TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION ANALYSIS IN A PERSONAL REFLECTIVE ESSAY: A SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS APPROACH

Dinda Saharani Harahap[1], Zaskia Safira[2], Kayla Khairunnisa Adhy Saputra[3], Nazwa Ghaisyah Azzahra[4], Rahmi Syahidah Azzam[5], Dinda Putri Adila[6], Johannes Jefria Gultom[7], Muhammad Eko Isdianto[8]
[1-7]*English Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Medan*
[1]dindasaharani.2253121082@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[2]zaskia.2253121098@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[3]kayla.2253121074@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[4]nazwaghaisya.2253121069@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[5]rahmisyzam.2253121002@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[6]dipudil.2253121004@mhs.unimed.ac.id,
[7]johan_nes81@yahoo.com, [8]ekoisdianto@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been widely applied to academic and formal texts, but studies of textual metafunction in modern personal reflective prose remain limited. This study aims to identify the types of Themes used in a personal reflective essay and examine how thematic development contributes to coherence and the flow of ideas. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design based on Halliday and Matthiessen's textual metafunction framework. The data consisted of 198 clauses from Gor's personal reflective essay, "You Can Genuinely Love Someone and Still Choose to Leave," published on Substack on May 31, 2026. Data were collected through documentation and analyzed by identifying Theme and Rheme, classifying Themes as Topical, Textual, or Interpersonal, examining their markedness and complexity, and tracing thematic progression. The findings show that Topical Themes are the most dominant, mainly realized through personal pronouns and participants such as I, we, they, and people. Textual Themes, including and, but, because, if, and when, connect ideas through relationships of addition, contrast, cause, and time, while Interpersonal Themes occur less frequently to express attitude, uncertainty, and personal position. Unmarked Simple Themes are the most common, followed by Unmarked Multiple Themes. Thematic progression contributes to coherence by connecting information across clauses and developing reflection from personal experiences to broader ideas about human behaviour, impermanence, and gratitude. The study demonstrates the usefulness of textual metafunction analysis in understanding how reflective prose organizes meaning coherently.

Keywords: *Systemic Functional Linguistics; Textual Metafunction; Theme–Rheme; Thematic Progression; Personal Reflective Essay.*

A. Introduction

Language is more than just a way to send messages back and forth. It also creates meaning, shows how people feel and think, and keeps ideas in order. Within the framework of

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday says that language has three main functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction shows how we experience the world, and the interpersonal metafunction deals with how we connect with others. The textual metafunction is important because it helps bring these meanings together into a clear and connected text. It does this by organizing each sentence in a way that starts with the Theme, which is where the sentence begins, and then moves on to the Rheme, which explains or develops the Theme. Even though a lot of SFL studies look at formal writing like academic papers, political speeches, and news articles, personal reflective writing such as personal essays that talk about feelings of loss, relationships with others, and coming to terms with situations has its own special way of organizing ideas. In personal reflective writing, authors explore deep inner feelings, moving smoothly between thinking about themselves, using logic to make sense of things, and telling a story that moves forward. Looking into how writers use different types of themes like Unmarked Simple Themes, Unmarked Multiple Themes, and Marked Themes in emotional and reflective writing helps us understand how feelings and thinking are organized into a clear and connected story.

Numerous researchers have explored textual metafunction across various text types using Halliday's SFL. For instance, Nurfadilah et al. (2022) analyzed textual metafunctions in EFL writing, demonstrating how students rely on declarative forms and simple themes to build internal text consistency. Similarly, Jing (2015) as well as Bloor and Bloor (2004) highlighted the importance of Theme-Rheme organizational patterns in guiding readers through a writer's train of thought and building textual coherence. In addition, McCabe and Heilman (2007) examined thematic choices in prose and essay writing, showing that thematic structures directly reflect the writer's underlying ideological orientation and rhetorical strategies. Despite this abundance of SFL studies on academic texts, IELTS writing, and political discourse, there is a scarcity of empirical research applying Textual Metafunction analysis to modern personal reflective

prose dealing with grief, loss, and human impermanence. Most existing studies categorize personal writing as merely informal, ignoring the intricate thematic manoeuvres writers use to balance personal introspection with broader universal truths. This study fills this empirical gap by meticulously dissecting how Theme-Rheme configurations and thematic complexity drive narrative progression in contemporary introspective prose.

A preliminary analysis of the chosen dataset shows clear patterns in how the text is structured. The writing often uses Unmarked Simple Themes (UST), which are mainly made up of first-person words like "I" and "We," to create a close, reflective tone. It also uses Unmarked Multiple Themes (UMT), which include words like "because," "and," "if," and "that," to help build logical and emotional connections in the text. Moreover, clear topics and relationship aspects are placed carefully to show important changes in the thinking process. Writing that reflects deep emotions needs to be well-organized so it doesn't confuse the reader. It's not clear exactly how certain themes help the writer move from personal memories to a broader understanding of right and wrong. To solve this problem, the study is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics, especially Halliday's Textual Metafunction framework (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), along with related ideas from Eggins (2004) and Gerot and Wignell (1994) about how sentences are structured. This method looks at Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal Themes, along with how complex the Theme is, whether it's simple or multiple, and whether it's unmarked or marked.

Based on this background, this study focuses on two questions:

1. What are the types of Themes (Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal Theme) realized in the reflective essay?
2. How does the thematic progression (Theme-Rheme organization) contribute to the coherence and flow of ideas in the essay?

In addressing this question, this study looks at how the text is structured to present the message in reflective writing and explains how the way themes and rhemes are arranged helps create a smooth story flow and emotional change. This study adds to the understanding of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the way text’s

function, and the analysis of reflective discussions. It also helps in understanding how personal writing shows emotional thinking, and how organizing themes affects how personal stories are clear and presented.

To fully comprehend this structural organization and textual clarity, it is essential to ground the analysis deeply in the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach. SFL views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts, emphasizing how language is used to express experiences, establish relationships, and organize messages. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the textual metafunction is primarily responsible for organizing ideational and interpersonal meanings into a coherent message. The main grammatical structure associated with the textual metafunction is the Theme-Rheme configuration. Theme functions as the point of departure of a message, establishing what the clause is about, while Rheme contains the remaining information that develops or expands the Theme. The identification of these elements requires a precise understanding of clause boundaries, a process supported by Eggins (2004), who emphasizes the importance of analyzing grammatical functions in discourse, and Gerot and Wignell (1994), who provide practical grammatical descriptions such as Subject, Finite, and Adjunct to analyze clause organization accurately.

Within this framework, Themes are classified into three main types: Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal. Topical Theme is the first experiential element in a clause, often realized by a participant or circumstance, which is highly relevant in reflective essays to introduce the people or events forming the focus of the reflection. Textual Theme refers to elements like conjunctions that establish logical or cohesive relationships between clauses, helping to organize the flow of information through addition, contrast, or cause. Interpersonal Theme includes elements that express the writer's attitude, judgment, or relationship with the reader. Furthermore, Themes can be analyzed based on their complexity and markedness. A Simple Theme consists of only the Topical element, whereas a Multiple Theme incorporates Textual or Interpersonal

elements before the Topical Theme. Theme markedness distinguishes between Unmarked Themes the typical grammatical choice, such as a Subject in a declarative clause and Marked Themes, where a different element (like a circumstantial Adjunct) is placed at the beginning to establish a specific context or perspective.

Finally, the way these Themes and Rhemes are sequentially organized across a text is known as thematic progression, a concept crucial for textual coherence. As Eggins (2004) discusses, this progression explains how information in one clause relates to the information in subsequent clauses, creating cohesive and coherent texts. By tracing these relationships, researchers can examine how writers maintain their main focus, seamlessly introduce related information, and fluidly transition from personal memories to broader emotional reflections, thereby revealing the underlying architecture of introspective writing.

B. Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine the textual metafunction in a personal reflective essay. The data consist of clauses from “You Can Genuinely Love Someone and Still Choose to Leave,” written by Gor and published on Substack’s mixtapes by gor on May 31, 2026. The essay was selected because its reflections on love, loss, relationships, and human connections provide relevant data for examining how ideas are organized through language. Data were collected using documentation by selecting the essay, reading it repeatedly, dividing the text into clauses, and documenting the relevant linguistic units. The analysis focuses on the Theme-Rheme structure, including Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal Themes, Simple and Multiple Themes, and Unmarked and Marked Themes, as well as thematic progression across successive clauses. Following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), with additional support from Eggins (2004) and Gerot and Wignell (1994), the

analysis was conducted by identifying clause boundaries, determining Theme and Rheme, classifying thematic structures, tracing thematic progression, and interpreting how the writer's thematic choices contribute to the coherence and development of ideas throughout the essay.

C. Findings

Types of Themes Realized in the Essay

The analysis of the 198 clauses shows that the reflective essay uses Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal Themes to organize its messages. Topical Themes are the most consistently realized type and frequently appear through personal pronouns, noun phrases, and other experiential elements. Textual Themes are also frequently used, particularly conjunctions that connect one clause to another. Interpersonal Themes occur less frequently and are mainly realized through modal expressions such as *maybe* and other elements that express the writer's attitude toward the message.

Topical Themes commonly appear as the starting point of clauses and introduce the participants, experiences, or ideas being discussed. Personal pronouns such as *I*, *we*, *they*, and *it* are frequently used. For example, clauses such as "I think," "we want clean explanations," "we lose versions of ourselves," and "they knew" begin with a Topical Theme. These patterns show that the text repeatedly starts from a participant or experience before providing further information in the Rheme.

The use of Topical Themes also changes according to the focus of the reflection. At the beginning of the essay, the writer frequently uses *I* and *we* to present personal observations about endings and relationships. Later, the focus expands to *people*, *they*, *most of us*, and other general participants. For instance, the essay moves from personal statements such as "I have done this myself" to more general statements such as "People are responsible for the pain they cause" and "most of us have hurt people." This shift allows the text to move from individual experience toward more general reflections.

Textual Themes are mainly realized through conjunctions and conjunctive elements. The analysis

contains many clauses beginning with *and*, *but*, *because*, *if*, *when*, *that*, and related elements. Examples include “and suddenly we start questioning every memory,” “because endings are difficult to sit with,” “but every time I have tried to do that,” and “when I was trying to survive my own thoughts.” These elements connect the current clause with the preceding or following message and indicate relationships such as addition, contrast, cause, and time.

Interpersonal Themes are less frequent than Topical and Textual Themes. They appear when an interpersonal element occurs before the Topical Theme. Examples in the analysis include *maybe* in “then maybe it was never as meaningful,” “And maybe that is what makes loss so painful,” and “Maybe that is why I want to love people differently.” Other examples include “only to later discover” and “without ever meaning to,” where the analysis identifies an interpersonal element before the topical element. These instances indicate the writer’s degree of uncertainty, attitude, or personal positioning toward the following message.

Overall, the distribution of Theme types demonstrates that the essay primarily relies on experiential starting points, while Textual Themes provide connections between clauses and Interpersonal Themes occur at particular points where the writer expresses a personal stance or qualification.

Simple and Multiple Themes

The classification of the 198 clauses shows a clear tendency toward Unmarked Simple Themes (UST). Based on the classifications recorded in the analysis, 117 clauses are identified as UST, 65 as Unmarked Multiple Themes (UMT), 9 as Marked Multiple Themes (MMT), and 3 as Marked Simple Themes (MST). Four additional entries are recorded less consistently in the analysis as either “Theme” or without a complete UST/UMT/MMT/MST label; therefore, they are not assigned to another category in this finding.

Theme Classification	**Number of Clauses**
Unmarked Simple Theme (UST)	117

Unmarked Multiple Theme (UMT)	65
Marked Multiple Theme (MMT)	9
Marked Simple Theme (MST)	3
Other/incomplete classification	4
Total	198

The dominance of UST indicates that many clauses begin directly with their main experiential element. Examples include “I think,” “A friendship falls apart,” “A relationship ends,” “we want clean explanations,” and “Bitterness gives us somewhere to put the pain.” In these clauses, the Topical Theme occurs without a preceding Textual or Interpersonal element. This creates a relatively direct organization in which the participant or main topic is immediately presented before the Rheme.

UMTs are also frequently realized. These Themes generally combine a Textual element with a Topical element. Examples include “and suddenly we start questioning every memory,” “and we begin searching for evidence,” and “because no matter how things ended, I cannot erase the fact.” In these clauses, the Textual element establishes a relationship with previous information before the Topical Theme introduces the experiential focus.

The data also contain multiple Themes involving interpersonal elements. For example, “And maybe that is what makes loss so painful” contains a conjunction, an interpersonal element (*maybe*), and a Topical Theme (*that*). Similarly, “And maybe we forget” combines a Textual element, an Interpersonal element, and the Topical Theme *we*. These structures show that the writer sometimes places a personal evaluation or degree of certainty between the textual connection and the experiential focus.

Thus, the data indicate that Simple Themes are the dominant pattern, while Multiple Themes are used to establish logical or interpersonal relationships before presenting the main experiential focus.

Unmarked and Marked Themes

The analysis shows a strong preference for Unmarked Themes. UST and UMT together account for the large majority of the classified data, while MMT and MST occur much less frequently. This indicates that the writer generally places the expected experiential element at the beginning of the clause rather than repeatedly using less typical initial positions.

Unmarked Themes are frequently realized through Subjects such as *I*, *we*, *they*, *people*, *most of us*, and noun phrases. Examples include "I have done this myself," "we lose versions of ourselves," "People are responsible for the pain they cause," and "most of us have hurt people." These clauses place the participant directly at the beginning of the message.

Marked Themes are less frequent and are used at particular points in the text. The analysis identifies three instances of Marked Simple Themes and nine instances of Marked Multiple Themes. Some marked structures begin with circumstances or other elements before the expected experiential focus. For example, the analysis identifies structures such as "for the pain they cause," "what they were carrying," and "that sometimes" as marked patterns. The use of these structures gives particular information or circumstances an initial position before the message develops further.

Marked Multiple Themes are also found when more than one thematic element occurs before the Rheme. For example, "And when those people leave" begins with the Textual elements *and* and *when* before the Topical element *those people*. Another example is "Not because they own those memories," where the negative element and conjunction precede the Topical Theme *they*. These patterns occur when the writer needs to establish a logical relationship or condition before presenting the main participant.

Therefore, the markedness pattern in the data is characterized by a clear dominance of unmarked choices. Marked structures appear selectively rather than as the main organizational pattern of the essay.

Thematic Progression and Theme–Rheme Organization

The Theme–Rheme organization contributes to the

coherence of the essay by maintaining, developing, and shifting the focus of information across successive clauses. The progression can be seen in several sections where information introduced in one clause becomes the focus of a subsequent clause.

One clear pattern occurs in the discussion of loss and personal history. The essay states, “there are people / who knew us before the heartbreaks, before the mistakes,” followed by “before the years changed us.” The Theme *people* introduces individuals connected with the writer’s past, while the following clauses continue developing information about those people and their shared memories. The progression then moves to “And when those people leave / It can feel like pieces of our own history leave with them.” The information about *those people* is therefore carried forward into the next message, creating continuity between the clauses.

Another pattern can be observed in the sequence concerning emotional exhaustion. The writer introduces the general participant *people* and then develops the idea through several related clauses: “Carrying grief,” “They have not spoken about grief,” “Carrying disappointments,” “They have not processed disappointments,” and “Carrying fears.” The repeated relationship between the implied participant and the subsequent clauses creates a connected sequence of information. The Rhemes concerning grief, disappointments, and fears further develop the broader idea of emotional burden.

Textual Themes also play an important role in connecting stages of the reflection. Conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *because*, *if*, and *when* occur repeatedly at clause beginnings. For example, “because endings are difficult to sit with” explains the reason for the preceding statement, while “but every time I have tried to do that” introduces a contrast with the previous idea. Similarly, “because no matter how things ended” establishes a relationship before the writer continues with “I cannot erase the fact.” These textual elements help signal how one proposition relates to another.

Thematic progression also accompanies a broader shift in the essay. The earlier clauses focus

strongly on personal experiences through *I* and *we*. The text then develops toward broader participants such as *people*, *they*, and *most of us*. For example, the writer moves from "I think about all the times I have judged someone" to the more general observation that "People are responsible for the pain they cause," followed by "apologies matter," "accountability matters," and "understanding matters too." The progression therefore allows the text to move from an individual reflection toward a more general consideration of human behavior.

A similar development appears in the final part of the essay. The writer repeatedly uses *I* and *we* while discussing gratitude and impermanence. Clauses such as "I want to remember," "We occupied the same small corner of the universe," "we spend so much of our lives measuring things by their permanence," and "the moments that shaped me most were never guaranteed forever" gradually develop the central idea that temporary experiences can remain meaningful. The final sequence, "I do not want to be sad / that it ended" and "I want to be grateful / that it happened," provides a clear thematic shift from the earlier focus on endings toward a concluding focus on gratitude.

Overall, the Theme–Rheme organization creates continuity by repeatedly maintaining participants, connecting clauses through Textual Themes, and gradually introducing new information through the Rheme. At the same time, changes in the Topical Theme allow the essay to shift from personal experiences to broader observations and finally to a concluding reflection.

Overall Findings

The findings show that the reflective essay predominantly uses Topical Themes as the starting point of its clauses, with Textual Themes frequently functioning to connect ideas across clauses. Interpersonal Themes occur less frequently and are mainly used to express personal qualification or attitude. The classification of thematic complexity also shows a strong preference for Unmarked Simple Themes, followed by Unmarked Multiple Themes, while Marked Multiple and Marked Simple Themes occur less frequently.

The Theme–Rheme analysis further shows that the essay maintains coherence through the repetition and development of participants and ideas, the use of conjunctions to establish logical relationships, and shifts from personal to more general Themes. The progression eventually leads toward a concluding perspective in which the ending of a relationship is separated from the value of the experience itself. These findings demonstrate that thematic organization provides a consistent structure for the development of the writer's reflections throughout the essay.

D. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework extends effectively beyond formal discourse, yielding critical insights into the textual organization of personal reflective writing. Through an analysis of 198 clauses from Gor's essay, "You Can Genuinely Love Someone and Still Choose to Leave," the findings reveal how Theme choices, complexity, markedness, and thematic progression materialize the writer's emotional trajectory.

The prominence of Topical Themes across the dataset highlights that the essay consistently anchors its messages in experiential starting points predominantly realized through first-person pronouns (I, we) and generic participants (people, they). This structural choice is fundamentally tied to the genre of personal reflection. Early in the text, the heavy reliance on first-person topical themes establishes an intimate, confessional tone, allowing the writer to process grief and vulnerability directly. As the essay progresses, the shift toward third-person participants (people, most of us) broadens the scope of the reflection, transforming subjective emotional pain into universal human truths. This structural modulation aligns with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) assertion that the Theme serves as the point of departure chosen by the writer to guide the reader's angle of vision.

Furthermore, the frequent deployment of Textual Themes, principally additive and causal conjunctions such as and, but, because, and when, acts as a cohesive glue. They signal logical, temporal, and adversarial

relationships, ensuring that fluid shifts in introspection do not fracture the text's macro-structure. In contrast, Interpersonal Themes (maybe, perhaps) appear sparingly but strategically. Rather than overwhelming the reader with modal evaluations, the writer employs Interpersonal Themes precisely at psychological turning points where certainty wavers, effectively encoding hesitation and emotional processing into the grammar of the clause.

In terms of structural complexity, the quantitative dominance of Unmarked Simple Themes (UST) (117 clauses) minimizes cognitive friction, enabling readers to track the narrative fluidly. However, the substantial presence of Unmarked Multiple Themes (UMT) (65 clauses) illustrates that textual connectors frequently prepend the experiential base to mirror the logically and temporally contingent nature of reflective thought.

Conversely, the scarcity of Marked Themes indicates that deviations from the canonical Subject-initial structure are strategically reserved for rhetorical emphasis and contextual foregrounding.

Conversely, marked Themes (both simple and multiple) occur infrequently, appearing only when the writer consciously disrupts the canonical Subject-initial pattern to foreground a circumstance, condition, or temporal anchor (e.g., “for the pain they cause”). This scarcity suggests that marked choices are reserved for rhetorical emphasis, breaking the rhythmic flow deliberately to draw the reader's attention to specific contextual dimensions of loss or memory.

Finally, macro-level coherence is driven by methodical thematic progression. The continuous re-introduction and development of participants across successive clauses generate strict textual continuity, mirroring Eggins’s (2004) principles of thematic selection. Structurally, this progression encodes a tripartite psychological arc:

1. It begins with micro-level, egocentric themes (I, we) focusing on personal memory and immediate grief.
2. It evolves into macro-level, sociological themes (people, most of us) addressing shared

accountability and emotional burdens.

3. It resolves into philosophical themes surrounding impermanence and gratitude ("I want to be grateful / that it happened").

Ultimately, this systematic organization of Themes and Rhemes validates that thematic structure is instrumental in externalizing an internal cognitive shift from raw emotional trauma to acceptance.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this study found that personal reflective essays use three types of Themes: Topical, Textual, and Interpersonal Themes. Topical Themes are the most dominant, mainly through personal pronouns such as I and we, followed by they and people. Textual Themes, particularly conjunctions such as and, but, because, if, and when, connect ideas across clauses, while Interpersonal Themes are less frequent and express uncertainty, attitude, or personal stance. Unmarked Simple Themes are the most dominant, followed by Unmarked Complex Themes, while Marked Themes occur less frequently. The study also found that Theme–Rheme organization contributes to coherence by connecting information across successive clauses and maintaining the flow of ideas. Thematic progression develops from personal experiences represented by I and we toward broader reflections involving people, they, and most of us, eventually leading to reflections on impermanence and gratitude. Thus, Theme–Rheme organization helps transform personal experiences and emotions into coherent and meaningful reflections.

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