

THE LEXICO-STRUCTURAL/SEMANTIC PROGRESSION IN DISCOURSE  
TOPIC CONSTRUCTION: EVIDENCE FROM COMMENT ARTICLES

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Abstract

In this article, Seuren's notion of mod-proposition is taken as point of departure to address the question of discourse topic. Seuren distinguishes between the classic notion of proposition (flat-propositions) and modulated propositions (mod-propositions), and assigns to the latter a topic-comment modulated structure which becomes essential to decide on the information structure of discourse, especially in terms of incrementation. Drawing from this propositional modulated status, different theoretical approaches to the notion of topic at sentence level are reviewed and special attention is paid to the syntactic functions identified by these theoreticians as predominantly topical. Then the empirical analysis of a small corpus of comment articles in English is used to classify the linguistic strategies employed in the construction of a global discourse topic; this procedure makes it possible to focus on those topics which gradually acquire global projection by re-use, in opposition to those pieces of information which are topical only at the local level. Based on this evidence, our research shows the linguistic mechanisms which allow for re-used topical information to gradually acquire subject status as discourse progresses and proposes thinking in terms of intermediate information structures as subsumers of local information and builders of global topics.

Key words: Discourse topic, global topic, local topic, comment article

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### 1. Sentence topic, discourse topic and information structure

In his article “A Discourse Semantic Account of Topic and Comment”, Seuren addresses the topic/comment question and explains why both notions, which do not seem to fall under the scope of propositional formal semantic approaches to meaning, become essential when a discourse semantic stand is taken<sup>1</sup>. To differentiate between the formal and the discourse approaches he draws a distinction between the notions of flat propositions (fprop) and modulated propositions (modprop). The first are classically the central units of analysis of “standard model-theoretic formal semantics, which maintains that semantics should deal with truth conditional contents”, thus rejecting “the analysis of topicalization phenomena as non-truth-conditional, and therefore non-semantic” (2000: 184). In opposition to this, Seuren places at the centre of discourse

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semantics the study of mod-props and assigns to them a “topic-comment modulation structure” (TCM), which he defines dynamically as the product of “the progress from what has been established in the discourse to what is added as new information” (2000: 183). He maintains that modulated propositions contribute to sentence meaning and “must be expressed in the incrementation value of a sentence” (2000: 185). Seuren terms the progression of meaning creation “the process of genesis” and makes it derive from a simple principle presented as the core of Discourse Semantics and aiming at

implementing the notion that each new sentence in a running discourse adds information to a given information store, called ‘discourse domain’ (DD), built up for the purpose of the discourse at hand as a result of earlier uttered sentences and supported by available general and situational knowledge (2000: 180)

Within this frame, Seuren distinguishes “three stages in the process of linguistic comprehension and interpretation”:

the IS (information structure) stage, which operates with modprops [modulated propositions];

the DS (discourse-semantic) stage, which processes the incoming TCM-structure, first as modprop then as fprop;

The TC (truth calculus) stage, which computes the truth value of a given DD-incremented fprop with regard to a given verification domain (‘world’). (2000-186)

In his account, Seuren relates Information Structure theory with the production phase of the communicative process and with the cognitive and linguistic components of modulated discourse. Discourse Semantics also makes mod-props an object of study but, at this stage, their analysis becomes a part of the reception phase and occupies a middle position between Information Structure Theory and the Formal Semantic truth-conditional, flat-propositional approach.

Although Seuren stresses the value that topicalization has in the incrementation of discourse information, the propositional approach pursued in his article restricts the

analysis of the structure both in Discourse Semantics and Information Structure to the sentence. The same line is followed by Lambrecht when he focuses on the information structure part of the process. For him, information structure concerns

that component of sentence grammar in which propositions as conceptual representations of states of affairs are paired with lexicogrammatical structures in accordance with the mental states of interlocutors who use and interpret these structures as units of information in given discourse contexts. (1994: 5)

The consideration of cognitive and contextual components leads Lambrecht to affirm that “the information structure of a sentence is the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse” which, according to him is manifested

in aspects of prosody, in special grammatical markers, in the form of syntactic (in particular nominal) constituents, in the position and ordering of such constituents in the sentence, in the form of complex grammatical constructions, and in certain choices between related lexical terms.(1994: 6)

In some of his earliest work, van Dijk also speaks of sentence topicality as ruled by the pragmatic and cognitive contexts influencing “the semantico-pragmatic domain of information distribution in discourse and information processing in communication” (1977: 51). Taking a different view, however, van Dijk makes the notion of sentence topic dependent on that of discourse topic and claims that “the topic of a sentence is determined by the structure of the discourse, e.g. the semantic interpretations of the linear sequence of previous sentences” (1977: 50). He develops the notion of sequence topic making sentence topics dependent to a general extent on the topic of previous or following sentences based on criteria related to participants’ expectations and on the principle that sequential topicality operates both backward and forward.

The same reasoning is applied and developed by Givón (1990) who considers that topic is “a relevant functional notion only at the discourse level, minimally at the chain or paragraph level”, and claims that “coherent discourse is [...] characterized by equi-topic

clause-chains". For Givón, "coherence across a multi-clause chain means continuity ('recurrence') of the sub-elements of coherence, chief among which are the referents/topics". Thus Givón considers that "the topic is only 'talked about' or 'important' if it remains 'talked about' or 'important' during a number of successive clauses" (1990: 902). Despite this progressive convergence of arguments, the grammatical realization of the category at sentence level, and its discourse projection still remains a multi-sided question.

## 2. Some considerations on the realization of the notion of topic at sentence level

Based on the quantified study of the topicality of grammatical subjects, Givón (1990: 900-901) contends that "human language seems to code grammatically only three discourse levels of topicality of the participants in events/states", which are:

- (a) Main topic = subject
- (b) Secondary topic = direct object
- (c) Non-topic = all other roles

Out of these options he considers the subject "consistently more topical than the direct object", thus constraining the initial assumption, namely that "if the topical participants in the clause are its nominal arguments (subjects, objects), then at first glance the clause may have a whole host of topics" (1990: 901).

There is another trend of research, however, which, attending mainly to questions of information highlighting, consider fronting, left-dislocation, thematization or focusing as topic marking or topic promoting constructions and, therefore, tend to interpret sentences with fronted elements as multiple topic sentences (cf. for example, Gregory and Michaelis, 2001; Jaeger and Oshima, 2002). As Givón partially suggests in his introduction to his edition of *Topic Continuity in Discourse* (1983), when he discusses "the topic strand", the problem underlying this apparent dissension may be one of overlapping terminology and theoretical sources:

The intuition, expressed under whatever terminology, which leads to shifting the attention of the linguist from the purely structural notion of “subject” toward the more discourse-functional notion of “topic”, or under some other guises “theme”, may be traced back to a number of sources [...].

Accordingly, there are theoreticians who speak about theme in connection with rheme, mainly those who follow the Prague school and the functional-systemic approaches to grammar (Petöfi and Söcer 1983; Halliday 1985; Downing and Locke 1992; Downing 2000, 2001; de Beaugrande 1997); others who opt for the terms topic and comment (Hockett 1958, van Dijk 1977, 1985, van Dijk and Kintsch 1983, Werth 1984, Chafe 1994). In some cases, a double use is made of the concepts of theme and topic and a differentiation is established between sentence and discourse; on these occasions, theme is reserved for clausal or sentential use and topic is employed for discourse (Downing and Locke 1992; Downing 2000, 2001; Gómez-González 2001). Others contemplate the term topic almost exclusively as a theoretical notion and use the word theme rather informally to refer to the general idea which covers the information contained in the discourse (Givón 1984, 1990). A clear case of this blend of functions and terms is, for example, Halliday’s use of “theme” (in the context of the theories mentioned above, a correlative of ‘topic’ as seen in Givón’s quote), which he defines both as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message” and “what the clause is going to be about” (1985: 38-39). This duplicity of functions seems to be at the root of those theoretical approaches which, priming sentence position over grammatical function, connect the “aboutness” value of theme (or its equivalent topic) with the condition of being “activated”, “in focus” or “prominent”, commonly associated with other related concepts such as focus, ground, left-dislocation, etc. (Gundel, 1999: 5). In her book *The Theme-Topic Interface. Evidence from English* (2001), Gómez-González provides an exhaustive description of these coexisting approaches.

To shed light on the possible problems caused by the double functions of the term “theme” and its opposition to the notion of “topic”, Brown and Yule (1983) opt for dissociating, formally and functionally, the notion of left-dislocation or fronting (i.e., ‘being activated’) and that of content-topics (i.e., ‘aboutness’). Their proposal involves combining and assigning different functions to the two terms, which are traditionally

considered equivalent: theme and topic. Thus, at sentential/propositional level, Brown and Yule identify “theme” with “the left-most constituent of the sentence” regardless of its syntactic class or informational load. By doing so, they allot it only one of the multiple functions which Halliday and his collaborators (cf. Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 325; Halliday, 1985: 38-64) attribute to the term, i.e. that which refers to “what the speakers/writers use as... point of departure” (Brown and Yule, 1983: 127). As for topic, Brown and Yule describe the notion as “what is being talked about” (1983: 71), which is in agreement with the majority of the literature, but for one slight difference. Brown and Yule “insist on the principle that it is speakers and writers who have topics, not texts” (1983: 68), a question which becomes of relevance, as will be seen below, when discourse is analyzed qualitatively.

At this stage, however, the most interesting point about Brown’s and Yule’s distinction between the functions of theme and topic concerns precisely the fact that focalization and aboutness become independent issues in the sentence structure, as topics may or may not be “thematized”, depending on the degree of markedness associated with the chosen topic entity (aboutness +/- point of departure and enhancement) (cf. Alonso, 2005). The consequence is at least twofold. Firstly, fronted elements with syntactic roles which are not first-rank candidates for topic entity (e.g. adverbials) may be considered salient elements in the sentential structure (involving intentional choice on the part of the producer who selects them as point of departure for his/her utterance), but they do not necessarily end up being what is talked about in the sentence, especially in the case of what Halliday calls “simple marked themes” (cf. Halliday, 1985: 45-48). And second, thematized elements open a second option to recover previous informational load in those cases where the function topic falls on a different entity, thus creating the possibility of establishing a double semantic link in the topic of discourse chain.

Recapitulating, it can be said that, in general, the question of topic recognition can be addressed at the grammatical level by following Givón’s proposal that clausal topics “are more likely to be coded grammatically as the clause’s subject or direct object” (1990: 900). In parallel, at the information level, a connection can also be made between the semantic role of these syntactic constituents, which are central for the organization of the propositional contents of a clause, and the informational status allotted to them.

In their formulation of the given-new contract, which is meant to describe the working agreement between speaker and hearer in the comprehension process, Clark and Haviland (1977) relate the syntactic distribution of sentential patterns to the two types of information which are conveyed in communication: given (i.e., information (supposedly or presented as) known or recoverable by the receiver from the previous text or from general/shared world knowledge of some type) and new (i.e., information (supposedly or presented as) novel to the receiver). They contend that, in simple standard English sentences with normal intonation and focal stress, the tendency is for given to come before new (1977:13), a principle assumed to be intuitively followed by participants in the communication process.

In her classic proposal of a taxonomy of given-new information, Prince (1981) studies the intersection between the informational terms given/new and their syntactic and semantic functions. First, she distinguishes between three types of givenness which are not necessarily independent from one another or mutually exclusive: predictability, saliency, and shared knowledge (of linguistic, textual or contextual phenomena) and terms their combination “assumed familiarity”. Second, she discusses these interactive realizations of givenness in the information structure of the sentence and the corresponding sentence position assumed by producers and receivers (1981: 233). Evidence from her clausal analysis of an informal oral text points at the grammatical-informational correspondence between subject/given non-subject/new (“one-sixth of the non-subjects – but none of the subjects – are New” (1981: 242)), a fact that, in view of the previous discussion, could help characterize the clausal topic as preferably occurring in subject position and informatively presented as given or known. But the situation encountered in the analysis of a theoretical written text (the beginning of a chapter in Hymes’ *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*) shows that this correspondence is not so easy to establish at least at surface level. Prince enumerates and examines the differences between the analyses of the two texts. Here, we will merely draw attention to three of the aspects she mentions: the abstractedness of many of the entities; their size and complexity; and the blurred correlation between given/new status and grammatical subject position (Prince, 1981: 252).

### 3. The construction of the discourse topic: evidence from a small corpus of comment articles

All three of the problems identified by Prince have been corroborated by the findings we have obtained from the qualitative and quantitative analysis of a small corpus of comment articles from *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and *The Times* which is being analyzed as part of an ongoing research project on coherence in media discourse. Our analysis of the data has shown, however, that, at discourse level, topical informational units of global projection and relevance (in subject or non-subject position) become integrated into a semantic informational intersentential chain realized and developed by chunks of recovered information whose syntactic/semantic and informational role oscillates between the topic-only (aboutness / subject) status and the theme and/or topic (enhanced / fronted position and/or aboutness / subject) status depending on the general frame structure of the articles. Considering the stand adopted by the producer with respect to his/her topic, we have been able to classify broadly three basic types of comment articles in our corpus: (1) those which adopt an objective point of view (producer writes about the topic); (2) those which take a subjective / personal stand (producer involved in the topic); (3) those which show a mixture of both perspectives (producer involved in the topic writes about it).

All three types have been found to employ a set of specific strategies which convert, through re-use, highly intricate new-information chunks occurring at sentence level in non-subject topical position into topical/given/subject entities as the text progresses. Based on this fact and from an overall perspective, it has been possible to establish a correlation between the notions of grammatical subject, informational given status and semantic topic. This is in agreement with Givón (1990: 896-897), who considers recurrence one of the backbones of discourse coherence and processing; furthermore, our findings complement his approach by identifying other resources which help to recover previous complex information for the topical, subject and given functions at discourse level. The simplest strategy of all is the existence of subsequent sentential subjects semantically interrelated through different types of lexical reiteration, reference and other grammatically-based cohesive devices (Alonso 2005, 2006a, 2006b). These recurrent and/or emergent grammatical subjects, which may not always be considered topical at the local sentential level, facilitate the conversion of information previously

presented as new into given and become key elements in the construction and maintenance of global discourse topicality or “aboutness”.

### 3.1 Lexical topic progression

The analysis of our corpus has indeed shown that there is an internal mechanism in the progression of discourse topic construction which is directly linked to the recurrence of lexical entities in subject position and with given informational status. This kind of progression, which may be realized by using different types of lexical reiteration (e.g. repetition, synonymy, superordination, hyponym, meronym or general word, if we follow the typology established by Halliday and Hasan (1976) or Halliday (1985) among others), alternates as a rule with the use of personal referential items (e.g. personal pronouns and possessive pronouns and determiners), and is rather simple to trace in easy-to-follow texts (or parts of a text) as happens in the passage below where sentences have been numbered for easy reference and the elements focused on have been italicized):

(1)

The discovery of a code at Shugborough Hall, in Staffordshire - "O.U.O.S.V.A.V.V" - that may disclose the location of the holy grail has been widely compared to *Dan Brown's super-selling novel The Da Vinci Code* (1).

This Shugborough cryptograph - on which old Bletchley Park codebreakers have been working - is seen as life imitating art, but the relationship between *popular fiction* and reality is more often the reverse (2). *Novels* sell well because they reflect our times: art imitating life, if often in heavy disguise (3).

*The biggest-selling novels of the 70s - Jaws and The Godfather* - concerned shadowy forces, fish and criminal, beneath the surface of society (4). We can now see that these tales reflected the menaces to the American way from the cold war, Vietnam and Watergate (5). Similarly, the millions drawn in Britain at the same period to *the animal epic Watership Down* were drawn by a sentimental regret that our traditional way of life was being swamped by modernity (6).

So, if bestselling books contain hidden messages about our times, then *The Da Vinci Code*, having cryptography as both content and method, may be the ultimate popular fiction (7).

(From the article "I'm sorry, I haven't a clue" by Mark Lawson *The Guardian*. Saturday November 27, 2004)

Here we can see how a piece of information: *Dan Brown's super-selling novel The Da Vinci Code*, which appears in the first sentence, first paragraph in non-subject /non topical position progressively becomes topic/subject through different types of reiteration devices hierarchically distributed. So in sentence (2) we have the superordinate *popular fiction* as part of the subject of the second conjoin of the compound sentence, while in sentence (3) the superordinate *novels* appears as topic/subject. In (4) we have partial repetition and in (4) and (6) we find category synonymy by mention of other similar best-sellers: *Jaws and The Godfather, the animal epic Watership Down*. Finally, in (7) *The Da Vinci Code* becomes topic/subject through repetition of the whole NP.

Another good example where lexical reiteration (all highlighted elements in italics) helps in the construction of a general discourse topic with subject/given position is the following:

(2)

Which *universities* have the lowest drop-out rate? *Cambridge*, where 97.9 per cent of those who arrive complete the course, and *Oxford* (95.1 per cent). Which *universities* have fallen furthest below the Government's "benchmark" for state school pupils? *Oxford*, only 53.8 per cent of whose undergraduates went to state school, and *Cambridge* (56.9 per cent). Which *universities* are most criticised by the Government's Office for Fair Access for being "too middle class"? *Cambridge*, only 11.4 per cent of whose admissions are considered "lower class", and *Oxford* (11.5 per cent).

*Oxford and Cambridge* are the only two British universities that appear in the world's top 10 in all available rankings, yet they are the ones viewed with the most official displeasure. (From "And now, the £1 billion question: will the middle class save our students?" By Charles Moore. *Telegraph.co.uk* 24/09/2005)

Here the strategy used to build and maintain a topical chain has been superordination (universities) and co-hyponymy (Cambridge / Oxford).

### 3.2 Referential topic progression

When the density of the new non-subject topical information that has to be recovered for reusage as given topic makes recourse to lexical items totally insufficient, discourse develops other resources which involve both cohesive devices and syntactic structures. In the corpus of media articles analyzed, we have been able to identify the regular consistent use of a series of linguistic strategies which facilitate the transition of complex information from post-verbal to pre-verbal position. Some of them could be considered different instantiations of what Halliday and Hasan (1976: 52-53) call “extended reference”, a mechanism which makes it possible to recover and re-use large stretches of text (complex phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or longer portions). Halliday and Hasan mention as paradigmatic types of extended reference realization the use of personal *it* and particularly deictic demonstratives *this* and *that*. We have found numerous examples of both cases in our corpus, as can be seen in the following selections, where both resources, which serve to recover complex semantic chunks from the previous cotext, are presented in italics:

(3)

What is extraordinary is that the Government substitutes its mouth for its money. As it pays less, so it grows more interfering. It will not entertain the idea that the low proportion of state school pupils in good universities might have something to do with poor standards in the schools for which it is responsible. No, it must be the result of snobbery, "elitism", even racism in the universities. (From “And now, the £1 billion question: will the middle class save our students?” By Charles Moore. Telegraph.co.uk 24/09/2005)

(4)

Our parents are becoming conscious of it too. The mother of one of my girlfriends, who is only in her 60s and in good health, has already picked out the home where she'd like to book in when she can no longer look after herself. Another, in equally fine fettle and of a similar age, is choosing a new oven at eye-level for the day when her knees give out. Is *this* mind-bogglingly pessimistic or simply pragmatic? (From “When I'm 64” by Hester Lacey. *The Guardian*, Tuesday November 23, 2004)

(5)

But the scale of Waugh's rejection of the whole 19th-century English portmanteau - in art, politics and religion - is the most impressively coherent achieved by anyone writing in English in the 20th-century's first half. He used satire to undermine the pomposity of liberal

humanism, the humbug of ethics and prosy sentiment. He made it impossible therefore to take a Victorian hangover like JB Priestley at all seriously. And he was always quite explicit that England was dead. This was not a question of imperialist nostalgia - but a bleak recognition of the post-1918 facts. (From "The artist in Philistia" by Hywel Williams. The Guardian, Thursday September 25, 2003)

(6)

A frequently heard complaint in the western world is of a lack of time. There simply isn't enough of it into which to cram the richness and variety of the full life. Some people manage this by a clumsy simultaneism, doing two or more things at once - driving and making telephone calls, eating and shopping, having sex and making plans to redesign the flat, holding dinner parties and furthering a career, listening to music while improving their bodyline, and so on. An intensifying penetration of our lives by the market permits us to spend money on several activities at the same time.

But *this* is a makeshift, and stumbles against the intractable fact that you can only be in one place at a time. (From "Who does the dirty work?" By Jeremy Seabrook. *The Guardian* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/> Saturday January 10, 2004)

### 3.3 Lexico-referential topic progression

But this use of extended referential items and demonstrative deictics is just one of the possible strategies that discourse employs to promote local information to global topic prominence. A similar function of complex information recovering is played by superordinate and general words to which Halliday and Hasan (1976: 274-282) also attribute a strong referential capacity. In these cases, superordinates or general words do not stand in a relation of reiteration of previous lexical items as is typical of their function in lexical cohesion; on the contrary, they serve a role which is similar to that played by extended reference resources and which operates to recover semantic information chunks. Here is an example where the superordinate "volte-face" in conjunction with the determiner "my" (both in italics) help to recover all the information (thematic, topical and comment) in the preceding paragraph:

(7)

When, over 10 years ago, my first-born sang Halloween's Coming at her nursery, accompanied by witchy music and brandishing a broomstick lovingly crafted by her dad, I was charmed. Halloween was new not just to me, but also to Britain. Before that it was just an obscure American tradition and a John Carpenter horror movie. Now, 10 years later, it's

become a fixture on the British calendar, but my enthusiasm has curdled. Halloween is the new Christmas, and I am its Scrooge.

*My volte-face* has nothing to do with religious objections. (From “Tricks, but no treat” by Anne Karpf. *The Guardian*, Friday October 24, 2003)

Another highly used strategy for the recovering of topical and non-topical information and for the construction and maintenance of global topicality is the combination of the two resources mentioned above, i.e. demonstrative deictic plus superordinate. Although there are plenty of examples in the corpus, the following case seems especially illustrative as, if the referential chain is traced bottom-up, the full understanding of the combined use of deictic and superordinate in the phrase “*this prospect*” (here again highlighted in italics) actually takes us up to the very beginning of the article. For practical reasons we will just quote the last block of meaning:

(8)

Road transport in the UK consumes 37.6m tonnes of petroleum products a year. The most productive oil crop that can be grown in this country is rape. The average yield is 3-3.5 tonnes per hectare. One tonne of rapeseed produces 415kg of biodiesel. So every hectare of arable land could provide 1.45 tonnes of transport fuel.

To run our cars and buses and lorries on biodiesel, in other words, would require 25.9m hectares. There are 5.7m in the UK. Even the EU's more modest target of 20% by 2020 would consume almost all our cropland.

If the same thing is to happen all over Europe, the impact on global food supply will be catastrophic: big enough to tip the global balance from net surplus to net deficit. If, as some environmentalists demand, it is to happen worldwide, then most of the arable surface of the planet will be deployed to produce food for cars, not people.

*This prospect* sounds, at first, ridiculous.

(From “Fuel for nought” by George Monbiot. *The Guardian*, Tuesday November 23, 2004)

The following passage provides another example of the same information re-use strategy; we have identified in italics the combination deictic plus superordinate (“*these burdens*”) which, as in example (8), occurs in subject/topic/known information position:

(9)

Successful companies and businesses delegate, outsource, contract out, contract in networks of sub- and sub-subcontractors, in order to save the expense of producing in-house. Chains

of proxies and surrogates routinely protect consumers from disagreeable encounters with the actual producers of their daily necessities. It is an inevitable next step that other forms of dirty work should also be farmed out by individuals.

Subcontracting one's own life is a natural response to the dilemmas of the time-poor, particularly when the poverty of time is compensated by generous salaries, spectacular bonuses, rewards and fees. What could be more appropriate than buying in those things which have become too onerous for busy people, those who suffer from the colonisation of time by demanding lives? *These burdens* can best be alleviated by engaging labour which will free us up for more beguiling and more lucrative activities. (From "Who does the dirty work?" By Jeremy Seabrook. *The Guardian*, Saturday January 10, 2004)

### 3.4 Syntactic strategies in global topic progression

The progressive development and construction of the discourse topic sometimes become more intricate (Halliday, 1985: 315), as happens in the more involved types of argumentative comment articles in our corpus. In such cases, the tendency continues to be for all or part of the non-subject/new topical information to become subject/given in subsequent sentences, thus entering and sustaining the dynamic pattern described above according to which the high-frequency subject position is a determining factor in the construction and identification of the global discourse topic. However, the function of reference elements or general words is not only anaphoric (i.e., limited to integrating previous complex information into the discourse), they can also be used cataphorically to anticipate complex noun clauses or phrases. This provides a way to indirectly project topical prominence onto the subject slot despite the post-verbal position of the informational unit. This is a typical function of dummy "it" when it is used in combination with an extraposed subject. Passages (10) and (11) provide examples of this anticipatory role of "it" grammatically standing for heavily loaded topical noun clauses functioning as extraposed subjects. The noun clauses, italicized in both, recover and expand the information presented in the preceding paragraphs in non-subject position. In example (10) subjects in this first paragraph have also been italicized to show the absence of semantic load they all share; in this case, the link used to establish a topical semantic chain between the two paragraphs is the anaphoric demonstrative deictic "this" (here italicized and emphasized in bold type):

(10)

Of course, *the very rich* have always sought relief from the chores of life. *Who*, if he or she can avoid it, wants to spend time on cleaning and scouring, or any of the tasks of self-provisioning - producing food, even preparing it, let alone cooking it? *Who*, in full possession of a right mind, would willingly spend more time - apart from those exalted and parenthesized "quality moments" - with children, aged parents, the demands of duty, the petty tyranny of those who believe that their relationship with us privileges them to more time than we have at our disposal?

*It is only to be expected that we should offload some of the oppressive weight of **this** on to those called by fate to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water*, even though this is no longer the guise in which the economically subordinate now appear in the world. (From "Who does the dirty work?" By Jeremy Seabrook. *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>, Saturday January 10, 2004).

(11)

A few years ago, Jana left the Czech Republic to work as an au pair for a family in London. Although au pairs are legally allowed to work 25 hours a week, Jana found herself rather busier than that. "I got the little girl up at 7.30am. I put her to bed at 7pm. Yes, I suppose it was about 12 hours most days."

For that she was paid less than £100 a week, but when I commiserated, saying to Jana that it was a long week of hard work, she put a brave face on it. "I didn't see it just as work. In order to be happy I had to say to myself, this is also play, I like playing with children." And did she do housework, too? "Yes - but, you know, if I was a mother in my own country I would do cooking and cleaning and I wouldn't see it as work."

It is a bitter irony that the rising level of women's employment in the UK is being underpinned, in many instances, by the low-paid work of other women cleaning their homes and looking after their children. (From "Left holding the baby" by Natasha Walter. *The Guardian*, Wednesday September 10, 2003)

As can be observed in both examples above, the use of extraposed subjects also favours the use of syntactically complex subjects which have the capacity to integrate different pieces of information into one single syntactic structure, another strategy that has been repeatedly found in our reduced corpus of comment articles. In this way, not only is local topical post-verbal new information converted into topical given information with subject function but the new information is also combined with and integrated into different topics of variable complexity and status. An example of complex syntactic subject (again italicized below) helping to recover chunks of information from the preceding cotext and adding new information to the topical string is the following:

(12)

Being a Muslim, especially a Muslim woman, in Britain is for many a dispiriting and occasionally terrifying experience. The society that prides itself on tolerance has lost its bearings over Islam. On the streets, *the prejudice that Islam is irrationally and murderously violent and menacingly foreign* has spawned a subculture of hatred and abuse. (Will Hutton, "A gagging order too far". *Observer*, June 19, 2005)

### 3.5 Thematization as a vehicle for shared topic progression

Furthermore, in line with what was said above about the structure of comment articles, there is one aspect which has also been found to be recurrent in the comment articles analyzed in our project, and which indirectly affects the distribution and maintenance of topical information. Depending on the personal stand adopted by the producer, i.e. (1) objective point of view (producer writes about a given topic); (2) subjective / personal stand (producer involved in the topic); (3) mixture of both perspectives (producer involved in the topic writes about it), the role played by the theme as initiator of the informational string acquires a significant value. In those cases where a subjective or a mixed stand is chosen, and following Brown and Yule's principle that it is speakers who have topics and not texts (1983:68), the discourse topic becomes, in point of fact, "what *I think about a given subject*". In these cases, thematically fronted elements collaborate with topic/subject/given items in the construction and maintenance of the informational load, as happens in the following example where thematized elements offer a second option to create a double link in the discourse informative chain (personal topics have been italicized and informative themes have been underlined):

(13)

The way in which we treat beggars is a test of our character. By any standard, they are a nuisance. Not only do they ask us for money, their existence makes us feel uneasy. However we respond to their pleas, we always feel we have done the wrong thing.

If we give a beggar a pound, we feel gullible and resentful at our inability to offer, instead, some improving advice about getting a proper job. If, like the Pharisee, we pass by on the other side of the street, we think of the starving children in the freezing garret who, thanks to us, will have no milk to drink tonight.

Faced with those disturbing alternatives, it is surely better to accept Lamb's advice and, not being frightened "at the hard words, imposition and imposture, give and ask no questions."

When I read that Mr Hockey was collecting something like £400 a week, I thought at once of a lady - central European in dress and, I suspect, more youthful than her worn-out appearance suggests - who spends her days under a theatre awning on the other side of the road from my office.

[...]

If someone would convince me that the woman outside the theatre has £400 a week to spend - whether it comes from gullible passers-by, social security fraud or the prudent investment of her inheritance - I could get on with my work instead of staring out of the window and wondering what should be done about her.

When I see well-heeled pedestrians - normally on their way to expensive restaurants or the taxi rank - pass her by as if she were invisible, I wonder what should be done about them.

I admit it. The occasional pound - certainly not a sacrifice, for its loss changes nothing - is moral hush-money, handed over so that I shall feel less guilty about my self-indulgence.

So I am open to the criticism that I have a vested interest in beggars being left to rot on the streets rather than persuaded or, if necessary, driven into accepting more congenial accommodation.

Perhaps I do. But while they remain, I shall stick to the view that it is better to help 10 frauds than ignore one deserving case. (From "Give and ask no questions" by Roy Hattersley. *The Guardian*, Monday August 25, 2003)

The use of semantically loaded thematized elements to recover salient information in a fronted marked position is also frequent in those articles which are mostly about one person or entity in particular, as happens in (14):

(14)

*Julian of Norwich* is probably the best-known of our medieval mystics: her line that "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" was taken up by Eliot in the Four Quartets and so passed into popular speech. But, far from being unique, *Julian* was part of an extensive medieval mystical movement which is every bit as central to our religious traditions as singing starchy hymns to the groan of a C of E pedal organ.

At the same time as Julian was receiving troubled souls at the window of her Norwich cell, a popular guide to lady anchorites was being avidly copied and distributed, giving advice to the thousands of other female mystics dotting the East Anglian countryside on how to live their lives: the guide, for example, forbade the wearing of hedgehog-skin undergarments and criticized the habit of beating the bare flesh with nettles. Compared to Julian's friend Marjorie Kempe, who had visions of intense love-making sessions with her Saviour, *Julian* was positively staid.

Likewise, 400 years later, when Blake was seeing angels in the trees of Peckham Rye, *he* was not alone in having such visions. Eighteenth-century London teemed with visionaries. (From “God in Peckham Rye” by William Dalrymple. *The Guardian*. Monday November 24, 2003.)

This distribution is very commonly found in those cases where a speaker’s words are quoted as in (15) and (16) (thematized elements underlined, personal topics italicized):

(15)

Unlike hydrogen fuel cells, biofuels can be deployed straightaway. This, in fact, was how Rudolf Diesel expected his invention to be used. When he demonstrated his engine at the World Exhibition in 1900, *he* ran it on peanut oil. "The use of vegetable oils for engine fuels may seem insignificant today," *he* predicted. (From “Fuel for nought” by George Monbiot. *The Guardian*, Tuesday November 23, 2004)

(16)

Jane Austen was aware of the problem. In *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, Edward Ferrers has been to look at the nearby village, and the Dashwood sisters are pressing him to enthuse about it with the same admiration that they do. "You must not inquire too far," *he* warns them. (From “Absolutely not fabulous” by David McKie. *The Guardian*. Thursday October 9, 2003)

### 3.6 Combination of strategies

Certainly, in these, as in practically all other texts, this resource alternates with the devices described above, as they are in no way mutually exclusive. Example (17) below shows, for instance, the combination of semantically loaded themes and personal topics (underlined and italicized respectively) with the use of demonstrative deictic “this” (highlighted in bold) to recover the block of information contained both in the paragraph where it appears and in the previous one. Noticeable is the help which referential “it” (also in bold) occurring in post-verbal position at the beginning of the second paragraph has as a builder of topicality at an intermediate level of the global discursive information chain:

(17)

And because, by and large, we love our parents as much as we are exasperated by them, *just as we always have,* **we** are starting to come up with a scary catalogue of "what-ifs". Where **it** they once dreaded the early-morning or late-night phone call, that has been passed on a

generation. *We* are all suddenly surprised that we're not the worried-about generation any more and that strong dads and stronger mums are developing knees and hips and timidity of strangers and a lack of inclination to travel on holiday any further afield than Torquay.

Our parents are becoming conscious of **it** too. The mother of one of my girlfriends, who is only in her 60s and in good health, has already picked out the home where she'd like to book in when she can no longer look after herself. Another, in equally fine fettle and of a similar age, is choosing a new oven at eye-level for the day when her knees give out. Is **this** mind-bogglingly pessimistic or simply pragmatic?

When my mother says that she doesn't know if it's worth investing in life membership of the National Trust in case, in 15 or 20 years, she can't totter round a stately home and get her money's worth, *I* bracingly reply that I hope she dies with her boots on, interested in mullioned windows and medieval herb gardens to the very end. (From "When I'm 64" by Hester Lacey. *The Guardian* Tuesday November 23, 2004)

Example (18) also illustrates how the different resources may alternate with one another to help construct a central topic of discourse (sentences have been numbered for later reference):

(18)

There's another less obvious way men haven't changed (1). Many men still can't admit to feeling sadness, loss or rejection (2). *This* makes depression dangerous (3). If they can't admit to these feelings or stay with them, *they* can emerge as rage and violence (4). Often *this* is directed against women, but also against themselves, which is why men are more likely to commit suicide than women (5).

*Almost all of these cases* happened in families which had fallen apart (6). Mochrie, unusually, still lived with his family (7). But, after the tragedy, *it* emerged *that he was upset about his wife having an affair and was suffering from severe, untreated depression* (8).

For the others, *the final psychotic state in which they turned on their children and themselves*, seems to have been triggered by rabid sexual jealousy, feelings of rejection and terror at losing the children (9). (From "When love hurts" by Ros Coward. *The Guardian*. Friday September 19, 2003)

As can be seen, there are two cases of subject/topic deictic (italicized) in sentences (3) and (5); a combination of semantically loaded theme plus personal subject/topic (underlined and italicized respectively) in sentence (4); a case of deictic plus superordinate (both italicized) in sentence (6); an example of anticipatory "it" and complex extraposed nominal clause as subject (also italicized) in sentence (8); and, finally, a complex noun phrase in regular subject position (italicized) in (9).

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the evidence obtained through the empirical analysis of our corpus, it seems to us that the promotion of certain chunks of information from sentential new/post-verbal position to given/subject topic status by means of the strategies identified above, might be related to the concept of “mod-prop” and its topic-comment organization, described by Seuren as a generator of discourse structure by gradual accumulation of information in the construction of a discourse domain (DD). From a discourse perspective, the progressive sentential addition to the information stored and the subsequent change of informational status which the incrementation of mod-props usually brings about act as a means to construct the general idea underlying the notion of global discourse topic and helps to distinguish between those mod-props whose semantic projection expands through large portions of text and those which are relevant only at the local level.

Within the frame of discourse analysis and more specifically in relation to some classic studies in discourse semantics (van Dijk 1980, 1985, van Dijk and Kintsch 1983), a succession of semantically interrelated (mod-)propositions with a global projection marked by some type of lexical or structural reuse and/or co-reference, as seen in the cases discussed above, would be considered to conform a macro-proposition, i.e. a larger semantic unit gathering and/or combining chunks of local information contained in successive interrelated mod-propositions. The notion of macro-proposition could therefore be added to Seuren’s account of discourse semantics and discourse dynamics as a mid-level semantic unit comprising a set of interrelated mod-propositions and playing an active role in the bringing together of the local information structure and the global semantic projection of discourse. Macro-propositions acquire relevance with regard to the global semantic content of discourse as they take in that kind of mod-propositional information which progressively becomes topical by being sustained throughout the discourse unit.

The analysis of our reduced corpus of comment articles has shown that the transition from post-verbal new sentential information to pre-verbal known topical status is linguistically realized by a set of lexico-referential, syntactic and semantic strategies which help to build and maintain central units of meaning through extended sections of discourse or the entirety of it. The systematic consideration of these strategies has

demonstrated how chunks of information in a non-topical position are accumulatively subsumed and made to enter the main topical chain in what should be seen as a full scope progressive development of the global discourse topic. Identifying the strategies has also helped to build a bridge between the theoretical notions of mod-proposition and macro-proposition as they have proven to work as intermediate steps in the conversion of information from local to global. This is consistent with Givón's view of discourse coherence as dependent on multi-clause topical continuity (1990), and supports the view that the local and global levels of meaning in a discourse are never separate, for the same type of information may function either as local or as global, depending on its semantic projection and/or on the topic condition it may have for the participants in the communicative interaction.

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