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SOMMAIRE

On the Position of Nominative Subjects in Contemporary English

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Abstract

In contemporary English, it is assumed that the structural position of nominative subjects, i.e., grammatical subjects of finite sentences, is [Spec. IP][1] (Pollock 1989; Belletti 1990; Chomsky 1991, 1993, 1995; Rizzi 1997; Radford 2009; Puskás 2013; Rouveret 2018, *inter alia*). What this means is that subjects with nominative Case do not move higher than the inflectional domain or IP in contemporary English. Nevertheless, if it is assumed following Reinhart (1981), Lambrecht (1994), Laenzlinger (2006), and Frascarelli (2007) that nominative subjects constitute another category of topics, then, this type of subjects must be defined by a topic feature ([+topic]) and give rise to a topic head (top) in accordance with the One Feature One Head (OFOH) principle[2] (Starke 2009). Needless to say that if nominative subjects are considered as topics in contemporary English, this implies that their structural position is higher than IP, namely in CP. As a consequence, this paper aims at showing that the position of nominative subjects in contemporary English is the specifier of topP, a projection in the CP system (as opposed to TopP (or left(ward) dislocation)).

Keywords: *Topic feature, Nominative Case, One Feature One Head, Agreement, Movement.*

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[1] It is worth noting that, according to the approach or theory, the position [Spec. IP] can be tantamount to [Spec. TP], [Spec. AgrP], [Spec. AspP], etc.

[2] This is a principle adopted in Cartography and Nanosyntax stipulating that each morphosyntactic feature has its own projection, i.e. each morphosyntactic feature amounts to a semantic feature or head.

Résumé

En anglais contemporain, il est admis que la position structurale des sujets nominatifs, i.e. les sujets grammaticaux des phrases à temps fini, est [Spec. IP] (Pollock 1989; Belletti 1990; Chomsky 1991, 1993, 1995; Rizzi 1997; Radford 2009; Puskás 2013; Rouveret 2018, *inter alia*). En d'autres termes, les sujets définis par un Cas nominatif ne se déplacent pas plus haut que le domaine inflexionnel ou IP en anglais contemporain. Cependant, on admet avec Reinhart (1981), Lambrecht (1994), Laenzlinger (2006), et Frascarelli (2007) que les sujets nominatifs représentent une autre catégorie de topiques ; alors, ce type de sujets doit être défini par un trait de topique ([+topique]) et donner lieu à une tête topique (top) en accord avec le principe Un Trait Une Tête (UTUT) (Starke 2009). Il va sans dire que si les sujets nominatifs sont considérés comme des topiques en anglais contemporain, cela implique que leur position structurale est plus haute que IP, c'est-à-dire dans CP. Par conséquent, cet article a pour objectif de montrer que la position des sujets nominatifs en anglais contemporain est le spécifieur de topP, une projection du système CP (à différencier de TopP (ou dislocation à gauche)).

Mots-clés : *Trait de topique, Cas nominatif, Un Trait Une Tête, Accord, Mouvement.*

1. Introduction

The (syntactic) position of grammatical subjects with nominative Case has always been assumed to be [Spec. IP] in contemporary English. In fact, nominative subjects are supposed to become inactive[3] when they derivatively reach the specifier position of IP, inasmuch as, at this level, all their uninterpretable features have been checked (Chomsky 1995; Radford 2009; Puskás 2013; Rouveret 2018; among others).

However, if nominative subjects are assumed to be defined by a discursive feature like [+topic] (Reinhart 1981; Lambrecht 1994; Laenzlinger 2006; Frascarelli 2007, *inter alia*), then, it proves inaccurate to assume that they do not move higher than IP in contemporary English. Indeed,

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[3] **Activity Condition** (our translation from French)

A target must have an uninterpretable feature. Otherwise, it is frozen or inactive. (Cf. Rouveret 2015:195)

according to the One Feature One Head (OFOH) principle (Starke 2009), there must be a head top (as opposed to Top) in the CP layer whose specifier position is targeted by nominative subjects. Therefore, nominative subjects are likely to move higher than IP due to their topic feature that makes them still active, even after they have reached [Spec. IP] in the course of the (syntactic) derivation.

As a result of these observations, this paper aims at showing that the position of nominative subjects in contemporary English is not [Spec. IP], in the sense that they move higher than that position to reach the specifier position of topP, a projection motivated by both the [+topic] feature of nominative subjects and the OFOH principle. The projection topP must be located immediately above FinP in the CP system.

The theoretical framework underlying this paper is the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), within the perspective of the Cartography of Syntactic Structures (Rizzi 1997).

As for the data used for analysis, they were collected from written texts by authors such as Harley & Ritter (2002), den Dikken (2001), Eberhard (1999), Dowty & Jacobson (1988), Reid (1991), Biber *et al.* (1999), Radford (2009), Acuña-Fariña (2009), among others.

The structure of the paper is the following. The section 1 amounts to the introduction of the paper. Next, there are the section 2 and the section 3. The first one deals with the notion of Topic and some reasons motivating the fact that nominative subjects are to be viewed as topics in contemporary English, and the latter is about the process (or derivation) ending in the movement of nominative subjects into the specifier position of topP. In the end, there is the section 4, that is, the conclusion.

2. The notion of Topic and nominative subjects in contemporary English

Before discussing the topic status of nominative subjects in contemporary English, it is worth referring to the idea or notion underlying the word "topic" in natural languages.

2.1. Definition(s) of Topic

The notion of Topic has been studied and/or analyzed in many recent scientific works, so it is possible to find some definitions for Topics. For instance, Puskás (2013:305) defines a Topic as

an element of the sentence which is interpreted as an already known information, either because the relevant element has previously been mentioned in discourse or because it is obviously present in the context. This is why, Topics are said to "typically represent old information" (Radford *op.cit.*:326).

From what precedes, nominative subjects can be considered as another category of Topics, inasmuch as they always represent old or known information for all discourse participants.

2.2.   The topic status of nominative subjects in contemporary English

The idea that nominative subjects should be regarded as topics (in contemporary English) is widespread, not new. Indeed, as already stated, what is generally assumed about the syntactic position of nominative subjects in contemporary English is that that position is [Spec. IP]. More interestingly, Laenzlinger (2006:61) supports the view that the [Spec. IP] position is linked to an informational property. What this means is that the relevant position is connected to a discursive feature. This is why, for Laenzlinger (*op.cit.*), nominative subjects constitute what is known as "*topiques-à-propos*" [4].

Moreover, the similarity between Topics and nominative subjects is pointed out by Frascarelli (2007); and this suggests that this type of subjects represents another category of topic elements. As a matter of fact, that view is expressed when she writes that "[…] Topics and subjects share basic properties since they are both connected with given information and provide a starting point for the event described in the predication." (Frascarelli 2007:26). Consequently, it should be kept in mind that nominative subjects have a topic status in contemporary English, as suggested by the Topic Criterion.

(1)

TOPIC CRITERION

a) [+aboutness] is connected with an EPP feature in the high Topic field that yields a specific discourse-related property, namely 'Aboutness'.

b) The [+aboutness] Topic matches with an argument in the main clause through Agree.

c) When continuous, the [+aboutness] Topic can be null (i.e., silent).

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[4] A possible translation for this French expression is ''aboutness topics''.

All of the features highlighted by the Topic Criterion can be attributed not only to Topics, but also to nominative subjects. This is why, a nominative subject must be viewed as another type of Topic, i.e. it is a topic.

That idea is in conformity with Lambrecht (1994) arguing that any predicative sentence must have a topic. Focusing on that view and assuming that Lambrecht's proposal is on the right track, it is then natural to have grammatical predicative sentences containing no Topics (or left(ward) dislocations), but only topics (or nominative subjects).

If nominative subjects are to be regarded as topics in contemporary English, this fact implies that they are defined by a [+topic] feature. And given the fact that a feature is equivalent to a head (Cf. the OFOH principle, footnote 2), consequently, nominative subjects must occupy the specifier position of a topic head, in compliance with the cartographic approach.

3. The position of nominative subjects in contemporary English

3.1. The legitimity of topP in the CP system

It is assumed that the syntactic position of nominative subjects in contemporary English, i.e. grammatical subjects of finite sentences, is [Spec. IP][5] (Pollock 1989; Belletti 1990; Chomsky 1991, 1993, 1995; Rizzi 1997; Radford 2009; Puskás 2013; Rouveret 2018, *inter alia*). What this means is that subjects having a nominative Case do not move higher than the inflectional or IP domain during the derivation of (finite) sentences in contemporary English. However, if nominative subjects represent a category of topic constituents, then, their position must be higher than IP. This must be true as a consequence of the OFOH principle, given that nominative subjects will be defined by a [+topic] feature.

The idea that nominative subjects must occupy the specifier position of a head in the CP domain of contemporary English is implicitly supported by Rouveret (2015:256) who underlined that any constituent must occupy the appropriate syntactic position to be correctly interpreted. Indeed, he wrote that ''*un objet syntaxique n'endosse qu'une interprétation donnée que s'il occupe*

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[5] It is worth noting that, according to the approach or theory, the position [Spec. IP] can be tantamount to [Spec. TP], [Spec. AgrP], [Spec. AspP], etc.

basiquement ou dérivationnellement la position pertinente"[6]. As a result, nominative subjects must occupy [Spec. topP], a position higher than IP, to be fully and correctly interpreted at the end of the derivation.

Next, if nominative subjects bear a [+topic] feature, they are bound to move to [Spec. topP] in order to check the feature of the head top. Cardinaletti (2004, p. 201) sustains this view according to which [Spec. IP] is not the final position for nominative subjects by stipulating that ''*the preverbal subject field is more complex than usually thought, and more than one subject position should be assumed*''.

Furthermore, Zubizarreta (1992) postulates that grammatical subjects in natural languages must occupy the specifier position of a functional projection located higher than Agr$_s$P et TP which are part of IP. The underlying idea being that the position filled by grammatical subjects is a topic position.

3.2. The syntactic derivation of nominative subjects in contemporary English

When regarding the derivation of the (nominative) subject *he* in the utterance *he was sleeping in the garden after the lunch* in (2), it is observed that *he* is externally merged in [Spec. VP] where it receives its thematic role of Experiencer from *sleeping*. Subsequently, *he* moves to [Spec. TP] as to check its structural Case and the EPP feature of T. Nevertheless, at this level, the subject pronoun *he* is still active due to its [+topic] feature which has not been checked yet (Cf. the subsection 2.2). As a result, *he* is attracted into the specifier position of top in order to check the topic feature under top. Consequently, the position of the nominative subject *he* at the end of the derivation of the sentence *he was sleeping in the garden after the lunch* is [Spec. topP] (Cf. the subsection 3.1).

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[6] A syntactic object gets a given interpretation only when it basically or derivationally occupies the relevant position.

(2)

```
                              topP
                      _____|_____
                   Spec               top'
                    he          _____|_____
                              top            FinP
                                        _____|_____
                                      Fin           TP
                                              _____|_____
                                           Spec            T'
                                            he        _____|_____
                                                    T            VP
                                                   was      _____|_____
                                                         Spec         V'
                                                          he      ____|____
                                                                V        PP
                                                            sleeping    /\
                                                                       /__\
                                                                   in the garden
                                                                  after the lunch
```
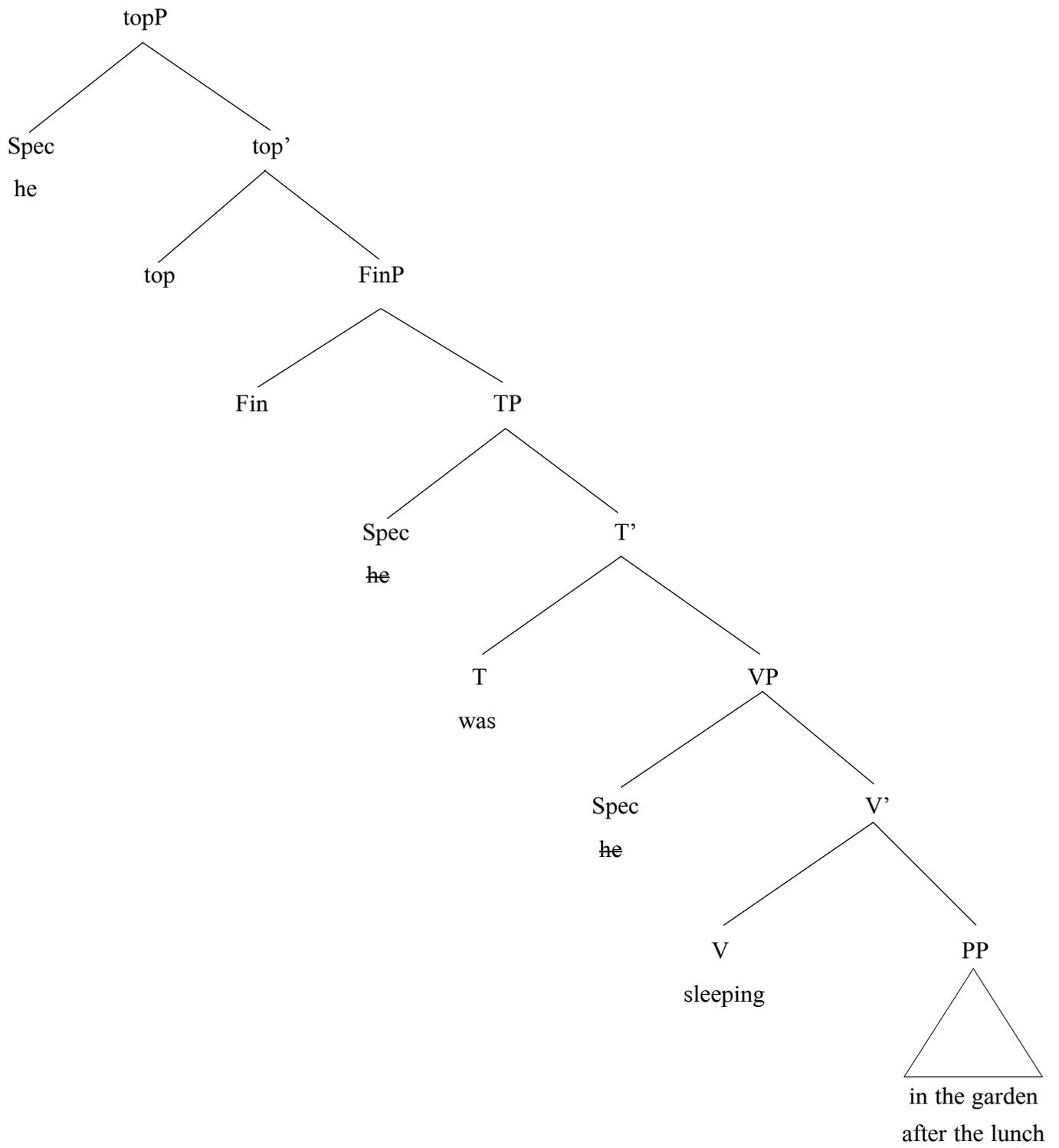
Just like in (2), the nominative DP-subject *this seller* in *this seller speaks a good English* in (3) is first merged in [Spec. vP] and receives the thematic role of Agent from the predicate *speaks*. Next, *this seller* undergoes an internal merge (or movement) into [Spec. TP]; and, being in that position, it receives its nominative Case from the head T and the EPP feature of the latter is checked or satisfied. Eventually, the subject *this seller* reaches [Spec. topP] so as to check the topic feature of the head top in the CP layer. Therefore, as seen in (3) below, the derivation of *this seller speaks a good English* ends up with the nominative subject *this seller* in [Spec. topP].

(3)

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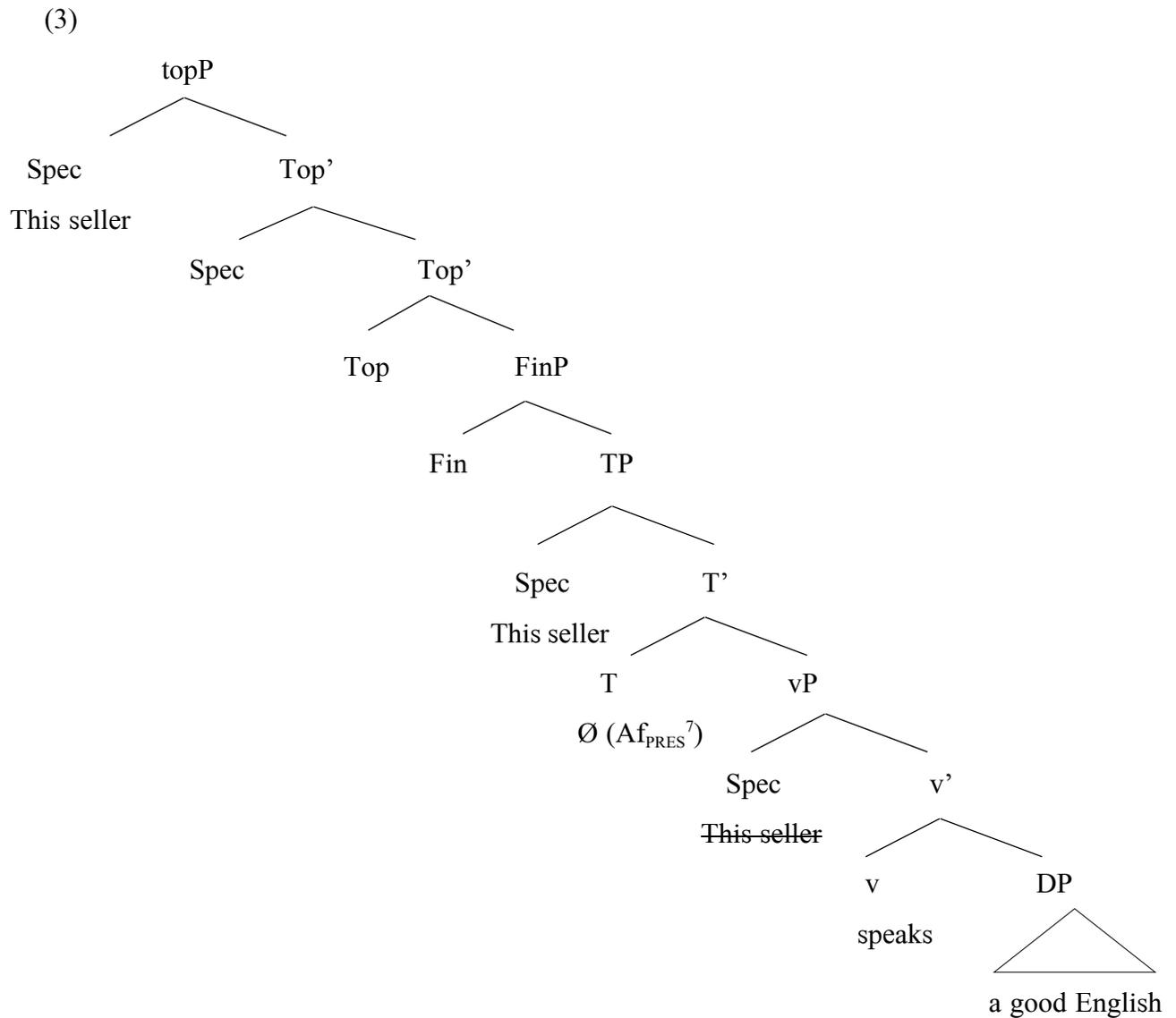
[7] Af_{PRES} amounts to Affix of Present Tense. Correlatively, the meaning of Af_{PAST} is Affix of Past Tense.

The same derivational process is observable for the grammatical subject in each example in (4). Indeed, the nominative subjects *your uniform* (4a), *three bananas* (4b), *the money* (4c), and *that woman* (4d), move to the specifier position of top at the end of the derivation of the sentence.

(4)

a. Your uniform is in the locker.

[$_{topP}$ your uniform [$_{top'}$ top Fin [$_{TP}$ ~~your uniform~~ [$_{T'}$ [$_{T}$ is] in the locker]]]]

b. Three bananas were plenty for them.

[$_{topP}$ three bananas [$_{top'}$ top Fin [$_{TP}$ ~~three bananas~~ [$_{T'}$ [$_{T}$ were] plenty for them]]]]

c. The money has fallen from him.

[$_{topP}$ the money [$_{top'}$ top Fin [$_{TP}$ ~~the money~~ [$_{T'}$ [$_{T}$ has] [$_{VP}$ ~~the money~~ [$_{V'}$ [$_{V}$ fallen] from him]]]]]]

d. That woman walks a lot.

[$_{topP}$ that woman [$_{top'}$ top Fin [$_{TP}$ ~~that woman~~ [$_{T'}$ [$_{T}$ Ø (Af$_{PRES}$)] [$_{VP}$ ~~that woman~~ [$_{V'}$ [$_{V}$ walks] a lot]]]]]]

One of the direct consequences of the approach developed in this paper is the assumption of the structure in (5) for the CP system.

(5)

ForceP … (TopP) … (FocP) … **topP** … FinP … IP …

Conclusion

This paper has been intended to show that the derivation of finite sentences in contemporary English ends up with the grammatical subject in a position higher than IP. As a matter of fact, if nominative subjects are taken to represent a category of topics, then their structural position must be in the CP system. As a consequence, due to their [+topic] feature, nominative subjects undergo a movement through IP so as to reach the specifier position of the head top, located immediately

above Fin in the CP layer, with the aim of checking the topic feature of top. This process is a direct consequence of the OFOH principle adopted in the Cartographic approach.

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