On Paragraph Groups
with a Narrow Theme
in Contemporary English

Renata Pípalová

Dealing with the thematic build-up of paragraph groups, this paper explores narrow Theme paragraph groups in a corpus of contemporary British English texts. It studies their build-up patterns, composition (constituent paragraphs), length, frequency, stylistic affinities, etc. The groups are shown to favour the unfolding pattern, to include on average fewer than three paragraphs, mostly stable Theme ones, and to thrive particularly in fiction, less so in journalism, and to be employed rather sparingly in academic texts.

This paper is based on the results of a larger study dealing with the thematic build-up of paragraphs and higher units in English texts.

The study originates in the Czech linguistic tradition and elaborates particularly on the pioneering papers by Mathesius (1942) and Danes (1994, 1995). It adopts the four basic types of paragraph suggested by Danes, i.e. paragraphs where the Paragraph Theme (P-theme) is stable, where it is unfolded, where it resembles a content frame, and where it develops. However, it modifies somewhat the boundaries between these types, since it establishes the taxonomy on an extended range of criteria.

In this framework, the relevant criteria include the relationship between the P-theme and the utterance (U-/ FSP) themes,[1] (i.e. the degree of in/stability of choices from the Thematic area,[2] affecting the range of the thematic Discourse Subjects[3] and their

[1]   To distinguish between the two homonymous terms of 'THEME', here outside citations the capital-preceded 'theme' - i.e. (Textual) Theme and its conspicuous varieties, P-theme (Paragraph Theme) and PGr-theme (Paragraph Group Themes) will be interpreted on the textual, hierarchically superior level. The non-capitalized 'theme' will label its counterpart delimited on the hierarchically inferior FSP level.

[2]   In the present approach, the content aspect of the Theme, constituting the so-called Thematic area, is conceived of as enclosing in all three distinct layers arranged from the broadest to the narrowest, to resemble a kind of a pyramid. The lowest and broadest layer corresponds to all the given elements of the particular speech event. The central layer embraces a number of hierarchized, closely interrelated elements organized as a cognitive structure, or a content frame. The third, the most restricted one of all, embodies some of its most conspicuous or foregrounded elements, or else, its dominant Discourse Subjects.

[3]   "As discourse subject (DS) I treat anything - be it an object, a group or class of them, a quality, state, process, action, circumstance, event, episode, and the like - that the speaker has just in mind when applying a nominating (or deictic) unit in the process of text production in order to introduce/present/mention/re-introduce/ recall something." (Danes, 1989: 24)

variability across the paragraph); the types, arrangement and hierarchy of thematic progressions;[4] the type of thematic paradigm (the cohesive ties[5] and means involved in thematic units); the role assigned to thematic progressions and cohesive links (their incidence); and the placement and characteristics of the P-theme exponents. Naturally, the number of the criteria need not be finite. Although in marginal cases paragraph types may be determined solely on the basis of a single criterion, prototypically, it is the interplay of the criteria which partakes in the apperception of paragraph types.

When applied to authentic material, the criteria arrange paragraphs on a continuous scale. On this scale, however, two conspicuous areas may be detected, corresponding to two distinct configurations of criterial values. These are referred to as Narrow P-theme and Broad P-theme paragraphs. They represent very general categories corresponding to paragraph supratypes. Naturally, it is possible to identify their central and their peripheral specimens, as well as a kind of boundary between them.

4   The term 'thematic progressions' is adopted in the sense defined by Danes (1974: 114), i.e. "the choice and ordering ofutterance themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text units (such as paragraph, chapter,...) to the whole text, and to the situation."

5   In this paper, cohesive links are conceived of as arranged on a tentative scale running from full identity, via equivalence, inclusion, all the way to parallelism and contiguity. Identity and equivalence do not involve any change in reference from their antecedents, although the latter is characterized by change of other modes of meaning; inclusion represents referential overlap; parallelism presupposes referential commensurability with respect to a common reconstructable superordinate unit; and contiguity, the least clear-cut type of all, involves some relation of mutual expectability, co-occurrence, semantic relatedness, association, etc.

Somewhat modifying the concept of thematic paradigm introduced by Červenka (1982), we distinguish between the narrow and broad thematic paradigms. The former is taken to include the proportion of identity, equivalence and inclusion among the thematic elements related to a single Discourse Subject.

Since only the first supratype, i.e. narrow P-theme paragraphs, is relevant to this paper, the present section will outline some of its conspicuous characteristics.

The narrow P-theme paragraphs are those embodying the top degrees of stability in their thematic build-up. This means that they are rather focussed, foregrounding[6] a single major Thematic Discourse Subject (hereinafter only "DS"), corresponding to the 'topic entity' in Brown and Yule (1983: 137).

Example 1

1. *Dolly* became lame in her left hind leg a few weeks ago. 2. *She* was examined by veterinary surgeons from the University of Edinburgh who confirmed with X-rays that she had arthritis in the hip and knee of that leg. 3. *She* is being treated with anti-inflammatory drugs. (J2, 5 January 2002)[7]

6 'Foregrounding' will be understood essentially in line with the Prague linguistic tradition, particularly with Mukarovsky (2000 [1932]). Mukarovsky argues that the purpose of foregrounding is "to attract the reader's (listener's) attention more closely to the subject matter expressed by the foregrounded means of expression." (ibid: 227) He also stresses "the consistency and systematic character of foregrounding" (ibid: 227). Furthermore, foregrounding is related to hierarchy. "The component highest in the hierarchy becomes the dominant. All other components, foregrounded or not, as well as their interrelationships, are evaluated from the standpoint of the dominant. The dominant is that component of the work which sets in motion, and gives direction to, the relationships of all other components", (ibid)
7 For simplicity's sake, in the examples adduced in this paper the unit of analysis is the main clause. Central to this approach exploring the thematic build-up of paragraphs and higher units the relationship between the P-/(PGr-)theme and the themes in individual main clauses. The latter are scrutinized, in line with the above criteria, for a number of parameters, i.e. the types of thematic progressions and cohesive links these units enter, etc. Whenever there are more thematic units per a main clause, priority is naturally given to that/those which is/are more directly relevant to the Theme. Hence sometimes it is possible to distinguish between more local links and those critical for the overall

The exponent of the P-theme is given explicitly, being typically launched through the Topic Sentence (which, in turn, is prone to appear paragraph-initially). It corresponds to the foregrounded DS (dominant) which the author selects from a complicated Thematic area. Once this salient DS is introduced, it becomes co(n)textually bound and remains the centre of attention throughout the rest of the paragraph. Therefore it comes as natural that it is either regularly thematized itself or else any noteworthy constituent of it. All the same, it motivates the U-thematic functions throughout the paragraph. Therefore, a favourite, clearly prevalent (though by no means exclusive) arrangement is paradigmatic.

It follows that the foregrounding of the above-mentioned dominant Thematic DS is achieved primarily by the extreme stability of choices from the Thematic area. Such constrained selection from the Thematic area is matched by a considerable degree of thematic as well as cohesive bonding. Clearly, such a degree of interweaving of utterances is viewed as enhancing coherence. However, there is a pronounced constraint on the range of bonding types. As a rule, to foreground the prominent thematic DS, authors employ a limited variety of both, thematic strings and cohesive links interrelating such DSs. Naturally, the U-themes tend to be interwoven by paradigmatic progressions[8], and the cohesive links between them establish, and never exceed, the narrow thematic cohesive paradigm (embracing identity, equivalence, and inclusion links).

In principle, authors of narrow P-theme paragraphs may employ two distinct, though by no means unrelated methods

integrity of the paragraph (group). It should be stressed, however, that coherence can also exploit various other devices (e.g. explicit connectives, syntactic parallelism, etc., and be further enhanced by some such means. Moreover the perception of coherence need not be established on the existence of any such links and devices at all.

8   Paradigmatic progressions include continuous theme, derived continuous theme, theme derived from the Hypertheme.

of foregrounding the dominant Thematic DS. Either its exponent (pro to typically launched in the Topic Sentence) is simply reiterated throughout all the U-themes (Example 1 above - stable P-theme paragraph), or else the individual U-themes are motivated somewhat less directly, being related to the foregrounded Thematic DS (and derived from its explicit exponent) as its parts, constituents, types, specimens, species, instances, etc. (Example 2 - Unfolded P-theme paragraph)

> Example 2
>
> 1. *The porcupine* is nocturnal and *A* capable of doing much harm to our native flora and fauna. 2. *A number of Himalayan porcupines* escaped in 1969 from a wildlife park near Okehampton in Devon, and although there are now probably less than 20 in the wild, *they* still seriously damage the local conifer plantations. 3.
> In 1972 *a pair of North African crested porcupines* escaped from Alton Towers in Staffordshire. 4. *They* may have bred, but apparently *A* failed to establish a colony. (Al, 32)

It follows, then, that U-themes may be either referentially identical/equivalent to the foregrounded exponent of the P-theme (Example 1), or else they may convey its various constitutive parts, segments, types, features, etc., and thus maybe related to the P-theme exponent also by way of cohesive inclusion (Example 2). It should be noted that these two approaches to the dominant Thematic entity differ in the relative measure of their foregrounding. Naturally, the foregrounding is more pronounced in the former than in the latter.

Generally speaking, in the narrow P-theme paragraphs, the units featured in the U-themes (establishing a particular thematic layer or thematic track) are semantically rather homogeneous. Nevertheless the degree of homogeneity is more

self-evident in the stable P-theme paragraphs than in those displaying an unfolded P-theme.

Moreover, the relationships between individual thematic exponents in all the narrow P-theme paragraphs tend to be made linguistically overt, i.e. either explicitly signalled or, due to language economy, suggested by ellipsis. In other words, by employing such means as personal pronouns, repetitions, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, meronyms, appositions, and others, the cohesive links exploit their systemic backing. Given the truism that cohesion facilitates coherence (without, however, guaranteeing it), it is only natural that the narrow P-theme paragraphs tend to be perceived as inducing coherence rather strongly.

Both the illustrative examples are central. Naturally, in authentic texts, the basic types may be combined and modified. The researcher may thus make full use of the theory of centre and periphery.

On the margin let us mention that the main clause was selected for the basic unit of analysis. Wherever more thematic elements are available in a single clause, priority is naturally given to those more relevant to the P-theme (for its foregrounded DS/ dominant).

3 Paragraph groups

Turning our attention now to the very subject of this paper, paragraph groups are higher textual units composed of paragraphs. Here a paragraph group will be conceived of as a group of paragraphs which features a single unifying Paragraph Group Theme (PGr-theme) and includes at least two paragraphs. A distinction maybe made between continuous (which are considered central) and discontinuous paragraph groups, where continuity is disrupted by inserted paragraphs. Due to

recursive patterns in the build-up of texts, groups too may display either a Narrow or a Broad PGr-theme. This paper explores solely the former type of groups.

3.1 Narrow Theme groups

Groups with a narrow PGr-theme may integrate paragraphs where the P-theme is stable, where it unfolds, or a combination of these types in various arrangements and numbers. Therefore in terms of their build-up, paragraphs composing such groups maybe homogeneous as well as heterogeneous. Let us add that the groups under scrutiny may comprise central paragraphs as well as peripheral specimens. The resulting paragraph group is then determined by the number of the enclosed paragraphs, their arrangement, their type, centrality, continuity, etc.

It should be stressed, however, that the Thematic build-up of groups may, but need not correspond with that of its constituent paragraphs. For instance, there are paragraph groups where the Theme is stable, constituted solely by paragraphs with a stable P-theme. In a similar vein, there are unfolded PGr-theme groups integrating only unfolded P-theme paragraphs. Such groups are considered to be constructed consistently. Example 3 embodies the former case.

Example 3

(11. With a gasp of dismay she tore herself from the Prince's arms and ran from the palace.)

II 2. *The Prince* raced after her but when he reached the palace steps there was no trace of his lovely princess. 3. All *he* found was one of her tiny glass slippers.

III 4. As the Prince held the slipper in his hand, *he* made a solemn vow.

IV 5. "The girl who can wear this glass slipper will be my bride," *he* promised himself.

V 6. Early the next morning, *the Prince* sent his herald through the town so that all the townsfolk might know of his search.

VI 7. "Each and every house must be visited and every girl must be given a chance to tiy on the glass slipper," *he* commanded his royal servants. (FI, 62)

In contrast, there are groups where the Theme is unfolded, and yet these groups are composed solely or at least partly of stable P-theme paragraphs. Such groups are considered to be constructed inconsistently.

Example 4

II *.Julian Hilton-Johnson, the vice-president of McDonald's in the UK,* dismissed a suggestion that health warnings should be displayed on burgers, or that staff should deter obese customers from buying extra-large meals. 2. "I don't think it is for us to presume to tell our customers what they should be eating," *he* said. 3. *Mr Hilton-Johnson* claimed that super-size meals accounted for 3 per cent of McDonald's sales and that the company offered healthy salads, fruit with Happy Meals and organic, semi-skimmed milk.

II4. *Martin Glenn, president of PepsiCo UK,* said: "We are confident from talking with our consumers that most parents understand they should be accountable for the healthy lifestyle of their children and thank heavens most do."

III 5. *All three heads* insisted that advertising and promotions had not led to increased sales, but merely *A* encouraged people to switch brands. (J2, 28 November 2003)

4   CORPUS FINDINGS

As mentioned above, this paper is based on the results of a larger scale study which explores a corpus of 2,070 paragraphs.

These were drawn from texts representing three stylistic areas, i.e. fiction, journalism and academic writing. In the corpus, there were 1,108 narrow Theme paragraphs. Of this number, 476 specimens (42.96 percent) came from fiction, 391 instances (35.29 percent) originated in journalism and 241 cases (21.75 percent) were gathered from academic sources.

Looking at the readiness of the narrow P-theme paragraphs to establish same-type paragraph groups, it is remarkable that of the total of 1,108 narrow Theme paragraphs, a striking set of 528 paragraphs are integrated in narrow Theme paragraph groups. This number corresponds to nearly a half (47.65 percent) of the narrow P-theme paragraphs.

This shows that there is a tendency in nearly a half of these types of paragraphs not to feature in isolation, but rather to partake in constructing larger same-type higher units. Considering that the paragraphs themselves foreground a conspicuous thematic entity, the construction of narrow Theme groups represents an even more pronounced highlighting phenomenon. This may have something to do with the attentional system studied by Talmy (2008).

The willingness of the paragraphs in question to take part in constructing narrow Theme groups, however, somewhat varied across registers. Their integrative potential was the most conspicuous of all in the academic register (where 50.62 percent of narrow Theme paragraphs were integrated in same-type groups), less so in fiction (where 49.58 percent of the paragraphs in question constructed the groups) and the least remarkable in journalism (where only 43.48 percent of narrow Theme paragraphs entered the groups). It should be recalled that the paragraphs under scrutiny were rather scarce in academic writing. Therefore the remarkable degree of their integration seems to be deliberate, at times perhaps even contrastive, and can be considered a powerful attentional phenomenon.

Further, the 528 narrow P-theme paragraphs in question were organized in 188 narrow Theme paragraph groups. This means that on average, 2.81 paragraphs went to a narrow Theme group. Nevertheless the length of paragraph groups varied across the individual register corpora. Fiction turned out to display the longest groups of all, interlacing on average 3.19 paragraphs. By contrast, in both the other corpora the length of groups fell short of the average. Put more specifically, as a rule, an academic narrow Theme group comprised 2.77 paragraphs and a typical group in journalism employed 2.43 paragraphs. Presumably, the most restricted lengths of paragraph groups in journalism may have something to do with the compact text format, apparently pressing on greater thematic turnover.

Examining the build-up subtypes, of the 188 paragraph groups detected in the corpus, ninety displayed a stable Theme, whereas ninety-eight exhibited an unfolded Theme. Therefore the second type slightly prevailed. This fact alone shows that compared to the build-up of constituent paragraphs, at the level of paragraph groups a somewhat higher constructional instability proved to be favoured.

Groups with a stable Theme were gathered chiefly from fiction sources (forty-seven instances), less frequently from journalistic texts (thirty-six specimens) and rather rarely from academic samples (seven groups). Conversely, groups marked by an unfolded Theme came most commonly from academic texts (thirty-seven examples), somewhat less typically from journalistic sources (thirty-four instances) and the least frequently of all from fiction (twenty-seven specimens).

From the above data at least three conclusions may be drawn. Firstly, compared to the stable Theme groups, the distribution of their unfolded Theme counterparts across the registers proved to be more balanced. Secondly, the greatest proportion of the narrow Theme groups originate in fiction (seventy-four

instances, 39.36 percent of all) and in journalism (seventy specimens, 37.23 percent of groups), the incidence of groups in academic sources being much lower (forty-four cases, 23.41 percent of all).

Thirdly, each register gives priority to different build-up patterns of groups. Fiction was clearly dominated by stable Theme groups. Indeed, as against forty-seven specimens of this constructional type there were only twenty-seven groups unfolding their Themes. Journalism exhibited nearly an even share of the groups in question, i.e. those marked by a stable Theme (thirty-six examples) and those marked by an unfolded Theme (thirty-four cases). Academic sources favoured groups where the Theme is unfolded, since against thirty-seven specimens of this category there were only seven cases of the other type.

These findings show that in narrow Theme groups, fiction preferred constructional stability, journalism was balanced and academic texts tended to prioritize constructional instability. These tendencies are conditioned by a host of mutually interlocked factors, such as the representation of the same-type paragraphs in the register corpora, their length, their tendency to enter notional paragraphs (mainly in journalism), the sharpness of boundaries between the paragraphs, etc.

As regards the internal composition of groups, in fiction and less pronouncedly in journalism, narrow Theme groups in general (i.e. no matter whether those marked by a Stable Theme or by an Unfolded Theme) were made up largely of stable Theme paragraphs. Such was the build-up pattern of as many as 90.25 percent of paragraphs integrated in fiction groups and of 83.53 percent of paragraphs integrated in journalism groups. The ratio, however, was nearly reversed in academic texts. Strikingly enough, academic narrow Theme groups integrated only 26.23 percent of the paragraphs with a Stable P-theme. It follows that academic groups were composed primarily

of paragraphs unfolding their Themes. This was the case for 73.77 percent of paragraphs in academic groups. Apparently, these findings only reinforce the above-suggested tendency that the fiction samples under investigation favour the greatest thematic build-up stability of all, whereas academic sources prioritize rather a high measure of constructional instability.

It should be recalled that due to the recursive tendencies in the build-up of texts, the thematic organization at paragraph level may, but need not, match that at paragraph group level. However, the research done appears to suggest that the narrow Theme paragraph groups favoured (at least a broadly) consistent build-up, i.e. paragraphs of a particular type (irrespective of whether central or non-central ones) were employed in constructing same-type groups. Indeed, of the 188 narrow Theme paragraph groups, 63.83 percent displayed a (broadly) consistent build-up, while 36.17 percent did not.

5   INTERPRETATION OF REGISTER-SPECIFIC TENDENCIES OF NARROW THEME GROUPS

As for remarkable tendencies in individual register corpora, journalism is marked by an extraordinary amount of groups of rather constrained length, which is conditioned by a number of considerations. For instance, the samples under investigation exhibited a tendency towards brevity already at paragraph level, which proved to be even more pronounced in the newspaper subcorpus. Further, they were marked by the greatest homogeneity in paragraph length of all. Naturally, the prototypical column arrangement turns even veiy short passages into eye-paragraphs, producing nearly a paragraphing rhythm. Consequently, many a notional paragraph was dressed up as two orthographic ones, i.e. as orthographic groups. Furthermore, the limited

space of journalistic texts pragmatically constrains the number of the discourse subjects on the scene, which in turn results in a higher degree of focus put on them.

In addition, journalism proved to be a relatively ample source of paragraphs with portions of direct speech where affinity with this build-up pattern was discovered. More crucially, paragraphs featuring direct speech typically follow immediately those devoid of direct speech, these two subtypes, as a rule, jointly constructing paragraph groups.

On the other hand, space constraints create a somewhat higher thematic DSs turnover which results in rather short groups and in a relatively balanced share of both the constructional patterns, i.e. stable and unfolded Theme ones. On the whole, in journalism, stability in the thematic build-up was found to be more conspicuous on the level of paragraphs than on the level of paragraph groups.

In contrast, fiction was marked by the top amount of narrow Theme patterns. Not only was its frequency of narrow P-theme paragraphs and groups the most striking of all, but among them, the stable patterns were clearly dominant. Indeed, of all the registers scrutinized, fiction displayed the top degree of stability in the thematic build-up of both, paragraphs and groups. This fact is conditioned by a number of mutually interlocked factors, including a significant share of direct speech paragraphs, which enliven the prose, and the typically narrative character of texts. Emphasis put on narration usually connotes a restricted number of characters on the scene of discourse, each, as a rule, foregrounded at a time. This slows down the DS turnovers in the thematic functions of individual utterances, prioritizes paradigmatic arrangements and softens considerably paragraph boundaries, these factors jointly facilitating the rise of paragraph groups of extraordinary length.

However, long groups, marked by an unusual degree of stability in their thematic build-up, and by less sharp, smooth boundaries between the enclosed paragraphs, naturally call for some counterbalancing by a somewhat greater diversity in a different area. For instance, fiction groups appeared somewhat variegated by intertwining at least paragraphs devoid of direct speech and those with a share of direct speech. Furthermore, the impending monotony was at least partly disrupted and enlivened by integrating in groups paragraphs of diverse lengths. Indeed, fiction was marked by the top degree of length heterogeneity of all the scrutinized corpora. One cause of paragraph length variability is the very intertwining of paragraphs with a share of direct speech and those devoid of direct speech portions, as the research done has shown a striking length discrepancy between paragraphs in these types.

Crucially, however, the extraordinary degree of stability in the thematic build-up of fiction paragraphs and groups naturally induces a clear perception of coherence, which appears even more vital in children's fiction.

Generally speaking, academic texts resort to employing this constructional type rather sparingly. In the thematic build-up of both, paragraphs and groups, they clearly prefer constructional instability. Nevertheless, despite their scarcity, the integrative potential of narrow Theme paragraphs in constructing same-type groups proved to be remarkable. This may have something to do with the in-depth analytical tendencies detected in academic texts as well as with their degree of attention drawn to the phenomena in question. At times the construction of groups may be even contrastive with respect to a distinct environment.

It is well known that academic texts aim at an accurate and meticulous scrutiny of phenomena. The researched reality is commonly explored in broader contexts. Moreover, the groups and paragraphs usually manifest a considerable hierarchy of

content, etc. No wonder then that narrow Theme paragraphs and groups proved to be rather limiting for their purposes. Rather, patterns marked by higher degrees of thematic build-up instability, an accelerated thematic turnover, and constructional diversity clearly flourished in the register, since they allowed for comprehensive, accurate and meticulous scrutiny of phenomena.

Significantly, academic texts were prone to employ the narrow Theme paragraphs and groups from transitional and peripheral zones, as their central counterparts would hardly accommodate all the needed evaluative comments, departures, contextualizing clues, asides, notes, cross-references, etc.

Of the various subtypes of this constructional pattern, academic writing made more frequent use only of the paragraphs and groups marked by a relatively higher measure of constructional instability, i.e. those where the Theme is unfolded. Naturally, this pattern suits better meticulous scrutiny and structured accounts than the limiting stable Themes, as the latter would render the content rather flat and devoid of subtle hierarchy.

In addition, it appears worth noting that academic texts generally displayed the longest paragraphs of all. Their considerable space could comfortably accommodate various contextualizations and interpretations. Regarding the groups, the extensive length of their building blocks, i.e. paragraphs, as well as the relative instability in their thematic build-up perhaps naturally preclude the rise of extensive groups, which could be excessively demanding for the recipients to process.

6 Conclusion

All in all, groups with a Narrow Theme clearly prefer a consistent build-up. They thrive in fiction, they are somewhat less prone to feature in journalism and they appear rather rarely in

academic writing. These findings seem motivated by a cluster of factors, including the subject matter differences between the registers under scrutiny (where, among others, different functions of language have different significance) and the various conventions established in them.

The various register-specific tendencies notwithstanding, the construction of narrow Theme groups represents a powerful attentional phenomenon (Talmy, 2008), resulting presumably from an interplay of numerous factors in the attentional system. Considering that the narrow Theme paragraphs themselves foreground a conspicuous Thematic entity, the same type groups apparently only reinforce further their attentional effect.

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Abbreviations and symbols

DS	Discourse Subject
U-theme	utterance theme
P-theme	Paragraph Theme
PGr-theme	Paragraph Group Theme
theme	theme in the theory of FSP
	(functional sentence perspective)