Placement of topic changes in conversation

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Introduction

Conversations are often characterized as having some 'topic' or several 'topics'. Thus:

Jane (to a co-conversationalist): Boy, this is really funny, when you think about our conversation we've hit about 12 different topics in the last seven minutes.

One commonsense notion, shared by professionals, is that the 'topic' in a conversation is what the conversation is 'about'. For example, Watson and Potter (1962: 251) state, 'Every episode of conversation has a focus of attention; it is talk about something'. As a consequence of this assumption, early work which has addressed topicality in conversation has almost invariably approached its investigation as a problem in content analysis.

Recent work in conversational analysis suggests, however, that topicality is an achievement of conversationalists, something organized and made observable in patterned ways that can be described. Thus, attention is directed to the structure whereby topicality is produced in conversation.

In other words, Sacks et al. (1974: 728) suggest that a speaker regularly exhibits understanding of prior talk in a current turn-at-talk. Furthermore, Schegloff and Sacks (1974: 243) argue that conversationalists 'fit' their current utterance to the utterance of the prior speaker. Topicality, then, is a matter not only of content, but is partly constituted in the procedures conversationalists utilize to display understanding and to achieve one turn's proper fit with a prior. Some of these procedures will be elaborated in the course of the following discussion as they bear on the main interest of the paper.

Although conversational turns by and large exhibit understanding of prior utterances, there are places where a current utterance may not display a relationship to, or may not fit with, a prior one. A class of such


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utterances can be considered as topic changes; they are unrelated to the
talk in prior turns in that they utilize new referents, and thus they
implicate and occasion a series of utterances constituting a different line of
talk.

Topic changes, however, are not random happenings; they occur in
specific environments and in characterizable ways. This paper considers
topic change as a solution to a problem of unsuccessful transfer of
speakership.4 The work that conversationalists do to produce continuous
topical talk and how such work sometimes fails will be described in the
next section. When topic talk does falter in these characterizable ways,
topic changes regularly get utilized to restore a state of continuous talk.
Certain formal features of the utterances that implicate a topic change will
be discussed in a later section.

The data for this study come from 22 two-party conversations which
took place between individuals recruited from beginning sociology classes
on a university campus. Fifteen of these 12-minute conversations involved
previously unacquainted students, and seven involved students who had
some degree of acquaintance with each other. All conversations were
recorded in an experimental setting.5

**Topic change as a solution to failed speaker transitions**

Turn-taking in conversation proceeds according to three rules, as
described by Sacks et al. (1974: 704). At a given transition relevance place in
a speaker's turn, which occurs upon the first possible completion of a unit
type,6 (a) the current speaker can select next, (b) the next speaker can self-
select, or (c) the current speaker can continue.

While the rules provide for turn-transfers at transition relevance places,
silences develop when a current speaker stops and no speaker starts up
(cf. Sacks et al. 1974: 714). However, Sacks et al. (1974: 708) say that the
vast majority of transitions from one turn to a next are accomplished with
minimal or no gap.7

When silences do occur, they mark different kinds of events and
activities. For example, Jefferson (1973: 69) has reported on silences which
are generated by speech components which are problematic for some
recipient. That is, a term in an utterance may be wrong, misunderstood, or
offensive to a recipient who waits to see if the speaker will produce talk
about the term. If the speaker does not, a silence will develop. Also,
Pomerantz (1975: 72) has noted that a gap may develop prior to the
initiation of a disagreement turn in conversation. For another thing,
silences are sometimes attributable to one of the parties. If one occurs at

the end of a current speaker's turn, when that person has selected the next
speaker, or if a silence occurs mid-utterance, it is heard as "belonging" to
the speaker whose turn it is and is technically termed a pause (cf. Sacks
et al. 1974: 715). In sum, a silence can be a variety of things depending on
the environment in which it occurs.

**The occurrence of a series of silences**

On some occasions, a series of silences occurs, indicating the failure of a
prior topic to yield successful transfer of speakership. It is in these
situations that topic changes regularly appear, as a solution to the
problem of producing continuous talk.8

This point can be expanded by reference to the following consider-
notes that when a story gets told, it is typically utilized as a resource for
generating further topical talk. However, Jefferson (1976: 14) examines
one story whose completion did not result in occasioning topical talk.
After the first conclusion, the teller provided a secondary ending, an
assessment, a request for recipient comment, and finally the first half of an
idiom, before speaker transition was successful and sequential implicativeness9 was demonstrated for the story. Each of the teller-produced items
(the story's completion, the secondary ending, etc.) was followed by a
silence. It was by reference to those silences, and their display of absent
speaker transition, that each subsequent item was produced as an attempt
at remedying the trouble.

In the conversations examined for this study, a similar phenomenon
was apparent. When silences develop which display a failure of speaker
transition, participants can often be observed to restore continuous talk
by producing a series of on-topic statements. However, when those are
unsuccessful, a topic change will be employed to reinstate continuous talk.
For example, in the following, Al has related a story about a party to Bob:

(1) (West, 2: 101)9

1. Al: Yeah, ninety cents a drink an' sixty cents a beer you know, heh-
2. heh-heh
3. Bob: Yeah. I wonder who the guy: was who-whose birth day it was What's =
4. [illegible]
5. Bob: = 's se f ret
6. Al: Did- uh- I understood that he didn't even GO here =
7. Bob: heh h =
8. Al: = that his sister'd threw it for him, rented the thing, hired the bar
Laura: I decided that wasn’t for me. Too: much like high school, you see all the same people there. hh that’s why I don’t like here-like it here anymore you see all the same people you see in high school, cause a lot of ‘em come up here, it’s so close ta home.

George: Are you kidding? "Go hhh d

23. Zimmerman and Maynard (1979) discuss membership categorization as a mechanism for construction of topcal talk.

24. Later, segments of this conversation further suggest that Bonnie’s utterances at lines 7–9 were setting up complaint talk about school as opposed to home life. First, things are not going all that well in her sociology class:

Bonnie: So how’d you do on the sosh midterm?

Linda: "tst. hh allii::ght [I-]"

Bonnie: [Did ya?]

Linda: I got a B.

Bonnie: ’Grea:y=

Linda: = And I didn’t, I didn’t work that hard for it so ‘hh guess I’m kinda pleased hh hunh [hh]

Bonnie: For su::re

Linda: Whad’d you get -hh

Bonnie: I gotta C and I wORKed

Second, Bonnie’s homework is quite a task:

Linda: Yew like psyche one

Bonnie: Um: yeah it’s a lot of reading though. Sociology and psyche pull together ... sometimes the reading gets out of hand. hh y’know psychology reading and soxology reading. hh but um: I’ll make it I guess ‘heh-huh

And, finally, dorm life apparently is not entirely satisfactory:

Bonnie: But I know they’re playing those little games in our dorm too.

Linda: Oh yeah?

Bonnie: Oh: god terrible games. The boys against the girls and it makes me sick ya know ... (and there follows a series of stories)

It is possible that any one of these mentionsables might have been occasioned by the proper solicit in after lines 7–9 in example (8). That they were not, and that they still get mentioned, brings up the following consideration. If conversationists have a set of mentionsables which might warrantably be talked about at one point in a conversation, and the topic gets shifted such that they do not, speakers regularly utilize the local organization of talk to provide for the natural occurrence of such mentionsables at another point in the conversation. (See example [8] and fn. 22 for a similar example, and Schegloff and Sacks [1974: 243] for a general discussion of the issue.)

25. ‘Final’ is not meant to imply that this exhausts the possibilities.

26. One way to see the tokens at line 7 as minimal is that they are not fitted acoustically to the prior laughter invitation (cf. Jefferson 1975: 5, 5a).

27. Jefferson (1975: 5a) discusses laughing-together as something negotiated and accomplished on a unit-by-unit, particle-by-particle basis, as a ‘stepping up’ of the activity generated in laughter invitations and their acceptance.

28. The latter part of Diana’s utterance at line 15 (‘uh, what year’) by its syntactic structure, appears to be an unmarked self-retieval of the overlapped ‘are you’ in line 15. Thus Jane’s apparent attempt in that overlap at recycling the assessment ‘that’s funny’ is deleted.

29. Setting talk, utilized in almost every conversation and at several points in each one, never exceeded 20 turns.
First, some detailed observations can be made. Al's utterance (line 1) which begins this segment, is a repeat of an earlier item (‘ninety cents a drink’) not available in this segment, plus an additional component (‘sixty cents a beer’). Bob's turn in line 3 contains a token acknowledgement (‘yeah’) of Al’s. There are, further, a speculation (‘I wonder …’) regarding the identification of the focal character of the story, and a rhetorical question (‘what’s his secret’), in lines 3–5, which invite further topical talk. Al provides an identification of ‘the guy’ as a non-university person (line 6), followed by a laughter-acknowledgement by Bob and a characterization of the party via a three-part list (his sister ‘threw it, rented the thing, hired the bar’). There is a concluding statement (line 9) and Bob's assessment (line 10), followed by a 1.2-second silence. Successively, there is Al’s ‘yeah’, not implicative for subsequent talk (line 13), a 1.0-second silence (line 14) and two utterances (lines 15–16, 18) suggestive of transition relevance, each of which meets a silence, and a final minimal token (line 20). Following the next 1.0-second gap, then, is a topic change (arrowed): ‘you ever get into sports cars or anything?’

Some summary points can now be made. Often one person at a time is given the responsibility for developing a topic. Nevertheless, topical talk is a collaborative phenomenon in that while one person does topic-developmental utterances, the other may produce questions, invitations, continuers, and so forth, to keep the line of talk going. If we focus on Bob's utterances in the above example, there is an invitation in line 3, and two appreciation tokens, one in line 7 (‘heh ha’) and the other in the first part of line 10 (‘Wo:wo’). It is after Bob's assessment (‘nice sister’) in lines 10–11 that the collaborative development breaks down. The utterances in lines 13 through 20 all belong to Al and each is followed by a long silence. While Bob, at line 10, produced an acknowledgement of Al’s description of the party (which occupies lines 8 and 9), those silences indicate a failure of any further speaker transition. However, when Al changes the topic (from ‘party’ to ‘sports cars’) in line 22, there is a return to continuous topical talk.

It is not only stories or story components which can fail to accomplish speaker transition. Topical utterances as well can lack a subsequent demonstration of their sequential implicativeness. In the conversation from which the following is a fragment, Linda, who lives in a sorority because there were no dormitory vacancies, told Bonnie she was anxious to get into a dorm room and was on a waiting list. Bonnie, who does live in a dorm, then begins to tell of vacancies that are developing on her floor.

1. Bonnie: My- the girl that lives across the hall from me! .hh she's leaving
2. for sure
3. Linda: Oh ‘yeah’?
5. Linda: Whry? I mean why'd somebody just get up off an=
6. Bonnie: =Oh because she- she's a sophomore and she's transferring to
7. Saint Mary's
8. Linda: ‘Tst hh ch:=
9. Bonnie: =Because it's SMALLer you know .hh and um her ROOMate is
10. filled out an application there too and is, really wants to go .hh
11. Linda: Hm=
12. Bonnie: But she doesn't know if she's going for sure
13. (1.0)
14. Bonnie: And um so a lotta people are whatever transferring quitting whatever
15. 
16. Linda: Hm
17. (1.5)
18. Bonnie: So there ought to be you [know ]
19. Linda: [Uh huh
20. Bonnie: a few openings
21. (0.6)
22. Linda: Um have you heard anything about this experiment at all
23. Bonnie: ‘uh uh
24. Linda: ‘h- Cuz I've just heard in passing that um: it was- it concerned
25. bike paths and- do you have a bike?

In lines 1, and 9–10, Bonnie suggests that possibly two persons will be leaving her hall. At line 11, Linda provides a token response (‘Hm’).
transitions' will variously be used to refer to a situation where turn-by-turn talk is proceeding with minimal gap or less between turns.
9. Schegloff and Sacks (1974: 239) say 'By "sequential implicativity" is meant that an utterance projects for the sequentially following turn(s) the relevance of a determinate range of occurrences (be they utterance types, activities, speaker selections, etc.).'
10. See transcription conventions (Appendix) for understanding the notations in this example and the following ones. The source of each example is noted in parentheses beside the example number. Examples with 'West' are from conversations transcribed by Candace West (see West 1978), to whom I am indebted for making them available. Examples with 'Maynard' in parentheses are from transcripts of conversations between acquainted parties collected in doing research for a master's thesis (see Maynard 1975). The numbers next to 'West' or 'Maynard' are line numbers in the original transcripts.
11. Line 18 ('It was kinda fun though'), an assessment, is a device which commonly marks the end of a story's telling, and specifically invites recipient response. See Jefferson (1976: 14).
12. Bonnie cited two persons who were possibly leaving her dormitory (in lines 1-2, 9-10). She then (line 14) states that a 'lotta people' are transferring, etc. The concluding statement is characteristic in part by the "so" (beginning line 14), which indicates 'thus', or 'as a consequence' and by the invoking of a summative statement based on the citation of specific examples.
13. At line 6, Ellen appears to have started a question. It is overlapped by Jerry's pursuit of topical talk, not retrieved, and thus sequentially deleted. See Jefferson and Schegloff (1975) for a detailed consideration of the orderliness to overlap in conversation, and how parties retrieve talk out of overlap to provide for the talk's consequence. The production of 'detailed topical items', as in example (5), involves a series of utterances which expand the formulation of some topical focus. Thus, if Laura can be considered the topical focus of her own talk in lines 5-8, there are four utterances which achieve an expanded formulation of her as being not terribly 'rational'. In lines 5-6, she says she doesn't 'think that way', she is not 'logical', and she never goes 'step by step'. After the silence another component is added: 'I'm really an irrational person sometimes.'
14. This is discussed more fully below, pp. 274-275.
15. Or what Jefferson (1976: 9, 24) refers to as utilizing a category so as to invoke the mentioning of an incumbent.
16. The co-class membership of items, it needs to be noted, is a locally occasioned phenomenon. It is by virtue of their relationship to situated topical talk that two (or more) items can get 'put together' in the same class. See Sacks (April 17, 1968: 8-9).
17. The parallel here is to the use of the term 'they' not as a plural pronoun but as a categorical pronoun (cf. Sacks lecture 2, 1970). However, the 'you' may be used as an attempt at 'co-implication' or 'affiliation' here as well (cf. Jefferson, 1975 lectures).
18. The categorical reference would not be to the incumbents of some category or collection of categories, but to a course-of-action type (cf. Sacks 1975: 77).
19. Capital letters are usually utilized to show stress (see Appendix), but since 'I' is always capitalized, the 'EYE' is substituted to denote an emphasized 'I'.
20. 'First possible recognition point', in this case, would be no sooner than Laura could creditibly display 'I know what you're going to say', a point at which enough has been heard to determine what George is going to do with his utterance (see Jefferson 1973: 56-65).
21. Laura's 'complaint' gets returned to a few lines later. It is established that she went to a year of junior college in her home town. Then:
Bonnie produces a topical utterance at line 12 which is followed by a silence (line 13). Bonnie then produces a prototypical concluding statement\(^2\) (lines 14–15), which receives another minimal token ("Hm", line 16). A second silence occurs (17), and Bonnie provides another concluding statement (18, 20). This latter utterance, overlapped by an acknowledgement ("uh huh") not implicative of further talk, is followed by a 0.6-second gap (line 21). Finally, at line 22 (arrowed), Linda performs a topic change which introduces a series of continuous speaker transitions.

Where a succession of between-turn gaps appear in conversation, therefore, they are a problem for conversationalists. A topic change can be invoked as a mechanism for remedying the situation when repeated attempts at producing utterances related to the ongoing topic fail to generate speaker transition.

Prior research has suggested that a great many topic changes in conversation will be preceded by a silence (cf. Adato 1976: 24 and fn. 9; Vucinich 1975: 55). The above considerations, however, indicate that topic changes when prefaced by a gap are likely to be preceded by a number of utterances and/or tokens, each of which is accompanied by a silence. So that with respect to topic changes, we must look to a prior environment of conversational activities to discover the mechanisms involved, and not just some immediately previous locus.

All of this, however, raises another issue, that being under what circumstances continuous speaker transitions can break down. That is, it is not simply the case that a series of silences may occur in the course of conversation, but that they arise in diverse situations or are produced in a variety of ways. In fact, some lapses can be generated systematically in the very ways that topical talk itself is developed. And in all of these circumstances where transfer of speakership fails, a topic change can be utilized to restore continuous talk. In the following discussion, then, some of the topical environments which produce unsuccessful speaker transitions will be considered.

**Restoring topical talk after a story**

Generally, stories are made to articulate with the context in which they get told (Jefferson 1976: 1). We have already noted how such a feature is sometimes absent; briefly, stories and story exit devices can fail to occasion other related mentionables by a recipient. Topic changes appear in such an environment to restore formal turn-by-turn talk, as is illustrated in the following segment. John and Judy had been talking about the experimental situation, which serves to occasion a story by John about a previous experiment. The story occupies lines 1 through 5.

(3) (West, 15: 84)

1. John: Yeah, it was uh (1.4) hh you s\(\text{it}\) on the other side of a room and a guy (0.4) ((sniff)) puts a LIGHT on. There's two lights. (Er's) a green an' a red one. h the red one comes on, you take your finger off a button. The gr\(\text{een}\) one comes on, 'n you keep it on: It's a re\(\text{ACKshun}\) test?
2. Judy: Um::
3. John: Did that for awhile
4. (0.6)
5. John: So I had my big Psych test that wa:y
6. (1.2)
7. John: ((sniff)). went through on:ce
8. (1.8)
9. John: Now we're working on Sosh
10. (1.6)
11. Judy: "um
12. (3.2)
13. John: So what do you THI::NK about the bicycles on campus?
14. Judy: I think they're terrible
15. John: Sure is about a MIL::LION of 'em.
16. Judy: eh [he:h]
17. John: (Duzit) SEEM da you: there's a lot more this year

John receives a token response to his story from Judy ("um", line 6), then produces a series of utterances (lines 8 through 14) suggestive of transition relevance. When those attempts to elicit recipient talk are unsuccessful, there is, in line 18 (arrowed), a topic change which does result in a course of continuous talk.

It appears, then, that story-related utterances and topic changing utterances, as two mechanisms employed to generate speaker transition, stand in an ordered relationship. It is after a teller has utilized story components as exit devices to accomplish speaker transition that a topic change regularly occurs.

**Detailed topical items and absent solicits**

With respect to sequences of topical talk (as opposed to the articulation of a story with an ongoing topic), one way in which they seem to falter is in an environment of absent recipient solicits.

Topical talk often proceeds, as mentioned earlier, by one person being aligned as topical-speaker and one as recipient, and it is the job of the latter to provide minimal utterances (uh-huh, oh really, etc.) and other
produce an answer plus additional talk. To do the former may be to refuse the topical invitation, or at least engage more work on the part of the inviter to continue the talk. To do the latter, i.e., to produce more than an answer to a topic changing question, would constitute accepting the invitation.

The main point is, however, that those topic changes occurring in the conversations between unacquainted pairs get formed as invitations (which may be either refused or accepted) while those between acquainted pairs get formed as claims to do topic-developmental talk, through an announcement sequence and the talk it implicates.

Summary

Conversationalists have varied procedures for reinstating continuous turn-by-turn talk: referencing the setting, making invitations, and making claims. Referencing the setting is a procedure common to acquainted and unacquainted individuals, while invitations and claims are differentially employed in those topic changes which address things outside the conversational setting.31

Conclusion

A number of implications can be drawn from this study. It is clear that studies of topicality in conversation must not merely pay attention to ‘content’ but must address matters of ‘structure’ as well. This is nothing new, for Garfinkel (1967: 28) recommended some time ago that what conversationalists are talking about cannot be distinguished from how they are speaking. Sacks and others, in various writings, have extended this notion and described some of the structures which organize and make observable topical talk.

A consideration of topical structure, then, is necessary to understand the phenomenon of topic change in conversation. Thus, while Simmel (1950: 53) has suggested that ‘the ability to change topics easily and quickly is ... part of the nature of social conversation’, that ability is no mean thing. As revealed in this investigation, it involves intricate knowledge of the environments where topic changes may be utilized and of how they may be produced. Where conversationalists are facing difficulty with developing some current line of talk, a topic change can be employed to reinstate continuous talk irrespective of the circumstances under which the topic may have faltered. Topic changes, in other words, regularly appear as one part of the work whereby continuous speaker transitions are maintained.

Furthermore, conversationalists display a finely-tuned interactional sensitivity in doing topic changes. It is often in response to disagreements or various sorts of recipient inattention that topic changes are produced. Also, while both acquainted and unacquainted conversationalists use the setting as a resource in doing some topic changes, in those new topics whose referent is outside the setting, acquainted participants form the topic-changing utterances as claims to the conversational ‘floor’ while unacquainted parties construct them as invitations.

Appendix:

Adapted transcribing conventions
(From the work of Gail Jefferson)

1. A: Oh you do? Really
   B: [Um hmmm]

2. B: That’s how I felt =
   A: = Really

3. A: And I’m not use to that
   B: [1.4]

4. A: People would say I’m from Marin ( ) County
   B: Uh huh they are because ...

5. A: It was unbelievable. I had a three point six? I think.
   B: You did.

6. B: I did oka:y

7. B: I did oka:y

8. A: That’s where I REALLY want to go

9. A: I told them that there was- well there IS a job opening

A left hand bracket marks the point of overlap, while a right hand bracket indicates where overlapping talk ends.

Equal signs indicate ‘latching’; i.e., no interval between the end of a prior utterance and the start of a next.

Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in tenths of seconds.

Dots in parentheses indicate a very small pause (less than one-tenth second).

Ellipses indicate where part of an utterance is left out of the transcript. Generally used in this paper only at the end of an example.

Punctuation markers are not used as grammatical symbols but for intonation. Thus a question may be constructed with ‘comma’ or ‘period’ intonation and ‘question intonation’ may occur in association with objects which are not questions.

Colon(s) indicate the prior syllable is prolonged. The more colons, the longer the prolongation.

Capital letters indicate various forms of stressing, and may involve pitch and/or volume.

The dash indicates a ‘cut off’ of the prior word or sound.
'solicits' which demonstrate recipient attention and invite further related talk. The following is an example. Jerry has remarked that he wants to transfer to another school, and Ellen asked him why.

(4) (West, 21: 119)

1. Ellen: Don' cha like it here?
2. Jerry: I like it here, it's real'ly pretty 'n ev'rything =
3. Ellen: =Um [hmm]
4. Jerry: [An'] the PEE-ple are very nice. But- hh Oh::, it's JUS' not
good academically. Really.
5. Ellen: 'R you go
6. Jerry: [Cuz] I'm MAjoring in Economics.
7. Ellen: [Um: hmm]
9. Ellen: 'Um hm =
10. Jerry: =And: I wanna go- d' you know Cornell University?
12. Jerry: Why::, are you gonna transfer there n- n- nexT year?

In line 1, Ellen produces a question which invites further topical talk from Jerry, providing for an alignment in which he will be a speaker for the topic. In lines 3, 8, 10, and 12, she issues monitoring responses at or around transition relevance places and thus displays her attention as recipient of his talk. In line 14, she produces another question invitational of topical talk. It is with these various items that a participant solicits topical talk and exhibits him/herself as recipient of that talk.

The absence of recipient talk at transition relevance places, then, may be particularly dramatic and consequential for the course of an ongoing topic. This is apparent in the following, where George and Laura had been talking about various philosophy classes.

(5) (West, 19: 154)

1. George: There's discussion: an:: short- .h there's ya know, written an' oral exams frequently. Er- once in a while at least.
2. George: [hhhh- hh- hh- hh- hh- hh- hh]
3. Laura: Yeah, I'd like to take uh- something like] HIS'ry of philosophy
4. George: [hhhh- hh- hh- hh- hh- hh- hh]
5. Laura: 'r something where you don' afta do any of that kinda- I don't thINK that way, I'm not that logical. I never go step by step.
6. Laura: =N I just- I'm REAllly an irRAtional person sometimes. So
7. Laura: (1.2)
8. Laura: 'N I just- I'm REAllly an irRAtional person sometimes. So
9. Laura: (1.4)
10. George: Where do you live in Eye Vee? or
11. Laura: Yeah I live in uh- at the Tropicana

In lines 1 and 2, George produces a topical utterance, while, in line 3, Laura provides an acknowledgement, 'yeah', and goes on to produce a topical utterance of her own. Then in lines 5 and 6, Laura repairs that utterance and offers self-characterization through a three-part list ('I don't think that way, I'm not that logical, I never go step by step'). It is followed by a silence (line 7). She extends her self-characterization by offering an alternative formulation in line 8, and appends a 'so', which is a routine way of soliciting a response (see Jefferson 1976: 14). However, it is also followed by a silence. Finally, George changes the topic at line 10 (arrowed) and continuous speaker transitions are reinstated. If indeed it is the task of a recipient to provide demonstrations of attention, then the silences at lines 7 and 9 dramatically mark the lack of such attention. Thus, one way in which topical talk can falter and bring on a topic change is through absent solicits. Further, such displays of inattention together with the topic change may be parts of a mechanism whereby topic control gets done. Zimmerman and West (1975: 124) have argued that monitoring responses, when delayed or accompanied by prior lapses, often act to bring off a topic change.

**Topic shifts and absent solicits**

It is not only after detailed topical items are produced, as in the last example, that solicits may be absent, but after attempts by a speaker to do topic shifting as well. Topic shifts involve a move from one aspect of a topic to another in order to occasion a different set of mentionables, and they can be done in various ways. For example, participants often use alternate formulations of an object to constitute different lines of topical talk. Another method is to use what Sacks (April 17, 1968) calls co-class membership; that is, to accomplish, for example, a shift in topical talk from cigarettes to cigars by virtue of their co-membership in the class 'things people smoke'. In the following, Jennic and Lisa have been talking about the quarter system and how hard it is to keep up with the work.

(6) (West, 11: 197)

1. Jenny: It's really pressur[ing] move so: fast =
2. Lisa: [They] res'fer a DA:: y' an
3. Jenny: =Um hmm =
4. Lisa: =You jus'- you know GAW h [you jus'] res'fer a DA:: Y' an'
5. Jenny: Oh ya::ah
6. Lisa: you're w- way hunh huh hh hind [it seems like]
7. Jenny: Oh ya::ah An I been
transitional in the sense that they shortly result in other work whereby formal turn-by-turn talk is maintained. Once again, the suggestion is that this is a general conversational pattern. Aspects of any given setting are regularly utilized as a resource to generate topical talk, or to make transitions between topics.

Invitations and announcements

Where topic changes involve talk which references something outside the setting, two distinct patterns are observable in the talk of the acquainted as opposed to the nonacquainted pairs of conversationalists. With the acquainted pairs, the topic-changing utterances were regularly formed as announcements.

(16) (Maynard, G: 119)
1. Melissa: But uh hah Dr. Buttram, Today he gave us a lecture on Freud? And
2. it's the most interesting lecture on Freud I have ever
3. (Oh) had good

(17) (Maynard, F: 279)
1. Jane: I don't want to go to psych-sosh tomorrow
2. Sue: You don't?

Both of the beginning utterances in these examples are topic changes. Furthermore, both are announcements, i.e., items which are produced as a report by some deliverer as not known to some recipient, and which are '... subsequently interactionally ratified by the recipient as news to them' (Terasaki 1976: fn 3). Thus, an announcement forms the first pair part of an adjacency pair, and provides for the conditional relevance (see Schegloff 1972b: 364) of a second pair part: an acknowledgement, assessment or question. In locations where topical talk has faltered, then, announcements are reliable devices for insuring at least one turn transition, and strongly implicate a series of turns in which a complete account of the news may be given and received.

Between unacquainted participants, on the other hand, topic changes occurring in an environment of failed speaker transitions were invariably formed up as questions. Again, questions are first pair parts which require a second part, an answer, and in a parallel way to announcements obtain at least one turn transition. In addition, as Sacks (April 18, 1972: 14) suggests, topic changing questions operate as topical invitations. They are built so that a recipient may produce simply an answer, or may
If 'resting for a day' (in line 4) and 'playing around' (line 8) can be considered members of a class of activities which involve a person in getting 'way behind', then Jenny's utterance in lines 7-8 can be characterized as a topic shift trading on the co-class membership mechanism.\textsuperscript{17}

There is another procedure operating in this segment as well, which is the movement from a categorical statement to one that is particularized. In lines 4 and 6, when Lisa says 'you just rest for a day and you're way behind', the 'you' is utilized in an abstract way.\textsuperscript{18} It is not only Lisa, but Jenny and any other student in the same situation who would be 'way behind'.\textsuperscript{19} Jenny, then, makes the shift to a statement about herself: 'I been playing around too much'. Here, then, we have the interaction of two mechanisms which accomplish a topic shift and the occasioning of a new set of mentionables. Lisa produces an immediate solicit of further talk (line 9) and Jenny (line 10) continues the line of talk.

Topic shifting procedures, in this way, are regular features of ongoing topical talk, and are ways in which transformations can be done on a prior utterance in order to occasion a set of mentionables in a present utterance. It is in this sense that structural matters are crucial to the description and understanding of topical talk.

While it is through such means that a continuous state of topical talk is maintained, conversationalists also use these mechanisms to restore smooth speaker transitions in situations where they have failed to transpire. We can examine this with respect to the following segment.

\textsuperscript{7} (West, 8: 290)

1. Alice: I mean EYE\textsuperscript{20} don' even know if I want to go to grad school or what.\textsuperscript{h} [So]
2. Jane: Eh I'm not gonna think about it.
3. Alice: heh heh \textsuperscript{h} =
4. Jane: =I figure if I REALy wanna go, when i- you know, by the time I get outta school I'll be able to get in someplace.
5. Alice: Yeah, somePLACE, someHOW h-huh \textsuperscript{h} [Yeah]
6. Jane: (2.0)
7. Jane: But- I don' know, I'm startin' ta feel like there-you know a bad grADE can affect yuh to some degree but
8. Jane: (1.0)
9. Jane: You know, other thing- ya' know. PE:OPLE is what affects yuh a lot more so
with ongoing talk, detailed topical utterances or topic shifts may not generate further topical items, recipient refocusings might defuse an adumbrated topic, or disagreement turns can result in foregone selfselections. It may be that, as with absent recipient solicit or the lack of turn selection after the display of discrepant positions in adjacent turns, silences are utilized as a resource to focus off the line of talk such that a topic change is invoked to restore continuous speaker transitions. In a sense, the turn-taking mechanism itself provides this way, i.e., the production of silences, to ‘wind down’ a topic.

Thus it is not just that conversationalists run out of things to say and change the topic, but that they run out of things to say in systematic ways. The selfsame work whereby participants achieve the occasioning of mentionables and the building of topical talk sometimes results in failed transfer of speakership. A topic change, an utterance directed to occasioning a new set of mentionables, is employed in such circumstances as an abstract procedure for reinstating continuous talk. So at the same time as it is this general type of mechanism, i.e., a topic change utilizes new referents to occasion a different line of talk, it is employable in the aforementioned variety of circumstances and is responsive to diverse kinds of situations wherein transfer of speakership fails. Topic changes thereby display the dual characteristics of context-freeness and context-sensitivity (cf. Sacks et al. 1974: 699–700).

The argument, furthermore, is that the procedures participants utilize to achieve formal turn-by-turn talk, and the work they do to repair its absence, are not patterns intrinsic to conversation in an experimental setting. Rather, they represent ways that members will construct their conversation topically in any ‘make-talk’ situation, such as parties, passenger terminals, on public transportation, etc., and whether the conversants are newly-introduced or well-acquainted. This is, of course, a matter for further research.

**Topic-changing utterances**

A topic change, it has been stated, is an utterance which employs referents unrelated to prior talk in order to implicate a new set of mentionables. In this section will be considered certain formal characteristics of the topic changing utterances.

As noted at the outset, the conversations in this study took place between both acquainted and acquainted persons. An examination of the construction of topic-changing utterances reveals a pattern common to the conversations of both sets of participants, and an interesting contrast between the two as well.

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**Placement of topic changes in conversation**

The common pattern is that topic changing utterances often were statements which addressed aspects of the experiment or experimental setting. So, for example, there is this from a pair of acquainted individuals:

(12) (West, 14: 197)
1. Bonnie: I’ve never seen a two-way mirror. [Are you sure]
2. Linda: Tst [hh] No: I’m not
3. Linda: POS("h"")ive ‘huh-huh I mean it’s weird how they set it up just
4. like this [hh]

Bonnie’s utterance at line 1 (arrowed) is a topic change which references part of the experimental setting (two-way mirrors facing the participants). Then, there is this from an acquainted pair:

(13) (Maynard, C: 68)
1. Andy: Hey I know he’s been watching us. They’re gon[na leave us in here =
2. Ralph: Hh
3. Ralph: = They’re not watching me. Oh it’s my one moment of glory then
4. (1.8)
5. Ralph: Well
6. (3.0)
7. Ralph: No actually I was on TV twice

In line 1, which is a mid-conversation topic change, Ralph makes reference to the research assistant (‘he’s been watching us’) and to the experimenters (‘they’re gonna leave us in here’).

In some instances, these topic changes would result in an extended sequence of related talk. They often serve to occasion a story of a prior experiment or similar happening. The utterance above at line 7, for example, prefaced a story Ralph tells about having been on television.

In other instances, however, topic changes which related to the experimental setting would result in a topic shift, as in the following:

(14) (West, 22: 85)
1. Claudia: Well thIS is uh- f- sure is fu:n hh-hh
2. Brian: Yeah. Should be int*rest*ing. This is the first experiment I’ve
3. been in like this
5. Brian: .h Prob’ly makes us good subjects. eh-hunh
shifts, is constructed in part by reference to the occurrence of the transition relevance places ignored by Jane's recipient, Alice.

Jane's topic-shifting work yields only a token acknowledger from Alice (line 19) and another silence (line 20). Jane's 'too' (line 21), is not implicative for subsequent talk, thus exhibiting a refusal to do more topic-developmental work. It does re-offer a place for a recipient response, constituting the silence at line 20 as intraturn and providing a next transition place. However, that meets with another silence. A topic change (arrowed) occurs and reinstates continuous talk.

Prior discussion (example 5) described how detailed topical items produced in an environment of absent recipient solicits may result in a topic change. Here, we have considered how the production of topic shifts may also lack recipient demonstrations of their sequential implicativeness. The point, then, is that it is not a matter that speaker transitions simply falter. Rather, a topic change, by reinstating continuous talk, appears as a procedural solution to a situation in which the mechanisms whereby ongoing topics are expanded in detail or are shifted and new mentionables occasioned through those artful shifts have been unsuccessful in generating a series of continuous turn transitions. Topical talk, in short, is a collaborative phenomenon. It can break down even though a topical speaker is doing various sorts of developmental work, provided a recipient avoids turn selection at transition relevance places. Topic changes regularly appear in such environments.

Refocusings

There are other ways in which a recipient can disattend ongoing topical talk besides avoiding self-selection for a turn. Trouble may arise when a recipient, in doing a solicit, refocuses a speaker's line of talk. The following is an example.

(8)(West, 19: 58)
1. George: Where do you COME from.
2. Laura: Ventura. Not too far from home.
3. George: No not at all you go home every weekend?
4. Laura: No
5. George: No?
6. Laura: =I'm gonna try to go to Berkeley next year. I didn't wanna go here.
7. Really. It's too close to home.
9. (0.5)
asked Diana, who is a sociology major, how she liked a psychology class she [Diana] is taking. Both know what major the other person is.)

(10) (West, 9: 38)
1. Diana: Uh: I like the book. I don’t like the teacher.
2. Janet: Oh! hh=
3. Diana: =He’s a bore
4. Janet: Oh really? Yeah=
5. Diana: =An: (0.4) I don’t like- Psych classes that much. heh-huh=
6. Diana: =I ‘afta admit, I mean, you know!=
7. Janet: hh! h
8. Janet: =h EYE don’t like Sosh classes! [hch-hch ((unintelligible))]
9. Diana: =Yeah I know, I lo:ve Sosh=
10. Janet: =hbb
11. Diana: =classes I don’t like Psych classes=
12. Janet: =h-hch that’s fun: [ny]
13. Diana: =What can you do. y’kn [ow]
14. Janet: (That’s f-t)
15. Diana: =Are you- uh, what YE:AR?
16. Janet: Freshman

In line 5, Diana asserts that she doesn’t ‘like Psych classes that much’, and appends a laughter invitation (Jefferson 1975: 61f.). That receives minimal laughter tokens in line 7 which are overlapped by Diana’s pursuit of topical talk. In line 8, Janet’s utterance exhibits disagreement by repeating the phrase in line 5 (‘I don’t like Psych classes’) with the substitution of a contrasting, recipient-sensitive item (Sosh) for Psych. That is, it’s not just that Janet asserts what set of classes she does not like, but that those classes are ones in her co-participant’s major, just as Diana had stated she doesn’t like classes in Janet’s major. Janet also issues an invitation to laugh (end of line 8) which is overlapped by Diana’s pursuit of topical talk (line 9), an upgrade of the discrepancy (‘I love Sosh classes’) and, in line 11, a recycle of her prior assertion.

It appears that Janet and Diana are attempting to treat the disagreement as a joke, in that there are the laughter invitations and tokens, and in line 12, Janet’s assessment ‘that’s funny’. That may be one way of minimizing the discrepancy, although it is notable that in two cases of laughter invitations (lines 5 and 8) one receives a minimal response and the other is overlapped by topical talk. The two parties never quite achieve a state of laughing-together. What does occur is a kind of phased withdrawal from the disagreement, starting with Janet’s ‘that’s funny’ assessment, followed by Diana’s aphorism in line 13 (‘what can you do, y’know’) and consummated by the topic change (arrowed) which engages an entirely different line of talk. In general, and as Pomerantz (1975) has argued, conversationalists appear to have set of resources for minimizing disagreement turns in conversation. Here we see topic change as one mechanism whereby that minimization is accomplished, while preserving a state of talk.

Disagreement turns can not only result in such a step-by-step movement away from the display of contrary positions, but can also engender the occurrence of silences. For example:

(11) (West, 2: 12)
1. Tom: Yeah I’m a bio sy major I kinda wanna get ina some research work so=
2. Bill: =Yeah=
3. Tom: =At’s kinda why I’m here=
4. Bill: =See I sorta want to get OUttta research work=
5. Tom: =Outta-outta research huh
6. (1.2)
7. Tom: =hm:
8. (2.4)
9. Tom: =Hh psho:oo
10. Bill: Do you live here on campus

These participants’ discrepant positions are characterizable by the contrast class of terms ‘inta’ and ‘outta’. Tom wanting ‘to get into some research’ (line 1), and Bill wanting ‘to get outta research work’ (line 5). In fact, Bill marks the contrast term, ‘outta’, by stressing it (line 5). Tom pursues topical talk in line 6, but there follow two silences (lines 7 and 9) interspersed with Tom’s own token (line 8) and followed by his elongated outbreak (line 10). A topic change (arrowed) then introduces a new line of talk. The suggestion here is not only that the silences indicate neither party has elected to talk, but that such non-election is a way of avoiding the consequences of the participants’ divergent positions. By ‘consequences’, I am referring, as above, (see p. 277), to the regular appearance of either maintaining prior positions or minimizing them. Topic change is a means whereby conversationalists can re-engage formal turn-by-turn talk when disagreement turns result in foregone self-selections for turns at talk, i.e., in failure at speaker transition.

Summary

The import of all this is that in a variety of ways conversationalists can bring about the breakdown of topical talk. Stories can fail to articulate
tions are possible, leaves the recipient with an ambiguity as to what the proper one is. Furthermore, the occurrence of a mishearing is itself in part a matter of conversational sequencing. In this instance (example 8), it is not only that some referent might allow for alternative formulations, but that through subsequent negotiations the wrongful focusing on one of those formulations is made observable.

Absent solicits and refocusings in combination

Absent recipient solicits and refocusings may occur in tandem such that topical talk falters.

(9) (West, 14: 18)
2. Linda: Sacramento.
4. Linda: [hh 'tst yeah it's] a little bit close
5. Bonnie: Yeh
6. (0.8)
7. Bonnie: An: I went home this weekend an I'm just- I got back last night
8. .hh and it was ALL I could do was ta um (1.2) go to class today.
9. Ya know I didn't wan- I wanted to stay at home I didn't wanna
10. come back here
11. (1.0)
12. Linda: Hm::
13. (0.6)
14. Bonnie: Ya [kn] ow cuz you know how you get so- I got so ho::me [sick]
15. Linda: [hh yeh]
16. Bonnie: and stuff =
17. Linda: = Did you drive all the way up
18. Bonnie: No I flew
19. (0.4)
20. Bonnie: It cost fifty-five dollars
21. (0.4)
22. Bonnie: tch
23. (0.6)
24. Linda: "Wow
25. Bonnie: But
26. (1.4)
27. Bonnie: What else =
28. Linda: = Oh:
29. (2.0)
30. Bonnie: So how'd you do on the sosh midterm?

In line 7, Bonnie utilizes an invited self-categorization23 (from line 3) to develop topical talk. She sets up a contrast between 'home' (where she 'wanted to stay') and 'here' (where she 'didn't wanna come back'). There is a one-second silence at line 11, displaying a first lack of speaker transition, followed by Linda's token at line 12 and another silence. Bonnie adds a topical component at line 14 about getting 'homesick'. Thus Linda's question 'Did you drive all the way up' (line 17) is a shifting of Bonnie's topical talk, a focusing off the contrast of home and school in terms of which is a desirable place to be, and a focusing on the trip between the two places.24 There follow Bonnie's two utterances (lines 18 and 20) which answer Linda's question, neither of which achieves transfer of speakership, and Bonnie's own token at line 22 which is followed by a silence. Subsequently, a series of minimal utterances are produced, none of which is implicative for talk, and after a final silence at line 29, a topic change occurs at line 30 (arrowed). In summary, then, there can be a combination of mechanisms which result in discontinuous topical talk. Here there was a delayed response to one line of topical talk, a refocusing of that line, and absent solicits or demonstrations of sequential implicativeness for the refocused topic. The topic change results in a course of successful speaker transitions.

Disagreements

As a final consideration of how topical talk may expire,25 we can examine the occurrence of disagreement in conversation. Disagreement here is used in a technical sense: it refers to the display of discrepant positions in adjacent turns of talk. As discussed by Pomerantz (1975), an utterance which disagrees with a prior one implicates a delimited collection of subsequent occurrences, and she (1975: 77, 85) suggests two possibilities. Given the display of variant positions in adjacent turns, and insofar as participants remain on topic with respect to those turns, successive assertions may involve modifications of prior ones such that the discrepancy is minimized, or the parties may hold their prior positions across a series of turns.

In the following, one party holds her position for one turn subsequent to the occurrence of disagreement turns. But following that, there is a movement away from the discrepancy. (Janet, who is a psychology major,