



University of Zanjan



Please cite this paper as follows:

Almulla, N., & Alyousef, H. (2025). Theme structure and thematic progression in Trump's impromptu speech: An SFL theme analysis of the 2024 Meet the Press interview. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in English Language Communication*, 2(1), 31-43. <https://doi.org/10.30470/irelc.2025.2064058.1024>

Original Research

Theme Structure and Thematic Progression in Trump's Impromptu Speech: An SFL Theme Analysis of the 2024 Meet the Press Interview

Naif Almulla¹ & Hesham Alyousef²

¹Department of English Language, College of Education, Majmaah University, Majmaah, Saudi Arabia; n.almulla@mu.edu.sa

²Corresponding author, English Department, College of Language Sciences, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; hesham@ksu.edu.sa

Received: 25/06/2025

Accepted: 09/10/2025

Abstract

While many studies on Theme structure and thematic progression patterns have investigated speeches or formal letters/statements, few studies have focused on interviews or debates, which reflect the improvised or unrehearsed nature of human language production, as well as the most authentic form of language exhibited in its most direct and spontaneous nature. The present study aimed to investigate the dominant Theme type and thematic progression patterns in Trump's 8 December 2024 presidential interview with Kristen Welker in the Meet the Press program. The study employed Halliday's (2014) social semiotic approach to the analysis of Theme/Rheme and thematic markedness and Daneš's (1974) model for the analysis of thematic progression patterns. The findings revealed that Trump's presidential interview included topical and textual Themes, while interpersonal Themes rarely occurred. The most frequently occurring thematic progression pattern was the constant pattern, followed by the linear pattern. The derived Theme rarely occurred in Trump's speech. No instances of the multiple Theme/split Rheme were found in the analysed sample, which may be expected considering its complex nature, on one hand, and the simplistic nature of spoken impromptu language, on the other hand. Trump's speech style reflects a self-centred personality that uses language skilfully to persuade the audience.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); Trump's 2024 Presidential Interview; Theme Structure, Thematic Progression Patterns.

1. Introduction

According to Bakhtin (1981), language is seen as a meaningful worldview rather than a linguistic system, purely composed of sounds and structures. Since language is used to carry out communicative functions, approaching language from a functional perspective facilitates proper understanding of how it is employed in accomplishing communicative purposes at different levels (Halliday, 2014). With language being an indispensable part of our daily communication, interest has increased among linguists in how a particular segment of language could function to mean different things to different people (Eggins, 2004). According to Eggins (2004), the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which was initiated by the works of the social semiotic linguist Michael Halliday since the 1960s, examines language in terms of how different linguistic representations, such as lexical items ("semantics") and grammatical structures ("syntax"), work simultaneously to convey and achieve a particular meaning/function (Eggins, 2004). For example, a speaker may employ the "passive" structure to extend a descriptive narrative about something that happened by focusing on the "act" itself (and not on the person who did it).

Within the framework of SFL, the clause can be viewed in terms of three-dimensional meanings: clause as a message (*textual* meaning), as an exchange (*interpersonal* meaning), and as a representation (*experiential* meaning) (Halliday, 2014). It is assumed that the clause represents a message in all languages. The line of meaning that gives the clause its character as a message is known as "thematic structure." From this perspective, the clause is organized in such a way that it fits in with and contributes to the flow of discourse. This type of meaning enables text to be negotiated.

The clause is framed as a message through having two distinct parts; one of which is the Theme, which combines with the rest of the clause (i.e., Rheme) to constitute a message (Halliday, 2014). While languages may be different in terms of how they signal Themes, it is indicated in English by the position of the clause (i.e., by positioning it first in the clause). In spoken English, the Theme could also be signalled by speakers through intonation. The Theme is the element “which serves as the point of departure of the message,” that “locates and orients the clause within its context” (Halliday, 2014, p. 64). As a starting point, the Theme typically carries familiar information to the hearer or reader or information previously given or understood from the context (Eggins, 2004).

In SFL, a distinction is usually made between “*structural*” units, which have been discussed above (i.e., Theme & Rheme), and “*information*” units (i.e., New & Given), which are more closely related to the familiarity status of the content of the message by the hearer/reader. While *Given* refers to information that is already known or predictable, *New* refers to information that is unfamiliar or unpredictable. The Theme of the clause typically corresponds with Given and the Rheme with New, but this is not always the case. For instance, according to Halliday (2014), in some cases, a speaker may start with something that is unfamiliar to the hearer/reader because contextual cues or assumptions of knowledge or familiarity made by the speaker/writer about the hearer/reader may not be available.

SFL views grammar as “a network of interrelated meaningful choices” (Halliday, 2014, p. 31). From this perspective, grammar does not only refer to mere structural units, but, in fact, these structural units function in a way that largely indirectly contributes to the meaning of the message being transferred through these structures. This indirect way of conveying a meaning can be very effective in communication because it functions and works at the subconscious level. This may explain why some propositions are endorsed by some people mainly because of how they were communicated rather than because of how convincing they were.

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the dominant Theme type in Trump’s 2024 presidential interview?
2. What is the most commonly employed thematic progression pattern in Trump’s 2024 presidential interview?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Context of the Study

From a discourse analysis perspective, presidential interviews fall within the overall field “political discourse.” The term “political discourse” may be used to refer to texts and talks by political individuals and institutions (Van Dijk, 1997), in which case, a political interview, a speech, or a debate are examples of political discourse (Wilson, 2015). “Political discourse” could also be used to refer to any kind of text or talk that is politically motivated or about a political subject, even though it may not be produced by a politically-affiliated entity (Wilson, 2015). Pointing out that the political discourse is not a straightforward domain to define, Wilson (2015) remarks that one of the aspects the political discourse is mainly concerned with is how real-world events are linguistically represented to the public. For instance, it tries to investigate questions such as “how are certain events perceived and described?” or “how much of ‘reality’ is maintained when delivering these events?” Within the “critical discourse analysis” (CDA) field, a relatively newly developed domain has been employed called “institutional discourse” (Mayr, 2008), which looks into discourse based on the conventions and rules governing a given institution, be it a ‘hospital,’ a ‘university,’ or even for that matter, a ‘political government.’

Approaching the political discourse from an ‘institutional identity’ view, specifically, from the perspective of ‘news interviews’ as an ‘institutional identity’ exhibiting specific impersonal structures (i.e., passivization, nominalization, existential processes, and relational processes), Zohrabi and Radkhah (2019) conducted a qualitative analysis to compare between 20 English and Persian news interviews to see how the two sets of interviews differed in employing ‘impersonality’ or ‘detachment.’ The findings showed that interviewees in both sets of interviews showed similarity in mostly using relational processes (i.e., verbs such as ‘be,’ ‘become,’ ‘seem’) to distance themselves from critical or sensitive remarks and stances. However, they differed in their second-most-used impersonal structure. While it was ‘existential’ processes (e.g., ‘there is,’ ‘there are’) in the English interviews, the second-most-used impersonal structure in the Persian interviews was ‘nominalization’ (i.e., converting a verb, for example, into a noun such as ‘develop’ into ‘development’).

Since ‘political discourse’ is related to politics and politicians whose main objective is usually seeking power, it can sometimes be seen as part of the broader field of CDA, which is more sociological in nature than linguistic, which is why it is not surprising to find some main figures in CDA, such as Norman Fairclough, as leaders in political discourse analysis (Wilson, 2015). It goes without saying, however, that while political contexts across countries and nations share many aspects centered around ‘politics,’ political contexts actively interact with the societal themes and contexts from which they emerge (Schiffrin et al., 2008; Wilson, 2015).

As the US plays an important role in international politics, it is no surprise that the US political discourse context has received special interest from many discourse analysts. In the past ten years, the US has witnessed a new phenomenon, where a businessman (not a politician) ran for the presidency, the highest position in the country. At that time (in 2016), Donald Trump (a Republican) ran against two Democratic candidates (Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders).

Donald Trump is a particularly interesting character to look into because he had no professional political engagement. Despite the lack of political background, he was able to win two non-consecutive terms, which is a rare case in the US presidential elections. This is probably the main reason why Trump is seen as an interestingly peculiar character running for the presidency. Another reason why Trump is noteworthy to study could be because he is considered only the second in US election history to win a second non-consecutive term (in 2024). These factors raise interest in trying to find out how such a person could effectively influence the audience. An audience who not only did not know him as a politician before (in the 2016 elections), but also an audience who had experienced his presidency a few years back with whatever problems may have led to not re-electing him in 2020. Based on previous research findings, Trump was found to focus on the ‘personal’ style, presenting himself to potential voters as a non-typical politician (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2022). Another aspect that makes Trump stand out from typical politicians is his focus on the ‘rally speech’ events, whose audience is mostly the general public. Whereas politicians normally spend a great deal of their campaign time trying to win interest groups and individual constituents, Trump devotes most of his campaign time to rally speeches (Quam & Ryshina-Pankova, 2016). Since language is the main medium used to interact with the audience, it becomes pertinent to examine further how such political goals are accomplished using a personal style that goes against the grain.

2.2. Previous Studies

Many studies on thematic structures and thematic progression have been conducted in different contexts to find out how different concepts were delivered and how different purposes were achieved. However, because it is usually controversial in nature, the political context proves to be one of the most important contexts when it comes to how the audience is addressed and how language is used to achieve political objectives. Because of the essential part they constitute in language communication, Theme has been studied from different angles. Some studies have examined Trump’s speech from the perspective of thematic choice functionality. That is, how the selection and focus of a Theme can be used in portraying the speaker in a certain way. For example, mainly employing the ‘significance’ (i.e., Theme importance) component of James Paul Gee’s model of ‘building tasks,’ Alenizi and AbuSa’aleek (2022) analyzed Trump’s speech given in 2017 in Saudi Arabia to see how the themes were approached and utilized. It was found that Trump, through selecting and moving from one Theme to another, enacted different identities within the same speech.

However, what follows is a review of some studies related to Theme structure and thematic progression patterns. It starts broadly, taking the political context in general as a Theme (i.e., not US-specific) involving one of the well-known political characters in modern times (Queen Elizabeth II), then narrows down into research related to the US political context, and finally ends with some studies focusing on Trump’s speech style as part of the US political context.

One study that investigated thematic structures in political discourse is Sari and Alyousef (2024). In this study, 20 Christmas speeches given by Queen Elizabeth (from 2001 to 2021) were analyzed to see what types of thematic structures were more frequently used and what thematic progression patterns were most commonly employed. The findings revealed that while all three types of themes (i.e., topical, interpersonal, & textual) were used in Queen Elizabeth’s 20 speeches, *Topical* Theme was used more frequently (77%) than the *interpersonal* and *textual* themes (6% & 17%, respectively). Since the topical Theme is an essential part of the clause (because of its relation to the participant component of the clause), this high percentage of the topical themes used by the Queen was not unexpected. With regard to *unmarked* and *marked* Themes, it was found that unmarked Themes constituted 82% of the topical Themes in the 20

speeches. Finally, the analysis of 88 thematic chains showed that the “*constant*” pattern was the most frequently used with 52%, followed directly by the “*linear*” pattern with 46%.

In the United States political context, the language produced by former US presidents has also received great attention from a ‘discourse analysis’ perspective, in general, and from a ‘thematic structure’ analysis in particular. For instance, Kuswoyo (2016) analyzed Barak Obama’s speech delivered in two press conferences. The analysis showed that while five thematic patterns were found in the data, the most frequent pattern was the combination of the *constant* and the *linear* thematic patterns, which functionally served to better clarify the messages being communicated. Another study that investigated Obama’s speech from a thematic analytical perspective was Feifei (2019), where the election-winning speech given by Obama was analyzed. It was found that 60% of the Themes used by Obama were *unmarked* (i.e., the “default type”; the expected form). It was suggested that, considering Obama was the first Black president of the US, he was very concerned about being correctly perceived, which required him to speak with confidence about his plans. Saepuloh et al. (2023) analyzed a speech by US President Joe Biden on Israel-Hamas and Ukraine-Russia wars. The results showed that each thematic progression pattern illustrated distinct ways in which Theme-Rheme is employed. However, an apparent limitation of this study is the small sample size of the data, which makes it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions.

In another study that looked into the thematic structure of Donald Trump’s speech from an SFL thematic perspective, which is closely related to the present study (although not on his impromptu/unrehearsed speech as in this study), Liu and Zhang (2018) analyzed the victory speech given by Trump in 2016. The findings showed that most of the Themes used by Trump in the speech were ‘simple’ and ‘unmarked,’ which has been seen to be more convenient to the audience in quickly understanding his remarks. In addition, the study revealed Trump’s frequent use of the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘I.’ While his use of ‘I’ was interpreted as showing that he is an independent entity that won the election and could be relied on, the use of ‘we’ shows another aspect of his presidential plan, which is about working hand in hand with the people as one nation.

2.3. Why This Study

Through surveying the literature on thematic structure and thematic progression analysis, many studies, regardless of the context, analyzed types of discourse that are not typically natural or spontaneous. For example, in the political context, speeches or formal letters/statements have been the focus of many studies on thematic analysis. On the other hand, few studies focused on interviews or debates, which reflect the improvised or unrehearsed nature of human language production (i.e., prototypically represented by face-to-face conversation), as well as the most authentic form of language exhibited in its most direct and spontaneous nature (Dash, 2005; Newman, 2008). At the same time, it would also be interesting to see how the institutional identities of ‘government’ and ‘news interview’ might function or play a role in Trump’s speech. To look further into this aspect of Trump’s speech, the present study aimed to investigate Theme structure and thematic progression patterns in the first interview with Donald Trump after winning the 2024 presidential elections.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study is framed by Halliday’s (2014) social semiotic approach to the analysis of Theme/Rheme and Daneš’s (1974) model of thematic progression patterns.

3.1.1. Theme Structure

In SFL, Themes can be classified in terms of their functions into *topical*, *interpersonal*, and *textual*. These are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Themes can also be classified in terms of their typicality of occurrence into Unmarked (typical/conventional) and Marked (non-typical/unconventional) Themes. Whereas ‘unmarked’ themes are typical/usual themes (very frequent), ‘marked’ themes are not typical in that they seem to be positioned in the clause differently from the usually expected place of such phrases. This non-typical movement of the Theme made by the speaker is in most cases functionally

motivated. That is, it is usually employed by the speaker for a functional purpose such as emphasizing a particular segment in the utterance because of its significance in the message delivered. For example, when ‘suddenly’ is fronted in *suddenly he smiled* (instead of *he smiled suddenly*), the ‘unexpectedness’ of smiling is emphasized (the meaning is communicated with the adverb itself, but emphasis is accomplished by making it at the beginning), and when ‘you’ is fronted in “*you I blame for this*” (instead of “*I blame you for this*”), there is emphasis on ‘you’ as the only entity to be held responsible for the action referred to (Halliday, 2014, p. 73). The Unmarked Theme refers to themes that are usually used in the following structural forms.

1. “*Declaratives*” where the subject of the clause serves as the unmarked theme such as “John” in “*John knocked the door.*”
2. “*Yes/No interrogatives*” where the auxiliary verb used in the question serves as the unmarked Theme such as “did” in “*Did John knock the door?*”
3. “*WH- interrogatives*” where the wh-word used in the question serves as the unmarked Theme such as “who” in “*who knocked the door?*”
4. “*Imperatives*” like “knock” in “*knock the door!*”

On the other hand, marked themes are non-typical Themes where the clause begins with an adverbial or prepositional phrase (Halliday, 1985). Generally speaking, it could be said that themes that do not belong to any of the four categories of unmarked themes listed above are classified as marked themes. For example, the adverbial phrase “with a large piece of wood” is the marked Theme in “*With a large piece of wood, John knocked the door!*” A writer uses a marked theme to emphasize the importance of this part of the message.

Overall, one aspect that shows the significance of Theme as an important element of language is the relation it has with the textual metafunction. Whereas the two metafunctions of the ideational (i.e., the content of the message; what is going on) and the interpersonal (i.e., how the speaker feels about the content of the message) carry meaningful content, the textual metafunction is how such meaningful content is made accessible to –and therefore comprehended by– the hearer/reader (Halliday, 2014).

Table 1. *Theme Types Within the SFL Framework (Egins, 2004; Halliday, 1985)*

Theme Type	Function	Example
Topical	<i>The Topical Theme is usually the subject of the clause and is related to the ideational/experiential content of the clause.</i>	<i>“John” knocked the door.</i> (“John” is the <i>Topical Theme</i>)
Interpersonal	<i>The Interpersonal Theme expresses how the writer/speaker feels about something referred to in the clause or is used to interact with the reader/hearer.</i>	<i>“Surprisingly,” John knocked the door.</i> (“Surprisingly” is the <i>Interpersonal Theme</i>)
Textual	<i>The textual Theme is used to organize the text and make it more coherent and logically flowing.</i>	<i>“However,” John knocked the door.</i> (“However” is the <i>Textual Theme</i>)

3.1.2. *Thematic Progression Patterns*

Thematic progression is mostly analyzed in the literature using Daneš’s (1974) model of thematic progression patterns. Building on concepts such as ‘Given’ and ‘New’ information and earlier contributions within Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) proposed by Firbas (1974), Daneš (1974) introduced the model of thematic progression (TP) patterns, which since then has been followed in the literature when analyzing themes in a given text by looking at how the text is connected through particular ‘thematic progression’ patterns. These patterns reflect how themes develop within the text (Egins, 2004). According to Daneš (1974), TP refers to how utterance themes in a text are initiated and ordered and how they are mutually and hierarchically interconnected. In addition, it refers to how these themes relate to higher-level themes of texts, such as those of a paragraph, chapter, etc. There are three common patterns of thematic progression: ‘constant or Theme reiteration,’ ‘linear or zig-zag,’ and ‘multiple Theme/split Rheme’ pattern.

The ‘*constant Theme*’ or ‘*Theme reiteration*’ pattern is where the Theme in clause 1 is taken and repeated/reiterated in the following clause. This pattern is frequently used in short passages, providing biographical

information and longer passages discussing a specific person's behavior. They are also commonly used in informational texts describing a particular topic or concept (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). The 'linear' or 'zig-zag' Theme pattern occurs when the subject matter in Rheme 1 is taken and employed in the Theme of the following clause. Finally, the Rheme of one clause may consist of *different pieces of information* and each of which is used as the Theme of several following clauses, constituting 'multiple Theme/split Rheme' pattern. Figure 1 illustrates these three patterns in a clausal diagram (Bloor & Bloor, 2004):

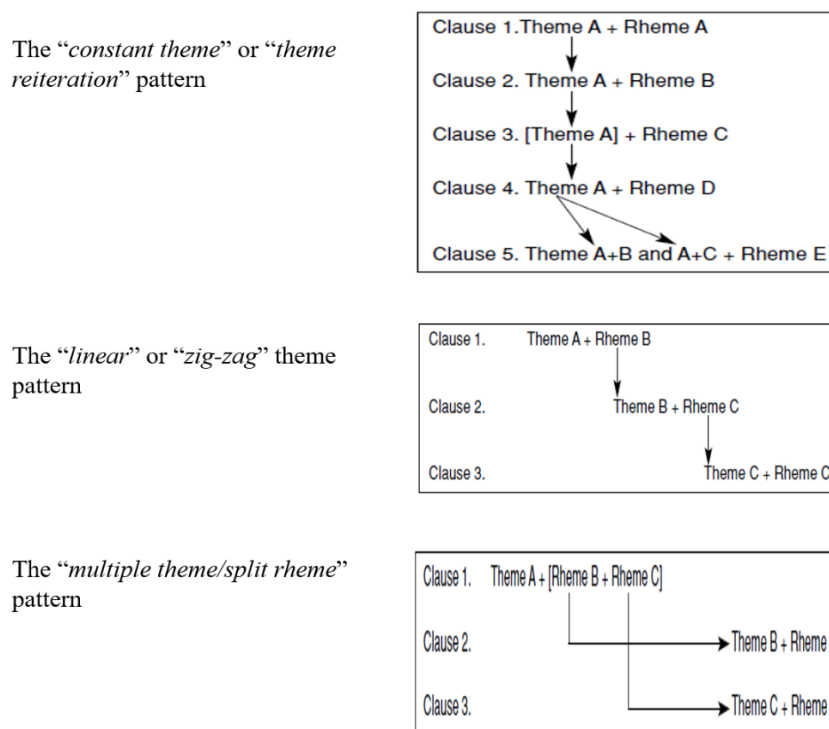


Figure 1: An Illustration of the Three TP Patterns (Adapted from Bloor & Bloor, 2004, pp. 87-90)

There are also other less common, however, essential patterns such as the 'derived Theme,' which is needed in thematic analysis in cases where the words/phrases/expressions used in Theme position are "cohesively linked in meaning, but not necessarily in form, to a topic which has been stated earlier in the text" (Bloor & Bloor, 2004, p. 91). This pattern of Theme builds in some cases on what the speaker/writer presumes is known to the hearer/reader as background knowledge or is expectedly inferred based on a given topic.

The present study aimed to analyze Trump's 8 December 2024 presidential interview with Kristen Welker in *Meet the Press* to investigate Theme structure, thematic progression patterns, and thematic markedness.

3.2. Study Design

The research design of the current study is primarily qualitative, although the researchers used frequencies and percentages to support the qualitative findings when comparing Trump's use of Theme structure and thematic progression types. To answer the first research question about the most commonly used 'Theme type' (i.e., topical, interpersonal, or textual) by Trump in the interview, a quantitative analysis of the data was conducted using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2008), and frequency counts were obtained. The UAM Corpus Tool is a text analysis software that runs different SFL built-in text analyses. One of these analyses is a 'Theme' analysis based on SFL, which renders a descriptive report about the text showing the number of occurrences of each Theme type, and how many of the themes were 'marked.'

In an attempt to answer the second research question that looks into the most commonly employed thematic progression pattern by Trump, a sample of the text (the first 1,000 words) was manually analyzed, and thematic progression patterns were identified. To get estimated rates of these patterns in the whole dataset, the relative frequencies

found in the 1,000-word sample patterns were calculated by dividing the number of each type in the sample by the total number of all themes found, and multiplying the result by 100.

3.3. Data and Analysis

Trump's part of the presidential interview with Welker in *Meet the Press* (NBCNews website on Dec. 8th, 2024) constituted over 13,000 words. As stated earlier, general descriptive information of Trump's speech was obtained using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2008). This information is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Descriptive Information of Trump's Part of the Interview*

Lexical Items	Total No. of Content Words		Function Words		Lexical Density	Nominalization	
	Tokens	%	Tokens	%			
	13,288	5,363	40.36	7,925	59.64	0.32	8.81% (142 out of 1612 nouns)
Structure	Text Complexity (Average word length "character per word")		No. of Finite Verbs		Person Reference		Passive
	3.89		2185		1 st P	7.2 %	
				2 nd P	2.27 %		
				3 rd P	6.56 %		
Sentiment	Subjective Positivity *						
	0.126						

* A measure of positivity of words in a text based on the MPQA subjectivity lexicon (-1: very negative, 0: balanced, +1: very positive)

Based on the question asked by the interviewer, Trump's responses in this interview ranged from only a few words to longer chunks, which may reach up to over 200 words.

Theme structures in Trump's speech and thematic 'markedness' were first analyzed. Whereas Theme structure shows how the text is organized, it enables linguists to understand and discuss linguistic choices made by speakers/writers (Forey, 2002). Analysis of this part was done through the UAM Corpus Tool. A further overall manual verification was done to ensure overall accuracy. Thematic progression patterns were identified manually.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Theme Structure

The first research question aimed to explore the dominant Theme type in Trump's 2024 presidential interview. Table 3 shows the distribution of different Theme types in Trump's impromptu speech.

Table 3. *The Distribution of Theme Types in Trump's Speech*

Theme Structure	<i>Topical</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Textual</i>	<i>Total Themes</i>
Frequency	1333	43	382	1758
Percentage	75.82%	2.45%	21.73%	100%

Out of the total 1758 Themes in Trump's speech in the interview, 1333 were Topical Themes, 382 instances were *textual* Themes, and only 43 instances were *interpersonal* Themes. *Topical* Themes are expected to be significantly more frequent than the other two types of Theme because of their relation to the *ideational* metafunction (i.e., "what is happening"), which is essential to any utterance. On the other hand, while *interpersonal* themes show how Trump feels about or reacts against a particular subject, *textual* themes show whether he relies more on textual elements in making his statements cohesive or on assumed contextual cues.

Topical and *textual* Theme frequencies are interestingly very similar to those found in Sari and Alyousef (2024) study of Theme in Queen Elizabeth's speeches, where *topical* themes constituted 77% and *textual* Themes constituted

17%. With regard to the *interpersonal* Theme, it was 6% in the Queen's speeches, whereas it was almost 2.5% in Trump's speech. Both datasets show agreement in having the *topical* Theme as the most frequently used and the *interpersonal* Theme as the least used. The very low usage of interpersonal Themes by Trump suggests that since Trump is in the highest position in the country, he may not need to give those in lower positions much consideration.

Trump's impromptu speech included a large number of personal pronouns as *topical* themes. This is not surprising since Trump aimed to express messages persuasively. The most frequently used personal pronoun was 'I' (638 instances), followed by 'we' (258 instances), followed by 'they' (210 instances). This finding is similar to what was found in Chen's (2018) and Kaewrungruang and Yaoharee's (2018) studies of Trump's political speech. An example where the personal pronoun 'I' was used twice in the same sentence is the following:

(1) *I'm lucky I'm not a drinker.*

I'm lucky		I'm not a drinker.	
THEME		RHEME	
I	'm lucky	I	'm not a drinker
THEME	RHEME	THEME	RHEME
Topical		Topical	
Unmarked		Unmarked	

As can be seen in example 1 above, at the clause level, the first pronoun is the Theme of "I'm lucky" and the second pronoun is the Theme of the second clause "I'm not a drinker." Looking at this from a wider perspective, the first clause, "I'm lucky," could be viewed as the Theme of the whole sentence and the second clause as the Rheme because "I'm not a drinker" explains and provides more details about why Trump thinks he is 'lucky.' Subconsciously, this use of 'I' in such a recursively embedded structure seems to express the centrality of the speaker more than mere repetitions in separate clauses do, using conjunctions such as 'and,' 'but,' or 'so.' In other words, saying "I'm lucky I'm not a drinker" is more influential than saying, for example, "I'm not a drinker, so I'm lucky." The former is more effective because a speaker claiming they are 'lucky' intrigues hearers into thinking and postulating about what makes the speaker 'lucky.' This seems to play a role in subconsciously engaging the hearer with what is being said.

The most frequent textual Theme is 'and' with 169 instances, followed by 'but' (72), and 'if' (40). The most common interpersonal Theme used by Trump in the interview was 'do' in "do you" (12) addressed to the interviewer. Below is an example that includes all three Theme types.

(2) *And maybe that's not fair.*

And maybe that			's not fair
And	maybe	that	
Textual	Interpersonal	Topical	
THEME			RHEME

In Example 2, Trump is referring to something he said earlier about making some restrictions that may negatively affect a company he benefited from in his presidential campaign. The stance he is taking is that doing so is what should be done because the company is affiliated with another company. At the same time, considering the interviewer's questions, which imply disagreement, as well as the fact that he did benefit from that company, drives him to express his strongly held position with a 'maybe.'

With regard to thematic "markedness," marked themes come very frequently in the form of prepositional or adverbial phrases. The results show that 'adjunct' marked Themes were used more (n=135) than complements (n=41) in Trump's speech. Adjunct marked themes provide extra information that is not part of the main constituent, such as adverbial and prepositional phrases (like the example mentioned above: "suddenly he smiled"). The complement marked themes would be examples like the typical example provided by Halliday (2014), "you I blame for this," where the unusual fronting of the complement of the verb is employed for emphasis purposes. Table 4 shows the frequency of *marked* and *unmarked* Themes in Trump's speech.

Table 4. *Frequency Counts of Unmarked and Marked Themes in Trump's Speech in the Interview*

Thematic Markedness	<i>Unmarked</i>	<i>Marked</i>	<i>Total</i>
Frequency	1157	176	1,333
Percentage	86.80%	13.20%	100%

Unmarked Themes constituted 86%% of the themes used by Trump, which is close but relatively higher than those found in Queen Elizabeth's speech (Sari and Alyousef, 2024) which was 82%. This should be expected considering that formal speeches go through careful planning and editing processes while impromptu speech does not, which allows more flexibility in using default unmarked themes. However, it was reported in Feifei's (2019) study that Obama's use of unmarked Themes in his election winning speech formed 60%. This large difference could be due to the level of formality of the speech that require some departure from the ordinary style resulting in more usage of marked themes. However, Queen Elizabeth's speeches are highly formal and yet they show close usage rates of unmarked themes to Trump's. Does the variety of English here (i.e., British vs. American English) have effect on these results? Until more comparative research has been done in this regard, it would be hard to pin down the exact reason. Generally speaking, this high usage of unmarked Themes by Trump (86%) could be seen in support of conclusions made in previous studies (e.g., Liu & Zhang, 2018) pointing that Trump uses 'simple' and 'direct' language in influencing the audience. Examples of marked Themes used by Trump in the interview are provided in Table 5.

Table 5. *Examples of Marked Themes in Trump's Speech in the Interview*

	THEME	RHEME
1	<i>With Canada, and in particular Mexico</i>	<i>we have millions of people pouring into our country.</i>
2	<i>In California</i>	<i>they raised it up to a very high number.</i>
3	<i>If we find something better</i>	<i>I would love to do it.</i>
4	<i>Many of those things</i>	<i>Democrats should've agreed to.</i>
5	<i>As you know</i>	<i>Mark Zuckerberg came in.</i>
6	<i>And last time</i>	<i>we were down 30% with youth.</i>
7	<i>Although I have to say</i>	<i>Lara did a phenomenal job as the head of the Republican Committee, along with Michael.</i>

In example 1 above, this utterance comes as part of the answer to a question about whether Trump was serious in imposing tariffs or if he was only using this as a negotiating tactic. He did not give a direct answer, not because he was hesitant about what he was doing; rather, because he seemed to be beyond the point of discussing being serious and aiming to reach the point where others agree with what he believed was the case. In other words, he starts his answer with an example to provide the interviewer with a picture of what he believes is reality that everyone should know about and, therefore, would have agreed with him if they knew what he knew. This example seems to be an instance of starting with *New* information (marked usage) to show what exactly the point of discussion should be.

In example 7 in Table 5, starting with "*Although I have to say,*" Trump uses the marked Theme 'although' structure not to express a reservation or an exception to what he was talking about, as this structure would usually be used. The focus of his preceding utterances (up to 250 words) was praising how well his close family members did in their previous political roles. Trump's non-conventional use of 'although' plays an effective role in emphasizing this particular 'important' thing among all the other 'important' things he mentioned earlier.

4.2. Thematic Progression Patterns

The second research question aimed to investigate the most commonly employed thematic progression pattern in Trump's 2024 presidential interview. The most frequent pattern used by Trump was the constant pattern, followed by linear progression. Derived Theme rarely occurred in Trump's speech. No instances of the multiple theme/split rheme were found in the analyzed sample, which is expected considering its usually complex nature and the simplistic nature of spoken impromptu language. Frequencies and percentages for each thematic progression pattern have been calculated by dividing the frequency of instances for each thematic progression type by the total number of all patterns (n=739), and multiplying the outcome by 100. Frequency counts and percentages are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *Thematic Progression Patterns in Trump’s Interview with Meet the Press*

		TP Patterns			
		Constant	Linear	Derived	Total
Corpus					
13,288 words	Frequency	433	278	28	739
(3093 Themes)	Percentage	58.59%	37.62%	3.79%	100%

Note. Frequencies here are calculated based on tokens found in the analyzed 1,000-word sample.

Below is an excerpt from Trump’s speech. It was an answer to the interviewer’s question: “*We are going to delve into your nominations, but since you bring him up, do you still have confidence in Pete Hegseth?*” There are four instances of constant Theme pattern and one instance of linear Theme pattern.

Table 7. *An Example of the Constant TP Pattern*

Textual Theme	Interpersonal Theme	Topical Theme	Rheme
	Yes,	I	do.
		I ↓	really do.
		He	‘s a very smart guy.
		I	‘ve known him through Fox,
		I ↓	
but		I	‘ve known him for a long time.
And		He	‘s basically a military guy.
		I	mean,
		I ↓	
	every time	I talk to him,	all he wants to talk about is the military.
		He ←	‘s a military guy.
		I	used to kid him about it.
		I ↓	
		I	didn’t think we’d be in this position ...

Trump starts his answer by “*Yes, I do*” and then he goes on to explain why he still has confidence in Pete (Pete Hagseth is now the Secretary of Defense, appointed by Trump) and repeats the topical Theme by saying, “*I really do.*” Later on, Trump uses a ‘linear’ pattern when saying ‘*He*’ to refer to Pete, which was introduced in the Rheme of the previous clause.

The Constant Theme here predominantly reflects emphasis on the speaker himself. In other words, while the question asked was about whether Trump still had confidence in Hegseth, and in each clause, Trump expressed positive things about Hegseth, the whole chunk of the response seems to be an answer to a slightly different question, such as “*why is Trump right in having confidence in Hegseth?*”

As referred to previously, the thematic progression patterns used by Queen Elizabeth in Christmas speeches were reported by Sari and Alyousef (2024) as 52% of the thematic progression patterns were *constant* (or *reiteration*) and 46% were *linear* (or *zig-zag*). With respect to studies in the US political context, and particularly Obama’s press conference responses, which were qualitatively analyzed by Kuswoyo (2016), it was found that Obama used several different patterns, namely constant, linear, a combination of constant and linear, and a combination of constant and split, and derived themes. On the other hand, Trump employed three types of thematic progression patterns: the constant (58.59%), the linear (37.62%), and the derived (3.79%) thematic progression patterns. Accounting for almost 60% of the patterns used, this high usage of the constant theme by Trump indicates, on the one hand, the simplicity of the language he uses. On the other hand, this, along with the high usage of first-person references, may suggest that a level of centrality and narcissism is at work.

With regard to Trump’s use of impersonal structures, which may indicate reservation due to the institutional identity setting (i.e., interview) as a factor, the number of passive structures and nominalization has been obtained (as seen in Table 2). Trump’s part of the interview constituted a total of 142 nominalized nouns forming about 8.81% of the nouns used, which is relatively lower than the 10% rate found for English interviews by Zohrabi and Radkhah (2019).

Another aspect was how many passive structures (passivization) were used by Trump. While the percentage of passives found in English interviews was 13.6%, the passive structure used by Trump formed less than 4%. This could be seen in terms of relying on simple language, as found earlier. In addition, it could also be claimed that since Trump is in the highest power position in the country, he is not thinking much about what other identities may take and respond to his remarks. However, in order to get a better insight into whether and how being a president or being in a news interview as an institutional identity plays a role in Trump's speech, a comparison between this interview with an interview with a previous US president should be highly reliable. Also, another comparison that would insure rigorous findings might be attained from comparing Trump's "interview" speech with a "formal speech" such as his inaugural speech.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze Donald Trump's impromptu speech from an SFL perspective. Three main areas were focused in this study: Theme structure, thematic markedness, and thematic progression patterns. The findings showed that Trump used many topical and textual themes, but fewer interpersonal themes. First-person pronouns constituted many instances of the topical themes in his speech. Trump used more adjunct-marked themes than complement-marked themes to make his arguments more persuasive. In addition, the findings showed that the most common thematic progression pattern in the data was the constant pattern, followed by the linear. Overall, Trump's speech style, as can be seen through Theme analysis, shows Trump as a self-centred personality that uses language skilfully in a 'simple' and 'personal' way to gain the audience's confidence. This has important implications for those interested in persuading an audience. In other words, we have a political character who seems to have won the presidency by influencing simple people through simple language, which means that understanding the majority of the audience's background, preferences, and expectations is an essential component of persuasion.

These findings suggest that different styles and usages of language can make a difference in achieving communicative goals. Making communication effective is not only about fluency and linguistic repertoire; it also relies heavily on how messages are delivered to make a text more cohesive and coherent. Therefore, in a similar way to how politicians use language to persuade potential voters, educators and teachers should pay attention to the implicit functions of language that are easily accessible to students.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

References

- Alenizi, A., & AbuSa'aleek, A. O. (2022). Political discourse analysis: Analyzing building tasks in Trump's speech in Saudi Arabia. *Arab World English Journal*, 13(2) 462-472. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol13no2.32>
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Bloor, T., & Bloor, M. (2004). *The functional analysis of English: A Hallidayan approach* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203774854>
- Chen, W. (2018). A critical discourse analysis of Donald Trump's inaugural speech from the perspective of systemic functional grammar. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 8(8), 966-972. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0808.07>
- Dash, N. S. (2005). *Corpus linguistics and language technology: With reference to Indian languages*. India: Mittal Publications.
- Daneš, F. (1974). Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text. In F. Daneš (Ed.), *Papers on functional sentence perspective* (Vol. 147, pp. 106-128). Academia. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111676524.106>
- Egins, S. (2004). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics* (2nd ed.). Continuum.
- Feifei, T. (2019). An analysis of theme and thematic progression patterns in political speeches. In *3rd International Conference on Economics, Management Engineering and Education Technology* (pp. 1563-1567).

- Firbas, J. (1974). Some aspects of the Czechoslovak approach to problems of functional sentence perspective. In F. Danes (Ed.), *Papers on functional sentence perspective* (pp. 11-37). Academia Praha. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111676524>
- Forey, G. (2002). *Aspects of theme and their role in workplace texts*. University of Glasgow. <http://www.isfla.org/Systemics/Print/Theses/ForeyThesis/>
- Full interview: Donald Trump details his plans for Day 1 and beyond in the White House. (2025, February 6). [Video]. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-interview-meet-press-kristen-welker-election-president-rcna182857>
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2014). *Introduction to functional grammar* (Rev. by C. M. I. M. Matthiessen, 4th ed.). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203431269>
- Hidalgo-Tenorio, E., & Benítez-Castro, M. Á. (2022). Trump's populist discourse and affective politics, or on how to move 'the People' through emotion. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 20(2), 86-109.
- Kaewrungruang, K., & Yaoharee, O. (2018). The use of personal pronoun in political discourse: A case study of the final 2016 united states presidential election debate. *rEFLECTIONS*, 25(1), 85-96. <https://doi.org/10.61508/refl.v25i1.136268>
- Kuswoyo, H. (2016). Thematic structure in Barack Obama's press conference: A systemic functional grammar study. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 7(2), 257-267.
- Liu, X., & Zhang, H. (2018). Discourse analysis of the victory speech of President Trump from the perspective of Theme and thematic progression patterns. *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Education, Management, Information and Management Society (EMIM 2018)*.
- Mayr, A. (2008). Introduction: Power, discourse, and institutions. In A. Mayr, *Language and power: An introduction to institutional discourse* (pp. 1-25). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Newman, J. (2008). Spoken corpora: Rationale and application. *Taiwan Journal of Linguistics*, 6(2), 27-58.
- O'Donnell, M. (2008). The UAM CorpusTool: Software for corpus annotation and exploration. In B. Callejas, C. M., & e. al. (Eds.), *Applied Linguistics Now: Understanding Language and Mind / La Lingüística Aplicada Hoy: Comprendiendo el Lenguaje y la Mente* (pp. 1433-1447). <http://www.corpustool.com/>
- Quam, J. & Ryshina-Pankova, M. (2016). "Let me tell you...": Audience engagement strategies in the campaign speeches of Trump, Clinton, and Sanders. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 4, 140-160.
- Saepuloh, A., Ningsih, D. N., & Halimah. (2023). Theme-rheme and thematic progression analysis of Joe Biden's speech on the Israel-Hamas and Russia-Ukraine wars. *International Journal of Educational and Life Sciences*, 1(4), 217-228. <https://doi.org/10.59890/ijels.v1i4.991>
- Sari, A. M., & Alyousef, H. S. (2024). Analyzing thematic structures in Queen Elizabeth II's Christmas speeches. *Journal of Contemporary Language Research*, 3(2), 53-63. <https://doi.org/10.58803/jclr.v3i2.108>
- Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., & Hamilton, H. E. (Eds.). (2008). *The handbook of discourse analysis*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Tappin, B.M., & McKay, R.T. (2019). Moral polarization and out-party hostility in the US political context. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 7(1), 213-245. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v7i1.1090>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis? In J. Bloomaert & C. Bulcaen (Eds.), *Political linguistics* (pp. 11-52). John Benjamins.
- Wang, L. (2007). Theme and rheme in the thematic organization of text: Implications for teaching academic writing. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(1), 164-176.

Wilson, J. (2015). Political discourse. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 775–794). Blackwell.

Zohrabi, M. & Radkhah, S. (2019). A comparative analysis of institutional identities in corpus of English and Persian news interview. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 132-154.



© 2025 by the authors. Licensee University of Zanjan, Iran. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0 license). (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).