6-20-2011

Topic Shift in Casual Conversation

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol2/iss1/8
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Keywords
topic shift, casual conversation, discourse, boundaries

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The domain of discourse for this piece of conversation 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 '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)/
I just lost them somewhere cause I just don't know where they are:/

T: that's sad/
A: ( ) I have to do laundry so much/
T: I don't know __ my sister made sure I didn't leave with something/

A: yeah/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: no she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: did you? did she come up too?/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
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T: (h) she (h)/
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A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
A: yeah!/
T: (h) she (h)/
A: ( )/
T: I did take off with a t-shirt of hers/
A: ( )/
T: she stayed home () she had a lot of work to do, it was such a good weekend I was surprised cause everybody got along:/
(h) = laughter

() = unclear of muffled utterance

, = lowered pitch intonation

? = high rise intonation

. = low fall intonation

! = exclamation

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

REFERENCES
