

The Performance of Topic Shifting in Inclusive Female Informal Gatherings: A Case Study

Ghada Abdullah Al-Ghathami

College of Language and Translation
Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This paper analyzes how topic shifts are performed and perceived in conversations. It investigates the way topic shifts are constructed and sequenced in Saudi female conversations, focusing on the structure of topic shifts along with their discourse markers. It also aims at highlighting the way these topic shifts are observed by participants. This paper is a case study that tries to understand the performance of topic shifts in a recorded conversation with emphasis on the construction, markers and sequences of topics, adding empirical evidence to the overall knowledge related to this issue. It also studies perceptions of Saudi women on topic shifting. Two instruments were used: data recording and analysis, and a four-axis questionnaire. Gathered data was analyzed using interactional sociolinguistics analysis and statistics to arrive at results. The findings of the study indicate that the most frequent shifts of topics occurred after a pause where speakers introduced a new topic. These shifts were performed by using discourse markers such as asking questions, seeking explanations, or telling personal stories. Topic shifts might be violated in informal settings based on relations between participants. Questionnaire results conclude that topic shifts are performed in relation to interest, and motivated by closeness and need. It is recommended that further investigation is carried out considering different social variables and domains of interaction.

Key words: conversation analysis, discourse markers, interactional sociolinguistics analysis, topic, topic shift, turn-taking system

Cite as: Al-Ghathami, G. A. (2018). The Performance of Topic Shifting in Inclusive Female Informal Gatherings: A Case Study. *Arab World English Journal*, 9 (4), 295-309.
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol9no4.22>

1- Introduction:

Topic shifts are certain phases of a conversation that indicate transitions from one discourse chunk that has a coherent topic or content to another chunk with another coherent topic or content. They occur in the conversation where one topic is covered and discussed and another topic needs to be introduced. Women interact on a cooperative basis in all-inclusive female interaction, showing significant differences from mixed or all-male interaction (Coates, 2004; Tannen, 2007). Interactional sociolinguistics analysis is an approach that is used to study language in use by specifying recurrent patterns and practices that are performed during social interaction. This approach studies conversational aspects related to discourse like turn-taking, turn-design, repair, questions, topic shifting and other aspects of interaction, revealing the dynamics of the discourse (Schiffrin, 1994; Clark, 2007). Interactional sociolinguistics analysis is adopted in this paper to investigate and highlight the performance of topic shifting by Saudi women in order to understand the construction, markers, and sequences of these instances. This paper aims at investigating the topic shifts that occur in natural speech between female participants where more than one topic is introduced. It focuses on the way these shifts are performed and perceived by participants. It investigates various explanations for differences that occur in the way these topics were introduced, and how women perceived them. It also tries to answer questions related to when and where shifts take place, how are they performed and why do they occur using two methods of data collection. This paper goes in line with other research conducted in this area, and it also investigates otherwise.

2- The Notion of Topic Shifting from a Theoretical Perspective:

In the structure of a conversation, there are points where one topic is concluded and another is introduced as a transitional phase that has its own unique and complex structure. The notion of "topic" is a problematic notion with a number of different suggested definitions (Blei et al, 2003; Kellermann, 2004). According to Chafe (2008), "A topic is defined as a coherent organization of thoughts introduced by a participant in a conversation and developed either by that participant or another or by several participants together" (p.674). In this perspective, a topic can be thought of as a coherent unit that is large enough to embed sequences contributing to the same idea. Topics introduce an issue in which all that is said must be relevant to that particular issue. Topics usually have a clear beginning, but their endings may be well defined or may not. Yet, there are phonetic cues that signal shifts such as a pause, a heightened pitch, loudness or a new voice quality (Schiffrin, (ed.), 2008). A topic has a pattern or a schema providing a path for participants to follow. As long as the topic is open, participants are free to develop it, dwell on it or terminate it (Hatch, 2000). People are usually constrained to fully develop the topic before the conversation moves to another topic. There are lots of techniques proposed by scholars trying to divide a stretch of talk into smaller, topically coherent segments (Purver, 2011). Yet, topic segmentation and division is still an open research problem. Some methods of topic analysis and topic segmentation focus more on content, ignoring speakers' identities, including gender. So, topics can be identified based on their content.

Topic as a notion is related to discourse in which a topic is a unifying concept that makes one stretch of discourse about something and the next stretch about something else (Brown & Yule 2007). Participants pick up elements from the contribution of a preceding speaker and introduce them in their contribution in a dynamic and negotiated way. A topic shift occurs between two

chunks of discourse, or two different topics. This shift takes place at a marked point in the conversation. If these markers or boundaries of shifts are identified, the discourse can be divided into units. In spoken discourse, there are structural units of discourse that take the form of speech paragraph called paratones marked by intonational cues (Brown & Yule, 2007). Introductory expressions are used to announce the beginning of a topic in a raising pitch to signal this shift. Participants need to pick up on these signals and respond upon. The end of a topic is signaled with a low pitch, a lengthy pause or a repetition of the introductory statement indicating that contributions are not accepted and a shift is about to be made to another topic (Hatch, 2000). All of these proposed signals are optional since actual interaction may take different expected or unexpected reactions. Any native speaker of a language learns these rules through socialization and interaction in which cooperation is based on this shared knowledge among participants (Johnstone, 2003; Gumperz, 1982). Topic shifts are usually established around relationships between conversational participants (Ireland et al, 2011). Participants having closer relations would tend to have a more relaxed circulation and change of topics. Women are more known to adopt a cooperative style of talk that is supportive in nature. This gender-specific style can be featured by positive violations to the structured frame of topic change suggested by scholars (Schiffrin, 1994). Kaoru Amino (2009) investigated women's style shifting of turn-taking (TT) strategies in mixed-gender conversation in the Japanese society, exploring the different (TT) strategies conducted by both men and women and whether women's TT strategy choice is influenced by the interlocutor's gender. The results illustrate that the senior female participants frequently used (TT) strategies that reflected supportive traits such as the promotion of conversations in mixed-gender conversations.

One of the most common ways to capture conversational structure in naturally occurring data is topic division and segmentation of long recordings or transcripts into shorter, topically coherent segments (Purver, 2011). The two main approaches used to study conversational structure center around either focusing on discourse markers, or studying word distribution. The first approach focuses on identifying discourse markers, which draw boundaries between different topics in the conversations. There are certain cue phrases such as, "well, now, that reminds me, etc." that explicitly indicate the end of one topic, or initiate the beginning of another (Hirschberg & Litman, 1993; Passonneau & Litman, 1997). The second approach focuses on lexical cohesion that divides a stretch of talk into topics (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In this method, words within a segment or a topic look more like their neighbors than like words in other segments or topics. Morris and Hirst (1991) worked on defining the structure of any given text by finding what they call "lexical chains", which consist of units of text that are related to the same theme. In this paper, the first approach is adopted because it gives more insight into the relations between participants, and focuses more on the transformational phase between topics.

3- Methodology:

In this empirical study, both the qualitative and quantitative approaches were implemented. Interactional sociolinguistics analysis is a qualitative method that is concerned with the structure and the pattern of natural conversations between speakers, paying more attention to the relations between participants and their influence on the structural aspect of interaction.

3-1- The Data of the Study:

The data of the study was taken from a recorded conversation between four female participants in an informal setting. The conversation took place in a café between female friends having their coffee and discussing a number of topics. The conversation was recorded on the 3rd of November, 2017. The length of this conversation is around 21 minutes. The method that was followed was the observer-participant method where the researcher was present at time of this conversation. Each participant is given a code (P1, P2, P3, P4). The conversation was tape-recorded by the researcher where the conversation along with the occurrences of topic shifts were transcribed and analyzed. The participants were close friends sharing similar interests and belonging to the same university environment.

The statistical data was gathered through conducting a questionnaire distributed on female participants. All participants were female college students. The total number of distributed questionnaires was 91, and the turned-on questionnaires that were completely answered were 80. They were collected in February 2018. The results were further analyzed using statistical analysis tools, and presented in diagrams and tables in later sections.

3-2- Data Analysis:

The recorded data was analyzed following the interactional sociolinguistics analysis. This approach is based on the work of Gumperz and Goffman in which they view language as a socially and culturally constructed configuration, reflecting and creating macro-level social meaning and micro-level interpersonal meaning (Schiffrin, 1994). This can be achieved through the analysis of contextualization cues, alignments, identities of speakers and the participation framework that includes different roles participants can play in an event (Schiffrin, 1994; Holmes, 2013). The recorded conversation was analyzed using this approach to highlight and investigate the effect of gender and interpersonal relations on the construction of topic shifts, and the way participants would follow or hence violate the structural rules proposed by scholars. Instances of topic shifts were transcribed and analyzed. Extracts were originally in Arabic (the native language of participants), and they were later translated to English. The Arabic transcribed formats were presented along with their translations.

The quantitative aspect of this paper deals with answering questions related to participants' perspectives on when and where women perform topic shifts, why they shift topics, topic choice and how these shifts are performed though using a questionnaire. This instrument was designed based on theoretical motivations and topic-change cues proposed by scholars. The questionnaire is divided into four parts each of which asks a different question (when does topic change take place, motivations of a topic change, topic choice, and how topics are changed?). Under each part, a number of statements were presented on an agreement scale. Data was analyzed using SPSS, calculating the mean and the rank of participants' responses to each item. The results were summarized in tables. The unit of analysis that is investigated in this paper by using these two methods of research is the unit of topic shift that occurs at certain points in the conversation affecting the pattern and the sequence of this conversation. It further focuses on the linguistic cues or markers that signal the beginning and the ending of topics.

4- The Topic Shifts in the Recorded Conversation:

In this recorded conversation, a number of topic shifts have occurred. This conversation shows an approximate number of 15 occurrences of shifts between different topics. Interactive topic development may be driven by a speaker's desire to agree, contradict with others, request information, or elaborate. Topic and response analysis is related to interaction since it is hard to discover the intentions of interlocutors without interaction (Shiffers, 2008; Ballard, 2007). Through analysis, topic-response strategies can be understood. The responses speakers provide to the topic reflect their relationships with each other. Maynard (1980) notes that topic changes often occur "as a solution to failed speaker transitions" (p. 264). That is, the circulated topic comes to an end with no contributions are to be provided, speakers then are likely to ensure the circulation of a talk by introducing a new topic. Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001) also noted that pauses and short utterances are speech markers that increase the chance that the next speaker will change the topic. It is also important to identify who controls the topic according to a participation framework based on the influence of power position, symmetrical relations, age, and gender factors (Okamoto & Smith-Lovin, 2001). The right of a participant to change the topic is limited in which this act of topic shifting has to be signaled and accepted by others. The conversation is analyzed at a point where the previous topic had just been closed and the conversation is to be continued where someone has to choose and introduce a new topic.

Shifts of topics that occurred in the data have different forms and interpretations. They follow some general rules that allow for a topic to be shifted. These shifts were developed to communicate and cooperate by trying to give details or share related stories about the topic being discussed. It can be considered as a collaborative topic building that reflects solidarity. Telling personal stories and asking overlapping questions are considered high involvement strategies (Wardough, 2010; Holmes, 2013). One instance of a topic shift in the data occurred at a point in which one topic was concluded and no more contributions were developed. It took place after a pause that lasted for six seconds without suggesting a new topic. (P1) at that point has decided to communicate and introduced a new topic related to the vacation asking about the annual schedule of holidays. The conversation took place according to the following sequence of turns:

Extract -1-

Pause 6 seconds:

1-P1: now how much we still have + two weeks for the vacation or three?

(halheen kam lessa bagi + esbou'een ala alejaza wella thalatha?)

2-P2: no three + I don't know if its three + but I don't know if its with counting this week or not (la thalatha + ma adri whu thalathah + bas ma adri ma'a hatha alesboua' wella la')

In extract -1- of the conversation, a topic shift took place where one participant was trying to communicate and proceed with the communicative event after a relatively long pause. P1 has initiated the new topic with a question regarding the period remaining for the vacation to start. The slightly raising intonation can be perceived as a contextualization cue that signals the need to communicate. The question was not asked for the sake of getting information, but for the need to communicate. This topic shift has followed the rules since it took place after the end of a previous topic. P1 has created a participation framework in which she took the lead. Yet, by asking that

question, she was assigning the turn to the second participant (P2) to contribute to the topic, assuming that she is going to cooperate and provide a response that suits the sequence. In line 2, P2 picked up these cues and decided to follow the rules and contribute to the topic regardless of her knowledge about the topic. The answer was communicative even if it was not one that included a confirmed response. The uncertainty in providing an answer indicates that the contribution was not really an answer to that question. Rather, it was a strategy of cooperative topic building in which she was trying to keep the conversation going. This form of topic shift occurred after a period of silence in which one participant needs to suggest a topic for the conversation to go on. There were other six similar instances in the conversation that took the same form of introducing a topic after a slightly long pause. These topics were introduced by asking questions, telling a story about an event, talking about a daily experience, or by asking about an object that was present at the scene where the conversation took place.

However, there was an instance of topic shift that occurred in the conversation that took a different form. It occurred when P2 was talking about a check that she received and needed to cash. Her topic was nearly closed after she talked about her experience regarding the procedures she had to go through. This topic was not fully closed and was open for more contributions to be made. The floor also allowed for a new topic to be introduced without violating the rules of topic introduction. This topic shift was gradual with a loose phase. It took place at the following point of the conversation as in extract 2:

Extract -2-

3- P2: So, they took it {the cheque} (ehh a'ad akhathowh {elshaik})

4- P3: You cashed it now its with you' !so you have the money' (enti sarafteeh elheen ma'ek! Ajal megrisha!)

5- P2: Ya. Do you want me to get you a treat? (ehh. Taboun a'azemkum?)

6- P3: So what are your plans? (a'ad wesh masharee'ek?)

In this extract, P2 was ending her story about her day at the bank (in line 3) after a long procedure that she had to go through. Her conclusion of the story indicates a conclusion of the topic in which feedback is needed to move on to another topic. The falling intonation at the end of her turn serves as a contextualization cue that signals the end of the topic. It also indicates allocating the next turn to P3, giving her a choice to either provide feedback related to the story or to shift the topic by introducing another. This cue has been interpreted by P3 in line 2 as a point in which a turn has been allocated to her, choosing to provide feedback and a concluding statement at the same time as a step to insure the end of the first topic. This transitional phase signals a gradual topic shift in a collaborative style in which both participants are about to start the new topic. P3 has allocated the next turn to the open floor giving participants a verity of choices. The freedom that can be noticed in the role assignment in this participation framework reflects the close relationship between them.

In line 3, P2 responded to P3's comment offering a treat since she got paid. By this act of offer, she was not really offering a treat but was using this act to function as a way of saying that she really had the money. This form of using a direct question to perform an offer is not considered an offer in the Saudi culture since it reflects uncertainty and hesitation. Her offer can be regarded as a general statement of offering and not an intended act that may be fulfilled. Her raising-falling

intonation could be considered a contextualization cue in which it indicated that this act was not performed as an act of offering, but as a collaborative contribution to the communication showing her agreement that she was willing to talk about it as a potential topic that might be selected by participants.

In line 4, P3 responded by asking a question about P2's plans regarding what she wanted to do. Her question was not relevant to the offer since it does not reflect refusal or approval. This response can be interpreted in more than one way. P3 has assumed from her interpretation of the contextualization cue that P2 was not really offering a treat. Instead, she was only communicating. Since this act was not interpreted as an act of offering, she decided to avoid the offer and shift the topic into another. This gradual movement from the topic of the story telling into the topic of plan telling has been completed and a new topic has been introduced. The topic shifts that were illustrated and examined in this section represent a case of topic shifting in which general rules of topic shifting were followed. These extracts indicate that topic shifting among females in the Saudi culture could be performed after a period of silence, or it could be performed with a contribution offered as a question, explanation, experience or a story telling.

5- Topic Shifts Used in a Different Pattern:

Topic shifts in real interaction do not always follow the rules that allow for a topic to be shifted or a topic to be introduced. Interaction reflects the complication of the configuration of the society in general. There is an impact of social structure and power relations on conversations, including the authority to allocate turns in conversations, to interrupt and to determine topic continuation or switch (Saville-Troike, 2003). The sources of power are developed from different factors based on differences in cultures that could include sources like age, gender, education, race, color and class (Saville-Troike, 2003; Wardhaugh, 2010). Topic shifting is a process that might be affected to a certain degree by the impact of power on discourse structure. Topic shifts were performed in some parts of this conversation in a matter that designates a deviation from the general rules that constrain topic shifting. These topic shifts contradict the assumption that female language is based in its structure on cooperation and solidarity and not based on power conflict.

To set an example, the following conversation between three friends who were relatively similar in their education, interests and background included an instance of topic shifting that was performed based on power conflict between these conversationalists. In the following example (extract 3), the participants were discussing a topic related to the procedures P1 had to go through to process her cash check. While P1 was narrating the events of her experience, a topic shift occurred before the end of her topic that took the form of an interruption as the following:

Extract -3-

7- P1: So I went and I cashed it today' you know +she said I have t.. I was about to go yesterday but she said I must have a card for //

(// Aad reht wa sarafaha alyum, mo galat lazim! Aa..kent abarouh ams bas ghalat lazim betakah alashaan//)

8- P3: // you were supposed if you want to go to Noura to leave from gate four.

(//enti elmafrouth etha serti betrouheen le Noura tetlae'en men bawwaba arba'a.)

9- P1: Why would I go there.. it is so crowded.

(Wesh yuadini henak. Marra zahmah)

The conversation continued for few turns.....

In extract 3, P1 was talking about her experience at the bank while she was trying to cash her check. While she was talking about her experience with the regulations of the bank, an interruption accrued shifting the topic to another one that is not related to the current topic under discussion. P1's turn was not completed and her topic was left open without a closure. According to the rules of topic shifting, a new topic can only be introduced after the closure of the previous one in which no contributions were about to be offered. P1 did not signal an end of her topic or of her turn. At the same time, she did not allocate a turn to another speaker allowing for an interruption to take place. Her intonation contour indicates a continuous speech and sequencing of events in a chain that was not completed at the point where the interruption took place.

In line 8, P3 interrupted P1's turn without paying attention to her need to complete her turn. Interruptions could carry corrections that are considered to be primary items licensing violations of the turn-taking system. It is also a technique that is used for signaling a need to discuss a different issue. In an ordinary conversation, a person waiting for a turn may decide to interrupt in order not to lose concentration or interest. P3 at some point in the conversation felt that she needed to discuss an urgent issue that just occurred to her and was not able to wait for P1's seemingly long turn that was not near an end. This new topic was related to a thought that P3 had just been thinking about. Her sudden topic shift was not performed because she was not interested in P1's experience, nor because she did not want to cooperate with her. Instead, her shift was performed because she wanted to suggest a solution to an existing issue. The relationship that naturally exists between friends gives the right to advice. Interruptions that lead to a sudden topic shift can be used as support strategies developing a pattern that shows involvement. P3's shift was not intended to maintain power and control over the conversation. By understanding the close relationship between participants, this shift can be considered a different form of cooperation and involvement where participants are free to discuss issues at any point of the conversation and expect agreement of the other participant regarding these choices and shifts. P3 allocated the turn to P1 and assumed that she would be cooperating with her new topic that she shifted to. This suggests that the shift is not interpreted as a violation of the rules. On the contrary, it reflects a new pattern of involvement that is based on solidarity. This example, as well as other similar ones, indicates that topic shifts could occur in Saudi female conversations as a result of both closeness and solidarity between participants. Topic shifts can be introduced in a manner that contradicts with rules that regulate the way conversations are developed. These shifts may be considered strategies of solidarity and involvement.

6- The Overall construction of Topic shifting in the Conversation:

In this paper, two different sets of topic shifts were discussed. One set of shifts followed the rules of shifting and the other set has diverted from these rules. The analysis of these extracts was based on understanding the context where these topic shifts were performed, and the forms they represented. Their numbers of occurrences along with their forms were calculated. The following table represents each form of the topic shifts, their points of development along with their number of occurrences in the conversation:

Table 1
Forms of topic shifts in recorded data

Form of Topic Shift	Number	Example
1- After a long pause.	6 topic shifts.	Extract -1
2- End of previous topic: shift with a contribution, experience, explanation, and questions.	8 topic shifts.	Extract -2
3- Different patterns: shifts by interrupting an unfinished topic, shifts back to previous incomplete topics.	3 topic shifts	Extract 3, Extract 4
Total number of topic shifts: 17 topic shifts.		

Participants performed two main sets of topic shifts in these conversations which involved cooperation by following the rules at points where support was needed by asking questions, talking about experiences, agreeing or providing details. These topic shifts were performed on solidarity bases as opposed to other findings that regard these shifts as violations. These different types of topic shifts that were noticed in this conversation seem to both follow and divert from general conversational rules that allowed for their initiation.

7- Questionnaire:

A questionnaire was implemented as a means of data collection to reveal general attitudes and perceptions regarding this linguistic behavior. Four main questions were targeted. These questions were concerned with when does a topic shift may take place, what motivates a topic shift, what are the topics chosen by participants based on their age and gender, and how topics might be changed. Each main question was followed by a series of suggested statements that were based on ideal rules of topic-circulation to be performed in ideal informal interaction. Results were calculated and presented in tables.

7- 1: When Does Topic Change Take Place?

One of the questions asked was about the point at which a topic change would likely appear. This question included 11 statements that centered on the length of topics, speakers' interests, interruptions, silence and pauses, topic order, turn-taking system and participation framework. Statements were presented and ordered in the following table 2 according to their rank.

Table 2
Study respondents' opinion about when does a Topic Change take place

	Item	Response										Mean	S.D	Response
		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree				
1	Some topics take a longer time than others.	0	0	1	1.3	6	7.5	36	45	37	46.3	4.36	0.68	Strongly agree
2	Topics that are not of interest to speakers do not last for long.	0	0	6	7.5	8	10	34	42.5	32	40	4.15	0.89	agree
3	The new topic needs to be of interest for it to continue.	0	0	5	6.3	11	13.8	41	51.3	23	28.8	4.03	0.83	agree

4	A new topic is usually introduced when someone interrupts the group.	0	0	5	6.3	21	26.3	26	32.5	28	35	3.96	0.93	agree
5	I open up a new topic to avoid the long period of silence.	2	2.5	8	10	22	27.5	26	32.5	22	27.5	3.73	1.06	agree
6	I might open up a topic, but not discussed by other speakers.	0	0	4	5	27	33.8	38	47.5	11	13.8	3.70	0.77	agree
7	When I am a conversation, I discuss different topics.	3	3.8	9	11.3	20	25	28	35	20	25	3.66	1.09	agree
8	I usually notice that topics are introduced after a pause or silence.	2	2.5	7	8.8	23	28.8	33	41.3	15	18.8	3.65	0.97	agree
9	When everyone feels that they said everything about a current topic, another new topic is introduced.	0	0	5	6.3	32	40	30	37.5	13	16.3	3.64	0.83	agree
10	I usually move from one topic to another topic while talking.	1	1.3	12	15	19	23.8	33	41.3	15	18.8	3.61	1.00	agree
11	I need to open up a new topic if no one did so.	3	3.8	12	15	20	25	34	42.5	11	13.8	3.48	1.03	agree
MEAN												3.81	0.38	

Table 2 indicates that the axis of when does topic change take place includes (11) statements. It is observed from the previous table that the responses of participants were with strongly agree degree on statement No. (1) whose mean is (4.36) which is put at the fifth category, and referred to (strongly agree) degree as their means range from (4.21 to 5.00) degrees. The responses were with the agree degree on ten statements whose means ranged from (3.48 to 4.15), and these means are put at the fourth category of the five-scale degree, and referred to (agree) degree as their means ranged from (3.41 to 4.20) degrees. Most participants strongly agreed with the effect of topic length and interest as the most influential factors that trigger topic changes. Participants also agreed on the effect of interruptions, silence, pauses, and participation framework on topic change. As it is observed, there is a convergence in the responses of study respondents on the axis (when does topic change take place). Additionally, the general mean of agreement degree on the statements of the axis is (3.81), and referred to (agree degree) that reflects that study respondents' perceptions on when does topic change take place are positive.

7- 2: Motivations of Topic Change:

The second question dealt with the motivations that naturally lead to a topic change to be performed. Ten statements were included centering on theoretically suggested motivations. Statements included motivations such as closeness and relations between participants, interest and need, participants and formality of the situation. Results are presented in the following table 3 arranged based on participants' responses.

Table 3

Study respondents' opinion about motivations of topic change

	Item	Response										Mean	S.D	Response
		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree				
1	I find it easy to open up topics when I interact with close people.	1	1.3	5	6.3	10	12.5	21	26.3	43	53.8	4.25	0.99	Strongly agree
2	A topic is changed when there is another urgent topic that needs to be discussed.	0	0	2	2.5	10	12.5	35	43.8	33	41.3	4.24	0.77	Strongly agree
3	Discussing similar experience and telling stories motivates introducing a new topic.	0	0	1	1.3	16	20	28	35	35	43.8	4.21	0.81	Strongly agree
4	A topic is changed because there is a lack of interest in a current topic.	0	0	4	5	11	13.8	32	40	33	41.3	4.18	0.85	agree
5	I might open a topic to involve a new member into the conversation.	1	1.3	5	6.3	14	17.5	33	41.3	27	33.8	4.00	0.94	agree
6	A topic could be changed by returning to a previous uncompleted topic.	0	0	3	3.8	18	22.5	40	50	19	23.8	3.94	0.79	agree
7	To maintain a friendly atmosphere, I might change a current topic.	0	0	4	5	20	25	34	42.5	22	27.5	3.93	0.85	agree
8	I find it hard to start a new topic when I am with people who are not close to me.	3	3.8	7	8.8	19	23.8	16	20	35	43.8	3.91	1.17	agree
9	Topics might be changed very often in informal situations.	0	0	7	8.8	25	31.3	24	30	24	30	3.81	0.97	agree
10	To reduce tension and anger, I might introduce a new topic.	0	0	8	10	22	27.5	30	37.5	20	25	3.78	0.94	agree
MEAN											4.02	0.49		

The axis of motivations of topic change includes ten statements. It is observed from the previous table that the responses were with strongly agree degree on statements No. (1,2,3) whose means ranged from (4.21 to 4.25), and this mean is put at the fifth category (strongly agree) degree as their means ranged from (4.21 to 5.00) degrees. The responses were with agree degree on seven statements whose means ranged from (3.78 to 4.18), and these means are put at the fourth category of the five-scale degree, referred to (agree) degree. As it is noted from the above table, the responses of study respondents strongly agreed with statements that included closeness between participants, urgency of a topic, and discussing similar experience and telling stories as motivations for introducing or changing a topic. As it is observed above, there is a convergence in the responses. The general mean of agreement degree on the statements of this axis is (4.02), and this mean is put at the fourth category whose mean ranged from (3.41 to 4.20) and referred to (agree degree) that reflects that study respondents' perceptions about Motivations of Topic Change are positive.

7- 3: Topic Choice:

The third item in the questionnaire dealt with topic selection preferred by female participants. Several suggested topics were presented and six items were included in this section. These suggested topics included personal experiences, situation related topics, feedback, external topics or sudden unplanned topics. Results are illustrated in the following:

Table 4
Study respondents' opinion about choice of topic

	Item	Response										Mean	S.D	Response
		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree				
1	I usually introduce a topic related to personal experience.	0	0	4	5	21	26.3	34	42.5	21	26.3	3.90	0.85	agree
2	I usually introduce topics related to something that is within the context or sitting of the situation.	1	1.3	4	5	20	25	42	52.5	13	16.3	3.78	0.83	agree
3	I usually introduce a topic related to seeking explanations about something that has been said.	0	0	6	7.5	29	36.3	30	37.5	15	18.8	3.68	0.87	agree
4	I usually discuss topics related to food, clothes and objects that are within my place.	1	1.3	11	13.8	20	25	33	41.3	15	18.8	3.63	0.99	agree
5	I usually open up any topic about anything because I need to break the silence.	3	3.8	13	16.3	32	40	12	15	20	25	3.41	1.14	agree
6	I usually open up a topic related to something that is outside the context or place of the conversation.	2	2.5	17	21.3	30	37.5	16	20	15	18.8	3.31	1.09	Neutral
MEAN												3.62	0.49	

This table indicates that the axis of topic choice includes six statements. It is observed from the previous table that the responses are with agree degree on statements No. (1-2-3-4-5) whose means ranged from (3.41 to 3.90) and this mean is put at the fourth category of the five-scale degree (agree). The responses of respondents were with neutral degree on statement no. (6) whose mean is (3.31), and this mean is put at the third category of the five-scale degree (neutral degree). As it is noted from the above table, the statements concerning this axis can be arranged in view of the respondents themselves regarding the agreement degree. The responses on statements related to: personal experience, something that is within the context, seeking explanations, food, clothes and objects came with (agree) degree. The responses on topics related to something outside the context or place of the conversation came with (neutral) degree. This reflects that perceptions were positive.

7 - 4: How Do I Change a Topic?

The fourth question was intended to measure respondents' perspectives on the techniques and devices used to perform a topic change. Six statements were included, suggesting devices like:

following a queue, story telling, expressing lack of interest, declaring the end of a topic or interrupting a current topic. The following table 5 represents calculated results:

Table 5
Study respondents' opinion about performing a topic change

	Item	Response										Mean	S.D	Response
		Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree				
1	I change a topic by simply talking about a new idea.	0	0	5	6.3	16	20	47	58.8	12	15	3.83	0.76	agree
2	I might change a topic by telling a story.	7	8.8	9	11.3	19	23.8	36	45	9	11.3	3.39	1.11	Neutral
3	I openly express lack of interest in a topic especially with close people.	9	11.3	6	7.5	31	38.8	16	20	18	22.5	3.35	1.23	Neutral
4	I usually show lack of interest to point out that I need to change the topic.	8	10	15	18.8	35	43.8	13	16.3	9	11.3	3.00	1.10	Neutral
5	I force the end of a topic by saying, "Let's move to another topic".	14	17.5	23	28.8	21	26.3	17	21.3	5	6.3	2.70	1.17	Neutral
6	I change a topic by interrupting the turn of a current speaker.	11	13.8	28	35	20	25	19	23.8	2	2.5	2.66	1.07	Neutral
MEAN											3.15	0.62		

This table indicates that the axis of how to change a topic includes six statements. It is observed from the previous table that the responses are with agree degree on statement No. (1) whose mean is (3.83), and this mean is put at the fourth category of the five-scale agreement degree (agree) as their means ranged from (3.41 to 4.20) degrees. The responses were with a neutral degree on statements no. (2-3-4-5-6) whose means ranged from (2.66 to 3.83), and this mean is put at the third category referred to (neutral) degree as their means ranged from (2.61 to 3.40) degrees.

The statements concerning this axis can be arranged in view of the respondents themselves regarding their agreement. The responses on statement no (1), which states that: (I change a topic by simply talking about a new idea) came with (agree) degree. The responses on statements related to: telling a story, expressing lack of interest, forcing the end of a topic, and interrupting came with (neutral) degrees. As it is observed above, there was a convergence in the responses of study respondents. Additionally, the general mean of agreement degree on the statements of this axis is (3.15) that reflects that study respondents' perceptions about how to change a topic are neutral.

8- Conclusions:

This paper investigates the instances of topic shifts and their construction and sequence in a conversation between Saudi female participants. It also investigates general perceptions related to this issue. In the data that was collected for the purpose of this paper, a number of topic shifts have occurred. One of the most frequent shifts of topics occurred after a pause where a participant introduced a new topic after the conclusion of the previous one. These shifts occurred by asking a question about an item that was present in the scene, seeking explanation, or talking about a

personal experience. Other topic shifts were also observed that participants performed in different ways. Topic change or shift might be violated in informal settings based on relations between participants in a cooperative and supportive manner. Questionnaire results conclude that topic change occur on the basis of interest, and motivated by closeness and need. Most frequent circulated topics by females are ones related to personal issues and offering explanations related to the situation. The strategy that is mostly used to perform a topic change is related to following a queue.

The findings of this paper go along with the findings of other research papers, indicating that topic shifts can be performed in a manner that reflects cooperation between female participants. However, some of the findings of this paper contradict with the findings of researchers where some other forms of topic shifting were performed on bases of power conflict between participants, or solidarity between them. Since topic shifts take different forms and occur in different locations in the discourse, further research needs to be carried out to investigate the construction of topic shifts in conversations searching for other forms that can be intended by speakers. Other research is also needed to examine other variants that can affect the forms of topic shifts in conversations along with the markers that are used to signal these shifts.

About the Author:

Dr. Ghada Abdullah AlGhathami, is an assistant professor of linguistics at Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Interested in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics. Research is my area of interest, especially in applying theories of sociolinguistics on Arab speech communities. She is also interested in teaching using new trends of teaching and learning implementing technology and social networking. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6268-3981>

References:

- Amino, K. (2009). Turn-taking strategy and women's style-shift in Japanese conversation. In *Proceedings of the 5th Biennial International Gender and Language Association Conference I Gala 5*, 1-15
- Ballard, K. (2007). *The Framework of English*. Second edition. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blei, D., Ng AY, Jordan, M. (2003). Latent Dirichlet allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research* 3
- Brown, G., Yule, G. (2007). *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coates, J. (2004). *Women, Men and Language*. Third edition. New York: Longman Group Limited.
- Chafe, W. (2008). The Analysis of Discourse Flow. p.673- 687. In Schifffrin, (ed). (2008). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Clark, U. (2007). *Studying Language: English in Action*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gumperz, J.J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Halliday, M., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. Longman, New York.
- Hirschberg, J., & Litman, D. (1993). Empirical studies on the disambiguation of cue phrases. *Computational Linguistics*, 19 (3).

- Hatch, E. (2000). *Discourse and Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Fourth edition. London: Routledge.
- Ireland, ME., Slatcher, R., Eastwick, P., Scissors, L., Finkel, E., & Pennebaker, J. (2011). Language style matching predicts relationship initiation and stability. *Psychological Science*, *22*(1).
- Johnstone, B. (2003). *Discourse Analysis*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Kellermann, K. (2004). Topical profiling: emergent, co-occurring, and relationally defining topics in talk. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *23* (3).
- Maynard, W. 1980. Placement of topic choices in conversation. *Semiotica*, *30*, 263-290.
- Morris, J., & Hirst, G. (1991). Lexical cohesion computed by thesaural relations as an indicator of the structure of text. *Computational Linguistics*, *17*.
- Okamoto, D., & Smith-Lovin, L. (2001). Changing the subject: gender, status, and the dynamics of topic change. *American Sociological Review* *66.6*, 852-873.
- Passonneau, RJ., & Litman, D.J. (1997). Discourse segmentation by human and automated means. *Computational Linguistics*, *23*(1)
- Purver, M. (2011). Topic segmentation. In: *Spoken Language Understanding: Systems for Extracting Semantic Information from Speech*.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2003). *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction*. Third edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994). *Approaches to Discourse*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D., & Hamilton, H. (2008). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Tannen, D. (2007). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men In Conversation*. New York: Harper.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2010). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Sixth edition. Wiley- Blackwell.

Appendix A

Coding

The transcription of the tape was written by using a coding system that was adopted by Hatch (2000) in discourse analysis by using the following:

(.) Micro-pause

. Period at end of line: clause final falling intonation

? Raising intonation of questions

- Dash: break off, unfinished words

[...] Omitted section

// Interruptions at this point by speakers

+ Short pause

++ Longer pause

+++ Long pause

, Comma: rise in intonation

: Colons: indicate the lengthening of a syllable

Uppercase typing: Stress (pitch and volume)

() Single parentheses: used when transcriber is using original text

(()) Double parentheses: indicate non-verbal sounds

{ } Transcriber's comment