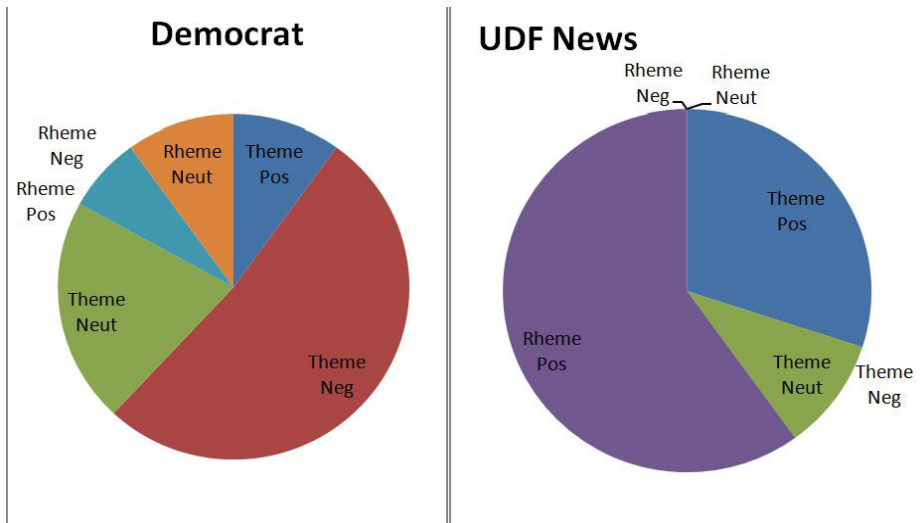

Figure 2: Actor and Types of Action[3] Represented in Sentences in the Tabloids

While thematisation patterns in the tabloids showed sharp differences between the supporting press and opposing press, as well as preferences to either topicalise Muluzi or camouflage his actions, the quality press did not have such
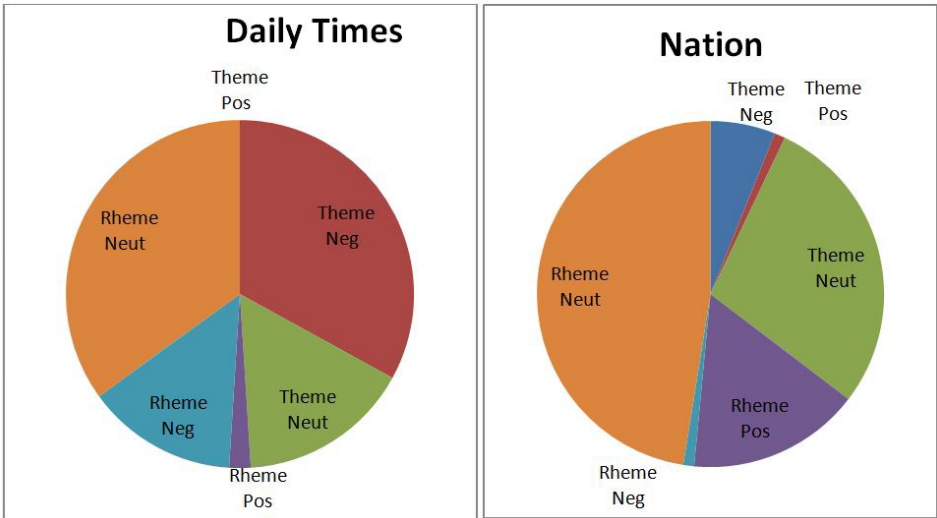
Figure 3: Actor and Types of Action Represented in Sentences in Quality Press

wide differences. This represents an attempt by the quality press to minimise bias in their coverage (c.f. Figure 1). Interestingly though, Muluzi was highly thematised (65%) in the supporting press, *The Nation,* than in the opposing press, the *Daily Times* (46%). Much as the difference is not as wide as in the tabloids, it is not negligible and must be commented on. Figure 3 below summarises the relationship between actor placed in the Theme and the type of action represented in the sentence.

The highest proportion of references to Muluzi is neutral and realised in the Rheme in both papers. The next highest proportion in both papers is thematisation of Muluzi. In the *Daily Times*, the opposing paper, thematisation of Muluzi is negative. Positive actions, which are rather rare in the *Daily Times*, are placed in the Rheme. Theme and Rheme choices in this case confirm the 'us' versus 'them' patterns of hypothesis.

In the supporting paper, *The Nation*, there is little evidence to support de-emphasis of negative actions since the same percentage of negative actions, 1%, occurs both in the Theme and Rheme. It can thus be noted that the main strategy

used by the paper is to omit negative actions. This is not only true for *The Nation*. The *Daily Times* also employs the same strategy of under-representing positive actions (2%). The thematic choice becomes more complex in the supporting paper, *The Nation*, which does not thematise Muluzi's positive actions. The highest proportion of positive actions occurs in the Rheme, similar to what has been observed in the supporting tabloid paper. This complex picture of thematic choices shows that thematic choices are driven by many other factors simultaneously and hence may not always reflect a bias of "us" versus "them".

Theme-Rheme and Semantic Roles

Firbas (1992) states that communication dynamism may be influenced by three main factors in written language: interpersonal factors (here considered in terms of ideologies), discourse organization and semantic content and relations within the sentence. While communicative dynamism deals with information structure, it was observed that similar factors may influence thematic prominence. Excerpt 4 below illustrates how interplay of ideology and semantic roles may have influenced thematic choice in the supporting press, *The Nation*.

Excerpt 4

12. Ntaba accused State President Bakili Muluzi of being impatient and accused him of trying to grab anything that belongs to former President under the guise of the Land Acquisition Act.
13. He accused the State President and his government of trying to bring back the infamous forfeiture act under the guise of the Land Acquisition Act.

(*The Nation*, 25th August 1994).

Muluzi is portrayed as a victim of his critics and hence occupies the patient role in the sentence. The critic, Ntaba, accused Muluzi in both sentence (12) and sentence (13) and Ntaba occupies the unmarked role of actor, while Muluzi occupies the unmarked semantic role of victim. This choice thematises the negative other and

pushes Muluzi to the Rheme. It can thus be seen that there is interplay of semantic roles and thematisation yet both are ideologically motivated. The preference to thematise the negative other is preferred in both the quality and tabloid supporting press. Excerpt 5, which was taken from the tabloid supporting press, *UDF News*, demonstrates this.

Excerpt 5

> True to habit the Malawi Democrat Newspaper, the mouthpiece of AFORD has come up with another front-matter page personal attack on Mr Bakili Muluzi the UDF President. It is a virulent but misguided personal attack regarding business transactions. Whether the allegations are true or not the Malawi Democrat has clearly gone overboard and has been carried away by its own zeal to defame Mr Muluzi. In the process it has treaded on very dangerous legal ground and has named some financial institutions which could be co-defendants in a defamation suit.

> (*UDF News*, 30th November, 1994).

In excerpt 5 above, Muluzi is also presented as a victim of bad press. The press is the actor in attacking and defaming Muluzi. A combination of semantic role and the desire to thematise the negative other similarly leads to the pushing of Muluzi to the Rheme position.

Text Organisation and Sentence Relations

Text organization also influences the choice of Theme in some cases. While it was observed that writers were free to mix thematic progression patterns within one article, often through gapping (Fries, 1995; Hawes, 2010), evidence exists that thematic choice was also driven by the need to create texture. In excerpt 6 below, taken from the opposing press the *Daily Times*, the need to create texture as the text develops influenced the thematic choice.

Excerpt 6: Gentle surprise: Muluzi walks into own trap

14. Despite great care and effort put in preparing his first visit to the north since his inauguration in May, State President Bakili Muluzi had his plans upset at the last minute by the Livingstonia Clergy who surprised him with a gentle rebuke.

15. The president, who is on the tour of the North, yesterday morning attended a church service at the church seat of the Livingstonia Synod during which the president promised the congregation that his government would do everything possible to assist the synod in rehabilitating some of the buildings which are in a state of disrepair at the synod headquarters.

16. However, the president was later stunned when the clergy in their sermons indirectly criticised the UDF government for not extending the hand of reconciliation to its political rivals especially the Malawi Congress Party and the Alliance for Democracy.

17. The clergy hinted that the government has no justification in talking of unity when political leaders are not united, and UDF as the ruling party ignores a hand of reconciliation with its rivals…

18. The clergy also criticised the UDF government individuals and urged the president and his government to reward only those people who deserve rewarding and 'build roads and clinics … only where they are needed'.

19. In his earlier remarks, the synod's general secretary, the Rev. Dr Overton Mazunda told the President that while it was obvious that some of his decisions may not be politically popular, he (the president) was solely responsible for the things he and his government do and was therefore answerable to God….

(*Daily Times*, 25th August, 1994).

A constant thematic progression pattern was adopted for the development of the text. In the first paragraphs of the article (14, 15 and 16), Muluzi is constantly thematised as we move from one sentence to another. In the second half of the article, the clergy are thematised (17, 18 and 19). A constant thematic progression pattern is also followed. Muluzi is as such placed in the Rheme in the second half of the article.

Similar to the need to create texture is the influence of choice of topic and thematisation as also observed in the tabloid press. The topicalisation of Muluzi would at times coincide with thematisation. Excerpt 7, taken from the supporting press, *The Nation*, discusses a symbolic big tour which was done to raise AIDS awareness. The story was covered in other papers such as *The Democrat* but they topicalised the scourge of AIDS itself and not the presence of Muluzi at the big walk. *The Nation*, however, placed emphasis on the participation of Muluzi in the big walk, hence topicalising him as also reflected in the headline "Muluzi marches against the killer". Excerpt 7 below illustrates how topicalisation of Muluzi coincides with thematisation. While there is considerable gapping throughout the text, Muluzi is mostly thematised.

Excerpt 7: Muluzi marches against the killer

> Six Malawians are killed by AIDS every hour. Muluzi makes history by making a symbolic gesture. Malawians should talk less politics and instead give more prominence to the AIDS scourge, State President Bakili Muluzi said yesterday.
>
> Speaking at Blantyre Old Town Hall after leading a big crowd of Malawians in a 35-mniute big walk aimed at promoting greater awareness of the AIDS crisis, President Muluzi said if politicians and journalists had nothing to say or write about, they should just talk about AIDS.

If we want politics, let us wait for 1999, he said. This time the country should brace itself to meet its challenging problems of land, population, environment and the AIDS epidemic.

He said his participation in the big walk was to accept publicly before the nation and the international community that AIDS is a very big problem in Malawi and that his government was committed hard in the fight against the disease. The onus was upon each and every Malawian. "We cannot afford to be complacent in the face of such a serious disease. And we must all come together to confront this serious epidemic", he said.

Noting that the main mode of HIV infection was through sex, the President urged Malawians to avoid high –risk sexual behaviour…

(*The Nation*, 10th August, 1994).

The other factor observed to have an influence on Theme was inclusion of quotes. The use of direct quotes is common in news discourse as a marker of evidentiality. The inclusion of quotes which mimic spoken forms leads to the adoption of thematic patterns common in spoken discourse. First person pronouns which represent the speaker are hence thematised in such sentences when the speaker himself is included in the sentence. Excerpt 8 below provides an example of how quotations affect the thematic patterns of the news texts. Muluzi is placed in the Rheme as this is the unmarked form in spoken discourse.

Excerpt 8

20. The previously invincible Lion of Malawi gracefully conceded defeat in a nationwide radio broadcast at 9 o'clock yesterday and much abused former UDF President Bakili Muluzi was sworn in as president.
21. "I congratulate him wholeheartedly for his victory."
22. "I offer him my full support and cooperation as he takes over the

presidency of this country," said Dr Banda making a moment
which sounded like a dream to millions of Malawians.

<div align="right">(The Nation, 20th May 1994).</div>

Thematic choices are similarly influenced by structure in inverted declaratives which are typical of this form of discourse e.g. "said Dr Banda making a moment…" as in sentence (22) above. The type of sentence and relations within the sentence can thus be seen to be a factor which motivates the choice of Theme.

All things considered, it can be seen that ideological factors played a role in the choice of Theme. Negative actions of the elite make news and there is a strong relation between negative thematisation and ideologies. But there were several instances in the study in which other text-based factors led to the choice of Theme.

Conclusions

The article combined the maximal approach and T-Unit analysis in the identification of Theme in order to account for thematic choices in selected newspapers published in Malawi. News discourse on the rise to power of Muluzi was used in the study. The article concludes that thematic choice in the Malawian English Language press is driven by many factors. There is evidence that negative actions are made more prominent than positive actions. The need to emphasize negative events of the 'other' influences thematic choices more than the need to emphasize the positive 'self'. While it is easy to isolate examples and argue for the 'us' versus 'them', the analysis of Theme-Rheme choices shows that motivations are much more complex and vary from one text to another. Text-based factors such as text organization, semantic roles, discourse topics and type of sentences may influence the same.

Notes

1. Frantisek Danes is a scholar within the Functional Sentence Perspective. However, his ideas on thematic progression have been borrowed and

used within SFG.

2. United Democratic Front News.
3. Pos refers to positive actions; Neg refers to negative actions; Neu refers to actions deemed neutral.

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