Chapter 1
Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the study carried out in analyzing thematic choices in sports texts using a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework. It states the purpose and the scope of the study. The main research area on theme choices and theme structures are also stated in this chapter. The chapter also puts forward the significance and the rationale of the study. It also discusses the constraints within which the study is carried out.

1.1 Statement of the Research Area

This study uses SFL to analyze and explain thematic choices in the genre of sports popularisation. The textual function concerns those resources of the language that allow parts of a text to be linked with other parts in a cohesive manner. The textual function also allows parts of a text to be foregrounded as important or prominent and thus coherence is created in relation to the situation of the text (Stillar 1998). Hence, this shows that an element in the initial position of an utterance plays an important role as a starting-point both in sentences and
in text. This notion of starting-point has been recognized by the Prague School linguist, Firbas (1964). Firbas described the thematic function of the initial clause constituent and gave a linguistic description to Theme. This was followed by others like Halliday (1967b), Dik (1981) and Fries (1983).

In the following examples, each clause has a different 'point of departure' (Halliday 1985:38). The sentences below are created to illustrate the different points of departure.

a. **John** completed painting the portrait of Meng Choo in 1998.

b. **The portrait of Meng Choo** was completed by John in 1998.

c. **In 1998**, John completed painting the portrait of Meng Choo.

In (a), **John** is the point of departure; in (b), it is **The portrait of Meng Choo**, and in (c), it is **In 1998**. Hence, the initial element tells us what the clause is about and what is important.

In this study, this phenomenon of theme is studied through a comprehensive analysis of thematic structure. It is an investigation of how the type of theme structure of the sports texts maps onto the information structure and how marked information are presented in the language. These key phrases will be explained in Chapter Two.

The text is approached from Halliday's (1985, 1994), Eggins' (1994) and Thompson's (1996) functional linguistic model. First, the study examines how a
message is organised in the clause structure. Second, the study examines how
sports writers structure the text's flow of information through thematic
development. It should be noted that the type of Theme is realized by the use of
a particular type of constituent in Thematic position.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how tennis sports writers use language
to structure the choice of Theme and Rheme and how language is structured to
enable textual meanings to be made.

Another purpose of the study is to identify the different functions of themes
and the way the choice of themes contributes to the cohesion of the text. These
relate to the linguistic representation of theme in terms of thematic choices.

The third purpose is to examine how different Theme structures allow
clauses to realize different textual meanings in text and how the progression of
ideas in the sports texts is achieved by the textual themes to create a cohesive
and coherent text.
1.3 **Major Research Questions**

In this study, I would like to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the choices of themes and the percentage of occurrences in the six sports texts?
2. What are the major grammatical choices of the topical Theme in the six sports texts?
3. What are the prominent theme structures found in the six sports texts?

1.4 **Significance of the Study**

Systemic Functional Linguistics has been described as a functional-semantic approach to language because it describes how language is used in different contexts and how language is organised for use as a semiotic system (Halliday 1985, 1994). In using Systemic Functional theory as a tool in text analysis, many benefits can be derived such as an understanding of the internal structure of the language. Pedagogic implications can be derived and applied in the teaching of reading and writing in the English language.

Language is a semiotic system of three levels (Halliday 1985). It has two meaning-making levels, an upper level of content which is discourse-semantics and an intermediate level of content which is lexico-grammar (Eggins 1994). The third level is the phonology or graphology level. The intermediate encoding level
of lexico-grammar enables us to understand how language is able to make three
types of meanings simultaneously – experiential, interpersonal and textual
(Halliday, 1994). Therefore, I believe an analysis on the grammatical systems of
language by language teachers in this field may help learners who are not
proficient in English to understand and acquire a strategy in reading and writing
English texts coherently and appropriately in context. This will also help learners
to have a better understanding on the progression of ideas in a text and how a
text stays intact on the subject of discussion.

Finally, it is natural for any language teacher to have an interest in language
analysis which will enable him to find a general characteristic of the popular
sports writing, knowledge of which could be applied in his reading and writing
classes of academic English for second language learners.

1.5 Rationale of the Study

Most research on the thematic system have focussed on written or spoken texts,
Halliday (1985) ; Berry (1989) ; Fries and Francis (1992) and Martin (1992a,
1992b). Moreover, text analysis that have been carried out were mainly within a
specific register such as science (Halliday and Martin 1993 ; Sridevi 1996) ;
medicine (Nwogu and Bloor 1991 ; Azirah 1996) ; daily press (Francis 1989) ;
telephone conversations (Backlund 1992); students' writings (Berry 1989); language education (Macken and Rothery 1991; Rothery 1991; Lee 2001); indigenous language (Wong 1994); agricultural texts (Vijaya 1997, 2000); spiritual writing (Wong 2001) and political texts (Chitra 2001). Little attempt has been made to analyse thematic structures in sport magazines. Thus, it is worthwhile that a study be made on the sport genre, particularly on Tennis which has received a wide recognition in the country. Furthermore, a course in sports science has also been introduced in some universities and have become a popular course among students. Therefore, this kind of sports writing is viewed important as a kind of genre.

The study was carried out with the teaching and learning of English in view. Indirectly, the researcher hopes that this study would provide some insights into the teaching of English especially the writing skill. Very often teachers find it difficult to put into words for the learner what exactly is wrong. Hence, it is hoped that through the Theme and Rheme analysis, the study would shed some light on how the message is organized in a piece of text.

In addition, linguists agree that Theme in first position serves two important purposes: it connects the previous text and guides a reader's comprehension of subsequent parts. Knowledge on how a message is organized is also helpful to non-native second language learners of English to enable them to read articles in English more efficiently. If second language learners of English
have the knowledge of how a message is organized in a text, they may be able to understand and interpret the message correctly.

I chose to study Theme in these sports texts because it is agreed among the linguists that information in first position has two important functions, that is it links up with the previous text and guides a reader's comprehension of subsequent segments. This study also seeks to find evidence from the sports texts.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations in the study carried out.

Firstly, the study focuses on six texts which are based on a particular sport, tennis by two different publications. It is suggested that a bigger corpus be used so that the results obtained can be verified across a larger body of texts. Thus, the results could be said to be more representative of sports writing as a whole.

Secondly, this study selects six texts out of the 24 issues identified which was published in a year. And out of the 24 issues, six articles were selected based on the rough estimation of the length of the text. Therefore, the texts used which do not have exactly the same number of sentences may affect the results obtained.

Thirdly, this study focuses on a particular sports texts – tennis. A comparison between different sports texts would further enrich the analysis.
Fourthly, this study concentrates on the system of Theme and textual meaning. There are other systems like the system of Transitivity and Mood which are not used in the analysis and which may further gives a clearer pattern of the system of Theme.

Finally, as the analysis is carried out manually, different interpretations may occur in assigning the theme elements into different types of Theme functions.

1.7 Conclusion

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One gives an introduction to the paper. Chapter Two reviews literature related to the study. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and provides a theoretical framework of the study. Chapter Four analyses and discusses the data. Chapter Five draws a conclusion with recommendations and suggestions for further study.