

From Spanish paintings to murder: Topic transitions in casual conversations between native and non-native speakers of English



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Abstract

This article explores some of the strategies used by international students of English to manage topic shifts in casual conversations with English-speaking peers. It therefore covers aspects of discourse which have been comparatively under-researched, and where research has also tended to focus on the problems rather than the communicative achievements of non-native speakers. A detailed analysis of the conversations under discussion, which were recorded by the participants themselves, showed that they all flowed smoothly, and this was in large measure due to the ways in which topic shifts were managed. The paper will focus on a very distinct type of topic shift, namely that of topic transitions, which enable a smooth flow from one topic to another, but which do not explicitly signal that a shift is taking place. It will examine how the non-native speakers achieved coherence in the topic transitions which they initiated, which strategies or procedures they employed, and show how their initiations were effective in enabling the proposed topic to be understood, taken up and developed. It therefore adds to our understanding of the interactional achievements of international speakers in informal, social contexts.

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1. Introduction

International students who come to study in target language countries bring with them not only the expectation that their language skills will improve, but also that contact with native speakers of the target language will contribute to this improvement. This type of contact, however, has been shown to be somewhat limited (e.g. [Ife, 2000](#); [Magnan and Back, 2007](#); [Tanaka, 2007](#); [Vaccarino and Dresler-Hawke, 2011](#)). [Copland and Garton \(2011\)](#) in their study of student experiences in the UK found that the great majority of encounters with native speakers involved service encounters and comment that “opportunities to speak English, especially outside the classroom, are reported as being quite rare, and many international students are frustrated and disappointed by this lack of interactional contact, especially in social situations” [Copland and Garton \(2011: p. 241\)](#). Reasons for the lack of social contact are many and varied, but one contributory factor may be students’ lack of confidence in their language skills, and consequent anxiety about putting them to use with native speakers ([Wang et al., 2010](#)). This was the case with some of the students featured in this article, who had expressed concerns about their ability to initiate and maintain conversations with native speakers.

There is considerable evidence of the conversational difficulties experienced by international students. [Xiao and Petraki \(2007: p. 13\)](#), for example, found that for Chinese students in Australia “one of the most notable difficulties was

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finding a suitable conversation topic to get the conversation going on". Iwata (2010) investigated topic choice and development in conversations between Japanese and American participants. She concluded that "The native English speakers seemed to change topics frequently" (2010: p. 155), and that this was a result of perceived passivity on the part of the Japanese speakers – who were instead adhering to Japanese conversational conventions, i.e. listening and giving feedback, answering questions, but not actively initiating topics. Itakura (2002) also found that L1 norms of interaction might adversely affect the topic management procedures of some students. Viswat and Kobayashi (2008) came to similar conclusions in their study, namely that topic initiation and development was an area of difficulty for Japanese participants. In a French study abroad context Wilkinson (2002: p. 163) showed how students were unable to depart from the familiar constraints of classroom discourse patterns, and were not able, for example, to recognise when statements, rather than questions functioned as topic initiators. Furthermore, "the students expected their native-speaking interlocutors to take the leading role in conversations with them" (p. 165).

The notion that successful topic management in native-non-native-speaker interactions is largely due to the contributions made by the native speakers is reinforced by other studies from a variety of contexts (Bremer et al., 1996; Chen and Cegala, 1994; Lesznyák, 2004; Liu, 2012) Most influential of these is the 1983 paper by Long. The picture which emerged from his study is one where the NNS would seem to be a very passive participant, entirely reliant on the NS to keep the conversation going and to select topics for discussion. Questions predominated as a method of initiating new topics, and the only information we get about topic initiations performed by the NNSs is by implication that they are 'unintentional'. Two issues with Long's study were, firstly, that the NNSs involved were at a fairly low level of proficiency, and therefore could not be expected to make major contributions to the discourse, and, secondly, that the interactions were at least quasi-experimental, i.e. not naturally occurring.

In contrast the results discussed in this article are based on naturally occurring data and are part of a larger study which aimed to explore the contributions which non-native speakers make in informal, social conversations with native speakers. Several features of topic management were examined, such as conversation starters, topic changes and transitions, as well as the potential impact of communicative difficulties on topic continuity (Morris-Adams, 2013).

This article will focus more narrowly on a specific type of topic shift which is particularly under-researched with regard to NNSs, namely where a shift of topic is not explicitly marked. I will first consider how topics and topic shifts in conversation may be defined, before moving on to describing the data collection and approach to analysis. Extracts from the conversations will illustrate some of varied strategies and resources employed by the NNSs, and the article will conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for intercultural interactions and for language learning.

2. Defining 'topic'

Topic in conversation is an elusive concept, and there is no clear consensus on how best to define it. Brown and Yule (1983: p. 71) provide the most well-known definition, namely that topic is simply "what is being talked about". Simply put, without something to talk about, there can be no conversation. However, it is far from easy to agree on what constitutes this 'aboutness'. Cook (1990: p. 25) defines topic simply as "the information carried in the message", and, along similar lines, Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) propose the following definition of a discourse topic: "the proposition or set of propositions about which the speaker is either requesting or seeking information." One of the shortcomings of this definition, according to Tryggvason (2004: p. 227), is that "it focuses more on single sentences than on longer stretches of discourse." Furthermore, it would seem to put a premium on transactional rather than interactional talk, and thus ignores the interpersonal aspects of topical content and selection. In addition, such an approach to topic identification runs into the problem highlighted by Stokoe (2000: p. 196), namely that "Treating topics as discrete, identifiable units is problematic because defining topics is highly subjective and may be different for all the participants, as well as for the analyst." Abu-Akel (2002: p. 1790) circumvents the problem by proposing that a topic can be identified by the following characteristics: "A single topic as an independent entity is a topic that is not linked thematically (propositionally) or linguistically to the preceding topic." This definition, though, brings its own problems, insofar as it then becomes necessary to define one topic in relation to other topics. However, as Crow (1983: p. 137) points out: "Defining 'topic' with any greater specificity than 'what a conversation is about' at any particular moment usually entails focusing on topic boundaries and shifts."

In this research topics were defined as stretches of discourse, with an identifiable and sustained focus, and bounded by specific moves that led to a recognisably complete or partial change of focus. Both content and organisation then contribute to clarifying what is meant by 'topic', and together they provide the basic structure for the creation of a coherent conversation. The role of topic as a coherence-organising device is reflected in Svennevig's (1999: p. 164) definition of topic "...as a process, that is a set of techniques for establishing boundaries and coherence patterns in discourse." Topical coherence, in the words of Tannen (1990: p. 168), "refers to how speakers introduce and develop topics in relation to their own and each other's prior and projected talk.", and in this study topical coherence proved to be a vital component in the effective management of the interactions.

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