Inherent topicality and object foregrounding in Early Modern English*

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This paper examines Early Modern English (EModE) passive constructions, specifically the factors that render a non-agent NP inherently topical (ie human and animacy features, semantic role and degree of definiteness). The aim of this study is to ascertain whether these factors determine, as in Present-day English (PE), the eligibility of non-agent NPs to become topics via passivisation in this period. Statistical data drawn from the *Helsinki Corpus* show that, in contrast with PE, only the degree of definiteness of non-agent NPs conditions the use of the passive as an object foregrounding device in EModE. Passive constructions in this period, therefore, run counter to the PE cross-linguistic tendency, reflected in the animacy and semantic hierarchies, to topicalise human, animate, benefactive NPs over non-human, non-animate, patient NPs.

1 Object foregrounding function of the passive

The object foregrounding function of the passive, which has also been referred to as the *topicalisation* function (Givón 1981 and 1982), refers to the assignment of subject/topic or merely topic function to a non-agent. In the case of the passive, this process involves the active object becoming passive subject, which Givón terms *clausal topic assignment*: 'the subject/agent of the active clause ceases to be the *topic*, and a non-actor argument of the active then assumes, by whatever means, the clausal-topic function' (1981: 168; cf also Langacker and Munro 1975; Frajzyngier 1982; Foley and van Valin 1985; Keenan 1985; Givón 1994: 9; Vezzosi 1996).[1]

When discussing the passive in relation to topicalisation, most scholars distinguish between two divergent senses of topic:[2] (i) Certain authors consider topic as the first propositional constituent of the clause; it is thus identified with initial position in the clause. (ii) Other authors define topic as the constituent which states what the clause is about; in this approach, topic is equated with

given information. The paragraphs that follow briefly outline these two notions and their relevance to the passive construction.

As has just been mentioned, some definitions of *topic* identify topic with the initial constituent of the clause. This is the case of, firstly, transformational and relational grammars, and also of authors such as Chafe (1976) and Li, Thompson (1976), who define topic as the initial constituent, which sets the individual framework within which the clause holds. Thirdly, Halliday (1968), Hinds (1975) and Hutchins (1975), among others, apply the term *theme* to the clause element which sets the stage or is the point of departure for the clause. Although these authors do not take into account the given/new status of the initial constituent, they assume, however, that unmarked topics or themes represent given information: 'other things being equal, a speaker will choose the Theme from within what is Given' (Halliday 1985: 278).

Those linguists who identify topic with initial position in the clause maintain that the passive is a topicalising construction because it places a non-agentive NP in clause initial position. In other words, an element which is not normally presented as topical in the active will occupy topic position for emphatic, contrastive purposes. This specific use of the passive can be compared to other fronting strategies, such as topicalisation and left-dislocation (cf Foley and van Valin 1985: 300–3, Keenan 1985: 243ff, Shibatani 1985: 844 and Doherty 1996: 631).

With respect to the second of the two intrpretations of topic mentioned above, some scholars use the labels topic (or theme) and focus with the meaning they originally had when first introduced by the Prague School. In this framework, topic (or theme) was defined as the clausal constituent with the lowest degree of communicative dynamism (CD), this latter concept being defined by Firbas as 'the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication' (1966: 270). The constituent with the lowest degree of CD is that providing old or given information (cf Firbas 1964),[3] since old information is shared by both interlocutors and is thus considered as the least relevant type of information. Focus, on the other hand, is defined as the constituent with the highest degree of CD, ie that constituent which conveys the pragmatically most salient information. Since the providing of new information is what motivates an utterance, new information is most salient, and is, therefore, the focus.

Other authors identifying topic with given information and focus with new information are Lyons (1968), Dahl (1974) and Dik (1980), for instance, who characterise topic as the entity about which something is predicated in a given setting. Similarly, Siewierska (1984: 219) notes that given and new information

'are primarily associated with two distinct pragmatic functions, namely that of topic and focus respectively'. Quirk et al are of the same opinion: 'There is commonly a one-to-one correlation between "given" in contrast to "new" information on the one hand, and theme in contrast to focus on the other' (1985: 1361).

The correlation between topic and given information, and between focus and new information, is relevant for the choice between active and passive because, as is well known, in English, as in the vast majority of languages, the unmarked positions of topic and focus are, respectively, clause-initial and clause-final, by virtue of their conveying given and new information.[4] Old information, therefore, precedes new information in unmarked constructions. The passive is a useful device to restore the unmarked given/new order of information in those contexts where the subject-agent is new information and the object-patient is given information, that is, where the order is new/given, and, therefore, marked. Such a restoration is achieved by placing the non-actor, which is given information, in topic position and by transferring the agent to focus position in the clause.

As can be gathered from the preceding, the correlation between given information and topic determines the choice of given NPs as topics. Such a correlation is called discourse topicality by Siewierska (1984: 222), since it is contextual, discourse factors that determine the topicality of the NP. There are other factors, however, that, irrespective of the given/new status of the NPs, also determine the eligibility of such NPs as topics over others. Thus, despite the fact that any NP may function as either topic or focus of a clause,[5] some NPs are more likely to have one of these functions than others. Statistical data gleaned from cross-language investigations show that, in the case of nominal topics, eligibility to act as such also depends on (i) the degree of animacy of the referent of the NP, (ii) its semantic role, and (iii) the degree of definiteness. As regards (i) and (ii), Siewierska (1984: 221) and Croft (1990: 112), among others,[6] note the existence of two topicality hierarchies, namely the Animacy Hierarchy and the Semantic Hierarchy, so that the argument highest on both of these becomes interpreted as the topic-subject:

The Animacy Hierarchy:

human → nonhuman
1st p → 2nd p → 3rd p animate → inanimate

The Semantic Hierarchy:

agent ⟶ recipient/ benefactive ⟶ patient ⟶ oblique

The most likely candidates for topic, therefore, will be those with a human referent and an agentive role. The animacy and semantic hierarchies respond to the human tendency to talk primarily about human agents. At the same time, the fact that humans tend to talk more about agents than about patients determines the higher frequency of active clauses over passive ones. In other words, human agents are most commonly chosen as topics, and, given that 'the subject slot is the topic slot', clauses are most likely to have human agents as subjects, and hence to be in the active voice (Givón 1979: 58, 64).

The third factor that determines the choice of an NP as topic is the degree of definiteness. The relation between definiteness and topicality lies in that, on the one hand, definite NPs are topics 'which the speaker assumes the hearer can identify uniquely, is familiar with, are within his file (or *register*) and thus *available* for quick retrieval' (Givón 1983: 10). Definite NPs are used, therefore, when the speaker believes that his interlocutor will be able to identify, from the possible range of referents, the one he has in mind (Chafe 1976: 39). On the other hand, indefinite NPs are normally introduced for the first time, and, consequently, not familiar and more difficult to identify. Hence, the choice of indefinite NPs as clausal topics is rarer.[7] In short, clauses with definite, human agentive subjects/topics are informationally the prototypical unmarked constructions cross-linguistically. These features of NPs, namely animacy, semantic characteristics and definiteness, are labelled by Siewierska 'inherent topicality' (1984: 222), because they determine the eligibility of an NP for topic with independence of contextual and discourse factors.[8]

The aim of this paper is to ascertain whether the inherent topicality factors lead, as in PE, to the topicalisation of a non-agent NP through the strategy of passivisation in the EModE period.[9] For this purpose, the *Helsinki Corpus* has been used. The samples used and the data drawn from the corpus are discussed in sections 2 and 3 below, respectively.

2 The corpus

The present study is based on linguistic data retrieved from the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. The sample used comprises about 153,000 words out of the

500,000 in the EModE section of the corpus (1500–1710). As is well-known, the sample size depends on the phenomenon under study, and, as Raumolin-Brunberg (1991: 53) points out, 'at the introduction of a syntactic study the researcher seldom knows the real frequency of the phenomenon under examination [...]. This is why it is difficult to know in advance how large one's sample should be'. For this reason, a preliminary overview of these 153,000 words was necessary; it revealed that this sample was sufficient for my purposes, since it contains numerous instances of passive constructions, and the passive types represented in them are repeatedly met with. There was, therefore, no indication that the analysis of a larger sample would result in the addition of relevant instances, or would modify the proportional distribution of such instances in any significant way.

Table 1 displays the number of words examined, and the ratio of passive constructions with respect to active constructions in each chronological subperiod. The count of active constructions was restricted to those for which a passive counterpart would be available, that is, to those active transitive constructions with an overt object eligible to become passive subject.

Table 1: Number of words examined, with indication of actives and passives and of relative frequency of passives with respect to actives

TABLE 1	WORDS	ACTIVES	% ACT	PASSIVES	% PASS
E1 (1500–1570)	50,000	2,236	78.5	612	21.4
E2 (1570–1640)	48,000	2,550	77.9	722	22.0
E3 (1640–1710)	55,000	2,893	75.8	922	24.1
TOTAL	148,000	7,679	77.2	2,256	22.7

As for text-types, among those classified as formal by the compilers of the *Helsinki Corpus*, I singled out *Statutes, Sermons* and *Science*; among informal text-categories, I selected *Private Letters, Drama* and *Fiction*. Table 2 provides the breakdown for the text-types studied and the number of words analysed in each:

Table 2: Number of words examined in each text-type

STATUTES	37,000	PRIVATE LETTERS	37,000
SCIENCE	25,000	DRAMA	19,000
SERMONS	15,000	FICTION	20,000
	TOTAL	153,000	

3 Inherent topicality and object foregrounding in EModE

As pointed out in section 1 above, the factors that make an NP eligible to be singled out as topic are related, among other factors, to its inherent topicality, namely, firstly, to its human and animacy features, secondly, to its semantic role, and, thirdly, to its degree of definiteness. The sections that follow examine these three factors in the EModE corpus.

3.1 Human and animacy features

In PE, those NPs whose referent is human [+H] are more likely candidates to become topics than those whose referent is non-human [-H]. Among non-human referents, those being animate [+A] are more likely to be selected as topics than inanimate ones [-A]. Therefore, it is NPs whose referents bear the [+H+A] features which tend to occupy topic position. Situations arise in which the patient of an active clause is human and animate, while the agent is [-H-A]. Passivisation, by promoting the patient to topic position, serves the purpose of topicalising that NP whose characteristics make it more eligible to become topic. In order to ascertain the extent to which the passives in the corpus serve this purpose, the human and animacy features of the subject and agent NPs were examined and compared. Table 3 shows the results:

Table 3: Human and animacy features of the subject (S) and agent (A)

1. S= [+H+A] / A= [- H- A]	33	9.4%	7. S= [- H+A] / A= [- H+A]	1	0.2%
2. S= [- H- A] / A= [+H+A]	84	24.06%	8. S= *as* / A= [+H+A]	8	2.2%
3. S= [+H+A] / A= [+H+A]	34	9.7%	9. S= *as* / A= [- H- A]	15	4.2%
4. S= [- H- A] / A= [- H- A]	69	19.7%	10.A= [- H- A] / S= CL	14	4.01%
5. S= [+H+A] / A= [-H+A]	1	0.2%	11.A= [+H+A] / S= CL	89	25.5%
6. S= [- H+A] / A= [+H+A]	1	0.2%	TOTAL	349	100%

Table 3 displays all the combinations found in the agent passives in the corpus, which amount to 349 out of the total 2,256 (cf Table 1). If we analyse them closely, we find that only combinations 1 and 2 are significant. The reasons why columns 3–11 are hardly of any relevance are as follows. Combinations 3 and 4 correspond to passives in which the subject and agent share the same human and animacy features. In such cases, illustrated in [1] and [2] respectively, the features under study are irrelevant as regards triggering the use of the passive, since, as just mentioned, there is no discrepancy between subject and agent in that respect.

[1] *Also Ser James and the Person of Sladeborne thynk that my cosyn John was puseynd, and that* ***his servant*** *was hyryd to do hit by* ***my broder Sir Edward****, and yf it so be then he forfets all.*
(|QE1_XX_CORP_EBEAUM: 71).

[2] *For surely the Kynges Highnes wolde now conceiue a great suspicion against me, and thinke that* ***the matter of the nonne of Canterbury*** *was all contriued by* ***my drift****.*
(|QE1_XX_CORP_MORELET: 105).

Secondly, combinations 5–7 correspond to passives in which either the passive agent (example [3]), or the subject (example [4]), or both (example [5]) have an animal as referent. Only one instance was found for each case, which means that NPs with animate and non-human referents are poorly represented in the corpus and do not warrant any conclusions.

[3] I love Hunting, but wou'd not, like (Acteon), be eaten up by my own Dogs;
(|QE3_XX_COME_FARQUHA: 33).

Example [3], in which the subject is [+H+A] and the agent is [-H+A], is in compliance with the animacy hierarchy (cf section 1), which specifies that NPs with human referents are more likely to become topics than NPs with non-human referents. The reverse is the case with [4] below:

[4] ***This*** *is a Creature so officious, that 't****will*** *be known to every one at one time or other, so busie, and so impudent, that* ***it*** *will be intruding it self in every ones company, and so proud and aspiring withall, that* ***it*** *fears not to trample on the best, and affects nothing so much as a Crown; feeds and lives very high, and (...) will never be quiet till* ***it*** *has drawn blood:* ***it is troubled at nothing so much as at a man that scratches his head****, as knowing that man is plotting and contriving some mischief against it, and that makes it oftentime sculk into some meaner and lower place, and run behind a mans back, though it go very much against the hair*;
(|QE3_EX_SCIO_HOOKE: 29).

In [4], the subject, whose referent is a louse, bears the feature [-H], and has been promoted to topic position despite the fact that the agent is human and animate. In this case, the clause is in the passive in order to maintain the same topic, as in the paragraphs before, which also refer to a louse. Finally, in example [5] there is no discrepancy between the features of the subject and the agent, since they both have animals as referents:

[5] ***The Cat*** *was not so madly alured by* ***the Foxe****,*
To run into the snares, was set for him doubtlesse,
For he leapt in for myce, and this sir Iohn for
madnes.
(|QE1_XX_COME_STEVENS: 62).

Coming back to combinations 8–9 in Table 3, these correspond to passives in *as*-comment clauses,[10] such as the ones in [6] and [7] below, where the subject is the relative *as*, and hence acts as structural and textual connector with respect to the preceding context.

[6] *And that ev~y Capteigne (...) shall uppon the payne afore seid pay (...) the Wag~ ratably as is allowed unto theym by* ***the Kyng oure Sov~aigne Lorde or the Tresourer of his Warres*** *without lessyng or withdrawyng of*

any parte therof.
(|QE1_STA_LAW_STAT3: 6).

[7] *And be it nevertheles inacted by thaucthoritie aforesaide, That if anye of the saide brode Plunckett~ Azures Blewes or other coloured Clothes, beinge well scowred thicked mylled and fullie dried, shall conteyn in weight any lesse then threscore and eight poundes at the leste, that then everie of the saide Clothiers therin offendinge shall incurr doble suche Penaltyes and Forfeytures, for everie Pounde soe wantinge of the saide Weight, and not weyinge after suche rate as ys before exp~ssed in and by* ***the saide Statute made in the Fyfte and Sixt yeres of Kinge Edwarde the Sixte****, (...)*
(|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: 9).

Lastly, in combinations 10–11 the subject is a clause, a case illustrated in [8] and [9]. Consequently, comparison between the subject and agent, as regards the animacy and human features, is out of the question:

[8] *Provided alwaies and be it enacted by* ***the authoritie of this p~sent Parliament, That the Correcc~on and Punishment of such as shall offend againste this Acte, or any parte therof, within either of the two Univ~sities of this Realme, or the p~cinct~ or Liberties of the same, shall be done upon the Offenders, and Justice shall be ministred in this behalfe accordinge to the intent and true meaninge of this Lawe, (...)***
(|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: 15).

[9] *Be it enacted by* ***the Quenes most Excellent Majestie the Lordes Sp~uall & Temporall and the Co~mons in this p~sent Parliament assembled****, That yf any p~son or p~sons shall after Fortie daies next after the ende of this Session of Parliament, make or cause to be made any Cables of any olde and overworn Stuffe w=ch= shall conteyne above seaven ynches in compasse****, Then everie p~son soe offendinge shall forfeyte (...)*
(|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: 7).

Only combinations 1 and 2 in Table 3, therefore, are significant as regards the human and animacy features of the subject and agent. These two patterns show that only 9.4 per cent of passives topicalise a patient NP whose referent is higher than the agent in the animacy hierarchy, a case illustrated in [10]:

[10] *trustyng soo to accomplysse and fulfyll yowr parentall com~andments in the passage of myne erudicion, that* ***yow, my good father****, schall therewith be ryght welcontentyd by* ***Gods helpe, the wiche with hys grace hee***

send hus.
(|QE1_XX_CORP_GCROMW: 123).

The reverse case, that in which a [-H-A] patient is promoted to topic position despite the fact that the agent is [+H+A], and should, therefore, have become topic, takes place in more than 24 per cent of the passives, as illustrated in [11]:

[11] *But as the Earth, the Mother of all Creatures here below, sends up all its Vapours and proper emissions at the command of the Sun, and yet requires them again to refresh her own Needs, and they are deposited between them both in the bosome of a Cloud as a common receptacle, that they may cool his Flames, and yet descend to make her Fruitful: So are* ***the proprieties of a Wife*** *to be dispos'd of by* ***her Lord****;*
(|QE3_IR_SERM_JETAYLO: 12).

In the vast majority of cases, therefore, the passive subject is [-H-A], while the passive agent is [+H+A]; that is, the subject is lower on the animacy hierarchy than the *by* agent phrase.

We must, then, conclude that, contrary to PE (Givón 1979: 58; Siewierska 1984: 222), the animacy and human features of NPs are not a determining factor for the use of the passive in EModE, at least to the same extent as today. Such a conclusion seems to go against the cross-linguistic tendency to talk about human and, specially, first person subjects (see, among others, Strang 1970: 151 and Givón 1979: 58), and appears to confirm the data adduced by Söderlind (1951–58) and Strang (1970) for earlier periods of the language. Strang, for example, argues, in relation to indirect passives, that the tendency to prefer IOs as subjects can already be seen at work in EModE, as is demonstrated by the fact that indirect passives are gradually consolidated in this period. However, she also points out that the apparently higher proportion of direct passives in EModE with respect to PE also shows that the tendency is only in its inception (1970: 151; see also Söderlind 1951–58: 24). The data relating to the animacy and human features of the NPs involved in the passives in the corpus lead to similar conclusions: though such features determine the use of the passive in 9.4 per cent of the cases (33 examples of this type were found), more than 24 per cent (84 examples) have inanimate, non-human subjects vs animate, human agents.

In order to further confirm this hypothesis, namely that the tendency to preferably topicalise human animate NPs in particular was not yet well established in EModE, I also examined the human and animacy features of the omitted agents in the 1,907 agentless passives in the corpus. Analysing the human and animacy features of covert agents is possible because such features are either

inferable from knowledge of the world or are contextually retrievable. The aim of this analysis is to ascertain whether it is those NPs lower in the animacy hierarchy that are preferably backgrounded, that is, whether the lack of inherent topicality of agents determines their being suppressed by passivisation. The survey of the animacy features of the backgrounded agents in the 1,907 agentless passives yielded the results shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Human and animacy features of the agent in agentless passives

TABLE 4	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
[+H+A]	1,754	91.9%
[- H- A]	136	7.1%
NOT POSS.[11]	17	0.8%
TOTAL	1,907	100%

As is obvious from the data in Table 4, the backgrounding role of agentless passives does not depend on the animacy features of the covert agents, since the vast majority of these, namely 91.9 per cent, are human and animate; that is, they are inherently topical and have been, nevertheless, backgrounded. Therefore, the analysis of both the covert and overt agents in the corpus confirms that the cross-linguistic tendency to topicalise human NPs is of little significance in EModE, in compliance with Strang's (1970: 151) opinion that this tendency was not yet firmly established in the English language in the period under study.

3.2 Semantic role

Another factor that determines the eligibility of an NP to become topic, and may, therefore, lead to the use of the passive voice in the corpus, is the semantic role of the NP in question. According to the semantic hierarchy, the most likely candidates to become topics are NPs with the role of agent, followed by those with the role of recipient/benefactive, patient and oblique (cf section 1 and Siewierska 1984: 221). This hierarchy accounts, inter alia, for the higher frequency of actives over passives in English, since the former have agents as subjects/topics; secondly, it also accounts for the preference for indirect over direct passives in PE (Huddleston 1984: 440–41), since the former topicalise NPs

whose semantic role is that of recipient/benefactive while the latter topicalise NPs with the role of patients.

In order to ascertain whether the semantic role of NPs is a determining factor for the topicalisation of such NPs via passivisation in the corpus, I analysed the semantic role of the topicalised NP in the passives of ditransitive clauses. As is obvious, passives from monotransitive clauses were not examined, since they only have the possibility of topicalising the patient NP. As for passives from ditransitive actives, the only two possible semantic roles that the NP subject of the passive can have in both EModE and PE are either that of patient, if it is the DO that is promoted to subject, or, in the case of IOs promoted to passive subjects, that of recipient/benefactive.

Table 5: Passives from ditransitive actives

TABLE 5	E1	E2	E3	TOTAL
DITRANSITIVE PASSIVES	43	50	47	140
IO AS SUBJECT	4 9.3%	15 30.0%	13 27.6%	32 22.8%
DO AS SUBJECT	39 90.6%	35 70.0%	34 72.3%	108 77.1%

Judging from the findings of the present study, the semantic role of the NPs involved in passivisation is less important as a determining factor in EModE than in PE. Contrary to PE, the proportion of topicalised benefactives in the corpus is lower than the proportion of topicalised patients. In other words, the PE tendency to topicalise NPs with roles high up in the semantic hierarchy is not observed in my EModE corpus.

Passivisation of IOs is greatly restricted in EModE, not really because of semantic factors but rather because the indirect passive was only recently established in the language and was still undergoing a process of consolidation. In fact, the data set out in Table 5 confirm the findings of Söderlind (1951–58), Kisbye (1952), Visser (1963–73), Strang (1970), Denison (1993) and Moessner (1994) that, in the early stages of the development of passives from ditransitive

structures, benefactives were less commonly promoted to subject position by passivisation than direct objects. As Strang (1970: 151) notes,

> Thus, though we understand them, we would hardly now produce such passive structures as Shakespeare's *attorneys are deny'd me* or *it was told me* or Bacon's *Ther was given us*... In each case the normal modern form would use first person pronoun (transformed indirect object) as subject.

In this respect, the behaviour of *tell* as a passive ditransitive verb in the corpus is noteworthy. There are only two instances: one corresponds to the case cited by Strang [12], with the DO as subject, and the other to the kind of passive we would expect in PE, ie that with the IO as subject [13]. As might have been expected, the first dates back to E1, the second to E3.

[12] *Come on fellow* ***it is tolde me*** *thou art a shrew iwysse, Thy neighbours hens y=u= takest, and playes the two legged foxe Their chikens & their capons to, & now and then their Cocks.*
(|QE1_XX_COME_STEVENS: 54).

[13] ***I was told*** *this day that the heralds had yet a quarter of their work to do:*
(|QE3_XX_CORP_ANHATTO: 98).

Söderlind (1951–58: 24) makes the same claim in the light of the evidence from John Dryden's prose, namely that passives of ditransitive verbs in EModE normally have the DO, rather than the IO, as subject. He concludes that, in ModE, the passive of ditransitives with the direct object as subject is more in favour than nowadays. To illustrate this he adduces examples like [14]:

[14] XIII Sat 15
Now if ***it may be permitted*** *me to go back again to the consideration of epic poetry ...* (Söderlind 1951–58: 23).

Here the verb *permit* is used in the direct passive, a construction that would be highly unlikely in PE. This verb does not occur as a ditransitive verb in my corpus, but *allow*, which is both syntactically and semantically very similar, appears three times with the DO as subject, as illustrated in [15]. My findings, once more, coincide with those of Söderlind:

[15] *and the other halfe to such person or p~sons as shall sue or informe for the same in any Court of Recorde, by Action of Debte Bill Plainte or Information, wherein* ***no Essoyne Protection or Wager of Lawe shall be allowed to the Defendant****.*
(|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: 19).

My data confirm, therefore, that it is still the passive with the DO as subject that prevails, since 77.1 per cent of the passives from ditransitive actives have the DO as subject, while the IO/benefactive is promoted to subject only in 22.8 per cent of the cases. However, as can be observed in Table 5, the indirect passive becomes gradually more frequent, which suggests that this recently established form is already undergoing a process of steady consolidation in EModE.[12]

3.3 Degree of definiteness

The last factor relating to the inherent topicality of the patient NP is its degree of definiteness. As was mentioned in section 1, topic NPs are most commonly definite, since it is normally definite NPs that convey given information and allude to referents easily identifiable by the hearer/reader. With the aim of ascertaining whether passivisation in the corpus was or was not determined by a higher degree of definiteness of the patient NP with respect to the agent NP, the degree of definiteness of both NPs was examined in each passive example. Passives in which either the agent or the subject was realised by means of a clause (103 examples in all) were not considered, since no comparison regarding the degree of definiteness is possible in such circumstances. For similar reasons, the 23 passive *as*-comment clauses in the corpus were not considered either. With these exceptions, the NPs involved in the passives in the corpus were found to fall into the following classes, ordered, according to their degree of definiteness, from most to least definite:

1. Pronouns: both personal pronouns and relative pronouns have been included here. As is well known, the most obvious means for a referent to become definite involves prior mention in the discourse (Chafe 1976: 40). Thus, a referent that has been mentioned before is normally pronominalised in subsequent NPs, as in ***My sister*** *arrived;* ***she*** *was told to leave immediately.* As for relative pronouns, such as *who* in *she is the girl who was told to leave early*, they also involve prior mention in the discourse by means of their antecedent, so that the referent is identified unambiguously and is, therefore, definite.
2. Proper N: this category includes both proper nouns and proper names (for the distinction, cf Huddleston 1984: 229–30). These are 'definite by definition' (Chafe 1976: 39), since they label specific referents directly.[13]
3. Definite NPs: they may refer either to unique referents, such as *the moon*, or to referents that have been mentioned before (Chafe 1976: 39).
4. Indefinite NPs: these introduce new information, referents that the hearer/reader cannot identify. Indefinite NPs may at times refer to a unique refer-

ent when they are used generically, as in *a battle is a fight between armies* (Siewierska 1984: 222).

Tables 6–8 show the results of the analysis of the NPs involved in each agent passive example in terms of their degree of definiteness. Table 6 below provides the figures for the subject/agent combinations in the corpus in which the subject is more definite than the agent; the percentages give the relative proportion of each combination with respect to the total number of clauses examined in terms of their degree of definiteness, namely 223. Relevant examples of each of those combinations are given in [16]–[19].

Table 6: Form of the subject and agent NPs (subject more definite than the agent)

TABLE 6	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
PRONOUN / DEFINITE NP	39	17.4%
DEFINITE NP / INDEFINITE NP	32	14.3%
PRONOUN / INDEFINITE NP	14	6.2%
PRONOUN / PROPER N	10	4.4%
TOTAL	95	42.6%

[16] *Forasmuche as **the science and connyng of Physyke and Surg~ie** (...) ys daily within this Royalme exc~cised by **a grete multitude of ignoraunt p~sones** of whom the grete partie have no man~ of insight in the same nor in any other kynde of lernyng (...)*
(|QE1_STA_LAW_STAT3: 11).

[17] *And where as **I** am enformed by **my sone Heron** of the losse of our barns and our neighbours also with all the corne that was therin, (...)*
(|QE1_XX_CORP_MORELET: 96).

[18] *for stubble though it be quickly kindled, yet it is as soon extinguished, if **it** be not blown by **a pertinacious breath**, or fed with new materials.*
(|QE3_IR_SERM_JETAYLO: 10).

[19] *but for as much as those tables be not altogether truely Printed, and for that **they** haue beene lately corrected, and made perfect by (^**Clauius**^), who doth set downe the saide Tables in quarto and not in folio, (...)*
(|QE2_EX_SCIO_BLUNDEV: 14).

As can be seen in Table 6, 42.6 per cent of the agent passives in the corpus have a subject which is more definite than the agent. Furthermore, in the majority of the passives within this group, namely in 63[14] out of the 95 passives, the subject is a pronoun, ie the most definite type of constituent and one which indicates that the referent has been mentioned before. Table 7 shows the figures for those passives in which the subject is less definite than the agent; the percentages, again, show the relative proportion with respect to the total number of passives analysed (223).

Table 7: Form of the subject and agent NPs (subject less definite than the agent)

TABLE 7	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
INDEFINITE NP / DEFINITE NP	25	11.2%
DEFINITE NP / PRONOUN	13	5.8%
INDEFINITE NP / PRONOUN	2	0.8%
TOTAL	40	17.9%

The agent passives in which the subject is more indefinite than the agent represent 17.9 per cent of the total, and most of them have an indefinite NP as subject and a definite NP as agent, a case illustrated in [20]:

[20] *To the end that **an Accompt** may bee taken by **the said Master and Wardens or theire Deputy or Deputies** thereof upon Paine that every Person and Persons offending herein shall forfeite and pay (...)*
(|QE3_STA_LAW_STAT7: 7).

Particularly remarkable are the other two patterns represented in Table 7; in both, the agent is realised by means of a pronoun, the category of nominal that comes highest on the definiteness hierarchy. According to Siewierska, passive

clauses with pronominal agents are rare in PE, and 'for many speakers of English are acceptable only under a contrastive interpretation' (1984: 224). Among pronominal agents, it is first person human agents that are less likely to be demoted to passive agent position, since they are at the top of both the animacy and the definiteness hierarchies, and are, therefore, the most likely candidates to be topics. Yet, in the corpus, I have come across one instance of this type, ie with the first person personal pronoun as agent. Witness:

[21] *I may hope to see you at Easter,* ***which time*** *will be much longed for by* ***me****.*
(|QE2_XX_CORP_HARLEY: 90).

Other pronominal agents in the corpus are the pronouns *them, his* and *her*, found in four instances each, and the pronoun *it*, in two. Example [22] illustrates the third pattern in Table 7, namely indefinite NP/pronoun:

[22] *Nor secondly, is this last more difficult to be explicated, then that* ***a Body****, as Silver for Instance, put into a weak (^Menstruum^) , as unrectified Aqua fortis should, when it is put in a great heat, be there dissolved by* ***it****, and not before;*
(|QE3_EX_SCIO_HOOKE: 9).

Finally, Table 8 provides the figures for those patterns in which subject and agent are on an equal level as regards definiteness; relevant examples are given in [23]–[26].

Table 8: Form of the subject and agent NPs when they both have the same degree of definiteness

TABLE 8	**NUMBER**	**PERCENTAGE**
DEFINITE NP / DEFINITE NP	63	28.2%
INDEFINITE NP / INDEFINITE NP	14	6.2%
PRONOUN / PRONOUN	7	3.1%
PROPER N / PROPER N	4	1.7%
TOTAL	88	39.4%

[23] ***the fyrst instruccyon*** *is offerd vnto vs of* ***these fyrst wordes of the gospell***.
(|QE1__IR_SERM_FISHER: 2).

[24] *(...) manye idle vagrante and wicked p~sons have harboured themselfes there, and* ***div~se remote places of the Realme*** *have bene disapointed of* ***Workmen*** *and dispeopled;*
(|QE2_STA_LAW_STAT4: 4).

[25] *And* ***Peter*** *was made by* ***christ***.
(|QE1_IR_SERM_FISHER: 4).

[26] *Mistris (^Louelesse^) (sayd Sir (^George^)) I am well acquainted with a good neighbour of yours, called Maister (^Winchcombe^) , who is my very good friend,and to say the truth* ***you*** *are commended vnto mee by* ***him***.
(|QE2_NI_FICT_DELONEY: 42).

In sum, as regards the definiteness of the NPs involved in the passives in the corpus, the findings reveal that 135 agent passives (cf the totals in Tables 6 and 7) exhibit a discrepancy between the degree of definiteness of the subject and the object, and that, in the majority of these cases (95) a patient that is more definite has been promoted to subject position. The degree of definiteness, therefore, is an important determining factor for passivisation in the data.[15] The remaining 40 cases, in which a patient is topicalised in spite of being less definite than the agent, show that other factors intervene in triggering the topicalisation of a patient NP via passivisation.

4 Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined the factors that make an NP inherently topical in the EModE period, with a view to ascertaining whether these factors determine, as in PE, the eligibility of a patient NP to be foregrounded via the strategy of passivisation. Examination of the corpus-data yielded the following results:

Among the factors that make patient NPs inherently topical and that, therefore, might determine their promotion to topic position through passivisation, only the degree of definiteness of subject and agent was found to play a significant role in EModE passives. In the corpus, 42.6 per cent of the patients ranked higher than the agent in the definiteness hierarchy, due, undoubtedly, to the association between definiteness and given information (cf section 3.3).

In contrast with PE, the animacy and human features of the subject and agent do not trigger passivisation in the corpus, for only 9.4 per cent of the passives exhibit the unmarked combination [+H+A] subject and [-H-A] agent. The passives in my EModE sample, therefore, run counter to the cross-linguistic tendency, reflected in the animacy hierarchy, to topicalise human, animate NPs. In section 3.1, it was suggested that this difference between EModE and PE might be due to the fact that the tendency to topicalise human subjects was still in its inception in EModE.

Another remarkable difference between EModE and PE passives concerns the semantic role of the promoted NP: the data examined in section 3.2 have demonstrated that the PE tendency to topicalise NPs with a benefactive role over those with a patient role does not apply to EModE, since only 32, out of the 139 passives from ditransitive structures, topicalise benefactive NPs. It appears, then, that, unlike in PE, passivisation of IOs is greatly restricted in EModE, which seems to confirm that, by EModE times, the indirect passive was not yet well established in the language.

Notes

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1. The thematic function of the passive involves another related phenomenon, which falls outside the scope of this study. This is the *subject backgrounding* role of the passive, whereby the subject/topic of an active transitive clause is removed from initial position when passivisation takes place (cf Stein 1979: 142; Van Valin 1980: 317; Siewierska 1984: 237; Werth 1984: 238; Shibatani 1985: 832–4; Givón 1990: 567).
2. The discussion that follows is simply intended to clarify those aspects which are relevant to the description of the topicalisation function of the passive. Other theoretical issues concerning the notion of topic are not dealt with, because they are outside the scope of this research. One such issue is the difference between *theme* and *topic*; for convenience, both terms will be used here to refer to the same category.
3. The terms given and new information refer, respectively, to information which the speaker assumes to be, or does not assume to be in the consciousness of his interlocutor. The givenness of information derives either from knowledge of the world or from the preceding linguistic context: 'the old

information may be shared from the common environment in which both the speaker and the hearer are interacting. Frequently it is also shared on the basis of sentences already uttered' (Chafe 1976: 211).

4. Aside from their position within the clause, given and new information are formally distinguished by intonation. As Chafe (1976: 213) points out, clause elements conveying new information are most frequently uttered with a higher pitch and greater amplitude than those conveying old information. It is primarily the new information that the speaker wants to convey, and it is therefore natural that he should emphasise it this way, because such prosodical properties are obviously related to a higher effectiveness of communication.
5. Obvious reasons of space force me to leave out non-nominal topics, which are not relevant for the discussion of passives. It must be noted, however, that any constituent can be the topic, whether verb, adverb or other.
6. The first description of the Animacy Hierarchy is found in Silverstein (1976), but its most common representation is the one given here, which has been taken from Siewierska (1984: 221).
7. Of course, indefinite topics are possible whenever they are used generically, as in *a chair is a piece of furniture to sit on*, where the entire class of chairs can be assumed to be a concept familiar to any speaker.
8. Undoubtedly, the inherent topicality of NPs is in direct relation to the type of information they convey. As already stated, definite NPs normally convey given information, while NPs are indefinite when introduced in the linguistic context for the first time. Concerning the semantic hierarchy, the agent is the most eligible type of element to be the topic of a clause, because it is the category that unmarkedly conveys old information. As for the animacy hierarchy, the type of information that its members convey is not so transparent. We are obviously moving in the grounds of interrelated functions which are often difficult to distinguish.
9. For a discussion of the passive as determined by discourse factors in EModE; cf Seoane Posse (forthcoming).
10. By *as*-comment clauses I refer to comment clauses introduced by relative *as* (Quirk et al 1985: 1112–7), for example *she got married, as was expected*, where *as* can be analysed as some kind of sentential relative in that it can be related to a *which*-clause (cf *she was married, which was expected*). Quirk et al (1985: 1117) point out that 'relative *as* may have the function of subject in its clause, but only if the operator is *be* or another copular verb'; therefore, in cases like the ones just quoted, relative *as* has been considered

given information, since it functions as subject and its referent is present in the immediately preceding linguistic context.

11. The 'not poss.' abbreviation stands for 'not possible' and refers to those verb phrases which cannot have an agent phrase, such as *be born or be drowned*.
12. I concur with Kisbye (1972: 136), therefore, in claiming that, despite the fact that some examples have been recorded in ME, the indirect passive is essentially an EModE development. According to Moessner (1994: 226), the rise of the indirect passive during EModE is obvious, yet very slow. In her view, the reason why it took so long (over five centuries, roughly) for indirect passives to become established is the fact that EModE readers/listeners could very easily misinterpret it, since they would analyse the IO/subject as the goal, and not the beneficiary, of the action denoted by the verb. In addition, Visser (1963–73: §1974) and Denison (1993: 112) contend that, from the eighteenth century onwards, the indirect passive was generally stigmatised, which further slowed down the establishment of this construction.
13. Despite the inherent definiteness of proper nouns and proper names, I follow Croft (1990: 127) in placing them after pronouns in the definiteness hierarchy.
14. The figure 63 is obtained by adding up 39 passives with the combination pronoun/definite NP, 14 where it is pronoun/indefinite NP and 10 of the pattern pronoun/proper N (cf Table 6).
15. In section 3.1, when analysing the animacy features of the subject and agent in agent passives, I also examined these characteristics in the omitted agents of agentless clauses, in order to further confirm the conclusions that had been reached. Such an analysis was possible because, though the agent is covert, its [+H+A] or [-H-A] features are either inferable from knowledge of the world or contextually retrievable. The degree of definiteness of covert agents, however, is difficult to determine, and one can distinguish, at most, between definite and indefinite covert agents. When analysed in these terms, agentless passives yielded the results expounded below:

[+H+A] = 1,754 (91.9%)	INDEFINITE= 1,371 (78.1%)	DEFINITE= 383 (21.8%)
[-H -A] = 137 (7.1%)	INDEFINITE= 103 (75.1%)	DEFINITE= 34 (24.8%)
NOT POSSIBLE	16 (0.8%)	

This table shows that almost 80 per cent of the omitted agents are indefinite. Such a proportion might reveal that indefinite NPs are more likely to be suppressed than definite ones, since these only amount to little more than 20 per cent of the total, and that, consequently, the degree of definiteness of the omitted agents also determines passivisation in the agentless clauses in the corpus. However, the degree of definiteness of the subject or agent in itself is not a determining factor for passivisation: as already noted, it is a difference between agent and subject as regards the degree of definiteness that triggers passivisation. Thus, a pronominal patient is more likely to be topicalised than a definite NP subject, because, even though both are definite, they exhibit a discrepancy in the degree of definiteness. In the case of agentless passives, since the exact degree of definiteness of the covert agents is not predictable from the context, this type of information is not available and, therefore, not included here.

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