Prosodic Aspects of Information Structure in Discourse
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Last weekend, when the snow fell thick and fast, we took a little trip to see winter in our national forest. The venture was rewarding. Under the load of snow and ice, the woods creaked and groaned like an orthodox haunted house. The constant threat of branches breaking under their burden and toppling down on our heads added an element of danger that can be paralleled in the city only by crossing the street. In addition, many of the snow-covered saplings lining the paths were bent so low that we had to crawl under them on our hands and knees. At no more than an hour's distance from Amsterdam, we felt very close to raw and inexorable Nature.

For hours we encountered no living being. Not a single person. Not a single animal.

'There aren't even any tracks of deer or wild swine,' said my wife. 'Where do you suppose they all are?'

'They've been driven away by hunters,' I replied. And I began jauntily to unfold an air-spun theory, concluding with the words, 'So that's why they've hidden themselves.' As I spoke we arrived at a side path that leads to a dell where man-high ferns grow in summer. We turned right, my wife repeating after me, 'Hidden themselves,' and came face to face with a whole herd of wild swine. I have never seen so many. There were at least thirty, and they formed a varied but scarcely attractive group. Mothers with children. Several half-grown adolescents. A few enormous boars that looked like muscle-bound hoodlums whose path it is just as well not to cross. And the boss of the whole caboodle - a monster with tremendous tusks. He stood at the head of the herd and glared at us with a far from friendly eye.

'I withdraw my theory,' I said.

My wife nodded. 'The important thing,' she whispered, 'is, what do we do now?' I hesitated.

'What do you think about a fast retreat?' she suggested.

'No one is looking.'
But all at once I thought of Naples. If you've ever been there you know that Neapolitan begging has assumed pathological proportions. Young and old have dedicated themselves to it with such fervent tenacity that after a day of giving something to everyone you are forced, in the interest of your traveling budget, to let your soul become calloused. You begin to shake off all the whining children, youths, and grandfathers. It doesn't help just to keep on walking, for they cling to you like groaning flies. Experience has taught me that the only thing to do is to say, in clearly articulated Dutch, 'Donder op!' They drop off immediately, since this expletive apparently has an internationally blasting effect.

'Will you try it à la Naples,' I said to my wife.

'Okay.'

Hand in hand we approached the herd.

Isn't it thrilling, friends, to know that in an overpopulated, undersized country like the Netherlands some spots still remain where you can be suddenly surrounded by wild animals of extremely unappealing appearance and completely unfathomable intention? I think so.

As we somewhat shakily yet dauntlessly drew nearer to the swine, the leader let out a hoarse grunt that sent the mothers, babies, and teen-agers scuttling off through the trees. He himself remained firmly planted, together with his robustly resolute nephews.

'Donder op!' I said when we were quite near by.

And I swear with my hand on my heart, he dondered op like a flash, virtuously followed by the muscle boys. They did stop for a moment under the trees to stare mustily at us, but they didn't follow us when we walked on - two proud little city slickers who had finally got one up on Nature.