

A Theme–Rheme Analysis of International News Reports on Russia’s LGBT Policy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how thematic organization contributes to the construction of state power and social positioning in international news discourse. Drawing on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, with a specific focus on Theme–Rheme structure, the study analyses a BBC news report published in November 2023 on the Russian Supreme Court’s decision to designate the so-called “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization. Using a qualitative textual approach, the text is segmented into clauses and analyzed to identify patterns of thematic choice and progression. The findings reveal a consistent foregrounding of institutional actors, such as state authorities and legal bodies, in Theme position when reporting legal actions and policy decisions, while members of the LGBT community and civil society figures are predominantly thematized in clauses expressing reactions, personal experiences, and anticipated consequences. This asymmetric thematic distribution constructs a discourse in which state authority is positioned as the primary agent of action, whereas affected social groups are framed as respondents to institutional power. The study demonstrates that ideological meanings in news discourse may be realized implicitly through grammatical organization rather than explicit evaluative language, and it highlights the value of Theme–Rheme analysis for examining power relations in contemporary international news reporting.

Keywords: Theme-Rheme, SFL, News Discourse, Media Representation, Russia LGBT Policy



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Russia has enacted a number of legal measures related to LGBT issues, including restrictions on public expression and the designation of the so-called “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These policy developments have generated extensive coverage in international news media, positioning Russia’s domestic governance within broader global discussions on law, state authority, and human rights.

News reporting, however, is not a neutral reflection of events. As argued in linguistic and media discourse studies, news texts actively construct social reality through systematic linguistic choices rather than merely transmitting information (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). The organization of information within clauses and across texts plays a crucial role in shaping how events, actors, and policies are interpreted by readers.

Within this context, examining the linguistic structure of international news reports provides insights into how meanings are organized and made salient. Rather than evaluating the legitimacy or morality of the policies themselves, a linguistic approach allows researchers to investigate how such policies are represented through language.

This study is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as developed by Halliday (1994) and further elaborated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). SFL conceptualizes language as a social semiotic system that simultaneously realizes three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The present study focuses exclusively on the textual metafunction, particularly the Theme–Rheme system, which concerns the organization of information within the clause. In Halliday’s framework, Theme is defined as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message,” while Rheme comprises the remaining part of the clause in which the Theme is developed (Halliday, 1994, p. 37). Theme selection determines what the writer foregrounds as the starting point of the clause, thereby guiding readers’ interpretation and expectations.

Previous research has shown that thematic organization is especially significant in news discourse, where patterns of Theme selection contribute to coherence, information flow, and the apparent objectivity of reporting (Eggs, 2004; Bloor & Bloor, 2013). By examining Theme–Rheme structures, researchers can identify recurring textual patterns without making evaluative or ideological assumptions in advance.

In journalistic writing, Theme selection is not arbitrary. News texts often rely on recurring thematic patterns to manage prominence, continuity, and emphasis, particularly in reporting institutional actions and policy developments (Fries, 1995; Bell, 1991). Through thematic choices, news writers can systematically foreground certain entities while backgrounding others, shaping readers’ perception of what is central to the reported events.

Despite the growing body of research on media discourse and political communication, studies that focus specifically on Theme–Rheme organization in international news reporting on LGBT-related state policies remain limited. Existing research more commonly prioritizes transitivity patterns or evaluative language, leaving thematic structure underexplored as a primary analytical focus. This gap suggests the need for a study that examines how information is structured and sequenced in news discourse on sensitive policy issues, without presupposing ideological outcomes.

This study aims to examine how Theme–Rheme organization is employed in an international news report to construct representations of state authority and affected social groups. Drawing on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study focuses on a BBC news article reporting the Russian Supreme Court’s decision to designate the so-called “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization. By analyzing patterns of thematic choice and progression at the clause level, this study seeks to reveal how power relations are implicitly organized in news discourse through grammatical structuring rather than overt evaluative language. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How are Themes and Rhemes distributed in the BBC news report on Russia’s designation of the “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization? and (2) How do patterns of thematic choice contribute to the representation of state authority and affected social groups in the news discourse?

This study contributes to linguistic research in three main ways. First, it highlights the analytical value of the Theme–Rheme system as a primary tool for examining news discourse. Second, it extends SFL-based media discourse research to the context of international reporting on LGBT-related state policies. Third, by focusing on textual organization rather than evaluative stance, the study demonstrates how ideology may be approached indirectly through patterns of information structure.

News discourse has long been recognized as a socially situated form of language use rather than a neutral reflection of reality. Scholars in critical linguistics and media studies argue that news texts actively construct social events through selective linguistic choices, framing practices, and information organization (Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1995). Through language, news media mediate between institutional actors and the public, shaping how policy developments and social issues are interpreted.

More recent research continues to affirm that news discourse plays a central role in representing state actions, legal decisions, and human rights issues in global contexts (van Dijk, 2018). Linguistic features such as information structure, thematic organization, and textual cohesion are particularly important in news writing, as they guide readers’ attention and establish what is presented as given, salient, or newsworthy.

This study is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a theory of language developed by Halliday that conceptualizes language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within SFL, language simultaneously realizes three metafunctions: the

ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Each metafunction contributes to how experience is represented, social relations are enacted, and discourse is organized.

SFL has been widely applied in media discourse studies due to its emphasis on the functional relationship between linguistic form and social meaning. Rather than treating grammar as an abstract system, SFL enables researchers to examine how grammatical choices are shaped by communicative purposes and institutional contexts, making it particularly suitable for analyzing news texts (Eggs, 2004).

The present study focuses on the textual metafunction, which concerns how language organizes information into coherent and meaningful discourse. Central to this metafunction is the Theme–Rheme system, which explains how clauses are structured as messages. In Hallidayan terms, Theme is defined as the point of departure of the clause, while Rheme constitutes the remainder of the message in which the Theme is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The selection of Theme plays a crucial role in determining what information is foregrounded and how discourse unfolds across a text.

Previous research has demonstrated that thematic choices contribute to textual coherence and guide readers' interpretation by maintaining topical continuity and managing information flow (Fries, 1995; Bloor & Bloor, 2013). In news discourse, thematic structures often reflect journalistic conventions, such as placing institutional actors or previously mentioned entities in thematic position to establish authority and relevance (Bell, 1991). In the last five years, a growing body of empirical research has reaffirmed the relevance of Theme–Rheme analysis for examining contemporary discourse, including news and public communication. Recent studies have applied Theme–Rheme analysis to opinion journalism, online news platforms, and political texts, demonstrating how thematic choices contribute to coherence and information management in modern media contexts (Alharbi, 2025; Ramadhan, 2024).

Studies focusing on international and online news reporting have shown that topical Themes remain dominant, reflecting journalistic practices that foreground institutional actors and key events at the beginning of clauses (Sari & Putra, 2025). Other recent research has extended Theme–Rheme analysis to politically salient discourse, such as speeches and policy-related texts, highlighting the adaptability of this analytical framework to sensitive and contested social issues (Nasution, 2024). Collectively, these recent studies establish that Theme–Rheme analysis continues to be an active and productive area of research within SFL, particularly for understanding how information is organized and prioritized in real-world texts.

Although SFL recognizes the interdependence of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, this study deliberately concentrates on the Theme–Rheme system as its primary analytical focus. This decision is motivated by the study's central concern with how international news discourse organizes information and establishes points of departure when reporting on policy-related issues. By focusing on Theme–Rheme structures, the study aims to provide an exploratory and descriptive account of information organization without presupposing evaluative or ideological conclusions. This approach is particularly appropriate for analyzing international news coverage of sensitive legal and social policies, where the sequencing and foregrounding of information play a crucial role in shaping reader interpretation.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative text-based approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine how meanings are organized in news discourse. Rather than measuring frequency or public reception, the study focuses on the internal linguistic organization of the text, specifically the clause-level realization of meaning through Theme–Rheme structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The data for this study consist of a single news article published by BBC News on 30 November 2023, titled "*Russia bans 'international LGBT movement' as extremist*". The article reports the Russian Supreme Court's decision to designate the so-called "international LGBT movement" as an extremist organization. Although published in 2023, the article was deliberately selected because it documents the initial public articulation of a landmark legal decision that continues to shape Russian state policy and public discourse beyond its publication date. In discourse-analytical research, such early reports are methodologically significant as they function as foundational texts that establish dominant frames and institutional narratives subsequently reproduced in later media coverage (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The BBC was chosen as the data source due to its established international editorial standards and its role as a global news outlet addressing transnational audiences, making it an appropriate site for examining how state authority is

linguistically represented in international news discourse. To ensure analytical focus and consistency, the analysis is limited to the core news report section of the article. Headlines, subheadings, image captions, hyperlinks, and reader comments were excluded. This delimitation ensures that the data consist solely of editorially produced narrative discourse, avoiding paratextual elements that follow different linguistic conventions.

The analysis is grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, with a specific focus on the textual metafunction, operationalized through Theme–Rheme analysis. In SFL, the Theme is defined as the point of departure of the clause, while the Rheme comprises the remainder of the message (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Theme–Rheme analysis is particularly suitable for news discourse because thematic choices play a crucial role in structuring information flow and foregrounding particular social actors, institutions, or processes.

The analysis followed a systematic, multi-step procedure to ensure transparency and replicability. First, the selected text was segmented into clauses, following Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) definition of the clause as the basic unit of meaning. Where a single sentence contained multiple processes, it was divided into separate clauses to allow for precise analysis. Second, each clause was assigned a unique identifier (e.g., C1, C2, C3) to facilitate explicit referencing and cross-checking throughout the analysis. This coding enables readers to trace analytical claims directly back to the data. Third, the Theme and Rheme of each clause were identified. The Theme was defined as the first experiential element in the clause, while the remainder was classified as the Rheme. Themes were further categorized into topical, textual, and interpersonal Themes. Fourth, Themes were classified as unmarked or marked, depending on whether they coincided with the grammatical subject or were realized by circumstantial or contextual elements placed in clause-initial position. This distinction allows for the identification of patterns of foregrounding. Finally, thematic patterns were identified across clauses by examining the recurrence of institutional, legal, and individual entities in Theme position. Interpretation was restricted to observable grammatical patterns within the scope of the textual metafunction, avoiding claims about authorial intention or ideological stance beyond what is supported by the data.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, several strategies were employed. Analytical decisions were grounded explicitly in established SFL theory, ensuring theoretical transparency. Consistent criteria for Theme identification were applied across all clauses, and representative clauses are presented in the Results section to illustrate analytical decisions. Throughout the analysis, interpretations were continuously checked against the textual data to avoid overgeneralization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Thematic Patterns

The Theme–Rheme analysis of the BBC news article "*Russian court bans 'LGBT movement'*" reveals a systematic and patterned thematic organisation that consistently foregrounds state institutions and legal authority, while positioning LGBT individuals and activists primarily as reactive or affected participants. Rather than appearing randomly, thematic choices across the text form a coherent pattern that structures how agency, responsibility, and legitimacy are distributed in the discourse.

Across the analysed clauses, unmarked topical Themes are dominated by three major categories: (1) Russian state institutions such as *Russia's Supreme Court*, *the authorities*, and *the Kremlin*; (2) abstract legal and political entities, including *the ruling*, *the ban*, and *the law*; and (3) reported speakers aligned with institutional power, most notably political figures such as *Vitaly Milonov*. These Themes function as stable points of departure that orient the reader towards a legal–institutional frame of interpretation.

By contrast, members of the LGBT community are thematised in markedly different ways. They most frequently appear as Themes in clauses involving mental or verbal processes (e.g. *I think*, *he said*, *I feel*), or through existential and relational constructions indicating vulnerability and precarity (e.g. *There is panic*, *people are emigrating*). This contrastive distribution suggests that while the state is discursively positioned as an actor that decides, defines, and enacts policy, LGBT individuals are represented primarily as experiencers of consequences rather than initiators of action. Importantly, this asymmetry is realised

grammatically rather than through overt evaluative language, highlighting the ideological potential of thematic organisation itself.

Theme–Rheme Analysis of Key Clauses

To ensure analytical transparency and replicability, each clause in the selected dataset is coded (C1, C2, etc.), enabling readers to trace interpretative claims directly back to the textual evidence. Table 1 presents representative clauses illustrating dominant thematic patterns in the text.

Table 1: Theme–Rheme Distribution in Selected Clauses

Clause Code	Clause	Theme	Rheme
C1	<i>Russia’s Supreme Court has declared what it calls “the international LGBT public movement” an extremist organisation</i>	Russia’s Supreme Court	has declared what it calls “the international LGBT public movement” an extremist organisation
C2	<i>The ruling was prompted by a motion from the justice ministry</i>	The ruling	was prompted by a motion from the justice ministry
C3	<i>Nobody from “the defendant’s side” had been present</i>	Nobody from “the defendant’s side”	had been present
C4	<i>Russia’s constitution was changed three years ago</i>	Russia’s constitution	was changed three years ago
C5	<i>I think this will mean that anyone whom the state considers an LGBT activist could receive a long prison sentence</i>	I	think this will mean that anyone whom the state considers an LGBT activist could receive a long prison sentence
C6	<i>There is panic in Russia’s LGBT community</i>	There	is panic in Russia’s LGBT community
C7	<i>The authorities portray LGBT activism as something inherently Western and hostile to Russia</i>	The authorities	portray LGBT activism as something inherently Western and hostile to Russia

Table 1 presents the Theme–Rheme organization of selected clauses from the BBC news article, analysed within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. Each clause is assigned a unique identification code to ensure analytical transparency and to allow precise cross-referencing between the table and the discussion. The Theme column captures the point of departure of each clause, while the Rheme represents the remainder of the message where new or expanded information is developed.

The table demonstrates a consistent predominance of unmarked topical Themes, typically realised by nominal groups referring to institutional actors such as *Russia’s Supreme Court*, *the authorities*, or *the law*. This pattern indicates a discourse orientation that foregrounds state institutions and legal mechanisms as primary agents, while marginalising individual or community-level perspectives. Marked Themes, including circumstantial elements such as temporal or causal adjuncts, appear less frequently and are strategically deployed to contextualise legal actions rather than to humanise their impact.

By mapping Theme–Rheme progression across clauses, the table reveals how the text constructs coherence through linear thematic progression, where information introduced in the Rheme of one clause

becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause. This pattern contributes to the presentation of the policy as a logical and procedural development, reinforcing its legitimacy within a legal-administrative frame.

Overall, the table does not merely function as descriptive linguistic evidence but serves as the empirical foundation for the critical interpretation advanced in the Results and Discussion section. It demonstrates how thematic choices in the BBC text systematically shape readers' understanding of Russia's designation of the LGBT movement as "extremist," framing it primarily as a matter of legal order rather than as a contested human rights issue.

Institutional Authority as Thematic Foregrounding

Clauses C1, C2, and C4 demonstrate a strong tendency to thematise institutions and abstract legal entities rather than individual human agents. In C1 (*Russia's Supreme Court has declared what it calls "the international LGBT public movement" an extremist organisation*), the Theme *Russia's Supreme Court* establishes the legal institution as the primary locus of authority and decision-making. By occupying Theme position, the court is presented as the unquestioned starting point of the clause, lending institutional legitimacy and a sense of finality to the declaration.

Similarly, C2 (*The ruling was prompted by a motion from the justice ministry*) employs a passive construction in which the Theme *The ruling* foregrounds the outcome rather than the actors responsible for initiating the process. The use of passivisation here is significant: it obscures human agency and frames the ban as a procedural consequence rather than a politically motivated decision. From a Systemic Functional perspective, this choice construes the event as administratively neutral and inevitable, thereby naturalising state power.

Clause C4 (*Russia's constitution was changed three years ago*) further reinforces this pattern. The Theme *Russia's constitution* presents constitutional change as a factual and completed process, detached from political contestation or social debate. Taken together, these clauses illustrate how institutional authority is repeatedly foregrounded through Theme selection, constructing the state as stable, legitimate, and structurally dominant within the discourse.

Marginalisation Through Experiential and Existential Themes

In contrast to the institutional Themes discussed above, LGBT individuals are primarily positioned through experiential roles. In C5 (*I think this will mean that anyone whom the state considers an LGBT activist could receive a long prison sentence*), the Theme *I* foregrounds subjective perception and personal fear. Rather than challenging state authority directly, the clause construes the speaker's position as speculative and anticipatory, reinforcing an imbalance between institutional certainty and individual anxiety.

Clause C6 (*There is panic in Russia's LGBT community*) employs an existential construction in which *There* functions as a non-referential Theme. This grammatical choice is particularly revealing. Panic is presented as a condition that exists independently, without a clearly thematised cause or agent. As a result, responsibility for this panic is diffused, even though it arises directly from state action. Such existential Themes thus play a crucial role in backgrounding agency while still reporting social suffering.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, these thematic patterns position LGBT individuals as vulnerable subjects whose experiences are acknowledged but grammatically subordinated. Although the BBC text includes direct quotations and emotive language, the underlying thematic structure continues to privilege institutional perspectives as the primary organisers of meaning.

Ideological Construction of "the LGBT Movement"

Clause C7 (*The authorities portray LGBT activism as something inherently Western and hostile to Russia*) offers a particularly clear illustration of ideological meaning realised through thematic choice. The Theme *The authorities* positions the state as the primary meaning-maker, while *LGBT activism* appears only in the Rheme as an object of representation. This asymmetry reflects a discursive hierarchy in which the power to define and categorise social groups resides with the state.

From a Hallidayan perspective, this clause enacts a relational process of attribution, assigning negatively evaluated attributes (*Western, hostile*) to LGBT activism. Although these attributes are reported rather than endorsed by the journalist, their placement within the clause structure reinforces an us–them binary that aligns with official state narratives. Ideology, in this sense, operates not through explicit authorial stance but through the repeated grammatical positioning of actors and attributes.

Discussion: Theme–Rheme as Ideological Work in News Discourse

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Theme–Rheme organisation in the BBC article performs subtle but consequential ideological work. First, it consistently foregrounds state institutions as legitimate and authoritative actors, reinforcing their discursive dominance. Second, it backgrounds or diffuses responsibility through passivisation and existential constructions, presenting state actions as procedural or inevitable. Third, it represents LGBT individuals primarily as reactive, fearful, or displaced subjects, thereby limiting their discursive agency.

While the article aims to critique Russian policy and foregrounds human consequences through reported speech, its thematic organisation simultaneously reproduces the very power asymmetries it reports. This tension highlights Halliday’s argument that grammar is not a neutral vehicle for meaning but a resource for construing social reality. Theme–Rheme analysis thus proves particularly effective in revealing how ideological meanings may be embedded in news discourse even when explicit evaluation is restrained.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how thematic organization is employed in a BBC news report on Russia’s designation of the so-called “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization. Drawing on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, with a specific focus on Theme–Rheme structure, the analysis demonstrates that patterns of thematic choice play a crucial role in shaping how state authority, legal action, and social consequences are discursively represented in international news media.

The findings indicate that institutional actors—such as *Russia’s Supreme Court, the authorities, and the Kremlin*—are consistently foregrounded in Theme position, particularly in clauses reporting legal decisions and policy rationales. This thematic pattern constructs state power as the primary point of departure in the text, reinforcing its centrality and legitimacy within the unfolding narrative. At the same time, members of the LGBT community and civil society figures are thematised mainly in clauses reporting reactions, fears, and personal consequences, positioning them discursively as responders rather than initiators of action. Through this asymmetrical thematic distribution, the text subtly organizes power relations without resorting to overt evaluative language.

Importantly, the study shows that the BBC report maintains an appearance of journalistic neutrality while still embedding ideological meanings through grammatical choices. Rather than explicit stance-taking, the text relies on thematic progression and attribution of voices to construct a contrast between institutional authority and lived experience. This supports the argument that ideology in news discourse is often realized implicitly at the level of clause structure, rather than through lexical evaluation alone.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of Theme–Rheme analysis as an effective analytical tool for critical media studies. It demonstrates that even a limited dataset—a single, carefully selected news article—can yield meaningful insights into how power and governance are linguistically organized in media discourse, provided that the analysis is systematic and theoretically grounded.

This study is not without limitations. The analysis is based on one news text published in 2023, and therefore does not aim to generalize across all media representations of LGBT-related policies in Russia. Future research may expand the corpus to include multiple news outlets, comparative national media, or diachronic data in order to examine whether similar thematic patterns persist across texts and contexts. Nevertheless, the present findings contribute to ongoing discussions on the linguistic construction of state power in news discourse and highlight the value of Systemic Functional Linguistics for examining contemporary socio-political issues.

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