The introduction of topics in two discourse genres

Arsenio Jesús Moya Guijarro

To cite this article: Arsenio Jesús Moya Guijarro (2005) The introduction of topics in two discourse genres, WORD, 56:2, 201-222, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.2005.12062306

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.2005.12062306

Published online: 23 Apr 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 16

View related articles
The introduction of topics in two discourse genres

Abstract. This paper aims to study the sentence topic introductory strategies (van Dijk 1981a and b; Givón 1995; Dik 1989; and Downing 1991, 1998) in news items and tourist brochures. The original hypothesis for this research proposes that, because of the characteristics of genre and register of the two subgenres analysed, news items and tourist brochures will show significant differences in the linguistic resources used for topic introduction by the journalist and the brochure writer (Hengeveld 1997, Gómez-González 2000, Moya and Albentosa 2001).

The empirical analysis carried out reveals that introductory topics are activated in the two subgenres by significantly different linguistic resources. The persuasive function of the tourist brochure frequently leads the writer to use linguistic strategies by which s/he moves the new topical entities away from the thematic slot of the sentence. However, in the news items the local topics frequently initiate the sentence without further introduction. Following this pattern, the journalist facilitates the understanding of the message as the sentence topic is clearly activated from the outset.

1. Introduction. This article intends to show how sentence topics—those referential and salient constituents about which information is given within the confines of the sentence (van Dijk 1981a and b, Givón 1995)—are introduced in two subgenres: news items and tourist brochures. Basing the general hypothesis on the characteristics of genre and register of the two text types, this research proposes that the journalist and the writer of the tourist brochure should use different lexicogrammatical and syntactic resources to activate sentence topics (Dik 1989, Givón 1995, Hengeveld 1997, Gómez-González 2000).

In fact, while the main aim of the journalist is to inform the greatest number of readers about all issues of a current and social event in a supposedly objective way, the main goal of the brochure (although it is, to a certain extent, also informative in nature) is to promote the tourist possibilities of an area being advertised. As far as the register of the sample of texts is concerned, although all of them are written specifically for publication, 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.
In order to demonstrate the proposed hypothesis, the concept of topic is initially defined from the aboutness perspective as a semantic-pragmatic notion. Secondly, following van Dijk (1981a), Downing (1997) and Moya and Albentosa (2001) among others, two basic levels of topicality are proposed: discourse topics and sentence topics. After showing the procedure that was followed in order to identify discourse and sentence topics, a further hierarchical organization of sentence topics is made according to van Oosten (1985) and Dik (1989). Then the concepts of new topic, known topic, subtopic, resumed topic and superordinate topic are dealt with. This is followed by a brief comment on the specific properties of genre and register of the two subgenres analysed (van Dijk 1988a and b; Bell and Garret 1998; Cook 1992; Myers 1994). Finally, after referring to the method of analysis, the linguistic strategies used to introduce topics are studied in thirty tourist brochures and thirty news items, taken from a selection of tourist magazines, independent brochures and quality newspapers.

2. Theoretical background.

2.1. The pragmatic function of topic: discourse topics and sentence topics. The notion of topic adopted in this paper is one that has been dissociated from the Hallidayan concept of theme (Halliday 1967, 1985/1994). The topic is, above all, a textual category that is determined by the context and not by purely formal aspects. A one-to-one correspondence will not be established between the concept of topic and its position at the beginning or the end of the sentence. The pragmatic function of topic is not so much a question of position or prominence as a question of relevance and aboutness.

The fact that Halliday (1985/1994) attributes to the theme both structural (the starting point of the message) and semantic properties (what the clause is going to be about) creates a problem of difficult solution. On repeated occasions throughout his many works on thematicity, Halliday (1994:52) affirms that the theme extends from the beginning of a sentence up to the first element that fulfills a function of transitivity and that this thematic constituent, mainly if it is a participant, tends to be topical. Although some academics accept the Hallidayan definition entirely, as is the case with van Dijk (1988a and b), Martin (1992: 434–435), or Eggins (1994:275), the correlation between the clause constituent that expresses what an utterance is about (the topic) and the first ideational constituent of the sentence (the theme) is by no means obvious. Halliday considers the initial constituents of the clause as top-
ics only if they belong to the ideational component. However, there is a 
wide range of ideational elements (adverbials, existential constructions, 
frontalized attributes, etc.) which can be located in initial position with-
out carrying out a topical function (Downing 1991). On many occa-
sions, 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.

Thus, 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: 
the theme, by its location in the clause, as a structural category whose 
main function is to determine the point of departure of the message, and 
the topic, for its informative value, as a pragmatic and cognitive cate-
gory that expresses what the message is about.

The cognitive-pragmatic concept of topic is defined from the about-
ness perspective as the entity, proposition, or main idea which a sen-
tence, a stretch of discourse, or a discourse in its global sense is about 
(van Dijk 1977, 1981a and b; van Oosten 1985). 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 concep-
tions (Rumelhart 1980; Lakoff 1987, 1990) which serve to shape our 
experience of the world. As a result, I have considered this concept as a 
pragmatic phenomenon, which can be established only in con-
textual terms (Moya and Albentosa, 2001).

Hockett's (1959) 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 or global topics (Schank 1977; van Dijk 1977, 
1981a; Reinhart 1982; van Oosten 1985).

Within the pragmatic and discourse perspective that has been 
adopted, the local topic is defined as the referential entity about which 
information is given at the sentence level. The sentence topic is a refer-
ential phenomenon, which is maintained through the continuous refer-
ences that are made to it (Givón 1983a and b, 1995). In agreement with 
van Dijk (1977), I have considered that a passage contains 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. While the sentence topic is confined to a single clause and represents the entity or the proposition about which information is given at 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 sentence topics of the discourse under the same topical frame (van Dijk 1977, 1981a and b; Moya and Albentosa 2001).

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 have considered the notion of Discourse Topic useful 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 (van Dijk 1979; van Oosten 1985). Therefore, discourse topics were identified on the basis of the aboutness perspective referred to previously and in terms of the macropropositions expressed either in news headlines or in the titles and subtitles of tourist brochures. On many occasions these provide a frame for the global meaning of a stretch of text, giving the analyst a basis for focussing in 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), were 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 and tourist brochures under analysis are prototypically those referential, concrete and perceptually salient entities (Chafe 1994; Meinunger 2000) which, after their activation, tend to (1) refer to the previous anaphoric discourse by the use of pronouns and other proforms; (2) maintain their continuity in the following cataphoric discourse by means of repetitions, synonyms, hyponyms etc.; and finally, (3) emerge linguistically as the nominal arguments of sentences.

2.2. Towards a hierarchization of sentence topics. With regard to the hierarchical organization 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, in order
to study the cohesive relationships that are established between the sentence topics of a text and the sequence in 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 1981a). 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 tourist brochure "Stanford Hall" provides an example. The superordinate local topic (all) 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:

(1) Stanford Hall built in 1697 for Sir Roger Cave is still home to his descendants and is one of the most exquisite examples of architecture of the period. The lofty ballroom grandly resplendent in pink and gold with its painted ceiling and renowned Stuart collection of portraits is surrounded by more intimate family rooms. The cosy panelled library is lined with over five thousand books. The peaceful drawing rooms with their lovely portraits and elegant furniture overlook the park . . .

All (superordinate topic) engenders the atmosphere of one's ideal of an English country house . . . (Stanford Hall. Lutterworth, Leicestershire).

In line with Dik (1989) and Hannay (1985), I will use the term "new topic", to make reference to those topical entities that are introduced for the first time in the discourse. The function of introductory topics is to activate an entity which will later become a potential topic (Hannay 1985a). Therefore, two characteristics should be attributed to this notion: on the one hand, its presentational and new character and, on the other, its high level of persistence in the subsequent text (Givón 1983a; Hengeveld 1997).

In the topical approach that has been here adopted, the new referents introduced by indefinite expressions, existential constructions, etc. are not assigned a topical function unless they are preserved in the linguis-
tic context by means of known topics, subtopics, resumed topics or superordinate topics. A boundary has been drawn between those referential entities which persist following their introduction and those which have a zero persistence rate or a break in continuity after their first activation in the discourse. Only the former have been analysed as topics.

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 when it is presented by other informative elements of the clause. As can be seen in the following fragment, these can be either verbal processes, circumstances, or nominal entities which, usually placed in rhematic position, introduce future potential topics. The notion of known topic is therefore defined as that entity previously introduced in the text by means of another topic, a subtopic or other informative elements already activated in the linguistic context (his wife—Patricia Willacy):

(2) A lone fisherman whose leg was severed in an accident at sea summoned help by calling his wife on his mobile telephone. Tom Willacy, 55, was fishing from his 38ft shrimper in the Solway firth when the boat's winch cable cut through his right leg . . . Patricia Willacy (known topic) kept him on the line while she ran to a neighbour's house to call for help . . . (Fisherman phones home for help after leg is severed. The Times. August 29, 1995).

Following Hannay (1985a) and Dik (1989), the term subtopic will be used to define those entities associated with or related to a topic previously activated in the text: "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 1985b:53). Prince (1981:236) and Hannay (1985a) consider that subtopics should be described on the basis of their dual nature both as new entities, due to their innovative character, and as given entities, since they are contextually bound and can be inferred, albeit indirectly, from other previously evoked entities. It is for this reason that, although they cannot be analysed strictly as known entities, as they are not identical to other constituents that have already been activated in the linguistic or situational context, their capacity for inference and their contextual dependence have led me to consider the referents they represent as given rather than new.
Finally, I will use the term resumed topic to describe 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. However, this does not imply that it is assumed that all sentences in a text contain a topical constituent or that, as Hockett (1959) suggests, they can be segmented in a binary structure made of topic and comment. There are introductory sentences in a stretch of discourse which cannot be assigned a topical status, or even sentences which only contain focal information (Siewierska 1991). The local topic is not always realized by a specific clause constituent; it sometimes remains implicit.

In fact, the analysis carried out proves that the number of new topics identified in the 30 tourist brochures (32) is smaller than the total number of introductory topics encountered in the 30 news items (72), even though the typology of texts chosen were similar in length (10,145 words in the journalistic texts against 9,873 words in the tourist texts). This is partly because in the tourist brochures the sentence topics are not always realized by a specific clause constituent. Sometimes they are not made explicit, either for purely rhetorical and persuasive reasons, for questions of linguistic economy or for their possible inference from the iconic elements drawn in the brochure. Thus, in tourist brochures it is not uncommon to find sentences which lack a local topic. In the following paragraph, for instance, all the information is focal and makes reference to the main topical entity about which information is given, Castleton. The propositional content of the sentence implies that Castleton is unique for its tourist features that can be seen both in the open air and underground:

(3) ... It would be hard to imagine anywhere with such an array of natural and historical features both above and below ground...

(Castleton)

The smaller presence of new topics in the tourist brochures than in the news items is also due to the fact that in the former only one intro-
ductory topic is usually activated, in order to focus the readers' attention on the main tourist area which is being promoted. Once the advertising texts have been analyzed, it can be stated than 23 out of 30 brochures are centred on a sole topical chain, defined on the basis of the association that is made between the new topic and its subtopics. Only 7 out of 30 tourist texts give information about more than one topical entity. In the news items, however, several new topics are activated in each to inform the reader about the most relevant aspects of a current event, generally of catastrophic and criminal character.

3. The introduction of topics in news items and tourist brochures. Having outlined the theoretical framework, we can now apply the typology of topic proposed to the sixty news items and tourist brochures in order to determine the linguistic resources that are available for the journalist and the writer of the brochure to introduce sentence topics in discourse. As the main aim of this study is to carry out a comparative analysis of the linguistic strategies used to activate new topics in the two subgenres, the general characteristics of genre and register of the sample of texts contained in the data will be briefly outlined first.

3.1. Database and genre selection. The thirty news items analysed belong to the informative subgenre and, following van Dijk (1988a), can be classified as "hard news", as they are current events that should be published the same day on which they occur. The selected news items have a sensationalistic character and make reference to events of human interest which usually imply rarity, suspense, conflict, antagonism and violence. Their style is impersonal and concise. Thus, they can be considered, together with brief news, as the prototype of pure news par excellence.

The "field" of the news items is determined by the specific activity that defines them. Although the rhetorical purpose of the journalist when writing news items for a newspaper can be influenced by political, economic, social 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 Albertos 1993; Grijelmo 1997). The transmission of this type of information requires a narrative style characterized, as Downing points out, "by temporal sequencing of events, dynamic verbs, usually past tense and characters who perform actions" (1998:25).

The "tenor" of the news items selected for research is determined by the sociological nature of the newspapers from which they have been taken. The sample of texts have been chosen at random from newspa-
pers such as *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, typically directed at the upper-middle class with a medium or high level of culture (Jucker 1992).

Finally, the "mode" of the news is, evidently, the written language. The written product tends to be independent of the immediate context in which the event being narrated takes place. Therefore, there is no possibility of feedback between the journalist and his/her reader. The vocabulary is elaborate, presenting a high level of lexical density, and the syntax is normally characterized by its grammatical simplicity. These variations in field, tenor and mode will be shown in the use of a formal, concise and impersonal language which rejects personal comments and evaluative expressions.

As opposed 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 city, a museum etc. is what defines the "field" of the tourist brochures. Their main rhetorical purpose is to attract the readers' attention so that they take an interest in the place that is being advertised. With the help of iconic elements, of psychological and social mechanisms and by the use of convincing and descriptive techniques, the professional tries to persuade the reader to accept fully the information that is shown in the brochure.

The variable of "tenor" is characterized by the interpersonal relationship that is established between the producer and the reader of a tourist brochure. An expert in a geographical area uses persuasive aims to address a possible visitor, who is usually less familiarised with the place that is being described. Although there is no possibility of feedback between them, the advertiser appeals to the potential tourist in a familiar tone in order to influence his/her behaviour.

As a written text, the tourist brochure shares 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 discourse of advertising 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 any direct interaction, the advertiser looks for a certain complicity with the tourist. This complicity is achieved by the use of personal expressions, stative verbs and descriptive adjectives (Lárazo Carreter 1979).

3.2. Methodology. In order to demonstrate the hypothesis outlined in the introduction, the 30 news items and 30 tourist brochures were submitted to an empirical analysis. Firstly the local topics were identified
in the sample of texts and then their linguistic realization was analysed. In this way, it could be determined whether the journalist and the writer of the brochure use the same linguistic strategies to introduce sentence topics in both text types or whether, in opposition to this hypothesis, they followed different tendencies.

As has already been stated, the topic is essentially a contextual notion, conditioned by discursive, cognitive and pragmatic criteria which go beyond the fixed and objective inflexibility of the syntactic organization of the English clause. Taking this view into account, discourse topics were identified on the basis of the aboutness perspective referred to previously and in terms of the macropropositions expressed either in the headlines of the news items or in the titles and subtitles of the tourist brochures. Sentence or local topics, however, were identified by their inclusion within the discourse topic and by their referential continuity in the text. The topical entities of the 60 news items and tourist brochures each consistently refer either to aspects of the main characters of the news items or to the tourist areas of interest described in the brochures.

Another point to be borne in mind is that topic, as with other pragmatic concepts, is realized by lexical-grammatical expressions. As Coultard (1987) suggests, the wording of a text provides access to its meaning and content. In this sense, when a clause constituent or a group is said to be the topic of a sentence, what is really meant is that this clausal element is either the formal realization of the topic in the clause structure or its lexical-grammatical manifestation in discourse (van Dijk 1977:179).

The main aim of this research was to identify the lexical and grammatical strategies (inversions, passives, indefinite expressions etc.) that were available to the journalist and the brochure writer for activating sentence topics. Once the new topics of the texts sample were identified, determination was made regarding their linguistic realizations by following the functional approach established by Givón (1983, 1995) and Downing and Locke (1992/2002). In this respect, the number of tokens concerning the lexico-grammatical and syntactic manifestations of new topics turned out to be larger than the number of the novel topics encountered within the 60 texts. Instances were found where a new topic was activated by means of two linguistic resources, a passive clause and an indefinite expression, for example (see extract no 13). In fact, the 32 and 72 introductory topics of the tourist brochures and news items are linguistically activated by 53 and 97 lexico-grammatical and syntactic realizations respectively.
3.3. Analysis of the data and examples.

3.3.1. Topic Introduction in tourist brochures. The main linguistic resources used for introducing the topic in the tourist brochures, as Graph 1 shows, were proper nouns and participle clauses. Thirty-two of 53 tokens have been found in the advertising texts (61.8% of the cases analysed), where the topic is introduced by utilizing a proper noun to draw the reader’s attention to the area being promoted; primarily with persuasive aims:

(4) Welcome to the Square Town centre, Tallaght, (introductory topic), Ireland’s award winning and largest Shopping Centre. Since its launch in October 1990, The Square has proved a favourite destination for people of all ages . . . (The Square Town centre, Tallaght).

(5) With some of the clearest water and best protected reefs in the Caribbean, the Cayman Islands (introductory topic) are a Mecca for divers and lovers of velvet smooth, white sand beaches. Grand Cayman’s bustling capital George Town—named after George V—has plenty of fine shops and restaurants, with beautiful Seven Mile Beach and West Bay the focus for many visitors (Cayman Islands).

In both extracts, the introductory topics, placed towards rheme position in the sentence, are proper nouns which refer to specific entities that are therefore, according to Downing and Locke (2002), definite. In fact, Givón (1993) defines them as a subcategory of defining nouns which are used for introducing referents that are currently inactive in the discourse but which have overall importance from the perspective of topic.

What are less frequent, no more than 14.7% of the total of linguistic resources used for introducing topics in advertising discourse (in raw figures, 8 out of 53 tokens), are sentences with present and past participle clauses. Jordan (1984) assumes that their main function is to add more information about a topical entity within the limits of the sentence structure. One way of expanding on information about a topic is to refer to it with a participial clause before activating it linguistically. In this way, as can be seen in the following examples, the informative element about which information will be given in the main clause is brought forward:

(6) Tucked away on the island’s southern coast, Plakias is over two hours’ drive from Heraklion (Crete. Plakias).
Both the present and the past participial clause refer to new topics: "Plakias" and "Castleton", about each of which more information is introduced in the subsequent discourse. In general terms these clauses usually denote a lower level of importance of information than the main clause, which is where the topic of the majority of the brochure's sentences is materialised linguistically. These structures, which do not contain an explicit subject, do share the same subject as the verb of the main clause (Quirk et alia 1985).

Although infrequently occurring in the text samples, syntactic resources such as inversions, imperative clauses, there-constructions and dislocations are also available to the writer of brochures for topical introduction. In three of the thirty brochures selected at random for this research, sentence inversions were used to activate the introductory topics. These three belong to the circumstantial type of relational clauses (Downing and Locke 2002:133) and are realised by a copulative verb. These clauses tend to be reversible and carry out a presentative function in the discourse, similar to that which characterises existential clauses with "there", which I shall refer to again shortly. In the same way as when participial clauses are placed in a position before the topic, inver-
sions lend suspense to the text and draw the reader’s attention to the tourist area being advertised. Their main function is to produce a greater prosodic weighting of the message by introducing the topic constituent in end position:

(8) One of the world’s best kept secrets is the beauty and wonder of Western Australia (Western Australia)

The use of the imperative structure (5 out of 53 tokens have been identified in the sample of texts), given its commanding and restrictive nature, is not always seen as appropriate in English, for its direct illocutionary force is to express an order or a mandate. However, as Downing and Locke state: “although the basic illocutionary act associated with imperative clauses is commonly held to be that of expressing a command, the imperative is used more frequently in English for less mandatory purposes” (1992:198). In fact, on many occasions, its discursive function is to express a polite request which generally benefits the recipient of the message. In the tourist brochures, for example, this modal structure is used to invite the reader to visit a particular area or geographical place of interest. In the extract which follows it can be seen how the imperative clause takes the reader’s interests into account and activates the introductory topic into the discourse, placing it at the end of the clause where it receives special prosodic prominence:

(9) Take time and relax, with a leisurely cruise on the River Trent aboard the Newark Line’s M.V. Sonning, the largest and certainly the most elegant passenger boat on the river (The Newark Line River Cruises)

Other linguistic resources which English provides the writer to introduce new topics are there-constructions and dislocations. The former, which represent 5.9% of the cases analysed (only 3 examples have been found in the 30 texts), are used simply to activate a referent in the discourse rather than to give information about it (Lambrecht 1994). The presentative constructions do not express that which the sentence, the extract or even the whole passage is about. As extract No. 10 demonstrates, they are usually realised by entities which are not activated or not accessible, and are normally preceded by indefinite articles. They simply introduce a participant or make its existence known (Kuno 1972a; Firbas 1974; Reinhart 1982), changing it into a potential candidate for topic in the subsequent discourse:7
There is a place in Middle England that is waiting to be discovered. North west Leicestershire is literally brimming over with things to do and places to go (Welcome to North West Leicestershire).

Finally, two cases have been found in the 30 tourist brochures in which the topic forms part of a sentence dislocation—a left dislocation—whose typical function is to refer to an activated topical element or to establish a contrast between two known topics (Prince 1992; Givón 1983a, 1993; Lambrecht 1994). On the other hand, linguists such as Keenan and Schieffelin (1976:22) have demonstrated in their conversational discourse analysis that left dislocation is used to introduce new topical referents. Prince (1992) also asserts that this structure can activate a new topic into the discourse—an entity which is neither prominent nor focal, and which is realised by a noun group with the syntactic function of subject, direct and indirect object in its corresponding unmarked sentence.

The dislocated elements are rarely used to activate a topical referent, as can be seen in the following example. Rather they point to the most relevant and new information of the message, that particular area of promotion which the writer wishes to draw the reader's attention to. The topic "Barbados" coincides with the subject and is placed between the thematic element (Beautiful beaches, warm blue sea and sun-drenched days ...) and its corresponding nominal co-referent (all the features). This permits the writer to use the most prominent sentence positions, the beginning and the end, to place the information he considers most important for the reader to notice:

Beautiful beaches, warm blue sea and sun-drenched days virtually year-round, Barbados (new topic) certainly offers all the features of a tropical island (Barbados).

3.3.2. Topic Introduction in news items. As far as the news items are concerned, the journalist has recourse to several linguistic strategies for introducing new topics. As the previous graph shows, of all the linguistic strategies used by the advertiser for activating the introductory topical referents in the brochures, only the proper nouns, which represent 18.8% of the total (in raw figures, 18 out of 97 cases), are used by the reporter to present the local topics of the sentences. Indefinite expressions and passive structures are also basic mechanisms, albeit not the only ones, used in journalistic discourse for topic introduction.
While introductory topics realised by proper nouns predominate in the brochures, in the news items the new topic is normally introduced by indefinite expressions, found in 50% of the total of linguistic realisations analysed (48 out of 97 tokens). The indefinite constituents are discontinuous, in the sense that they normally introduce a new topic into the discourse and maintain a high level of topical persistence, especially if they carry out the syntactic function of subject (Givón, 1983a).

In the following extract, for example, the local topic constituent is introduced by means of an indefinite expression: "a former British Council worker", serving to initially activate the main entity about which information is given in the majority of the sentences of the news item. Once activated, the topical constituent is realised by relative pronouns (who) or proper nouns (Charles Napier), which serve to present the entity as accessible or recoverable information for the reader:

(12) A former British Council worker (new topic) who sexually abused boys at his home was sent to prison for nine months yesterday. Charles Napier, 48, a former teacher . . . was a treasurer of the Paedophile Information Exchange and had convictions for child abuse as far back as 1972 . . . (Text N° 9).

The use of the passive voice for introducing new topics into the journalist discourse is significant, although its level of frequency is lower: 23.4% of the total of the cases identified (23 out of 97 tokens). The sample of texts showed a considerable number of introductory topics which were represented by indefinite constituents carrying out the syntactic function of subject in a passive structure:

(13) A British student (new topic) kidnapped in Colombia seven weeks ago has been found dead on the outskirts of Bogota. Trevor Catton, aged 22, had been tied up, shot repeatedly and dumped in a river . . . (Kidnapped Briton Killed in Colombia. The Guardian, 16.08.1995)

The functional motivation of this passive structure is not to omit the agent, for the agent who is responsible for the verbal action is actually specified in the text. “Trevor Catton” was killed by Colombian communist guerrillas, in fact by “rebels from the Jaime Pardo Leal front of the hard-line Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces”. Neither is it the journalist’s intention to use it in order to maintain an unmarked distri-
bution of information, placing the anaphoric elements in initial position and reserving the end position for new constituents, as all the information introduced in this sentence is unknown. The writer's functional motivation lies rather in wanting to establish the local topic in initial position, thereby coinciding with the subject of the sentence—the prototypical position in English for this pragmatic function (Givón 1983a; Dik 1989; Langacker 2000). Just as in the active voice, where the prototypical topic coincides with the agent subject, in the passive voice, as example n° 13 shows, the affected subject is the element which carries out the function of topic (Givón 1993). As Siewierska indicates, the passive is “a topicalizing construction for it places a non-agentive noun phrase in unmarked subject position” (1984:222).

Together with indefinite expressions and passive clauses, proper nouns are another resource by which the journalist can activate introductory topics. As indicated earlier, they constitute the only linguistic strategy used in both of the two subgenres investigated. Nevertheless, while in the tourist brochures the use of proper nouns showed up as 61.8% of the total, in the news items the figure is reduced to only 18.8%:

(14) Jerry Garcia, leader of The Grateful Dead, the ultimate San Francisco hippie band, was found dead yesterday in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre (Leader of Grateful Dead, Jerry Garcia, Dies in Clinic. The Times, 27.01.1995)

We shall conclude this section by mentioning another linguistic mechanism for introducing topic used in journalistic discourse: the so called deictics, which refers to noun phrases that are preceded by definite articles, genitives, possessive, distributive and demostrative markers. These show a low level of frequency, less than 8% of the total of examples encountered (8 out of 97 tokens). Deictics are usually used in English to select or identify a referent as a known element or to make it stand out from a group of entities. For this reason it is a prototypical resource of topical continuity and is rarely used as an introductory resource. However, some examples have been found in news items in which a nominal constituent, modified by a demostrative marker or a definite article, activates an introductory topic element in the discourse:

(15) . . . Fortunately the neighbour (introductory topic) whom the boy ran to was able to stop his brother going into the house. She then took the older boy to the public house where his father was play-
MOYA GUIJARRO: INTRODUCTION OF TOPICS

4. Discussion and concluding remarks. The original hypothesis for this research proposed that, because of the characteristics of genre and register of the two subgenres analysed, news items and tourist brochures would show significant differences in the linguistic resources used for topic introduction by the journalist and the brochure writer. As has already been pointed out, unlike the journalist discourse, which is essentially a narrative genre whose main aim is to inform on recently occurring events in a hypothetically objective and impersonal way (Martínez Albertos 1993; Grijelmo 1997), the main aim of the advertising text, characterised by its use of descriptive and persuasive techniques, is not so much to inform the reader of a saleable product but to influence directly on the reader's behaviour by using emotive suggestion (van Dijk 1988a and b; Cook 1992).

The empirical analysis carried out shows that introductory topics are activated in the two subgenres by significantly different linguistic resources. While in the 30 news items the strategies used most frequently by the journalist for introducing a topic referent into the overall discourse for the first time are indefinite expressions (50% of the examples analysed), in the 30 tourist brochures the introductory topic is normally activated by means of proper nouns (61.8% of the total of linguistic mechanisms for topic introduction identified).

Even though they appear for the first time in the discourse, the places being advertised in the tourist brochures are semantically definite and normally form part of the reader's general cultural and extralinguistic knowledge. The local topics of the news items, however, refer to inaccessible entities which only become part of the reader's linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge once they are activated by the journalist in the opening paragraphs of the text. These therefore tend to be realised by indefinite expressions, commonly used for introducing new constituents into discourse, as opposed to the proper nouns found in a high percentage of cases for the linguistic realisation of topical introduction in the tourist brochures. Proper nouns, as Downing and Locke state, either "denote unique entities and so are definite in themselves without needing the article the" (1992:432) or, as Givón (1993) affirms, allude to currently inactive entities which have a high degree of topical persistence.

While in the tourist brochures, in addition to proper nouns we find the use of syntactic structures such as participial clauses (14.7%), inver-
sions (5.9%), imperative clauses (8.8%), "there" constructions (5.9%) and dislocations (2.9%) for introducing a topical referent into the discourse, in the news items the lexico-grammatical and syntactic mechanisms used, in addition to the aforementioned indefinite and syntactic mechanisms, are the passive structures (23.4%) and deictics (7.8%). Bearing in mind that the only linguistic resource the two subgenres have in common is the use of proper nouns, it should be noted that their degree of frequency is considerably lower in the news items (18.8%) than in the tourist brochures (61.8%). The latter's interest in drawing the reader's attention towards the place being promoted determines the writer's preference for noun phrases that are modified by deictics, possessives or definite articles, as these ascribe a greater semantic prominence to the topic of description.

Participial clauses, which normally bring forward the presentation of the informative referent about which information will be given in the main clause (Jordan 1984), and inversions, existential constructions or imperative clauses, which postpone the activation of the introductory topic and place it in rheme position in order to lend it a special prominence and create expectations in the reader, are all commonly used in the subgenre of advertising and essentially serve a persuasive purpose. Also used are the presentative constructions; although they do not express what the sentence is about, they introduce a participant or introduce its existence in rhematic position, converting it into a potential candidate as topic in the subsequent discourse (Kuno 1972a and b; Reinhart 1982; Lambrecht 1994).

The fundamentally informative purpose of the news and its impersonal character requires, by contrast, the use of syntactic structures in which the introductory topic, normally realised by an indefinite noun phrase, is to be found in the thematic slot of the clause. Sometimes the indefinite expression carries out the syntactic function of subject in a passive structure, by which the local topic about which information is given is placed at the beginning of the sentence (Givón 1983a, 1993; Siewierska 1984).

In conclusion, the persuasive function of the tourist brochure frequently leads the writer to use linguistic strategies by which (s)he moves the new topical entities away from the thematic slot of the sentence. This way the activation of the new topic is postponed and the reader's attention is directed to the area being promoted. This pattern creates an expectation for the suspended topic that could have been placed earlier. However, in the news items the local topics tend to be located at the outset without further introduction. The journalist uses unmarked linguis-
tic resources that allow him/her to reserve the thematic positions (Halliday 1985/1994) for the presentation of topical referents. Following this pattern, (s)he makes the understanding of the message easier for the reader, as the local entity about which information is given has been previously clarified.

University de Castilla-La Mancha
Departamento de Filologia Inglesa
E. U. de Magisterio de Cuenca
C/Avda. de Los Alfares, 44
16074 Cuenca
Spain
arsenio.mguijarro@uclm.es

ENDNOTES

1The context of this paper is 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 gratitude to Christine Harris and Jerry Sumpter for their invaluable help and wise advice on the final writing of this study.

2In 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 as much through the general context as 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 citizens. However, from a topical and linguistic perspective, it will only be classified as “given” if it has been linguistically introduced in the previous context.

3The variables of field, tenor and mode (Halliday and Hassan 1985/1989) determine the register of a particular genre, that is, the variations the language suffers in a specific social situation of communication. A genre is, in turn, defined by a schematic macrostructure, considered as a cognitive model that facilitates its identification, understanding and interpretation. Whereas genre is typically associated with the context of culture, register is related to the situational context in which the communicative interaction is developed (Bhatia 1993; Eggins 1994).

4Although many Spanish scholars agree that journalism should essentially be objective (Martínez Albertos 1993; Martín Vivaldi, 1993), news items are products which are logically mediated by ideological interests. In fact, Martínez Albertos (1993:43) uses the term “objectivity” to refer to the journalist’s duty to truthfulness and intellectual honesty.

5When describing the news schema, van Dijk (1988a and 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 narrative style, characterized by a chronological sequence of events. As far as the schematic structure of tourist brochures is concerned, they usually follow a clearly predictable organization: once
the name of the place being promoted is introduced, the different touristic areas of interest that can be visited are described. Finally, information about timetables, fares and telephones numbers frequently close the brochure.

Almost all the texts under investigation follow the same tendency as regards the linguistic resources used for topical introduction. For this reason, it has not been considered necessary to carry out an empirical analysis with a larger number of texts.

Lambrecht (1994:185) maintains that if we wish to make it easier for the writer to communicate and for the reader to interpret, we should never introduce a referent and speak about it in the same sentence. Van Oosten (1985:23), who defines the prototypical topic as that informative constituent which is known, also assumes that all clauses contain a topic except for existential clauses, in which an informative referent is introduced into the discourse for the first time.

Following Dik (1989), I assume that the dislocated elements are optional and additional sentence elements, which are separated from the internal sentence structure by pauses. These are usually co-referential or are closely related to a pronoun or a noun phrase of the sentence predicate.

REFERENCES


