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COLLABORATION ON TOPIC CHANGE IN CONVERSATION

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Abstract: Conversations are cooperatively achieved speech events. Analysis of topic changes shows that topic endings are negotiated by participants over a series of turns, using the following specific types of indicators: summary assessments, acknowledgment tokens, repetition, laughter, and pauses. This analysis supports the view of conversation as a collaborative event.

Conversations are cooperatively achieved by participants, as has been shown by recent work in conversation analysis (see, for example, Sacks et al. 1974, Wilson et al. 1984, Houtkoop and Mazeland 1985 on turn-taking in conversation, Schegloff 1972 on conversational openings, and Wilson and Zimmerman 1986 on the organization of silence). Topic endings are one aspect of conversational interaction which show very clearly the collaboration of participants.

Whether topic changes in conversation are explicit (e.g., "OK, let's talk about something else now") or not, they are nonetheless attended to by conversation participants. Participants expect utterances to be relevant to preceding utterances, so in order to introduce a new topic, i.e., something that is not relevant, there are specific procedures which are followed to close off the old topic. Because these procedures take place over a series of utterances, both (or all) participants must cooperate to close a topic. Indeed, the behavior of participants who do not follow the normal topic changing procedures may be labelled as deviant in some way. In this paper I discuss the kinds of topic-ending utterances which mark disjunctive topic changes, in which participants make an obvious transition from one topic to another (as opposed to changes resulting from what Jefferson (1984b) calls stepwise transition, where the change from one topic to another is gradual and no clear boundary between the two topics is apparent). I then describe how these topic-ending indicators interact to show the cooperative nature of topic change.

The data upon which I base my analysis consist of tape-recorded naturally occurring conversations. With one exception,[1] the participants in the conversations were native speakers of American English. Most of the

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may be part of an adjacency pair of which the second part is an acknowledgment token (see next section for discussion of acknowledgment tokens). It is a comment on topic 1 which seems to close off the topic from further discussion. It may also function as a formulation, as discussed by Heritage and Watson (1979), clarifying the central point of the topic (the gist, or what Labov and Fanshel [1977] refer to as the evaluation) or stating the consequence of what has been talked about (the upshot). More often, however, it functions as a coda, a concluding remark, after which further conversation relevant to topic 1 is unnecessary. The main characterization of the summary assessment is that it contributes little, if any, new information to topic 1. In the following example, M's utterance at line 17 sums up and evaluates the problems with the microphone.

(trans2b-1a)[3]

```
 1   R:   yeah, that's better (    )=
 2   M:   the whole reason why I got that microphone. I
 3        really just got the microphone so that
 4   R:   it wouldn't be such an obvious=
 5   M:   =well, no but so I I wouldn't have so much tape
 6        noise.  but as it turns out
 7   R:   [does it do
 8   M:        it's a] fantastic microphone.
 9   R:   picks up everything
10        ((background noise))
11   T:   where where
12   R:   you were getting hiss and stuff?=
13   M:   =well from the internal microphone=
14   T:   =uff=
15   R:   =oh yeah cause it hears its own hears its own
16        micro- it hears its own motor yeah.=
17   M:   =oh it (was dreadful)=
```

In the next example, there are two summary assessments, at lines 429-430 and lines 431-432.

(trans2b-8)[4]

```
429  M:   =she can just be there, you know?  so maybe her
430       situation with men will also change.
431  R:   yeah I think getting away from home was the
432       best thing.
433       (9.1)
434 >T:   what?
435  M:   Rosie wants to go outside and bark.
436  T:   I don't think that's a good idea.
```

This segment is preceded by a very long section on the topic of the romantic and family problems of a friend of

M and R's who has moved to another city. Both summary assessments function as closings to the topic.

B. Acknowledgment Tokens

Acknowledgment tokens are linguistic expressions which acknowledge the previous speaker's utterance without elaborating on it. They often (but not necessarily) occur in response to summary assessments, as in the following example.

(trans2b-4)

93 T: =doesn't have room for it in his car.
94 M: **oh.**

Other examples (besides oh above) of acknowledgment tokens include yes, yeah, no, mm hmm, okay, and right. It is not surprising that they occur at topic-ending points since they provide no further information relevant to the current topic. Although in other contexts intonation and stress on acknowledgment tokens may vary, when they occur topic-finally they are always spoken with dropping or even intonation and minimal stress. Acknowledgment tokens with rising intonation act as signals to the other participant to continue and are thus not topic-final. Extra stress may, among other things, signal emphatic agreement or involvement in the conversation, as in the following example:

(trans2b-18; this follows discussion of Humane Society practices.)

702 R: =they interviewed me at ah six months later,
703 and said that ah we're doing a little interview
704 about how the humane society operates and how
705 you feel about it and blah blah blah I said
706 well listen, you deal real well with animals
707 but your your human interface is ((laugh))
708 *lacking ah*=
709 T: =leaves something to be desired=
710 R: =**yeah**=
711 T: =what'd they say?
712 R: oh we'll take that under advisement thank you.
713 I mean they were real nice about it but=
714 M: =they probably actually pay attention to that
715 stuff=
716 R: =**yeah.**

Topic-final acknowledgment tokens, lacking these intonation and stress patterns, signal a) that the other participant need not continue and b) that the speaker is not providing any new information on topic 1.

C. Repetition

I found several instances in my data where one speaker repeated all or part of the previous speaker's utterance shortly before the topic boundary. Long utterances tended to be only partially repeated, with some changes occurring. Two examples follow:

(trans2b-5b)

147 M: somewhere in **California.**=
148 R: =yes **southern California** near [( )
149 T: just **south**] **south**
150 [**east**
151 R: Anaheim]
152 T: **yeah, southeast** of Long Beach=
153 R: =**yeah**=

(trans2b-14)

1366 T: =the one I **put on.**
1367 R: you **puttin' it on** again=

Speakers often repeat acknowledgment tokens which occurred at the beginning of the previous speaker's utterance, as the following two examples show.

(trans2b-3)

72 M: **no.** you can't do that on this.
73 T: **no.**=

(trans2b-5b)

152 T: **yeah,** southeast of Long Beach=
153 R: =**yeah**=

Repetition is used to perform a different function in the first two examples (2b-5a and 2b-14 above) than in *the second two (2b-3 and 2b-5). In the first pair, the* repetition of various lexical items leads up to the closing, but in the second pair, the repetition of acknowledgment tokens is the last part of the closing segment and is followed immediately by a topic boundary. Therefore I believe that the stronger topic-closing indicator is the repetition of acknowledgement tokens rather than of lexical items.

D. Laughter

Laughter can function as a topic-ending indicator, often in conjunction with other topic-ending indicators.

It can occur as the only topic-ending indicator (as in the example given below), but it has so many other functions in conversation that it is not a very powerful topic-ending indicator by itself. Laughter by one or more participants can occur immediately before a topic boundary, and it appears that in this position it replaces pause as the ending indicator, as shown by the following segment.

(trans2b-15)

1519 M: =they're pretty excited about this place, Dad
1520 was telling me that he talked to somebody from,
1521 the bank who was saying it was her third
1522 application from Rockland that day. she said,
1523 what's going on up there and Dad - so Dad said,
1524 you know maybe there's kind of a boom and we're
1525 in on the ground floor.
1526 T: **((laugh))**=
1527 R: =**((laugh))**=
1528>T: =well, now it's time to go home and start
1529 preparing dinner for my wife.

In this example, as in most of the cases where laughter occurred, more than one participant laughed, and at topic-ending points the laughter tended to occur in turns rather than simultaneously.

E. Pause

Pauses are extremely common topic-ending indicators. They occurred immediately before the introduction of topic 2 in over half of the topic changes that I examined.

There is no arbitrary point at which the length of a pause becomes significant, because participants with different conversational styles use varying rates of speech (Tannen 1984, 1985) and correspondingly varying *pause lengths. For example, in one of the conversations* I recorded (trans2b), in which the participants are all rapid speakers and also know each other well, overlap and latching are very frequent, so a pause of more than one second is significant:

(trans2b-4)

93 T: =doesn't have room for it in his car.
94 M: oh.
95 **(1.4)**
96 M: so - did you - are you moved out?

On the other hand, in another conversation between one relatively rapid speaker (M) and one person who speaks very slowly (B), pauses of as much as four seconds, which would be almost uncomfortably long in the previously mentioned conversation, were not significant. In this conversation, topic-ending pauses were extremely long, as the next example shows:

(trans1b-1)

66	B:	did Priscilla listen to it?
67	M:	no I'm going to have her listen ((laugh))=
68	B:	((laugh))
69		(7.2)
70	M:	'cause naturally I think our voices sound
71		different.
72		(2.6)
73	B:	yeah.
74		**(9.7)**
75	>M:	so what's new with you?
76		(2.0)
77	M:	apart from the tedium [of
78	B:	oh]
79	M:	Russian phonetics.

Because of this variability of pause length from conversation to conversation, I cannot make a precise specification of the length of pauses that occur before topic boundaries. However, I measured all pauses longer than about one second with a stopwatch, and found that the longest pauses in a given conversation tended to occur before new topics (as in the example above, line 74).

II. Interaction of Topic Ending Indicators

Topic endings seem to be collaborated upon by the participants in conversation, rather than produced by only one of the participants. This is shown by the *occurrence of sequences of several topic-ending* indicators by both (or all) participants. If one participant introduces a new topic without sufficient closing of the previous topic, he or she may be perceived as flouting the Maxim of Relation (Grice 1975). The hearer may then be forced to make further inferences concerning the meaning of the utterance while assuming that topic 1 is still being discussed.

With the exception of summary assessments, the topic-ending indicators I found were all devoid of content, and even summary assessments contribute no new information to topic 1. They are thus boundary markers only. The more boundary markers are used, the more

effectively a topic is closed off, and the more likely it is that both participants in the conversation agree to its closing. This is why several topic-ending indicators appear in sequence, as in the following example:

(trans4b-7; there has been previous discussion of M's pregnancy.)

```
1386 J:   so are - do - are they - do they do any more
1387      sonograms? or anything like that?
1388      [(or is it just)
1389 M:   I don't know.]
1390 J:   I guess why.
1391 M:   right.  if everything's okay?  maybe not?
1392      (2.10)
1393      be kinda interesting though.
1394      (3.12)
1395 J:   baby's first picture.
1396      ((laughter))
1397 K:   (a smudge) ((laugh))
1398      (3.85)
1399 M:   yeah.
1400      (2.53)
1401 >    well are you guys planning any more trips?
1402 J:   I'm going to Alaska.
```

This segment is very strongly marked as a topic-ending point in the following way:

```
1386 J:   so are - do - are they - do they do any more
1387      sonograms? or anything like that?
1388      [(or is it just)
1389 M:   I don't know.]
1390 J:   I guess why.
1391 M:   right.  if everything's okay?  maybe not?
1392      PAUSE (2.10)
1393      SUMMARY ASSESSMENT be kinda interesting though.
1394      PAUSE (3.12)
1395 J:   SUMMARY ASSESSMENT baby's first picture.
1396      ((laughter))
1397 K:   SUMMARY ASSESSMENT (a smudge) ((laugh))
1398      PAUSE (3.85)
1399 M:   ACKNOWLEDGMENT TOKEN yeah.
1400      PAUSE (2.53)
1401 >    DISCOURSE MARKER, QUESTION well are you guys
          planning any more trips?
1402 J:   I'm going to Alaska.
```

Summary assessments and pauses seem to be the most common such indicators and were also most commonly found together, with pauses following summary assessments. In several cases where pauses do not occur following summary assessments, laughter does occur, which is one of the

reasons I believe laughter at a topic boundary may be interpreted as a filled pause.

Whether the summary assessment occurred with or without a pause, it was often followed by an acknowledgment token. In fact, topic-ending acknowledgment tokens only occurred in response to summary assessments. The sequence [Summary Assessment (+ Acknowledgment Token) + Pause] is one which seems to function as a particularly effective series of topic-ending indicators, immediately after which a topic boundary occurs and a topic-beginning marker is rarely used. The following example illustrates this pattern:

(trans3a3-1, this segment follows a long discussion on the topic of K's thesis)

```
423  K:   yeah.  I don't know, we'll see how it goes.=
424  A:   =mm hmm
425       (1.67)
426 >A:   last Friday it was, it was half, or it was two
427       for one, two lines for - and I didn't realize
428       it.=
429  K:   =what, bowling?=
430  A:   =yeah!=
```

This fragment can be analyzed as follows:

```
423  K:   yeah.  SUMMARY ASSESSMENT I don't know, we'll
           see how it goes.=
424  A:   ACKNOWLEDGMENT TOKEN =mm hmm
425       PAUSE (1.67)
426 >A:   NO BEGINNING MARKER last Friday it was, it was
427       half, or it was two for one, two lines for -
428       and I didn't realize it.=
```

In this example, K's summary assessment at line 423 concludes talk on topic 1 (K's thesis). A acknowledges K's utterance and then pauses.[5] No explicit topic-*beginning indicator marks A's introduction of a new* topic.

In circumstances where no topic-beginning indicator was present, the end of topic 1 was marked with at least two topic-ending indicators, as in the following example:

(trans4b-6)

```
467  R:   we've had] seventy-five, seventy-eight degree
468       weather already.=
469  K:   =yeah.
470  R:   it's been just really up and down this this
471       spring with winter and spring.
```

```
472         (2.75)
473         ((child's voice in background: whoa!))
474         (2.91)
475 >M:     wonder what he's playing with, which thing=
```

This segment follows several minutes of talk on the weather. At line 470, R makes a summary assessment of the topic. This is followed by what is essentially one long pause interrupted only by background noise. The new topic is not marked by any topic-beginning indicator. The fragment can be annotated as follows:

```
467  R:    we've had] seventy-five, seventy-eight degree
468        weather already.=
469  K:    =yeah.
470  R:    SUMMARY ASSESSMENT it's been just really up and
471        down this this spring with winter and spring.
472        PAUSE (2.75)
473        ((child's voice in background: whoa!))
474        PAUSE (2.91)
475 >M:    NO BEGINNING MARKER wonder what he's playing
476        with, which thing=
```

I consider summary assessments and pauses to be the most powerful indicators of potential topic change, especially when they occur together. This is because in every case where there was no topic-beginning indicator on topic 2, topic 1 ended with at least one sequence of [Summary Assessment (+ Acknowledgement Token) + Pause]. Neither acknowledgment tokens, laughter, or repetition occurred alone as topic-ending indicators. They only occur as topic-ending indicators after summary assessments or pauses. For this reason, and also because they all occur often throughout conversation, not just at topic boundaries, I believe that they are not primary indicators of topic change but merely serve to reinforce the main indicators, summary assessments and pauses.

As I noted earlier, although I expected that topic-beginning indicators would be of primary importance in topic change, topic-ending indicators were much more likely to mark topic change. All of these indicators may occur elsewhere in conversation, but at topic endings they appear together, in sequences of utterances alternating between participants.

The use of several topic ending indicators seems to show that both participants seek agreement on the closing of topic 1. The collaboration proceeds as follows: When participant A uses a topic ending indicator, participant B assumes that participant A is willing to initiate a new topic or to allow B to do so. Use of a second topic ending indicator as a response by B is an acknowledgment of that willingness and an agreement to it. At this

point either A or B may initiate a new topic, or the sequence may begin again.

When multiple topic-ending indicators do not appear, a misplacement marker (e.g., "oh by the way," "speaking of X," etc.) is likely to be used to mark the beginning of topic 2. This phenomenon supports the idea that topic endings are collaborated upon. Misplacement markers show that the speaker is aware of the conventional sequence which closes topic 1 and that he or she is violating that sequence. In my data, the topic beginnings which were indicated by misplacement markers were either not preceded by topic ending indicators or were preceded by only one, as in the following example:

(trans2b-11)

```
1230  T:    I'll talk to my wife and see what she has to
1231        say=
1232  M:    =all right=
1233 >R:    =speaking of your wife?
1234  T:    yes?
1235  R:    you know what time it is.
1236  T:    yes I do
1237  R:    it's time that we be throwin a fish in the oven
1238        for - so we can feed her.
```

In this example, the only topic ending indicator is a relatively weak one, an acknowledgment token (at line 1232) which does not even occur in response to a summary assessment, as would customarily be the case.

One further point concerning multiple ending indicators is that they occur in a sequence in which one kind of indicator is followed by another kind, not by another of the same type. Thus I did not find any instances of a topic boundary occurring following two summary assessments in a row, with no intervening pauses or acknowledgment tokens. Of course, two pauses which occur in sequence simply become one long pause. The existence of a regular sequence of ending indicators, in which participants take turns in response to previous turns, is strong evidence for the collaborative nature of topic closing.

Participants collaborate on accomplishment of a conversation, both on a turn-by-turn basis and over larger sequential units, as is shown by examination of the sequences found in conversation openings and closings (Button 1987, Clark and French 1981, Schegloff 1979, and Schegloff and Sacks 1974) as well as the existence of adjacency pairs (Goffman 1976, Schegloff 1972). Analysis of topic changes in conversation supports this view of conversation.

NOTES

1. A native speaker of Spanish whose English is extremely fluent.

2. For ease of discussion I will refer to the topic preceding a boundary as topic 1 and the topic following a boundary as topic 2. This does not necessarily mean that there are only two topics in the conversation or that topic 1 is the first topic of the conversation. Thus when a boundary follows topic 2, topic 2 then becomes topic 1 in discussion of that boundary.

3. Words or phrases in the transcripts which exemplify points under discussion are printed in boldface.

4. In the segments of transcript used as examples, topic boundaries are indicated with this symbol: >. Although these appear at the beginning of the line where a new topic begins, the boundary is not the topic beginning, but the point immediately preceding it.

5. Both K and A are rapid speakers whose talk is frequently latched together or overlapping. A pause of 1.67 seconds is thus a long one relative to the usual timing between these two speakers.

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