

**A THEME–RHEME ANALYSIS OF BARACK OBAMA’S WEEKLY ADDRESS:
EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO AFFORD HIGHER EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

Political rhetoric relies on the strategic sequencing of information to keep a message both persuasive and accessible. Drawing on the textual metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this study investigates Theme–Rheme selection in Barack Obama’s weekly address “Everyone Should Be Able to Afford Higher Education.” Previous research has concentrated on Obama’s campaign speeches, inaugural address, press conferences, and translated speeches, whereas this higher-education address has received little attention. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the study analyzed the official transcript, which comprises 87 clauses; 86 major clauses were analyzed and one minor clause was excluded from the Theme analysis. Each Theme was classified by complexity (simple or multiple) and markedness (unmarked or marked), and frequencies were expressed as percentages of the total clause count. Unmarked Simple Theme predominated (55 clauses; 63.22%), followed by Unmarked Multiple Theme (18 clauses; 20.69%), Marked Multiple Theme (9 clauses; 10.34%), and Marked Simple Theme (4 clauses; 4.60%). In aggregate, Unmarked Themes account for 73 clauses (83.91%) and Marked Themes for 13 clauses (14.94%). The predominance of Subject-initial Themes points to a preference for thematic transparency, a pattern plausibly suited to oral delivery, while Multiple Themes provide cohesive linkage between clauses and time-oriented Marked Themes establish a temporal frame that reorients the audience’s attention. Thematic progression lies beyond the scope of this study and is recommended for future research.

Keywords: Theme–Rheme, textual metafunction, Systemic Functional Linguistics, political speech, Barack Obama

A. Introduction

Political rhetoric relies significantly on the strategic arrangement of information to optimize persuasion and message accessibility. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the textual metafunction acts as an enabling mechanism that structures ideational and interpersonal meanings into a coherent whole via the Theme–Rheme configuration (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The Theme serves as the clause's point of departure, whereas the Rheme delivers the core experiential development of that point of departure (Eggins, 2004). The presidential weekly address is a genre in which this arrangement is particularly consequential: it is brief, typically scripted, and directed at a mass audience that receives the message in real time.

SFL models language as a resource that simultaneously construes three strands of meaning: ideational meaning, which represents experience; interpersonal meaning, which enacts social relations and attitudes; and textual meaning, which organizes the other two into discourse that is coherent and contextually appropriate (Halliday & Matthiessen,

2014). The present study is situated in the textual metafunction.

At the clause level, textual meaning is realized chiefly through the Theme–Rheme structure, and Theme selection is commonly described along two parameters: complexity (simple versus multiple) and markedness (unmarked versus marked). Together, these parameters reveal which elements a speaker selects as the point of departure and what that selection foregrounds.

Prior research on Theme–Rheme in Obama's discourse has covered several speech types. Oktaviani (2013) examined Theme–Rheme and thematic progression in an Obama speech and its translation, reporting Participants as the most frequent Theme and Theme Reiteration as the dominant progression pattern in both the source and target texts. Nisya (2010), analyzing Obama's general election campaign speech and his 2009 inaugural address, found that Unmarked Multiple Theme predominated in the former and Unmarked Simple Theme in the latter.

Within a Systemic Functional Grammar framework, Kuswoyo (2016) investigated the thematic structure of Obama's press conferences,

identifying five patterns of thematic progression, among which a combination of constant and linear Themes was most frequent, and noting that structural conjunctions and continuatives functioned as textual Themes. More recently, Swari (2024) analyzed the thematic organization of Obama's press conference at the G20 Summit and reported Participant as Topical Theme as the most prevalent type, with the Reiterated/Constant Theme as the most frequent progression pattern.

Collectively, these studies establish Theme–Rheme analysis as a productive means of examining how speakers organize and develop information in political discourse. However, they were confined to campaign, inaugural, press conference, and translated speeches. Obama's weekly address "Everyone Should Be Able to Afford Higher Education," a policy-oriented text addressed to a general audience, has received little attention. Examining it extends the empirical coverage of thematic selection in Obama's discourse to the context of educational policy.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify and analyze the Theme–

Rheme structures in the address from the perspective of the textual metafunction of SFL, focusing on the distribution of simple, multiple, marked, and unmarked Themes and on the way Theme and Rheme organize information.

Two research questions guide the study: (1) What types of Theme occur in Barack Obama's weekly address "Everyone Should Be Able to Afford Higher Education"? (2) How do Theme and Rheme organize information in the address?

B. Method

B.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) textual analysis to examine the Theme–Rheme structures in Barack Obama's weekly address, "Everyone Should Be Able to Afford Higher Education." The primary data source is the official written transcript of the address, which yields a corpus of 87 clauses. Excluding one minor clause because it lacks a Theme–Rheme configuration comparable to that of major clauses (Eggins, 2004), 86 major clauses were systematically analyzed.

A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate for research that aims to provide a clear and systematic description of a phenomenon based on the data collected. Sandelowski (2000) explains that qualitative description seeks to present an accurate account of a phenomenon while remaining close to the original data. In this study, this approach enables the researchers to identify, classify, and describe Theme–Rheme structures while interpreting their distribution in relation to the textual metafunction.

The address was selected because it discusses higher education and its affordability, including post-secondary education, college costs, student loans, financial aid, and students' responsibilities. Although the address was delivered orally, the written transcript served as the primary data source because it provides the linguistic material required to identify clause boundaries and analyze thematic structures. Consequently, this study focuses on the wording and grammatical organization of the clauses rather than on prosody or other features of oral delivery.

Following Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and Gerot and Wignell (1994),

Themes were classified according to two parameters: complexity and markedness. The first parameter, complexity, distinguishes Simple Theme from Multiple Theme. A Simple Theme consists of a single topical element, whereas a Multiple Theme comprises a topical Theme preceded by one or more textual or interpersonal elements. The second parameter, markedness, distinguishes Unmarked Theme from Marked Theme. In a declarative clause, an Unmarked Theme typically places the Subject in initial position as the topical Theme, whereas a Marked Theme places another element, such as a circumstantial Adjunct, before the Subject (Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2014).

The combination of these two parameters produces four Theme types: Unmarked Simple Theme, Unmarked Multiple Theme, Marked Simple Theme, and Marked Multiple Theme. This classification provides a consistent basis for examining the thematic choices found in the address.

B.2 Method

The analysis proceeded in five steps: (1) segmenting the transcript into clauses; (2) identifying the Theme

and Rheme of each clause; (3) assigning each Theme to one of the four categories, taking textual, interpersonal, and topical elements into account for Multiple Themes; (4) counting the frequency of each Theme type; and (5) interpreting the distribution qualitatively to explain how these thematic selections organize information throughout the address.

The analysis also involved organizing the identified clauses into categories to facilitate the examination of recurring patterns. Miles et al. (2014) describe qualitative data analysis in terms of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In this study, these principles are reflected in the classification of Theme–Rheme structures, the presentation of their frequencies in tables, and the interpretation of the resulting patterns. The frequency counts provide a descriptive overview of the distribution, while the qualitative interpretation explains how the identified Theme types contribute to the organization of information in the speech.

The results are presented in tables listing each Theme type, its frequency, and its percentage. Percentages were

calculated by dividing the frequency of each category by the total number of clauses in the transcript (87). Illustrative clauses are also presented with their corresponding Theme–Rheme analyses to demonstrate how the classifications were applied to the data. The findings are then discussed in relation to the textual metafunction and relevant previous studies of Theme–Rheme patterns in political discourse.

This study is limited to the analysis and classification of Theme–Rheme structures. Thematic progression, which concerns how Themes and Rhemes develop across successive clauses, is not examined as a separate focus. This aspect is suggested for future research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of thematic organization in political speeches.

C. Results and Discussion

The 86 major clauses of the address were segmented into Theme and Rheme and classified into four Theme types: Unmarked Simple, Unmarked Multiple, Marked Simple, and Marked Multiple. The single minor clause is listed in Table 1 for

completeness but is not analyzed further.

C.1 Distribution of Theme Types

Table 1. Distribution of Theme Types in the Speech

Type of Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Unmarked Simple Theme	55	63.22%
Unmarked Multiple Theme	18	20.69%
Marked Multiple Theme	9	10.34%
Marked Simple Theme	4	4.60%
Minor clause	1	1.15%
Total	87	100%

Table 1 shows that Unmarked Simple Theme is the most frequent type, occurring in 55 clauses (63.22%), followed by Unmarked Multiple Theme in 18 clauses (20.69%), Marked Multiple Theme in 9 clauses (10.34%), and Marked Simple Theme in 4 clauses (4.60%).

Aggregated by markedness, 73 clauses (83.91%) have an Unmarked Theme and 13 clauses (14.94%) a Marked Theme. Aggregated by complexity, 59 clauses (67.82%) have a Simple Theme and 27 clauses (31.03%) a Multiple Theme. Thematic selection in the address thus gravitates toward the typical, Subject-initial option, with Marked Themes confined to a minority of clauses.

C.2 Unmarked Themes and Cognitive Accessibility

The quantitative findings reveal a heavy reliance on Unmarked Simple Themes (UST), which constitute 63.22% ($n = 55$) of the total clauses. These Themes are realized predominantly by Subject nominal groups, as in “students will suit up for fall sports and marching band and the school play,” where “students” is the Theme and the remainder is the Rheme. In “A typical American with a bachelor’s degree or higher earns over \$28,000 more per year than someone with just a high school diploma,” the Theme spans the entire nominal group, including its postmodifier, and the Rheme supplies the information about earnings. In both clauses the participant is established as the point of departure before the informational development unfolds.

In spoken political discourse, the predominance of Subject-initial Themes plausibly serves a cognitive function. Because oral audiences process information in real time, without the opportunity to review a written text, placing the primary participant first is likely to reduce processing load and to maintain clear thematic continuity. This pattern is

consistent with Nisya's (2010) finding that Unmarked Simple Theme dominated Obama's inaugural address and with Oktaviani's (2013) finding that Participants were the most frequent Theme in an Obama speech. Nisya (2010) also reported the dominance of Unmarked Multiple Theme in Obama's campaign speech, which suggests that thematic selection varies with the purpose and situation of the speech.

Unmarked Multiple Themes occur in 18 clauses (20.69%). In "and that includes me and Michelle," the textual Theme "and" precedes the topical Theme "that." The textual Theme signals an additive relation to the preceding clause (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), thereby contributing to cohesion and presenting successive clauses as increments of a single line of argument rather than as discrete statements.

C.3 Marked Themes and Temporal Framing

Marked Themes occur in 13 clauses (14.94%), comprising 4

Marked Simple and 9 Marked Multiple Themes. In the instances discussed here, a circumstance of time is fronted before the Subject (see Table 2): "Earlier this year," in "Earlier this year, a young woman named Elizabeth Cooper wrote..." and "Since then," in "Since then, we've met with even more leaders." Fronting establishes a temporal frame before the participant is introduced, which accords with the recognized function of Marked Themes in setting the scene of a clause (Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2014).

A Marked Multiple Theme appears in "and so today I want to talk directly with students and parents..." Here "and" and "so" are textual Themes, and "today" is a marked topical Theme. The conjunctive elements link the clause to the preceding discourse, while "today" foregrounds the present moment of the address. This configuration demarcates the shift from background information to Obama's direct appeal to students and parents.

Table 2. Examples of Theme–Rheme Analysis

Theme	Rheme	Theme type	Theme element
students	will suit up for fall sports and marching band and the school play	Unmarked Simple	Topical (Subject)

Theme	Rheme	Theme type	Theme element
and that	includes me and Michelle	Unmarked Multiple	Textual ^ Topical (Subject)
Earlier this year	a young woman named Elizabeth Cooper wrote...	Marked Simple	Topical (Adjunct: time)
Since then	we've met with even more leaders	Marked Simple	Topical (Adjunct: time)
and so today	I want to talk directly with students and parents...	Marked Multiple	Textual ^ Textual ^ Topical (Adjunct: time)

C.4 Thematic Organization of the Address

Overall, Obama introduces a participant or topic in the Theme and develops it in the Rheme. The high frequency of Unmarked Simple Themes keeps most clauses direct and transparent, Multiple Themes bind clauses into a continuous argument, and the less frequent Marked Themes place time and circumstance in initial position, as in the move to direct address.

These selections correspond to the content of the address, which progresses from education after high school to college costs, student loans, financial aid, and the responsibilities of students. The thematic patterns help link these topics and sustain the focus on higher education, which suggests that Theme and Rheme contribute to the organization of information and the flow of the address (Fries, 1981; Martin & Rose, 2007).

This study examined Theme types only and did not address how the Themes and Rhemes of successive clauses relate to one another. Future research could analyze thematic progression, such as constant Theme, linear Theme, and split Rheme (Daneš, 1974; Eggins, 2004), to clarify this dimension.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the Theme–Rheme structure of Barack Obama's weekly address "Everyone Should Be Able to Afford Higher Education" from the perspective of the textual metafunction of SFL. Of the 87 clauses in the transcript, 86 major clauses were analyzed and classified into four Theme types: Unmarked Simple, Unmarked Multiple, Marked Simple, and Marked Multiple.

Unmarked Simple Theme was the dominant pattern, found in 55 clauses (63.22%). Subject-initial Themes keep the point of departure explicit, which

promotes thematic transparency and is plausibly well suited to a mass audience listening in real time.

Unmarked Multiple Theme appeared in 18 clauses (20.69%). Through textual Themes such as “and” and “so,” these clauses link ideas across the address, strengthening cohesion and presenting the argument as a unified whole.

Marked Themes, both Simple and Multiple, occurred in 13 clauses (14.94%). Although less frequent, they served a distinct function: time expressions such as “Earlier this year” and “Since then” set the temporal frame and direct the audience’s attention to a particular moment. Obama thus varied his thematic selection to foreground information where needed.

These findings are consistent with earlier research on Obama’s speeches, which indicates that Theme selection depends on the purpose and situation of the speech (Nisya, 2010). Given that the address targets a broad audience, the predominance of Unmarked Themes is understandable as a resource for ease of reception, while occasional Marked and Multiple

structures add variation to the delivery.

The study shows that Theme–Rheme structure is not merely a grammatical matter but a resource for constructing meaning and guiding the presentation of information. It shapes the flow of ideas, supports coherence, and may influence how the audience receives the message.

A limitation of this study is that thematic progression, that is, how Themes and Rhemes develop from one clause to the next, was not analyzed. Future research should address this aspect to show how Obama builds his argument across the address.

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