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Theme, Subject, and Actor in Systemic Functional Grammar: A Theoretical Review of Halliday's Model

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Abstract

This paper explores a comprehensive review of M.A.K Halliday's treatment of the Theme, Subject and Actor within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Drawing exclusively from Halliday's book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, the book traces how these three clauses elements function across the textual and experiential metafunctions of language. It examines the structural role of the Actor as the doer of the action. Through carefully selected examples from Halliday's own text, the review illustrates the differences and interrelationships among these elements, particularly in active and passive constructions. The aim is to provide the readers, especially students and early scholars of functional grammar, with a clearer understanding of how Theme, Subject and Actor contribute to meaning-making in discourse.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Grammar, Theme, Subject, Actor, Halliday, Clause Analysis, SFL, Functional Linguistics

Introduction

Language is not merely a collection of words and rules, but a system of choices that reflect and construct meaning in context. One of the most influential approaches to understanding how language function is Systemic Function Grammar of Halliday's introduction to functional grammar fourth edition.

The paper focuses on three core concepts in Halliday's clause analysis: Theme, Subject and Actor. These elements are crucial to understanding how clauses are organized and how meanings are distributed across different metafunctions of language. Subject according to Halliday and Mathiesen (2014) 'Subject' can be used to shed light on the three concepts. (Theme, Subject and Actor). 'Subject' is one of the basic concepts to the Western tradition of grammatical analysis. Since it is a familiar term, it is important to take it as the starting point for investigating the function in an English clause. While Theme relates to how information is structured in discourse, Subject serves as a grammatical role in mood and Actor represents the participant responsible for the process in experiential meaning.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical review of Theme, Subject and Actor drawing exclusively from Halliday's book *Introduction to Functional Grammar* fourth edition. Through a close reading of Halliday's explanations and illustrative examples, the paper seeks to clarify the distinction and interrelationships among these three concepts.

The duke gave my aunt this teapot

In accordance with the syntactic principles established by medieval grammarians, which were themselves based on the grammarians of ancient Greece and Rome, comprehensively explain that each clause contains one element which can be identified as its subject (see e.g. Covington 1998: 34-37) so going by this, the subject would be **the duke** in the above example.

The Conceptual Framework

Halliday's SFL identifies three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This paper focuses on the ideational and textual metafunctions. The **Theme** is the point of departure for the message, the **Subject** is the doer or carrier in the clause, and the **Actor** is the entity responsible for the action in the transitivity system. These roles help uncover how language reflects social realities and power relations.

According to (Halliday, 1984b) subject is the label for a grammatical function of some kind. But it is not so easy to say exactly what the subject is, and it is difficult to find in the grammatical tradition a definite account of what the role of subject means (of Halliday 1984b, on the ineffability of the category of subject).

In the line with above, Bloor and Bloor (2013: 30-45) define subject as a function which is realized by a normal group. At its simplest, can be a pronoun. It can also consist of a straight forward nominal group with common noun as the. Or it may be an empty pronoun. Example:

- 1) [. . .] he could not decipher his own scrawl [. . .] (he – personal pronoun)
- 2) The next night, at three a.m., the idea returned. (the idea – common noun)
- 3) [. . .] whether there is any chemical substance. (there – empty pronoun)

Another way of explaining the concept, 'Subject' is not an intrinsic feature of a word but a clause function. It is not easy to point out a Subject out of context as the example below.

4) Wedgwood is experimented ceaselessly

Wedgwood is a subject and also a noun. To say it out of context, that Wedgwood is a noun is quite viable. The quality of being a noun is a feature of the word Wedgwood in virtually all circumstances. But out of context Wedgwood cannot be considered as a subject, going by this, Bloor and Bloor provide ample examples to support their argument as follow:

5) Money is the root of all evil.

What is just said about **Wedgwood** is actually true about **money**. It is always noun and in this example it is a Subject. But it is not always a Subject, however. It is only in some specific instance of a clause that an item can be labelled Subject.

6) They offered money.

7) He is obsessed with money.

In Systemic Functional Grammar, **money** is said to be the complement and the pronoun **they** is the Subject in example (6). In example (7) **He** is the Subject and **money** is part of a prepositional phrase (with money). For easy identification, Bloor and Bloor advocated some clue for identifying the Subject.

A) Apposition: is a construction in which a noun or noun phrase is placed with another as an explanatory equivalent, either having the same syntactic function in the sentence.

1) Otto Loewi, an Austrian physiologist awoke in the night...

The Subject of the clause *Otto Loewe, an Australian physiologist* which is complicated slightly by the nominal group *an Austrian*, placed alongside the personal name. Such a group is said to be in apposition, in this instance, *an Australian physiologist*, is in apposition to the nominal group Otto Loewe. The author could have chosen to place either *Otto Loewe* or an *Austrian physiologist*, alone as a Subject. Both expressions refer to the same individual.

B) Subject- Finite Agreement

Agreement with the finite element of the verb is one way to find the Subject. This is often not a reliable guide, because English verbs rarely vary in form to reflect person and number except third person singular present tense, where they often add -s. where the change of number or person coincide with a change of number in the verb. By number means choice of singular or plural and by person means first person- I and we, second person - you and third person - anyone else.

1) The computer chip uses this battery information.

2) The computer chips use this battery information.

The computer *chip* co-occurs with the verb form *uses*, but with a plural subject there is no -s inflection on the verb. (It is a strange quirk of English morphology that s is the suffix denoting singularity in verb and plurality in nouns.)

3) He awoke in the night.

The feature of agreement is not manifest. The verb awake is invariably awoke in the past, regardless of how many are involved or whether the person doing the awaking is the speaker or the addressee or third person. Also, verbs like can, may, and should (the modal operators) and most past tense main verbs do not vary according to Subject or for any other reason.

C) Tag Question Probe

Introduction to Functional Grammar proposes one diagnostic test (or probe) for Subject which works fairly well. The Subject is item in the clause which is picked up in the pronoun in the mood tag (question tag). A tag is a question which is made up of a clause with a short form interrogative tagged on at the end; the mood tag is the bit at the end after comma.

1) The computer chip uses this battery information, doesn't it?

2) The computer chips use this battery information, don't they?

Thus, one can probe for the Subject of a declarative clause by adding to it a question tag.

Example:

3) Loewe awoke in the night with ideas, didn't he?

The pronoun in the tag reflects Loewe and so takes the form *he* rather than *it*, which would have to do if it reflected *the night* or *an idea*.

The application of the tag probe works as a diagnostic for the subject in a similar way to the Subject - finite agreement probe.

4) A. Erosion depletes the grasslands, doesn't it?

5) B. All savannah lands experience a period of drought, don't they?

Fawcett, (1999)) advocated that 'reduce the clause to its simplest declarative form (if it is not in such a form already); then re-express it as a Yes/No question. The subject is the nominal group which immediately follows the finite operator in the interrogative.

Thus (4a) can be re-expressed as (4b) Does erosion depletes the grasslands? To signal the change of mood (from declarative to interrogative), *erosion* 'change place' with the finite operation and thus identifiable as Subject.

D) Passiveness: a passive clause is a clause in which the verbal group includes some form of the auxiliary verb be and a past participle, in some instances, known as in:

1) The nerve impulse was known to be electrical in nature...

The probes convincingly suggest that the Subject is the *nerve impulse*. Passive clauses are, in a sense, the inverted form of corresponding active clauses, example:

2) Loewe was obsessed by the idea.

3) The idea obsessed Loewe.

In example (2), the passive clause, the hypothetical tag is wasn't he? And in (3), the active, the tag is didn't it? Thus, one can ascertain that the Subject of (2) is *Loewe* but that of (3) is *the idea*.

However, different interpretations have grown up around the subject notion, ascribing to it a number of various functions. These are broadly categories into three broad definitions, which can be summarized as follows.

- i) That which is the concern of the message.
- ii) That of which something is being predicated (i.e. on which rests the truth of the argument).
- iii) The doer of the action.

These three definitions are obviously not synonymous; they are defining different "concepts", The question is; is it possible for the category of "Subject" to embrace all these different meanings at one and the same time?

In *the duke gave my aunt this teapot*, it is reasonable to claim that the nominal group *the duke* is, in fact, the **Subject** in all these three sense. It represents the person with whom the message is concerned, the truth or falsehood of the statement is vested in him: and he is represented as having performed the action of giving.

If all clauses were like this one, in having one element serving all three functions, there would be no problem in identifying and explaining the Subject. Many clauses contain no such element that embodies all three. For example;

This teapot my aunt was given by the duke.

What has happened in this instance is that, the different functions making up the traditional concept of Subject has been split up among three different constituents of the clause. *The Duke* is still represented as the doer of the deed: but the message now is concerning *the teapot*, and its claim for truth is represented as being vested in *my aunt*.

The Three Different Kinds of Subject

When these different functions came to be recognized by grammarians as distinct, they were first labelled as if they were three **kinds** of Subject, the terms that came to be used in the second half of the nineteenth century, when there was renewal of interest in grammatical theory (See Siren, 19998: 120-133, the subject-predicate debate that lasted from the nineteenth Century until the 1930s) were psychological Subject, grammatical Subject, and logical Subject.

- i) **Psychological Subject** means that which is the concern of the message'. It was called psychological because it was what the speaker had in his mind to start with, when embarking on the production of the clause. Example: a) *the duke gave me aunt this teapot*. b. *this teapot* my aunt was given by the duke.
- ii) **Grammatical Subject** means that of which something is predicated'. It was called grammatical because at the time of the construction of subject and predicate was thought of as a purely formal grammatical relationship, it was seen to determine various other grammatical features; such as the case of the noun or pronoun that was functioning as Subject and its concord of a person and number with the verb, but it was not all thought to express any particular meaning. That is the verb, or predicate, must agree with subject in person and in number. If the subject is singular, the verb must be singular, too.

Example

The teacher was praised for his work.

The teachers were praised for their work.

Moreover, compound subjects are plural as in: teacher and students were around. But some subjects require the singular e.g. two and two is four. Also, expressions like *along with*, *with* and *together with* do not make subject plural: the mechanic, *together with* his apprentice is working.

The verb also agrees with the subject in person and in number that is nearer to the verb: either *she* or *you* are to go.

- iii) **Logical Subject** meant doer of the action'. It was called 'logical' in the sense this term had had from the seventeenth century, that of 'having to do with relations between things', as oppose to 'grammatical' relation, which were relations between symbols.

Example: *The duke gave my aunt this teapot*

<i>The duke</i>	<i>gave my aunt this teapot</i>
Psychological Subject Grammatical Subject Logical Subject	

Figure: 1

In the given example all) these three functions are mapped on to one another as shown in figure: 1
This teapot, my aunt was given by the duke,

this teapot	my aunt	was given	by the duke
psychological Subject	grammatical subject		logical subject

Figure: 2

In this Second example, on the other hand, all three are separated (fig). In *his teapot my aunt was given by the duke*, the psychological Subject is **this teapot**. That is to say, it is **this pot** that is the concern of the message that the speaker has taken as the point of embarking at the clause. But the 'grammatical' Subject **is my aunt**; my aunt is the one of whom the statement is predicated, Only the 'logical' Subject is still **the duke**; the duke is the doer of the deed, the one who is said to have carried out the process that the clause represents.

In natural living language, and of the kinds of variation that occur in it, in which the order of elements can vary, passives can occur as well as the actives, and soon, it is no longer possible to base an analysis on the assumption that these three concepts are merely different aspects of one and the same general notion. They have to be interpreted as what they really are, three separate and distinct functions. They are not three kinds of anything, they are three quite different things in order to take an account of this, and the earlier labels will be replaced by separate ones that relate more specifically to the functions concerned. Halliday replaces the earlier labels with the new ones as follow:

Three Distinct Function of the Subject

1. Psychological Subject: **Theme**
2. Grammatical Subject: **Subject**
3. Logical Subject: **Actor**.

Example of Figure 2: *this teapot my aunt was given by the duke* is labelled as follows:

this teapot	my aunt	was given	by the duke
Theme	Subject		Actor

In *the duke gave my aunt this teapot*, the roles of Theme, Subject and Actor are all combined in one element 'the duke. In the second example, *this teapot my aunt was given by the duke*, all the three are separated.

a)

My aunt	was given	this teapot	by the duke
Theme Subject			Actor

b)

this teapot	the duke	Gave	to my aunt
Theme	Subject Actor		

c)

by the duke	my aunt	Was given	this teapot
Theme Actor			Actor

Figure: 3

In any interpretation of grammar of English one need to take note of all these possible forms, explaining how and why they differ. They are all, subtly but significantly, different in meaning; at the same time, they are all related in a systematic way. Any comparable set of clause in English would make up a similar paradigm.

a)

I	caught	the first ball
Theme Subject Actor		

b)

I	was beaten	by the second
Theme Subject		Actor

c)

The third	I	Stopped
Theme	Subject Actor	

d)

By the fourth	I	was knocked out
Theme Actor	Subject	

The series of clauses in (a) - (d) forms an entire natural sequence that the speaker might use in personal narrative of this kind. Often no variation at all is possible if there is only one element that can have the three function for example **I ran away**, where I is inevitable Theme, Subject and Actor. Even here there is a possibility of thematic variation as in **runaway I did** or **the one who ran away was me**. On the other hand, in the process of explaining all these variants, there is the need of explaining the fact typical, unmarked form in an English declarative (statement- type) clause, is the one in which, Theme, Subject and Actor are mapped into a single element.

Conclusion

SUBJECT

Psychological Subject
(Concern of the message)
Theme

Grammatical Subject
(Concord)
Actor

Logical Subject
(Doer of the action)
Subject

In a nutshell, Subject is the key element of every clause, its functions in & clause gives the clear picture of the concept of Subject Theme and Actor. The functions of the three kinds of Subject (Theme, Subject and Actor) serve as an illustration of the fact that the same samples of language can be usefully labelled in more than one way, reflecting co-existing dimensions.

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