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The theme as message onset: its structure and characteristics*

MURIEL VASCONCELLOS

Abstract

Perhaps the main problem in understanding the notion of topic stems from the myriad functions that have been attributed to it. In Halliday's view of language (1967 and subsequent work), the theme defines an independent system unto itself. It is separate from the notion of given information. The function of the theme is to signal the relationship between the thought in the speaker's mind and its expression in discourse (Trávníček 1962). It MAY hark back to a previous referent, but it need not. When it does, it is not concerned with the information value of the referent; it only establishes that there is in fact a relationship. To define the theme or topic as "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation, and from which the speaker proceeds in his discourse" (Mathesius 1947 [1939]: 235) is to conflate two different systems each of which has its own distinct function.

Viewed from this perspective, the structure and characteristics of the theme have been examined in spoken and written Portuguese, and the resulting classification is presented here. Two broad theme types are posited: major and minor themes. The major themes include subject-as-theme, predicator-as-theme, and complement/object-as-theme. The major theme is always cognitive; it refers to the world beyond the discourse. It is obligatory — without it, the message unit is incomplete — and there can only be one to a unit. The minor themes are the adjunct-as-theme and the conjunction-as-theme. They are optional and they need not be cognitive. They provide a "setting" for the message unit, and they organize the presentation of the discourse itself. The minor themes can stack to the left of the major theme, and when they do, they follow a consistent pattern.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Viewpoint*

In pinning down the notion of *topic*, it is important to separate out the several meanings that have been attributed to it. For some authors — in particular the functionalists Trávniček (1962) and Halliday (1967 and subsequent work) — the *theme* plays a role quite distinct from that of *known, old, given, or shared information*. The function of the theme, they say, is to signal the linking relationship between the thought in the speaker's mind and its expression in discourse (Trávniček 1962). It may hark back to a previous referent, but it need not. When it does, it is not concerned with the information value of the referent but merely with the fact that is the link to what was in the speaker's mind. Thus, to define the theme or topic as "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation, and from which the speaker proceeds in his discourse" (Mathesius 1947 [1939]: 235) is to conflate two different systems each of which has its own distinct function. The present paper starts from the Trávniček/Halliday perspective and proposes a fresh account of the theme and its structure. Examples have been taken from written and spoken Portuguese.

Although for purposes of this study the theme and the information systems are seen to be independently variable (Halliday 1967), at the same time it becomes clear that they are also highly INTERDEPENDENT. In fact, it would appear that both are essential to formation of the *message unit*. The *theme*, in signaling the relationship to the speaker's thought, establishes the onset. In a broader sense, the theme *system* provides the mechanism by which the first unit in a text is launched, new information is introduced, and all units in general get their start. On the other hand, the information system provides the mechanism that enables the listener to compute an antecedent, integrate new information into his or her data base (Clark and Haviland 1977), and carry the unit forward to culmination and closure. It is claimed here that the combined effect of the two systems is what makes it possible for units to be chained together as text.

The theme system seems to be *speaker/writer*-based and the information system, *listener/reader*-oriented. They respond to the needs of the speaker and listener, respectively — both of which are essential to creating and shaping the reality that we know as language.

1.2. *Definitions*

Trávniček (1962) was apparently the first to take the position that the conveyance of known information is not the essential feature of the theme

or topic. He believed that the nature of the theme had to be universal and invariant. All utterances have themes, he said, and they occur without fail in initial position (1962: 166). The common nature that they share must be "some larger principle than givenness." He concluded that this principle flows from the relationship between the speaker's object of thought and its expression in text.

In taking this stand, Trávníček departed from the Praguian mainstream. He went on to differ further by asserting that the theme may take the form not only of an NP but also of an adverbial "setting," a conjunction, a verb, and even a grammatical particle.

Halliday, like Trávníček, emphasizes that the function of the theme is derived from its being in initial position. "Basically," he says, "the theme is what comes first in the clause" (1967: 212) — it is "the peg on which the message is hung" (1970: 164). With Trávníček, his definition takes the theme beyond nounhood and permits it to be expressed by any element of language whatsoever. He also takes exception to the standard Mathesius definition of theme and makes a clear separation between the functions of theme and given information. He regards the theme system and the information system to be the key components of the "grammar of discourse."

Although Halliday does not consider that the theme has a referential function as such, he makes a distinction between *cognitive themes*, which are associated with entities and events in the world external to the discourse, and *noncognitive themes*, which function at the discourse level. Noting that the noncognitive always precede the cognitive within the clause, and that the noncognitive themes are of several subtypes, he has identified right-to-left order classes for theme types in English (1967: 222).

1.3. Study criteria

Do the Halliday thematic-order classes apply to other languages? This question was the inspiration for the study reported here. Portuguese is of interest because of its frequent use of verb-initial constructions, which, according to Trávníček/Halliday, become the theme of the clause.

Both written and spoken data have been examined.¹ Following Trávníček, the *theme* has been defined for working purposes as "the linking relationship to the object of thought in the speaker's mind." The term *message unit* has been adopted to refer to the unit that is initiated by a theme and concluded by a focus of new information.² As indicated above, the theme and the information systems are considered to work in

tandem, and their joint product is the series of related message units which together constitute a text.

2. Theme types

From the study, two broad theme types emerged: *major themes* and *minor themes*.

The *major theme* is essential to the unit's structure: it must be present, and there can only be one to a unit. It is always cognitive. It can be expressed as the subject of the clause, the object/complement, or the predicator. *Minor themes*, on the other hand, are not essential. They are expressed as adjuncts (cognitive and noncognitive) and conjunctions (non-cognitive only). They can cooccur and combine, and they seem to have a consistent right-to-left ordering. Whereas major themes always signal a relationship to the speaker's thoughts about discourse-external experience, minor themes can express a myriad of other relationships.

2.1. *Major themes*

2.1.1. *Subject-as-theme*. Of the major themes, the one that is expressed as the *subject* of the clause is the unmarked instantiation, which is the most frequent expression of the theme in the Halliday model for English. In the written data for Portuguese, the theme was a subject — an NP that either agreed with the main finite verb or else stood by itself in an incomplete clause — in slightly more than half the units (52.6%). The proportion is probably higher in the spoken corpus because of the frequent use of subject pronouns.

A variant of the subject-as-theme is the *identified theme* (Halliday's term in the sense of 'X is to be identified as Y'). This was seen quite often in the Portuguese data, especially in the spoken corpus:³

- (1) ##*Então*₁ *o que eu estou precisando*₂ / *é do diclodrisek*#
 #*cinquenta miligramas*#
 *##*Now*₁ *what I'm needing*₂ / *is diclodrisek*# #*fifty milligrams*#*

Essentially, the clause is organized as a cleft sentence with one of its elements nominalized so as to place it in theme position. Prince (1978) has observed that the information contained in such an identification phrase is being presented as *given*. Hoyle (1983) adds that speakers may use this construction to introduce new information in theme position when they want to do so covertly. In example (1) the speaker used the

device to introduce a new topic while at the same time softening the unadorned demand, 'I need diclodrisek'.

In the written data the identified theme tended to be associated with the previous text. It seemed to be a mechanism to set the stage for further elaboration:

- (2) #... Martim ficara de pé na sacada procurando ... não perder nada do que se passava# #Mas₁ o que se passava₂ / não era muito#
 '#... Martin stood and watched from the balcony, trying ... not to miss anything of what was going on# #But₁ what was going on₂ / was not much#'

Here there is a playful chaining of the focus at the end of the first unit with the theme of the next, and one senses the tacit understanding between writer and reader that the structure has been enlisted to give special thematic status to the preceding coda.

2.1.2. *Object/complement-as-theme*. The other two major theme types were of special interest for studying thematic structure because neither of them is very common in English. The *object/complement-as-theme* is the result of what is generally referred to as *topicalization*. This resource is used quite often in Portuguese, especially spoken Portuguese, and it can be associated with several different syntactic structures (Pontes 1987). Still, the construction is marked because it deviates from the unmarked declarative clause, and as such it seems to gloss as 'take special notice of this idea and its relationship to what I am about to say'.

Object-as-theme occurred frequently in the spoken data. In the following example, the object is moved to the beginning of the clause, leaving an empty slot in its place:

- (3) #Mas₁ certidão de idade₂ / eu não tenho comigo#
 '#But₁ certificate [showing my] age₂ / I don't have [*] with me#'

Again in the spoken data, these "topics" could be quite long:

- (4) #Aqueles retratos que a Mariinha bateu no Arpoador₁ / nos mandamos revelar e recebemos dois#
 '#Those pictures that Mariinha took at the Arpoador₁ / we sent [*] to develop and got back two#'

It would appear that topicalized objects, regardless of their length, are taken by both speaker and hearer as a single theme. The most impressive example was

- (5) #O discurso da minha posse em Brasília que o Presidente Castelo escreveu do próprio punho o discurso e o Luis Viana me deu os originais desse discurso₁ / eu não estou encontrando também#
 ‘#The speech from my swearing-in in Brasília which President Castelo wrote in his own hand the speech and Louis Viana gave me the original of that speech₁ / I’m not finding [*] either#’

The speaker twice repeated the word *discurso* ‘speech’ within the thematic constituent, probably to keep the concept active in short-term memory (Chafe 1986).

Topicalization was less frequent in the written data, with only 43 examples in the entire corpus (1.2%). It tended to occur mainly in colloquial passages from fiction, and especially in constructed dialogue:

- (6) #Agora o senhor já viu uma estranhez?# #A mandioca-doce pode de repente virar azangada — #Motivos₁ / não sei#
 a. ‘#Now did you ever see such a strange thing?# #the sweet cassava can all of sudden turn flared-up# #Reasons₁ / I don’t know#’

The published literary translation:

- (6) b. ‘Now the strange thing is that the sweet cassava can turn poisonous — why, I don’t know.’

When object themes did occur in the nonfiction data, they seemed to lend even greater force to the gloss, ‘take special notice of this idea and its relationship to what I am about to say’. In example (7) the thematized object highlights a relationship to the larger discourse by summing up the preceding three units:

- (7) #Conta-se que um rapaz português, vindo do Reino, casara-se com uma menina, filha do Velho, chamada Margarida# #Um dia — quem de repente chega a Pitangui?# #A esposa portuguesa do genro do patriarca# #Os casos de bigamia₁ / parece que foram freqüentes em regiões como a das minas ...#
 ‘It is told that a young Portuguese man, coming from the Kingdom, married a young girl, daughter of the Old Man, named Margarida=
 #One day — who of a sudden arrives in Pitangui?# #The Portuguese wife of the son-in-law of the patriarch# #The cases of bigamy₁ / [it] seems that they were frequent in regions like the mines ...#’

Bigamy had not been specifically mentioned before; the theme specifies the relationship to an *inference* that was in the *speaker’s mind* — bearing out the point that the theme does not refer to previously available

information but rather to the thought prior to its insertion into the discourse.

2.1.3. *Predicator-as-theme.* The third and last expression of the major theme is the *predicator*. Since the verb does not stand for an entity, by the standards of Mathesius and those who follow him in studying the issue today, it would not be considered a theme or topic. However, if the theme is always the initial element, as Trávníček and Halliday claim it is, then the thematic status of the verb must be examined and understood.

Verb-initial constructions in the written corpus of the study represented nearly half the units (46.2%). The breakdown was as follows:

<i>Verbs with</i>	<i>% total</i>	<i>% verbs</i>
postposed subject fully specified	7.9	17.1
subject implicit in inflection of verb	8.0	17.3
subject inferrable from discourse	16.0	34.7
no subject, impersonal verb	6.8	14.8
impersonal <i>se</i>	1.2	2.5
nonfinite verbal construction	3.4	7.4
negation, question, or imperative	2.8	6.1

The thematicity of the predicator is most clear in the case of postposed subjects. Regarding such constructions in the case of Spanish, Suñer (1982) has concluded that the verb presents an "object" to the hearer for consideration; "... it is like the tray on which the delicacy is presented" (1982: 126). It carries the existential assertion, to a greater or lesser degree, that the "object" exists in the universe. Suñer's interpretation fits within the present approach if we say that the thematic relationship is no longer simply an assertion that there is a referent; it emphasizes the manner in which attention is to be called to it. The verbal scaffolding is like a meta-theme that has been set up for presentation of the so-called "object." From the written data (a child's diary):

- (8) ≠*Chegou*₁ *hoje*₂ / o meu vestido≠
 a. ≠*Arrived*₁ *today*₂ / my dress≠'

The published translation:

- (8) b. 'My dress came today!'

The "downgraded" subject appears to actually take on objectlike characteristics. In fact, often in the corpus the postposed subject could be analyzed as having the semantic role of object. In example (8), for instance, the verb *chegar* 'arrive' has the case frame [OL], with *vestido* 'dress' as O. And indeed, Aid (1973: 133) specifically assigns the frame

OL to the Spanish verb *llegar* 'arrive'. Such constructions also present the object as new information, confirming the symbiosis of the theme and information systems. Certain verbs lend themselves to fronting; the nature and role of these verbs in Spanish has been studied extensively by Hatcher (1956).

With the other verb-initial constructions, what is interesting is that Portuguese appears to favor the predicator-as-theme to such an extent that the subject is frequently omitted in situations where it would be specified in other languages. "Subjectlessness" takes various forms.

Often, especially in writing, the verb in the third person can stand alone without a specified subject. While usually the subject is understood because there is an antecedent, either explicit or implicit, in the discourse, Portuguese also has verbs which, when used thematically in the third person singular, become truly subjectless. The written corpus yielded quite a few: *Acontece* que '[it] happens that', *Acrecece* que '[one] adds that', *Adiantará* [+inf.] ...? '[will it] do any good to ...?', *Basta* [+inf.] '[it]'s enough to ...', *Cabe* [+inf.] '[it]'s well to ...', *Dá gosto* [+inf.] '[it] gives pleasure to ...', *Fazia* nojo, '[it] caused disgust', *Lembra-me* que '[it] reminds me that', *Parece* que '[it] seems that', etc. These verbs are especially interesting because it is likely that their property of subjectlessness is invoked precisely when they are used as themes — and that otherwise they require a subject.

In addition, the great majority of verbs in Portuguese can stand in initial position without a specified subject if the particle *se* is attached to the third person singular form.

The notion of a subjectless predicate has been associated in the literature with topicalization. Gruber (1967: 445–446) concluded that topicalization is in fact the cogeneration of an NP and a subjectless predicate. This was evident in example (7) above:

- (7) ...#*Os casos de bigamia*₁ / parece que foram freqüentes em regiões como a das minas, ...#
 '...#*The cases of bigamy*₁ / [it] seems that they were frequent in regions like the mines ...#'

So far, all the verbs discussed have been finite. Nonfinite verbal constructions are discussed in section 3.4 below.

2.2. *Minor themes*

The minor themes, as their slots move away from the major theme, are gradually less cognitive, or experiential, and increasingly noncognitive, or discursal, in their function.

2.2.1. *Adjunct-as-theme*. Adjuncts by nature play a stage-setting role, whether they are descriptive settings in the concrete sense, or whether they set the stage for development of the discourse. Halliday states that they can be either cognitive or noncognitive. The cognitive consist of adverbs or adverbial phrases that specify time, place, manner, or cause. The noncognitive, in turn, Halliday breaks down into *modal*, which establish the mode of the message (*perhaps, probably, frankly, apparently*), and *discoursal*, which tie together the pieces of the discourse (*however, nevertheless, in that case, therefore*). Sometimes the same expression can have a cognitive reading and also, by extension, a noncognitive one. The difference can be seen in the two uses of *ao mesmo tempo* ‘at the same time’. In example (10) it is used in the cognitive sense, whereas in another context it could be interpreted as noncognitive and discoursal:

- (9) #Os jesuitas são os primeiros sacerdotes que chegam para ficar# #e já em 1561 estão construindo seu primeiro colégio na cidade de Salvador# #Seguem-se-lhes os beneditinos (1581), os carmelitas (1586) e os franciscanos (1587)# #Ao mesmo tempo, um considerável clero secular se estabelece ...#
 ‘#The Jesuits were the first priests to come to stay# #and by 1561 they were already building their first *colégio* in the city of Salvador# #They were followed by the Benedictines (1581), the Carmelites (1586), and the Franciscans (1587)# #At the same time, a sizable secular clergy ... was becoming established#’

The relatively free occurrence of such expressions throughout the clause raises the question of how their meaning is different when they are in the theme position. In the Portuguese data, preliminary investigation suggested that the same elements are not used in both thematic and rhematic environments — a distinction that did not carry over into English. Thus for example, *contudo* and *entretanto* ‘however’ were consistently thematic and unit-initial, whereas *porém* and *todavia* ‘however’ were consistently rhematic.

2.2.2. *Conjunction-as-theme*. In the Halliday model, the categories of discoursal and modal adjuncts include a number of forms that might otherwise be dealt with as conjunctions. As a result, the conjunctions are limited to a small list: the “pure coordinators” (*and* and *or*) and those in which a coordinator is combined with some further meaning (*but, yet, so, then*). Their function as themes is to signal a connection or some inference to be made with respect to the preceding discourse (as, for example, the linking of a series of events in narrative) or to the actual

speech situation. These conjunctions-as-theme occurred abundantly in the spoken corpus but in the written corpus mainly in colloquial texts:

- (11) #A senhora está grávida?#
 #Não senhora — respondi gentilmente#
 #E₁ *lhe*₂ / chinguei interiormente#
 *#Are you pregnant?#
 #No Ma'am — I replied politely#
 #And₁ *her*² / I cursed inside#

The subordinating conjunctions, according to Halliday, cannot serve as themes in and of themselves because they signal a relationship of dependence that extends over the domain of the subordinated clause. Yet he feels that “there is a slight thematic flavor about their occurrence in initial position. It is as if the theme of a dependent clause was the fact and nature of the dependence” (1967: 220). Trávniček made this same point. It is argued here (section 3.4 below) that the entire dependent clause, taken as a single constituent, has thematic status as a stage-setting adjunct.

3. Theme structure

3.1. *Stacking*

Both Trávniček and Halliday recognize that certain types of themes can cooccur. This raises a number of questions about the order in which they tend to “stack.” Is the ordering entirely predictable, or does it have to do with the speaker or writer’s wish to highlight a particular type of thematic relationship? What is the status of the first in a series of themes? Does the leftmost position have greater thematic “force”? Does it have a special thematic meaning? Do outer themes bracket inner themes? Are themes that are lower on the “stack” less thematic in any sense? At what point are they downgraded to the status of rheme?

Application of Halliday’s thematic-order classes to the Portuguese data yielded a complex, multidimensional array. Despite this variability, however, it became clear that certain configurations were typical and that an unmarked order could be established: the major theme is always the rightmost element just before the rheme. In the declarative mood, adjuncts come next, and finally the conjunctions. Thus,

(conjunction_n) > (adjunct_{n,c})^x > major theme_c / rheme

The notion of a major theme is useful because it helps to establish the point at which the rheme begins. In other words, nothing comes between it and the rheme, which is the rest of the unit. The theme ends abruptly, and this makes sense, because its function is specific and finite; once the theme's job is done, other systems of the language take over. Even though themes can stack, there is no progression of salience; each theme slot has a specific function. The rightmost slot is for the major theme, which is the cognitive "hook" on which the rest of the message is hung; the next is for minor themes that create the setting; and the leftmost slot is for themes that link the unit as a whole to the rest of the discourse.

The slots do follow a progression from cognitive to noncognitive and, within noncognitive, from discursal to interpersonal. Within adjuncts, the noncognitive precede the cognitive, and both types can be stacked. The stacked cognitive adjuncts must be either of different subtypes (time, place, manner, cause) or in a logical sequence within the same subtype. For example,

- (11) ##*Mais abaixo*₁ *na dobra da ladeira*₂ *em vão de porta*₃ *o velho Emo*
*Corró*₄ / manteve afreguesada cadeira de barbeiro ...#
 '##*Farther down*₁ *at the bend in the hill*₂ *in a doorway*₃ *old Emo*
*Corró*₄ / kept a steady stream of customers in his barber's chair
 ...#'

The pattern *conjunction* > *adjunct* > *major theme* is more general than Halliday's order classes for English. The introduction of further refinements appears to lead to variations that are language-specific.

3.2. *Interrelationship of themes*

If each theme slot has a unique function, then we may wonder to what extent the meaning of outer themes encompasses that of inner themes. There does appear to be some bracketing: conjunctions bracket adjuncts, and adjuncts bracket the major theme. Within this broad framework, however, there seem to be many possibilities and variations.

Finally, if themes can stack, we may well wonder what happened to the original definition of the theme as the initial element signaling the link between the speaker's thought and its expression in language. Does the leftmost theme — the actual onset of the message — have some special thematic status or meaning? It would appear to. The theme that is chosen as the onset will establish the main perspective from which the rest of the message unit develops. If it is a conjunction, for example, the relationship expressed by that conjunction — such as additive, adversa-

tive, etc. — will steer the logical development of the rest of the unit. Similarly, the interpersonal adjuncts engage the speaker/writer and the listener/reader in a relationship for the duration of the unit and possibly longer. The discourse adjuncts, in turn, establish an attitude. And the cognitive adjuncts create a setting. Whichever of these comes first, it will set the tone for the rest of the unit. The other themes in the stack are still themes, but they will not have the same duration of force as they would have in the position of onset.

3.3. *Thematic depth*

Another question that is important to ask is whether there is a limit to the length of a thematic constituent. Is the theme only the onset, or does its value extend to the end of the construction, no matter how long it is? Both NPs and adjuncts can be quite protracted — certainly in English, and also in Portuguese. Example (12) shows a complex adjunct containing two conjoined NPs each of which in itself is long, for a total of 16 words:

- (12) *#Com a decadência das atividades agrícolas de exportação e o desenvolvimento de um setor industrial urbano₁ surgiram₂ / novas bases para a atividade política#*
 **#With the decline of agricultural export activities and the development of an urban industrial sector₁ there emerged₂ / new bases for political activity#*

In principle, longer constituents should be able to occupy one of the slots in the theme structure in the same way that a single element can. This would have to be true of adjuncts if we accept that adjuncts precede major themes and that the major theme is always required. The point is that the adjunct has a conceptual unity which prepares the reader for the assertion contained in the main clause; there is no point at which it could have been truncated and still function as a theme. Halliday agrees that the whole of such a construction is thematic: “the function of theme, restricted elsewhere to single clause elements, can in the case of adjuncts extend over two or more” (1967: 219).

Thus the long adjunct sets the precedent for long themes in general. Frequently in the data there were long NPs which were candidates for major theme — example (5), for instance:

- (5) *#O discurso da minha posse em Brasília que o Presidente Castelo escreveu do próprio punho o discurso e o Luis Viana me deu os originais desse discurso₁ / eu não estou encontrando também#*

'#The speech from my swearing-in in Brasília which President Castelo wrote in his own hand the speech and Luis Viana gave me the original of that speech₁ / I'm not finding [*] either#'

In this case the internal cohesion of the constituent is emphasized both by repetition of the word *discurso* and by the empty slot calling for an object later in the clause. Some of the other examples, however, were less clear-cut and raised the question of whether the leftmost part of the phrase could serve by itself as the theme. This came up, for instance, with conjoined NPs and with complex postmodification — the latter a common occurrence in Portuguese. For example,

- (13) #*As tendências de crescimento demográfico*_{1a} *apresentadas acima*_{1b};
/ *mantiveram-se no decurso do primeiro quartel deste século ...*#
'#*The trends of demographic growth*_{1a} *presented above*_{1b} / continued
throughout the first quarter of this century ...#'

For the same reason that the constituent is analyzed grammatically as the subject of the clause, it is a cohesive element that is processed by reader and writer as a whole. Also, the second element has a discourse-organizational function and therefore belongs to the theme.

From the evidence so far, it would seem that the solution is to adopt the distinction that Trávníček drew between *simple theme*, or onset, and *developed theme*, which can embrace a long constituent.

3.4. *Nonfinite verbal constructions*

The structure described up to now accounts for just about every type of opening that the declarative clause can have — except for the initial nonfinite verbal construction. These constructions would appear to correspond to two principal theme types. In the first, the dependent clause serves as an adjunct, and in the second, the theme signals a relationship of dependency with scope extending across the entire constituent.

The case has just been made for the developed theme: long adjuncts are necessarily thematic, and, at least in one case, a long subject with a postmodifying participial clause could be justified as a single thematic constituent on syntactic and discursal grounds. It is therefore proposed that the dependent clause which opens with a participle is also an adjunct, rather than a predicator-as-theme, as Halliday had indicated. From both the cognitive and the discursal point of view, its function is the same as that of an adjunct. In the following example two participial clauses are in fact conjoined in series with the thematic adjunct *graças à pressão ...* :

- (14) #... por onde passa o boi passa o vaqueiro com o seu cavalo#
 #Colado ao dorso deste_{1a} confundindo-se com ele_{1b} graças à pressão dos jarretes firmes_{1c} realiza₂ / a criação bizarra de um centauro bronco ...#
 ‘#... wherever the cattle go there the cowboy and his horse go too#
 #Glued to his horse’s back_{1a} merged as one with him_{1b} thanks to the pressure of his firm knees_{1c} [he] strikes₂ / the bizarre image of a rough-and-ready centaur ...#’

Example (16) shows another type of participial clause again functioning as an adjunct:

- (15) #Fechada_{1a} a porta_{1b} da Casa Verde_{1c} entregou-se₂ / ao estudo da cura de si mesmo#
 ‘#Closed_{1a} the door_{1b} of the Green House_{1c} [he] set about₂ / the study of curing himself#’

These examples, very typical of the data, argue for the whole participial clause being considered a thematic adjunct. If the participle were a thematic predicator as Halliday proposes, then everything after it would be downgraded; the subject, main verb, and object, if any, in the major clause would fall into the rheme. It seems better to say that these clauses should be analyzed in their totality as cognitive adjunct themes. The onset is a participle, not a predicator, and its thematic function is to set up the participial relationship. The adjunct in its entirety is a minor theme. The major theme comes later.

The other kinds of dependent clauses are distinguished from the participial clause — at least in Portuguese and English — by the fact that in each case they begin with some kind of modal marker: *se* ‘if’, *quando* ‘when’, *talvez* ‘perhaps’, etc. For example,

- (16) ##Se examinarmos atentamente o mapa físico da América do Sul /
 ? a imagem impressionante que nos fica ... é a de um imenso maciço de terras ...#
 ‘##If we examine closely the physical map of South America /? the impressive image that we get ... is of an immense land mass ...#’

This is perhaps the most perplexing issue in the whole study of theme. Halliday deals with it by proposing that the theme system operates only in independent clauses and that the dependent clause has an “underlying” theme which is its relationship of dependence to the major clause (1967: 221). Actually, there are four possibilities: (1) there is no surface theme, only an underlying one; (2) the introductory particle is the theme; (3) the constituent up through the first verb is the theme; or (4) the entire clause

is the theme. If the definition and structure presented so far are in fact correct, then every message unit has a theme and there are no exceptions. Trávníček (1962: 166) takes this position, and it seems reasonable. As for only part of the constituent being the theme, this goes against the rationale just given in which conceptual unity is overriding. Thus we are left with the two remaining alternatives: that only the introductory particle is the theme, or that the whole clause is the theme. It would seem logical to go with the same reasoning given above in connection with the participial clauses: there is the onset, which is a single element, and there is the developed theme, which is the entire clause. The first sets up the dependency, while the clause as a whole serves as a modal adjunct which specifies more fully the nature of the interpersonal relationship in question — Halliday's reasoning but with the conclusion that the whole is thematic rather than that there is no theme at all.

It is interesting to note that with the participial clauses the adjunct formed by the complete clause was cognitive; the modal marker, on the other hand, is noncognitive. Thus the cognitive/noncognitive distinction once again proves useful.

4. Embedded themes and the limits of the unit

It has just been pointed out that the initial element in a dependent clause serves to stage a relationship of dependency. At the same time, however, it must be recognized that such clauses, with identical introductory elements, can occur in embedded positions as well:

- (17) #*Acreisce*₁ / ainda que, [?] *por* maior que seja a ação do mar sobre o espírito dos homens, o mar por si mesmo não é mais do que um caminho aberto à humanidade#
'#*Add*₁ / the fact that, [?] *however* great may be the action of the sea on the spirit of men, the sea in itself is nothing more than an open road to be used by mankind#'

Embedded relative clauses also have markers which signal the type of structural relationship that is to come, and in fact there is a wide variety of options for introducing embedded clauses in Portuguese. The question that must be addressed is whether the introductory element is as thematic at the onset of an embedded clause as it is when initial.

It is proposed here that the embedded markers are *potential* themes, but that they do not have the same status as when they are in the initial position of a typical major clause or incomplete major clause. Were the constituent that they introduce to become a separate information unit,

they would acquire the status of theme. I believe that the presence of a form that can serve as a theme contributes to the structural conditions appropriate for such a breakoff.

Any consideration of the theme is inseparably tied to decisions about the unit that it governs. Whereas Halliday interpreted the theme in relation to the major clause with all its embeddings, it would seem that the status of embeddings is derived from the combined effect of the theme and the information systems. Just as there are well-recognized peaks in the delivery of information which lead to segmentation, there are probably potential themes within a clause which also pave the way for the creation of separate units.

We know that it is precisely those areas in linguistics that are most resistive to analysis that hold the clues to progress. The problem of embedded themes, considered within the thematic structure that has been proposed above, opens up for us a new perspective in which the theme is recognized to have a role in the segmentation of messages.

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Notes

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1. There were two parts to the data: a written corpus of 54,000 words from 32 Brazilian works (16 fiction and 16 nonfiction) for which published translations were available in English (Vasconcellos 1985, examined in part also in Vasconcellos 1986) and a spoken corpus of 19,000 words supplied by Professor Cléa Rameh, Georgetown University, consisting of transcripts from ham radio conversations between Brazilians in the US and Brazil.
 2. For a discussion of the criteria for the message unit, see Vasconcellos (1985, especially 3.2.1.1, 5.1, and 7.1).
 3. The follow conventions are used in the examples:

##	discourse-initial or -terminal boundary
#	unit boundary
/	cutoff between theme and rheme
italics	theme(s)
subscript	order of stacked themes

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