Making mention of mentionables: How topic change occurs in natural dialogues

I. Introduction

The Importance of Knowledge about Topic Change Practices in Language Teaching

In the field of TESOL, there are many instances when teachers refer to textbooks to find examples to teach students about a specific type of speech act that occurs in normal, everyday dialogue. More often than not, the example found in the textbook is one broad example used to teach English learners how to communicate an extensive spectrum of possible conversation points. There needs to be more use of real or authentic material and examples of conversation in the classroom. "Authentic materials…offer a much richer source of input for learners and have the potential to be exploited in different ways and on different levels to develop learners' communicative competence" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 103). It is important for the growing TESOL field, and instructors within, to find ways to improve texts and materials so that they may be more user-friendly, accessible, adaptable, and overall authentic for the students in the classroom. Teachers of ESOL need to be able to help students develop interactional competence: the ability to use various interactional resources; e.g., turn-taking, how to deal with problems that occur with understanding (Wong & Waring 2010). The textbooks available rarely help students in this area (Gilmore, 2007):

> "Language teaching materials tend to concentrate on monologues or
> dialogues where turn-taking is structured and predictable, with some kind
> of transactional goal. More interactional, non goal-oriented language, used
> to develop relationships, is much less common and it is hardly surprising,
> therefore, to find that learners experience more difficulties with this kind of talk." (p. 102)

Many of the interactional practices needed in second language learning can be found within Conversation Analysis (CA), such as repairs and word searches or the examination of

topic change and how it occurs in natural conversation. Topic change is an important aspect for students learning English as a foreign language to study and be familiar with as it is one of many vital interactional practices that speakers must be competent in so that they can partake in and appreciate the full experience of conversation (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 103). CA is one approach to help in the area of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), an approach to second or foreign language teaching that emphasizes communication as the final goal and means of learning a language.

This paper will review the interactional practices involved in topic management in current and previous CA literature. Then, some new data will be examined to exemplify topic change and how and when it generally occurs. These findings will be analyzed and compared to the literature.

II. Previous Research on Topic Management

Topic Management

According to research in CA, topic management occurs in multiple forms and in different places in conversations. Researchers Wong and Waring (2010) offered that topic management includes: "topic initiation" (refers to practices of starting a new topic) (p. 104); "topic shift" (shifting emphasis within a topic or moving towards a new topic) (p. 115); and "topic termination" (practices of closing down a topic) (p. 126). Maynard (1980) explained the term "topic change" as "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" (p. 264).

The above terms refer to ways in which speakers manage topic, most often depending on the kind used and where it occurs in a conversation. The reference of "topic shift" made by Wong and Waring (2010) can be similar in regards to "topic initiation" in that they are both

"moving towards a new topic" (p. 115), however, a "topic shift" is done within a current topic, "topic initiation" starts a new topic either at the beginning or end of conversation; after silences; or after a previous topic has been closed (p. 104).

A final definition of a term used to explain topic management is "topic proffer" which comes to CA by way of Emanuel A. Schegloff (2007), his term is defined as "a distinct mode of entering into topic talk, contrasting with topic solicitations, and unilateral topic initiation" (p. 169).

As defined by Wong & Waring (2010), "just as applied linguists have spoken of language as a system, various interactional practices combine to form conversation as a system" these methods are the "verbal and nonverbal methods participants use to engage in social interaction" (p. 8). When discussing topic change within CA in this paper, only verbal methods will be used. Examples of such interactional practices include: "(1) topic initial elicitor; (2) itemized news inquiry; (3) news announcement; (4) pre-topical sequence; (5) setting talk" (p. 105).

The two terms that will be focused on in this paper will be "topic change" and "topic shift." To understand these specific terms and types that will be examined and facilitated in this paper more clearly, they will be described in more detail in the following passages.

Topic Change

The role of topic changes are generally used "as a solution to [the] failed speaker transitions" that occur during turn-taking and within silences (Maynard, 1980, p. 264. Often, as topic (what the conversation is ultimately about) is one of the main goals of some conversations, Maynard (1980) explains that "topicality…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" (p. 263). Again, topic changes do not occur randomly in

conversation; the organization of these changes is specific and they are often "regularly…utilized to restore a state of continuous talk" (p. 264). The ways in which topics are changed, or topic changes occur can be done in many different ways. Some of these ways include the use of topic initial elicitors: which are ways to ask, *what's new?*; setting talk: which refers to the environment in which the speakers are speaking; and news announcements: which are audience specific, in that the choice of talk is chosen based on what the speaker would think that listener should or would want to hear (Wong & Waring, 2020).

Topic Shift

As previously mentioned, a topic shift "is done within a current topic" in two different ways. The topic can be shifted by means of the disjunctive shift or by a step-wise topic shift. A disjunctive topic shift is the "method of moving into a new aspect of the same topic or a new topic by marking such moves as not tightly fitted to the ongoing talk with utterances such as actually or by the way" (Wong and Waring, 2010, p. 115). A step-wise topic shift, on the other hand, is the "method of gradually moving into a new focus or a new topic [by means of specific devices" (Wong and Waring, 2010, p. 120). As cited by Wong and Waring, Sacks (1992) considered the step-wise topic shift to be "the best way to move from topic to topic" (p. 120).

III. Research Question

The main question that this paper aims to address relates to the types of topic changes that may occur in conversation and how those topic changes are initiated. To do this, several types of interactional practices used to trigger topic change in everyday conversations will be examined.

IV. Methodology

The Data

The data used for this paper comes from two different sources. The first is a group of colleagues from a university in the Midwestern US during a lunch break at the school. The participants of the conversation were recorded with a video camera and were very much aware of the camera within the room. The second piece of data used is a conversation between two friends while they were at dinner at a Greek restaurant in Hawaii. It was recorded with a cell phone and both parties were aware of the recording of the conversation as it is occurring. The two pieces of data are lengthy and, therefore, give many samples of topic change occurring within.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis (CA), according to Wong and Waring (2010), "is a unique way of analyzing language and social interaction" (p. 4). This idea came about due to work done in the 1960s by three sociologists, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. While the idea began in sociology, it has expanded from this discipline to reach also applied linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and communicative studies (p. 4). Some of the core principles of this area of study rely on the use of naturally occurring data, meaning actual occurrences of talk in any day-to-day conversation. CA is also looked at from an emic perspective: looking at language based on the evidence in the conversation, it comes from the insider's perspective (role of participants) in the conversation.

The analytical procedures of CA are broken down into six steps: (1) Collect data without a preset hypothesis; (2) Transcribe collected data—a task that requires repeated listening and viewing of the collected data; (3) Answering the question, "Why this now?" and writing down every possible response; (4) Identifying patterns within the data, developing an analysis, and

building an argument; (5) Support the found patterns with (if possible) even more data; and finally, (6) Explaining deviant cases—it is important not to discard any data that does not fit within the general preconceived argument (Wong & Waring, 2010).

V. Analysis

After much research within the field of CA as well as the examination of additional data, the role of topic change within conversation is one that is exceptionally prevalent and can be examined in multiple situations and appears in different ways throughout. The following examples of data and examinations of said data will further investigate the questions this paper aims to answer: when and how topic change occurs, the interactional practices used to shape topic changes, and what the possible outcomes of such topic changes may be.

Topic Change

The first piece of data examined is a segment from the colleagues eating lunch.

```
(1) Office Lunch [7:14-7:38]
1      (4.0) ((eating))
2  →   M:  °this oughta° be good for the video
3          I'm °eatin° with- my fingers
4      A:  heh heh heh
5      J:  ((looking at M))
6  →        well- at least you're eating it with
7            your fingers I'm throwing it on the
8            floo:r
9      M:  ((throws head back))
10          UH(hh)huh
11     A:  °huh huh°
12 →   N:  $and the ↑phone ↓isn't ↑↓ri:ngi::ng.
13     A:  yeah ↑that's amazi[ng-
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14   J:                        [<don't> say a word

15   N:   ↑↓ah okay

16   A:   it's been ringing <off the ↑↓hoo:k,>

17        [for awhile

18   M:   [(xxx) yeah yeah yeah I was gonna say

19        she disconnected it

20   J:   ↑↓ye:ah

21   (2.5) ((eating and drinking))
```

In this segment, topic change occurs in several positions. The previous conversation (before the pause in which they were eating and drinking) was about the different types of cookies that were available on the table. In line 2, M uses a topic initiation to announce that the action he is doing (eating with his fingers) is good [material] for the video. The topic is continued through lines 6 through 8 where J also mentions something that refers to the way she is eating her food (throwing it on the floor.) As this and M's turns incite laughter from one another and their other colleagues, this can be determined as what the topic is for those seven lines. In line 12, however, N announces that the phone is not ringing. This announcement has nothing to do with the way anyone is eating his or her food, but it is used to refer to the discussion of the video and what is good [material] for the video; rather, it is a step-wise topic shift. It refers back to the previous topic of what was good material for the video; in this case, the phone not ringing is making the video better. This topic is then further discussed by the colleagues by referring to the way it has been ringing off the hook as well as the point that M makes about the researcher (another joke) that disconnected it. It appears nobody else has any more input on the topic since nobody responds and all take up eating and drinking again, rather than using the available time to further discuss the topic of the phone.

Topic Change by way of disjunctive topic shift

    An additional example from the office lunch data that includes topic change is listed

below. This part of the conversation occurs directly after the previous example and pause.

```
(2) Office Lunch [7:34-7:52]
1    M:   [yeah yeah yeah I was gonna say

3         she disconnected it

4    J:   ↑↓ye:ah

5    (2.5) ((eating and drinking))

6    A:   looking at B

7 →  A:   speaking of whi:ch our phone still

2         isn't connected I called Ameritech

3         >°again (0.1) today°<

4    B:   °we should try using somebody else°

5    M:   looking at A

6         are you (0.1) in the one you were

7         gonna be in, or are you (0.7) in

8         a new one,

9    J:   <they're in a ↑↓n(h)ew one>

9    A:   we're in a new one (0.9) which is (0.1)

10        much nicer

11   (0.8)
```

    In this set of data, A uses the disjunctive marker of "speaking of X" to create a

disjunctive topic shift (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 116). She moves from one aspect of the

conversation (a phone ringing) to bring up a new topic (the fact that her phone line in her new

rental apartment still is not connected); lines 1-3.

Topic Shift by way of news announcement

The following and final example from this set of data looks at a bit longer part of the conversation to note several different places and types of topic change. In this part of the conversation, the participants have been debating peppers, including colors and degrees of sweetness and A mentions that she had eaten purple peppers, but they tasted just like green peppers.

```
(3) Office Lunch [5:45-6:14]

1    A:   well they're just like green

2         peppers

3    J:   taste like ↑gree:n peppers,

4    A:   ↓yeah they're not (0.1) not sweet

5    (3.5)

6    J:   °I'll bet they're g(h)ood°

7    (0.5)

8 →  N:   °o(h)ur pepper pla:nts° (0.3)

9         waves hand in air and shakes head no

10        didn't do a thing this year

11   (2.5)

12   N:   I sprayed em with Epsom salts

13        >and everything<

14   (0.5)

15   A:   >oh yeah< I do that too (0.5)

16        oh but I ha- >haven't=done=it=lately<

17   (4.7) some eating and drinking

18 → L:   I love the exotic variety of vegetables

19        (0.2) they have in Arkansas >heh heh heh<

20        I just don't see those colors here at
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21        a(hhh)ll
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In this example, in line 8, N then shifts the topic from A's purple peppers to discuss her own dilemmas with peppers, referring to her failed attempt to grow peppers. She explains a way to encourage growth in line 12, which A responds to in line 15. After a long pause of almost 5 seconds, L shifts the topic in line 18 from peppers to the different types of vegetables found in Arkansas, which is further discussed at that point of the conversation. This type of shift is a news announcement. As it allows for L to continue discussing vegetables in Arkansas after this comment, she has prompted the further telling of such news. While the types of topic management in this section aren't specifically changes, they're a type of change in that the topic shifts from one aspect to another, still within the same realm of topic (peppers, and then vegetables.)

An additional set of data examines an audio-only recording of two friends eating dinner at a Greek restaurant in Hawai'i. This data occurs about 2/3 into the dinner, while the conversationalists already have their food.

A second example of a news announcement appears in this data. This part of the conversation appears after the section found later in this paper (#1.) The two had been discussing "bread to content ratio" and movie theater hotdogs.

```
(2) Greek Dinner [20:17-20:30]

1  → M:  I felt so fat after that night heh heh
2        heh (.) that I had the >hotdog and the
3        popcorn after I already had dinner or
4        whatever<
5        (3.0)
6 →  M:  $I'm so glad we watched it though.
7        It was:::=gr:ea::t
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8      J:   I felt really fat too: but
```

In line 1, M changes the topic from "bread to content ratio" (which is discussed in the next excerpt presented) and reminisces of the time when they went to a movie and ate too much. This is the strongest shift within the presented segment of the conversation and is examined as a news announcement. It is unclear at first what she has changed the topic to until she expresses that she was glad they watched the movie in lines 6 and 7. J could then express how he felt about the movie, or he could talk about food still, since in M's turn before her last turn, she was discussing food. J shifts back to the previous topic of food, which terminates the topic of discussing the movie with a "reclaimer" (shifting focus back to himself) in line 8.

Stepwise Topic Shifts

Looking again at the Greek dinner data, the speakers also use stepwise topic shifts to change topic by "mov[ing] from one topic or aspect of a topic to the next in a stepwise fashion" (Wong & Waring, 2010, p. 120).

```
(1) Greek Dinner [19:23-20:16]

1      J:   I like how the pita bread is like

2           (1.0) I mean they put uh jus:t the

3           right amount of meat (0.8) in

4           here and it the bread even though

5           th- there's not (.) meat underneath

6           it you still have to eat it cuz it

7           like (.) goes good with what you (xxx)

8      M:   mmm hmmm

9   →  J:   yeah (.) unlike when you have a

10          sandwich with wa::y too much bread

11     M:   yea:h

12     J:   sometimes I just don't eat the bread
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```
13          [heh heh

14    M:    [hh hh hh hh I know me (neither)

15          (2.0)

16    M:    the bread to the content ratio heh heh

17    J:    yup

18          (1.3)

19    J:    exactly

20    M:    I know >sometimes I end up near the

21          end of my sandwich and I like just

22          eat the filling< (0.5) so I have like

23          a co:rner of bread

24    J:    Yeah

25          (2.5)

26 → J:     I do that with hot dogs all the time

27          (0.9)

28    J:    except the movie hot dogs cuz

29          they're so huge=

30    M:    =I kno:w

31          (3.5) eating and drinking
```

In this set of data, both speakers are helping to move the conversation along, the topic shifts in line 9 by use of stepwise shifts from discussing that there is the perfect amount of pita for the gyro to discussing the fact that when eating a sandwich there can sometimes be too much bread. In line 26, J then admits he does the same thing that M does with her sandwich, only with hotdogs, and leaves some of the bread at the end when he is finished eating. He then explains that movie hotdogs, however, are the exception in lines 28 and 29, because they are much bigger.

A second example of a step-wise topic shift occurs in this lunch in the office sequence:

```
(4) Office Lunch [7:39-7:48]

1    A:   speaking of whi:ch our phone still

2         isn't connected I called Ameritech

3         >°again (0.1) today°<

4    B:   °we should try using somebody else°

5    M:   looking at A

6 →       are you (0.1) in the one you were

7         gonna be in? or are you (0.9) in

8         a new one,
```

This data appeared after the second section from this collection of data (#2.) M, now recognizing the topic of the conversation has turned to the fact that A and B are in a new place, uses a stepwise topic shift to move from one aspect of the topic (new phone) to the next (new place) and he asks about where they are living in lines 6-8.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

As Douglas A. Maynard (1980) noticed, there are many times within conversation when topic change occurs after a pause. This type of topic change did occur somewhat within the data used for this paper, but that was not always the case. More often than not, the topic changes occurred with the use of topic initial elicitors or by the different means of moving between topics, such as the stepwise topic shift. It should not be assumed that topic change will always occur after pauses and, therefore, it is important for speakers to know how and when to change a topic successfully. Referring back to Wong & Waring (2010), topic change is an important aspect for ESL students to be familiar with as it is one of many vital interactional practices that speakers must be competent in so that they can partake in and appreciate the full experience of conversation (p. 103).

When determining ways to create texts and literature more suitable for teaching learners of English, it is imperative to consider all the ways in which students will be assessed on the skills they will have had to learn. Hughes (2003) stated that "the objective of teaching spoken language is the development of the ability to interact successfully in that language" which "involves comprehension as well as production" (p. 113). When assessed on oral abilities, students should be able to "change the topic of an interaction" as one of the skills needed to manage interaction (p. 115). If students are going to be tested on this, then it is vital that teachers are able to teach this aspect of conversation to students. This paper looked at some of the ways that topic can be changed in conversation through CA; teachers need to be able to examine those strategies and then use them in the classroom. It is important for any conversationalist to be able to listen to and adapt to the different courses that a conversation may take since topic is a vital component of conversation and must be more clearly examined and developed within textbooks so that ESL students have a better chance of getting the full experience of speaking English.

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