

# Transitioning to a new topic in American English conversation: A multi-level and mixed-methods account

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## Abstract

In talk-in-interaction, transitioning to a new (discourse) topic is an interactional action which involves the mobilization of a number of linguistic cues. This paper presents a holistic analysis of the design of topic transition in spontaneous conversation by combining qualitative analysis, instrumental prosody, and statistical modeling. To investigate the grammatical patterns that participants routinely mobilize for their turns initiating topic transitions, three types of cues are taken into account: pitch register, discourse markers, and questions. Each type of cue is analyzed for its individual contribution to topic transition design, as well as for the way it can combine with other cues. Analyzing different types of cues – verbal and prosodic – creates a composite picture of the various ways in which the topic trajectory of a conversation shapes its grammar – including its prosody.

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## 1. Introduction

Speakers and analysts usually share the intuition that, in the course of casual interaction, a number of topics are discussed in turn by conversational participants. If different topics are raised, then there is a moment of junction when participants switch from one topic to the next. Following previous work in the Conversation Analysis framework (Button and Casey, 1984, 1985; Holt and Drew, 2005; Jefferson, 1984), I refer to this pivot moment of topic structure as topic transition. It constitutes a sequential position (a topic-sequence boundary) and an interactional action (switching topics). An occurrence of a topic transition, indicated by an arrow, can be seen in the following example. Alina (ALN) was talking about her husband's colleagues, who work for a production company. After she detailed the professional background of one of them, she initiates a topic transition (l.7) about an evening she spent at this colleague's new house (a list of transcription conventions can be found in Appendix A).

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**(1) Their house (SBC006, 1462-1473)**

1 ALN (.) .h < <h> I don't know what > he's gonna do.  
 2 (..) he ↑wants to work actually features.  
 3 he doesn't really wan [na do ] TV.  
 4 LEN [.h ].  
 5 ALN .h ((SNIFF))  
 6 LEN hm.  
 ⇒ 7 ALN (.) I went and saw their house the other night.  
 8 LEN (..) where is it.  
 9 ALN their new [house ].  
 10 LEN [((THROAT))].  
 11 ALN (.) it's u:m,  
 12 you know where Beverly Glen is?

ALN's transition (l.7) is not grammatically designed in a way that proclaims its status of transition, but its sequential placement indicates it clearly: the preceding topic has manifestly come to a halt and a lull in the conversation threatens to set in (l.4–6). This environment is typical of new topic introductions (Maynard, 1980).

By contrast with the extract presented in (1), many topic transitions in talk-in-interaction are delivered with a format involving recurring grammatical cues. As it investigates prosodic cues on a par with verbal cues, this study holds the view that prosody is a part of grammar (see Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 1996 *inter alia*). In this paper, I focus on three types of cues mobilized by participants to initiate a topic transition: questions (*did you ever get into Tesla?*), discourse markers (*so I called Laura today*), and expanded register span (< <exp> *think about the kids* >). Previous research has studied each of these cues individually to assess its contribution to the structure of interaction (see section 2.2). However, earlier studies have rarely combined the analysis of several types of cues in a systematic way.

This paper adds to a previous publication about the same dataset (Riou, 2017), which focused solely on the prosody of topic transition, investigating the role played by variations of pitch register. Two dimensions of pitch register were investigated in Riou (2017): register level (*i.e.*, high vs. low) and register span (*i.e.*, expanded vs. compressed). The present study complements this account by integrating the analysis of verbal cues (discourse markers and questions) to that of prosodic cues. It is characterized by hybridism in two ways. Firstly, it analyses the contribution of verbal and prosodic cues separately, as well as in combination. Secondly, this study lies at the interface of Conversation Analysis, Interactional Linguistics, Pragmatics, and Corpus Linguistics, borrowing from their respective methodologies and previous findings. The methods used here are mixed, as they associate qualitative analysis to systematic coding and statistical modeling. As has been argued by Robinson (2007), Stivers (2015), and Kendrick (2017), systematic coding and statistics can make precious additions to the methodological arsenal at the interactionist's disposal. I used logistic regression, a confirmatory statistical technique, to determine whether the presence of a certain format can predict whether a turn initiates a topic transition. Based on this statistical modeling, I argue that conversational participants mobilize a distinct set of verbal and prosodic cues for their topic transitions: questions, discourse markers, and pitch register variations. What is more, results suggest that topic transition routinely mobilizes these different cues in combination, *i.e.*, topic transitions are typically signaled by more than one cue.

Section 2 provides some theoretical background on topic in talk-in-interaction. Section 3 presents the data and methods. Section 4 focuses on the specific role that register span, discourse markers, and questions play in topic transition. Section 5 considers the three types of cues together and analyzes their combined contribution by means of statistical modeling and qualitative analyses.

**2. Background****2.1. Topic in interaction**

Topic should be kept analytically distinct from two phenomena: sentence-topic (S-topic) and sequence. In the perspective of information structure (Lambrecht, 1994), S-topic is what a sentence is about (vs. the “focus”). Within Functional Grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), S-topic (the “theme”) is the first element of a sentence (vs. the “rheme”). From a conversation analytic perspective, it has been argued that the notion of topic and sequence should not be conflated (Couper-Kuhlen, 2004), even though some sequences can be specifically organized around the management of topic structure, such as topic-proffering sequences (Schegloff, 2007:169–180).

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