

# THEMATIC AND TOPICAL STRUCTURING IN THREE SUBGENRES. A CONTRASTIVE STUDY

**A. JESÚS MOYA GUIJARRO**

University of Castilla-La Mancha

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## 1. Introduction

This article aims to analyse the thematic and topical structure of three subgenres: narratives for young children, news items and tourist brochures.<sup>1</sup> As these are written specifically for publication, the 60 texts under analysis (20 of each type) share the fact that there is no possibility of direct interaction between writer and reader. However, their main rhetorical purpose and their register (Propp 1972; van Dijk 1988a, b; Cook 1992; LLuch 2003) are clearly different and it is hypothesized that this plays a key role in their thematic and topical patterning.

In fact, while the primary aim of the news stories<sup>2</sup> selected for research is to inform the greatest number of readers about all issues of a current and social event in a hypothetically objective and impersonal way, the main goal of the tourist brochures (although they are, to a certain extent, also informative in nature) is to promote tourism in the areas being advertised. As for the children's tales, also narrative in structure like the news items, their main rhetorical purpose is first to entertain, and second to instruct the young child.

As far as the register of the sample of texts is concerned, although all of them are written texts, the language of the news items is formal, concise and impersonal. This is clearly different from the language of the tourist brochures: more descriptive, persuasive and appealing in nature. These properties determine the use

of personal, subjective, descriptive and evaluative language in the tourist texts. As with tourist brochures, tales, especially traditional ones, are characterized by the use of evaluative and attitudinal lexis, by means of which the writer tries to instil moral and/or social values in the young child from an early age. However, the language of tales is direct and informal, only slightly more developed than the colloquial language of the child with the aim of increasing his linguistic and lexical competence.

The hypothesis suggested for this research is that the news items, the tourist brochures and the children's narratives should, according to the characteristics of genre and register, show significant differences in the placement of sentence topics, understood as those referential and salient entities about which information is given within the confines of the sentence (van Dijk 1981; Givón 1983, 1995).

In order to demonstrate the hypothesis proposed, after first setting out the theoretical background concerning theme (Halliday 1985, 1994) and topic (van Dijk 1981; Downing 1997; Cornish 2004; Moya (in press)), and showing the procedure that was followed in order to identify discourse and sentence topics, the specific properties of genre and register will be treated within each of the three subgenres under study (van Dijk 1988a, 1988b; Cook 1992, Myers 1994; LLuch 2003). The location of topical entities in the clause will then be carefully studied in three texts, taken as models from the sample of 60 texts. The conclusions and the final results, obtained from analysis of the texts under investigation (twenty of each type), will bring this study to an end. The texts were taken from a selection of children's narratives for under fives, tourist magazines and quality newspapers.

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## **2. Theoretical background**

### **2.1. Theme as point of departure**

The thematic approach adopted here is based on Systemic Functional Grammar where Theme is considered a predication-internal entity. This differs from the Functional Grammar model represented by Dik (1989: 135) which approaches Theme as a left dislocated element or as an initial predication external entity that expresses what the following predication is about.

Thematic structure, like information structure, is not without controversial terminology. In fact, the concept of Theme has undergone debate in the heart of the Prague School of Linguistics ever since Mathesius offered a definition which combined two aspects. Theme was identified, firstly, with the known information of the message and, secondly, with the initial constituent of the clause. This "combined" approach, in Fries' words (1981), has been followed by linguists such

as Danes (1974), Kuno (1975) or Gundel (1985), in opposition to others such as Halliday (1967), Quirk (1985) or Martin (1992), who adopt a “separatist” perspective. The latter group assume that the two properties used by Mathesius in his definition of theme express two different realities that do not always overlap in the same clause constituent. Although theme and given do on occasion coincide, both dimensions correspond to different elements: on the one hand is to be found the informative structure of the clause which distinguishes between *given* and *new* information; while on the other there is the thematic structure, also with two parts (Theme and Rheme), which responds to purely sequential criteria: the theme is located in initial position and always precedes the rheme.

However, as van Oosten (1985) and Jiménez Juliá (1986) state, these are not the only two properties that Mathesius (1939) attributed to the notion of theme. In fact, Mathesius presents a triple characterization to describe the initial constituent of the clause. Theme is the part of the sentence that expresses known information; it also represents the point of departure of the clause as message, and finally, it is described as what an utterance is about. Later on, Halliday (1967, 1985, 1994), Martin (1992), Eggins (1994) and Lock (1996) defend, albeit only partly, this viewpoint and define the initial constituent of the clause on the basis of two criteria: “the Theme is the starting-point of the message; it is what the clause is going to be about” (Halliday 1985: 39).

This controversy surrounding the conceptual characteristics of theme would not make sense if the syntax of a language were so rigid that all the initial elements of its sentences were already determined in advance. However, as Halliday states (1985, 1994), the theme is a meaningful choice that specifies the angle from which the speaker/writer projects his/her message. As a matter of fact, Halliday distinguishes between marked and unmarked themes<sup>3</sup> in order to analyse the communicative intentions that lead the speaker/writer to move a clause constituent from its typical place to the initial position of the sentence.

### **2.1.1. *The topical theme: an ideational component***

“[...] just how much of what comes first in a clause counts as Theme? More technically, how many constituents belong in the Theme?” (Eggins 1994: 275-276). Eggins’ query into which part of the sentence should be considered thematic is of interest to us here. Although in many cases the theme is simple and is realized by a sole constituent, there are also sentences that present a more complex initial structure.<sup>4</sup>

On repeated occasions throughout his many studies on thematicity, Halliday (1994: 52) affirms that the theme of a sentence extends from its beginning up to the first element that fulfils a function in transitivity and that this thematic constituent,

mainly if it is a participant, tends to be topical. When speaking of multiple themes, Halliday (1994: 54) states that only ideational themes are, in principle, referential and can be assigned a topical status. In contrast, textual and interpersonal components, structural elements (and, but, that, when...), conjunctives (anyway, besides...), continuatives (oh, well...), modal adjuncts (probably, frankly...), vocatives and finite operators which are typically located before ideational elements do not exhaust the thematic potential of the clause and do not fulfil a topical function.

The fact that Halliday (1985, 1994) attributes to the theme both structural and semantic properties creates a difficult problem. Although some academics accept the Hallidayan definition entirely, as is the case with van Dijk (1988), Martin (1992: 434-435) and Egginis (1994: 275), the correlation between the first and second aspects of the definition of Theme is by no means obvious. The problem lies in the fact that in his definition, Halliday groups under one concept (Theme) a linguistic category, which is identified exclusively by positional criteria, together with a discourse category, that which the message is about. Besides, he considers the initial constituents of the clause as topics only if they belong to the ideational component (participants, processes and circumstances). However, there is a wide range of ideational elements (adverbials, existential constructions, frontalized attributes...) that can be located in initial position without carrying out a topical function (Downing 1991; Moya and Albentosa 2001).

Thus, it is not always possible to establish an automatic relationship between the clause constituent that expresses what an utterance is about (the topic) and the first ideational constituent of the sentence (the theme). On many occasions, as the following excerpt taken from a tale shows, the theme is realized by an adverbial component that does not provide topical information and whose only function is to specify the temporal and spatial frame within which the communicative interaction takes place. This is why we agree with Downing (1991) when she suggests a dissociation between the notions of theme and topic and rejects the Hallidayan concept of topical theme:

- (1) [...] The next day (theme) CHOO CHOO (topic) was left alone on the tracks while Jim and Oley and Archibald were having a cup of coffee in the restaurant. 'Now is my chance!' said CHOO CHOO, and off she started... (Choo Choo: the Story of a Little Engine who ran away)

Although Halliday identifies Theme and Topic, I assume, following Downing (1991), Hassan and Fries (1997), Alcaraz (2000) and Gómez-González (2000), that they are two different concepts that should be defined from two distinct perspectives: theme, as a structural category whose main function is to determine the point of departure of the message, and topic, as a cognitive and contextually-

referential category, independent of special language-systematic coding (Cornish, 2004), that expresses what the message is about.

## **2.2. The Pragmatic function of topic: discourse topics and sentence topics**

As was stated in the previous section, the notion of topic adopted here for the purposes of this paper is not defined on the basis of the special treatment that is given to some clause constituents from a structural or informative perspective (Halliday 1985, 1994), and no one-to-one correspondence is established between the concept of topic, given information and initial or final position in the sentence. The function of topic is not so much a question of position as a question of relevance and aboutness. The topic is, above all, a textual category that is determined by cognitive and contextual factors and not by purely formal or structural aspects.

Following van Dijk (1977, 1981), Downing *et al.* (1998) and Moya (in press), the cognitive concept of topic is here defined from the aboutness perspective as the entity, proposition or main idea which a sentence, a stretch of discourse or a discourse in its global sense is about. The communicative purpose of the writer, the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts and the general or background knowledge that both the writer and the reader share or can infer from a specific situation, are all taken into account in the delimitation of the notion of topic as aboutness. Interpreting a text or stretch of discourse from a topical perspective is highly dependent on being able to activate our knowledge structures or schematic conceptions (Rumelhart 1980; Lakoff 1987, 1990) which serve to shape our experience of the world. As a result, I consider this concept as a pragmatic and cognitive phenomenon, which can only be established in con-textual terms.

Hockett's (1958) notion of topic has been enlarged upon to apply not only to the sentence, but also to textual sections and to the text in its global sense. In fact, depending on the unit of application (sentence or discourse), many linguists make a distinction between sentence or local topics and discourse topics (van Dijk 1977, 1981; Reinhart 1982; van Oosten 1985; Dik 1997).

Within the pragmatic and discourse perspective that has been adopted, the local topic is defined as the contextual and referential entity about which information is given at the sentence level (van Dijk 1977, 1981). The sentence topic is a referential phenomenon, which is maintained through the continuous references that are made to it (Givón 1983, 1995). In agreement with van Dijk (1977), I have considered that a passage is about a topic if this entity about which information is given is referred to persistently throughout the text.

However, the topic does not always coincide with a specific constituent of the clause structure. In many cases it expresses a main idea or a general concept that

unifies and gives coherence to the text. It is for this reason that I have adopted two basic levels of topicality, distinguishing between Sentence Topics and Discourse Topics. While the sentence topic is confined to a single clause and represents the entity or the proposition about which information is given at a local level, the discourse topic represents what a whole text or discourse is about and is defined as a cognitive schema which sequentially organizes and unifies all the local topics of the discourse under the same topical frame (van Dijk 1977, 1981; van Oosten 1985).<sup>5</sup>

Although in cognitive approaches (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983) the general meaning of a text is not always considered to be intrinsically present, but is instead assigned to it by its readers, I consider the notion of Discourse Topic useful and necessary to refer either to the global idea which the discourse or an episode within the discourse is about, or to the propositions, hierarchically organized, that constitute its semantic macrostructure (Brown and Yule 1983; van Oosten 1985; Downing *et al.* 1998).<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, discourse topics are identified on the basis of both the aboutness perspective previously referred to and in terms of the macropropositions expressed either in the news headlines, in the titles and subtitles of the tourist brochures, or in the titles of the children's narratives. On many occasions these provide a frame for the global meaning of a stretch of text, giving the analyst a basis for focussing on the textual elements that realize or carry out in some way the general thrust of a passage. However, sentence or local topics, "what shorter segments of discourse are about" (Downing 1998: 27), are identified by their being embodied or subsumed within the discourse topic and by their referential continuity in the text. In practical terms, the sentence topics of the news items, tales and tourist brochures under analysis are prototypically those referential, concrete and perceptually salient entities which, after their activation in the current discourse, (1) convey the pragmatic aboutness of the sentence in relation to the wider discourse (Reinhart 1982), (2) are at the forefront of the interlocutor's consciousness at the time of utterance, (3) are referred to in the subsequent discourse by means of proforms, repetitions, synonyms, etc. and (4) emerge linguistically as the nominal arguments of sentences.

### 2.2.1. *Towards a layering of sentence topics*

With regard to the hierarchization of sentence topics and in line with van Oosten (1985) and mainly Dik (1989), a further typology is presented in which five different subtypes of local topics are differentiated (New topics, Given topic, Subtopic, Resumed topic and Superordinate topic), in order to study the cohesive relationships that are established between the local topics of a text and the

sequentiality with which they are activated in discourse.

Although the levels of application of discourse and sentence topics are different, they are closely related to each other, as the sentence topic can encapsulate (Sinclair 1992) all the information expressed in a text or in an episode of the whole text in a sole constituent (van Oosten 1985; van Dijk 1981). Therefore, any element of the discourse topic can be focussed on and become a sentence topic without losing the internal coherence of the discourse. These local topics, which evoke at the sentence level the general idea about which information is given in a text or a stretch of text, have been called Superordinate Topics (van Oosten 1985). The news item ‘Car bomb kills Punjab minister’ is an example. The superordinate local topic (the explosion) helps to establish the internal coherence of the text and to maintain its topical continuity. It is used as a way of creating links between a specific sentence and the whole text of which it is a part:

- (2) A car bomb yesterday killed the chief minister of Punjab and 12 bodyguards. Beant Singh was leaving his office in the region’s capital, Chandigarh, when the powerful bomb exploded. All windows in the 10-storey building were shattered by the blast, which was heard several miles away. The explosion (superordinate sentence topic) prompted security agencies to declare a red alert across the troubled region [...]. (*The Daily Telegraph*, 1995)

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Independent of its position in the clause, I will use the term “introductory topic” when referring to those topical entities that are introduced for the first time in the discourse. The introductory topic is a new referent whose main function is to activate an entity that will later become a topic in the following text (Hannay, 1985). Therefore, two characteristics should be attributed to this notion: on the one hand, its presentative and new character and, on the other, its high level of persistence in the discourse (Givón 1983; Dik 1997).

Once a topical element has been introduced or activated it will be called “known topic”. A topical entity should be analysed as known, not only in those cases when it has been previously activated directly or indirectly through an introductory topic or a subtopic component (Dik, 1989), but also in those cases when it is presented by other informative elements of the clause (Moya and Albentosa 2001). These can be either verbal processes, circumstances or nominal entities which, usually placed in rhematic position, introduce future topics.

In opposition to Hajicová and Sgall (1975) and Mackenzie and Keizer (1990), who assume that a topical entity should be analysed as given or known in those cases in which it is recoverable from the general or situational knowledge that both speaker and hearer share, in the model of topic presented here the referential identity of the known topic has been restricted to the linguistic context. The fact that a topic is retrievable either through the general context or through the

situational context does not mean that it should be analysed as known if it has not been linguistically activated before. An entity such as ‘The Queen’ is recoverable from general knowledge by all English people. However, from a topical and linguistic perspective, it will be classified as *given* only if it has been linguistically introduced in the previous context.

Following Hannay (1985, 1991) and Dik (1989), the term “subtopic” will be used to define those entities associated or related to a topic previously activated in the text, as we can see in extract n.º (3). “If an entity X has been activated in the given setting, then the speaker may present an entity Y as a sub-Topic entity, if Y R X, where R is a relationship of inference” (Hannay 1985: 53).

- (3) Cyprus (New topic) is how most of us would like Britain to be. The island is clean, standards of service are incredibly high, it’s friendly and safe... Limassol (subtopic) is the biggest and most important centre of tourism on Cyprus and consequently there is plenty to do and see during the day and night... Due to its stormy past, the town (given topic) is actually split in two. Ancient Paphos (subtopic) originally grew into a major harbour [...]. (*Cyprus, more exclusive than the average winter holiday*)

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Finally, we will use the term “resumed topic” to refer to a topical entity that has been re-established through anaphoric reference after some time without mention in the discourse. The resumed topic functions both as a mechanism of continuity and discontinuity, since it produces a break in the current topical chain and at the same time establishes the continuity of a known topical entity that had already been the focus of attention in the previous text.

This topical hierarchy allows us to approach the study of the topical progression of a text from two different perspectives: from a local level, through the identification of the sentence topics, and from a general or global perspective, on the basis of the discourse topic.

### 3. Choices of theme and topic in three subgenres

Now that the theoretical framework has been outlined, the proposed typology of topic can be applied to the 20 news items, 20 tourist brochures and 20 tales in order to establish the differences in their topical and thematic progression. As the main aim of this study is to carry out a comparative analysis of the topic and thematic organization displayed by the three subgenres researched, it is considered convenient to canvass the general characteristics of genre and register in the sample of texts which form the data.



### 3.1. Database and genre selection

The selected news items belong to the informative subgenre and, following van Dijk (1988a), can be classified as “hard news”, as they refer to current events that should be made public the same day on which they occur. They are sensationalist in character and make reference to events of human interest, which usually imply rarity, suspense, conflict, antagonism, or violence. Their style is impersonal and concise. Thus, they can be considered as a prototype of pure news par excellence. The “field”<sup>7</sup> of the news items is determined by the specific activity that defines them. Although the rhetoric of the news story writer can be influenced by political or ideological motives (Fowler, 1991), his/her main aim is to inform on current issues in a hypothetically objective and impersonal way (van Dijk 1988b; Martínez Albertosa 1993; Grijelmo 1997).<sup>8</sup> The “tenor” of the news items selected for research here is determined by the sociological characteristics of the newspapers from which they have been taken. In this case, quality newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*, typically directed at the upper-middle class with a medium or high cultural level (Jucker 1992). The “mode” of the news is obviously the written language. Therefore, there is no possibility of immediate feedback between the journalist and his/her reader. These variations in field, tenor and mode will be seen in the utilization of a formal, concise and impersonal language that does not use personal comments and evaluative expressions.

In contrast to the narrative character of the news items, the main aim of the tourist brochures is not so much to inform the reader about a particular “product” as to influence directly his behaviour (van Dijk 1988a and b; Cook 1992). The promotion of a town is what defines the *field* of the tourist brochures. Their main rhetorical purpose is to arouse the reader’s interest for the place that is being advertised. The variable of *tenor* is characterized by the interpersonal relationship that is established between the sender and the reader of the tourist brochure. A travel writer uses persuasive aims to address a possible visitor, usually less familiar with the place that is being described. Although there is no possibility of direct feedback between them, the writer of the tourist brochures appeals to the potential tourist in a personalized tone in order to have an influence on his/her behaviour. As written texts, the tourist brochures share some properties of the *mode* of the news items: both subgenres are written to be published. However, in contrast to the discourse of journalism, the language of travel texts is more interpretative and evaluative. As a text type, the tourist brochure is a descriptive text in which there is a predominance of subjective language. In fact, although there is no possibility of direct interaction, the travel writer looks for a certain complicity with the tourist. This complicity is achieved by the utilization of personal and commentary expressions, stative verbs and descriptive adjectives (Lárázo Carreter 1979).

As with the news items, the tales belong to the narrative text type<sup>9</sup> and are basically characterised as a plot which develops from an initial complication towards a final resolution by passing through a range of intermediate stages (Fabb 1997: 165). As stories, their main characteristics are their condensed style and brevity (cf. Cervera 1992: 113; Sotomayor 2000: 29). All this implies that the texts are basically formed by short sentences, usually in the past, which contribute to the plot's development of the action: there are no digressions nor detailed descriptions which can interfere with the narrative tension (Cerrillo and García 2000; Lluch 2003).

Regarding the three components of register, the field of the tales can be defined as non-technical or non-specialised. Tales are then characterised by simple and clear language, presented in a way that is only slightly more developed than the everyday language of the child in order to increase lexical and linguistic competence without supposing too much difficulty (Albentosa and Moya 2001, Lluch 2003). As for the rhetorical purpose, both entertainment and instruction are the two basic aims of this genre. The tenor, which defines the relationship between the participants in the communicative exchange, is realized in short tales by the necessary presence of three participants, since between author (tale writer) and receivers (young children under five) mediates the figure of an adult (normally a parent or a teacher at a nursery school) that tells (not just reads) the story. Given the close relationship between the storyteller and the receiver/s, the language is direct and informal. The presence of evaluative and attitudinal lexis is, as in tourist brochures, a constant in tales. This evaluative and attitudinal language is frequently used by writers of traditional tales in order to instil moral values in young children. As far as mode is concerned, although the tales analysed are in written mode, their oral origin is traditionally accepted (Almodóvar 1984, Anderson 1992). The lexis and simplicity of syntactic structures are, of course, closer to that of oral discourse. The syntax is characterized by a predominance of short, simple sentences and declarative structures. The explanation for this lies in the fact that the declarative clauses generally contribute directly to the continuity of the plot of the narrative, while the introduction of imperative and interrogative modes would tend to interrupt the thread of the story.

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### 3.2. Method of analysis

I will now attempt to highlight the differences in the thematic and topical organization of three chosen texts: a tale about a little boy who is wishing to become older taken from *Stories for Under-Fives* (Corrin and Corrin, eds. 1979), a news item on terrorism taken from a quality newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph* (1995), and a tourist brochure about a Greek island taken from a tourist magazine,

*Olympic Holidays* (1995). All three were selected as models from the total sample of 60 texts. After a concise analysis the overall results obtained from the study of the correlation between theme and topic in the whole sample of texts will be displayed.

In order to demonstrate the hypothesis outlined above, the 60 texts were submitted to an empirical analysis to determine whether the local or sentence topics were typically located in thematic position in the subgenres under study or whether, in contrast to this hypothesis, they followed different tendencies.

For the purposes of this paper I have taken the Hallidayan model in which all the sentences in a text have a thematic constituent located in initial position. In the case of compound sentences, “the point to bear in mind is that there will be a thematic structure in each of the two constituent clauses” (Halliday 1994: 56-57). In fact, two thematic structures have been assigned to compound sentences: one in the main clause, another in the dependent clause.

As mentioned above, while the theme has been considered as a structural concept, fundamentally defined by its location in the sentence, the topic is essentially a contextual, cognitive and pragmatic notion. Therefore, sentence topics are identified by their being embodied within the discourse topic and by their referential continuity in the text. The local topics of the news items, tourist brochures and children’s narratives usually make reference to the main participants, to the tourist areas of interests, or to the characters that fulfil the main narrative functions (Propp 1972; Lluch 2003) respectively.<sup>10</sup>

Taking this position into account, by identifying the thematic and topical entities for the selected texts, the correspondence between the structural notion of theme and the pragmatic and cognitive concept of topic was examined firstly in the three texts, and then in the whole sample of texts.

### **3.3. Choices of theme and topic in the three chosen texts**

An overall view of the thematic progression of the tale (see appendix, text I) confirms that most of it follows a constant theme pattern (Danes 1974),<sup>11</sup> realized by the repetition of Tim/he throughout the whole story. The story begins with the introductory phrase “There was once”, a presentative there-clause which takes the main character to rhematic position. From here on, in 36 sentences *he* becomes the theme. As can be seen in the first three paragraphs, after its introduction as Rheme in the first sentence, Tim, the main character, comes to occupy the position of Theme. This pattern is altered by only two direct appeals by the narrator to the hearer with the use of the impersonal *you* which invites the child to become part of the story.

- (4) There was once a boy called Tim. He was smaller than his sister Sally and smaller than his brother Billy. He was the smallest person in the house, except the kitten and the canary, and *you can't count them*.<sup>12</sup>  
Tim was so tiny he could only just walk, he could only just talk and he only had one candle on his birthday cake. So *you can guess* how small he was [...].

In the paragraph that follows the model of constant theme is maintained, as the same theme is shared by a series of sentences. There is no doubt that constant theme is a very appropriate pattern for children's narratives, for in this way given information is reiterated so that the young child does not lose the thread of the story. Only at the end does the narrator once again appeal to the reader and break the repetitive string of themes, and in the closing paragraph produces a linear thematic progression, echoing the style of the opening of the tale:

- (5) He didn't know his right foot from his left foot. He didn't know what was red and what was blue. He couldn't say what one and one makes. He was much too small to count [...].  
*Tim* was now so big, he went to the Nursery School. *What do you think of that?*  
*He* was still much smaller than his sister Sally, and he was still much smaller than his big brother Billy. For *they* had grown too!

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Added to this is the coincidence throughout the text of the grammatical function of subject, the textual function of Theme, and the pragmatic-discourse function of topic carried out by the main character (Tim/he), which in turn coincides with given information.

As for the tourist brochure (see appendix, text II), its topical constituents are placed both in thematic and rhematic positions. There is not always a one-to-one correspondence between the topical elements and the thematic slot of the sentence. In addition to clause n.º 6 (don't miss the famous Rethymnon wine festival...), which introduces a subtopic component in final position, there are another two syntactic inversions (sentences n.º 1 and 5) that place the topic further away from the initial positions. Sentence n.º 5 (Contrasting with the bustling atmosphere of the waterfront is the old part of the town [...]) activates a subtopic closely related to the main topical entity, *Rethemnon*. The first, however, is used as a way of introducing a new topic in the text (Half way along Crete's northern coast between Heraklion and the island's western most point is the seaside town of Rethymnon). It can be seen that in this sentence the subject complement (attribute) is fronted while the subject, which realizes the topical entity, is placed at the end. In sentence n.º 4 the topic, *the harbour*, is also placed in rhematic position. Finally, in sentence n.º 7 (Luxury, style, service, quality, this beautiful hotel has it all), the predicator complement is located in the theme zone leaving the subject and the subtopic, *this hotel*, in the rhematic slot of the sentence. In this way, the introduction of the topic

(especially new and subtopic components) is postponed and the reader's attention is fully attracted to the area being advertised. This marked pattern in which theme and topic fail to coincide creates an expectation in the reader, as the topical entity about which information is given at a local level is not revealed from the beginning.

As far as the news item is concerned (see appendix, text III), the majority of the topical entities occupy the thematic position of the clause without further introduction. There are only six sentences where the theme and the topic are not realized by the same element: n.º 3 (All windows in the 10 storey building were shattered by *the blast*), n.º 7 (No one has yet claimed responsibility for *the attack*), n.º 10 (Once, a Sikh, likened *Mr Singh* to one of the gurus of his faith), n.º 11 (Many Sikhs considered *this* a blasphemy), n.º 13 (To fanatical Sikhs especially, his failure to do so meant *he* was accepting the praise) and n.º 19 ([...] of which *Mr Singh* was a member and close ally).

The news writer seems to reserve the thematic zone for the presentation of topical referents in subject position and places the information transmitted about them towards the end of the clause. By following this pattern, the local entity about which information is given is clearly identified from the beginning. By placing the topics in initial position and leaving the end of the sentence structure available for the new informational constituents, the writer of the news items avoids a change of subject in discourse and maintains the continuity of a previously activated topic. In this way, the prototypical pattern of the English clause (Given plus New information) is achieved, and the newspaper reader can understand the plot more easily.

### 3.4. Analysis of the data: final results

Having concluded the study of the three texts, this section now comments on the final results of the analysis of the whole sample of 60 texts selected for research. In the initial hypothesis it was predicted that the specific communicative purposes and contextual characteristics of the news items, children's stories and tourist brochures would reveal differences in their thematic and topical patterning.

The empirical analysis of the sample of 60 texts verifies, to some extent, the hypothesis outlined in the introduction. In fact, the topical and thematic structures of the clauses show different patterns in the three subgenres. While in the news items the theme and the topic are realized by the first element of the clause structure in 84% of the tokens analysed (in raw figures, out of 484 topics, 405 overlap with the theme), in the tourist brochures the correlation between the first clause element and the topic is lower, with a rate of 65% of the tokens identified (213 out of 330 tokens). In the tales, the percentage stays in an intermediate position, reaching the rate of 76% (out of 762 tokens, in 579 theme and topic are realized by the same clause element).

In the tourist texts, sentence topics are more frequently located in rhematic position, especially if they are participants introduced into the discourse for the first time or subtopics associated with the main topical entity. In this way, the activation of the topic is postponed and the reader's interest for the area that is being promoted is aroused in a specific way, as the entity about which information is imparted in most of the sentences of the text (a place, a venue, etc.) is not identified from the beginning.

In 10 of the 20 tourist brochures analysed, the introductory topic is positioned in the rheme of the sentence and is activated in various ways. In some cases, it is realized by adverbial elements placed in rhematic position (Arriving at the Candlelight (new topic) you find the warm and sincere type of welcome which only a family-run small Irish Hotel can supply [...]), or by means of a syntactic inversion (One of the world's best kept secrets is the beauty and wonder of Western Australia (new topic)). In other cases the new topic is introduced by imperative clauses with a persuasive function through which the writer tries to influence the potential visitor (Take time off and relax, with a leisurely cruise on the River Trent aboard the Newark Line's M. V. Sonning (new topic), the largest and certainly the most elegant passenger boat on the river). In two of the brochures, the topic is located after an adverbial group (with some of the clearest water and best protected reefs in the Caribbean, the Cayman Islands (new topic) are a Mecca for divers [...]), or after a dislocated element (Beautiful beaches, warm blue sea and sun-drenched days virtually year-round, Barbados (new topic) certainly offers all the features of a tropical island).

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In 6 of the brochures the topic is part of the theme, but is preceded either by a participial clause (Sheltered by the reef that encircles this beautiful, uncrowded island, Bermuda (new topic) is a relaxing destination [...]) or by an existential sentence which anticipates its activation in discourse (There is a place in Middle England that is waiting to be discovered. North West Leicestershire (new topic) is literally brimming over with things to do and places to go). Finally, in only four of them, the introductory topic coincides with the initial element of the first sentence (Our Little Farm (new topic) is a combined small-farm park and nature trail [...]).

In contrast, the local topics of the news items tend to overlap with the theme or are usually activated in initial position without further ado. The journalist reserves the thematic positions for the presentation of topical referents and places the information transmitted about them towards the end of the clause. Following this unmarked pattern, (s)he allows the reader to clearly understand the message, as the local entity about which information is given is activated from the beginning.

Unlike the tourist brochures, only in 1 of the 20 news items is the introductory topic activated in the rhematic span of the clause (Police in Paris yesterday arrested Green peace protesters (new topic) who were trying to deliver to President Chirac a petition bearing more than three million signatures of people objecting to France's resumption of nuclear tests). In line with Givón's (1983a) viewpoint, the rest of the introductory topics, typically realized by indefinite expressions or proper names, coincide with thematic constituents (A British student (new topic) kidnapped in Colombia seven weeks ago has been found dead on the outskirts of Bogotá).

This difference between news items and tourist brochures is mainly due to the communicative purposes and the peculiarities of genre and register of the two text typologies. The persuasive function of the tourist brochure leads the writer to use linguistic strategies through which he tries to influence his reader's behaviour in order to obtain a positive response from him/her. It is, however, the informative function that is the fundamental factor which determines the organization of the news items selected for research.

Although the degree of correspondence between theme and topic is somewhat lower than in the news items, the topical entities of the tales, especially the known and resumed topics, are also usually placed in the thematic span of the clause. By following this strategy, the writer of tales tries to make it easier for the young child to follow the plot of the story, as the entities about which information is given are activated from the beginning of the clause, usually in subject position. However, the new topics that introduce the main characters in the first paragraphs of the story by means of presentative constructions are typically placed towards the rheme of the sentence (Once upon a time there was *a little engine...*). In addition, the utilization of adjuncts of time (one day, the next day, in the meantime...) in initial position often forces the new topic into the rhematic span, and decreases slightly the average of sentence topics that are located in thematic position.

Of the twenty randomly selected tales, only in 6 of them are new topics introduced in the thematic span of the sentence. These local topics refer to the secondary characters in the story, i.e. those that do not fulfil a main function in the narrative. While the topics that refer to the main characters in tales, i.e. the ones that fulfil a key role in the solution of the narrative tension, are prototypically introduced in the rhematic zone of the beginning paragraphs (Not far away was a fox (new topic) who lived in a hut of ice), the local topics that refer to the secondary characters appear after the introductory paragraphs. They are linguistically introduced within the rhematic slot of the sentence. Once activated, the subsequent sentences take them as topics placed in thematic position.

#### 4. Conclusions

It can be concluded that there seems to be a strong association in tales between the point of departure of the clause as message and the element which conveys the aboutness property, the topic. The correlation between theme and topic is also found in the news items, and shows even higher degrees of incidence. The informative function of the news items and the entertainment and didactic functions of the tales determine their thematic and topical patterning, perfectly structured and organized in order to help the reader's or the listener's understanding.

However, in the tourist brochures there seems to be a tendency to move the new topical entities and the subtopic components further away from the thematic slot of the sentence. As a consequence, the introduction of the topic is postponed and the reader's expectations of the area that is being promoted increase. Activating the topic in rhematic position allows the travel writer to introduce a large quantity of information in the initial part of the sentence, so that the reader takes an interest in the place that is being advertised.

It can also be stated that whilst there is a strong tendency to use the constant theme pattern in children's narratives, this does not mean that it is the only pattern available. Although the tale that has been analysed in detail basically presents a continuous thematic schema throughout, the model of lineal thematic progression (Danes, 1974) has also been identified (sentences n.º 1 and 11) as it has in some passages in all the tales under investigation. The constant theme patterning, if employed in many clauses, runs the risk of making the text somewhat static and tedious for the listener. Given the length of the tales (an average of three pages) and the age of the audience (under fives), the repeated use of this pattern achieves its objective of making the stories easy to follow.

The communicative intentions of the journalist, the advertiser and the writer of the tales clearly play a decisive role in the internal organization and the topical progression of the three subgenres selected for investigation. The evidence supports the initial hypothesis.

#### Appendix

##### TEXT I:

##### A GROWING TALE

(1) *THERE was once a boy called Tim.*

*He was smaller than his sister Sally and smaller than his brother Billy. He was the smallest person in the house, except the kitten and the canary, and you can't count them.*



(2) *Tim was so tiny he could only just walk, he could only just talk and he only had one candle on his birthday cake. So you can guess how small he was.*

(3) *He couldn't wash himself, he couldn't dress himself and he couldn't blow his own nose. His mother had to do almost everything for him. She gave him a tiny chair to sit on, and a tiny bed to sleep in every night.*

(4) *He didn't know his right foot from his left foot. He didn't know what was red and what was blue. He couldn't say what one and one makes. He was much too small to count.*

(5) *He was very good at shouting, at banging and at bawling. He was very good at throwing, at grabbing and at crawling. Tim was so very tiny he could walk beneath the table and never bump his head!*

(6) *But he wished and he wished he could see over fences, and turn door handles all by himself.*

(7) *He grew and he grew until he was two, he grew and he grew until he was three, and he grew and he grew and then he was FOUR. And when he was four, Tim was a Great Big Boy. He had four candles on his birthday cake.*

(8) *He could see over fences and what was on tables. He could now turn door handles, all by himself.*

(9) *He was MUCH too big for his tiny little chair, he was much too big for his tiny little cot, so he slept in a real bed of his very own. He could wash himself, dress himself and blow his nose on a great big pocket handkerchief. He put his left shoe on his left foot, his right shoe on his right foot, and he tied both the laces in a very tidy bow. He knew what was red and what was blue, so he didn't bother bawling and he didn't bother crawling. He was much too big for that!*

(10) *Tim was now so BIG he went to the Nursery School. What do you think of that?*

(11) *He was still much smaller than his sister Sally, and he was still much smaller than his big brother Billy. For they had grown too!*

N. Montgomerie (In S. and S. Corrin eds. (1974) *Stories for Under-Fives*. Puffin Books)

## TEXT II:

### Crete R E T H Y M N O N

(1) *Half way along Crete's northern coast between Heraklion and the island's western most point is the seaside town of Rethymnon.*

(2) *The massive stretch of sand is a pretty welcoming sight: a great place to 'sunbake', build sand castles or take part in the water sports on offer: (3) The promenade which leads from the beach to the centre of town provides a great choice of bars and tavernas.*

(4) *A favourite spot after dark is the picturesque and colourful old harbour with some very good fish tavernas. (5) Contrasting with the bustling atmosphere of the waterfront is the old part of town where narrow alleyways and beautiful old houses give evidence of past Venetian and Turkish influences. (6) For lots of Greek music, dancing and drinking don't miss the famous Rethymnon wine festival which takes place every year in mid July.*

CRECOTEL  
CRETA PALACE  
THE LUXE

*(7) Luxury, style, service, quality, this beautiful hotel has it all. (8) The Grecotel Creta Palace is located, in its own private grounds, on a beautiful sandy beach 3\_ miles outside the town of Rethymmon. (9) This large complex offers elegant accommodation in the main building and bungalow village types. (10) It boasts many amenities which will keep all the family occupied by day and by night. (11) The Grecotel Creta Palace is very popular and not just with Olympic's clients SO BOOK EARLY! (12) It will also accommodate clients in wheelchairs.*  
*Olympic Holidays, 1995.*

**TEXT III:**

**Car bomb kills Punjab minister**

By Trevor Fishlock and Rahul Bedi in New Delhi

*(1) A car bomb yesterday killed the chief minister of Punjab and 12 bodyguards. (2) Beant Singh was leaving his office in the region's capital, Chandigarh, when the powerful bomb exploded. (3) All windows in the 10-storey building were shattered by the blast, (4) which was heard several miles away. (5) The explosion prompted security agencies to declare a red alert across the troubled region and to seal off the Indian capital, New Delhi. (6) Initial reports indicate that the bomb, believed to be plastic explosive, was placed inside Mr Singh's car. (7) No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack but (8) many believe that Mr Singh may have paid the price for his own vanity. (9) Mr Singh was lauded at a meeting 10 days ago by two ministers in the Punjab government. (10) Once, a Sikh, likened Mr Singh to one of the gurus of his faith. (11) Many Sikhs considered this a blasphemy. (12) Mr Singh made the mistake of not rejecting this flattery. (13) To fanatical Sikhs especially, his failure to do so meant he was accepting the praise. (14) Suspicion for the attack has fallen on the small band of Sikh separatists. (15) It may be that the fanatics, enraged by Mr Singh's vanity, planted the bomb - perhaps with inside help. (16) The assassination is a set back to Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government, (17) which claimed to have eliminated Sikh militancy nearly three years ago. (18) It is also a setback to Mr Rao's ruling Congress party, (19) of which Mr Singh was a member and close ally. (20) Mr Singh's election as chief minister in February 1992 virtually ended 12 years of Sikh militancy, (21) during which more than 17,000 people were killed.*  
*The Daily Telegraph, 01.09.1995.*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. This study broadens the scope of a previous one published in *Text* 2001, in which only two of the three subgenres under research were analysed. The context of that paper was my doctoral thesis on topic introduction and topic continuity in news items and tourist brochures, directed by Professor Angela Downing. I am indebted to her for her accessibility and insightful comments on that research. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Christine Harris for her invaluable help and wise advice on the final writing of this study.

<sup>2</sup>. As a great macrogenre current Anglo-Saxon journalism can be classified into two general subgenres: stories and comments (Dijk, 1988a). Martínez Albertos affirms that the first and immediate objective of journalistic information is to give news; in second place it is the subjective comment of the facts that have become news (1993: 44). Fairclough (1995: 72) expands the classification offered by Dijk and also distinguishes a third journalistic subgenre, 'background features', in order to make reference to the so called 'interpretive articles' that are located in an intermediate line between the purely informative style and the editorial or evaluative style. Although the basic distinction between stories and comments is widely accepted, the classification of journalistic genres is a question which can be considered as neither solved nor exhausted. As van Dijk (1988a: 125) suggests there is a gradual transition between the various journalistic genres. Subgenres are not rigid frames with clear boundaries between them.

<sup>3</sup>. Halliday (1985, 1994) distinguishes marked and unmarked themes. A theme is unmarked when it coincides with the subject of a declarative clause, the finite form or the wh-element of an interrogative modal clause or the predicate of an imperative structure. However, the speaker/writer does not always use a prototypical pattern; on many

occasions the realization of his/her message requires a marked option with some specific informative connotations.

<sup>4</sup>. Halliday admits the possibility that within the thematic part of the sentence three different types of theme can be included: ideational, interpersonal and textual themes.

<sup>5</sup>. The term frame is used here as an embracing word that unifies under the same umbrella all the local topics about which information is given in discourse (van Oosten 1985). Thus in the context of this study, its meaning is not related to frame theory.

<sup>6</sup>. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) define the concept of macrostructure as the hierarchical representation of the different macropropositions that determine the content of a text. The highest proposition represents the global discourse topic, while other propositions of lower level represent what a stretch of text or a part of the whole text is about.

<sup>7</sup>. The variables of field, tenor and mode determine the register of a particular genre, that is, the variations the language suffers in a specific social situation of communication (Halliday and Hasan, 1985/1989: 12). A genre is, in turn, defined by a schematic macrostructure, considered as a cognitive model that facilitates its identification, understanding and interpretation. Whereas the genre is typically associated with the context of culture, the register is related to the situational context in which the communicative interaction is developed.

<sup>8</sup>. Although many Spanish scholars agree that journalism must be essentially objective (Martínez Albertos 1993; López García 1996), news items are products which are logically mediated by ideological interests. In fact, with the term 'objectivity', Martínez Albertos (1993: 43) makes reference to the

journalist's duty of truthfulness and intellectual honesty.

<sup>9</sup>. When describing the news schema, van Dijk (1988a,b) distinguishes two basic parts: (1) the summary, formed by the headline and the lead, where the most relevant information is given and the five questions (who, what, when, where and why) are answered in a concise way and (2) the body of the news story, where the main events referred to in the lead are developed in a decreasing order of informative importance. The structure of the news item is, therefore, prototypical of the narrative style, characterized by a chronological sequence of events. Also narrative in form, although with a less complex structural arrangement, are the tales, defined by a very simple presentation of the situation and the main characters, a very basic account of the development of the action and a brief account of the final outcome of the story. As far as the schematic structure of tourist brochures is concerned, it should be stated that they usually follow a clearly predictable organization: once the name of the place being promoted is introduced, the different tourist areas of interest that can be visited are referred to. Finally, information about timetables, fares and telephone numbers frequently close the brochure.

<sup>10</sup>. The main characters that fulfil Propp's functions in tales are the following: the

hero, who either suffers an aggression or lacks something, the aggressor, the donor of the magic object, who will help the hero to achieve his goal and overcome all the obstacles, the princess (usually the final prize of the hero after his triumph), the king or any other powerful man, and the false hero. (Cerrillo *et al.* 2000).

<sup>11</sup>. Danes proposes three basic patterns of Thematic Progression: 1) Simple Linear TP or TP with Linear Thematization of Rhemes. In this, the Rheme of a clause becomes the thematic constituent of the following clause, lending the text a dynamic character. 2) TP with a continuous (constant) Theme. In this model the same Theme is shared by a series of clauses, each of which adds new information about it. 3) Derived Theme TP. This is a broad spectrum Theme, which Danes calls hypertheme, and which gives rise to the themes of the clauses which follow to form a chain of subthemes deriving from the general Theme.

<sup>12</sup>. In this example the pronoun *you* does not fulfil a function in topicality. It is just used by the writer to emphasize the interactive nature of tales. By means of this pronoun the narrator addresses the young child directly as if s/he was also a character in the story.

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