

Sentence Topic in Comment Articles¹

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Abstract

Although it competes with subject and theme as a key concept within the field of discourse analysis, there is much to be gained by utilising the sophisticated treatment of sentence topic developed by theorists working within the frameworks of functional and cognitive grammar. The claim that there is a tendency for sentence topics to coincide with grammatical subjects and familiar referents is examined in relation to texts drawn from two different genres and text-types. It is argued that the alignment of topic and grammatical subject may be more clear-cut in brief expository biographical notes than in longer argumentative comment articles, where clarity and coherence may not be the primary objective. Finally, it is suggested that the preference for sentence topics and familiar referents to be realized by grammatical subjects might vary according to text-type and genre.

There is widespread recognition among functional grammarians and discourse analysts of the importance in the development of discourse of the preverbal element of the clause or sentence, at least in languages like English with a rigid SVC word order. For Chafe (1994), the relevant unit in English is the grammatical subject. In systemic-functional grammar, it is the *theme*, the initial constituent of a clause, or the first constituent “that has some function in the experiential structure of a clause” (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 66), whether this is the grammatical subject or not. There is an alternative approach, however, perhaps dominant in the American linguistic tradition, which is to identify the sentence *topic* (usually, but

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PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

not necessarily, expressed by a preverbal unit) as playing the key role in the development of the text (see e.g. Givón, 1993).

One advantage of this approach is that it enables discourse analysts to draw on “two thousand years of largely unchallenged grammatical tradition” (Lambrecht, 1994: 132) and on more recent work by scholars such as Reinhart (1982) and Gundel (e.g. 1988) which suggests that sentences are generally used to convey information about some topic under discussion. In the approach of Gundel and Lambrecht, sentence topic is “the matter of current interest which a statement is about and with respect to which a proposition is to be interpreted as relevant” (Lambrecht, 1994: 119). The text producer picks out an entity or state of affairs which must in principle be familiar to the receiver and adds a comment about this topic entity designed to increase the receiver’s knowledge of it. While the *theme* is “the point of departure of the clause as message” (Downing and Locke, 2006: 223), the *topic* is the entity or state of affairs which the speaker identifies as what he or she is speaking about. Unless otherwise signalled, this sentence topic will usually be related to the local discourse topic.

Within the differing frameworks of generative, functional and cognitive grammatical theory (Gundel, 1988; Givón, 1993; Langacker, 1991), sentence topics are generally assumed to be expressed by noun phrases or nominal clauses which prototypically function as grammatical subject of the clause or sentence (Downing, 2000). There seems to be a plausible cognitive rationale for this position, which makes it highly compatible with a discourse analytical perspective. Experimental work quoted in Brown and Yule (1983: 135) appears to suggest that texts in which topical referents occur in subject position are more easily processed by text receivers.

The role of sentence topic in facilitating efficient communication can be seen at work in the following text, my analysis of which follows Alonso (2005), where a similar text is discussed. The text below is a note on the author David Mitchell which occurs on the first leaf of the paperback version of his novel *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell, 2004). I have indicated the clause subjects in bold.

David Mitchell

David Mitchell was born in 1969 and grew up in the West Country. His first novel, *Ghostwritten*, was published in 1999. It was awarded the Mail on Sunday/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for the best book by a writer under thirty-five, and was also shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award. His second novel, *number9dream*, followed in 2001 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize as well as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and in 2003 *he* was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists. *Cloud Atlas*, published in 2004, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

After living in Japan for several years, *David Mitchell* now lives in Ireland.

It is immediately apparent that in this text, the grammatical subjects coincide both with the sentence topics and the global discourse topic. Four of the ten grammatical subjects (including those which are omitted in coordinate clauses) refer to the author, while the remaining six refer to his works. In addition, those sentences in which only personal information about David Mitchell is presented are separate (in initial and final sentence) from those where it is his works which are the topic. The syntactic device by which the majority of sentence topics are aligned with the grammatical subject is the passive construction, the primary purpose of which, as here, is to promote a non-agent to topic status (Givón, 1993: 48). In keeping with its communicative purpose, the text is easily processed, with the reader filing the incoming information about the author and the recognition which his works have received under the addresses conveniently provided by the sentence topics.

It is not obvious, however, that what applies to a relatively simple expository text will be equally valid for more complex discourse, or other text-types. Let us therefore look at a more complex text, this time of an argumentative type.

The extract reproduced below is from a comment article written by Kathryn Hughes and published in the Comment section of

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

the online edition of the *Guardian* (*Guardian Unlimited*) on 27th June, 2005. The article is deals with the gender imbalance among top chefs in Britain. I print below the opening paragraph and the first sentence of the second paragraph, with the matrix clauses numbered and the subjects of the matrix clauses in each sentence in italics. I have included the opening sentence of the second paragraph as it is relevant to my argument later.

A domestic goddess, maybe, but never a chef
When a woman cooks for a living, it's just food.
When a man does it, it might just be a masterpiece

(1) *Just 5% of the Michelin-starred kitchens in this country* are run by women, even though an equal number of men and women sign up for catering courses. (2) It is to highlight and partially redress the oddness of this state of affairs that *a leading food magazine* has just announced its list of the UK's finest up-and-coming female chefs. (3) *You* probably won't have heard of these women unless you are at least of a pro-am standard of dining out, (4) but *they* are, say Square Meal magazine, the first serious wave of female chefs since Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray launched the River Cafe in the late 80s.

At first glance, the reasons for this gender imbalance at the top table are obvious, pedestrian even.

- (1) *Just 5% of the Michelin-starred kitchens in this country* are run by women, even though an equal number of men and women sign up for catering courses.

The grammatical subject of the matrix clause is a complex noun phrase and these occur fairly frequently in comment articles. The difficulty lies in identifying the topic entity. This cannot be the referent of the whole of the subject noun phrase—the 5% of Michelin-starred kitchens which are run by women—as quantifying expressions are non-referential and cannot be topical. Nor is it Michelin-starred kitchens in

the literal sense, as the expression functions here as a metonym. The solution must be that the topic is top chefs while the proposition that only 5% of them are women is *comment*. The sentence can in fact be restructured as “Of the Michelin-starred kitchens in this country, only 5% are run by women”, with the topical expression detached from the rest of the sentence, and the quantifying expression functioning as part of the comment.

The same would apply to the subordinate clause “even though an equal number of men and women sign up for catering courses”. Here again, the subject noun phrase includes, but is not limited to the topic entity, which in this case is men and women.

- (2) It is to highlight and partially redress the oddness of this state of affairs that a leading food magazine has just announced its list of the UK’s finest up-and-coming female chefs.

The explicit subject of both the *that*-clause and the implicit subject the initial non-finite subordinate clause in this cleft sentence is *a leading food magazine*. This is an indefinite noun phrase which introduces a new referent and as such, it represents in classical sentence topic theory an unlikely topic, especially as a local discourse topic has already been established. The hearer-old referent “this state of affairs”, which might be expected to be a candidate for topic status, is not expressed by the grammatical subject but is deeply embedded within a prepositional phrase within a noun phrase which is itself an object within a non-finite complement.

- (3) You probably won’t have heard of these women unless your are at least of a pro-am standard of dining out.

The grammatical subject of these two clauses is the deictic pronoun *you*, referring to the readers of the article. In a Hallidayan analysis, *you* is unproblematically the theme, but from a sentence topic perspective a deictic pronoun is unlikely to be topical – the discourse topic of this article is clearly not Guardian readers. The topical expression is in fact “these women”, and the first clause can be rewritten to place this in canonical initial subject position as “These

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women will probably be unfamiliar to Guardian readers” (similar wording occurs in other comment articles).

- (4) but they are, say Square Meal magazine, the first serious wave of female chefs since Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray launched the River Cafe in the late 80s.

It is only here, in the final clause of the paragraph that we have a canonical topical expression as subject, the pronoun *they* referring to a previously introduced entity “these women”.

This paragraph is fairly representative of the position with respect to the alignment of sentence topic, grammatical subject, and non-focal information which I have found in the corpus of comment articles which forms the data base for a research project on media discourse at the University of Salamanca. That is to say, there *is* a relationship between topic and subject (Alonso, 2006), but it is more apparent in some of the texts than in others and is not as clear-cut as it is in simpler genres and text-types. In a significant minority of cases, in fact, sentence topic and subject do not coincide, and it is a productive task to investigate why in each case the writer should have avoided a strategy which seems designed to facilitate efficient text processing by the reader.

First, the non-alignment of grammatical subject and clause topic is sometimes simply the result of the mismatch between the syntactic constraints of English and maximum communicative efficiency. There is a preference in canonical sentences in English, for example, for quantifying expressions to form part of the syntactic subject rather than take the form of the dislocated phrase which I have produced above, in which the topic is clearly separated from the comment (“Of the Michelin-starred kitchens in this country, only 5% are run by women...”). A second reason for the avoidance of topical material in subject position is a potential local confusion caused by identical pronoun forms which refer to different referents. In sentence (3), for example, my re-written version is only possible because I have excluded material which the text producer obviously wanted to include. The inclusion of this material leads to a potential confusion in identifying the referent of the pronoun *they* in “These women will probably be unfamiliar to readers of this newspaper, unless they are at

least of a pro-am standard of dining out, but they are, say Square Meal magazine, ...” These local tactical factors in the text producer’s decision to employ non-topical subjects are surprisingly frequent in the comment articles I have analysed. In this case, the decision to use a non-topical subject might have been reinforced by a third, stylistic, preference –the fairly frequent use in *Guardian* comment articles of direct address to the readers through the use of the deictic pronouns, *you* and *we*, and the avoidance of impersonal forms.

However, we have still not accounted for the subjective impression created by the opening paragraph, which is one of a certain lack of clarity and coherence. The first sentence introduces an anomalous situation, the unequal number of male and female top chefs, which will become the global discourse topic of the text. However, in sentence (2) the topic and subject is “a leading food magazine”, while the topic of sentence (3) is the up-and-coming female chefs introduced in sentence (2). Neither of these topics has anything but an oblique relationship with the initial topic, and neither the magazine nor the up-and-coming female chefs are referred to again in the article. It is not until sentence (4) which begins the second paragraph that the discourse topic introduced in the first sentence recurs as sentence topic (“this gender imbalance at top table”).

My explanation for the curious indirectness in the topical development of this paragraph is as follows. The opening paragraphs of comment articles are a site of conflicting generic preferences. On the one hand, there is the desire for a first sentence which both attracts the attention of the reader and introduces the global discourse topic. On the other, there is the convention that comment articles are a response to a topical event which should logically be mentioned at the beginning of the article, but which is not necessarily directly connected to the discourse topic. What has happened in this case, I suggest, is that the postponement the mention of the topical event (the publication of the list of female chefs) to the second and third sentences of the opening paragraph creates a disturbance in the coherent development of the discourse. A re-written version of the text, I suggest, with the topical event mentioned first, is more coherent and more easily processed than the original text, though arguably less dramatic in its opening sentence:

PROCEEDINGS 31ST AEDEAN CONFERENCE

A leading food magazine has just announced its list of the UK's finest up-and-coming female chefs. These women will probably be unfamiliar to Guardian readers who are not of a pro-am standard of dining out, but they are, say Square Meal magazine, the first serious wave of female chefs since Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray launched the River Cafe in the late 80s. The list is designed to highlight and partially redress the oddness of the state of affairs in which just 5% of the Michelin-starred kitchens in this country are run by women, even though an equal number of men and women sign up for catering courses.

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In this re-written version, the new referent “a leading food magazine” occurs relatively unproblematically in subject position in the initial sentence, the topics in the remaining clauses are familiar referents in subject position, and the discourse topical expressions “the oddness of the state of affairs”, “an equal number of men and women” and “this gender imbalance at top table” occur in close proximity. Whether the resulting text is preferable to the original is of course open to question.

Although it would obviously premature to treat the findings from the analysis of part of a single text as anything more than suggestive, it seems a reasonable conclusion that the preference for grammatical subjects as expressions of sentence topics may vary according to the discourse medium, the text-type and genre. In a text such as a comment article, the writer might have to balance conflicting objectives, and the aim of producing an accessible discourse, with sentence topics and grammatical subjects neatly aligned, might be impeded by local processing difficulties or overridden by a desire to produce a more complex and expressive, but less coherent discourse. Composing a comment article is harder than writing a brief note about the author of a book and one reason for this might be the necessity of expressing more complex discourse aims within the syntactic and

stylistic constraints, and the generic conventions of the comment article in English.

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