

DECODING BURMESE ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING STYLES: A THEMATIC PROGRESSION PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Thematic Progression patterns in arguments written by Burmese native speakers, addressing a gap in the application of Daneš's TP model. While previous Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) research on Burmese has primarily focused on isolated clause-level structures, the macro-level discourse coherence achieved through sequential theme development remains underexplored. To investigate these textual strategies, 60 argumentative essays produced by 20 native Burmese undergraduates under standardized, timed conditions were analyzed. The texts were segmented into clauses to identify Theme-Rheme boundaries and map their organizational trajectories into Constant, Linear, Derived, and Split Rheme progressions. The quantitative findings reveal that Constant Theme Progression is the most prominent pattern (40.99%), indicating a strong preference among native writers for maintaining focus on a central topic across clauses. Linear Theme Progression closely follows (37.78%), demonstrating the writers' ability to construct dynamic information chains by transforming preceding Rhemes into subsequent Themes. Derived Theme (11.60%) and Split Rheme (9.63%) patterns were utilized to a lesser extent. Finally, this study decodes the rhetorical strategies employed by Burmese writers, providing structural insights that enrich the Thematic Progression framework for non-Western and low-resource languages.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, Thematic Progression, Theme and Rheme, Argumentative Writing, Burmese Language

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INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the realization of text coherence can be traced through the clause-level configuration of ‘Theme’ (the point of departure) and ‘Rheme’ (the core development of the message) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). According to Daneš (1974), the Theme contains ‘Given information’ that is already known from the preceding context, while the Rheme is the core development of the message, containing ‘New information’ that stimulates the reader’s attention. The strategic selection and arrangement of these elements systematically determine the direction of information flow within a text, serving as a primary method of text development (Crompton, 2004; Fries, 1995). Expanding this clause-level analysis to the macro-level discourse, the mechanism of Thematic Progression proposed by Daneš (1974) acts as the structural glue that holds an extended argument together. Daneš (1974) posited that text connexity is represented by thematic progression, famously illustrating its significance by stating, “Thematic progression might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot” (p. 114). It reveals how writers systematically chain given and new information across successive clauses, ensuring macro-level coherence and logical textual organization.

Understanding these progression pathways becomes particularly complex when examining languages with unique typological constraints. Burmese is a head-final, Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) language that heavily relies on postpositional particles to mark syntactic and topical roles (Hopple, 2005). Because the vast majority of existing Thematic Progression research has predominantly focused on Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) languages like English, the discourse-level structural strategies of SOV systems remain significantly underrepresented in the SFL literature. Furthermore, producing coherent text in an SOV language within an argumentative genre places exceptionally high cognitive demands on working memory and self-regulatory planning processes (Nückles et al., 2020; Walková & Bradford, 2021). Argumentative writing forces writers to alter multiple complex cognitive representations by extracting rhematic tokens from earlier segments and systematically reprocessing them into novel thematic departures. Therefore, analyzing Thematic Progression patterns in this specific genre provides a clear perspective on the cognitive coping mechanisms writers employ when faced with demanding composition tasks.

To address this gap and expand the application of SFL to macro-level discourse, this article aims to investigate and classify the Thematic Progression in the argumentative Burmese writing of native speakers. Drawing on Daneš’s (1974) framework, it seeks to decode their textual strategies. This approach will not only reveal how writers logically sustain their arguments but also build a foundation that could ultimately help learners organize information effectively through theme progression instruction (McCabe, 1999, p. 210).

To systematically decode these argumentative writing styles, this study addresses two primary research questions:

- 1) What are the prominent thematic progression patterns manifested in the argumentative writing of native Burmese undergraduates?
- 2) How are these thematic progression patterns strategically employed to maintain macro-level cohesion in their texts?

By answering these questions, this study endeavors to illuminate the intricate relationship between syntactic typology and macro-level discourse organization in the Burmese language. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework of Thematic Progression and relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Finally, Sections 4 and 5 present the empirical findings and discuss their broader implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concepts of Theme, Rheme, and Thematic Progression

In text linguistics and discourse analysis, creating a coherent text requires more than merely stringing grammatically correct sentences together; it demands a logical and systematic flow of information. At the micro-level, this information flow is managed by the clause's thematic structure, which is divided into two primary components: the 'Theme' and the 'Rheme'. The Theme serves as the point of departure for the message, typically representing 'Given information' that anchors the reader in the preceding context. Meanwhile, the Rheme is the core development of the message, presenting 'New information' that stimulates the reader's attention and pushes the discourse forward.

While Theme and Rheme operate at the clause level, these elements must interact seamlessly across boundaries to achieve macro-level cohesion. This dynamic inter-clausal interplay is known as Thematic Progression. Essentially, Thematic Progression refers to the strategic ways in which the Theme or Rheme of one clause connects to the structural elements of subsequent clauses. It acts as the transitional bridge that transforms isolated sentences into a unified, coherent text, systematically determining the direction and logical organization of the information flow (Crompton, 2004).

Daneš's Thematic Progression Framework

To systematically analyze how this flow of information is structured within texts, Daneš (1974) developed the framework of Thematic Progression, building upon the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) theory. Daneš posited that text connexity is fundamentally represented by this progression mechanism, famously illustrating its significance by stating, "Thematic progression might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot" (p. 114). The mechanism driving the discourse occurs when given and new information is transferred from one clause to the next, creating a continuous chain of meaning. Within this framework, Daneš identified four primary types of thematic progression: Constant Theme Progression, Linear Theme Progression, Derived Theme, and Split Rheme.

The first type, Constant Theme Progression, maintains the same theme across multiple clauses, while the rhemes introduce new information (Daneš, 1974). This approach keeps the focus on a central topic, making it particularly effective in expository or descriptive writing where a consistent emphasis is required.

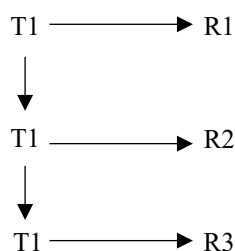


Figure 1 Constant Theme (Daneš, 1974)

The second type, Linear Theme Progression, occurs when the rheme of one clause becomes the theme of the following clause, creating a direct and logical flow of information (Daneš, 1974). This progression is often considered the most elementary form, as it ensures continuity by linking successive ideas seamlessly.

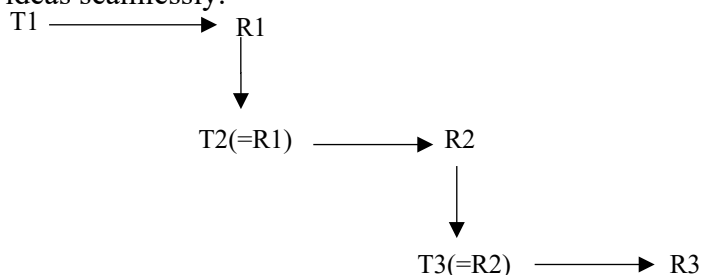
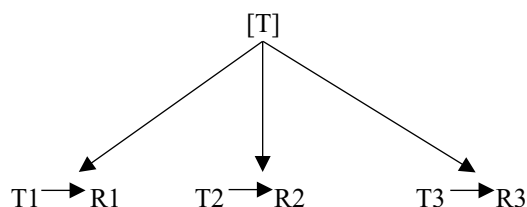
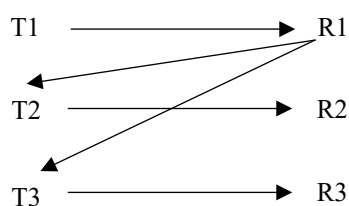


Figure 2 Linear Theme (Daneš, 1974)

In derived theme progression, themes stem from a central “HyperTheme” which serves as the main idea for a paragraph or text section (Daneš, 1974). This progression supports hierarchical information structuring, allowing for cohesive exploration of related ideas within a larger framework. These thematic progressions show how themes and rhemes interact to create coherent and organized texts.

**Figure 3** Derived Theme (Daneš, 1974)

In the fourth type, the exposition of a Split Rheme, multiple information pieces are split and developed into clause themes. Daneš (1974, pp. 120-121), describes this pattern as doubling or multiplying an initial rheme. The first element becomes the theme of the next clause, and the second element becomes the theme of the next clause. It simplifies complex information and allows for detailed explanations or structured categorizations in text.

**Figure 4** Split Rheme (Daneš, 1974)

Beyond its theoretical significance, Thematic Progression is particularly crucial in academic and argumentative writing contexts, as it provides a framework for writers to construct logically structured texts. Mastery of these thematic patterns helps writers organize complex information effectively and manage discourse-level cognitive load (McCabe, 1999; Nückles et al., 2020). Consequently, explicit awareness of theme progression ultimately helps writers build compelling arguments and communicate their stance more persuasively to academic audiences.

Thematic Progression and the Demands of Argumentative Writing

In academic contexts, argumentative writing compels writers to master specialized rhetorical structures to construct compelling arguments (Walková & Bradford, 2021). Producing such texts is widely recognized as a highly demanding cognitive task, as writers must integrate sound reasoning with appropriate linguistic features (Pavavijarn, 2022). Writers are required to hold multiple discourse representations in their working memory concurrently, extracting elements from preceding clauses and reformulating them to develop fresh propositional content. To manage this structural complexity, thematic progression acts as a vital mechanism. It enables writers to systematically develop hierarchical text plans and maintain textual cohesion across clause boundaries without losing track of the overarching topic (McCabe, 1999; Wang, 2007).

Research on Thematic Organization in Burmese Discourse

Within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, previous textual analyses of Burmese have successfully mapped out the language's fundamental grammatical structures. Early foundational insights into Burmese discourse were provided by Hopple (2005), who explored how Burmese uses postpositional particles as a primary means of topicalization in expository texts. Subsequently, the application of SFL to Burmese was initiated by Rattanapitak (2009), who analyzed textual meanings and Theme-Rheme configurations within religious narratives. This foundation was significantly expanded by Lai Yee Win (2021, 2022, 2024), who constructed a comprehensive description of the Burmese clause-level Theme system, rigorously categorizing unmarked and marked theme statuses.

However, while these studies provide a framework for understanding isolated Burmese clauses, their analytical scope is predominantly confined to clause boundaries or narrative genres. The inter-clausal dimension specifically, how Themes and Rhemes interact and sequence together to construct coherent, macro-level discourse in cognitively demanding argumentative writing remains entirely unexplored. By transitioning the analytical focus from the micro-level clause to the macro-level discourse, the present study systematically decodes the thematic progression choices native Burmese writers employ to sustain logical argumentation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and Context

Data were elicited from 20 native Burmese undergraduates using purposive sampling. The participants were purposively selected based on two primary criteria: (1) being native speakers of Burmese to ensure linguistic authenticity, and (2) being currently enrolled in higher education to guarantee a baseline competence in academic argumentation.

Procedures

The primary dataset consists of 60 essays generated under standardized, timed conditions. Elicited through three argumentative prompts from The New York Times Learning Network, the texts were produced independently without machine translation. The specific prompts were randomly selected based on their topical neutrality, cultural accessibility, and conceptual capacity to produce complex stance-taking and logical reasoning. Specifically, the three selected prompts were: (1) "Does Social Media Harm Young People's Mental Health?", (2) "Is Online Learning Effective?" and (3) "Is It OK to Use Family Connections to Get a Job?".

Data Analysis

The analytical process had three steps. Texts were divided into clause units using Matthiessen's (1995) criteria. Instead of ranking clauses, embedded qualifier clauses were treated as nominal group members to ensure thematic analysis borders. Second, SFL concepts defined each ranking clause's Theme-Rheme boundaries. Topical theme was the first departure. Finally, Daneš's (1974) Thematic Progression framework was used to track discourse coherence's progression. Sequences were grouped into Constant, Linear, Derived, or Split Rheme patterns and measured by frequency and percentage to show writers' organizational preferences.

As the coding was conducted by a single researcher, an intra-rater reliability test was performed to ensure consistency and minimize subjective bias, particularly concerning the nuanced distinction between Derived Theme and Split Rheme. The researcher recoded a randomly selected subset comprising 20% of the dataset four weeks after the initial analysis. The agreement rate between the two coding sessions was calculated at 95% (Mackey & Gass, 2015). Any minor intra-coder discrepancies were carefully reviewed and reconciled strictly based on Daneš's (1974) original framework to maintain a highly standardized analytical process.

RESEARCH RESULTS

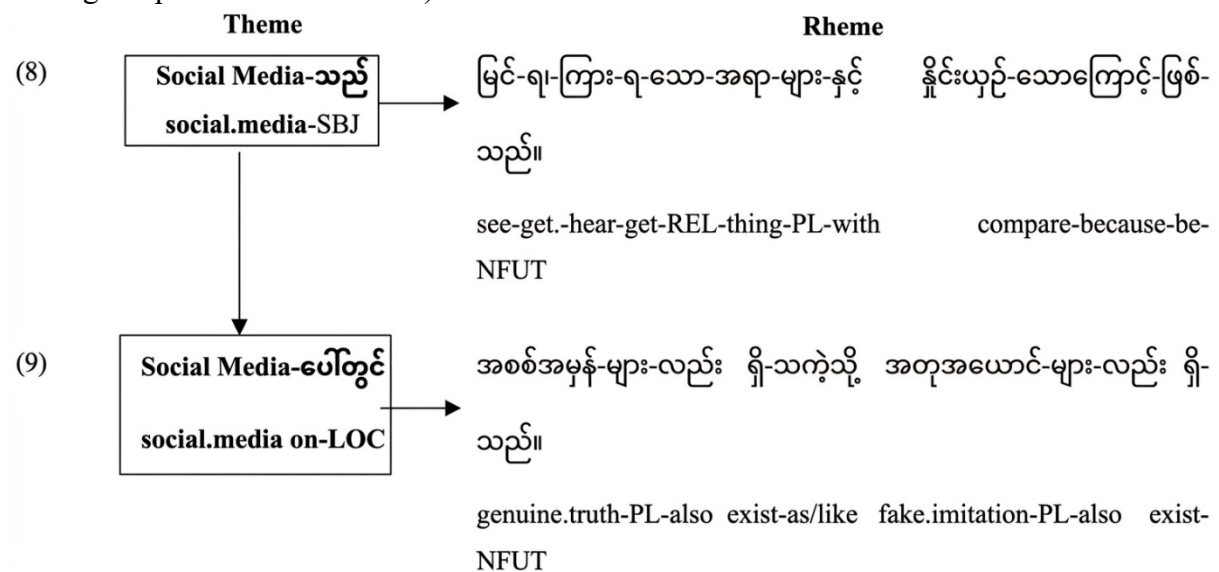
Prominent Thematic Progression Patterns

Table 1 presents the overall frequency and percentage distribution of the four patterns identified in the dataset, based on Daneš's (1974) framework.

Table 1 A Frequency of Thematic Progression Patterns

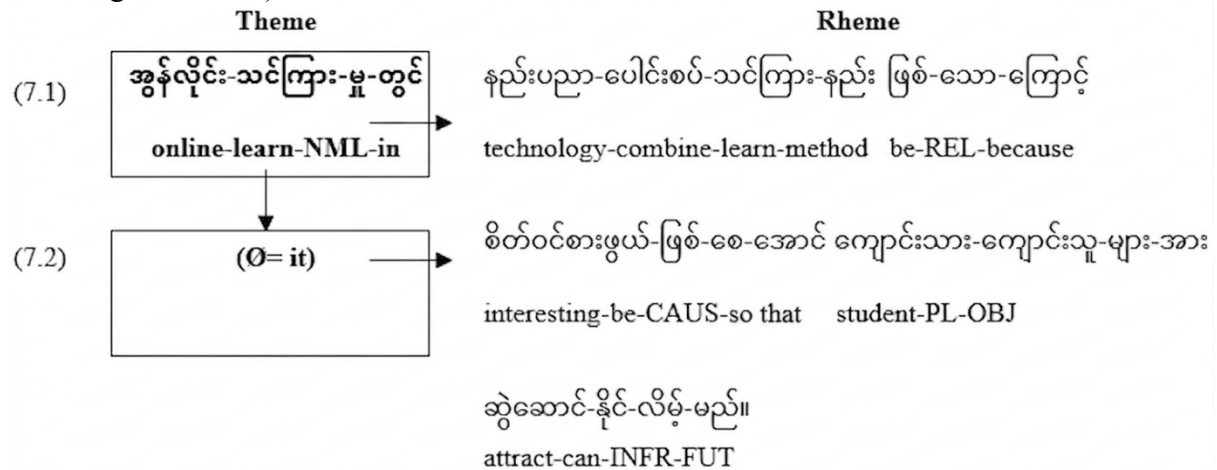
Thematic Progression Patterns	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Constant Theme	166	40.99%
Linear Theme	153	37.78%
Derived Theme	47	11.60%
Split Rheme	39	9.63%
Total	405	100.00%

As illustrated in Table 1, the quantitative analysis reveals a distinct preference in the structural organization of Burmese argumentative writing. The Constant Theme Progression emerged as the most prominent pattern, accounting for 40.99% of the total occurrences. This indicates a strong tendency among the native writers to maintain a consistent point of departure by keeping the focus on a central topic across clauses. Consider Excerpt 1 as an illustration of this strategy: **Excerpt 1** Constant Theme in clauses (8)-(9) by Writer 06 (Topic: Does Social Media Harm Young People's Mental Health?)



As demonstrated in Excerpt 1, the writer anchors the argument by reiterating the central participant, “Social Media,” in the thematic position of both clauses. While the first clause introduces “Social Media” as the primary subject, the subsequent clause maintains this exact point of departure as a contextual frame (“On social media”). This strategy ensures that the main subject remains in sharp focus, allowing the writer to seamlessly introduce new assertions in the Rhemes without disrupting the logical flow of the text.

Excerpt 2 Constant Theme with Ellipsis in clauses (7.1)-(7.2) by Writer 02 (Topic: Is Online Learning Effective?)



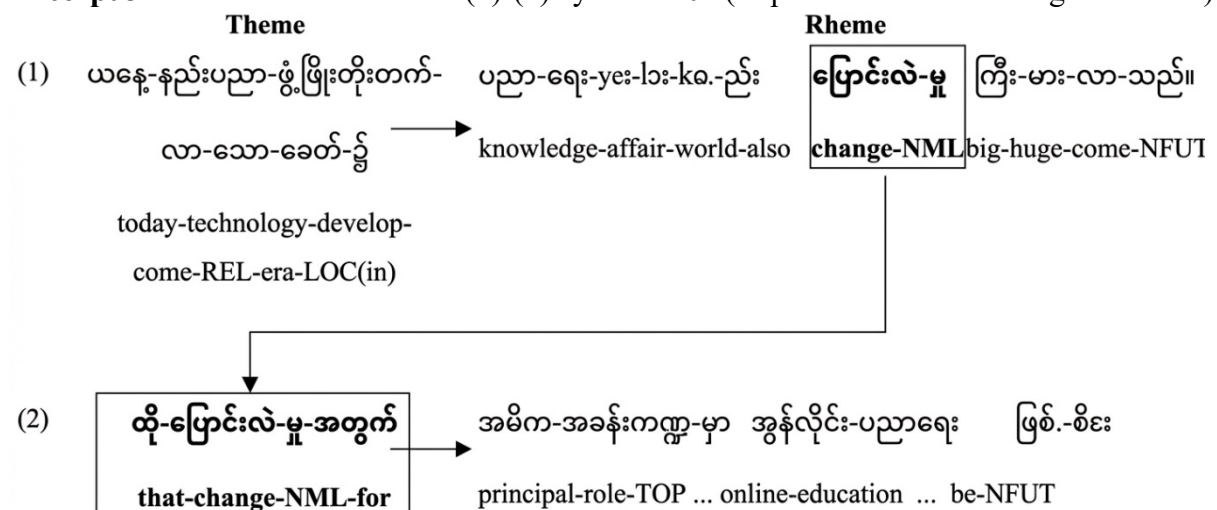
(7.1) 'In online learning, because it is a teaching method that integrates technology,'

(7.2) '(it) will be able to attract students and make learning interesting.'

As demonstrated in Excerpt 2, the writer employs a Constant Theme Progression while elegantly utilizing a typological feature characteristic of the Burmese language: zero anaphora (ellipsis). The first clause establishes "online learning" as the initial point of departure (Theme 1). In the subsequent clause, the writer implicitly maintains this exact thematic focus but omits the explicit subject (indicated by Ø). Despite this ellipsis, the constant progression ensures strong textual cohesion. The reader naturally retrieves the unstated theme ("online learning"), allowing the argument to flow seamlessly into the new rhematic assertion about attracting students without unnecessary redundancy.

This was closely followed by the Linear Theme Progression, which constituted 37.78% (153 instances) of the data. This high frequency suggests that L1 writers readily build dynamic new information chains by extracting elements from the preceding Rheme and reprocessing them as the Theme of the subsequent clause.

Excerpt 3 Linear Theme in clauses (1)-(2) by Writer 02 (Topic: Is Online Learning Effective?)



(1) 'In today's era of technology coming to develop, the education world also, change comes to be huge.'

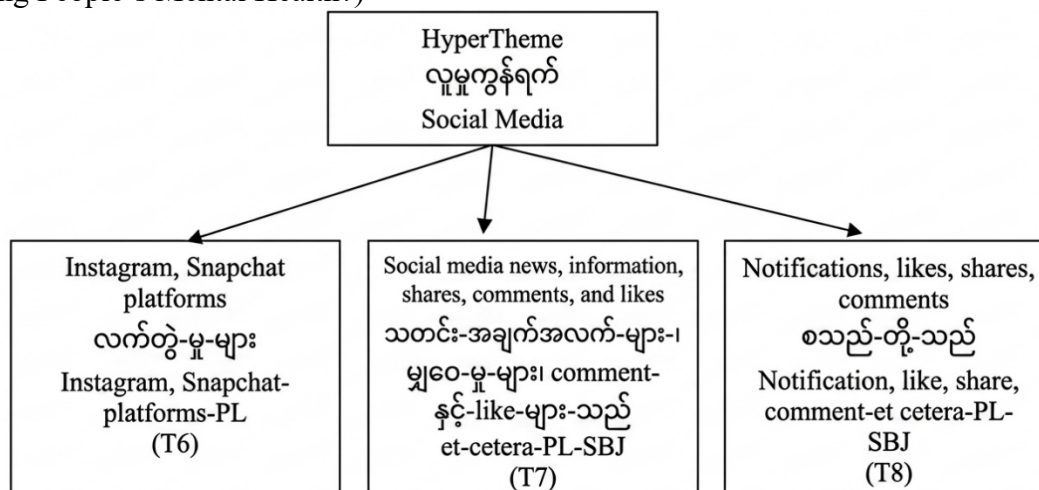
(2) 'For that change, as for the principal role, [it] is online education.'

As shown in the excerpt above, the writer uses a Linear Progression to reason logically. The concept of a significant "change" in the education sector is immediately extracted and repurposed as the point of departure (Theme 2) for the next clause. Note that the writer uses

“For that change” to reference the previous rheme. This step-by-step chaining dynamically advances the argument, allowing the writer to smoothly transition from global technological advancement to online education while maintaining structural cohesion.

The Derived Theme accounted for 11.60% (47 instances) of the dataset, reflecting the native writers’ capacity to organize arguments from a paragraph-level HyperTheme. This pattern demonstrates a high level of discourse competence, as it requires the writer to establish a broad, overarching topic and subsequently extract its specific sub-components to serve as the Themes for ensuing clauses. Excerpt 4 provides a clear illustration of this macro-level planning:

Excerpt 4 Derived Theme in clauses (6)-(7)-(8) by Writer 09 (Topic: Does Social Media Harm Young People’s Mental Health?)



(6) ‘Instagram and Snapchat platforms cause mental illness among young people.’

(7) ‘Social media news, information, shares, comments, and likes can cause addictive behavior in young people.’

(8) ‘Notifications, likes, shares, and comments can affect (users) by encouraging dopamine addiction.’

As demonstrated in Excerpt 4, the writer employs a Derived Theme Progression to construct a hierarchically structured argument. The overarching topic, or HyperTheme, focuses broadly on the concept of “Social Media.” In the subsequent clauses, the writer systematically extracts specific components belonging to this HyperTheme and places them in the thematic position. For instance, Theme 6 highlights specific platforms (“Instagram and Snapchat”), while Themes 7 and 8 focus on specific interactive features (“news, information, shares, comments, and likes” and “Notifications”). Crucially, these derived elements are not confined to immediately sequential clauses. As is often characteristic of this pattern, the derivation can span across a textual distance, allowing the writer to insert supporting details or extensively elaborate on one sub-topic before introducing the next. This progression strategy reveals the writer’s macro-level planning capacity. Rather than monotonously reiterating a single global theme, the writer breaks down the complex phenomenon of social media into tangible subcomponents.

It demonstrates that these writers do not merely generate isolated clauses, but consciously orchestrate their texts. By strategically reserving the thematic position for categorized sub-topics across a paragraph, they transform a potentially overwhelming catalog of facts into a compelling, readable, and structurally sound argument.

Conversely, the Split Rheme progression was the least frequently used structural strategy, representing merely 9.63% (39 instances). This low frequency is largely attributable to the cognitive complexity required to execute this pattern; it involves introducing a dense, multi-faceted proposition within a single rheme and subsequently unpacking its individual components into the thematic positions of subsequent clauses. Despite its rarity, when

employed, it serves as a highly effective tool for detailed and systematic elaboration. Excerpt 5 illustrates this complex unpacking strategy:

Excerpt 5 Split Rheme in clauses (3)-(5)-(9) by Writer 06 (Topic: Is Online Learning Effective?)

	Theme	Rheme
(3)	Online learning-သည် Online learning-SBJ	သင်ကြား-သူ-နှင့်-သင်-ယူ-သူ-များ-အား teach-person-and-learn-take-person-PL-OBJ အချိန်-နေရာ-မ-ရွေး-လွယ်ကူ-မြန်အန်-စွာ-သင်ကြား-နိုင်-ခြင်း၊ time-place-NEG-choose-easy-fast-ADV-learn-capable-NML, မိမိကိုယ်တိုင်-တစ်နိုင်တစ်ပိုင်-လေ့လာ-နိုင်-ခြင်း in.person-independently-study-can-NML, အစရှိသည့်-အကျိုးကျေးဇူးများကို ရရှိစေပါသည်။ such as-benefit-PL-OBJ, get-exist-let(CAUS)-IMPORT-NFUT
(5)	အချိန်-နေရာ-မ-ရွေး-လွယ်ကူ- မြန်အန်-စွာ-သင်ကြား-နိုင်- ခြင်း-သည် time-place-NEG-choose- easy-fast-ADV-learn- capable-NML	ကောင်းကျိုး-တစ်-ခု-ဖြစ်-သည်။ benefit-one-CLF-be-NFUT
(9)	မိမိကိုယ်တိုင်-တစ်နိုင်တစ်ပိုင်- လေ့လာ-နိုင်-ခြင်း in.person-independently- study-capable-NML	Online Learning-၏-အားသာ-ချက်-နောက်-တစ်-ခု-မှာ ဖြစ်-သည်။ Online Learning-POSS-advantage-point-next-one-CLF-TOP be-NFUT

(3) Online learning provides teachers and learners with benefits such as the ability to teach/learn easily and *quickly*, regardless of time and place, and the ability to study independently.

(5) The ability to teach/learn easily and quickly regardless of time and place is one benefit.

(9) The ability to study independently is another advantage of online learning.

As demonstrated in the excerpt above, the writer utilizes a Split Rheme Progression to systematically unpack multiple pieces of information introduced in a single clause. In the initial clause (Clause 3), the rheme presents a complex proposition containing two distinct benefits of online learning: (1) the flexibility of time and location, and (2) the ability to study independently. The writer then splits this dense rheme, elevating each specific benefit to the thematic position of the subsequent clauses (Clauses 5 and 9). Notably, these split components do not emerge in immediately sequential clauses. The textual distance between the initial rheme and its subsequent thematic realizations occurs because the writer takes the necessary space to provide detailed elaboration and supporting evidence for the first point before moving on to the second.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examines the dominant thematic progression patterns in the argumentative writing of native Burmese undergraduates and how these patterns contribute to macro-level cohesion. The findings show that Constant Theme (40.99%) and Linear Theme (37.78%) together account for nearly 80% of thematic progression, consistent with the cross-linguistic view that effective text development balances thematic continuity with rhematic expansion. A closer look at the data, however, reveals a pattern that departs from conventions typically described in the literature.

In composition studies shaped largely by English and other non-pro-drop languages, heavy reliance on Constant Theme in argumentative writing is often treated as a stylistic weakness

associated with repetitive prose. This assumption does not hold for Burmese, an SOV, pro-drop language. The prominence of Constant Theme (40.99%) here reflects not weak writing but an efficient use of zero anaphora: writers maintain a stable point of departure across clauses without repeating the subject. What would read as redundant in English becomes an economical strategy in Burmese, reducing the reader's processing load while allowing the writer to develop more complex rhematic content without losing the argument's thread.

The frequency of Linear Theme (37.78%) reflects writers' skill in building step-by-step logical chains: new information introduced in one clause's Rheme becomes the Theme of the next. This progression moves the reader from general claims toward specific, well-contextualized points.

The lower frequencies of Derived Theme (11.60%) and Split Rheme (9.63%) do not indicate weaker structural range; rather, these patterns are cognitively more demanding to produce. The data show that when writers use them, the connections often span non-adjacent clauses rather than immediate ones. This suggests writers are managing paragraph-level HyperThemes deliberately, organizing blocks of evidence before shifting to a new sub-topic.

Beyond typological constraints, these findings offer significant pedagogical implications for Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly within the framework of contrastive rhetoric. When Burmese native speakers transition to writing in SVO languages such as English, they may unconsciously transfer their L1 thematic strategies. In English academic writing, which lacks the pro-drop feature, an overreliance on Constant Theme can be perceived by native readers as repetitive or structurally immature. Furthermore, English academic discourse heavily relies on explicit lexical cohesive devices and often favors Linear Theme progression to build explicit, step-by-step logical chains. Therefore, language educators should explicitly raise learners' awareness of these cross-linguistic structural differences. By incorporating explicit instruction on thematic progression (Wang, 2007; Connor, 1996), teachers can effectively help Burmese learners adjust their structural choices, guiding them to meet the rhetorical expectations of English academic writing without framing their native organizational strategies as a deficit.

In sum, this study extends the description of Burmese SFL grammar from the clause level to macro-level discourse organization. The findings show that thematic progression cannot be analyzed independently of a language's morphosyntactic features: Burmese's pro-drop and SOV properties directly shape how its argumentative prose is structured. This challenges universal assumptions in text development models and supports a typologically grounded approach to studying discourse cohesion. Future research could examine whether these progression patterns are specific to argumentative writing or extend to other genres in Burmese. It is important to acknowledge that the sample size of 20 participants is relatively modest. While the findings provide profound insights into Burmese discourse, future research could fruitfully explore whether these specific progression tendencies extend across a larger corpus or different textual typologies.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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