PATTERNS OF TOPIC MANIPULATION IN UNPLANNED DISCOURSE

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In recent years, the functional and pragmatic aspects of language have received increased attention in research. This focus has necessitated the consideration of the parameters of language in discourse. Speaker-listener interaction and speaker change are basic to discourse (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). One interesting and observable parameter of speaker interaction is the notion of topic. As a discourse notion, Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) defined topic as "...the proposition or set of propositions about which the speaker is either providing or requesting new information (p. 338)." They explained that in defining or identifying discourse topic, it is necessary to consider the speaker's purpose in speaking. In utterances, a speaker addresses a theoretical or explicit issue or "question of immediate concern." The discourse topic is based on this question of immediate concern. It is "...the proposition or set of propositions that the question of immediate concern presupposes (p. 344)."

This definition of discourse topic, which is also shared by Hornby (1971) is virtually synonymous to what Chafe (1976) referred to as subject. In fact, Goodenough and Weiner (1978) defined discourse topic as the subject matter of discussion. Bates and MacWhinney (1979) explained that discourse topic is closely associated with or dependent on the shared or old information between speaker and listener, the perspective of the speaker, and the salient aspects inherent in the specific situation or context.

Bates and MacWhinney (1979) also noted that topicalization in discourse involves two processes. First, a speaker must select a matter about which he will make a point. Second, a speaker must specify this "matter" with enough detail so that his listener can follow the point. Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) added that in establishing a discourse topic, the basic prerequisites include securing the listener's attention and identifying the referents. The discourse topic may or may not appear in the surface form of a particular utterance. If enough contextual information is apparent to both speakers, then the topic may be contextually coded (Bates and MacWhinney, 1979).

According to Keenan and Schieffelin (1976), after a discourse
topic is introduced, that topic may then be maintained or con-
tinued in the utterances that follow. The topic is maintained if
(1) the topic in the following utterance matches that of its pre-
decessor exactly (collaborating discourse topic), or (2) the topic
in the following utterance incorporates the topic of the immedia-
tely preceding utterance and adds or requests additional informa-
tion concerning that topic (incorporating discourse topic). The
discourse topic is changed however, if (1) from one utterance to
the next, or within an utterance, a totally new topic is intro-
duced, or (2) if a preceding, but not immediately preceding dis-
course topic is reintroduced.

Some conversational rules used by adult dyads in changing or
maintaining topic have been described by Weiner and Goodenough
(1977). The topic continuation rule dictates that when a speaker
introduces or contributes to a topic, he has the right to continue
that topic in his next conversational move. The fact that he
yields the floor to another speaker does not necessarily mean that
he has nothing more to add on the topic. Weiner and Goodenough
(1977) found that in changing topics, either both speakers decline
their rights to continue, or one speaker changes the topic uni-
laterally.

However, occasionally topic is neither changed nor strictly
maintained from utterance to utterance. Goodenough and Weiner
(1978) defined this phenomenon as topic shading. Goodenough and
Weiner noted that topic shading tends to be inefficient in dis-
course as an attempt may be made to divert the topic without giving
the first speaker the opportunity to complete the communication.
One example of topic shading is the following segment:
        1. I can't decide what to fix for my party on Friday.
        2. Oh, Susie had a party last week.

Topic shadings are frequently heard in Edith Bunker conver-
sations in the television series "All in the Family." For ex-
ample, in one episode (Archie Bunker's Place, 1979) Archie Bunker
was complaining about Edith's attempts to save energy by lowering
the heat, so he warmed his hands over the meatloaf dinner, and
the following exchange occurred:
        Archie: "Do you think Jimmy Carter is roaming around
                  the White House looking for a meatloaf to
                  get warm on?"
        Edith: "I don't think the Carters eat meatloaf."
These topic shadings have been described as a disarming shift of
topic but have not been described as a topic opening or closing

marker.

Some mechanisms to signal a topic boundary or the closing and opening of topics have been described in adult conversation. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) considered some of these mechanisms or moves as they apply to whole conversations. The moves discussed applied to closing or to closing - opening frames. These include preclosing moves or passes such as "Well" or "So," final interchanges of "Ok" and "Alright," and closing morals or lessons and agreement such as "That's life, yeah." These kinds of moves announce and contrive the closing of conversations.

Other researchers have discussed topic boundaries within conversations. Goodenough and Weiner (1978) described a unilateral conversational move that signals a topic change and serves to introduce a new topic. These moves are similar to the framing devices described by Forsyth (1974) where a speaker inserts a single word like "ok" or "now" at the beginning of a passage to close a previous topic and to introduce a new topic. In addition, Goodenough and Weiner (1978) also found that speakers tended to exchange passing moves such as "Ok...alright" to close topics within conversations.

These available preliminary investigations of the pragmatic aspects of topic change have described some mechanisms involved in topic manipulation in discourse but little attention has been given to the patterns of topic introduction, maintenance, change, and reintroduction in discourse. This paper studied unplanned discourse in adult dyads in order to investigate these patterns.

Subjects consisted of four dyads of graduate students. The individuals within each dyad were peers and were friends.

The subjects were asked to participate in a project on problem solving and were shown into a waiting room with a table, chairs, books, magazines, and snacks. The dyad was then informed that they would be taperecorded for approximately one half hour while they waited for the examiner to check the set up of the recording equipment. The examiner asked the pair to "just talk for a while" and then left the room. Each dyad was recorded for 30 minutes.

The first five minutes of discourse was not considered. The next 15 minutes was transcribed and analyzed for each dyad, yielding a total data base of over 1200 utterances. Each topic was determined by examining the conversational sequence and by label-

ing each proposition about which the speakers were either contri-
buting or requesting information. Then for each utterance, a
judgment was made as to whether that utterance maintained the topic
of the previous utterance, changed the topic of the previous ut-
terance, or shaded the topic of the previous utterance according to
the guidelines suggested by Keenan and Schieffelin (1976). An an-
alysis of the patterns of topic maintenance and the methods of
topic introduction followed.

Table I
Topic Introduction and Topic Shading

	Dyad 1	Dyad 2	Dyad 3	Dyad 4	Total
Topics introduced	14	10	4	10	38
Topics reintroduced	5	2	4	5	16
Topics maintained	19	10	8	15	52
Shadings	7	8	15	6	36
Shadings maintained	3	7	14	4	28
Shadings reintro- duced as topics	0	2	9	4	15

Observation of Table I indicates that the number of different
topics introduced in a 15 minute time span remained fairly consis-
tent across dyads 1, 2, and 4 (14, 10 and 10 topics respectively),
but decreased in dyad 3 to four topics. However, it is evident
that previously discussed topics were occasionally reintroduced
later in the conversation by all the pairs with little differences
across dyads.

Topics introduced or reintroduced were almost always maintain-
ed in succeeding utterances. In fact, out of a total of 54 topics
introduced or reintroduced, 52 were continued in the following dis-
course. Topics were frequently maintained for extended sequences
of utterances. It was not uncommon for a single topic to bridge
across 25 or 30 utterances and then reappear in a later sequence.

Table I also shows that topic shadings occurred in all the
dyads. It is interesting to note that dyad 3, who introduced and
reintroduced topics only 8 times, shaded topics 15 times. Across
the dyads, of the 36 times that topics were shaded, the shaded
topic was maintained 28 times. Also, topics that had been pre-
viously shaded into were reintroduced as topics later in the dis-
course 15 times. Again it is interesting to observe that dyad 3
was particularly dependent on topic shading and reintroduction

of previous shadings to indicate the next topic of conversation.

Goodenough and Weiner (1978) found that topic shadings were inefficient in discourse inasmuch as shadings tended to interrupt the exchange of information about a particular topic. In one sixth of the incidents of topic shadings produced by these dyads, the shaded utterance or utterances did indeed seem to temporarily interrupt the conversational flow, contributing irrelevant information. For example, one individual in dyad 1 was informing the other speaker about the location of Lake Powell, a reservoire in Southern Utah:

Speaker:	1.	I'll draw a map.
Speaker:	1.	Here's Salt Lake
Speaker:	2.	I just heard about it
Speaker:	2.	I don't know where...
Speaker:	1.	Here's the state, you know
Speaker:	1.	<u>Utah's a good state to draw.</u>
Speaker:	1.	<u>Here's St. George right here.</u>

The shaded utterance "Utah's a good state to draw" while linked to the general subject matter, contributes no information about the topic of the surrounding utterances, namely, how to get to Lake Powell.

However, in addition to serving as inefficient conversational interruptors, in five sixths of the topic shadings they acted as methods for effectively shifting from one topic into another. Topic shadings as a type of topic boundary have not been considered. It is evident in Table II that all the dyads used topic shadings to

Table II
Methods of Topic Introduction

	Dyad 1	Dyad 2	Dyad 3	Dyad 4	Total
Shading	7	8	15	6	36
Direct (Unmarked)	8	6	6	5	25
Marked	11	8	11	14	44

introduce new topics. Dyad 3 again demonstrated their preference for topic shading as a mechanism for topic change. An excellent example is the following segment where several utterances had been devoted to the topic "last night's party." The topic was effectively shifted through a topic shading:

Speaker:	1.	I was thinking of taking off my shoes
Speaker:	2.	You should have
Speaker:	2.	Oh, M. you should have.

Speaker: 2. <u>Oh, M., your shoes</u>
Speaker: 2. I wish I could find some
Speaker: 1. I bought these on sale
Speaker: 1. They were a real bargain.

The shaded topic, "speaker #2's shoes" was continued for 11 more
utterances and reintroduced and maintained as a topic two more
times in the course of the conversation. Thus, shadings may
serve as a topic boundary, that is, both a closing and opening
device that indirectly creates a change.

Table II also shows that all the dyads occasionally intro-
duced or reintroduced topics in a direct but unmarked way. In
these cases, a speaker simply launched a new topic without sig-
nalling the change:

Speaker: 1. And all those things.
Speaker: 1. I don't know why you have to do all
             those things going out.
Speaker: 2. mmmmm
Speaker: 1. But you do, kinda
Speaker: 1. And you know, I know I can't define it
Speaker: 2. <u>I noticed Rosalie when we took that ride
             up to Snowbird that time to the arts
             festival.</u>

However, Table II shows that speakers also marked topic boundar-
ies, and they marked topic boundaries almost twice as often as
they left them unmarked. Table III describes these types of
overt opening and closing markers that signalled topic boundaries.

Table III
Types of Opening and Closing Markers

	Dyad 1	Dyad 2	Dyad 3	Dyad 4	Total
Opening Markers					
Choice question	7	4	2	5	18
Attempt to tie	4	1	7	5	17
Opening statement	0	3	2	4	9
Closing Markers					
Single pass	5	1	2	2	10
Double pass	0	1	0	1	2

It is interesting to note that the most commonly used topic
opening device was a choice question. Choice questions have not
been studied as a topic opening device. These choice questions
(Langacker, 1972) were always reduced to a yes/no form.

For example, new topics were opened when speakers asked:
          a. Are you finished with your stuff this quarter? or,
          b. You know Kathy's friend, Steve?
Choice questions such as a. introduced a new topic when a speaker
requested information and passed the floor to the other speaker.
Choice questions such as b. were used to establish the necessary
base of shared or old information between the speakers. In all
cases where choice questions were used, a response was elicited,
thereby establishing a new topic and guaranteeing its maintenance.

      Speakers also introduced topics with moves that are described
here as "attempts to tie." These attempts to tie are similar to
what Goodenough and Weiner (1978) call framing moves. A speaker
introduces a new topic by using an introductory device such as:
          Well...
          So...
          Yeah, and...
          But...
          Cause...
An attempt to tie was used when a speaker apparently wished to con-
nect the new topic with the previously discussed topic, even though
the actual propositional content differed. For example Dyad 3 was
discussing speaker #1's new shirts:
          Speaker: 1. My mother had a stack of them
          Speaker: 1. So I said, I'll take them.
          Speaker: 1. So that's how I got...
          Speaker: 2. Oh, that's great
          Speaker: 2. That's great
          Speaker: 1. But, they send her (speaker's sister) to
                        the vendors
          Speaker: 1. And the vendors really try to impress the
                        buyers.
The "but" tacked on to the utterance where a new topic was intro-
duced acted as an attempt to tie the two topics together grammati-
cally, preserving the conversational flow even though the actual
topics were unrelated.

      Dyads 2, 3, and 4 also opened topics with opening statements.
These statements clearly alerted the listener to the initiation of
a new topic. For example:
          I was going to say that...
          I know what I wanted to tell you...
          Oh, did I tell you about...
          Oh, I know what's new...
These opening statements leave little doubt as to the intent of the
speaker with regard to topic. However, Dyad 1 never introduced
topics in such an obvious manner.

In the anlysis of topic closing markers, Table III also shows that a single passing moves such as "mmmmm," occasionally appeared at the close of tpics. Double passing moves such as "1. uh huh, 2. uh huh" described by Goodenough and Weiner (1978) were rarely found.

For these dyads, topic opening markers were much more evident than closing markers. In unplanned discourse topic seemed to change primarily by manipulating an opening rather than by closing.

In summary, this study supports Goodenough and Weiner's (1978) notion that unplanned discourse is "topical" in nature. That is, that the information flow between speakers is structured according to topic. The pattern of topic manipulation seen in these dyads is highly interactive in nature. Introduced topics are rarely ignored in succeeding utterances and are usually maintained for extended exchanges of utterances. Also, the pattern of topic introduction and reintroduction indicates that speakers retain the right to return to previous topics at any later time.

Topic shadings occurred frequently in all the samples. Shadings were occasionally inefficient interruptors, but most of the time topic shadings were used to shift one topic into another. As a topic boundary, they serve as both a closing and opening device.

The speakers in these dyads occasionally changed topics directly without signalling the listener, but they were more apt to introduce or reintroduce topics by marking topic bounardies with specific opening devices such as choice questions, opening statements, and attempts to tie. Closing markers were less frequently utilized.

This study of the patterns of topic manipulation is a different approach to the study of topic. Further investigations of the patterns of speakers in unplanned and in planned discourse may lead to the development of specific conversational topic maxims.

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