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Topic Shift in Casual Conversation

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OVERVIEW

The study of topic in discourse involves identifying the boundaries of stretches of discourse which set one fragment of discourse off from the rest. In other words, it is the study of where one part of a conversation ends and where another begins. There is undoubtedly an intuitive notion of topic as every speaker change does not necessarily terminate a particular coherent piece of conversation (Brown and Yule, 1983:69). I will analyse topic choice and shift using the techniques found in *Discourse Analysis* (Brown and Yule 1983). The data used to illustrate this analysis involves two friends engaged in a casual, social conversation.

CONSTRUCTING A TOPIC FRAMEWORK

To begin an analysis of discourse topic, one must establish the topic framework of the data, which "represents the area of overlap in the knowledge which has been activated and is shared by the participants at a particular point in a discourse" (Brown and Yule, 1983:83). This allows the analyst to determine what is 'being talked about'. To do this, one must call upon the "activated features of context"; to determine what aspects are explicitly reflected in the text as formal records of utterance. The analyst must also consider the speaker's assumptions about the hearer's knowledge, as this is related to what the speaker will make explicit in the conversation. If the two conversational participants have a strong shared knowledge or experience of the discourse topic, then the speaker is likely to be less explicit than otherwise.

In formulating a topic framework, the analyst must record the contextual features of the discourse, including participant, time and location information. As well, the domain of discourse must be established. This involves internal conversational elements which are derived from prior discourse fragments, which, in being previously mentioned, have been activated for both participants. These can include people, places, entities, events and facts (Brown and Yule, 1983:79). In examining the data provided, one can construct various topic frameworks relating to the various topics discussed throughout the discourse. For example, a framework is present for the fragment of discourse ranging from line 82 through to line 121.

The contextual features of the discourse are as follows:

Conversation between Participant A (20+ years, female, student, English speaking, resident of Southern Ontario) and Participant T (20+ years, female, student, English speaking, resident of Southern Ontario) in location p (apartment in London, Ontario) at time t (October, 1993).

The domain of discourse for this piece of conversation regarding one participant narrating a humorous situation which took place, would include: the prior mention of 'John' in line 1; the previous mention of the weekend in line 75, signalling that was when the event took place; the shared knowledge that 'John and Katherine' are friends of participant T; and the shared knowledge that 'the game', in line 83, was the hockey game on television.

Another topic framework can be made for the discourse ranging from line 140 to line 156. The contextual features would remain the same as above. The domain of discourse includes the previous topic of speaker A's mother in line 124, prompting speaker T to introduce a new topic involving her own mother in line 140. Furthermore, a different topic framework immediately follows this segment of conversation, beginning on line 157. Its domain of discourse would involve the previous topic of 'autumn flowers' in line 156, leading to the new topic of 'driving here' in line 157. This domain would also include the shared knowledge that 'driving here' means driving from home in Toronto to school in London ('here').

Thus, one can see that constructing a topic framework can enable the analyst to identify what motivated certain topics to be chosen and how much shared inference exists between the participants.

RELEVANCE AND TOPIC SHIFT

Once the elements in a topic framework have been established, one can then make judgments of relevance regarding conversational contributions (Brown and Yule, 1983:83). There exists an unconscious discourse maxim which states that participants must make their contributions as relevant as possible in terms of the existing framework (Brown and Yule, 1983:84). Speakers are said to "speak topically" when they make their contributions accord with recent elements of topic; they pick up elements from the previous speaker's speech and incorporate it into their own.

This can be illustrated by expanding upon the topic framework established above from the data. In line 122, speaker A introduces the topic of 'Aladdin'; this in itself stems from the shared participant knowledge of the 'Aladdin' movie video and the shared interest in acquiring it. This topic can be seen to have been introduced at this point in discourse, as the topic of movie videos had been previously discussed by participant T in lines 90 through 115. Thus, speaker A chose the next discourse topic with relevance to speaker T's previous contribution. Again, speaker T's choice of the topic of buying flowers for her mother in line 143, can be traced back to speaker A's mention of her own mother in line 124.

Another example of this phenomena is illustrated in lines 1 through 37. In line 11, speaker A introduces the topic of 'model homes'. This choice can be traced back to speaker T's previous topic of the 'Eddie Bauer sale' in line 6; this topic caused speaker A to remember that she had intended to go to the sale, but went to view model homes instead. Furthermore, speaker T's choice of topic in line 6 can be seen to have been introduced in lines 1 and 2 when she spoke of 'Tab's insta–bank card', which was given to her at the 'Eddie Bauer sale';

thus, her mention of the bank card can be said to have prompted her to elaborate and introduce the topic of the sale.

INTRODUCTION OF TOPIC WITH THE FIRST PERSON

Another interesting facet of topic choice, is that speakers often introduce their discourse choice through a first person reference. This is illustrated in the data numerous times. For instance, speaker A introduces the topic of 'model homes' by stating in line 10, "'*we*' went to look at model homes ...". Also, in line 42, speaker T changes the topic by saying "*I*' got so much food ...". In line 59 speaker A, again chooses a personal topic; "'*I*' am missing underwear!", and further, speaker T changes the subject by stating "'*I*' did take off with a t–shirt of hers" in line 72. Again in line 83, speaker T takes control of topic choice by introducing an account of her weekend with "'*we*' (h) all watched the game". Evidence of first person reference to topic introduction abounds in this data, and the assumption can be made that it would in most conversational data sets.

CONCLUSION

It can thus be seen that in conversation, most topics are not previously fixed or determined; rather they are negotiated between participants in the process of discourse (Brown and Yule, 1983:89). These negotiations involve participants making their contributions compatible so that discourse may continue, but it also involves the assurance that speakers may speak about the topics they wish to be discussed. Topic choice can be traced in previous discourse and each topic has a tendency to lead to the next; to provide the opening for another. Analysts can observe this by establishing topic frameworks and by investigating the notion of the maxim of 'speaking topically'.

Brown and Yule's analytical techniques seem to work well for this data set. Although, topic shifts can usually be identified intuitively by reading the spoken text, topic analysis should also identify what preceded and determined the choice of particular topics. As we have seen Brown and Yule's techniques were applicable to the data available. It is still necessary, however, to observe whether such results are consistent with other genres of discourse, such as narratives, formal conversations, and discourse between participants not closely familiar with each other. Only with such a broad scope of study can generalisations, about the effectiveness of the use of topic frameworks and 'speaking topically', be conclusively demonstrated as valid.

DATA TRANSCRIPTION

Casual conversation between Speaker A (20+ years, female, student, English speaking, resident of Southern Ontario) and Speaker T (20+ years, female, student, English speaking, resident of Southern Ontario) in location p (apartment in London, Ontario) at time t (March 1994).

1   T: John went through my wallet, which is a good thing
     he did 2   because he found Tab's uh (.) insta–
     bank card (h)/
3   A: oh really? (h)/
4   T: //(h)] cause I would have left town with it/
5   A: oh! ( )/
6   T: cause she gave it to me to keep at the Eddie Bauer
     sale/
7   A: right we were going to go to that but (.)
8   T: //they didn't have a 9   lot]
10   A: I don't know why we didn't go (.) oh we went to
     look at 11   model homes instead/
12   T: oh really? was this a family outing?/
13   A: um my mom, my sister and I (.) cause they've got
     the 14   models open now in Springdale/
15   T: where's that?
16   A: it's Brampton's new uh (.) new community ( )
     Springdale 17   north of umm (.)
18   T: //planning on moving?]
19   A: hmm?
20   T: are you guys planning on moving?/
21   A: no (.) we were just looking (.) some of them are
     nice, but 22   they're building this whole new
     town just north of us 23   ( )/
24   T: is it going to be Springdale Ontario of Brampton
     Ontario?/
25   A: well it's going to be Springdale but (.) it's gonna be
26   under city of Brampton government
27   T: //ok]
28   A: so I don't understand what they're __ all I know is
     that 29   they're getting their own schools and
     their own (.) 30   churches and malls and
     everything and it's too bad because 31   it was all
     (.) like it's kind of before you hit Caledon 32
     like it's so pretty like you used to just be able to just
     33   cross the road from our house
34   T: //yeah]
35   A: and just ( ) farmhouses (.) and now it's just all dirt
     36   and tractors and houses (.) I'm not happy (.)
     some of the 37   houses are nice/
38   T: ( )/
39   A: hmm?/
40   T ( )/
41   A: oh, did you?/
42   T: I got so much food ( ) I don't have to go shopping/
43   A: I can't be bothered to do that when I'm home/
44   T: oh really?/
45   A: it just seems easier: just to go grocery shopping
     when I'm 46   here and ( )/
47   T: I figure if I'm getting a ride __ (h)/
48   A: well, you might as well/
49   T: it's just I just can't be bothered to go grocery
     shopping 50   this week ( )/
51   A: ( )/
52   T: the only thing I got done was my log for tomorrow/
53   A: well at least you got that done/
54   T: yeah I did my log and I did ( )/
55   A: when's your midterm? Thursday?/
56   T: night but it's only an hour
57   A: //( ) midterm]
58   T: it's only an hour/...
59   A: I am missing underwear!/
60   T: I'm missing some too/
61   A: I don't understand:! in the summer I had (.) I had
     62   underwear for three weeks without ( ) and
     now (.) like I 63   think in the process of moving

I just lost them somewhere 64   cause I just don't know where they are:!/

65 T: that's sad/

66 A: ( ) I have to do laundry so much/

67 T: I don't know __ my sister made sure I didn't leave with 68   something/

69 A: yeah!/

70 T: (h) she (h)/

71 A: ( )/

72 T: I did take off with a t–shirt of hers/

73 A: did you? did she come up too?/

74 T: no she stayed home (.) she had a lot of work to do, it was 75   such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got 76   along:/

77 A: that's good/

78 T: //it was really odd]

79 A: //(h)]/

80 T: //really really weird]/

81 A: yeah:/

82 T: and then John and Katherine came over and like the whole 83   family stayed down:: we (h) all watched the game

84 A: //well that's   85 nice]/

86 T: what's going on here!

87 A: //that's nice, that's a nice feeling 88 though]/

89 T: //yeah (.) John's like (.) someone had borrowed his 90   umm (.) what's that (.) thing with Mike Myers ( )

91 A: //Wayne's   92 World?]/

93 T: yeah cause he loved that movie so we got it for him for 94   Christmas

95 A: //right]/

96 T: Kath and I did and uh (.) for the birthday that just past 97   we got him (.) the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition   98   cassette (.) video cassette. so we couldn't remember: what 99   we got him for what birthday but apparently someone had   100 borrowed his (.) Wayne's World video and hadn't given it 101   back yet (.) and he's like oh I'm so pissed off I haven't 102   gotten it back __ and I'm like, well get it back it was a 103   birthday: present! (.) and he went (.) he just looked at 104 me and Kath's like (.) you know (.) she didn't

105 A: //hm–hmm]/

106 T: she didn't faze at all, he's like you guys gave that to me 107   for Christmas and we went oh:: (.) ok

108 A: //(h) yeah]/

109 T: we had no idea, Kath turned around she's like (.) yeah 110   what did we give him for his birthday? (h) I'm like (h) we 111   couldn't remember __ it was so funny, he's like well just, 112   all of you (.) just go away I hate you all (h) it was just 113   so funny (h) and he's like well, what did you do with the 114   Mickey Mouse I brought you from L.A. and I'm like, I think 115   it's at schoo __ he's like you're lying! I saw it in your 116   room (h)

117 A: //ooh::!]/

118 T: and I'm like oh sorry I couldn't remember I thought for 119   sure I brought it down

120 A: //hmm]/

121 T: but it's still there/

122 A: ( ) did you get your Aladdin?/

123 T: hm hmm I got it/

124 A: my mom bought it for me too/

125 T: did she give it too you already/

126 A: yeah (.) it was supposed: to be wrapped up for Easter 127   and I: was fine with that I said fine, like if she 128   just __ I had been going out to Jumbo Video to get (.) to 129   get a movie to watch (.) Friday night and (.) she said   130   well here's the money, just buy one while you're there (.) 131   and I said ok (.) so I figured I'd just put it away for 132   Easter and then my brother had (.) Saturday morning he   133   had hockey (.) in the morning and I guess he came home: 134   (.) and he had to be on the ice at six so he got home at 135   7:30 (.) and opened it and watched it, so then it was   136 opened:: right so I had to watch it

137 T: //(h)]/

138 A: once it was opened I couldn't just say oh just wrap it up 139   and put it away for Easter ( ) we watched it/

140 T: we watched it too my mom and I watched it Friday morning, 141   half an hour of it/

142 A: ( )/

143 T: I bought flowers for my mom

144 A: //oh did you!]/

145 T: I do that every time I go home and (.) my sister met me at 146   the bus station (.) we couldn't: call home, I guess my 147   mom and dad both went to Cannes

148 A: //ah!]/

149 T: and um (.) I left the flowers in the phone booth

150 A: //ohh!]/

151 T: I was so upset they were such a nice bunch of flowers, 152   they cost me seven bucks they were so beautiful/

153 A: that's too bad/

154 T: it was so funny! (h) so the next day I went out and ( )/

155 A: hmm hmm/

156 T: it was autumn flowers/

157 A: autumn flowers, it's so pretty driving here/

158 T: oh I know!/

APPENDIX A

Legend of Transcription Marking Symbols (Ochs 1979:63–5).

* Standard English writing system is utilised with the exception of:

/ = utterance boundary; end of an utterance

(.) = pause (long and short pauses were not differentiated between for the purpose of this analysis, as the particular techniques examined did not mention pause length).

//] = overlapping utterances

__ = self–interruption

(h) = laughter

( ) = unclear of muffled utterance

, = lowered pitch intonation

? – high rise intonation

. = low fall intonation

! = exclamation

::: = lengthened syllable (each : = one beat)

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