ANALYSING CASUAL TALK: TOPIC AS A STRUCTURING FRAME

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Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como objeto analizar uno de los géneros socialmente más significativos y más frecuentes dentro del habla espontánea: el cotilleo. Tomando ejemplos reales de habla cotidiana y dado la complejidad del tema, el análisis presenta un innovador planteamiento de la noción de tópico. Por un lado, se realizará un estudio desde un punto de vista cognitivo: tópico como un asunto social y psicológico. Por otro lado, se llevará a cabo un exhaustivo análisis desde un punto de vista funcionalista presentando la noción de tópico como el elemento vertebrador de dicha habla.

Palabras claves: análisis de la conversación, tópico, estrategias de cortesía, pragmática.

Abstract

The present paper is aimed at analysing one of the most commonly occurring and socially significant genres in casual conversation: gossip talk. Using samples taken from naturalistic recollection, the analysis presents an innovative approach to the notion of topic as a highly important element in dealing with spoken data. On the one hand, I will deal with the notion from a cognitive point of view, considering topic as a social and psychological concern. On the other hand, an exhaustive analysis will be carried out from a functionalist point of view, dealing with topic as a structuring frame.

Keywords: conversation analysis, topic, politeness theory, schema theory, pragmatics.

Résumé

L’objet fondamental de cette étude est celui d’offrir une analyse d’un des genres socialement le plus significatif et fréquent dans le langage spontané: les commérages. Si l’on prend des exemples réels dans le langage journalier et, étant donné le complexe de ce sujet-la, l’analyse en présente un projet innovateur de l’idée de topique. D’un côté, on fera une étude dès un point de vue compréhensif: topique en tant qu’affaire sociale et psychologique. D’autre part, on mettra une analyse du point de vue fonctionnel en présentant l’idée de topique comme l’élément vertébral de cette façon de parler.

Mots-clés: analyse du discours, topique, formules de politesse, pragmatique.
Sumario

0. Introduction  1. Theoretical Background. 1.1. Definition of Gossip. 1.2. The data. 1.3. Previous research on the notion of Topic. 1.3.1. Topic as a discrete element: the what perspective. 1.3.2. Topic as structuring frame: the how perspective. 2. Aim and Scope of the Research. 3. Analysis of the data. 3.1. Topic as a Social and Psychological Concern: Defining its Nature. 3.2. Topic as a Structuring frame: an Application to Spoken Data. 3.2.1. Topic Introduction. 3.2.2. Topic Continuation. 3.2.2.1. Topic Supporter. 3.2.2.2. Topic Contributor. 4. Conclusions. 5. Acknowledgements. 6. References.

0. Introduction

The present paper is aimed at analysing one of the most commonly occurring and socially significant genres in casual conversation: gossip talk. The point of departure is that due to the general unpredictability of topics in informal conversation (Cheepen, 1988: 2), certain aspects of conversation have proved to be elusive to the analyst and much work has been left undone.

Due to the growing interest during the last ten years in the relationship between language and gender, many Feminist linguists (Tannen, 1990; Coates, 1998) have focused their attention on Sociolinguistic research and on Feminist Linguistics of gender differences. These studies are mainly concerned with quantifying differences in women's and men's usage of certain linguistic forms. Moreover, a majority of researchers have drawn their data from mixed interaction - involving both male and female speakers - and have generalised about the 'way women talk'; research has rarely focused on women single-sex groups, except for Coates' (1998) exploration of the notion of co-operativeness in all-women discourse.

Hence, there is an absence of systematic, empirical studies on all-female discourse from a more functionalist insight - aimed at analysing thoroughly topic as a highly important element in dealing with spoken data.

The paper is organised into four different sections. Section I presents a concise theoretical background dealing with the notions of gossip, topic and its distinct perspectives. Section II presents the aim and scope of the research. Section III focuses on the analysis of the data. Finally, Section IV is aimed at compiling the main conclusions derived from the analyses.

1. Theoretical Background

My purpose in what follows is to present some theoretical aspects dealing with the notion of Gossip Talk and the selection of the sample of data.

1.1. Definition of Gossip

In popular currency, the term gossip (Egging, 1997: 278) is used in many different ways. In the most general sense, it can refer to any 'idle' chat about daily life; it can also be used to characterise women's talk in general or it can be used more specifically to refer to conversations between two or more people about another person behind his/her back.

In this paper, gossip is defined in a more specific sense to that used by other linguists such as Jones (1980: 243) who defines gossip as 'a way of talking between women in their roles as women'. It is then taken as talk which involves pejorative judgement of an absent other and which is also meant to be confidential - or at least not reported to the third
person - whose generic structure would consist of the following elements: (a) third person focus (Us Vs Them); (b) substantiating behaviour (speaker provides evidence); and (c) pejorative evaluation (evidence is evaluated and commented).

1.2. The data

The data employed in the analysis were recorded in naturally occurring situations and comprises under 60-minute taped conversation of three pair of all-female friends at workplace at coffee breaks. The conversations are therefore authentic and spontaneous, occurring in real contexts in the everyday lives of the participants. All participants are educated from similar socio-economic background aged between 25 and 35.

The selection of this sample is based on the assumption that the status patterns which are adopted in dialogue are an important aspect in interactional encounters (Cheepen and Monaghan, 1990: 16) in that they serve to define the precise nature of the encounter, and to enable the participants to pursue their goal. Thus, the formal feature of the sample chosen for analysis may be defined as one adopting an interpersonal orientation towards one another, in terms of their relative status, so that they adopt complimentary roles of equal / equal. Such a feature is seen as an advantage since no impositions and restrictions upon the speakers contributions -depending on their status or power relationship- are expected to occur.

With regard to representing the talk in written form, I transcribed the conversations in a way that is faithful to the spontaneity and informality of the talk, but it is also easily accessible to readers not familiar with conversational literature or phonological / prosodic symbols.

1.3. Previous research on the notion of Topic

My purpose in what follows is to present some theoretical aspects dealing with the notion of topic. The first part of my discussion will be devoted to spelling out some preliminary theoretical aspects specially to do with the multiplicity of views on topic; whereas next section will focus on presenting the aim and scope of the research.

Theories of topic in the literature have made claim about essentially different facets of the same phenomenon. As de Beaugrande (1992: 243/244) argues, topic seems to be a diffuse notion: 'a topic would be familiar subject matter that everyone ought to know and be able to talk about'.

Following Goutsos' (1997: 2) work on discourse topic, the ambiguity in the common use of this term derives from its technical employment. A basic dichotomy can therefore be established: topic can be regarded as a discrete unit or, in a more general sense, as structuring or unifying frame. In Goutsos' terms, the difference is a matter of perspective: in the former case we are concerned with what we speak about, in the latter with how we structure what we say.

In this sense, the notion of topic has been applied to a variety of phenomena, which are distinguished with regard to the perspective followed (unit / whole), the unit of application (sentence / discourse), and their reference to content / expression. In short, the approaches to topic can be differentiated with respect to the properties assigned to topic: the what perspective which maintains that a topic should be detectable at the surface of the
utterance or discourse: by contrast the how perspective focuses on the overall discourse organisation with respect to which topic is defined. In this view, what we say is assumed to stem precisely from the way we say it (Brown and Yule, 1983).

1.3.1. Topic as a discrete element: the what perspective

Goutsos (1997: 10) suggests that a common assumption in the what perspective is that the sentence is the starting point and discourse organisation is the outcome of interrelations between topics at the sentence level. Among the approaches which start from a sentence-level identification of topic in order to produce an analysis of discourse topic are functional approaches following Halliday’s (1985) model of theme - rheme. Firbas’s (1992) theory of communicative dynamism, and Danes’s (1974) model of thematic progression. Relating sentence to Discourse Topic, Halliday’s notion of theme emphasises the importance of the initial position, whereas Firbas’ approach stresses the internal dynamics of the sentence as part of the evolving communication, where the degree of communicative dynamism carried by a linguistic element is the relative extent to which the element contributes toward the development of the communication.

As Goutsos (1997: 4) argues, these structural claims imply that topic is a discrete element, expressed as a distinct constituent, either explicitly in the surface structure, or in the underlying structure. In addition, topic must always be present and has a grammatical function.

1.3.2. Topic as a structuring frame: the how perspective

Goutsos (1997: 23) proposes that in order to investigate the construction of topical coherence, it is necessary to shift our attention from the isolated unit to the way in which topic structuring is achieved; that is, the how perspective. Topic (Goutsos 1997: 23) is interpreted less as a unit or what is talked about and more in terms of the organising work that talk does.

Studies of conversation, for instance, have contributed to the analysis of topic by considering topic as an activity, a phenomenon constructed by the participants in interaction. These studies significantly emphasise topic as process or activity, following Orletti (1989: 78) topic is the result of the joint interactional efforts of the participants. In the framework of conversational analysis, topic is thus seen as a type of sequential structure along with the utterance-by-utterance (or adjacency pair) organisation and the overall structure of conversation. In the Birmingham school approach, topic is related to the rank of transaction which is part of the hierarchical organisation of conversational structures, and the marking of boundaries. Nevertheless, a technical sense of topic has not been developed. In the light of these criteria, topic appears in Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) in its intuitive sense (of subject matter) as a variable in the teaching situation.

In short, not only do both approaches foreground a how perspective, which is independent of what is being talked about (Goffman, 1981: 6), they both focus on the linguistic means by which sequencing and segmenting are achieved.

In addition, discourse is the appropriate unit of application of the how perspective because, according to Schiffrin (1992: 174) ‘topics - regardless of the type of level at which they are defined - are ultimately created through discourse. It is the interactions between speakers and respondents that create the structures and meanings of talk as well as that create the framework.
in which a message is understood to be about something’. Thus, topic is here understood not as a pre-established entity, but as a category of discourse production and decoding. This would conform to our intention that ‘we progressively expand our understanding of what someone is talking about’ (Schiffrin, 1992: 75) as the discourse folds.

2. Aim and Scope of the Research

The former introductory section was aimed at drawing on the sights of topic, which has proved to be indeed a multiplex phenomenon, as de Beaugrande (1992) observed. Furthermore, topic management in casual talk has proved to be elusive to the analyst, which in turn much work has been left undone. Here I shall attempt to show that, in spite of the general unpredictability of topics in spontaneous conversation (Cheepen, 1988), the nature of topic might be grasped and topic may then be used as a tool to analyse and to give structure to spoken data.

The fact that the term ‘topic’ is encountered rather frequently, though still without a general consensus on its status, makes me argue that an investigation of topic may involve considerable complexity and co-ordination among distinct elements combination of current literature. I do not agree with Goutsos (1997: 27) that in order to develop a theory of discourse topic in its own right, it is essential to adopt only a how perspective, which would focus on the structuring rather than the individual units of topics. However, I argue that a combination of current literature may turn out to be linguistically more profitable. In view of this criterion, I propose to combine the following two levels: a) Topic as a social and psychological concern; and b) Topic as a structuring frame. Inspection of the first notion (a) will provide the possibility to define and characterise the nature of topic from a more cognitive point of view. The second (b) will provide a linguistic insight on the notion of topic in gossip talk.

3. Analysis of the data

3.1. Topic as a Social and Psychological Concern: Defining its Nature

In this section, I will devote myself to characterising the nature of topic in gossip as a representative of casual talk. For this purpose. I will briefly draw on the insights of Schema theory to substantiate my claim.

My proposal is then that topic might be understood as an abstract entity which is characteristic of participants. In assuming that, I agree with van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) in topic not being merely a linguistic, but also a social and psychological concern: ‘Each society or social group has a repertory of topics that are considered appropriate for discourse among certain participants. Also topics must be psychologically organised in cognition and memory, for example in terms of frames or schemas that promote discourse processing by indicating what typically belongs to topic’.

Let us then explain some terminology that may be useful. Following Cook (1995), I accept Knowledge Schemata as mental representations of typical situations and which are used in discourse processing to predict the contents of the particular situation which the discourse prescribes. The idea is then that the mind, stimulated by key words or phrases in the text, or by the context, activates a knowledge schema, and uses it to make sense of the discourse. Furthermore, these mental representations (Rumelhart, 1980; Cook, 1995) may
predict stereotypical roles and relationships of participants, or they can be stereotypical text types, predicting plot structure or conversational development.

These characterisation of our knowledge of familiar event sequences are called in Schank and Abelson's terms (1977) script. They use it to refer to the stereotypical knowledge structures that people acquired about common routines, such as going to a restaurant. In this sense, I will deal with the notion of script as a particular event schema. Understanding event schema (Mandler, 1984: 14) as a hierarchically organised set of units describing generalised knowledge about an event sequence. It includes knowledge about what will happen in a given situation and often the order in which the individual events will take place. It is organised like a categorical structure in that the knowledge is arranged in a hierarchy with more classes of events containing more specific events nest within them.

My point of departure here shall be to test the viability of the following assumption: (a) that a gossip involves a whole pattern of events and this in turn will provide a set of social and psychological characteristics of topic and a possible interpretational framework to understand the development of a gossip episode.

The point I am making, heavily indebted to Schank and Abelson (1977) and Nelson and Gruenel (1986), is that just as, say, the restaurant script, evokes the series of events which typically occur in going to a restaurant, so the gossip script activates knowledge of the sequence of events associated with gossip.

In view of these criteria, the good deal of commonality found in the different episodes in my spoken data gave me the opportunity to find out that a gossip episode exhibits a very predictable temporal structure in which one stage is a prerequisite for the next stages.

Thus, I have worked out a basic prototypical scenario, where I postulate three main stages: pre-gossip; gossip and post-gossip.

The first stage is the pre-gossip. In this stage, I have distinguished two main sub-stages. Firstly, what I have called presentation. It is in this stage when one of the participants introduce the gossiped issue statement which will be later developed into a gossip episode. Secondly, there comes the acceptance by the rest of the participants. The gossiped issue statement aimed at sharing an opinion about an absent third person- is potentially face-threatening and thus there needs to be explicit or tacit approval given for the gossip to proceed.

The second stage is the gossip proper. I have differentiated another two main sub-stages. On the one hand, what I have called exposition. One of the gossipers develops the gossip and provides evidence for it, while the other participants make contributions to discourse such as telling anecdotes on the same theme. This stage is followed by the discussion, where the participants start a general discussion in which all the participants co-construct the gossip.

Finally, the third stage that I have called post-gossip. It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to work on a detailed analysis of how gossip ends. Still, in dealing with this stage, two basic alternatives may be drawn: (a) the recapitulation where one of the participants summarise the content of the discourse and/or (b) the coda, where one of the speakers has the last word.

1 Nevertheless, the information provided by the frame is still fairly specific. In more general terms, frames as we have got to know then are cognitive structures that are context and culture dependent. (Rumelhart, 1980; Cook, 1995 and Mandler, 1994). Note that misjudgements and mismatches are particularly likely when people try to communicate across culture and across languages (Cook, 1995).
In the following matrix, I shall attempt to propose the basic stages for a gossip-script together with integrating the prototypical items/action which are expected to appear:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGES</th>
<th>NAMES</th>
<th>PROTOTYPICAL ELEMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-gossip</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>A introduces the ‘gossiped issue statement’ (T).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptation</td>
<td>The rest of the speaker corroborate and contribute to (T).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gossip</td>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>1. A presents evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. The rest of the speakers contribute / tell anecdotes on the same theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>The participants start a general discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-gossip</td>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>A has the last word and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and/or Coda</td>
<td>A may summarise the content of the discourse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the light of this gossip-script, I will consider the implications of the proposed sequential structure. My first claim is then concerned with topic being at participants’ disposal. What is to be noted in the prototypical scenario is that gossip is realised or construed on ongoing, negotiated solidarity. From the very beginning of the interaction, one participant introduces the ‘gossiped issue statement’ and the other participants agree and give explicit approval for the gossip to proceed. Furthermore, all the participants—once the episode has started—make constant contributions to discourse. In this sense, the notion of topic seems to be closely related to the participants involved in the interaction; that is to say, participants are the ones who have topics since they are those who construct the gossip.

Since the prerequisite for the gossip to proceed is the acceptation of all the participants, the second claim would be the fact that the motivation of staying on topic or topic shift is closely in conjunction with participants’ discourse agenda. Therefore, by agreeing to share a topic-topicalization—participants reveal their hidden agenda, even when the ostensible purpose is merely to make small talk about any topic that comes up (de Beaugrande, 1992: 246).

From these two claims, two main social motivations may be pointed out in a gossip episode:

a) **Gossip functions to establish and reinforce group membership.** Participants’ acceptance to be involved in a gossip episode; that is to say, their motivation of staying on topic is determined by the fact that gossip is a way of asserting social unity. Moreover, it provides participants a mean of exploring similarity and shared values (Eggins, 1997).

b) **Gossip functions as a form of social control.** Their motivation of staying in topic could also be influenced by the fact that group values are asserted in gossip. In approving the gossip to proceed, the action or the behaviour of a third person is labelled as deviant and unacceptable and in this way makes clear what is considered appropriate behaviour. Hence, gossip can be seen to reflect and maintain social structures and social values (Eggins, 1997).
What emerges from these implications shed additional light on the nature of topic in gossip talk, since four social and psychological features may be identified:

i) **Topic in Gossip is focused on the personal rather than global, private rather than public.** The establishment and maintenance of social relationships and the reaffirming and strengthening of friendship argued in gossip lead to a distinction between the public and private discourse; that is to say, gossip is expected to take place in a private sphere and focus on the personal.

ii) **Topic in Gossip is widely regarded as trivial yet is valued by individuals.** Even though the chief goal of the interaction is not the exchange of information - contrarily to public discourse (Smith 1985). Moreover, the term 'gossip' is often used by men to denigrate women's talk (Egginss, 1994), participants regarded it as positive since their identity as a group is consolidated. Furthermore, gossip involves sharing opinions and judgements about a person's behaviour or physical attributes, and by doing so implicitly asserting appropriate behaviour. In other words, the identity of the group (Us) versus the others (Them) is established.

iii) **Topic in Gossip is entertaining and enjoyable.** Gossip occurs in a sympathetic environment, among close friends and intimates - not strangers. The smaller and closer the group is the more personal and probing the gossip will be (Egginss, 1997).

iv) **Topic in Gossip is ephemeral and has limited interest outside the participating group.** Since gossip is generally a talk which involves pejorative judgement of an absent and which is also meant to be confidential- or at least not reported to the third person, outside the group the pejorative judgement does not make much sense (Egginss, 1997).

In sum, this section attempted to show that the 'logic' inherent in this construal of gossiping makes it possible to elaborate an *gossip script*, i.e., a prescription not only of sequential states of gossip, but of possible courses of action that a gossiper can take. Conversely, it has also to be shown that the notion of 'topic' is directly determined by participants and the agenda of the discourse goals.

3.2. **Topic as Structuring Frame: an Application to Spoken Data**

In this section, I will deal with the basic notions required for developing the functional analysis of topic as a structuring frame in spoken data. For this purpose, I will present the point of departure taken for the analysis. Secondly, I will introduce the main assumptions that characterise gossip talk and establish the criteria for the study.

My study will take as point of departure Goutsos' topic structure model (1997: 75) - applied only to expository texts. In doing so, I understand that in spoken data there are also two basic strategies: (a) that of staying on topic and (b) that of topic shifting. Furthermore and according to Goutsos (1997: 75), in order to realise such strategies speakers may use the following techniques: Topic closure (TCL) - Topic Framing (TF) - Topic Initiation T1 - Topic continuation TC.

With regard to topic management in this sort of interaction and before establishing the criteria for the study, four main assumptions about gossip talk should be pointed out: (a) that the main goal of this interaction is, like most informal between
equals, the maintenance of good and social relationships (Eggins, 1997: 229); (b) that women develop topics progressively in conversation (Maltz & Borker, 1982: 213) and do build progressively on each other’s contributions together with the fact that topics are developed jointly: (c) that shift between topics are gradual rather than abrupt (Coates, 1998: 237) and (d) that women’s talk (Coates, 1998) appears to be observing generally recognised principles of politeness: that is to say, women use a high number of the positive politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987) as strategies which emphasise group membership and solidarity.

Following this, I shall concern myself with the notion of topic as a structuring frame in gossip - as a representative of casual talk. In addition to this, given that politeness strategies are closely related as well as these strategies are a complicated but highly sensitive index in speech of kinds of social relationships, they will provide a useful tool for analysing and specifying the nature of topic in this sort of interaction.

The criteria that are proposed for studying topic as a structuring frame in terms of positive strategies will be discussed and restricted to the following headings: (a) Topic Initiation (TI); (b) Topic Continuation (TC). Two out of the four primary sequential techniques applied by Goutsos to expository written texts.

3.2.1. Topic Introduction (TI)

In this section, I shall try to analyse the distinct possibilities to introduce a topic in gossip talk. Therefore, topic introduction (TI) is an obligatory sequential technique associated with the strategy of topic shift; that is, without topic introduction, no shift can be established (Goutsos, 1997: 56).

Take the following piece of data in terms of topic introduction:
E.g. (1) A: ‘¿ No os he contado lo del Sábado?’
E.g. (2) A: ‘¿ Sabéis ya lo de Ingrid?’
E.g. (3) B: ‘¿ Se Ha hecho ya la prueba?’
E.g. (4) A: ‘¿ Y qué tal le va con el ligue nuevo?’

In general terms, it can be said that this technique is mainly achieved by means of elicitation. However, close inspection of the transcription throws some light on the matter. I propose that although participants take advantage of elicitation to introduce a topic, all these elicitations cannot still be said to accomplish the same function. In view of this, the following distinction may be drawn: Topic initiators (Ti) and Topic introduction (TI).

On the one hand, participants start a gossip episode by means of an elicitation. Still, when the data are examined (see e.g. 1 and 2), it is found that any time a gossip episode is introduced through elicitation, the elictor - the one who elicits the topic through a question - and the responder - who possesses the bulk of information which contributes to the development of a topic - is the same person. The participant introduces what she considers to be an interesting topic and presents it as something appealing for the other participants. In other words, the fact that the elictor and responder are the same person leads to think that these elicitations are aimed at just eliciting an explicit or tacit approval - in the form of an answer - for the gossip to proceed. In the light of this, I will call them - in my own terms - Topic initiators (Ti).
Notice, however, that these Tis are not sometimes in the form of an elicitation, but they are introduced in a declarative form. Nevertheless, they accomplish the same function.

E.g. (5) A: Tengo noticias jugosas

In saying so, the speaker attempts to initiate a topic which may be interesting for the participants and expects to have an acceptance. Finally, all these turns (E.g. 1, 2, and 5) seem to share the following features: (a) they are expected to occur at the beginning of the gossip episode and (b) they are also followed by the rest of participants’ contribution to express their approval for the gossip to continue. Let us consider the following piece of data:

E.g. (6) On Saturday night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>¿ No os he contado lo del sábado?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>¡ Ah! Es verdad ¡i cuenta!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>¡i cuenta!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E.g. (7) On an acquaintance’s pregnancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>¿Sabéis ya lo de Ingrid?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>No dime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Yo no ¿ el qué?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E.g. (8) On an acquaintance’s pregnancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tengo noticias jugosas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>¿ Sí?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>¡Suelta! vamos …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first turn in the former examples introduces a possible *gossiped issue statement* whether by means of an elicitation or by a - similar in function - informing turn. In doing so, the speaker exploits positive strategies aimed at intensifying interest to the other participants: that is, the speaker communicates to the other participants that she shares some of their wants, such as to make them know what happened on Saturday Night or what was new about Ingrid. In this way, she intensifies the interest of her own contribution to the conversation by making a “good story”. Such device increases the intrinsic interest to the participants.

These topic initiators (Ti) are followed by the other participants’ answers. These responses are also expected to be whether in a declarative or interrogative form, and they are mainly concerned with approving the gossip to proceed. In view of this criterion, I will call them - in my own terms - Topic approvals (Ta) - due to the fact that they fuel the gossip. Furthermore, these turns are also based on the exploitation of positive strategies: since they *notice* together with providing *positive feedback* to the hearer, which convey that the gossiped issue statement is interesting for the participants.
Nevertheless, it cannot be said that these elicitations introduce the topic properly, they are just oriented to topic initiation, what makes me distinguish topic initiators (Ti) from these elicitations certainly aimed at topic introduction (TI).

Consider the following piece of data:

E.g. (3) ¿ Se ha hecho ya la Prueba ?
E.g. (6) ¿ Es que quiere abortar ?
E.g. (7) ¿ y que te ha contado ?

The first turn is aimed - through elicitation - at introducing a topic. In doing so, participants mainly mark an inquiry into immediately current events and introduce properly a topic into conversation together with demanding more information. This turn is followed by the other participants’ answer, which provides a bulk of new information. Contrary to Ti, topic introduction (TI) are not expected to occur at the beginning of the episode, but once the episode has started.

In sum, this section has tried to show that topic introduction in gossip episodes present a particular pattern. Even though, this technique is mainly achieved by means of elicitation it accomplishes different functions depending if they occur at initial position of the episode - what I have called topic initiators (Ti) - or once the episode has already started; that is, topic introduction (TI). On the one hand, Ti are not elicitation in the real sense but they just introduce the possible gossiped issue statement and are aimed at eliciting an approval (Ta) on participants’ side. On the other hand, topic introduction (TI) are proper elicitations and are aimed at introducing a new topic. Finally, both of them have been shown to exploit some of the positive strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987): ‘claiming common ground’, ‘conveying that speaker and hearers are co-operators’ and ‘fulfil hearer’s wants’.

3.2.2. Topic Continuation

In this section, I shall try to analyse the distinct possibilities to continue a topic in gossip talk. According to Goutos (1997: 56), topic continuation (TC) is another obligatory technique, since a sequence of two successive topic introductions is impossible.

As mentioned in section (2.3), and given the close relation in this sort of interaction between positive strategies in developing a topic, I will also analyse topic continuation in terms of the speaker’s exploitation of the positive strategies. Nevertheless, I shall only concern myself with how topic continuation is mainly based on the three main mechanisms identified by Brown and Levinson (1987):

Let us consider the following piece of data:

E.g. (9) On Saturday night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C: Pues va y me dice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: No me digas ¿ qué aguante !</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Es que eres masoquista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Ni que lo jures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
E.g. (10) On an acquaintance’s pregnancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B:</th>
<th>¿Quién te lo ha dicho?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Me lo ha dicho Pilar que se lo ha dicho ella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>Pues como esté embarazada menudo marujeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>¿Pero de cuánto tiempo está?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>No sé, pero debe de estar de poco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>¿Se ha hecho ya la prueba?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Pilar me ha dicho que está tan asustada que ni siquiera quiere hacerse la prueba.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general terms, these examples can be considered as topic continuations, however they are certainly accomplishing different functions. In the light of this, the analysis will be centred on one main argument: (a) that in spite of topic having proved to be a complex phenomenon, Feminist Linguistics have not developed a thorough investigation on topic in this sort of interactions and they have dealt with it in a fuzzy and superficial fashion. However, I do not intend to dispense with the notion that women develop topic jointly, but I will propose that the continuation of a topic may work at different levels with regard to what is understood as topic.

For present purposes, a first distinction should be drawn between - in Downing’s terms - between global discourse topic and local topic. I will thus adopt Downing’s hierarchy of topics (1997: 50). According to her, global discourse topics are sequentially organised and represent a wide concern which may involve a considerable stretch of discourse, while local topics are hierarchically structured under the ‘umbrella’ of the D-topic which unifies them (Van Oost, 1985: 19; cf Van Dijk, 1988; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

Hence, in example (9) A’s and B’s contribution to discourse can be regarded as topic continuations. Still, although they provide for continued conversation on the former item, they themselves do not develop on that item. Therefore, these turns are aimed at demanding more information and signalling active listenership. In view of this proposal, this kind of continuation will be further developed and explained - in my own terms - as Topic Supporters (Ts). Conversely, in example (10) the participants’ contribution can be again regarded as topic continuation, however, these turns not only provide for continued conversation on the former item, but they also develop on that item. Apart from signalling active listenership, these turns are aimed at continuing properly the topic. In this sense, their continuation will be further discussed - in my own terms - under the heading Topic Contributor (Tc).

3.2.2.1. Topic Supporter

In this section, I will concern myself with the function of those turns at talk aimed at continuing the topic without actually providing any relevant piece of information on the previous item. In my own terms, these turns will be referred to as *Topic supporter* (TS). Furthermore, the exploitation of positive strategies will also be considered. Let us consider the following piece of data:
E.g. (9) On Saturday night

| C:       | Pues va y se picó conmigo toda la noche |
| A:       | No me digas ¡qué aguante!              |
| B:       | Es que eres masoquista, tía           |

In this example, A and B claim common ground with C. These turns attend to C’s needs and intensity sympathy with her. A’s and B’s exaggeration reinforces their admiration for C. Moreover, their contributions are aimed at seeking agreement in which the three participants express their common point of view about the topic under discussion. This fact, in turn, reinforces their identity as a group.

E.g. (11) On Saturday night

| C:       | Si y al rato aparece el operístico (laughter) |
| B:       | Yo no sé cómo no te fuiste al verlo, ¡qué valor! |
| A:       | Es verdad                                  |

Both speakers contributions to discourse are redress to C’s positive face. These positive-politeness utterances claim common ground by niticing C. They gifts to C and exaggerate their sympathy and admiration to her.

E.g. (12) On Saturday night

| C:       | No enseño y nos enseñó las fotos que tu has visto... tía |
| B:       | Esas fotos las hemos visto todos                  |
| A:       | las he visto hasta yo                             |

The claim of common ground in B’s and A’s turns is achieved by seeking agreement. In this sense, B’s and A’s contributions stress their agreement with C and therefore they satisfy C’s desire to be ‘right’ since they corroborate her point of view. Moreover, these two turns convey that the three participants are co-operators since it claims reflexivity including all the speakers in the same activity. Finally, the active listenership is emphasised by the fact that B repeats part of the C’s turn.

E.g. (13) On an acquaintaince’s pregnancy

| B:       | No, si le gustan más los pantalones |
| A:       | ¡Ni que lo jures!                     |

Once more C’s contribution claims common knowledge by reinforcing and emphasising their common point of view and attitude towards the same person. In addition, C’s corroboration encourages B to keep gossiping about the third absent person.
E.g. (14) On Saturday night

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Y tu porque eres tonta…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Es que tienes una paciencia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Speaker C claims common ground with B by giving her gifts. The exploitation of positive strategies are concerned with noticing B and intensifying sympathy with her. In this way, C praises B’s patience, which can be pointed out as an exaggeration.

All the former examples present the same pattern: (a) one speaker firstly starts developing a certain topic on some piece of information - which she considers to be interesting for the other participants and (b) a continuation of the topic is then provided by the other participants.

The point I am making here is that this continuation, on the one hand, continues the topic in the sense that no other topic is introduced, but it does not still provide any relevant piece of information. Conversely, these turns - as already shown - are mainly based on the exploitation of positive strategies, which emphasise group membership and solidarity.

For purposes of explanation, it could be appropriate to reintroduce the notions of global discourse topic and local topic. In my view, the function accomplished by Ti is highly important. I argue that these topic supporters cannot be considered as a continuation of the local topic, since the topic is not developed in a proper sense. Still, the support of the local topic is achieved through speaker’s contributions being redress to the addressee’s positive face.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 103), redress expressed in these turns consists of that desire by communicating that B’s and A’s own wants are in some respect similar to C’s wants. These positive-politeness utterances are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy, to imply common ground. B and A claim ‘common ground’ with C, by indicating that they three belong to some set of people who share specific wants, including goals and values. A and B convey that C’s behaviour is admirable or interesting to them, which in turn stresses common membership in a group.

Although topic supporters build on the former contribution, they do not actually develop the local topic, but exploit positive strategies aimed at providing positive feedback and signalling active listenship. Such strategies encourage the other participants to keep developing the local topic. In this sense, topic supporters help to construct the conversation as a whole and can be regarded more precisely as contributors of the global discourse topic.

3.2.2.2. Topic Contributor

In this section, I will concern myself with the function of those turns at talk aimed at continuing and developing the topic. In my own terms, these turns will be referred to as topic contributors (Tc).
Take the following piece of my data, for instance:  
E.g. ( 10 ) On an acquaintance’s pregnancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B:</th>
<th>¿Quién te lo ha dicho ?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Me lo ha dicho Pilar que so la ha dicho ella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>Pues como esté embarazada de verdad menudo marujeo .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>¿. Pero de cuánto tiempo está ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>No sé pero debe de estar de poco .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>¿. Se ha hecho la prueba ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Pilar me ha dicho que está tan asustada que ni siquiera quiere hacerse la prueba .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The former example presents clearly a case in which women develop topic jointly and how each contribution is built on the previous one. B and C claim common ground by noticing A, and intensify their interest to A together with the fact that topic is presented. The extract is a succession of elicitations produced indistinctly by speakers C and B to A, as a way to demand and elicit more information. The topic can be said to be interesting because of the sympathy expressed in the positive-politeness strategies. The participants also seek agreement in sharing the same point of view. Note that apart from elicitation, there are also personal comments.

E.g. ( 15 ) On Saturday night

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B:</th>
<th>¿. Y tú que le dijiste ?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Tú te crees… que no se lo cree ni harto vino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Por supuesto ni que estuvieras desesperadas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Claro que no, lo peor es que puso muy plasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Peor para él , si además de un niño es un plasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Como todos los tíos cuando les dices que no… se ponen de un pesadito.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A claims common ground with C by noticing her and giving gifts to her. In approving A’s behaviour, the participants can be identified as a group, whose turns are aimed at seeking agreement. From these facts, it can also be inferred that there are certain rules within the group, which assert appropriate behaviour.
E.g (16) On an acquaintance’s pregnancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C:</th>
<th>¿Qué tal le va con el ligue nuevo?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>¿Qué?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>¿Qué Sandra tiene ligue nuevo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>O sea que con el que estaba nada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Como que con el que estaba nada, pero ¿estaba con uno?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Sandra siempre está con uno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B:</td>
<td>¿Y qué te ha contado?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A:</td>
<td>Lo de siempre …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This example consists of topic contributors. A succession of elicitations and answers can be identified, they are produced indistinctly by all the participants and construct the local topic. Active listenership is then seen in every contribution since each turn is built on the former one.

In the former examples, it is shown how in the course of the dialogue, interlocutors both interact with each other and develop the local topic in and through the discourse. Talk-in-interaction is produced on a moment-to-moment, utterance-to-utterance basis; discourse is built by ‘incrementation’ (Eggins, 1997). Bits of pieces of discourse are selected and strung together, in a process of local production, one ‘idea unit’ makes another one possible relevant, and once this new materialises opportunities for further contribution does not build a topic; a series of contributions, bound together by response links, will be needed to establish topic. In this way, a topic becomes a joint accomplishment and a product of the dialogue dynamics of responses and initiatives (Linell, 1997). A topic is the project and product of coherence-building (Goffman, 1983).

In sum, these two last sections have argued that there are two alternative possibilities to continue a topic. On the one hand, topic supporters (Tc) which help to develop the conversation without actually providing any piece of relevant information on the local topic; on the other hand, topic contributors (Tc) which have shown to have all the stereotypical notions assigned to this particular sort of interaction.

With regard to both types of continuations, close inspection of the data shows how the more interesting and exciting the participants found the conversation, the more often they contribute in the form of topic supporters. Even though the length of the turn may be extremely short in most cases, these turns respect addressee’s face wants. The following strategies have been all identified in the previous examples:

**Noticing H.** Both Ts and Tc notice H by commenting, for instance, how brave C was or how patient. Speakers also tend to give gifts to H praising her great qualities.

**Exaggerate Ts and Tc give positive feedback** to H exaggerating interest and sympathy with her. Women, talking to one another, sounded as if they were ‘acting on a play’.

**Use of group identity markers.** Ts and Tc implicitly and explicitly assert social unity and explores similarity and shared values which defined participants as a group.

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*Pragmalingüística, 8-9, 2000-2001, 123 - 142*
Seek agreement. Ts and Tc claim common ground, participants seek ways in which it is possible to agree with each other. Although the topic under discussion may be certainly FTA, in the group of people in which takes place may be regarded as a ‘safe topic’ since all the participants agree and have given their explicit approval for the gossip to proceed.

Assert common ground including both S and H in the activity. Ts and Tc include all the participants in the same activity as a way to claim common ground.

4. Conclusion

In summary, what I have spelled out in this paper has been a new and innovative attempt to deal with a diffuse notion: that of topic in spoken data. In spite of the unpredictability that has always characterised casual talk, this study has tried, on the one hand, to define the nature of topic in gossip talk and, on the other hand, has used the notion of topic as a tool to give structure to spoken data. Still, this paper has not set out to solve all the problems and has not purported to offer a detailed analysis of topic in spoken data that serves everyone needs perfectly. Two basic analyses have been carried out: (a) topic as a social and psychological concern and (b) topic as a structuring frame.

The first part of the paper has argued in favour of topic not being merely a linguistics, but also a social and psychological concern (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). By taking advantage of Rumelhart’s (1980) Schema Theory, I have postulated that (a) a gossip involves a whole ‘pattern of events’ which exhibits a very predictable temporal structure; that is to say, a prototypical scenario made of three main stages in which one stage is a prerequisite for the next stages.

Arising from the scenario, two main implications have been claimed: (a) that the motivation for staying on topic or the motivation for topic shift is closely in conjunction with participant’s discourse agenda and (b) that participants are the ones who have topics.

In addition, two main social functions have been pointed out: (a) gossip establishes and reinforces group membership and (b) gossip can be considered a form of social control.

The second part of the study has been aimed at carrying out an analysis of topic as a structuring frame of spoken data. For this purpose, I have taken Goutsos’ (1997) topic structure model - applied to expository texts - as point of departure. Moreover a study of positive politeness has also been used to sustain the analysis. The notion of topic as a structuring frame having discussed under two distinct headings: Topic introduction and Topic continuation.

With regard to Topic introduction (TI), a basic distinction has been drawn: topic initiators (Ti) and topic introduction (TI). Topic initiators (Ti) introduce the gossiped issue statement and are aimed at eliciting an approval (Topic approval (Ta)) for the gossip to proceed; whereas topic introduction (TI) introduces properly a topic into conversation together with demanding more information. Finally, both of them have been shown to exploit some of the strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987).

With regard to Topic continuation (TC) another twofold distinction has been argued: (a) Topic supporters (Ts), which are turns aimed at continuing the topic without actually providing any relevant piece of information on the previous item. Furthermore, these topic
supporters have been shown to support the local topic and contribute to construct the global discourse topic; (b) Topic contributors (Tc) have been claimed to develop the local topic in and through the discourse. The topic becomes a joint accomplishment and a product of the dialogue dynamics of responses and initiatives (Linell, 1997). In the end, an overview of positive strategies has been provided.

5. Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Professor Angela Downing for expert supervision and guidance concerning relevant Topic literature. Many thanks to Carmen Maiz and Begoña Núñez, who were unequivocally enthusiastic and constructive, for making this paper possible. And finally all my gratitude to Sonia for her support and trust.
6. References


