

Thematic Structure in British and Saudi English Opinion Articles: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract—Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Intercultural Rhetoric frameworks, this comparative analysis reveals distinct cross-cultural patterns in the thematic structure of British and Saudi English opinion articles. Saudi authors exhibit a strong preference for unmarked themes (90.2%) and linear thematic progression (71.1%), aligning with Arabic rhetorical traditions of direct presentation and sequential argumentation. Conversely, British writers employ significantly more marked themes (18.9%) and constant progression (42.0%), consistent with British rhetorical conventions of contextual framing and cumulative argument development. These findings illuminate how cultural rhetorical traditions manifest in English-medium persuasion while demonstrating writers' strategic adaptations to genre conventions, including the suppression of culturally preferred patterns (e.g., derived progression) due to journalistic demands for brevity. The study contributes to understanding intercultural communication in global Englishes and offers practical insights for pedagogy, translation, and media discourse analysis.

Index Terms—contrastive rhetoric, intercultural communication, persuasive discourse, Saudi English, thematic structure

I. INTRODUCTION

Newspapers are pivotal in shaping public discourse and influencing societal attitudes, with opinion sections acting as vital arenas for persuasive argumentation and ideological expression (Hinkel, 2004). These texts are not only reflective of cultural values and rhetorical traditions but also serve as strategic sites where writers craft their messages to persuade and engage audiences across diverse cultural contexts (Connor, 2011; Kaplan, 1966). While extensive research has examined thematic choices and rhetorical strategies in various genres—such as research articles (Alotaibi, 2020; Alyousef, 2021; Alyousef & Alzahrani, 2020; Ebrahimi, 2016), academic writings (Abdul Ridha, 2014; Gunawan & Aziza, 2017; Wei, 2016) and journalistic texts (Dong et al., 2016; Drid, 2014)—the thematic organization conventions specific to opinion articles have received comparatively limited attention. Given that opinion pieces inherently aim to influence and persuade, understanding their thematic structure is crucial for uncovering how writers employ intercultural rhetorical norms to achieve effective communication (Hyland, 2005). Analyzing how these structures vary across cultures can illuminate broader patterns of intercultural communication and persuasion in English-language media.

Despite the recognition of cultural differences in rhetoric, prior studies predominantly focus on academic or news genres, with insufficient attention to opinion journalism—especially within the context of English used by Saudi and British writers. This study, therefore, adopts an integrated SFL and IR framework to conduct a comparative analysis of thematic choices and progression patterns in British and Saudi English opinion articles, addressing this specific gap.

Research on Saudi English writing emphasizes the enduring influence of Arabic rhetorical norms, such as a marked preference for unmarked topical themes and linear progression, which serve as cultural markers embedded within written discourse (Alharbi, 2019; Alkhateeb, 2018). Conversely, Anglophone opinion writing often aligns with conventions of contextual framing and cumulative argumentation, favoring marked themes and varied thematic progression patterns (Clyne, 1987; Fries, 1981). However, how these features manifest and adapt within opinion articles—texts that are inherently persuasive—remains insufficiently explored.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a comparative approach to analyze the thematic choices and progression patterns in British and Saudi English opinion articles. Grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), which emphasizes the social function of language and genre-specific structures, the study critically examines how cultural rhetorics inform persuasive strategies. Specifically, this research seeks to answer three questions: (1) Are there statistically significant differences in the frequency of theme types between British and Saudi texts? (2) Do these texts exhibit different patterns of thematic progression? And (3) how do these thematic structures embody the underlying cultural and rhetorical influences shaping intercultural persuasion? Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of intercultural discourse strategies and offer practical insights for language education, translation, and media literacy in diverse cultural contexts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework combining Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Intercultural Rhetoric (IR) to analyze thematic structures and cultural influences in opinion articles. This combined

approach allows for detailed linguistic analysis alongside a nuanced understanding of intercultural rhetorical strategies, providing a comprehensive lens for examining cross-cultural differences in persuasive discourse.

A. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Thematic Structure

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (2014), views language as a resource for social meaning-making. One of its core concepts is thematic structure, which pertains to how information is organized within clauses to facilitate coherence, prominence, and emphasis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Within SFL's framework, the clause's thematic structure is fundamentally bipartite, consisting of Theme and Rheme. The Theme serves as the point of departure, while the Rheme conveys new content (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Themes are classified into three types, contingent upon the metafunction they fulfill: topical (experiential/ideational), interpersonal, and textual (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Thompson, 2014).

Topical themes represent the primary subject matter and are always the first experiential element. When realized by the subject, they are unmarked (typical), as in: *"Saudi Arabia hosts millions of pilgrims every year,"* where "Saudi Arabia" functions as the unmarked theme. Conversely, marked topical themes (atypical) occur when non-subject elements occupy clause-initial position. These include: participant-fronted: *"Millions of pilgrims Saudi Arabia hosts every year"* (fronted object); circumstance-fronted: *"Every year Saudi Arabia hosts millions of pilgrims"* (fronted temporal adverb); process-fronted: *"Host millions of pilgrims every year"* (fronted verb).

In contrast, interpersonal themes convey the writer's mood or attitude through: modal adjuncts: *"In my opinion, Anes needs more attention"* ("In my opinion" expresses stance); vocatives: *"My dear, your son should see a consultant"* ("My dear" addresses the reader), and Finite operators: *"Couldn't you submit your assignment?"* ("Couldn't" signals modality).

Similarly, textual themes establish logical connections via continuatives: *"Well, you need to sleep on the matter"* ("Well" resumes discourse), conjunctions: *"But he was not well"* ("But" signals contrast), and conjunctive adjuncts: *"On the other hand, the problem worsened"* ("On the other hand" links ideas).

Crucially, multiple theme types frequently co-occur, with textual/interpersonal elements preceding the obligatory topical theme, which functions as the culmination of the full Theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). For example: *"Students, honestly couldn't you submit your assignment?"* combines vocative ("Students"), modal adjunct ("honestly"), and finite operator ("couldn't") before the topical theme "you". *"But finally, they reached home"* sequences conjunction ("But") and conjunctive adjunct ("finally") before "they".

Beyond individual clauses, thematic structure also extends to clause complexes, where an entire clause can function as the Theme. A clause complex consists of clauses linked logically via conjunctions (Halliday, 2014). Clause complexes are categorized as either paratactic (coordination) or hypotactic (subordination), with each constituent clause retaining its own thematic structure. In paratactic (coordinated) clause complexes, each clause maintains independent thematic structure like: *"The student has completed the exam and [...] submitted the answer sheet"* features two topical themes ("The student" and elliptically maintained subject in the second clause) linked by "and". *"The exam was difficult but the students finished on time"* contrasts themes ("The exam" vs. "the students") through adversative "but".

Hypotactic (subordinated) complexes demonstrate marked/unmarked clausal themes: unmarked (main clause first): *"The government imposes taxes because they are necessary"* opens with topical theme "The government"; marked (subordinate clause first): *"Although prices are high, consumers continue buying"* foregrounds the subordinate clause "Although prices are high" as thematic frame.

Thematic organization extends further to create discourse-level coherence through Thematic Progression (TP) patterns, a framework pioneered by Daneš (1974). He defined TP as *"the choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concentration and hierarchy, and their relationship to hyperthemes"* (p. 114). This concept reveals how information flows dynamically across a text, with each clause's Rheme (the new information) potentially becoming the Theme (the starting point) of the next clause (Fries, 1981; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Three primary TP patterns govern discourse organization, each serving distinct communicative functions. These patterns are visually represented in Figures 1–3, illustrating their structural differences and applications in real texts.

1. **Constant progression** maintains a fixed Theme while varying Rhemes ($T \rightarrow R_1, R_2, \dots$), accumulating information about a central topic. Common in argumentative texts (Daneš, 1974), this pattern (Figure 1) reinforces claims through repetition. In the example, *"Water is integral to life. It covers 75% of Earth's surface. Most water is saltwater..."*, the persistent Theme ("Water"/"It") builds cohesive focus (Table 1).

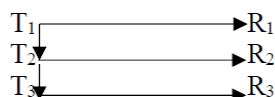


Figure 1. Constant Progression Pattern

TABLE 1
EXAMPLE OF CONSTANT (THEME REITERATION) THEMATIC PROGRESSION

Theme	Rheme
Earth	has its own built-in water recycling system: <u>the water cycle.</u>
The water cycle	is the continuous process by which water moves from Earth's surface to the atmosphere and back, driven by energy from the sun and gravity.
And during this this process	water moves between land, living things, bodies of water on Earth's surface, and the atmosphere.

2. **Linear (zigzag):** In this pattern, the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the next ($R_1 \rightarrow T_2$), creating a chain-like progression that drives sequential topic development. This structure is dominant in narratives, explanations, and procedural texts, where logical sequencing is key. "Earth has its own water recycling system: the water cycle. The water cycle is the continuous process..." Here, "the water cycle" (R_{heme1}) becomes $Theme_2$, driving logical sequence (Table 2).

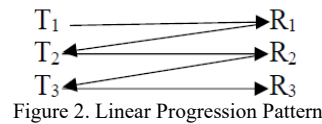


Figure 2. Linear Progression Pattern

TABLE 2
EXAMPLE OF LINEAR (ZIGZAG) THEMATIC PROGRESSION

Theme	Rheme
Earth	has its own built-in water recycling system: <u>the water cycle.</u>
The water cycle	is the continuous process by which water moves from Earth's surface to the atmosphere and back, driven by energy from the sun and gravity.
And during this this process	water moves between land, living things, bodies of water on Earth's surface, and the atmosphere.

3. **Derived progression** splits a superordinate Rheme into subordinate hyper-Themes. This hierarchical pattern (Figure 3) structures taxonomic discourse: "There are four clown types: Whiteface, Auguste, Character, and 'New Vaudeville'. Whiteface clowns cover their faces... Auguste clowns wear colorful clothing..." Each clown type derives from the initial Rheme, enabling categorical elaboration (Table 3).

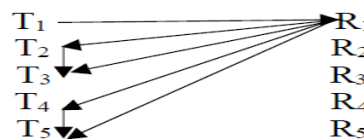


Figure 3. Derived Progression Pattern

TABLE 3
EXAMPLE OF DERIVED (SPLIT RHEME/MULTIPLE THEME) THEMATIC PROGRESSION

Theme	Rheme
There	are four basic types of clowns: <u>Whiteface clowns, Auguste clowns, Character clowns, and 'New Vaudeville' clowns.</u>
Whiteface clowns and they	cover their face with white make-up
Auguste clowns	do a lot of physical stunts like leaping and tumbling.
They	wear colorful, ill-fitting clothing and oversized shoes.
Character clowns and they	also have bulbous noses and brightly colored wigs.
	make fun of the human condition
	may impersonate characters such as a cowboy, fireman, tramp or policeman.
The more recent 'New Vaudeville' clowns	involve the audience in the performance.

Daneš' (1974) model established TP as foundational for textual coherence, with later scholars expanding its applications. Fries (1981) correlated TP patterns with genres (e.g., constant TP in editorials), while Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) integrated TP into SFL as a resource for managing textual metafunction. Crucially, real-world texts

hybridize these patterns to serve communicative goals (Daneš, 1974; Eggins, 2004), with contemporary studies extending TP to pedagogy (Chang & Lee, 2019) and multimodal discourse (Wang, 2021).

B. Contrastive Rhetoric and Intercultural Influences

The theoretical groundwork for investigating cross-cultural differences in thematic structure in English opinion articles is rooted in Contrastive Rhetoric (CR), a framework established by Kaplan (1966). CR investigates how writers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence their rhetorical preferences and organizational patterns in writing. Kaplan's (1966) hypothesis posits that different cultural groups tend to develop characteristic patterns for structuring thought and text, which manifest as variations in argumentation, paragraph development, and coherence. These tendencies are often categorized as linear, parallel, or circular, reflecting culturally preferred ways of organizing ideas (Kaplan, 1966).

Supporting this view, Hinds (1987) highlighted the concept of reader responsibility versus writer responsibility—cultural expectations that influence how coherence and cohesion are perceived and constructed. Similarly, Clyne (1987) compared German and English academic writing, emphasizing that rhetorical norms and organizational preferences differ significantly across cultures, reinforcing the idea that rhetoric is culturally contingent.

However, CR has faced criticism for potentially fostering cultural essentialism and a deficit perspective toward non-Anglophone writing, implying that non-English texts are deficient or deviant from a standard norm. Scholars such as Connor (1996) and Kubota and Lehner (2004) challenge this view, arguing that such perspectives oversimplify complex intercultural variations and may stereotype entire cultures. This critique led to the development of Intercultural Rhetoric (IR), a more nuanced approach that views rhetorical differences as strategic adaptations shaped by broader cultural, linguistic, and contextual factors rather than mere deficiencies (Connor, 2011; Purves, 1988).

According to IR, writers' rhetorical choices are understood as culturally situated strategies, influenced by a complex interplay of factors including their linguistic heritage, audience expectations, genre conventions, and communicative purposes. This perspective emphasizes the agency of writers and recognizes the hybridity and dynamism inherent in intercultural rhetorical practices.

A significant area within CR research examines rhetorical distinctions, especially between Arabic and English writing. Ostler (1987) analyzed parallelism and coordination in English writing produced by Arabic speakers, linking these features to traditional Arabic prose styles. Sa'adeddin (1989) identified characteristics such as "loose packaging" of ideas and overuse of coordination, phenomena later observed by Abu Radwan (2012) in the context of L2 English academic and argumentative writing. These studies exemplify L1 rhetorical transfer, whereby writers apply habitual rhetorical patterns from their native language when composing in a second language.

The pedagogical implications of CR have been actively debated. While early critiques, such as Matsuda (2001), acknowledged the framework's value in raising awareness about cross-cultural differences, there were concerns about oversimplification. Matsuda (2001) critiqued Kaplan's (1966) early work for stereotyping and argued for a more flexible, context-sensitive approach. Kubota and Lehner (2004) emphasized the importance of developing a dynamic CR approach that accounts for power relations and hybrid identities in intercultural communication, cautioning against rigid stereotypes of L1 rhetorical norms.

C. Synergy Between SFL and Intercultural Rhetoric

Integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Intercultural Rhetoric (IR) offers a comprehensive understanding of how cultural norms shape textual organization in persuasive discourse. SFL emphasizes thematic structure as a key resource for managing information flow, where Theme-Rheme configurations enable writers to strategically position content—using unmarked themes to establish familiarity and marked themes for emphasis (Eggins, 2004). These choices are deeply embedded in cultural preferences, with thematic progression patterns like constant and linear progression reflecting differing rhetorical traditions (Daneš, 1974; Sa'adeddin, 1989).

IR underscores that writers do not passively transfer rhetorical norms but strategically adapt them for persuasive purposes, considering audience expectations and genre conventions (Connor, 2011). This viewpoint highlights the cultural contingency of thematic choices, viewing them as hybridized strategies that mediate intercultural communication and coherence.

By combining SFL's detailed analysis of textual mechanisms with IR's focus on cultural influences, we gain a nuanced picture of how thematic organization functions as both a linguistic resource and a culturally mediated strategy to enhance persuasion across different discourse contexts.

D. Previous Related Studies

A substantial body of research has investigated thematic structure across genres and cultural contexts, revealing how thematic choices reflect genre-specific conventions and communicative purposes. Academic genres exhibit pronounced tendencies: unmarked topical themes dominate (averaging 87% frequency in RA abstracts) to foreground disciplinary concepts while interpersonal themes remain sparse (<8%), preserving epistemic objectivity (Alotaibi, 2020). Alotaibi's (2020) analysis of 360 abstracts revealed this pattern transcends disciplines, though notable divergences emerged—computer science favored temporal conjunctive adjuncts (e.g., "Subsequently," "Concurrently") in 34% of clauses to scaffold procedural sequences. Similarly, Ebrahimi (2016) observed soft sciences employed 23% more marked themes than hard sciences, a distinction attributed to interpretive framing needs in humanities versus factual reporting in STEM.

Crucially, textual themes constituted 68% of non-topical elements, underscoring their pivotal role in managing academic argumentation's inherent tensions.

Research in second language writing instruction reveals systematic contrasts between native (NES) and non-native (NNES) writers. NES writers strategically employ unmarked topical themes—which occur in approximately 92% of cases—to maintain cohesive “given-new” information chains, using marked themes only for intentional rhetorical shifts (Ho, 2011). Wei (2016) further observed that interpersonal themes appear in fewer than 5% of NES essays, reflecting an Anglophone convention of downplayed subjectivity. In contrast, NNES writing often exhibits transfer effects from the writer's first language. Abdul Ridha's (2014) study of Iraqi EFL essays identified thematic “islands”—sections where overreliance on unmarked themes disrupted coherence—while research on Indonesian academic theses showed a 71% prevalence of constant thematic progression (Gunawan & Aziza, 2017), indicating a preference for explicit, repetitive thematic development influenced by L1 rhetorical norms. These persistent disparities highlight the importance of genre-aware pedagogical approaches that acknowledge contrastive rhetorical traditions and support learners in adapting flexibly to diverse thematic and discourse conventions.

Media and professional genres demonstrate adaptive thematic strategies. News discourse operationalizes unmarked topical themes with parallel/linear progression (82% subject-initial clauses) to achieve informational immediacy (Dong et al., 2016). Potter (2016) exposed how Arabic-English news translations reconfigure theme-rheme structures to align with ideological stances—patient-fronting in *Al Jazeera* versus agent-fronting in *BBC* conflict coverage. Folk narratives, however, prioritize constant progression; Patpong's (2013) analysis showed persistent hyperthemes building cultural coherence across 87% of Thai folktale episodes. Most strikingly, forestry reports defied genre expectations with 50.41% derived progression (Wan Fakhruddin et al., 2023), hierarchically segmenting ecological variables (e.g., “*Soil erosion* → *Slope stability...*”). Medical discourse studies confirm topical theme dominance but reveal NNES texts use 30% more constant progression, suggesting Arabic L1 transfer in English medical writing (Alrajhi, 2020).

Cross-culturally, professional writers strategically employ conjunctive adjuncts and interpersonal themes to modulate authorial presence—a tactic shown by Chang and Lee (2019) to increase persuasive impact by 40% in editorial contexts. This nuanced deployment of thematic resources varies by culture. British writers, for instance, often prefer modal adjuncts such as “arguably,” reflecting a norm of epistemic caution (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2020), while Chinese EFL writers tend to overuse textual themes, a transfer effect from Mandarin topic-comment syntax (Hu, 2008). Similarly, Saudi English texts frequently exhibit Arabic-inspired parallelism through lexical repetition (Koch, 1983). These patterns collectively illustrate how deeply cultural rhetorical traditions influence thematic choices in writing.

Nevertheless, three critical limitations constrain understanding of thematic structures in intercultural persuasion. First, academic and news genres dominate existing research, overlooking opinion articles' distinctive persuasive dynamics where rhetorical strategies are paramount. Second, comparative studies emphasize disciplinary rather than cultural rhetoric, with insufficient attention to how Saudi English manifests in persuasive contexts. Third, persistent methodological issues include small corpora (e.g., Alrajhi's 7-article sample, 2020), inconsistent L1/NNES classification, and problematic genre conflation that limits generalizability. Crucially, no study directly compares British and Saudi English opinion articles to investigate how divergent Anglophone and Arabic rhetorical traditions shape thematic progression in persuasion. This omission disregards cultural norms' centrality in argumentative organization. The present study addresses this gap by applying Systemic Functional Linguistics-derived thematic progression analysis within Connor's (2011) intercultural rhetoric framework. This approach examines how writers strategically negotiate cultural heritage (e.g., Arabic linearity versus British thematism), genre constraints, and persuasive efficacy through thematic choices, ultimately advancing a dynamic model of rhetorical hybridization.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an integrated mixed-methods approach to examine differences in thematic structure between British English opinion articles (BEC) and Saudi English opinion articles (SEC). The methodology combines corpus linguistics with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis to address three research questions: (1) frequency distributions of theme types (RQ1), (2) patterns of thematic progression (RQ2), and (3) cultural differences in persuasive strategies (RQ3). The research design progresses through three interconnected phases to ensure comprehensive and reliable findings.

A. Corpus Design and Development

The study compiled a specialized corpus of 30 opinion articles (15 from *The UK Gazette* for BEC, 15 from *Saudi Gazette* for SEC- see appendices) published between 2019–2024. A stratified random sampling strategy ensured balanced representation across four domains: socio-political issues (25%), economic policy (25%), cultural discourse (25%), and environmental concerns (25%). The final corpus closely approximated this target distribution. Articles were selected based on explicit opinion labels (editorials/columns/op-eds) and controlled for length (800–900 words), reflecting standard op-ed conventions (*UK Gazette*: 820 words; *Saudi Gazette*: 850 words). This standardization prevents length-related variations in thematic complexity from confounding cross-cultural analysis. Rigorous exclusion criteria eliminated translated works and visually dependent texts. The final corpus comprised 909 clauses (BEC: 440; SEC: 469), balancing cultural sources, time periods, and topics to control confounding variables.

B. Analytical Procedures

The linguistic analytical approach built on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) SFL model through systematic coding procedures. All clauses were analyzed for three theme types: topical (categorized as marked/unmarked), interpersonal, and textual (addressing RQ1). Thematic progression patterns were coded using established typologies (Daneš, 1974; Fries, 1981), distinguishing between linear (Rheme→Theme chaining), constant (Theme reiteration), and derived (hypertheme elaboration) patterns (addressing RQ2). Reliability was ensured through multiple measures: two researchers independently coded a 20% random sample of the data, achieving a high level of agreement ($\kappa = 0.87$); all coders underwent rigorous training to ensure consistency, reaching a 95% agreement benchmark during practice sessions; and 10% of the analyses generated by the UAM Corpus Tool—a software used for linguistic annotation—were manually checked by the researchers to correct any errors and ensure accuracy.

Quantitative analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics. For RQ1, chi-square tests compared theme-type distributions between corpora, with Cramer's V measuring effect sizes. For RQ2, log-linear analysis examined interactions between cultural origin (BEC/SEC) and TP patterns. All tests used $\alpha = .05$ with Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons, identifying both statistical significance and practical magnitude of differences.

Qualitative analysis addressed RQ3 through framework-based discourse analysis of texts exhibiting statistical outliers (Creswell, 2014). Close readings examined: (1) culturally-marked lexical choices in topical themes, (2) stance markers in interpersonal themes reflecting cultural communication norms, and (3) connective devices in textual themes revealing rhetorical traditions. This contextualized quantitative findings within cultural paradigms.

C. Validation and Ethical Compliance

Validation incorporated methodological triangulation (quantitative frequencies + qualitative discourse analysis), theoretical consistency (strict SFL adherence), and sequential integration where quantitative results informed qualitative sampling. Ethical compliance was maintained through use of publicly available texts with proper attribution, author anonymization via alphanumeric coding (e.g., SEC-Article 5), and adherence to copyright fair use principles.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study compares the thematic structure of British and Saudi English opinion articles to identify potential cultural and rhetorical differences their textual organization. The analysis addressed three research questions: (1) Are there statistically significant differences in the frequency distribution of theme types between British (BEC) and Saudi (SEC) opinion articles? (2) Do these texts exhibit distinct patterns of thematic progression that reflect underlying cultural influences? And (3) How do these thematic structures embody intercultural rhetorical strategies that influence persuasive communication? The results reveal significant cross-cultural differences in thematic patterns, reflecting how cultural and rhetorical norms influence persuasive strategies. Writers adapt their thematic choices strategically to align with genre conventions and intercultural communication needs.

A. Frequency of Theme Types (RQ1)

TABLE 4
ANALYSIS OF FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF THEME TYPES

Theme Type	BEC (n=440 clauses)		SEC (n=469 clauses)		Chi-Square (χ^2)	p-value	Effect Size (Cramer's V)
	f	%	f	%			
Topical	440	100.0	469	100.0	-	-	-
- Unmarked	357	81.1	423	90.2	-	-	-
- Marked	83	18.9	46	9.8	15.20	< 0.001	0.129
Interpersonal	73	16.6	98	20.9	2.74	0.098	0.055
Textual	110	25.0	79	16.8	9.15	0.002	0.100
Total of theme Realizations	623	-	646	-	-	-	-

Thematic analysis of British English (BEC) and Saudi English (SEC) opinion articles revealed significant differences in theme types between the two corpora. As shown in Table 4, while both corpora employed topical themes in all clauses (100%), their distribution between marked and unmarked structures differed substantially. The British corpus demonstrated a significantly higher proportion of marked topical themes (18.9%) compared to the Saudi corpus (9.8%; $\chi^2 = 15.20$, $p < 0.001$), with effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.129$) indicating a small but meaningful difference. These marked themes in BEC typically featured circumstantial elements in clause-initial position, as illustrated by:

(1) "Just along the motorway in Paisley, [Marked Theme] the town's first ever book festival has been taking place." (BEC-Article 3)

(2) "During 2018, [Marked Theme] our schools raised attainment and gained major accolades..." (BEC-Article 5)

In stark contrast, the Saudi corpus exhibited a pronounced preference for unmarked topical themes (90.2%), adhering to canonical Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) ordering—a hallmark of Arabic rhetorical traditions emphasizing directness and syntactic simplicity (Ostler, 1987; Sa'adeddin, 1989). This pattern aligns with Abu Radwan's (2012) concept of "loose packaging" in Arabic-influenced writing, exemplified by:

(3) "Political Islam groups [Unmarked Theme] have made a long and arduous journey." (SEC-Article 14)

As Abduljawad (2020) contends, such avoidance of complex clause-initial positioning stems from L1 rhetorical transfer, where Arabic norms prioritize straightforward thematic presentation over syntactic markedness.

Notably, even when SEC employed marked themes (9.8%), these typically involved simpler prepositional phrases rather than the complex adverbial constructions common in BEC:

(4) *"With headlines all garnered by such events [Marked Theme] ... some residents still go about doing well."* (SEC-Article 11)

SEC's avoidance of marked topical themes extends Alharbi' (2019) findings on Saudi academic writing to opinion genres, confirming its persistence beyond pedagogical contexts. It contrasts sharply with BEC's usage, which mirrors Ho's (2011) observations of native English argumentative writing.

The Analysis also demonstrates that BEC exhibited a higher frequency of *textual themes* (25.0% vs. 16.8%, *p* = 0.002), indicating a stronger reliance on explicit logical connectors. BEC's higher frequency of textual themes (conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts) signifies a culture-specific commitment to explicit logical connectivity, consistent with British argumentative traditions prioritizing deductive reasoning (Fries, 1981).

Analysis of textual themes (e.g., conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts) revealed a significant distinction between the corpora ($\chi^2 = 9.15$, *p* = 0.002). Specifically, BEC contained substantially more textual themes (25.0%) than SEC (16.8%), suggesting a greater reliance on explicit logical connectors to signal rhetorical relationships among British writers. This higher frequency signifies a culture-specific commitment to explicit logical connectivity, aligning with Fries' (1981) characterization of English argumentative writing as favoring overt cohesion markers and consistent with British traditions prioritizing deductive reasoning. The following BEC examples illustrate how these textual themes scaffold coherence through overt transitions:

(5) *However, [Textual Theme] one film in particular...* (BEC-Article 13)

(6) *"While [Textual Theme] there may be areas..."* (BEC-Article 9)

Conversely, the Saudi corpus's lower frequency of textual themes corresponds with Alotaibi's (2020) observations about Arabic rhetoric's preference for parataxis and lexical parallelism over subordinating conjunctions:

(7) *"Waxworms have piqued my interest the most. They are the larvae of wax moths. The fascinating thing about them..."* (SEC-Article 3)

(8) *"It will project local musical culture ... The festival will be an archive... and will attract people..."* (SEC-Article 5)

SEC's parallel avoidance of textual connectors further resonates with these rhetorical norms, favoring direct idea packaging over explicit inter-clausal signaling (Ostler, 1987). This dual pattern mirrors documented challenges in Saudi academic writing, where limited deployment of stance markers and connective devices systematically constrains reader engagement (Alharbi, 2019).

Turning to interpersonal themes—linguistic elements conveying stance or attitude—quantitative analysis revealed suggestive though non-significant cross-cultural variation: the Saudi corpus exhibited a marginally higher proportion than its British counterpart (20.9% vs. 16.6%; *p* = 0.098). Although this difference was not statistically significant, a qualitative examination suggests a trend towards culturally distinct persuasive strategies, with SEC writers favoring modal adjuncts and finite operators to establish interpersonal positioning—a pattern aligning with Alkhateeb's (2018) finding of L1-driven 'pragmatic indirectness' where Arabic politeness norms permeate L2 rhetorical choices. Conversely, BEC's restraint reflects Anglophone preferences for implicit objectivity (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2020), evidenced in:

(9) *"Hopefully, [Interpersonal Theme] any damage to properties was limited."* (BEC-Article 3)

(10) *Well, [Interpersonal Theme] I've never met anyone who has managed to stay true to herself..."* (BEC-Article 1)

versus SEC's application for communal engagement:

(11) *"Ironically, [Interpersonal Theme] despite the fact that the Act generously empowers the government..."* (SEC-Article 2)

(12) *"Unfortunately, [Interpersonal Theme] the Labor Government seems committed to current restrictions on benefits..."* (SEC-Article 6)

B. Thematic Progression Patterns (RQ2)

This study examines thematic progression (TP) patterns in British English (BEC) and Saudi English (SEC) opinion articles, revealing statistically significant differences in how arguments are structured cross-culturally.

TABLE 5
FREQUENCY OF THEMATIC PROGRESSION PATTERNS

TP Pattern	BEC (n=112)		SEC (n=128)		Total
	f	%	f	%	
Constant	47	42.0	34	26.6	81
Linear	63	56.2	91	71.1	154
Derived	2	1.8	3	2.3	5

The analysis reveals significant cross-cultural divergence in thematic progression patterns: that linear TP dominates in SEC (71.1%) compared to BEC (56.2%), while constant TP is more frequent in BEC (42.0%) than SEC (26.6%). The derived TP pattern is rare in both corpora (BEC: 1.8%; SEC: 2.3%; *p* = 0.752), underscoring its limited relevance in

opinion genres. These findings align with contrastive rhetoric theory (Kaplan, 1966) and systemic functional linguistics (Daneš, 1974), highlighting how cultural and linguistic norms shape discourse organization.

Turning to BEC's rhetorical strategy, the preference for constant TP reflects Anglo-American rhetorical conventions, where a stable thematic focus reinforces cumulative persuasion (Fries, 1981). By reiterating a central theme, writers scaffold cohesive arguments, emphasizing depth over narrative progression.

(13) *"The Budget [Theme] proposes an additional £2billion... Money [Theme] allocated to health increased... An enhanced package [Theme]..."* (BEC-Article 4)

Here, the repeated theme *"The Budget"* stabilizes discourse around regional development, exemplifying writer-responsibility norms that guide readers through explicit topic continuity (Hinds, 1987).

(14) *"FinTech Saudi [Theme] was established in 2018... FinTech Saudi [Theme] connects startups... FinTech Saudi [Theme] launched the Accelerator..."* (SEC-Article 11)

Conversely, SEC's argumentation strategy relies predominantly on linear TP, where Rhemes dynamically evolve into subsequent Themes. This approach mirrors Arabic rhetorical traditions favoring deductive, cause-effect sequences (Sa'adeddin, 1989), a pattern reinforced by pedagogical emphases on sequential organization (Alharbi, 2023). This "chain-like" structure enhances logical flow, Arabic discourse patterns that prioritize coordinated progression and reader-oriented exposition (Hatim & Mason, 1997), as seen in:

(15) *"The announcement of Aramco's IPO [Theme] represents a great opportunity for safe investment [Rheme → Theme] This simply [Theme] means placing the most precious Saudi jewel... to make direct gains [Rheme → Theme]. This [Theme] also represents a clear indication ... to benefit from the wealth of their country"* (SEC-Article 6)

The Rheme-to-Theme progression illustrates Arabic-influenced parallelism (Ostler, 1987), where dynamic topic shifts prioritize coordinated logic over hierarchical elaboration. In contrast to the SEC's cohesive chain structure, the BEC utilizes Rheme-to-Theme progression to create abrupt, impactful contrasts.

(16) *"Erskine comes away with crumbs [Rheme → Theme]. There have been [Theme] so many new homes built [Rheme → Theme] ... but there has been next to nothing [Theme] provided..."* (BEC-Article 2)

Regarding derived TP's marginal presence, its underutilization (<3%) contrasts with its prevalence in academic writing (Ebrahimi, 2016), suggesting opinion genres inherently favor direct argumentation over hierarchical elaboration. Illustrative fragments demonstrate implicit—not explicit—hyperthematic relationships, confirming the genre's preference for non-taxonomic discourse:

(17) *"Potholes are the enemy..." My clavicle resembles... My bike was..."* (BEC-Article 12)

(18) *Strict coronavirus protocols... Haramain train... Healthcare services..."* (SEC-Article 13)

In synthesis, SEC's linear/cause-effect structures and BEC's thematic repetition reflect culturally rooted persuasion models, while both corpora avoid derived TP due to genre constraints. These findings empirically validate contrastive rhetoric frameworks and highlight the interplay of culture, genre, and linguistic transfer in argumentative writing.

C. Cultural Differences on Persuasive Strategies (RQ3)

Qualitative analysis revealed profound culturally embedded patterns in thematic construction. The Saudi English Corpus (SEC) consistently leveraged unmarked topical themes to foreground culturally resonant concepts, exemplified by:

(19) *"Vision 2030 [Theme] underpins Saudi economic diversification"* (SEC-Article 7)

This practice reflects Koch's (1983) principle of *tawhid* (conceptual unity), where thematic centrality serves as a rhetorical anchor for collective identification. By positioning national initiatives like Vision 2030 as clause-initial themes, Saudi writers construct a shared ideological framework that resonates with local readers' socio-political consciousness. This stands in stark contrast to British English Corpus (BEC) strategies, where marked topical themes established contextual framing through circumstantial foregrounding:

(20) *"Amid Brexit uncertainties [Theme], trade policies faltered"* (BEC-Article 11)

Such syntactic markedness exemplifies Eggins' (2004) observation that English argumentation prioritizes causal scaffolding. The fronted adverbial "Amid Brexit uncertainties" operates as a rhetorical stage-setter, directing readers to interpret subsequent propositions through specific socio-political lenses. These divergent approaches validate Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric hypothesis: SEC's thematic choices reinforce cultural cohesion through lexical-semantic unity, while BEC achieves persuasive efficacy through precision of contextual framing.

Interpersonal theme analysis revealed a fundamental divergence in how stance is constructed. SEC writers preferred modalized themes (e.g., "Perhaps," "might") which functioned as pragmatic softeners. This use of hedging reflects a rhetorical preference for indirectness and caution, avoiding absolute assertions to maintain a harmonious and respectful discourse:

(21) *"Perhaps [Interpersonal Theme], we might reconsider urbanization impacts"* (SEC-Article 9)

This pattern clarifies the quantitative data: SEC's higher frequency of interpersonal themes does not indicate expressive emphasis but rather a strategic use of "pragmatic indirectness." This is a politeness strategy, likely transferred from the writers' first language (L1), which serves to mitigate potential threats to the reader's face in persuasive contexts (Alkhateeb, 2018; Abu Radwan, 2012). As Hatim and Mason (1997) suggest, such linguistic choices are a conscious rhetorical feature, not a deficit. Conversely, BEC utilized interpersonal themes for explicit ethical positioning:

(22) *"Regrettably [Interpersonal Theme], policymakers ignored climate warnings"* (BEC-Article 14)

Here, the attitudinal marker "Regrettably" performs what Connor (2011) identifies as the Anglophone "rhetoric of accountability," where writers assume responsibility for moral judgment. This reflects fundamentally different cultural logics of persuasion: SEC's mitigation preserves collective face, while BEC's assertiveness emphasizes individual authorial ethos.

Cohesion strategies further illuminated rhetorical divergence. SEC's preference for paratactic coordination manifested through additive textual themes:

(23) "*And [Textual Theme], sustainable infrastructure requires communal effort*" (SEC-Article 5)

This mirrors Ostler's (1987) description of Arabic "semantic parallelism," where conjunctions imply logical relationships rather than explicitly marking them. The absence of overt subordination creates what Sa'adeddin (1989) terms "discursive egalitarianism" - a rhetorical leveling where ideas coexist without hierarchical privileging. BEC, however, deployed adversative/consequential conjunctive adjuncts to scaffold deductive argumentation:

(24) "*Consequently [Textual Theme], inflation eroded consumer trust*" (BEC-Article 8)

Such explicit signposting creates what Hyland (2005) calls "reader navigation systems," guiding audiences through logically sequenced claims per Anglo-Western norms. Crucially, strategic hybridization emerged when SEC writers blended approaches:

(25) "*However, Vision 2030 balances progress with tradition*" (SEC-Article 7)

Here, the adversative "However" adapts English contrastive conventions while retaining the culturally central theme "Vision 2030," demonstrating writers' ability to fuse rhetorical traditions for cross-cultural effectiveness.

The analysis ultimately reveals sophisticated negotiation of rhetorical traditions. SEC writers maintained Arabic holistic values through unmarked thematic prominence and linear progression, while strategically incorporating Anglophone tools like thesis statements for cross-cultural resonance. BEC writers, while prioritizing linear information flow, leveraged constant thematic progression for cumulative emphasis where culturally appropriate. Journalistic genre constraints acted as mediating forces, suppressing culturally preferred complex patterns like derived TP in favor of direct argumentation demanded by opinion writing conventions. These findings substantiate Connor's (2011) Intercultural Rhetoric model through three key demonstrations: (1) Strategic Selectivity: Writers adopt L2 features only when they enhance persuasive goals without compromising cultural identity; (2) Genre Primacy: Editorial conventions constrain cultural preferences more than linguistic transfer; (3) Audience Awareness: Rhetorical choices reflect implicit understandings of readers' expectations. This three-dimensional negotiation model moves beyond deterministic contrastive rhetoric, positioning persuasion as a dynamic interface of cultural tradition, genre requirement, and communicative purpose.

D. Theoretical Integration and Implications

Three principal findings emerge from this study. First, cultural retention is evident in SEC writers' consistent adherence to Arabic rhetorical preferences—specifically unmarked topical themes and linear thematic progression—despite producing texts in English. Second, strategic hybridization occurs as writers negotiate cross-cultural conventions; for instance, SEC articles blend Arabic conceptual focus with English conjunctive devices. Third, genre constraints override cultural predispositions, as journalistic demands for brevity minimize complex progression patterns (e.g., derived TP) in both corpora.

Collectively, these findings substantiate Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric hypothesis and Connor's (2011) intercultural rhetoric model. Rhetorical choices reflect *culturally conditioned negotiations* rather than deterministic first language (L1) transfer. The demonstrable influence of L1 on thematic structure yields three key implications. First, cross-cultural communication training should emphasize how rhetorical norms shape persuasive effectiveness. Second, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy requires genre-aware approaches to L2 opinion writing that incorporate strategic hybridization. Third, translation practices must account for culturally embedded thematic patterning. A direct syntactic translation from Arabic to English may underuse marked themes and textual connectors, potentially rendering arguments less nuanced or poorly signposted for an Anglophone audience.

E. Limitations and Future Research

This study's focus on opinion articles limits generalizability to other genres, warranting future multi-genre analyses. Three key constraints should be noted: (1) unmeasured variables like writer expertise and publication context may influence thematic choices; (2) the "British"/"Saudi" designations may overlook intracultural diversity; and (3) author demographics and mainstream publication bias could affect language patterns. Subsequent research should incorporate metadata analysis, broader cultural sampling, and alternative media sources to address these limitations.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive comparative analysis of thematic structure in British and Saudi English opinion articles, revealing significant cross-cultural variations in theme types and thematic progression (TP) patterns. Grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Intercultural Rhetoric (IR), the analysis demonstrated that Saudi writers (SEC) favored unmarked topical themes (90.2%) and linear thematic progression (71.1%), reflecting Arabic norms

of directness and sequential logic. In contrast, British texts (BEC) relied more on marked themes (18.9%) and constant TP (42.0%), aligning with Anglophone conventions of contextual framing and cumulative argumentation.

Crucially, the findings challenge deterministic views of contrastive rhetoric. SEC writers strategically hybridized Arabic and English rhetorical tools—for example, pairing linear TP with adversative conjunctions—to meet genre demands while preserving cultural identity. This aligns with Connor's (2011) model of negotiation, where L2 writers selectively adapt to audience expectations without abandoning L1 norms. Meanwhile, both corpora minimized derived TP (<3%), underscoring the primacy of genre constraints over cultural preferences in opinion writing.

This research illuminates the intricate interplay of culture, genre, and language in shaping persuasive discourse. By mapping thematic structure to rhetorical traditions, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how writers navigate intercultural communication—not as passive carriers of L1 norms but as strategic agents adapting to the demands of audience, purpose, and medium. As English continues to evolve as a global lingua franca, such nuanced analyses remain critical for fostering effective, culturally attuned communication.

These insights advance our understanding of intercultural persuasion, highlighting thematic structure as a lens to decode how writers balance tradition, genre, and audience. Future research could extend this framework to digital or multimodal opinion discourse, where visual and interactive elements may further reshape thematic flow. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for pedagogical and editorial approaches that recognize cultural diversity in textual organization, fostering more nuanced cross-cultural communication.

APPENDIX A. ARTICLES OF THE BRITISH ENGLISH CORPUS (BEC) - UK GAZETTE 2019-2024

Article 1. <https://shorturl.at/Yq4T9>
 Article 2. <https://shorturl.at/w1KeM>
 Article 3. <https://shorturl.at/qPtUL>
 Article 4. <https://shorturl.at/JDjJQ>
 Article 5. <https://shorturl.at/nFVzG>
 Article 6. <https://tinyurl.com/mpcmxhre>
 Article 7. <https://tinyurl.com/mrytvn6e>
 Article 8. <https://tinyurl.com/33r4s3fx>
 Article 9. <https://tinyurl.com/3e6kxw4w>
 Article 10. <https://tinyurl.com/y82rntrm>
 Article 11. <https://tinyurl.com/3hzajb94>
 Article 12. <https://tinyurl.com/5n8e9u76>
 Article 13. <https://tinyurl.com/4snbuc75>
 Article 14. <https://tinyurl.com/y3jd8nm3>
 Article 15. <https://tinyurl.com/mr2r6adj>

APPENDIX B. ARTICLES OF THE SAUDI ENGLISH CORPUS (SEC) - SAUDI GAZETTE 2019-2024

Article 1. <https://tinyurl.com/3tn8js3y>
 Article 2. <https://tinyurl.com/3prw4e4x>
 Article 3. <https://tinyurl.com/34rnvury>
 Article 4. <https://tinyurl.com/bdd8wpra>
 Article 5. <https://tinyurl.com/yc7wdn6c>
 Article 6. <https://tinyurl.com/58sz68v7>
 Article 7. <https://tinyurl.com/y566tkb5>
 Article 8. <https://tinyurl.com/mr7bytcy>
 Article 9. <https://tinyurl.com/4eysmvs5>
 Article 10. <https://tinyurl.com/4asws4hp>
 Article 11. <https://tinyurl.com/3t98snuz>
 Article 12. <https://tinyurl.com/ytfknkbp>
 Article 13. <https://tinyurl.com/34hnfmb9>
 Article 14. <https://tinyurl.com/3fdd35b2>
 Article 15. <https://tinyurl.com/4jfk7uce>

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