ANALYSIS OF THE UK PRIME MINISTERIAL DISCOURSE ON BREXIT: THEMATIC CHOICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Ray C. H. Leung

Abstract

This study of political discourse focuses on three selected texts about Brexit delivered by British Prime Minister Theresa May in early 2017. The texts represent three rare occasions on which May revealed to the public in detail what "negotiating objectives" the government has for Brexit. The three texts are: (i) the Lancaster House speech; (ii) Britain's Article 50 notification letter; (iii) May's oral statement in Parliament on the notification letter. Analytic tools from systemic functional linguistics (SFL) were employed to investigate the thematic choices in these three texts. The findings shed light on the interface between discourse and ideology. For example, frequent reference to the British society in the experiential Themes of the Lancaster House speech suggests that May tries to give prominence to the voice of the British people while addressing the general public. In the Article 50 notification letter, textual Themes which signal an adversative relation construe May's optimism about the prospect of Brexit. Furthermore, the first-person plural pronoun *we* in the thematic position serves multiple purposes, one of which is to establish solidarity between Britain and the European Union. The current research underscores the contributions of SFL thematic analysis to the study of ideology in discourse.

Keywords

1   Introduction

For years voices questioning the value of European Union (EU) membership have emerged in British society. As EU membership entails free movement of labor within the member states, immigration from other EU countries into Britain has caused considerable concern among some (if not all) British citizens. Such concern has become apparent since the EU enlargement in 2004 under which a number of Central and Eastern European countries attained membership. There are fears that EU immigrants would take away employment opportunities and stretch the limited resources in Britain. Furthermore, due to its EU membership, Britain has to be bound by EU legislation which the European Court of Justice oversees. This is perceived by some people as a threat to national sovereignty.

These negative public sentiments have provoked debate over the withdrawal of Britain from the EU, which is now commonly referred to as *Brexit*.

In January 2013, the then British Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron promised to organize a referendum on Brexit if the Conservative Party won the next general election. What Cameron proposed was to renegotiate the terms of Britain's relation with the EU before providing people with a choice between remaining in the EU under the new conditions and quitting the EU (British Broadcasting Corporation 2013). Having scored a victory in the general election in 2015, Cameron had to honor his commitment to the referendum on Brexit. In November 2015, he sent a letter to the president of the European Council Donald Tusk asking for reforms in specific areas such as immigration. This was followed by negotiations which led to a draft deal published in February 2016. The deal fell short of Cameron's requests, resulting in public dissatisfaction. On 20 February 2016, Cameron announced that the referendum would happen on 23 June. Whilst Cameron urged the voters to opt for Britain's continued membership of the EU, Eurosceptic critics including those of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) were promoting the idea that the only method of controlling immigration was to withdraw from the EU (Clarke et al. 2017: 22-29).

The referendum results were unexpected. The country voted to leave the EU, by 51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent (The Electoral Commission 2017). Shortly after the release of the results, Cameron resigned and said that formal notification of Britain's decision to withdraw from the EU (viz. invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty) would be initiated by his successor (Prime Minister's Office 2016a). On 13 July 2016, Theresa May was appointed as the new Prime Minister. Claiming that time was needed to prepare for Brexit, May did not immediately trigger Article 50. Amidst public demand for clarification from the government, May gave a speech on 17 January 2017 laying out specific negotiating targets for Brexit (Clarke et al. 2017: 227). A letter which officially informed the EU of Britain's intention to leave the EU was eventually submitted to the European Council on 29 March 2017, marking the start of the Brexit procedure.

This study will focus on three selected texts delivered by May in early 2017 concerning Brexit: (i) the aforementioned speech about the government's negotiating objectives; (ii) Britain's Article 50 notification letter; (iii) May's oral statement in Parliament on the notification letter. Given May's refusal to offer a "running commentary" on Brexit (Prime Minister's Office 2016b), the chosen texts constitute three rare occasions on which she substantially revealed to the public the kind of Brexit pursued by the government. It can be said that as the new leader of the country, May was not only addressing Brexit-related matters on behalf of the British government in the three texts, but she was

also establishing her authority as well as a rapport with various stakeholders via discursive interaction, which could have an influence on the ensuing Brexit negotiations. While the three texts all come from May in response to Brexit, they essentially belong to different genres of political communication as they were produced under different situational contexts with different purposes. Based on all these factors, it is believed that the three texts are worth studying from the perspective of discourse analysis. In the present research, I will make use of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and examine the texts on the basis of thematic choices (see Section 2 for more information). It is hoped that the findings will provide insights into how language, politics, power and society are intertwined within May's discourse on Brexit.

2   Theoretical background

2.1 Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) – Thematic choices

As stated by Schleppegrell (2012: 21), SFL is useful for analyzing discourse because it affords concrete tools which enable researchers to investigate meaning in language and to connect language use to social situations. SFL was originated by Halliday (1978) in his work *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. This approach to language studies (i.e. the Hallidayan approach) was expanded and popularized through his subsequent publications (Halliday 1994, Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, 2014). The fundamental assumption of SFL is that language is a system of "meaning-making resources" which are deployed by its users to fit particular social contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 4). Owing to the extensiveness of SFL, it is not possible to illustrate here all the "meaning-making resources" put forward by Halliday. This study will focus on thematic choices, from which Halliday devised an analytic framework. It should be borne in mind that other linguists (e.g. Bloor & Bloor 2013, Eggins 2004, Thompson 2014) have contributed to the scholarly discussion of SFL and its enrichment. For the sake of consistency, I will adhere to the terminology used in the work of Thompson (2014) when presenting the SFL framework of thematic choices.

Generally speaking, Theme is the starting point of a clause whereas the rest of the clause is Rheme (Paltridge 2006: 145). Structurally, Theme includes everything up to the first 'experiential element' in a clause. In declarative clauses[1], experiential elements are typically realized by nominal groups, as the examples in Figure 1 show.

The referendum results	were shocking.
David Cameron	resigned after the referendum.
Theme	Rheme

Figure 1: Subject as Theme in declarative clauses

In both examples, the experiential element is the Subject. This is the default thematic choice in declarative clauses. However, there are instances in which the experiential element in Theme position is manifested via another grammatical constituent, as the examples in Figure 2 demonstrate.

One year ago	Britain voted to leave the EU.
In Gibraltar	people are concerned about the effects of Brexit.
Theme	Rheme

Figure 2: Marked Theme in declarative clauses

Here the experiential element is the circumstantial Adjunct rather than the Subject. When the experiential element in Theme position does not coincide with the Subject, the resulting thematic pattern is called a 'marked Theme'.

In SFL thematic analysis, a dependent clause which occurs before a dominant clause in the same clause complex is considered an experiential element and hence is a marked Theme as well (Thompson 2014: 159-160). Examples are in Figure 3 below.

After the referendum had been held,	David Cameron gave a speech.
Although they lived overseas,	they were eligible voters.
Theme	Rheme

Figure 3: Dependent clause as marked Theme

All cases of the experiential element given so far can be labeled 'experiential Theme' in order to differentiate it from other non-experiential elements which sometimes appear before it. These non-experiential elements are divided into two groups: 'textual Theme' and 'interpersonal Theme' (Thompson 2014: 164). If an experiential Theme is preceded by a textual Theme and/or an interpersonal Theme, a 'multiple Theme' is formed. Examples are:

And	surprisingly	many people	voted to leave the EU.
However	---	the results	have to be respected.
---	Certainly	Brexit	is going to have a huge impact.
Thus	frankly	the campaigns	have been successful.
textual	interpersonal	experiential	
Theme			Rheme

Figure 4: Multiple Themes

As Figure 4 indicates, examples of textual Theme are Conjunctions (e.g. *and*) and conjunctive Adjuncts (e.g. *however* and *thus*), whose primary function is to signal semantic relations between two propositions such as addition, contrast and result. On the other hand, examples of interpersonal Theme are modal Adjuncts (e.g. *surprisingly*, *certainly* and *frankly*), the purpose of which is to show the speakers' attitudes towards the truth value or relevance of their utterance (Thompson 2014: 162).

It should be noted that 'thematized comment' (or 'interpersonal projection') is also regarded as interpersonal Theme (Thompson 2014: 168-170). Examples are:

It is true that	the results	were unexpected.
It may be that	people	were frustrated.
I think	reforms	are really needed.
interpersonal	experiential	
Theme		Rheme

Figure 5: Thematized comment (or interpersonal projection)

Before proceeding to the next subsection, I would like to make three remarks. First, when referring to a standard unit for thematic analysis, Thompson (2014: 161) adopted the notion of 'T-unit' proposed by Fries (1994). A T-unit consists of a main clause and all the clauses which are subordinate to it, and every T-unit is supposed to have its own Theme. Second, SFL scholars distinguish between the two pairs 'Theme/Rheme' and 'Given/New.' Although what is found in Rheme tends to be new information, Halliday argued that the two pairs are inherently different because Theme/Rheme concerns speakers' 'point of departure' of their message whereas Given/New is oriented towards listeners' knowledge (Halliday

& Matthiessen 2014: 120). Based on this argument, I will maintain the distinction throughout this paper. Third, while thematic choices are usually explored along the line of how ideas are organized within a text (i.e. the 'textual metafunction' in the nomenclature of SFL), they tell us much more than pure structural organization. As Paltridge (2006: 145) noted, Theme signifies what speakers think should be given prominence, or 'thematized,' in a text. This can be revealed by examining what specific information occupies the position of Theme. In fact, by the end of this article, this additional function of thematic choices, which is less often discussed by fellow researchers, will have become salient.

2.2 Empirical studies

As pointed out by Forey and Sampson (2017: 137), thematic analysis has been frequently performed on academic discourse. A number of researchers (e.g. Alyousef 2016, de Oliveira 2015, Park & Nam 2015) have studied students' writing in the hope of identifying thematic choices which could have pedagogic implications because it is believed that certain patterns can help to build up coherence of a text. Capitalizing on SFL, de Oliveira (2015) investigated two sample essays completed for a university placement assessment in the United States. One of the essays received the highest possible score whereas the other was deemed to be below standard. The researcher found that the essay written by the strong candidate displays a larger variety of thematic choices such as longer noun phrases and varied textual Themes. By contrast, the weak candidate had to rely heavily on pronouns to fill the thematic slots (de Oliveira 2015: 215-218). Alyousef (2016) examined six group assignments submitted by 19 postgraduate students in accounting. It was discovered that 'Theme reiteration' (viz. the repeated occurrences of the same Theme) predominates in the essays, creating a clear topical focus (Alyousef 2016: 493). Park and Nam (2015) compared essays written in English by Korean students majoring in different disciplines with those produced by their American counterparts. While the researchers did not identify any significant discipline-driven variations in thematic choices among the texts from the Korean group, they found notable differences between the Korean and the American data. For instance, Korean students tend to overuse multiple Themes which contain repetitive textual Themes (Park & Nam 2015: 80). Park and Nam (2015: 83) recommended that explicit teaching of thematic choices be incorporated in the curriculum.

Other genres also capture the attention of discourse analysts. In addition to abstracts of research articles, Kong (2004) analyzed advertisements from magazines and newspapers as well as administrative documents generated in academic environments. The findings show that many marked Themes identified

in the advertisements are related to the product being promoted. Making use of the terminology from Daneš (1974), Kong (2004: 357) named this pattern 'Derived Theme'. Regarding the administrative documents, there is an inclination for the writers to utilize marked Themes for justification of proposed institutional measures (Kong 2004: 358-360). Kong (2004: 361) argued that apart from their textual function, thematic choices have an ideological and interpersonal facet.

Newspaper articles are popular objects of research as well. Potter (2016) attempted to uncover the different representations of Syria in English and Arabic news reports via SFL thematic analysis. Lavid, Arús and Moratón (2012) carried out a comparative analysis of British news reports and commentaries. They noticed that textual Themes occur more frequently in commentaries whereas other strategies like paragraphing are mobilized in news reports to organize ideas (Lavid et al. 2012: 17). Ghadessy (1995) discussed the thematic choices in reports of football matches. One salient finding is that animate participants such as *strikers*, *players* and *goalkeeper* constitute the preferred Theme selection (Ghadessy 1995: 135).

To the best of my knowledge, thematic choices in texts on Brexit have not been studied by any SFL practitioners. Indeed, there is a paucity of discourse-related research about Brexit in general, possibly because Brexit is a current affair which did not get extensive international media coverage until the announcement of the referendum results. The work of Ballmann (2017) is the only relevant study which I managed to identify. In Ballmann's (2017) study, discourse analysis was undertaken on articles about Brexit which had been released on three non-British international media platforms: (i) *Deutsche Welle*; (ii) *France 24*; (iii) *Al Jazeera English*. It was discovered that while articles of *Deutsche Welle* and *Al Jazeera English* both make heavy use of direct quotes, there is a tendency for *Deutsche Welle* and *Al Jazeera English* to quote from non-British and British politicians respectively (Ballmann 2017: 35-36). Ballmann (2017: 48) acknowledged that research on Brexit is inadequate and more future work is thus encouraged.

By investigating the thematic choices in three selected texts on Brexit from Theresa May, the present research is considered worthwhile from various perspectives. As the literature review in this subsection has shown, thematic choices in texts produced by political leaders have not been so widely studied in comparison with other genres or text types. Besides, the premiership of Theresa May began in July 2016; it can be assumed that there is not yet a lot of published scholarly work on her as the British Prime Minister. What's more, Brexit is a recent sociopolitical issue which affects not only Britain, but also a multitude of countries in the world. This study is expected to enhance our understanding of this new subject.

3 Data and methodology

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the data of the present research are comprised of three texts from the British Prime Minister Theresa May concerning Brexit. The first text is a speech delivered by her at Lancaster House on 17 January 2017. On this occasion, she spelled out in detail how the British government would like to approach Brexit (i.e. the "negotiating objectives"). The major intended audience should be members of the public in Britain; however, there is no doubt that the speech attracted many "unratified hearers" (Goffman 1981: 146) because it was broadcast online. When analyzing the speech, I made use of the 6,448-word transcript uploaded on the official website of the British government (Prime Minister's Office 2017a). The second text for analysis is the 2,194-word letter sent to the European Council from Britain on 29 March 2017 expressing its decision to leave the EU. The letter was signed by May and was addressed to Tusk, the president of the European Council. A copy of the letter has been archived by the government and is available for public perusal (Prime Minister's Office 2017c). The third text is an oral statement given by May in Parliament on the day the Brexit letter was handed in. This statement contains 2,200 words. It can be presumed that Members of Parliament were the target audience, although the oral statement is accessible to everyone on the Internet (Prime Minister's Office 2017b).

Before I analyzed the thematic choices of the three texts, all T-units had been identified. In total, there are 320 T-units in the Lancaster House speech. The Brexit letter and the oral statement have 94 and 104 T-units respectively. For the purpose of comparison across the three texts, the frequency of the thematic choices will be normalized in accordance with the number of T-units in each text.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Overall comparison

Table 1 presents the distribution of the various thematic choices in the three texts. The total number of experiential Themes identified echoes the number of T-units analyzed because each T-unit is made up of an obligatory experiential Theme and its Rheme while textual Themes and interpersonal Themes are optional. As explained in Section 2, experiential Themes which are not the Subject can be categorized as marked Themes. There appears to be a high level of similarity between the distribution of unmarked and marked Themes in the three texts. Generally, the Brexit letter and the parliamentary oral statement bear a strong resemblance to each other whereas the Lancaster House speech deviates from them in two respects. First, the use of multiple Themes in the Lancaster

House speech is much more frequent. Nearly half of the T-units in the speech (47.19%) contain either a textual/interpersonal Theme or both. This figure is probably inflated by the high occurrences of textual Themes in the speech (i.e. 42.5% of all the T-units), as compared to the Brexit letter (28.72%) and the parliamentary oral statement (32.69%). The second noteworthy difference is that while the statistics on interpersonal Themes for the Brexit letter and the oral statement are alike, a noticeably lower percentage of interpersonal Themes is recorded for the Lancaster House speech.

Thematic choice Tokens		Lancaster House speech		Brexit letter		Parliamentary oral statement	
		% (based on 320 T-units)	Tokens	% (based on 94 T-units)	Tokens	% (based on 104 T-units)	
Experiential	Unmarked	255	79.69%	73	77.66%	81	77.88%
	Marked	65	20.31%	21	22.34%	23	22.12%
Total		320	100%	94	100%	104	100%
Multiple		151	**47.19%**	30	31.91%	36	34.62%
Textual		136	**42.5%**	27	28.72%	34	32.69%
Interpersonal		28	8.75%	14	**14.89%**	15	**14.42%**

Table 1: Thematic choices in the three texts

In the following subsections, I will look into the realizations of the thematic choices in order to gain a better understanding of the findings.

4.2 Experiential Theme

This subsection is about experiential Themes that are unmarked. Discussion on marked (experiential) Themes can be found in Section 4.5. Examination of the data shows that the unmarked experiential Themes in the three texts are realized by a number of common referents. These referents tend to fall into one of the five categories: (i) the British society; (ii) the British government; (iii) Theresa May herself; (iv) Europe (including the EU); (v) Britain's future relation with the EU. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of these referents in the three texts.

Referent	Lancaster House speech		Brexit letter		Parliamentary oral statement	
	Tokens	% (based on 255 unmarked experiential Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 73 unmarked experiential Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 81 unmarked experiential Themes)
The British society	53	**20.78%**	3	4.11%	11	13.58%
The British government	47	18.43%	20	27.40%	37	**45.68%**
Theresa May herself	25	9.80%	2	**2.74%**	8	9.88%
Europe (including the EU)	21	8.24%	21	**28.77%**	5	6.17%
Britain's future relation with the EU	79	30.98%	22	30.14%	15	**18.52%**

Table 2: Common referents in unmarked experiential Themes

Certain interesting patterns can be derived from the table. When comparing the figures across the three texts, one can notice that reference to the British society in unmarked experiential Themes happens much more often in the Lancaster House speech than in the other two texts. Examples are:

(1)   *And* [TEXTUAL THEME] ***the country*** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *comes together.*

(2)   ***The public*** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *expect to be able to hold their governments to account very directly […].*

The two nominal groups *the country* and *the public* represent the British society. On the one hand, it can be argued that May places prominence on the voice of the British citizens in the Lancaster House speech via frequent reference to them in the thematic position. On the other hand, the British people are 'collectivized' as one homogeneous group (van Leeuwen 2008: 37). As remarked by Wodak (2009: 37), this is one way of constructing national identity and the implication is that "intra-national sameness" is assumed.

The voice of the British government is given importance in the parliamentary oral statement instead, as can be seen in Table 2. Two relevant excerpts are:

(3)   *Today the government acts on the democratic will of the British people. And* [TEXTUAL THEME] ***it*** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *acts, too, on the clear and convincing position of this House.*

(4)   *We* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *will ensure that workers' rights are fully protected and maintained.*

In Example 3, May reports to the parliament on the action taken by the government (i.e. the submission of the Brexit letter to trigger Article 50). Here May distances herself from the proposition through the third-person singular pronoun *it*, thus projecting the government as an impersonal entity. This differs from Example 4, in which *we* is used when May conveys the future commitment of the government. Undoubtedly, this instance of *we* is speaker-inclusive, marking May's involvement. Also, the first-person plural pronoun can construct a sense of unity and consensus within the government as far as safeguarding people's welfare is concerned.

We is a deictic expression whose referent is dependent on the context. It is prone to manipulation by language users due to its potential to include or exclude certain people (Wodak 2009: 45-47). The data of the present study corroborate this claim. Table 2 demonstrates that linguistic expressions denoting Europe (including the EU) occur much more frequently in the unmarked experiential Themes of the Brexit letter than the other two texts. In 16 of the 21 tokens, the pronoun *we* is used. Examples are:

(5)   *We* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *should engage with one another constructively and respectfully, in a spirit of sincere cooperation.*

(6)   *We* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *must therefore work hard to avoid that outcome.*

In both examples, the experiential Theme *we* – which represents not only May (the speaker) and Tusk (the addressee) but also the British government and the EU – facilitates the creation of solidarity and rapport between Britain and the EU. This is reminiscent of the 'linguistic strategies of involvement' stipulated by Scollon et al. (2012: 51), one of which is to establish "in-group membership" with the addressee. Moreover, under May's portrayal, what is put in the Rheme ("engage with one another constructively and respectfully" and "work hard to avoid that outcome") is construed as a duty or obligation of both parties through the deontic modality *should* and *must*. It can be argued that the use of *we* in such contexts reduces the differences between Britain and the EU and evokes commonality as well as agreement.

Although *we* is also employed by May in a manner which excludes the EU, it emerges in contexts where deontic modality is absent. An example is:

(7)   **We** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *want to play our part to ensure that Europe remains strong and prosperous and able to lead in the world [...].*

May's self-mention in the three texts is indicated by the first-person singular pronoun *I*. Given her status as the leader of the country, May is the legitimate person to deliver the three texts and the use of *I* embodies the institutional power granted to her. It can be said that every time she uses *I* in the texts, she is re-asserting or exercising her authority. For instance, she uses *I* in the experiential Theme when performing the 'speech act of declarations' (Searle 1975: 358) in the Brexit letter to invoke Article 50:

(8)   **I** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *hereby notify the European Council in accordance with Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union.*

As Table 2 reveals, May does not use *I* in unmarked experiential Themes of the Brexit letter as often as in the other two texts. One interpretation is that she may want to avoid giving unnecessary prominence to herself among EU leaders, with whom she will soon have negotiations. The use of *I* can sometimes be "face-threatening" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 204). To circumvent any confrontational tone, an alternative for May is to fill the experiential Themes with referents that link Britain and the EU together, as I have already discussed above.

Linguistic expressions referring to Britain's future relation with the EU form a significant portion of the unmarked experiential Themes in the Lancaster House speech and the Brexit letter. Examples are:

(9)   **That Agreement** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *may take in elements of current Single Market arrangements in certain areas [...]."* (Lancaster House speech)

(10)   *But we also propose a bold and ambitious Free Trade Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.* **This** [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *should be of greater scope and ambition than any such agreement before it [...].* (Brexit letter)

Nevertheless, the parliamentary oral statement places Britain's future relation with the EU in the thematic position less frequently, as reflected from Table 2. In order to explain this phenomenon, the context where the statement was given has to be taken into account. At that moment, May was speaking in Parliament about the Brexit letter. In anticipation of the scrutiny from Members of Parliament, it makes more sense for her to give prominence to the voice of the government.

4.3 Interpersonal Theme

Table 3 displays the findings about the interpersonal Themes in the three texts.

Form	Lancaster House speech		Brexit letter		Parliamentary oral statement	
	Tokens	% (based on 28 interpersonal Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 14 interpersonal Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 15 interpersonal Themes)
'Thematized comment' (or 'interpersonal projection')	23	82.14%	12	85.71%	7	46.67%
Modal adjunct	5	17.86%	2	14.29%	3	20%
Vocative	0	0%	0	0%	5	**33.33%**

Table 3: Forms of interpersonal Themes identified

The use of vocatives is a distinctive feature of the parliamentary oral statement. As Forey and Sampson (2017: 133) maintained, vocatives carry an interpersonal function. All occurrences of vocatives involve the address form *Mr Speaker* used by May in her interaction with the Speaker of the House of Commons, who serves as the chair of the meeting. One example is:

(11) *But* [TEXTUAL THEME] ***Mr Speaker*** [INTERPERSONAL THEME]*, no decisions currently taken by the devolved administrations* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *will be removed from them.*

The use of the title *Mr* followed by the role (rather than the last name) of the addressee is suggestive of the formality of the communication setting. It also marks the specific institutional context under which May delivers her statement, as *speaker* here refers to a dignitary in Parliament.

One commonality across the three texts is that a majority of their interpersonal Themes are what Thompson (2014: 156) called 'thematized comment' (or 'interpersonal projection'). Examples are:

(12) *And so* [TEXTUAL THEME] ***I believe*** [INTERPERSONAL THEME] *there* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *is a lesson in Brexit not just for Britain but, if it wants to succeed, for the EU itself.* (Lancaster House speech)

(13)   *And* [TEXTUAL THEME] ***it is true that*** [INTERPERSONAL THEME] *full Customs Union membership* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *prevents us from negotiating our own comprehensive trade deals.* (Lancaster House speech)

(14)   ***We believe that*** [INTERPERSONAL THEME] *these objectives* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *are in the interests not only of the United Kingdom but of the European Union and the wider world too.* (Brexit letter)

Example 13 shows how 'thematized comment' is employed by May to express her viewpoint. On the other hand, Examples 12 and 14 are instances of 'interpersonal projection.' It should be noted that in these two examples May is trying to draw a connection between Britain and the EU, i.e. both having a lesson to learn from Brexit and both benefiting from May's objectives. Once again, the first-person plural pronoun is utilized in Example 14. In fact, all occurrences of 'interpersonal projection' identified in the interpersonal Themes of the Brexit letter involve the use of *we*, not *I*. This echoes the aforementioned observation about May's attempt to minimize the use of *I* in the Brexit letter wherever possible.

4.4 Textual Theme

To systematize the analysis of the textual Themes, the Conjunctions and the conjunctive Adjuncts identified were classified according to the four main types of conjunctive relations suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976: 241): (i) 'additive;' (ii) 'adversative;' (iii) 'causal;' (iv) 'temporal.' The distribution of these four types in the data is illustrated by Table 4.

Conjunctive relation	Lancaster House speech		Brexit letter		Parliamentary oral statement	
	Tokens	% (based on 136 textual Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 27 textual Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 34 textual Themes)
Additive	69	50.74%	9	33.33%	19	55.88%
Adversative	31	22.79%	15	**55.56%**	4	11.76%
Causal	36	26.47%	2	7.41%	11	32.35%
Temporal	0	0%	1	3.70%	0	0%

Table 4: Classification of textual Themes based on conjunctive relations

In Section 4.1, it has been mentioned that textual Themes in general occur much more often in the Lancaster House speech. Table 4 shows that half of them are used to indicate an additive relationship. An example is:

(15)   *But the purpose is clear: we will seek to avoid a disruptive cliff-edge, **and***
         [TEXTUAL THEME] *we* [EXPERIENTIAL THEME] *will do everything we can*
         to phase in the new arrangements we require as Britain and the EU move towards
         our new partnership.

The Lancaster House speech is approximately three times longer than the
other two texts. Considering the length of the speech, it is not surprising that
May employs a large amount of textual Themes (particularly those expressing
an additive relation) to weave together the various propositions made. Besides,
and is said to be one of those lexical items which frequently appear at transition
points in conversations (Paltridge 2006: 168). Although the speech was prepared
in advance, it was delivered in spoken English so features geared towards
conversational discourse are likely to show up. This phenomenon applies to the
parliamentary oral statement as well.

A remarkable pattern noted from Table 4 is the high proportion of the textual
Themes marking an adversative relationship in the Brexit letter. Two examples
taken from the letter are:

(16)   *The task before us is momentous **but*** [TEXTUAL THEME] *it* [EXPERIENTIAL
         THEME] *should not be beyond us.*

(17)   *This will require detailed technical talks, **but*** [TEXTUAL THEME] *as the UK is*
         an existing EU member state [MARKED THEME]*, both sides have regulatory*
         frameworks and standards that already match.

In Example 16, the textual Theme *but* is used to highlight the contrast between
two propositions (viz. the challenging nature of Brexit versus the optimism
and confidence about overcoming it). In other words, May is defending herself
against the claim that Brexit is impossible owing to its difficulty. This function
of the adversative is again evident in Example 17, where May contradicts the
belief that a post-Brexit free trade agreement with the EU is not feasible due to
technical issues.

4.5 Marked Theme

Table 5 captures the different forms of marked Themes in the three texts.

Form	Lancaster House speech		Brexit letter		Parliamentary oral statement	
	Tokens	% (based on 65 marked Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 21 marked Themes)	Tokens	% (based on 22 marked Themes)
Adjunct	26	40%	9	42.86%	11	50%
Dependent clause	18	27.69%	11	52.38%	7	31.82%
'Thematic equative'	20	**30.77%**	1	4.76%	4	18.18%
Others[2]	1	1.54%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 5: Forms of marked Themes identified

First of all, it is worthwhile to point out the salience of marked 'thematic equatives' in the Lancaster House speech. As explained by Thompson (2014: 155), marked 'thematic equatives' are cases where an embedded WH-clause is in the Rheme. Two examples from the speech are:

(18)   *And* [TEXTUAL THEME] *that* [MARKED THEME] *is why* we will ensure we can control immigration to Britain from Europe.

(19)   *That* [MARKED THEME] *is why* it is time for Britain to get out into the world and rediscover its role as a great, global, trading nation.

The marked 'thematic equatives' in both examples are triggered by the structure *that is why*. This is in line with Thompson's (2014: 155) remark, as he noted that pronouns like *that*, which refer back to what has been stated earlier, have a tendency to occur in marked 'thematic equatives.' Examples 18 and 19 are actually the summarizing statements for two of the Brexit objectives (i.e. monitoring EU immigration and increasing trade with non-EU countries). Prior to these two marked 'thematic equatives,' May has given the relevant background information and the justification for the objectives. Since the Lancaster House speech is meant to reveal to the public the "negotiating objectives" of the government, it is necessary for May to provide sufficient information and justification so that a persuasive argument can be produced. This style of communication (i.e. supporting information first before the main point) is known as the 'inductive pattern' and is normally adopted when a demanding request is made (Kong 2014: 18).

5   Conclusion

Academic work on the withdrawal of Britain from the EU is still in its infancy, leading to a research niche. In this study, the SFL analytic framework of thematic choices was employed to examine three selected texts about Brexit delivered by the British Prime Minister Theresa May. Despite the fact that thematic choices are conventionally associated with the overall flow or coherence of discourse (Bloor & Bloor 2013: 103), the findings of the present research show that thematic choices in political texts can shed light on the interface between discourse and ideology.

It has been found that linguistic expressions having a common set of referents appear in the experiential Themes of the three texts. At first glance, this seems predictable because all the three texts are prime ministerial discourse on Brexit. Nonetheless, how often these referents are thematized in each text has valuable ideological implications. In the Lancaster House speech which is mainly intended for the general public in Britain, reference to the British society occurs in the experiential Themes much more frequently. It has been argued that such thematization can amplify the voice of the British people, construing May's readiness to listen to the public. On the other hand, linguistic expressions whose referent includes Europe (the addressee-inclusive *we* in particular) prevail in the Brexit letter. It can be said that May wants to emphasize the connection with the EU notwithstanding Brexit and to establish some sort of solidarity and rapport before the actual negotiations.

What is put in the interpersonal Themes is underpinned by ideology as well. 'Interpersonal projection,' which is one manifestation of interpersonal Themes, does not involve the use of the first-person singular pronoun *I* in the Brexit letter. Instead, the first-person plural pronoun *we* is used. It is believed that May tries to avoid giving excessive prominence to herself in the letter, which could result in resentment from the addressee.

Studying thematic selection in the three texts has yielded other insights. For example, it has been shown that thematic choices are genre-specific. The vocative *Mr Speaker* occurs regularly in the interpersonal Themes of the parliamentary oral statement. This deferential address form is a typical feature of communication in Parliament. The exploration of the marked Themes has revealed that the inductive pattern is employed by May to justify her negotiating objectives.

The current research has demonstrated how SFL thematic analysis can contribute to our interpretation or understanding of discursive data. Such understanding goes beyond the structural organization of a text, as significant ideological issues have been unfolded. Of course, one may argue that under SFL

thematic analysis, what is in the Rheme tends to be overlooked. Given the space constraint of this article, it might not be realistic to dissect the information in the Rheme. A separate future study which makes use of other SFL analytic tools like transitivity is needed in order to extend the analysis to the non-thematic parts of the texts.

Notes

1 Due to the constraint on space, I will only concentrate on declarative clauses in the literature review, although thematic analysis on interrogative and imperative clauses is performed differently.
2 These include the rare cases like the Object being the experiential Theme (e.g. "*What I heard* [MARKED THEME] *I do not want to remember*".).

References

Alyousef, H. (2016) 'A multimodal discourse analysis of international postgraduate business students' finance texts: An investigation of theme and information value.' *Social Semiotics 26*(5), 486-504.

Ballmann, K. (2017) *Brexit in the News: Frames and Discourse in the Transnational Media Representation* (Master's thesis). Stockholm University, 11 June 2017. Online document. 7 Sep 2017 <http://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1107235&dswid=-9001>.

Bloor, T. and Bloor, M. (2013) *The Functional Analysis of English: A Hallidayan Approach*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

British Broadcasting Corporation (2013) 'David Cameron Promises In/Out Referendum on EU.' The United Kingdom, 23 Jan 2013. Online document. 3 Sep 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21148282>.

Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clarke, H., Goodwin, M. and Whiteley, P. (2017) *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Daneš, F. (1974) 'Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text.' In: Daneš, F. (ed.) *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective*. The Hague: Mouton. 106-128.

De Oliveira, L. (2015) 'A systemic-functional analysis of English language learners' writing.' *DELTA: Documentação de Estudos em Lingüística Teórica e Aplicada 31*(1), 207-237.

Eggins, S. (2004) *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. 2nd ed. New York: Continuum.

The Electoral Commission (2017) 'EU Referendum Results.' Online document. 3 Sep 2017 <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>.

Forey, G. and Sampson, N. (2017) 'Textual metafunction and theme: What's 'it' about?' In: Bartlett, T. and O'Grady, G. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Systemic Functional Linguistics*. Abingdon: Routledge. 131-145.

Fries, P. (1994) 'On Theme, Rheme and discourse goals.' In: Coulthard, M. (ed.) *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. London: Routledge. 229-249.

Ghadessy, M. (1995) 'Thematic development and its relationship to registers and genres.' In: Ghadessy, M. (ed.) *Thematic Development in English Texts*. London and New York: Pinter Publishers. 129-146.

Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 2nd ed. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1976) *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, C. (2004) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, C. (2014) *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 4th ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kong, K. C. C. (2004) 'Marked Themes and thematic patterns in abstracts, advertisements and administrative documents.' *Word 55*(3), 343-362.

Kong, K. C. C. (2014) *Professional Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lavid, J., Arús, J. and Moratón, L. (2012) 'Genre realized in Theme: The case of news reports and commentaries.' *Discours: Revue de Linguistique, Psycholinguistique et Informatique. A Journal of Linguistics, Psycholinguistics and Computational Linguistics 10*(1), 3-21.

Paltridge, B. (2006) *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. London: Continuum.

Park, K. and Nam, D. (2015) 'Analysis of thematic structure in L2 writing: A systemic functional perspective.' *SNU Journal of Education Research 24*(1), 65-88.

Potter, L. (2016) 'Ideological representations and Theme-Rheme analysis in English and Arabic news reports: A systemic functional approach.' *Functional Linguistics 3*(1), 1-20.

Prime Minister's Office (2016a) 'EU Referendum Outcome: PM Statement.' The United Kingdom, 24 June 2016. Online document. 3 Sep 2017 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-referendum-outcome-pm-statement-24-june-2016 >.

Prime Minister's Office (2016b) 'G20 Summit: PM Commons Statement.' The United Kingdom, 7 Sep 2016. Online document. 3 Sep 2017 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/g20-summit-pm-commons-statement-7-september-2016>.

Schleppegrell, M. (2012) 'Systemic functional linguistics.' In: Gee, J. and Handford, M. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge. 21-34.

Scollon, R., Scollon, W. and Jones, R. (2012) *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. 3rd ed. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Searle, J. (1975) 'A taxonomy of illocutionary acts.' In: Gunderson, K. (ed.) *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 344-369.

Thompson, G. (2014) *Introducing Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2008) *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wodak, R. (2009) 'The discursive construction of national identity.' In: Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., Reisigl, M. and Liebhart, K. (eds) *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 7-48.

Sources

Prime Minister's Office (2017a) 'The Government's Negotiating Objectives for Exiting the EU: PM Speech.' The United Kingdom, 17 Jan 2017. Online document. 7 Sep 2017 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech>.
Prime Minister's Office (2017b) 'Prime Minister's Commons Statement on Triggering Article 50.' The United Kingdom, 29 March 2017. Online document. 7 Sep 2017 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-commons-statement-on-triggering-article-50>.
Prime Minister's Office (2017c) 'Prime Minister's Letter to Donald Tusk Triggering Article 50.' The United Kingdom, 29 March 2017. Online document. 7 Sep 2017 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prime-ministers-letter-to-donald-tusk-triggering-article-50>.

Ray C. H. Leung is conducting post-doctoral research at the University of Potsdam in Germany. He received his PhD in English from Hong Kong Baptist University and has published papers in various language-related journals since then. His core academic interest is discourse analysis.

Address: Ray C. H. Leung, Ph.D., Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Potsdam, Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam, Germany. [e-mail: chungleungde@gmail.com]