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Topic in Talk-in-interaction: A Longitudinal Study of Japanese Learners of English

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Topic in language

A commonality of all language in use is that it is ‘about’ something, that is, it has a topic. However, topic in spoken and written language differs markedly. In written language there are a variety of devices that writers use to indicate topic. Titles and subtitles in articles and books, subject lines in E-mails, abstracts prefacing academic papers and so on, are all means by which a writer makes it clear to his or her readership what the piece of writing is about, what are the likely contents. Such topic highlighting is placed at the beginning of the written piece in order for the reader to have an idea of topic prior to the onset of reading. The topic in the form of a title or abstract is set apart from the body of the writing, using larger and/or different fonts. In addition to this clear, prior marking of topic, a further convention of written language is that topics are adhered to, not changed back and forth as the writing unfolds. Writers seek to give a piece of writing an overall coherence and avoid sudden topic disjunctures. (Some creative writing may have such topic disjunctures, but it would be considered and purposeful on the part of the writer rather than incidental and unplanned.) Thus, topic in writing can be characterized as prior stated, prominent, and usually tightly constrained.

Topic in spoken language is often of a different nature. Of course, the expression ‘spoken language’ is a broad term, and there are many different kinds of talk. A speech, lecture or presentation is a different kind of talk from transactional talk such as ordering in a restaurant or giving directions. However, many people never give speeches or lectures and most transactional talk is of a very brief nature. The most common kind of spoken language is the daily, conversational interactions that are largely phatic in nature and are the main locus of social action. It is this kind of talk, referred to as ‘talk-in-interaction’ in conversation analysis (CA) terms, that will be dealt

with here.

In talk-in-interaction topic is much more fluid and emergent than in writing. There are ways in which topics are proffered, maintained, developed, shifted, (and shifted back) and closed. Topics are often proffered in tacit terms rather than stated boldly and whether the recipient(s) of a proffer take up a proffered topic depends on mutual assent, often achieved through a process of negotiation.

These general observations may seem commonsensical, but the difficulties surrounding topic in talk-in-interaction are considerable. Atkinson and Heritage (1984, p. 165) write that “Topic may well prove to be among the most complex conversational phenomena to be investigated and, correspondingly, the most recalcitrant to systematic analysis.” The following study is in some senses rather coarse grained. (For more in-depth discussions of topic in talk-in-interaction see Schegloff, (2007), Button and Casey, (1984), Wong and Waring, (2010).) Rather than attempt a comprehensive description of, and accounting for, every aspect of topic in talk-in-interaction as manifested in learners’ talk, a description of a variety of practices is given in order to convey something of the nature of learners’ talk and the kinds of topic management practices that took place over the period of an academic year.

Topic initiation

The obvious place for topic nomination is at the opening of a piece of talk, but not right at the opening. Greetings, enquiries into health and wellbeing, practical matters concerning the here and now of the participants’ shared space are often attended to before any topic is proffered. An enquiry into wellbeing or talk about the here and now of the participants’ environment may be oriented to by the participants as a greeting sequence before the main business is attended to, or it may become the main business of subsequent talk. For in-depth discussions of topic initiation sequences see Schegloff (2007. pp 170–180) and Button and Casey (1985).

Topic pursuit and development

Once a topic has been taken up it will be developed by participants. Reichman (1990, p.28) describes the kind of expectations that speakers have of each other in regards to topic management.

[They] expect a lot of feedback on topics that they introduce into the conversation. They expect their coparticipants to engage in the topic with them. They expect them to develop the topic, discuss alternatives to the proposed content, and provide variations on a same theme with them.

In dealing with topic development, Schegloff (2007, p. 171) describes the processes by which topic is taken up and developed. (*Italics in the original*)

. . . the key issue is whether the recipient displays a stance which *encourages* or *discourages* the proffered topic, embraces it or rejects it, accepts or declines what has been proposed.
(p. 171)

He goes on to add;

[A key feature] is whether the response turn is constructed to be minimal (or minimized—i.e., analyzably kept short, even if not as short as possible) or expanded. Here turn organization plays a strategic role; response turns composed of a single TCU [Turn Construction Unit] (especially if they are redundant or repetitive) are ways of embodying minimal response.
(p. 171)

Topic shift, drift and closure

Talk is not, however, mono-topical in nature in the way that much writing is. Topics often shift and drift, in a process described as stepwise transition. In this process, elements of the current topic which are incidental, are foregrounded and become topicalized in their own right, whilst the foregoing topicality is, by default, backgrounded by not being attended to in ongoing talk. The process repeats in a cyclical manner. As Sacks noted:

It is a general feature for topical organization in conversation that the best way to move from topic to topic is not by a topic close followed by a topic beginning, but by what we call a step-wise move. Such a move involved connecting what we've just been talking about to what we are now talking about, though they are different. I link up whatever I'm now introducing as a new topic to what we've just been talking about [in such a way that] so far as anybody knows we've never had to start a new topic, though we are far from wherever we began and haven't talked on just a single topic. It flowed.

(Sacks 1995 vol. 2: 566)

Jefferson (1984.) shows the process unfolding in a stretch of dialogue. The opening lines detail a troublesome social event: (line numbers in the original)

Excerpt 1

1 E: If I'd just gone down there and spent my
 2 Thanksgiving like, Tillie wanted me to, why
 3 I would of had no problems, and hell with the
 4 Thanksgiving dinner. I'm through. I'm not gonna
 5 do anything anymore.

(p. 198-199)

This conversation continues without any apparent topic disjuncture until the participants have moved away from the 'troubles telling', and by the end of the fragment, some 80 lines later, the conversation is much more upbeat:

Excerpt 2

82 E: Oh: that's wonderf[ul,
 83 L: [Oh:: God we had. we. I never
 83 had so much fun in my li:fe.

(p, 200)

In addition to this stepwise transition, topic disjunctures may also occur. In these cases a topic that has no relation to the previous topic is proffered. This topic shift may be triggered by the previous topic having come to an end, an end which is designed by the speaker and aligned to as such by the other participants. An example of such a designed topic ending is when a speaker offers a summary assessment of the preceding talk, often by means of the production of a recognizable prefabricated language chunk, a figure of speech. This is followed by a round of agreement tokens and brief periods(s) of silence. The new topic is then proffered. The following fragment is taken from Drew and Holt (1998, p. 499) and shows this process unfolding. A mother and daughter are talking about an elderly acquaintance that has recently died. (Line numbers are from the original.)

Excerpt 3

20 Mum: Good gracious,
 21 (0.3)

- 22 Lesley: And he wz their buyer,
 23 (.)
 24 Mum: Hm::::
 25 Lesley: .t
 26 Mum: Hm:.
 27 Lesley So he had a good innings did[n't he.
 28 Mum [I should say so:
 29 Yes
 30 (0.2)
 31 Mum Marvelous
 32 Lesley .tk. hhhh Anyway we had a very good evening o:n
 33 Saturda:y.
 34 (.)
 35 Mum Ye:s?

In line 27 Lesley offers a summary assessment through the use of the figure of speech 'He had a good innings' meaning he had a long and happy life. Lines 27 to 21 involve both participants offering agreement to this assessment, then Lesley proffers the new topic in line 32, introducing the topic with the marker 'anyway', showing that the previous discourse is not to be considered as sequentially relevant to what follows. The use of figures of speech as summary assessments is just one way in which interactants may signal that a stretch of talk is being proposed to be coming to an end in terms of topic. Drew and Holt (1998, p. 504) note that 'repetition is commonly associated with terminating a topic.' Summary assessments, repetitions and other means serve to show that co-participants have means to hand with which to design topic endings, even if they may not be able to metacognitively account for the practices they deploy.

In addition to this process, where the talk has recognizable contours of topic ending that are attended to and co-managed by the participants, a participant may introduce a topic shift that is completely disjunctive to the ongoing talk. Such disjunctures are usually carefully managed by the speaker introducing the disjuncture, and the topic shift is usually introduced with stock phrases such as 'By the way', 'Oh, while I remember', 'So, anyways', 'On a different topic' and the like, which are clearly recognizable as initiating a topic disjuncture. The topic thus introduced may be pursued as a temporary deviation from the main topic at hand, or it may represent a new phase of talk that closes off the previous topic completely. The subsequent talk may align with the new topic proposer's intent, i. e. temporary deviation or clean break, or the unfolding talk may go in the opposite direction. That is, the topic insertion that was intended as temporary may well

continue for a lengthy period and there be no subsequent return to the original, interrupted topic. Or, conversely, a speaker may insist on a return to the original topic even though the topic disjuncture was intended to bring that topic to a close. Such expressions as 'Well, getting back to . . .' or 'As I was saying' are clearly recognizable as doing the job of 'return to previous topic'. To sum up, topics in talk in interaction have an emergent quality that is not easy to pin down and define empirically. Dorval (1990, p. 1) states 'Topic is not a static feature of conversation, but rather the outcome of an ongoing negotiation. As such, topic continually takes unforeseen paths in the course of a conversation in response to the participants' needs, interests and whims.'

Topic management in learner English

The preceding section gave a brief account of some of the dimensions of topicality in talk-in-interaction. Topic proffering, negotiation, maintenance, change, drift and closing are all areas important aspects of talk that adult speakers of a language attend to in a largely unconscious way. The talk of children is often different from that of adults in terms of topic management. (See for example, the essays in Dorval, 1990.) Rather than simply seeing children as deficient in their topic management skills, the contributing authors in that volume seek to look for regularity and orderliness in the talk of children, and describe the processes by which not-yet-adults go about the task of doing talk-in-interaction. The following study takes a similar view with learners of English, seeing the ways in which learners go about the business of managing topic, using whatever language resources are to hand. The ways of managing topic develop over time as language resources become more plentiful, allowing for a greater spectrum of interactional behaviors to be deployed.

The study

The study took place over the course of an academic year (April to January) at a private university in Japan. The participating students (N=13) were all second or third year non-English majors enrolled on an elective English language course. Twelve of the students were native Japanese speakers and one was a native speaker of Cantonese who was also fluent in Japanese. The class met twice a week for 90 minutes for two 15-week semesters. The students were video-taped by the teacher in mid-April, late July and late January. (This study will refer to the April and January data.) The recorded data consisted of five-minute segments of ongoing conversations. In each class during the 30 week course the students were instructed by the teacher to hold conversations, in English as much as possible. No direction was given as to topic, group membership or any goal of the speaking. (It was suggested that groups should be no more than three members.) The video data was transcribed using CA transcription conventions. (See appendix)

As no direction was given concerning group membership, some groups comprised the same participants across the three recording sessions, whilst others varied. One student was absent from the July recording session, and another student did not participate in the course for the second semester, thus the January conversations are $N=12$. The following descriptions are rather coarse grained in order to give a view of the data which is broad enough to encompass a variety of practices, but specific enough to deal with certain practices of talk-in-interaction in detail.

Conversation summaries

April

AEI/P. 1

Speakers: D, Y, Ts

Speaker D opens the conversation with a 'How are you' enquiry. Speaker Y reports the news of his having a cold. D pursues this with an enquiry as to why he (Y) came to school. This is misunderstood by Y as 'How did you come to school?' Y responds 'by bike'. A cycle of repair resolves the issue and finally Y responds that he wants to get a class credit. A topic disjuncture then occurs. D asks Y if he has brought his lunch. D pursues this line of questioning, asking about where and what Y will eat for lunch. Several cycles of repair are engaged in until the lunch enquiries are answered. After a short lull, D then moves forward with an enquiry about what Y will do after lunch. The third speaker (Ts) plays a largely passive role in the interaction, mostly offering backchannels.

AEI/P. 2

Speakers: Yu, Mi

The conversation opens with greetings of "how are you?" Speaker Yu reports being tired and hungry, which launches a round of question and answers about getting up and going to bed times. Yu then switches topic and asks Mi what she did at the weekend. A series of questions by Yu are answered by Mi in minimal fashion concerning her part-time job's location, hours and so on. Mi then asks 'how about you' which is interpreted by Yu as enquiring about her (Yu's) weekend activities. Yu details a trip back to her hometown for her mother's birthday. A similar round of questions and minimalized answers covers details of the trip and the gift of flowers given by Yu to her mother. This sequence is brought to a close when Mi asks about Yu's mother's age. Yu declines to answer and then she observes that today is very hot. A series of short observations about the weather ensues, followed by a multi-second silence. Yu then returns to the topic of

Mi's part-time job and asks when she started the job.

AEI/P. 3

Speakers: S, Ta

The conversation opens with a question by S about Ta's Saturday's activities. Ta details his part-time job in a restaurant. The speakers then engage in a round of questions about part-time job hours and so on, switching speakership by 'how about you' enquiries. This sequence ends with a long silence followed by S suggesting that they go to Ta's restaurant. S then switches topic, saying that he has heard that Ta's father will buy him a sports car. Ta confirms and then a round of enquiries by S about the car are answered by Ta. This sequence closes with S asking Ta to show him a picture of the car when he has it. S switches topic with 'by the way' to ask about today's lunch plans. A sequence of questions and answers about Ta's lunchtime plans and his friend's unavailability for lunch because he (the friend) is with his girlfriend ensues. S advises Ta to mail his friend after class. S reverts to the topic of weekend activities, this time Sunday's activities. Ta reports that he worked on Sunday as well.

AEI/P. 4

Speakers: R, C, A

R asks what time the other members got up today. The other members answer in minimal fashion. R then asks if C and A have a boyfriend. After answering, C turns the question back to R, who answers. R then asks about Golden Week plans. A short round of repair sequences follows as the participants try to understand one another's responses, working through several trouble sources. In clarifying C's answer, R reverts to Japanese and an extended sequence of clarification turns in Japanese ensue. R then asks the others if they have ever been to Suzuka circuit, and then there is a round of questions and answers about what is at Suzuka circuit. It is clarified by R and C to A that it is a theme park as well as a Formula 1 racing venue. R follows up by asking if A likes Formula 1.

AEI/P. 5

Speakers: Ya and K

"How are you" greetings are initiated. K reports that he is recovering from a bout of influenza. The positive side to this was that he was able to watch a daytime TV program every day. Ya aligns with K's positive assessment of the program in question. Ya then changes topic with 'by the way' and reports a day of listening to music. He then asks K what kind of music he likes. A long series of fragmentary turns ensues in which the participants name artists and songs. This

sequence concludes with Ya suggesting that they go to Karaoke after class. The topic of music is introduced again, moving swiftly to theme songs from a popular animated TV show, which both participants assess positively. Then another animation program is mentioned. This prompts K to mention that he likes Tokyo, which is not treated as disjunctive by Ya. K then details a trip to Tokyo during the spring vacation during which there was a large earthquake. K details his experience of the earthquake, Ya offers supportive assessments of the experience.

AEI/P. 6

Speakers: Ma Ka

The conversation opens with Ma explaining that she has a travel pass so she wants to explore Kobe and Sanomiya. Ka responds and then shows confusion as to why Ma doesn't know those areas well. Then follows a prolonged series of turns in which Ma explains that although she was born in Kobe, her family moved early and she actually grew up in Shizuoka. She moved back to Osaka alone to attend this university, then her family moved back to Kansai, and she now lives with them. This sequence ends with mutual assessments of Shizuoka as being very far, followed by a period of silence. Ma then starts a new topic by relating a trip to a well-known Osaka landmark. Ka aligns with this, but offers the news that although she was born in Osaka she went there for the first time a few months ago. Ma moves the topic forward by talking about another landmark in the same area. K assesses this place positively as well and then asks M what spots she recommends in Kobe.

January

AEI/F.1

Speakers: S and Ta

Ta opens with an extended account of his trip to his hometown during the winter break. This prefaces an enquiry as to S's winter vacation activities. S reports a return to his home in Hong Kong for the first time in two years. He ate a lot of food. A round of turns ensues comparing the prices of food in Japan and Hong Kong. This sequence closes with a reference to going to Hong Kong together. S then returns to the topic of Ta's trip to his hometown Kanagawa. This prompts a round of turns about local food in Kanagawa, including the price. Ta offers to buy S some udon from Kanagawa next time he visits. After more talk about Kanagawa food, S enquires about travel times to Kanagawa. Ta replies with a detailed itinerary of his recent trip.

AEI/F. 2

Speakers: Ma, Mi

Ma opens with greetings followed by outline of plans for spring vacation, which prefaces an enquiry about Mi's plans. After outlining an upcoming trip to the UK, the talk turns to foreign trips. A stepwise transition to Harry Potter ensues. The talk then returns to the topic of UK and its cold weather. This is compared to Hokkaido. By stepwise transition, the talk turns to winter sports and proficiency thereof. The topic is then shifted to the summer vacation. The activities of scuba diving and drumming are discussed.

AEI/F. 3

Speakers: Ka, Yu

Greetings are followed by assessment of tired appearance. This is accounted for by upcoming tests, which is followed by a stepwise transition to talking about the spring vacation. Trips to Korea and Nagano by K are elaborated upon, concluding with a negative assessment by Y of an upcoming night bus journey. K then asks Yu about her spring vacation plans, which is elaborated upon by Yu with reference to traveling within Japan, but having a shortage of money.

AEI/F.4

Speakers: Ya, A

Greetings are followed by talk about the weather, then Ya introduces a story about a delay caused by a train accident. Ya concludes and attempts a 'how about you' other nomination, but this is not attended to by A and talk continues to resolve information gaps about Ya's story. After this sequence Ya moves forward with 'by the way' and reports New Year's social activities and nominates A with 'how about you?' A reports being busy with writing reports over the holiday. A round of turns ensues about the length of term papers. Ya then outlines his spring vacation plans and asks A where she will go. A replies that she will probably be job hunting.

AEI/F. 5

Speakers: C, R

Assessment of the weather as freezing begins a round of turns about winter sports and upcoming snowboarding trip by R. The topic shifts to spring vacation plans and C reports the possibility of visiting some amusement parks. This is followed by assessments of various amusement parks in Japan, with R concluding that although USJ is not perfect it is near her house, so it is good. This is followed by discussing frequency of visits to USJ using a yearly pass, and an upcoming visit by R to USJ.

AEI/F. 6

Speakers: D, Ts

The talk opens with “how are you” enquiries. This leads to talk about being tired because of upcoming tests. Ts criticizes his Japanese teacher’s class and English pronunciation. D shifts topic by asking Ts to confirm and upcoming trip to the UK for study. This leads to talk about Ts’s proposed activities in the UK. D then refers to the urban setting of Ts’s trip and contrasts this favorably with his own study trip to rural Australia. Ts agrees that his trip will be exciting. D then enquires about what Ts intends to buy in the UK.

Overview of the conversations

Firstly, it must be observed that all of the conversations, both April and January dealt with topics that were attentive to the daily lives and concerns of the participants and at no point did any of the participants seek to develop topics into anything more abstract or analytical in nature. Conversations often started by referring to the here and now, such as prevailing weather conditions, feelings of tiredness and hunger and such like. In temporal terms, there was talk about past happenings, typically last week, last spring vacation or high school trips. There was also talk with future orientation, next weekend and plans for upcoming vacations being prominent. In many cases the talk dealt with reports of activities (past or projected) followed by evaluations which were convergent. Examples of recurrent topics were; part-time jobs, study related activities, vacation activities, especially trips abroad and discussion of places in Japan. A further observation is that although the conversations were ongoing, and the teacher moved from group to group with the video camera, in many cases, the learners treated the onset of recording as a second beginning, and started the recorded section of talk with mutual exchange of greetings, despite having been engaged in conversation for an extended period prior to the onset of the recording.

Topic proffering

In many of the conversations, especially in the April sessions, there was a noticeable imbalance in the speaker’s roles vis-à-vis topicality. In several cases one speaker in particular seemed to self-assign themselves responsibility for topic proffering and maintenance. For example in the following April conversation, speaker R continually asks questions of her interlocutors that can be seen as doing the job of topic proffering:

Excerpt 4

01. R: Did you::: get up (.) today >uh< when

02. A: [What time]

03. R: [What time] What time get got up today?

(Lines omitted)

08. R: Do you have boyfriend?

09. C: Yes I have [Hahaha]

10. R: [Hahaha]

11. R: How how long?

12. C: How long about four years

(Lines omitted)

21. R: What what are you doing what will you be doing in Golden week?

22. (2.0)

23. A I might (0.3) go to Aquarium

(Lines omitted)

47. R: =What kind of job (.) what °do you° will you have part time job

48. C: Uh::I want to (.) some (.) café (6.0) I (1.6) don't don't decide a (1.0) uh?

(Lines omitted)

60. R: Kimaru Ha ha ha .hh ah:: Have you ever been to Suzuka circuito

61. A: °I don't have°

(Lines omitted)

79. R: do you like eff one?

80. (0.8)

81. A: I not see (0.9) itu on tee vee

By contrast, the other speakers in this conversation mostly follow the topics proffered by R and ask questions related to these topics.

Here C turns R's questions about having a boyfriend back to R.

Excerpt 5

15. R: Four years. ((Looks to A)) eh do you have?
 16. A: ((inaudible.))
 17. R: Ha hhh
 18. C: ((Looks to R)) Do you have?
 19. R: No I haven't but I want to heheheh, jya (1.0)e:::to (2.0)

In this excerpt, A develops R's topic of Suzuka circuit by asking what is there, meaning apart from an F1 racing track.

Excerpt 6

60. R: Kimaru Ha ha ha .hh ah:: Have you ever:: been to: Suzuka circuito
 61. A: °I don't have°
 62. C: Yes I have
 63. R: he he he °suzuka°?
 64. A: Whatu:: (4.2) °izu there?°

This role of one participant as primary questioner/ topic profferer is found in several of the other conversations from the April sessions. In the above conversation, speaker R introduces a succession of questions as topic proffers, without any particular sense of cohesion, apart from generalized talk about personal matters, recent or upcoming events and so on. The recipients of these questions orient to the topics thus proffered without any further ado. The roles seem to be tacitly agreed on. The nature of these topic proffers is in the form of single, direct questions; both 'wh' type and yes/no type. The questions are introduced without any discourse marking or pre-question or post-question sequences.

In the January sessions, topic proffering was done through a wider variety of strategies. In addition to single unsupported questions, question strings were employed. In the following fragment, C asks a pair of related questions to expand the topic from a certain location (Akakura Onsen) to winter sports.

Excerpt 7

01. C: =So you you know >I mean< I maybe I will go::
 02. C: >Akakura Onsen[shiki< area]
 03. R: [°yeah yeah°]
 04. C: Do you know >Akakura Onsen< oh >have you ever been to<
 05. C: snowboarding or skiing ?

Topic proffering was also done through pre-question sequences, where participants engaged in a stretch of talk about some activity or plan which is concluded with a question on the same topic. The pattern is illustrated in the following fragment:

Excerpt 8

01. Ma: Well my spring vacation plan is I > want to go to< driving
 02. license sch[ool] =
 03. M: [°uh huh°]
 04. Ma: =How about you? What will you do this spring vacation?
 05. Mi: Well, I mean, I will go abroad ((Continues))

Here we see that Ma raises the topic of spring vacation plans through a short stretch of self-disclosure. This is not elaborated upon and the speaker then nominates the other speaker with the question 'How about you' which is latched to the self-disclosure sequence, indicating that it was designed as part of the turn. The topic profferer then adds a question to this other-nomination, 'What will you do this spring vacation?' This further question reinforces the topic being addressed, and renders the 'how about you' enquiry as primarily an invitation for the other take a turn, rather than primarily a means of self de-selection that can be an interactional feature of unsupported 'how about you' type of turn ending.

In a further example, we can see that the topic proffer is done by means of constructing a turn with a question prefaced by some background statement. In this case, the topic is not prefaced with self-disclosure as in the example above, but framed within the epistemic difference between the questioner, regarding local delicacies of his hometown, and the co-participant.

Excerpt 9

01. Ta: >Kagawa <is ah:: another famous for ah:: Wasambon. Do you know
 02. Ta: Wasambon?
 03. S: No I nev. I have never heard it before
 04. Ta: Ah: Wasambon is ah::sugars
 05. S: Uh huh
 06. Ta: [Sugars snack]
 07. S: [>Uh huh<] I see, I see.

((Ta continues explaining Wasambon ingredients and cost to S))

As was mentioned, in the April sessions, topic proffering was often done repeatedly by a single participant, and the other participant(s) aligning unproblematically with the topics thus proffered. In the January conversations, this pattern of proffer/uptake was seen but other patterns were also observable. In the following excerpt the proffered topic “A’s recent activities” is rejected by A and she instead returns to the topic of Y’s train incident.

Excerpt 10

01. Y: So I’m tired (0.9) >You know wharimean<=
 02. A: =°I think so° (.) So::
 03. Y: Wha’bout you?=
 04. A: =Do. What e. when did you ari::ve (.) your home

((The talk continues on the train incident))

In line 01, Y concludes his telling of the train incident with an upshot assessment (“So I’m tired”) this is followed by a chunked figure of speech expression asking A to align with this upshot assessment. (“You know what I mean?”), spoken quickly and placed in a typical turn closing position. Both of these utterances seem to indicate that Y considers the story of the delayed train as now concluded. A responds to this in a sequence appropriate fashion, by agreeing, but her agreement is spoken in a quiet voice, followed by a slightly elongated ‘so’. Before she can continue with this turn Y asks in line 03 ‘What about you?’ In this, he further reinforces his stance that the train in incident story telling is now closed, and he wants to move on to some talk about A’s activities. What precise information he seeks to gather by this other-nomination is not realized as A re-orient back to the train incident story. Her turn in line 04 is latched to Y’s ques-

tion and the initial word is spoken more loudly than the rest of the turn. Although this turns out to be a false start, and is quickly repaired, it is hearable as the start of a question, a dispreferred second pair part to a first pair part if the first pair part is a question. By these means, A does not align with Y's attempted topic closure and proffer of new topic, but proposes instead that Y elaborates on the train incident. Over a short few turns, the participants engage in a delicate process of proposed closure by Y, alignment with the summary assessment of the story, but not the closure itself by A, a proposed new topic by Y which is counter proposed by A, whose counter is then taken up by Y. There are a wide variety of sophisticated interactional practices in evidence in this fragment.

Topic maintenance and pursuit

Once a topic has been taken up by co-participants, it is jointly developed by them and maintained over a stretch of talk. Participants usually expand on details, fill in background information, offer assessments, and so on. The following excerpt from April shows a topic being talked about over a series of turns.

Excerpt 11

01. Yu: Whato (1.1) did you: (1.0) do
02. (2.1)
03. Yu: weekend this (0.9) last weekend? weekend
04. (4.8)
05. Mi: Part time job
06. Yu: Oh? eh what whato what job?
07. Mi: Conbini (.) ence store
08. Yu: Eh:: where? where?
09. (1.9)
10. Mi: Near (.) my home.
11. Yu: My home? (1.0) °my° near
12. Mi: Near.
13. Yu: Near eh? Seven Eleven?
14. Mi: No circle K?
15. Yu: Circle K? Circle K Circle K ah ah ah::
16. Mi: Schoolu
17. Yu: Ok ok oh eh:: (3.6) oh eh what time. (.) uh::

18. (2.5)
 19. Mi: Four ah four hours
 20. Yu: Four hours?
 21. Mi: °Kana°
 22. Yu: Morning? (4.5) Night?
 23. Mi: (1.8) Lunch lunch [jyanai] =
 24. Yu: [he he he]
 25. Mi: =Good afternoon [jya shi] =
 26. Yu: [he he]
 27. Mi: =[Afternoon]
 28. Yu: [Afternoon] afternoon afternoon (.)ah twelve
 29. (1.0)
 30. Mi: Yes
 31. Yu: Ah uh::
 32. Mi: How about you?

In this excerpt, Yu proffers the topic of Mi's weekend activities in lines 01 through 03. Mi aligns with this topic by referring to her part time job. What follows is a series of questions by Yu (Lines 06, 08, 13, 17, 22) seeking further information from Mi regarding such details as the location of the job, and the working hours. Mi answers the questions, but the answers are minimal. Although Mi displays no discernable disinclination to talk about her part-time job, nor does Yu seem to display any sense that Mi is being evasive or uncooperative, the answers given to each question give the minimum possible amount of information in order to satisfy the questions as transactional interrogatives. Noticeable is the complete lack of any attempt at giving an expanded answer, a lack of discourse marking or even any attempt to form full sentences. In one sense, Mi can be said to be active in maintaining the topic, in that she answers each question in a more or less timely fashion with responses that are oriented to by her interlocutor as appropriate, but the sparseness of the answers gives the whole sequence of turns a rather laborious sense of forward momentum. It is interactive in only a very superficial manner. Note how the same speaker responds to a topic proffer in the January conversation. (Note that the co-participant is different.)

Excerpt 12

01. Ma: Well my spring vacation plan is I
 02. Ma: want to go to driving license [school]

03. Mi: [ah ha]
04. Ma: How about you what will you do this spring vacation?
05. Mi: Well I mean hh. I will go: abroad
06. Ma: Oh, nice
07. Mi: I go to: Brita:in
08. Ma: Oh::
09. Mi: I stay for a (.) for a month
10. Ma: Wow (.) °Oh°
11. (0.4)
12. Mi: Have you ever bee:n go abroad?

In this fragment, the topic proffered by Ma is taken up by Mi and answered in a very general manner, but unlike the April conversation quoted above, she then proceeds to elaborate, moving from the general to a more specific answer. 'Go abroad' is narrowed down to which country in particular (Britain) and then the further detail of the duration of the trip is added, even though this was unasked for in the original question by Ma. The prosody of the Mi's speech clearly shows that lines 05, 07 and 09 are designed as a single turn. Not only does Mi supply three separate units of information to the initial enquiry, she also marks the onset of the turn with the discourse marking cluster 'Well, I mean', showing a certain amount of turn design planning and other-orientation, rather than answering in the bald and unadorned style of the April conversation fragment quoted above. This kind of expanded, marked answer is a much more subtle piece of turn design than was previously demonstrated by this speaker and is more normative in showing a commitment to maintaining the topic and moving it forward than the short answers offered previously.

Topic change, stepwise transition

In several of the April conversations, there was a tendency for topics to be proffered, taken up and then dropped, followed by further talk which was unrelated to the topic of the previous stretch of talk. Consider the following fragment from April.

Excerpt 13

01. A: I I always get up (1.2) at (1.5) Six O'clock.
02. R: °uh°
03. C: I got up today five fifty fifty?

04. A: Five fifty
 05. R: Do you have boyfriend?
 06. C: Yes I have hahaha

The talk has been progressing on the topic (proffered by R through a direct interrogative) of when the participants woke up that morning. After A's turn at line 04, which seems to be a confirmation of C's try-marked turn at line 03, R launches a new topic at line 05 without any preamble, marking or other signaling. The co-participants accept this abrupt topic disjuncture without any ado, despite its being apparently unrelated to any prior talk, and despite its socio-cultural delicacy. Over the course of this conversation the participants cover: getting up times, boyfriends, vacation activities, part-time job hunting, and talk surrounding a Formula 1 racing circuit. The topic disjunctures are all initiated by R, through means of a single interrogative, are unmarked and oriented to by the recipients without any perturbations in the talk.

By contrast, in January, topics proceed in a more stepwise fashion. In the following January conversation, the speakers move skillfully from an assessment of today's weather to talk of an upcoming winter sports trip.

Excerpt 14

01. C: Oh, R(..), today i:s ve- absolutely freezing
 02. R: Yeah I think so >you know< but I like ah this
 03. R: weather but because I like it
 04. R: snow I want it to snow lots of do you think so=
 05. C: =yeah yeah yeah yeah I think so oh actually I wi. I'm going to::
 06. C: snowboarding in February

The topic of winter sports continues for nearly 50 lines of dialogue and then the topic moves on.

Excerpt 15

47. R: hh So:: I like skiing but >a little bit< different different snowboarding
 48. R: [and skiing]
 49. C: [Yeah yeah]
 50. R: but ahh:: (.) ahh maybe I think I will enjoyed
 51. C: Yeah [yeah]

52. R: [Yeah] What? What do you have plan Spring vacation
 53. C: ahm may::hhh so (0.4) >you know< eh well I will go: Disneyland or:

Here the participants manage a stepwise transition. The previous talk of winter sports was referred to within the context of upcoming vacation activities. In the transition, this topic of the upcoming vacation, which was backgrounded in the previous talk, is foregrounded, and the topic of winter sports is dispensed with. The conversation then proceeds from C's mention of Disneyland at line 53 to a more broad evaluative series of turns dealing with the merits and demerits of various theme parks, which then focuses on a local theme park, and R details her frequent trips to this theme park because of its proximity to her home.

Excerpt 16

093. R: uhm (.) uhm we go to easy USJ
 094. C: Yeah I see:: So do you have pass year i. for USJ
 095. R: Yeah, I have it and uhm I will go to USJ uhm on this Saturday
 096. C: Yes
 097. R: and buy year pass
 098. C: wow
 099. R: again my friends is like USJ [uhm]
 100. C: [yes]
 101. R: di last year
 102. C: yea
 103. R: my friend an I went to USJ three or::: four times

The conversation has now moved far from where it started, but has proceeded in a stepwise fashion from snowboarding to assessments of theme parks, without any overt topic disjuncture being done by the participants.

In other cases topic progression in January is managed through use of markers, usually 'so', tag questions and the like, rather than bald interrogatives. In the following fragment the participants have been talking about watching the Harry Potter series of movies, based on Mi's newstelling of an upcoming trip to the UK and her hopes to visit some Harry Potter locations.

Excerpt 17

01. Ma: Oh, oh, me too, ah, but, so, I watch one four and lasto (.) yeah, I want, I
 02. Ma: want, to know finish with
 03. Mi: Yeah
 04. Ma: so I want to go to movie theatre watch last yah
 05. Mi: Yes
 06. Ma: So my image is Britain is absolutely::: freezing you know?
 07. Mi: Yeah me too I think so too. But I heard I hear I heard same
 08. Mi: Hokkaido

In this case, Ma moves to change the topic back to talk about Britain and does so through a subtle and nuanced turn at line 06. Rather than ask a direct question to launch the new topic, she prefaces with the marker 'so' and then makes an observation about the weather in Britain couched as personal non-objective report, and closes the turn with the discourse oriented question 'You Know?' The construction of this multi-component turn displays more sophisticated approach to topic management than was observable in the April conversations.

Topic closings

Participants achieved topic closure by a variety of different strategies across the conversations. One recurrent strategy was a convergent assessment series of turns often using repeats. In the following excerpt Ma is bringing to a close her talk on moving house:

Excerpt 18

01. Ma: But my family >eto< came to Shizuoka to::[Kobe]
 02. K: [Ah::::]
 03. Ma: Come de (.) I: eto stay I live in Kobe withu my family
 04. K: Ah::: eh:: abouto (.) one hitori gurashi
 05. Ma: Uhn about one one year
 06. K: One year
 07. Ma: Very (.)nice very en.[enjoy]
 08. K: [Ah::::]::~::~°so ka°
 09. (1.9)
 10. K: Shizuoka

11. Ma: Shizuoka
 12. (3.1)
 13. Ma: Very far
 14. K: Very far
 15. (4.9)
 16. Ma: Tenoji (.) ah. I: eto:: went to:: ?Tenoji no? anno very big tower

By regular standards of language assessment, this excerpt has many features that mark the speakers as deficient in some sense. The fragmentary sentence structure, lexical and grammatical infelicities, silences, restarts and reversions to Japanese utterances all indicate a lack of accomplishment in the formal aspects of English. However, when looked at from an interactional stance, the participants here display very sophisticated, nuanced and finely-tuned skills. In line 06, K repeats Ma's utterance about the duration of her period of living alone. Ma offers a summary assessment at line 07, followed by K's alignment response, in partial overlap. After a short pause, in lines 10 and 11 the participants recap one of the main points of Ma's preceding talk by a pair of repetitions, followed by a slightly longer pause, followed by another pair repetition, taking the form of a joint and convergent assessment, followed by an even longer pause before Ma proffers the next topic. By an aligned process of repetitions, assessments and progressively longer pauses, the participants display a tandem and in-step move towards closing the preceding topic, and opening the way for the next topic to be introduced.

Summary of results

In the April conversations, the participants engaged in several recurrent practices in managing topic openings, shifts, maintenance and closings. In January the range of practices deployed in topic management had expanded to include a wider variety of strategies. Some of the practices were also used in the January conversations (e. g. Topic proffer through a single interrogative), whilst others (e. g. topic proffering roles being tacitly adhered to for the duration of the interaction) were absent from the January conversations. Some of the most salient points are outlined below.

- One repeated pattern in the April conversations was the seemingly tacit allocation of roles by participants. In the groups, one member would do the lion's share of the topic proffering, whilst the other member(s) would adopt a reactive role in respect to the profferer. In the January conversations, various different members took active roles vis-à-vis topic management at different points during the conversation.

- In the April conversations, topics were mostly proffered by the device of asking a single question. In The January conversations, topics were proffered by a variety of different means. Single questions were still used, but in addition, question strings were used which broadened the possible scope of the answer.
- Also in January, questions were positioned at the end of self-disclosure sequences, that is, the questioner offered some information about him or herself before asking the co-participants to comment on the topic. It was clear from the intonation contours of the sequences that the question was a designed part of the turn rather than an afterthought to make up for non-uptake by the interlocutor.
- In addition, the other-nomination question ‘How about you’ was followed by a question, serving as a true other-nomination rather than a self-denomination as is the case in some instances of its stand-alone use.
- In the April conversations, the topics were often dealt with in a superficial manner. Responders to questions answered those questions giving exactly the information required by a transactional understanding of the question intent, and did not proceed to give any unasked for information. In the January conversations, participants answered questions in an interactional manner. That is, they gave the information required to answer the question and then provided other unasked for information, thus helping to maintain the topic and move the interaction forward in a recognizable manner.
- The April topics were often not moved forwards as members spent time working on trouble sources and attending to basic questions of comprehension. These trouble source sidebars were often conducted in Japanese. In January, trouble sources were dealt with more quickly, and in English, as the participants oriented more to the interaction and the business at hand, i. e. the current topic’s direction, rather than matters of basic comprehension.
- In the April conversations, recipients of topic proffers universally accepted the proffer without any disaffiliative comments or dispreferred turn structure. In January, topics proffers were sometimes rejected or underwent a process of negotiation.
- In April, the topics were dealt with briefly and then new topics, unconnected to previous talk were introduced, often without marking or by a simple ‘by the way’ utterance. In January, topic transition was often done through a stepwise transition where elements of previous talk became topicalized in their own right. The marker ‘so’ was deployed repeatedly at topic junctures, both in stepwise transition and in topic disjuncture locations.

Discussion

Brouwer and Wagner (2004, p. 44) observe that “Learning a second language, then, may be described in terms of increasing interactional complexity in language encounters rather than as the acquisition of formal elements”. The longitudinal, qualitative nature of the study above allows a broad overview of language seen from this stance. In terms of the formal elements of the target language (usually taken to mean the morpho-syntactic operations and use of lexis) at the end of the study the participants still had trouble producing sentence level utterances that would be acceptable in written form.

However, in the area of topic management there was a noticeable change in the variety of strategies that students used. This is in keeping with findings by Pekarek Doehler and Ponchon-Berger (2011), which found that disagreement strategies by learners of French broadened from a restricted number of strategies among lower intermediate students, that were characterized by brevity, directness and turn initial placing. Among advanced learners they found a wider variety of practices for disagreement, characterized by greater length, increasing indirectness and placed later in the turn. The same pattern was observed in the nature of topic management in this study, namely a narrow band of interactional strategies in the early conversations, with a broader spectrum of strategies, involving multi-component turns being deployed in the later conversations.

Pekarek Doehler and Ponchon-Berger caution against making sweeping claims about evidence of learning having taken place. Their study looked at two different groups. Not only were the groups different by ‘level’ (as an institutionally constructed linguistic identity) but also by age. (13–14 year olds as opposed to 17–18 year olds.) They suggest that the differences may be a ‘... reflection of different communicative cultures at the two levels of schooling.’ (p, 235.) The caution applies to this study as well.

In the April conversations and the January conversations, various factors should be taken into account when attempting any comparison. In April, the participants had only known each other for a short period of time. (The April recordings took place in lesson six of term, i. e. a little over three weeks into the course.) The lack of a long-term social intimacy in all likelihood affected the participants in several ways. As was noted by Iwata;

From the viewpoint of native English speakers, self-disclosure must be one of the useful strategies in co-constructing conversations. They can show their involvement by talking about themselves. On the other hand, talking about themselves, especially about their private lives, is not expected in Japanese society when people meet for the first time. They prefer to start talking more about impersonal matters and gradually start talking more about

personal matters as they build a good relationship.

(2010. p, 155)

The superficial, hesitant and somewhat disfluent manner of many conversations in the April sessions may well be a combination of these effects from the L1 culture and the natural non-culture specific difficulties of interacting with relative strangers. In addition to the social dynamic, which was nascent in April and much more established in January, the presence of the video camera must also be taken into account. In the April sessions, students were unused to being videotaped, whereas in January they had been videotaped on several prior occasions. The various factors that were different between the April and January sessions must sound a note of caution when making claims about learner development and evidence of learning having taken place. A further consideration is that the current study focused on an analysis of transcripts of student speaking. No analysis was undertaken of such extra-linguistic features as gaze, gesture or other aspects of embodiment.

These caveats aside, it remains true that the spectrum of strategies used by speakers was broader after two semesters of classes. Twice weekly engagement in undirected, naturalistic, spontaneous conversation had, it seems, brought about development of a more finely tuned sensitivity to the emergent exigencies of talk-in-interaction.

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Appendix: transcription notations

Simultaneous utterances.

I went [with my] friend	Left square brackets mark the start of overlapping talk
[yeah]	Right square brackets mark the end of overlapping talk

Contiguous utterances

=	Equals signs show:
	a) that talk is latched; that is there is no pause between the end of one turn and the start of the next turn
	b) that a turn continues at the next equals sign on a subsequent line

Pauses

(0.5)	Numerals in parentheses show pauses in tenths of a second
(.)	A period in parentheses indicates a micropause

Characteristics of speech delivery

<u>Weekend</u>	Underlining indicates marked stress
Job?	A question mark indicates rising intonation
Finish.	A period indicates falling intonation
> you know<	Inward facing indents indicate talk which is faster than the surrounding talk.
Ni:::ce	One or more colons indicates a lengthening of the preceding sound. More colons prolong the stretch.
°nice°	Degree signs indicate speech that is quieter than the surrounding talk.
NEVER	Capitals indicate speech that is louder than the surrounding talk

Topic in Talk-in-interaction: A Longitudinal Study of Japanese Learners of English

John CAMPBELL-LARSEN

This paper examines conversation topic management by Japanese learners of English at a private university over the course of an academic year. The students (N=13) were videotaped engaging in unrehearsed conversation in class time. The students were entirely free to select group membership, topic and so on, and were given no directions by the teacher other than to talk in English as much as possible. The recordings were made in April, July and the following January, transcribed and analyzed. The transcribed portions were five-minute segments of continuing talk. Initially the talk was characterized by a limited repertoire of topic management strategies with simple interrogatives deployed as topic proffers, minimal development of proffered topics, little or no negotiation of topic and frequent disjunctures. These features were supplemented by a wider variety of strategies by the end of the study. The learners engaged in more stepwise transitions, developed topics more deeply, used self-disclosure as a topic proffer and aligned with other members in co-constructing coherent, convergent stretches of interaction.