

## A Systemic Functional Linguistic Differentiation of Theme-idea and Theme-subject

Antoni M. Keya\*

### Abstract

*The closeness in sound between the literary theme-idea and non-literary theme-subject has blurred the difference between the two that they are treated similarly in Tanzanian academic literature. Examples of theme-idea are grammatically realized in phrases as those for theme-subject, and this limits the enjoyment and appreciation of literary works. This study is an attempt to make explicit the difference between the two. The question leading this study is: how do theme-idea and theme-subject differ in their grammatical realization? The data were collected from various secondary schools and universities in Tanzania, and from lecturers during the meeting where this work was presented for the first time. The Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics was used to help set the two apart. The results show that the examples given for theme-idea in this study are in the form of noun phrases and they lack process types for them to construe doings, happenings and experience. These are examples that should have been given only for subjects or topics. An idea is grammatically expressed in a clause, which none of the respondent's supplies in this study. Finally, I argue that this mismatch is detrimental to the understanding and enjoying of literary works.*

### Key words

*Theme-idea, theme-topic, theme-subject, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Tanzania*

### Introduction

The 'Ant and the Chrysalis' in the *Aesop's fable* ends with a warning "appearances are deceptive" which challenges us, especially linguists, to be wary of words that spell the same and sound the same but with different meanings. They always catch us unawares. These are homonyms such as *theme* (the main idea in a work of art) and *theme* as a subject or topic. These two are deceptive as some literary scholars see these two concepts as similar, but these words have important differences that affect the learning of literature. This study was prompted by the mismatch between the definitions of theme as a central idea, thought or message found in a literary work of art, which this study calls *theme-idea*, and grammatical form of examples given for them. Examples were given in noun phrases,

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\* Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, P.O. Box 35040, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, E-mail: amkeya@yahoo.com

which according to this study, should be for *theme-topic* or *theme-subject*. We seem, for some unknown reason, to have accepted examples supplied by lexicographers rather than literary scholars. For example, all the following dictionary examples, which we adopt, lack the notion of the idea, but the subject matter, topic or anything that goes defined in a noun phrase. These lexicographers say that theme is:

1. a subject or topic, short dissertation by a student, leading subject in a musical composition (Patterson, R.F, 2004:172 [New Webster's Dictionary])
2. 1. SUBJECT the main subject or idea in a piece of writing, speech, film etc.: *The book's theme is conflict between love and duty. /main/central/major etc. theme Campbell has made health care a central theme in his campaign. /Nature is a recurrent theme (= a theme that appears repeatedly) in Frost's poetry. / Most of Kurt's other pictures were **variation on the same theme**. 2: theme music/song/tune: music or a song that is often played during a film or musical play, or at the beginning and end of a television or radio programme: *the theme song from 'The Brady Bunch'* 3: REPEATED TUNE a short simple tune that is repeated and developed in a piece of music: *Freia's theme in Wagner's opera*. 4: STYLE a particular style: *Her bedroom is decorated in a Victorian theme*. 5:PIECE OF WRITING *AmE old-fashioned* a short piece of writing on a particular subject that you do for school; **essay** [essay on] *Your homework is to write a two-page theme on pollution* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003:1718 underline mine).*

The Longman dictionary definition of a theme as the “main subject or idea” seems to have been treating theme-idea and theme-subject matter as one because it gives the example as “conflict between love and duty” which is a noun phrase. It also defines the subject as a “THING TALKED ABOUT: the thing you are talking about or considering in a conversation, discussion, book, film etc. (Longman, 2003:1654), and Macmillan defines it as “an idea, problem, situation etc. that you discuss or write about: e.g. The subject of our debate today will be *environment*” (Macmillan, 2002:1430). There's a lot more on *subject* as something taught at school, e.g. Kiswahili, English, History and Civics; 3. in art (thing or person you show when you paint a picture, take a photograph etc.), 4. in a test (person or animal used in a test or experiment); 5. in grammar (subject –

predicate) and 6. a citizen (someone born in a country that has a king or queen, or someone who has a right to live there). The dictionaries so far treat theme-idea and theme-subject to be the same, but this study doubts this similarity. In non-literary contexts the word *theme* is used as the subject of discussion, a topic, but this definition does not place the condition of centrality so we may have as many subjects in a text as the author wishes to introduce. Various books are organized in chapters or topics but these subjects (headings) of discussion do not meet the definition of theme as an idea. In line with the above, therefore, this work makes use of Systemic Functional Linguistics to make explicit the difference between these two types of theme. The question I wish to answer is: how are theme-idea and theme-subject stated grammatically? This work presents the methods of data collection, the results, and then offers a theoretical explanation with Systemic Functional Linguistics. It then does a discussion, offers recommendations in the form of what should be done, and then it gives a conclusion.

## Methods

This qualitative study adopted elements of survey method in collecting data. Data collection began in 2004 at St. Mary's Mazinde Juu in Lushoto among Form Six students doing the History, Geography and Language (HGL) combination. In the 2004/5 and 2005/6 academic years I collected data from the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM Main Campus) among students doing LT 112 *Introduction to Literary Devices*; LT 313 *Poetry*; and LT 315 *African-American and Caribbean Literature*. In the 2006/7 I did the same with 150 first-year students doing literature at the Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE). In 2007, I collected data from 40 Form Three students at Turiani Secondary School in Dar es Salaam. In the 2008/9 academic year, I did the same with 40 students doing LT 102 *Language and Literature* at the University of Dodoma (UDOM). In the same academic year (2008/9) I collected data from 125 third-year students doing LL 317 *Introduction to English Pragmatics*, 80% of whom were training to be teachers. In the year 2012 I collected data from 16 Form Three students at Kihonda Secondary School in Morogoro (April 19<sup>th</sup> 2012); 3 Form Three students and 6 Form Six students from Forest Hill Secondary School in Morogoro (April 20<sup>th</sup> 2012 and April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 respectively); 51 Form Five students from Bwiru Girls High School in Mwanza (November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012); 17 Form Four students from Aaron Harris Secondary School at Pugu (April 24<sup>th</sup> 2012); between April and May 2012 from 26 second year and 15 third year students doing BA

English & BA Literature at the University of Dodoma (UDOM); and lastly, 28 Form 3&4 students from Bunju A Secondary School in Dar es Salaam on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.

The respondents were asked to define (or simply present their understanding of) literary theme and then present any 5 examples of literary theme from any work of art, be it poetry, drama or prose. Examples would be drawn from as far back in the academic journey as one could remember, which meant that the respondents at the tertiary level could provide examples from their secondary level readings. This made possible the gathering of responses that are not necessarily a result of the teaching at tertiary level. No attempt was made to have respondents justify their choice of theme and the expressions in which they couched their responses. Where I could not be present to collect the data, teachers in those institutions collected the data on my behalf.

Then while presenting this work for the first time among staff and students at the University of Dar es Salaam, I asked some questions indirectly, trying to see under normal circumstances how they would articulate an idea, that is, what form or expression would theme as an idea take? The questions were:

- Do you have any idea what would happen if you didn't eat anything for a week?
- What do you think of Michael Jackson's song 'Liberian Girl'?

What are your views on the new policy?

Responding to this set of questions were postgraduate students and lecturers mainly from the Department of Literature.

## **Results**

The definitions from respondents were such as theme was: the central idea or message found in any literary work of art; central idea by the writer in a literary text; general idea a literary artist wants to convey to his society; central idea from different contexts; message or idea that the author wants the audience to get; central idea in a literary work; main idea, main focus of artistic work, what the author wants to communicate with his/her society; main concern in writing an artistic work; general idea of the author; central idea or main idea found in a literary work; main idea in a certain literary

text; idea presented in a literary work; central or main idea of an author found in any literary text when you read; central idea of a literary work like a novel, play, poem or short story; central or dominant idea in a literary work; central idea selected by literary artist under powerful feelings intending to convey message to a particular society; central idea of literary texts; main idea of an artist who composes different kinds of literary texts; and central idea or thought.

Examples by respondents were all without exception in the form of noun phrases, and to avoid duplicity, only a few are listed here: Exploitation; poverty; corruption; position of women; betrayal; classes between rich and poor, rulers and ruled ones; extravagancy; love; colonialism; equality among the people; prostitution; women's segregation; patriarchy; good policy and development; neo-colonialism; poverty; bad government; unemployment; polygamy; female genital mutilation; disillusionment; irresponsibility of political leaders; poor traditions; position of women in the society; racial segregation; strikes against government irresponsibility; ignorance; leadership; education; sexual harassment; lack of true love; family conflicts; early pregnancies; humiliation; marriage issues; and immorality.

The answers to my questions (and their answers in the brackets) to staff and students were:

- Do you have any idea what would happen if you didn't eat anything for a week? ([1]. If I didn't eat for that long I would die. [2] I wouldn't die but I would grow very weak. [3] That would be committing suicide.)
- What do you think of Michael Jackson's song 'Liberian Girl'? ([1] I like the song. [2] It is a very good song. [3] The Liberian girl was lucky. [4] I wish I were the girl on the other side. [5] It's a masterpiece.)
- What are your views on the new policy? (After explaining some fake policy, the answers were: [1] I don't like it at all. [2] Such a policy will get everyone out of office.)

**Theoretical Explanation: Systemic Functional Linguistics**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a meaning-based theory and regards language as a meaning system. Form is the realization of meaning, and studies should deal with language in use, focusing on the realization forms of meaning at the lexico-grammatical level. Traditional grammar and SFL both discuss the relationship between grammar and meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999: 15, 28). So we can say that Systemic Functional Linguistics is a framework for describing and interpreting language in functional terms. It is functional in that language is interpreted as a resource for making meaning, and descriptions are based on analyses of written and spoken text. According to Eggins, one of the functions of this theory is trying to answer the question: how do people use language (Eggins, 2004:3), just like we are asking how we should use language to realize an idea. Language functions as a semiotic system, involving two dimensions: content or meaning and its expression or realization (Eggins, 2004:17). The basic question this study has been trying to answer is: how is theme-idea expressed or realized grammatically as opposed to the theme-subject matter? In other words, how do the two differ? Which grammatical form do we use to express or realize a thought?

Clause is the basic grammatical unit that represents a process in terms of Systemic Function Grammar (Halliday, 2007). The semantic configuration of a process is experientially constructed from the process itself, the participants of the process and the circumstances associated with the process. The clause expresses mood, transitivity and theme at the same time. Processes are divided into six types, namely material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential (Halliday, 2007; Halliday and Matthiessen, 1999). This study uses transitivity (the ideational metafunction) to examine the data. Although the ideational metafunction deals with the extra-linguistic social aspect, it is important in this study as the expression of thoughts or ideas comes from the experience that sometimes tells us who does what to whom. Halliday (ibid) says that the ideational metafunction construes our material, mental and relational process types with which we construe our experience.

With the material processes we construe doings and happenings with Actor as an inherent participant of it, bringing about the unfolding of the process through time that may extend to another participant, Goal, which is directly affected by the performance of process, e.g.

“the tourist” in “the lion caught the tourist” (Halliday, 2004: 180). We can probe material processes by asking: “What does the Actor do to the Goal” or “What happens to the Goal” (Halliday, 2004: 192). The material processes are characterized by particular structural configurations, such as Process + Actor + Goal (+ Recipient), and Process + Range (ibid). There is always an Actor in this clause, which can be realized by a nominal group representing anything, and if directed, it has a Goal as well. So we can say that the material process must have Actor, Process and Goal as compulsory elements. The mental process type construes sensing - perception, cognition, intention, and emotion. It is characterized by Process + Senser + Phenomenon (ibid). A mental clause leads to a system of projection in a sense that it can project the content of consciousness, thoughts or ideas. The ideational metafunction therefore offers a network of inter-related options for representing different types of experience - our experience of the material world, of the world of our inner consciousness, and of the world of symbolization. But whereas Fawcett (2001: 49) confidently claims that “the process is typically expressed in the main verb,” the examples given in this study do not carry any process for lack of verbs, they are only nominal (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 251). Let us take a look at the data below:

Ideas here have been presented in two different ways in Lists A and B

<b>A: Examples given in schools and universities as themes, the main ideas</b>	<b>B: Examples solicited during a presentation without warning that the responses were ‘ideas</b>
<p>1) Exploitation; 2) poverty; 3) corruption; 4) position of women; 5) betrayal; 6) classes between rich and poor, 7) rulers and ruled ones; 8) extravagancy; 9) love; 10) colonialism; 11) equality among the people; 12) prostitution; 13) women’s segregation; 14) patriarchy; 15) good policy and development; 16) neo-colonialism; 17) poverty; 18) bad government; 19) unemployment; 20) polygamy;</p>	<p><i>Do you have any idea what would happen if you didn’t eat anything for a week?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. If I didn’t eat for that long I would die.</li> <li>ii. I wouldn’t die but I would grow very weak.</li> <li>iii. That would be committing suicide.</li> </ul> <p><i>What do you think of Michael Jackson’s song ‘Liberian Girl’?</i></p>

<p>21) female genital mutilation; 22) disillusionment; 23) irresponsibility of political leaders; 24) poor traditions; 25) position of women in the society; 26) racial segregation; 27) strikes against government irresponsibility; 28) ignorance; 29) leadership; 30) education; 31) sexual harassment; 32) lack of true love; 33) family conflicts; 34) early pregnancies; 35) humiliation; 36) marriage issues; and 37) immorality.</p>	<p>iv. I like the song. v. It is a very good song. vi. The Liberian girl was lucky. vii. I wish I were the girl on the other side. viii. It's a masterpiece.</p> <p><i>What are your views on the new policy?</i></p> <p>ix. I don't like it at all. x. Such a policy will get everyone out of office.</p>
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If we take a look between List A and List B, we note the difference between the two sets. List A has members with ideas that are formed by nominal groups, that is, they do not form a clause but they can be part of a clause. If they were to be components of a clause, they can either be part of Actor or Goal. They lack the most important thing with which they would construe doings and happenings, perception, cognition and intention—the processes. These, however, fit those called theme as subjects, things to talk about or deal with. An example of these would be “the University of Dar es Salaam’s proposed theme for the 4<sup>th</sup> research week (issued in February 2018) is ‘advancing research for improved life’”. The goals to achieve this theme are:

no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being for people; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate change; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; and partnership for the goals.

Other examples of expressions of ‘theme’ as topic include the theme for the 2010 International Students Week in Tanzania (hosted in



Dodoma from 19<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> July 2010), which ran as “The Voices of Young Intellectuals”. This is a nominal group too. Other examples of expressions of theme as topic include the following:

1. “The focus of University of Dar es Salaam activities shall be guided by the following theme: *Enhanced quality outputs in teaching, research and public service*”(UDSM, 2008:6*italics mine*);
2. “... themes of *cohering with a set of beliefs or commanding agreement in ideal conditions*” (Dodd, 2008:48*italics mine*);
3. “... themes of *individualization and de-structuring.*” (Côté and Levine, 2002:44*italics mine*);
4. “... theme of difference” (Vincent, 2003:46);
5. “Wollstonecraft’s themes of *rational equality, the corrupting influence of bodily passions, the injunction to restrain the passions within marriage, and the necessity for knowledge to aid the development of virtue* are all derived from the writers of devotional literature” (Boucher, 2003:198*italics mine*).

Any of the examples in List A would fit in with the examples given from numbers 1 to 5 and vice-versa. But upon hearing them, the question still remains: what about X? These examples cannot be used to answer this question because they are nominal groups only suitable for the expression of theme as subject of discussion or topic. The use of nominal groups to announce subjects or topics is popular in the world of seminars and workshops. We see that they are not capable of giving ideas, as they do not have means of construing experience. They do not carry the process types.

Turning to List B, this is a list with processes or verbs for telling experience. These have what Fawcett would like to see, “the process typically expressed in the main verb” (Fawcett 2001: 49). They give ideas. Examples of theme-idea would include the italicized parts of the following:

1. “a common theme running through modernist studies is the notion that *modern institutions (especially of 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘mass society’)* created a tension between self and society, resulting in *identity confusion, alienation, the fragmentation of self, and*

*loss of a sense of authenticity among those affected* (Côté and Levine, 2002:40 italics mine);

2. “Here are themes very familiar to multiculturalist theorists: the claims that *the denial of equal recognition to groups such as ethnic, religious and sexual minorities (a) marginalizes their voices and interests in democratic society, thus contributing to their oppression; and (b) damages their members’ potential for flourishing because of the way their identities are formed and expressed in cultural contexts that denigrate them*” (Evans, 2003:65 italics mine);
3. “[*The potential of the ethic*] as the basis of social and political critique is also realized when a society merits condemnation for fostering insincerity in the lives of its citizens (a theme which is at the heart of Rousseau’s political theory)” (Evans, 2003:65 italics mine);
4. “Poe’s ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ suggests that *when the desire for revenge becomes obsessive, it can deprive individuals of all that makes them human*” (Kirszner & Mandell, 1997:337 italics mine);
5. “It has also been a sub-theme of this chapter that *Barry’s proposed solution – privatization - is a non-starter as far as national groups in the state are concerned, and that the only way to resolve national conflict is to consider various institutional mechanisms to accommodate these political communities, in ways consistent with democratic governance and liberal values*” (Moore, 2003:172 italics mine).

All the above examples are in forms that can be broken into subject and predicate, offering a complete thought each on its own. What we have to insist on here is the presence of processes as underlined in the following: “modern institutions created a tension...” (Côté & Levine, 2002:40); “the denial of equal recognition to groups marginalizes their voices and damages their members’ potential...” (Evans, 2003:65); “the potential of the ethic is realized when a society merits condemnation...” (Evans, 2003:65); “when the desire for revenge becomes obsessive, it can deprive individuals of all that makes them human” (Kirszner & Mandell, 1997:337); “privatization is a non-starter as far as national groups in the state are concerned and that the only way to resolve national conflict is to

consider various institutional mechanisms...” (Moore, 2003:172). These examples are similar to those given during the presentation: If I didn’t eat for that long I would die; I would grow very weak; the Liberian girl was lucky; I wish I were the girl on the other side; such a policy would get everyone out of office. So this type of data is the ones acceptable as the form in which to express an idea.

## Discussion

This study attempted to remove uncertainty of meaning and grammatical expression between theme-idea and theme-subject. Non-literary examples have been used as part of data because the major purpose of the paper was to understand meaning and grammatical formulation of theme through an idea, and secondly, the literary and non-literary have in real world been freely used interchangeably in the reading and appreciation of literary works. It is this literal non-literary laxity in everyday use that seems to have caused the problem that this work tries to solve. Having this literal non-literary interchange mind, let us try this for an idea. Suppose you met a friend who said to you, “I got an idea”. Your question would be, “What is it?” or “What do you have in mind?” The answer would be something like, “We will need more money soon, so we should find other means to get the money.” Your friend would be giving you his or her idea; whether or not you will take it is another thing. Whatever response they give you here will be expressible in a clause, which can then be subdivided into “groups of words, sometimes separated by commas, which we technically refer to as phrases or groups...for example, a nominal group is a group of noun-like words, a verbal group contains the verb elements, a prepositional group realizes meanings about time, place, manner, etc.” (Eggins, 2004:124). This means that a clause is bigger and does more than a phrase or group. Examples given by students are less than they should be. What if someone came to you and said, “I got an idea” and upon you asking him what he or she had in mind, the response came as “prostitution”? This is a nominal group, and the question would still be ‘what about prostitution?’ still begging to know what the idea is. If we want to get theme-as-thought, which we should normally solicit with “What do you think?” [not ‘What are you thinking about?’], this is where we need Systemic Functional Linguistics. Halliday suggests that a process is represented only from the clause as the basic grammatical unit. If we are to begin here, the above question (“What do you think?”) requires a process, which Fawcett (2001:49) says it typically is “expressed in the main verb (Fawcett 2001: 49), shall be anything but definitely not in the

form of a nominal group like *corruption, prostitution, jealousy, hatred, love* etc. These expressions are lesser than a clause and they do not have or are not main verbs so they cannot express any process. These are typical expressions for topics of discussion. Since asking for one's ideas is alluding to what their views are about something, any question in that direction yields a response in the form of an independent clause, a sentence. From these illustrations, it is more convincing that a literary theme should be stated in the form of a statement or independent clause, and not a nominal group or phrase. So List A, which represents responses given by literary scholars as theme-idea are not good candidates for the current task. These are examples that should stand for theme-subject or theme-topic.

This study is of the view that theme-idea should be stated in a clause, but also more generally. It should be stated like a general truth applicable in other areas or situations. Talking about the literary theme, Kirszner and Mandell say that a theme should be an idea "that extends beyond the story" (Kirszner & Mandell, 1997: 337), and it has "meaning outside the story itself" (ibid: 338) which suggests that theme-idea is not something you pin down on a page or number of pages in the book. Theme-idea is arrived at after reading the whole book, play or poem and assessing various *issues*. These issues (not themes) can be located on a page or pages. These issues are the ones wrongly presented as theme-ideas. Sometimes a counting of issues that are dubbed as theme-ideas makes it seem like we have an unlimited number of themes in a single source. When I taught literature, my students would always come up with a good number of themes from the same book, one of them mentioning as many as thirteen from one source. The question was and it continues to be: how many themes can be unearthed from one work of art by one reader?

Since we all seem at peace with the definition of theme-idea (the literary theme) as *the central, dominant or main idea, thought or message in a work of art*, we can begin here. When something is central, excluding the geographical notion of positioning something at the center, that something is the most important of its kind in that setting. In this we would have terms like 'the central police station', 'the central bus station' etc. In such cases the police station referred to is the highest police station in importance in the area, and the bus station is the main one in importance, without any other

on top of it in importance. So when 'central' is used in a non-geographical sense it means or it is synonymous to 'most important', acquiring the superlative status. The most important is likewise the dominant one. Now, using the superlative 'most' marks the head in the noun phrase from all others in that setting in terms of importance. There is no way, for example, that we would accept as correct a construction like:

Malcolm is the most intelligent in Class 3, and Helena is also the most intelligent in the same class.

In other words, 'the most' should be the only one in importance, and this boils down to one thing – that is, if theme is the central or most important idea in a literary work, then there must be only one theme in one literary work through one's careful reading. Any other in the same work (by the same reader) would be a sub-theme.

### **So what should we do?**

Does knowing or accepting this affect the learning of literature? The answer is *yes*, but in a positive way. The purpose of carrying out this study was to find the correct grammatical realization of theme-idea to see to it that there is more commitment to the reading of literary works. This commitment helps us to understand and appreciate what the author, poet or playwright is bringing out. This way we are building a stronger bridge between the text producer and the consumer. So knowing what I think we know at this point, it calls the consumer to read the text multiple times to understand it. As soon as we do our multiple readings of the same source, the constant question in mind should be, "what is the author trying to say?" If this is the question we keep asking ourselves all the time, we will see that we will bring forward all the thirteen or so things that we once called or used to call 'themes' as issues. If we are to call the reader the house builder, then the builder should take those nominal groups or noun-phrases that she can pin to certain pages, collecting them as bricks. If the author is talking about issues of poverty, women's segregation, unemployment and, maybe prostitution, the reader should put all these together to ask herself the big question: what is the author trying to say by bringing up all these details? The answer she will get will not be traceable on a certain page number; it will be stretching across the whole text and beyond. So these little things that we once called themes will be the bricks with which to build a house – the theme-idea. We will always go back to these as evidence

if we are to defend our theme-idea. So in writing, this new house can be positioned as an opening or closing, depending on one's style.

### **Conclusion**

This work aimed at gripping the grammatical realization of theme-idea to differentiate between theme-idea and theme-topic. Respondents in literature classes in schools and universities rightly defined theme as a central idea (which makes the literary theme an idea) but the examples given of literary theme were composed only with the nominal group, making it similar to theme-subject matter, which is non-literal. The study attempted to disambiguate the two. The Hallidayan Systemic Functional Theory through the ideational metafunction (the material, mental and relational process types) showed that an idea could only be expressed with a clause. The examples given by students were only nominal groups that did not and would not construe doings and happenings for lack of process types. This study argues for the need to build a stronger bridge between the text producers in form of authors, poets and playwrights and text consumers – the readers, which calls for a better teaching of theme-idea.

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