On the semantic and contextual factors that determine topic selection in Italian and Spanish[1]

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Abstract

In this article the reasons for an argument to be chosen as sentence topic are discussed. I argue that a topic expression can be prototypical or not, depending on how its thematic/semantic properties reflect humans' preference to talk about certain things and not others. Although subjects are mostly prototypical topics, I show that a non-subject topic is prototypical with predicates that select a patient subject and an IO with protoagent properties but volition (psych-verbs, unaccusative verbs). Constructions like passives or arbitrary subjects may also have a prototypical topic object. As for nonprototypical topics, they are generally left dislocated direct objects. Their presence is justified by the fact that discourse needs may overrule the requirement of a topic to be prototypical. In particular, they are used in contrastive contexts. It follows that whenever a topic is non-prototypical, it is automatically interpreted as contrastive.

1. Introduction

Consider the Italian (left) and Spanish (right) sentences below:

(1) a. *La   segretaria   ha   spedito   la   lettera. | La   secretaria*
         the   secretary   has   mailed   the   letter   the   secretary
         envió   la   carta.
         mailed   the   letter
         'The secretary mailed the letter.'
    b. *A   Gianni   piacciono   i   film   dell'orrore. | A   Juan*
         to   G.   please   the   movies   of-the horror   to   J.
         le   gustan   las   películas   de   horror.
         to-him$_{cl}$ please   the   movies   of   horror
         'Gianni/Juan likes horror movies.'
    c. *La   lettera,   l'ha   spedita   la   segretaria. | La   carta,*
         the   letter   it$_{cl}$ has   mailed   the   secretary   the   letter
         la   envió   la   secretaria.
         it$_{cl}$ mailed   the   secretary
         'As for the letter, the SECRETARY mailed it.'

In (1a), the preverbal element is a subject, in (1b) it is an Indirect Object (from now on, IO), and in (1c) it is a Direct Object (from now on, DO). The IO in (2) is obligatorily resumed by a clitic in Spanish, optionally in Italian. In (1c), the DO is obligatorily resumed by a clitic both in Spanish and in Italian. I will call the latter construction *(Clitic) Left Dislocation* (from now on: (CL)LD). When these sentences are uttered with a normal, descending intonation, the preverbal elements represent the sentence topic. In this article, I will discuss the semantic and contextual reasons for a certain argument to be "promoted" to a topic position. Whenever it is crucial to distinguish the pragmatic concept of topic from its linguistic realization, I will use the words "topic expression" to refer to the linguistic entity.[2]

   This article is organized as follows. In Section 2, I present the pragmatic and syntactic characteristics of topic expressions. In Section 3, I discuss the common overlapping between subject and topic and propose that both tend to have agent-like properties. I argue that for topics, that tendency is due to the fact that agent-like properties are a semantic reflex of the cognitive characteristics that define a prototypical topic, while for subjects it depends on argument selection rules. In Section 4, I present the notion of canonical and non-canonical sentences: the former have a prototypical topic, the latter do not. I illustrate cases of canonical and non-canonical sentences with non-subject topics. The former are found with psychological, unaccusative, impersonal verbs, with passives, and with clauses that have an arbitrary subject. The latter are found in contrastive contexts. I argue in fact that the requirement to have a prototypical

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2. For a discussion about this distinction, see McNally (1998).

topic is overruled in that particular contextual situation. In Section 5, conclusions are drawn.

2.   Characteristics of topic expressions: Pragmatics and syntax

Following the tradition of Strawson (1964), Kuno (1972), Reinhart (1981), Lambrecht (1994), and many others, I assume that a sentence topic is "what the sentence is about". More precisely, adopting Vallduví's definition, a topic expression (a *link*, in his terminology) directs "the hearer to a given address (...) in the hearer's knowledge store, under which the information carried by the sentence is entered" (Vallduví 1992: 59). This definition highlights the anchoring role of the topic to the common ground. Additionally, it points out the updating function of a topic expression. In fact, the operation of directing the hearer to an address implies that a *different* topic is introduced in the discourse whenever such an operation takes place (in other words, a topic shift occurs). So summarizing, in this article I assume that a topic expression always represents an aboutness *and* shifting topic.[3]

As for the syntactic position, the literature is divided with respect to two issues. One issue is whether *subject* topics are dislocated (but without clitic resumption, as these languages do not have subject clitics), or rather they stay in their canonical, spec,IP position. The question depends on the position in which subjects are assumed to be based-generated. For instance, according to Vallduví (1993), subjects in Catalan are base-generated in a post-verbal position; therefore, their preverbal manifestations are always the result of movement to an adjoined-to-IP position. Because of this analysis, É. Kiss (1995) considers Catalan as a "topic prominent language", namely a language whose sentence structure gives a major role to the grammatical relation topic-comment (Li and Thompson 1976). It is not clear whether Spanish and Italian are topic prominent languages too, and I will not deal with this issue in the present article. Keeping my syntactic assumptions to a minimum, I will limit myself to say that preverbal, sentence initial arguments in sentences with a neutral, descending intonation are topics (cf. Benincà 1988[2001]: 144; Salvi 1988[2001]: 53; Zubizarreta 1999).

The other issue concerns the contrastive interpretation of topics. It has been claimed in the literature (see Belletti and Rizzi 1988 for Italian; Masullo 1993 and Fernandez-Soriano 1999 for Spanish; among others) that the IO of an object-experiencer psychological verb (cf. 1b) occupies a different position than a (CL)LD (cf. the DO in (1c)). While the latter is a case of movement to

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3. See Brunetti (in press-a) for evidence in Italian that a topic expression always indicates a topic shift.

a position in the C(omplementizer) area, the former occupies a lower position (e.g., the low C position Fin, Frey 2004). Within that approach, contrast, which is present with a CLLD but not with a IO, is a consequence of the syntactic difference between the two constructions. In this article, I derive the contrastive interpretation of the DO from the fact that a DO is generally a 'bad topic' from a thematic point of view, and so it is used as topic only in specific contexts, namely contrastive ones. Without excluding that the DO in (1c) and the IO in (1b) may occupy two different positions in the syntactic tree, the reason for this difference does not have to do with contrast, but rather is related to syntactic constraints on movement of different arguments.

3.   Subjects, topics, and agents

If we look at corpus data in the languages under discussion, we see that subjects are much more frequently preverbal than other arguments. It follows that subjects represent the sentence topic much more often than other arguments.[4] The relation between topic and subject has been frequently noticed in the literature. Reinhart (1981: 62) observes that there is a strong preference in English to interpret the grammatical subject as the sentence topic and to place the topic in subject position. Chafe (1976), Prince (1992), Lambrecht (1994), among many others, observe that most subjects have topic properties (familiarity, definiteness, "aboutness"). Why are subjects good topics? According to Lambrecht (1994), "since the subject is the most common argument in the sentence – most predicates have at least a subject but not necessarily an object complement – it is necessarily also the argument which will be most readily identified with the pragmatic role of topic" (Lambrecht 1994: 132). I believe that this reasoning is not sufficient to explain why subjects are good topics. The fact that a verb selects just one argument - the subject - does not automatically give it a topic status. As Lambrecht himself observes and discusses in detail, and as we will see below, subjects of unaccusative monovalent verbs are usually not chosen as topics. Furthermore, the fact that the subject is the most common argument among verbs does not explain why, when a verb selects more than one argument, the preferred topic is the subject.

In this article, I propose that a subject is usually chosen as topic because topics and subjects tend to be associated with similar thematic properties. It is a well-known fact in the literature on accusative languages that subjects in active

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4. A preverbal subject can also be considered as part of a fully focused sentence. However, I assume that whenever the verb is preceded by an argument in Italian and Spanish, that argument is automatically interpreted as topic (with a descending intonation). It might be the case, though, that while non-subject topics are always shifting, subject topics can be continuous, cf. Duranti and Ochs (1979).

clauses, cross-linguistically and cross-verbally, tend to be agents (van Oosten 1986; Dowty 1991; Lambrecht 1994, 1995, Primus 1999; among others). The relation between topichood and agentivity has been noticed too (van Oosten 1986; Lambrecht 1994; Primus 1999; Lamers and de Hoop 2005; among others). In other words, there is a correspondence among topichood, subjecthood and agentivity (cf. Lambrecht 1995; Murcia-Serra 2003). In Lambrecht's view, agent topics are simply a result of the fact that topics are generally subjects and subjects are generally agents. The correlation between topichood and subjecthood is more basic than that between topichood and agentivity. My view on the contrary is that the subject-topic relation is derived, namely it is a consequence of the fact that a good topic is an agent, and agents are given the grammatical status of subjects. This position explains why, in the constructions to be discussed in Section 4.2, the subject is a less appropriate topic. We will see that when a subject does not have "enough" agent-like properties, the topic position is occupied by a different argument. If topics tended to be subjects and the topic-agent relation was derived, topics would still be subjects in sentences where the subject is not an agent; on the contrary, precisely in those circumstances, a different argument is chosen. Furthermore, the relation between topics and agents is not arbitrary, but rather is based on the idea that, from a cognitive point of view, a topic is more likely to be instantiated by a participant in the event with agent-like properties than by a participant with a different role (see van Oosten 1986; Givón 1976, 1994; Mac Whinney 1977; and others).

Summarizing, my point is that subjects and topics both tend to be agents, but they do it for different reasons. Subjects are agents because, according to argument selection rules (see Section 3.2), if a verb requires an agent, it assigns it the grammatical function of subject. Topics, on the contrary, are agents because agentivity is more likely to be associated with topichood (it is a *prototypical* property of topics) given the notion of topichood adopted in this article (that is, speakers prefer to talk about agents). While the operation of choosing a subject is done at a lexical level, that of choosing a topic is done at the utterance level, and the overlapping of subject and topic is simply accidental (at least at a synchronic level of the language, see Givón 1976), and it may not occur in the eventuality that argument selection rules and factors determining the choice of topic do *not* end up selecting the same argument. Indeed, we will see that with some specific verbs or constructions, the overlapping does not occur. In this sense, my proposal is less strong than the one given by Givón (1976). Givón uses topic prototypicality to explain syntactic constructions such as existential sentences or morphological phenomena such as agreement. In this article, I only explain word order *preferences* in discourse. This is possible, because the languages under study have a relatively free word order, namely not driven by

syntactic constraints and therefore usable for the organization of discourse.[5,6]

3.1.   Topic-agent relation: Prototypical topic

In this section I will present the properties that scholars have singled out for a topic to be prototypical, and the reasons why such properties make it prototypical. Specifically, I will argue for the fact that agentivity is a prototypical topic property.

  Some scholars have proposed a *hierarchy of topicality*, namely of likelihood of an argument to be sentence topic. Givón (1976, 1994) splits the hierarchy into sub-hierarchies, some of which are reported below.[7] From left to right, the referent of the argument chosen as topic preferably is:

(2)   a.   speaker > hearer > 3rd person
       b.   human > animate > inanimate
       c.   agent > dative[8] > patient
       d.   large > small
       e.   possessor > possessed
       f.   definite > indefinite

These hierarchies are motivated by humans' preference to speak about certain topics rather than others, and their tendency to view things (and talk about them) from a certain perspective. The preference in (2a) and (2b) are explained by Givón by appealing to the "ego/anthropocentric nature of discourse" (Givón 1976: 152), namely the tendency of humans to speak about themselves or what is similar to themselves (cf. also Zubin 1979; Kuno 1976). (2a) is also motivated by the fact that speaker and hearer are highly salient in the discourse, and topics, given their anchoring role (cf. Vallduví 1992), have to be given or at least be part of the interlocutors' common ground. A similar explanation

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5. Optional movement *is* a syntax-driven phenomenon for those who argue for syntactic features for pragmatic categories (in that approach, optionality is accounted for by *covert* movement). I do not follow that kind of approach. For extensive arguments against it, see Brunetti (2004, in press-b).

6. Whether the choice of a particular word order in languages that allow for optionality is driven *exclusively* by pragmatic preferences (as I claim for Italian and Spanish) or is also driven by *syntactic* preferences (e.g., of a subject first, cf. Dutch) can only be seen through a quantitative investigation on a large corpus. Such a work, however, goes beyond the limits and scope of the present article.

7. Duranti and Ochs (1979) provide some evidence that these hierarchies apply to left-dislocated elements (that is, topics) in Italian.

8. I believe that Givón means a thematic role such as experiencer or beneficiary, which are typically realized with dative case.

holds for (2f), as definite expressions are existentially presupposed and therefore already present in the minds of the interlocutors. (2c) is motivated by the tendency of speakers to tell an event from the perspective of the participant that is more involved in it and that has more control over it. Preferences such as (2d) and (2e) can also be explained by the preference to talk about an entity with a potentially greater power or capacity to affect an event.

Van Oosten (1986) assigns similar properties to what she calls a *prototypical topic*. She more explicitly ties such properties to general cognitive preferences of humans to *talk about* certain things and not others. She says in particular that the semantic properties of a prototypical topic expression are a reflex of the fact that :

(3)   a.   A prototypical topic refers to the speaker and hearer's focus of attention;
         b.   A prototypical topic preferably is a concrete and visible entity;
         c.   A prototypical topic is a *basic level* topic.

From the property in (3a) it follows that a prototypical topic is already part of the common ground. As seen above in Givón's classification, the preference to talk about what is already part of the common ground explains the preference for definite topic expressions. The "ego/anthropocentric nature of discourse" makes the speaker's normal focus of attention to be an entity that resembles the speaker as much as possible, so the topic is preferably *human or animate* (cf. (2b)). Furthermore, since "agents are cognitively salient to humans" (van Oosten 1986: 30), a prototypical topic expression is expected to be an agent (cf. (2c)). The property in (3b) is linguistically reflected by the fact that a prototypical topic expression is referential. Point (3d), finally, refers to van Oosten's classification of (discourse) topics in three "layers": superordinate topic, basic-level topic, and subordinate topic. A superordinate topic represents the set of experience, knowledge, memories, judgments that are needed to interpret a specific language text (what van Oosten calls a 'cognitive schema', and other scholars call 'scene' or 'frame'; see references in van Oosten 1986: 42, Footnote 5). A basic-level topic is instead a participant or an element inside the 'scene' (the superordinate topic), and a subordinate topic is an aspect or a part of a participant or an object (the basic-level topic). van Oosten's claim is that at sentence level, the preferred topics are the participants in a scene, namely basic-level topics. Among the participants in a scene, major participants are more prototypical than minor participants, and humans are more prototypical than inanimate objects. Speakers prefer to talk about the main characters in a scene, and secondarily about other participants in the scene, or about relevant objects in the scene. Speakers tend to prefer all these topics to abstract objects

like events or scenes themselves (superordinate topics).[9] On the other hand, speakers prefer to talk about individuals or objects rather than aspects or parts of them (subordinate topics).

As a final remark on the topic-agent relation, I would like to point out that since it is determined by what speakers prefer to talk about, I assume it to hold for all languages. For accusative languages, that relation is indeed strongly attested, while in ergative languages, its existence is less clear. As pointed out by Primus (1999) (who makes similar assumptions on the topic-agent relation) it is commonly believed that in ergative languages, patients and not agents represent the unmarked topic. Since I am focusing on two accusative languages, I will not tackle the issue of ergative languages in this article. I would like however to report Primus's remark that the claim on patient topics in ergative languages has been challenged by many scholars in the literature. I refer the reader to Primus (1999: 175) for references and a more detailed discussion.

3.2.   *Subject-agent relation: Argument selection rules*

I have said above that the relation between subject and agent is of a different nature than that between topic and agent: it is in fact determined by lexical rules of argument selection. I am going to present now Dowty's (1991) proposal, namely his Principle of Argument Selection. Dowty's principle is part of a more general proposal concerning thematic roles, which I will summarize below. My analysis of non-subject topics given in Section 4 will be based on that proposal.

Dowty (1991) proposes that thematic roles are not discrete categories but rather a cluster of concepts. Verbs impose lexical entailments on their arguments, which can be divided into two groups: those that express agent-like properties (forming together a 'Proto-Agent role'), and those that express patient-like properties (forming a 'Proto-Patient role'). Thematic roles are thus not primitives, but rather derived notions.[10] The entailments forming the Proto-Agent role are:

(4)   PROTO-AGENT role: (a) Volitional involvement; (b) Sentience or Perception; (c) Cause of a change of state in another participant; (d) Movement relative to another participant (*Water filled the boat*); (e) Existence independent of the event.

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9. An analogous preference, pointed out by MacWhinney (1977), is for humans to use figures than grounds as 'starting point' (a notion that is clause to that of topic, see Duranti and Ochs 1979).

10. Cf. the macro-roles of Van Valin (1990 and related works).

The entailments that form a Proto-Patient role are almost complementary:

(5) PROTO-PATIENT role: (a) Change of state; (b) Incremental Theme (*John filled the glass with water*); (c) Being causally affected; (d) Being stationary relative to another participant; (e) Existence not independent of the event.

The number of entailments that a verb imposes on each of its arguments may vary from none to all. Besides, an argument may be assigned both proto-agent and proto-patient entailments.

Primus (1999) makes some revisions to (4) and (5). Instead of "volition", she talks about "control", to underline the fact that an agent is not just the individual who has the *intention* to do something, but more generally who has a control over the event.[11] Furthermore, Primus makes it more precise in what sense movement (see 4d) is a proto-agent entailment. It is not intended as movement *caused by another participant* (which is, rather, a proto-patient property) but movement as an "autonomous activity". In this sense, (5d) must also be revised to include participants that are causally moved by another participant. Vanhoe (2002) proposes a further revision: he substitutes independently/dependently existing from the event with container/contained and possessor/possessed. Along the same lines, Primus points out that what all proto-patient properties have in common is thematic dependence on another participant. More generally, Agent and Patient proto-roles are distinguished by their dependency relative to each other (see also Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005: 63, and references quoted there).[12]

According to Dowty, the distribution of entailments determines argument selection. Dowty's Argument Selection Principle is reported (in a shortened version) below:

(6) *Argument Selection Principle* (Dowty 1991): In predicates with grammatical subject and object, the argument with the greatest number of Proto-Agent properties will be lexicalized as the subject; the argument with the greatest number of Proto-Patient properties will be lexicalized as the DO.[13]

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11. A similar notion of "control" is used by Kline and Perdue (1992) to explain word order preferences of L2 speakers. They say that speakers at early stages of (spontaneous) acquisition of a foreign language tend to utter the NP-referent first that has the highest control on the other referents in the event. Kline and Perdue also say that at the two-word level, speakers tend to utter topic material first and focus material last. It follows that among these speakers, controller and topic tend to coincide.

12. As discussed in Vanoe (2002) and Primus (1999), among others, proto-role properties can also derive from aspectual characteristics of the verb. I will leave this factor aside in this article.

13. For this generalization, see also Alsina (1996: 36) and references quoted there.

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Two corollaries further specify how argument selection works. Cor. 1 establishes that if two arguments have equal numbers of proto-agent and proto-patient properties, either or both may be lexicalized as the subject. Cor. 2 states that with a three-place predicate, the non-subject argument with greater number of proto-patient properties is lexicalized as the DO and the non-subject argument with fewer proto-patient properties is lexicalized as an oblique object.

"Highly" or "primary" transitive verbs (see Hopper and Thompson 1980), such as *build, write, murder, eat, wash*, etc., perfectly exemplify the prototypical case, where the DO has only proto-patient properties and the subject has only proto-agent properties. Other verbs impose the same number of proto-agent or proto-patient entailments on their arguments, or impose both proto-agent and proto-patient entailments on the *same* argument. In the following Section, the consequences of these distributions of entailments on the choice of topic are discussed.

4.   Canonical vs non-canonical sentences

Assuming Dowty's proto-role theory and given what we said above about prototypical topics, a prototypical topic is expected to have as much proto-agent properties as possible, and more than those of the other arguments. Animacy, control over the event or power to affect the event, etc., are all characteristics of what speakers prefer to talk about. With a transitive verb like (1a), the choice of the subject as topic is uncontroversial, because it has (at least) the proto-agent properties of causation, volition/control, and sentience, while the DO clearly has proto-patient properties. The IO in (1b) is a good topic as well. In fact, it has more proto-agent properties than the subject, as we will see in details in Section 4.1, where certain classes of verbs and constructions displaying this thematic pattern will be presented. On the contrary, the DO topic in (1c) is not the most prototypical, because it has proto-patient properties and the post-verbal subject has proto-agent properties. In a parallel fashion, the subject topics in (7) (which correspond to (1b) with reversed order of the arguments), are also not optimal.

(7)   *I   film   dell'orrore   piacciono   a   Gianni.* / *Las*
       the movies of-the horror please   to   Gianni   the
       películas   de   horror   le   gustan   a   Juan.
       movies   of   horror   to-him$_{cl}$ please to   Juan
       'Gianni/Juan likes horror movies.'

I will call *canonical* those sentences that have a 'good' topic, like (1a) and (1b), and *non-canonical* those with a 'bad' topic, such as (1c) and (7). Canonicity is determined by the proximity of their topic to the prototype.

Why should non-canonical orders exist at all? The argument order in (1c) and in (7) is not justified by prototypical properties, so it must be justified by something else. Given that information structure (the articulation of the sentence into topic and focus) is affected and affects discourse structure, it is natural to think that the reason for non-canonical order is a discourse requirement. In fact, my idea is that the choice of topic must always be coherent with discourse needs, so the choice of the most prototypical topic in the sentence is done by the speaker *only* if the discourse context leaves freedom of choice and does not impose a particular topic. When the context requires a certain argument as topic, it does not matter if that topic is prototypical or not. Within this light, the main difference between canonical and non-canonical sentences is the following: a canonical sentence is not restricted to a particular contextual situation, so it may occur in any kind of context, while a non-canonical sentence, given the non-prototypical characteristics of the topic, can only occur in a particular context.

I will now present data of non-subject topics in constructions that are either canonical or non-canonical. Most data are taken from the *Nocando* corpus, a corpus of oral narrations that I have compiled for the project *Nocando*: *Non-canonical constructions in oral speech* at the University of Pompeu Fabra.[14] Subjects were asked to tell the story depicted in three of Mercer Mayer's textless books (cf. Berman and Slobin 1994; Strömqvist and Verhoven 2004). The Italian corpus is made of 43 narrations by 16 native-speakers, for at total of about 4 hours of speech and about 26,000 words. The Spanish corpus is made of 39 narrations by 13 native-speakers, for a total of about 2½ hours of speech and about 23,000 words. Speakers were mostly university students.

I found a total of 40 non-subject topics in the data (17 in Italian and 23 in Spanish). Canonical sentences, namely those with a prototypical topic, were 9 in Italian and 15 in Spanish. Non-canonical sentences were 8 in Italian and 8 in Spanish. I will first look at canonical sentences, and classify them according to what verb class or construction triggers a prototypical non-subject topic.

4.1.   *Canonical sentences with non-subject topics*

Canonical sentences with a non-subject topic are found with verbs that select a non-agent subject and an IO that has proto-agent properties except volition/control, namely an experiencer, a beneficiary, or a possessor. These verbs are (object-experiencer) psychological verbs (see 4.1.1.) and unaccusative verbs (see 4.1.2.). A subject-IO pattern, where the IO is more prototypical than the

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subject, is also found with passive verbs (see 4.1.3.), and with verbs that lack an overtly expressed subject (impersonal verbs and verbs with an arbitrary subject, see 4.1.4.).

4.1.1. Object-experiencer psychological verbs.   Psych(ological) verbs denote a mental state and select two arguments: one representing the cause of the mental state, and one representing the individual who experiences the mental state.[15] According to Dowty, the fact that both arguments have one proto-agent property leaves space to alternation, cross-linguistically and within a language, between a subject experiencer (SE) and an object experiencer (OE). The reason for the alternation is that each argument has one proto-agent entailment (cf. Cor. 1), namely causation and sentience respectively.

Italian and Spanish have both SE verbs like *odiare* (It.) */ odiar* (Sp.) 'to hate' or *amare* (It.) */ querer* (Sp.) 'to love', and OE verbs like *piacere* (It.) / *gustar* (Sp.) 'to please'. Most canonical sentences with non-subject topic in my corpus contain OE psych-verbs: 7 out of 9 in Italian and 9 out of 15 in Spanish. An example is (8):

(8)   *Ma alla   rana piace   molto l'acqua.*   (Italian, Noc)
       but to-the frog is-pleasing much   the water
       'But the frog likes the water very much.'

As noted in the literature (cf. Benincà 1988[2001] for Italian), the most natural order is when the IO occupies a preverbal position and the subject is postverbal, while the reversed order is marked. "Marked" means that the contexts in which the sentence can occur are very few. In other words, the sentence is pragmatically marked. For instance, a sentence like (7) only occurs in contexts where a set of films are compared with respect to their being preferred by a set of individuals; the corresponding sentence with reversed order in (1b), instead, can occur in "out of the blue" contexts, where no set of individuals or films is presupposed.

The pragmatic markedness of the Sbj-Verb-IO order shows that the proto-agent property of causation is less prototypical than that of sentience. Why should that be so? I said above that humans' focus of interest is as much like themselves as possible, so being human or animate is an important characteristic of the topic prototype. While sentience entails that the referent of the argument be animate, causation does not. The pragmatic markedness of a Sbj-V-IO order then indicates that a proto-agent property that involves animacy (such as

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15. In fact, what I say in this subsection also holds for verbs denoting a *physical* state, such as the Spanish *hacer daño* 'to hurt'.

sentience, volition/control, possession) is more important with respect to the choice of topic than one that does not, such as causation.

The fact that sentience entails animacy is evident when both arguments refer to human beings. While Cesare in (9) must be animate in order to experience a mental state of liking, Anna does not need to be aware of the effect she causes on Cesare in order to cause it. As Dowty points out, "sentience means more than a presupposition that an argument is a sentient being; it is rather sentience with respect to the event or state denoted by the verb" (Dowty 1991: 573).

(9)   *A   Cesare   piace   Anna. / Anna   piace   a*   (Italian)
       to Cesare is-pleasing Anna   Anna is-pleasing to
       Cesare.
       Cesare
       'Cesare likes Anna.'

Consider also the psych-verb *dare fastidio* (It.) / *molestar* (Sp.) 'to bother, to annoy, to harass'. When the cause of the mental state is inanimate, the preferred word order is with the experiencer in sentence initial position. When both arguments are animate, the verb meaning becomes ambiguous: it can either entail that the individual causing the event does it intentionally or not.

(10)   a.   *Quell'uomo dava fastidio a Maria.*   (Italian)
                that man   gave bother to Maria
                'That man was harassing Maria.' / 'That man bothered Maria.'
       b.   *A Maria dava fastidio quell'uomo.*
                to Maria gave bother   that man
                'Maria was harassed by that man.' / 'Maria was bothered by that man.'

The ambiguity is due to the fact that the verb can impose an additional entailment to the subject: Volition/Control, which makes the cause of the bother intentional). Sentence (10a) is most naturally found in contexts where the interpretation is that the man is voluntarily giving bother to Maria (he is harassing her), and sentence (10b) is found in contexts where the interpretation is that the man is an involuntary cause of Maria's bother. In other words, in (10a) the verb is preferably interpreted as assigning two proto-agent properties to the topic argument and one proto-agent property plus one proto-patient property to the non-topic argument. In (10b), the most natural interpretation is one where the topic has the property of sentience and the non-topic is the cause. So the natural interpretation of (10a) is the one where the topic has a larger number of proto-agent properties, and the natural interpretation of (10b), as discussed above, is the one where the topic is sentient, because sentience is a more prototypical

property than causation (given the animacy requirement of sentience).[16]

Similar ambiguity of meaning is found in the corresponding Spanish verb *molestar*, as shown by Ackerman and Moore (2001). In terms of argument selection, many scholars have observed that if the meaning is 'to bother', the experiencer is realized as a DO; if the meaning is 'to harass', it is realized as an IO (see Treviño 1992). This fact shows that in Spanish the two sets of thematic properties also influence argument selection: the ambiguity of the verb is expressed morphologically by the direct-indirect alternation of the object.

4.1.2. Unaccusative verbs.   Unaccusative verbs select a subject with proto-patient properties. Some verbs additionally select another argument with some proto-agent properties but not volition/control. Consider (11), with the verb rompersi 'to break' that has reflexive morphology.

(11)   *A Gianni si è rotto il televisore.*   (Italian)
       to Gianni refl$_{cl}$ is broken the TV-set
       'Gianni's TV set broke.'

Dowty's Principle in (6) cannot predict the argument selection of this verb. The verb selects a subject referring to an entity that undergoes a change of state (from not-broken to broken), which is a proto-patient entailment. The referent of the IO, on the contrary, is the possessor of the TV set, as the English translation confirms, and the TV set is the possessed entity. We know that being a possessor is a proto-agent property, and being possessed is a proto-patient property. According to (6), the subject should have more proto-agent properties, while in this example it is not the case. Consider, however, that the verb has a transitive counterpart that selects three arguments: the two above, plus an argument with the proto-agent property of volition/control:

(12)   *Maria ha rotto il televisore a Gianni.*   (Italian)
       Maria has broken the TV-set to Gianni
       'Maria broke Gianni's TV set.'

The changes in terms of grammatical functions that occur from (12) to (11) are like those that occur from (12) to its passive counterpart, given in (13).

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16. Ackerman and Moore's (2001) analysis of the corresponding Spanish verb *molestar* is different: they argue that the verb assigns the additional proto-patient property *change of state* to the object, and no additional proto-agent property to the subject. The result in terms of topic selection is the same: the proto-patient property makes the object a worse topic than the subject. However, it is not clear to me in what sense the experiencer undergoes a change of state with one meaning but not with the other. The property of volition/control, on the contrary, clearly highlights the fact that with one meaning, the individual is aware to cause the mental state, and with the other meaning, s/he is not.

(13)   *A Gianni è stato rotto il televisore (da*   (Italian)
       to Gianni is been broken the TV-set   by
       Maria).
       Maria
       'Gianni's TV set was broken by Maria.'

In both (11) and (13), the subject corresponds to the DO of the transitive coun-terpart, and the volitional agent is eliminated (with just one difference: (11) describes an event where there is no volitional agent, as nobody caused the TV set to be broken; in (13), its existence is still implied). The problem of (11) for Dowty's theory is therefore analogous to the problem that such theory has with passives. But as Ackerman and Moore (2001) observe, the fact that pas-sives cannot be accounted for in Dowty's theory is expected: alternations of this kind are the result of purely morpho-syntactic manipulations and cannot (must not) be explained by a linking theory of semantic entailments with gram-matical functions. Therefore, if we assume that (11) can be analyzed as (13), and if we do not attempt to explain why in these constructions the proto-patient is realized as subject, Dowty's Principle can predict the realization as IO of the argument with proto-agent properties. That argument could not be selected as subject, because there is an argument with more proto-agent properties in the transitive construction in (12). That argument cannot be selected as a DO either, because there is an argument (lexicalized as DO in the transitive construction) with proto-patient properties.

The parallelism with passives cannot be pursued with other unaccusatives that lack the transitive counterpart, such as the (only) Spanish corpus example in (14a) or Primus' Italian example in (14b):

(14)   a.   *Al hombre se le caen las*   (Spanish, Noc)
            to-the man refl$_{cl}$ to-him$_{cl}$ fall the
            gafas.
            glasses
            'The man drops his glasses.'
       b.   *Ai bambini non manca energia.*   (Italian)
            to-the children not lacks energy
            'Children do not lack energy.' (Primus 1999)

Nevertheless, the thematic pattern is exactly the same as that of verbs like *rompersi*: the IO is the possessor, and the subject is the possessed entity, and in (14b) it undergoes a change of state. The *subject-IO* (or *nominative-dative*) pattern is therefore typically present when the arguments are in a possessed-possessor relation.[17]

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Sbj-IO predicates are also used to avoid mentioning the participant that has control over the event. Consider the (only) Italian example I found in the corpus:

(15) *A un bambino un giorno arriva un regalo.*   (Italian, Noc)
      to a   boy   one day   arrives a   present
      'One day a boy receives a present.'

The picture the speaker is watching is the first one of the book, depicting a boy looking at a big pack with a bow. The picture does not show who gave the present to the boy. The construction in (15) allows the speaker not to mention the unknown agent (cf. also Salvi 1988 [2001]).

Consider now the choice of topic in these constructions. Given that the subject has proto-patient properties, and the IO has proto-agent properties, we expect the IO to be the preferred topic. Indeed, that is the case. First, subjects of these verbs are frequently post-verbal (cf. Calabrese 1992; Saccon 1993; Pinto 1997 for Italian), so they are not usually topics. A couple of corpus examples are given below:

(16) a. *E' arrivato un pacco a casa del*   (Italian, Noc)
          is   arrived   a   pack   at house of-the
          bambino.
          boy
          'A pack has arrived at the boy's house.'
      b. *De repente, sale   la rana.*   (Spanish, Noc)
          of   sudden   comes-out the frog
          'Suddenly the frog comes out.'

The IO, on the other hand, is typically used as topic: the constructions in (14) and (15) (cf. also (11)) are all pragmatically preferable to those with reversed order in (17).

(17) a. *Las gafas se le   caen al   hombre.* (Spanish)
          the   glasses refl$_{cl}$ to-him$_{cl}$ fall to-the man
          'The man's glasses fell out.'
      b. *Energia non manca ai   bambini.*   (Italian)
          energy   not lacks to-the children
          'Children do not lack energy.'

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17. Primus proposes an Optimality Theoretic account for nominative-dative predicates. She claims that besides Dowty's Principle, argument selection is determined by constraint rankings. Nom.-dat. predicates result from the high ranking (in German and Romance) of the constraints: (a) Every predicate must have a nominative argument, and (b) A dative argument must have a small number of proto-agent properties.

> c. *Un regalo un giorno arriva a un bambino.* (Italian)
> a present one day arrives to a boy
> 'One day a boy receives a present.'

Note also that the subjects in (17b) and (17c) lack other prototypical *semantic* properties. In (17b), *energia* 'energy' lacks concreteness (recall van Oosten's claim that a prototypical topic is a concrete and visible entity), and violates the preference for a human topic (which could be satisfied by the other argument). Furthermore, recall that a topic expression is an anchor to the common ground, so definite descriptions are better topics than indefinites or bare nouns. The subject in (17b) is a bare noun, while the IO is definite, so the IO would be a better topic in this respect. As for (17c), both arguments are indefinites; however, if the topic is the boy, the familiarity of that referent is easily accommodated by the context: the sentence is uttered at the beginning of a story, where it is expected that a human or at least an animate protagonist will be introduced. If the topic is the present, on the contrary, its familiarity cannot be easily accommodated.

The IO of an unaccusative verb is a better topic also if it is an *inanimate* possessor, e.g., when the two arguments are in a part-whole relationship. Consider the sentences below, found after a Google search of *se le cae* 'it falls out to him/her/it':

> (18) a. *Al Teatro Español se le cae la* (Spanish)
> to-the theatre Spanish SE$_{cl}$ to-it$_{cl}$ falls the
> *cretona.*
> cretonne
> (Google search)
> b. *A la trama islamista se le cae el velo.*
> to the plot Islamist SE$_{cl}$ to-it$_{cl}$ falls the veal
> 'The Islamist plot drops the veal.'

The subject refers to a part belonging to the referent of the IO. The preference for an IO topic can be accounted for by van Oosten's (1986) distinction between basic-level and subordinate topics. The former are individual participants or elements inside the scene; the latter are an aspect or a part of such elements. A basic level topic is, according to van Oosten, more prototypical than a subordinate topic. In (18a) the cretonne is a component of the theatre, and in (18b), the veal is a (metaphorical) attribute of the Islamist plot. Therefore, these referents (if chosen as topics) would be subordinate topics, while the theater and the Islamic plot are basic-level topics.[18]

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18. Note that these sentences are headlines of web pages, so they are not preceded by any linguis-

4.1.3.   Passives.   As we have already recalled above, the thematic properties of passive constructions are analogous to those of unaccusative verbs. The subject has proto-patient properties, and the volitional agent, which is absent in unaccusative verbs, is reduced to an adjunct (the *by*-phrase) and can be omitted. It follows that a passive is used, like unaccusatives (cf. 15), when the volitional agent is not known by the speaker or is not relevant for the information that the speaker provides.

If a verb selects an IO with proto-agent properties except volition/control, its passive form will display the same sbj-IO pattern seen in the preceding Subsection. Again, the canonical sentence is the one with an IO topic, because the IO is more prototypical than the subject. No examples of passive verbs that select an IO argument were found in the corpus, but see the following example adapted from Salvi (1988 [2001]):

(19)   *A   Gianni   è   stato   assegnato   un   nuovo   incarico.*   (Italian)
        to Gianni is been   assigned   a   new   task
        'Gianni has been assigned a new task.'

Again, if the order of the arguments is reversed, like in (20), the sentence is acceptable only in a context where contrast is expected. For instance, the sentence might be used to point out that a new task has been assigned to Gianni and *not* to Paolo (contrary to what was previously believed by the participants in the conversation).

(20)   *Un   nuovo   incarico   è   stato   assegnato   a   Gianni.*   (Italian)
        a   new   task   is been   assigned   to Gianni
        'A new task has been assigned to Gianni.'

Note that a passive construction does not *determine* topic selection. The 'promotion' (to use Givón's term) of the DO to subject status does not make it a better topic, given that the (now) subject is still a patient. Of course, if the subject is the only argument of the verb, it is the only choice for topic selection, and may therefore be fronted to a topic position (although it may also remain post-verbal, like most subjects of unaccusative verbs do). But if another argument is present and has proto-agent properties, such as the IO in the examples above, that argument is more likely to be chosen as topic.

It is true that the same preference does not go to the *by*-phrase representing the volitional agent. A sentence like the one below is rather odd:

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tic context. It is precisely in cases where previous context is missing that the most prototypical topic is chosen, because there aren't discourse conditions that force a different argument in topic position.

(21) *Da Piero è stato assegnato un nuovo incarico (a*   (Italian)
      by Piero is been assigned a   new   task   (to
      Gianni).
      Gianni)
      'By Piero, a new task has been assigned to Gianni.'

However, we may recall that the volitional agent in a passive construction is not an argument, but an adjunct. I argue that this fact excludes it from a first selection of potential topics, and therefore prevents it from being preferred to the IO. As a matter of fact, the function of the passive voice is precisely that of reducing the importance of the volitional agent in the description of the event. In this perspective, it does not make sense that the volitional agent be chosen to express 'what the sentence is about'.

In conclusion, my idea is that a passive construction does not promote the subject to topic position, unless the subject is the only argument of the verb; nevertheless, it does favor a certain choice of topic, as it excludes from topic selection precisely the argument that in the active form would be the topic: the volitional agent. This exclusion does not necessarily make the patient subject the best topic: if present, a more agentive object will be preferred by the speaker.

I found 65 passive constructions in the Italian corpus, and only 2 in the Spanish one. Such a strong quantitative difference shows that Spanish prefers a different strategy to avoid mentioning the volitional agent. Specifically, Spanish seems to prefer arbitrary plurals. I will discuss this construction in the following Subsection.
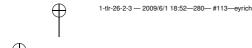
4.1.4. Absence of subject: arbitrary plurals and impersonal verbs. *Arbitrary plurals* (or *arbitrary subjects*) are another device that speakers use not to mention the participant that has control over the event described. In this case, the absence of the agent is not due to argument selection. The verb does select a volitional agent (as subject), but that subject is not represented by a full linguistic expression in the sentence, and its referential status is unknown.

As Jaeggli (1986) explains, arbitrary plurals have no phonetic realization in Italian and Spanish, and always appear in tensed clauses as third person plural subjects (cf. also Salvi (1988 [2001])). They are always animate and only occur in transitive, unergative intransitive, or raising sentences, which supports the idea that they represent the (volitional) agent in the sentence. I did not find any example in Italian, but I did find 4 examples in Spanish. One is given below:

(22) *A nuestro niño protagonista le   han*   (Spanish, Noc)
      to our   boy   protagonist   to-him$_{cl}$ they-have

> *hecho   un   regalo.*
> done   a   present
> 'Our protagonist boy received a present.'

The context is the same as in (15): the speaker does not know who sent the present to the boy, so she uses a structure that allows her to avoid mentioning the sender. The predicate selects a third argument, the IO, with the proto-agent property of possessor.

   With respect to topic selection, the volitional agent is not eliminated from the argument structure, but still, it is not the most prototypical topic. In fact, referentiality is a prototypical topic property (cf. Section 3.1), and in this construction the speaker cannot exactly identify the referent of the subject. It is indeed unlikely that the speaker use a non-identified entity as the topic about which she provides a piece of information, if there are other arguments that can properly carry out that function. Furthermore, an arbitrary subject lacks phonetic visibility, so no linguistic expression would occupy a sentence initial position, and a new, shifting topic (as I assume all topic expressions are) could not be represented by it.

   When the only argument besides the arbitrary subject is the proto-patient DO, the sentence is likely to be thetic (all focused), but there are also cases in which the DO is chosen as topic, as in (23):

(23)   *Y   la   rana* (…) *acaba   cayendo   en   una*   (Spanish, Noc)
       and   the   frog   ends-up   falling   in   a
       bandeja   que   un   camarero   por   ahí   estaba   pasando
       tray   that   a   waiter   for   there   was   carrying-by
       (…). *Entonces   este   plato   lo   terminan   en   la   mesa   de*
              so   this   dish   it$_{cl}$ they-end   in   the   table   of
       una   señora (…)
       a   lady
       'And the frog (…) ends up falling on a tray that a waiter was carrying by (…). So this dish, they bring it to the table of a lady'

The topic is even inanimate. Interestingly, however, *este plato* refers to the plate where the frog, the main character of the story, is sitting. Therefore, talking about the plate implies talking about the frog himself and where it is carried. This justifies a patient DO topic.

   Other than when they are arbitrary, subjects are absent in a sentence when the verb is impersonal. If the verb selects an IO, it is then likely that the IO will occupy a topic position, as in the (only) Spanish example I found in the corpus:

(24)   *Al   perro   y   al   niño   se   les   ve*   (Spanish, Noc)
       to-the   dog   and   to-the   boy   SE$_{cl}$ them   see

muy contentos.
very happy
'The dog and the boy look very happy.'

In the (only) example I found in the Italian corpus (see 25a), topic selection occurs between the IO and a sentential DO (*entrare nell'acqua* 'going into the water'), the former being the experiencer of the event described by the latter. The choice again goes to the IO, as shown by the oddness of the reversed order in (25b):

(25)　a.　*Alla　mamma gli　　tocca　entrare*　　　　　(It, Noc)
　　　　　　to-the　mother　to-her$_{cl}$ falls　to-go
　　　　　　nell'acqua　　per recuperare la　　barchetta.
　　　　　　into-the water　to　retrieve　　the　boat
　　　　　　'The mother has to go into the water to retrieve the boat.'
　　　b.　*Entrare　nell'acqua　　tocca　　alla　　mamma.*
　　　　　　to-go　　into-the water　happens　to-the　mother

The preference for the IO results clear, given its proto-agent properties. Besides, the mother is a basic-level topic (she is the protagonist of the event), while "going into the water" is the event itself, a superordinate topic, so the former is more prototypical. As for (25b), a context in which it is acceptable is where the mother is contrasted with other people and/or the event of going into the water is contrasted with other events. Clearly, this kind of contexts is very restricted.

4.2.　*Non-canonical sentences with non-subject topics*

In all examples described so far, an argument different from the subject is given topic status by placing it in a preverbal position. This occurs because the referent of the subject would not function as an optimal topic, so the speaker prefers to "talk about" a different referent. In the corpus, 16 out of 40 sentences with non-subject topic can be considered as non-canonical. What triggers the selection of a non-prototypical topic in these sentences? All throughout this article, I have underlined the fact that the requirement of a prototypical topic is fulfilled *only* if discourse factors do not overrule it. In many contexts, that is possible, namely speakers have the freedom to choose different discourse strategies without compromising the understanding of the information they provide and the coherence of their discourse. In such contexts, they will tend to choose the most prototypical topic at their disposal. As I already hinted at various times in this article, the same freedom of choice is not available in other contexts, where the information must be "packed" in a precise way in order for the

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speaker to convey it successfully. Such contexts require that either the sentence informative part (the focus) be contrasted with a previous piece of information in the discourse, or that the topic itself be contrasted with other topics in the discourse. In the corpus, 11 out 16 non-canonical sentences are used in contrastive contexts. I am now going to discuss such contexts. I will consider first cases of contrastive focus and then of contrastive topic.[19]

4.2.1. Correction and contrastive focus.   A discourse context in which the choice of topic is not free is when the speaker wants to warn the hearer of an incorrect belief or wants to deny the truth of a hearer's belief. If the prototypical argument is part of the information that needs to be contrasted, it cannot be uttered as topic. On the other hand, if the correct information concerns the less prototypical argument, that argument must be the topic. There are two clear cases of this type in the corpus: a Spanish one and an Italian one. Consider the Spanish one first. The frog finds himself in an elegant restaurant, where he frightens everybody with his presence. A woman felt sick after seeing the frog, and is now leaving the restaurant with her husband. The frog is watching the couple leaving (*eso* 'that' refers to that scene).

(26)   *La   rana   los   está   mirando,   feliz,*   (Spanish, Noc)
          the   frog   them$_{cl}$ is   watching   happy
          dándose   cuenta   de   que eso lo   ha   hecho ella.
          realizing   of   that that it$_{cl}$ has   done   she
          'The frog is watching them, happy to realize that HE was the cause of that.'

The speaker wants to highlight the (pleased) surprise of the frog realizing that *he* is the cause of the couple's departure. The information of the subordinate

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19. Of the five non-canonical clauses that are not contrastive, two can be accounted for by the fact that they have multiple topics: see Footnote 21. Two other clauses (an Italian and a Spanish one, depicting the same scene), can instead be explained by the fact that there is no great difference between the topic and the other argument in terms of prototypical properties. Consider for instance the Spanish example:

(i)   *Y   se   encuentra   que la   rana   la   tiene   cogida   al   brazo.*
        and   refl$_{cl}$ finds-out   that the frog   it$_{cl}$ she-keeps   held   at-the   arm
        'And she finds out that the frog is catching hold of her arm.'

La rana (the topic) is the subject of a small clause that constitutes an argument of *tener* 'to hold'. The difference between *la rana* and the other potential topic, the subject of *tener* (the woman who finds the frog catching hold of her arm), is not sharp in terms of prototypical properties: neither is a volitional agent, and the woman has the property of being human, but the frog is the (humanized) protagonist of the story. Furthermore, the woman is a continuous topic, so it is not referred to by a full expression, and that makes the addition of another topic less problematic.

sentence (the identification of the individual who caused the couple's depar-
ture) is in contrast with the frog's expectations. The subject is in focus because
it precisely refers to the individual that contradicts such expectations. Conse-
quently, the DO becomes the only candidate for topic position. Indeed, the DO
refers to the scene of the leaving couple, which is precisely what the unex-
pected information is about.

In the Italian example, the topic is the dislocated DO *la punizione* 'the pun-
ishment':

(27) *Insomma, secondo   loro, la punizione,*   (It., Noc)
     in-sum   according-to them the punishment
     stavolta, se   la   merita.
     this-time refl$_{cl}$ it$_{cl}$ deserves
     'In short, for them, this time, he does deserve a punishment'

The speaker is telling the same restaurant story, and is saying that the boy (the
frog's master), according to the boy's parents, deserves a punishment for the
disasters caused by the frog. *Stavolta* 'this time' indicates that the speaker is
contrasting this situation with others where the boy had not been punished.

4.2.2. Contrastive topic.   Another context that forces the choice of topic is
when two pieces of information *about two different topics* are contrasted. The
speaker's goal is to specify what information concerns a topic *in contraposition*
with the information that concerns a different topic. There are several examples
in the corpus. Consider (28):

(28) *Della cena   non gli   interessava, però*   (Italian, Noc)
     of-the dinner not to-him$_{cl}$ interested   but
     la   rana, poverina, l'aveva   quasi   persa
     the frog   poor   it$_{cl}$ he-had almost lost
     'As for the dinner, he didn't care, but the poor frog, he had almost lost
     it!'

The speaker is telling the restaurant story. A waiter has found the frog and is
about to throw it away. The boy owner of the frog recognizes his pet and asks
the waiter to give it back to him. The waiter does so but sends the boy and his
family away. The speaker says that the boy is sorry, not because the dinner is
spoiled, but rather because of the risk he ran to lose his dear pet. An explicit
contrast between the boy's feelings concerning the dinner and those concerning
the frog is given. Another example is (29):

(29) *Claro   esto, la tortuga sí   que lo vio.* (Spanish, Noc)
     of-course this the turtle   yes that it$_{cl}$ saw

'And the turtle did see that.'

The speaker is telling the story about the jealousy of the frog for a younger frog. The frog is told by the boy not to join him and the other pets on a boat, but the frog jumps on it when unseen, and then kicks the younger frog out of the boat. The speaker is contrasting the event of the frog kicking the young frog with the event of the frog jumping on the boat. The former was not seen by anybody, but the latter was seen by the turtle. The topic *esto* 'this one', referring to the kicking event, is then contrasted with the previous jumping event.

4.2.3.   Multiple topics.   Among the non-prototypical topics that I found in my corpus, some occur together with other topic expressions in the same sentence. Lambrecht (1994: 148) observes that when a sentence has more than one topic expression, "the point of the utterance is to inform the addressee of the nature of the *relation* between the referents as arguments in the proposition".[20] Consider (30). The topic position is occupied by the subject *esta* 'this one', which is the most prototypical argument, and by the less prototypical IO *a mí* 'to me'.

(30)   *Esta   a   mí   no   me   quiere   nada   bien.*   (Spanish, Noc)
        this   to   me   no   to-me$_{cl}$ want   nothing   good
        'This one does not like me at all.'

The sentence is taken from a story about two frogs: a big one and a younger one. The narrator is quoting the young frog. The subject *esta* 'this one' refers to the big frog. The sentence is about the *relation* between the big frog and the young frog, and the information is that the former does not like the latter. The prototypical properties of the two topic expressions are not crucial here. What is relevant is whether the *relation* between the two arguments is the best topic. That is not the case, as such a topic is not a basic level one. The subject, which represents one of the participants of the event and has proto-agent properties, would be a better topic than the relation between the two arguments. So the latter must have been chosen because it was appropriate in the specific context in which the sentence occurred. I would say that in this example, the context is one where the provided information contrasts with previous expectations, given that there are no apparent reasons for the big frog to hate the young frog.

Most sentences with multiple topics in my corpus occur in contrastive contexts. Consider the example below.

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20. In fact, the only part in focus is the predicate, and a predicate precisely expresses a relation between its arguments.

(31) *La   rana* (…) *comincia   a   guardare   le*   (Italian, Noc)
    the frog   begins   to   watch   the
    farfalle   pure lei. Però   la   rana,   le   farfalle   se
    butterflies also she but   the frog   the butterflies refl$_{cl}$
    le   mangia, e   infatti tira   fuori la   lingua …
    them$_{cl}$ eats   and in-fact she-pulls out the tongue
    'The frog too begins to watch the butterflies. But the frog EATS butter-
    flies, and in fact, he pulls his tongue out …'

The speaker previously said that the boy was watching the butterflies, and in
(31), he says that the frog is doing the same. The speaker provides some in-
formation about the relation between the frog and butterflies, namely that the
former usually eats the latter. The speaker is contrasting this relation with the
implicitly assumed one between the boy and butterflies (the boy does not usu-
ally eat them). So again, the (non-prototypical) topic (the relation between the
frog and the butterflies) is justified by the specific (contrastive) context in which
it is relevant to talk about it in comparison with the relation between the boy
and the butterflies.[21]

4.3.   Canonical sentences and contrast

Canonical sentences do not have to occur in contrastive or other marked con-
texts, because the topic expression is chosen by the speaker on the basis of the
prototypical properties of its referent. As a matter of fact, most canonical sen-
tences with non-subject topics in my data occur in unmarked contexts, where
the topic is simply a shifting one, and no contrast is implied with other propo-
sitions. Among the nine Italian sentences, none occurs in a contrastive context;
among the 15 Spanish ones, 11 are clearly not contrastive.

   Nevertheless, the presence of a canonical sentence in a contrastive context
does not have to be excluded completely. It may perfectly occur that a proto-
typical topic, other than being a good topic because of its inherent properties,
is also necessary in the discourse to express contrast. A couple of examples are
given below:

(32) a. *Y   a   todos parece gustarle, pero*   (Spanish, Noc)
        and to all   it-seems to-like-it$_{cl}$ but
        a   la   rana no.
        to the frog not

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21. It must be further noted that, even when a sentence with multiple topics is not justified by
a contrastive context (there are two such cases in the corpus), the non-prototypical topic is
made acceptable by the fact that it is associated with a topic that *is* itself prototypical.

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'And everybody seems to like it, but the frog doesn't.'

b.   *Giovanni e   gli altri amici   si allontanano*   (It., Noc)
Giovanni and the other friends go-away

e   lei   rimane   da sola.
and she remains by herself

'Giovanni and the other friends go away, and she remains alone.'

In the sentence with a psych verb in (32a), the feeling of dislike of the frog
is contrasted with the opposite feeling of everybody else. In (32b), where the
canonical sentence has a topic with the function of subject, the contrast is be-
tween the fact that Giovanni and the other friends left while the frog stayed
behind.

The difference between canonical and non-canonical sentences then is not
given by the possibility to occur in a contrastive context, but by the expecta-
tion or not of a contrastive context. While a non-canonical construction clearly
signals a contrast effect, a canonical construction does not signal any particular
pragmatic effect. The sentence *can* be used to contrast or correct a previous
sentence, but that use is not exclusive.

From this difference between canonical and non-canonical sentences we ex-
plain why preverbal subjects and preverbal IOs of psychological and unac-
cusative verbs are not usually associated with a contrastive interpretation, while
CLLDed DOs of transitive verbs or subjects of psychological and unaccusative
verbs are naturally interpreted as contrastive. Note further that such interpreta-
tions are determined by the thematic/semantic characteristics of the arguments
in topic position, and are therefore motivated independently from the syntactic
positions of the topics.

5.   Conclusions

In this article I have illustrated the reasons for a non-subject argument to be
preferred to the subject as sentence topic. A topic can be prototypical or not,
depending on how its thematic/semantic properties reflect humans' preference
to talk about certain things and not others. I have called *canonical* those sen-
tences that have a prototypical topic, and *non-canonical* those that do not have
a prototypical topic. I have shown that canonical sentences with a non-subject
topic generally have Sbj-IO predicates (some psychological and unaccusative
verbs), where the subject has proto-patient properties, and the IO has proto-
agent properties, though it lacks volition/control. Passives, impersonal verbs or
predicates with an arbitrary subject may also have a prototypical topic object.
Non-canonical sentences, instead, are generally constructions with a CLLDed
DO topic. The requirement of a prototypical topic is overruled in these sen-

tences by discourse needs. Precisely, non-canonical sentences are generally used in contrastive contexts: in fact, the need to contrast a certain argument forces it to be focused, and therefore not to be chosen as topic, even if it has prototypical properties. It follows that while a contrastive interpretation of a canonical sentence, although possible, is not expected, a contrastive interpretation of a non-canonical sentence is expected, because it explains the presence of the non-prototypical topic.

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