2   Conversational Topic along a Continuum of Perspectives: Conceptual Issues

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The literature regarding conversational topic is vast. Conversational topic, however, has various conceptualizations. For example, some studies examine topic changes, whereas others examine the broad subjects about which people talk. Four different perspectives (i.e., topic as a noun phrase, topic as a bounded unit, topic as a perception of language users, and topic as a subject matter of talk), focusing on different conceptions of topic for ostensibly different purposes, emerge across the literature, and, as a result, grasping the literature as a whole is difficult. This chapter highlights each perspective by pointing to the questions already answered and others remaining to be answered. In doing so, within each perspective, we review relevant research, offer critiques and suggestions for future research, and discuss conceptual issues. Spanning the four different perspectives, several general points elucidate commonalities throughout the conversational topic literature. We then present our own conceptualization of conversational topic following from our explication of the conceptual issues (such as topical abstractness, globality-locality, prototypicality, and focus) that emerge in light of the four perspectives. Finally, we draw conclusions based on our explication of conversational topic for various areas within the communication discipline.

Topic is one of the most fundamental concepts in the empirical examination of human communication. Topic as a communication concept, in other words, permeates and has utility for a wide variety of areas

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within the communication discipline. Media researchers, for example, focus on the topic (or content[1]) of media messages and how topic determines, in part, the type and extent of media effects. Specifically, agenda-setting research suggests that media sources influence the topics about which individuals are concerned; that is, the topics that the media address affect the topics about which the public thinks and discusses (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Media research that focuses on television also finds the concept of topic fundamentally important. Extensive content analyses of violence (Wilson et al., 1997) and sex (Farrar, Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, & Donnerstein, 2003) on television focus on the topics of media messages. Farrar et al., for example, examined television's portrayal of sexual topics on primetime programming, including specific topics on sex as well as topics relating to the risks and responsibilities associated with sexual behaviors. Furthermore, media effects research demonstrates that the impact of media on certain outcomes, such as sexual socialization, depends on the specific sexual topics (e.g., talk about risks and responsibility) of television messages (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000; Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

Work in other areas of human communication also reveals the significance of topic as a core communication concept. For example, the phenomenon of groupthink demonstrates that a group suffering from groupthink self-censors and contains mindguards who squelch adverse opinions and unwanted information on certain topics; restricting talk on certain topics, in other words, contributes to poor decision making (Janis, 1982, 1989; Janis & Mann, 1977). Furthermore, topic is essential to consider when one is delivering a public speech; significant portions of many textbooks on public speaking are devoted to how to select and narrow the topic of a speech (e.g., S. A. Beebe & S. J. Beebe, 2005; McKerrow, Gronbeck, Ehninger, & Monroe, 2002; O'Hair & Stewart, 1998). Topic pervades the field of communication; its investigation is fundamental to the study of human communication and spans several divisions within the field.

Perhaps topic's most significant contribution to the study of communication is in the broad area of interpersonal communication and social interaction, spanning various contexts (Cappella, 1994; Ellis, 1992; McLaughlin, 1984; Ng & Bradac, 1993; Nofsinger, 1990). Topics provide a way to advance, maintain, or disengage personal, family, and work-based relationships (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Kellermann & Palomares, 2004). Individuals attend to topics and construct their interactions accordingly (G. Brown & Yule, 1983; Button & Casey, 1984; Tracy, 1985). People use topics strategically as a means of control and power by expressing their topical dominance over others in health (Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987) and close relational contexts (Folger & Sillars, 1980). Topics offer a means for friends to enact and embrace their gender identity (Cameron, 1998). Individuals accom-

modate others via topics (Chen & Cegala, 1994). Individuals use topics as basic building blocks in their cognitive representations of conversation (Kellermann, 1995). The use of topics varies cross-culturally, pointing to topic as a source of intercultural miscommunication (Chen & Cegala, 1994; Hinkel, 1994; Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991). In fact, topic-free social interaction *may* be impossible to accomplish; even ritual interaction has an implicit point. Because of topic's significance across various contexts (e.g., health, family, work, intercultural, etc.) in social interaction and interpersonal communication, the current chapter focuses on the role of topic in conversation; that is, we limit our discussion to the concept of *conversational topic* and its role in the broad area of social interaction and interpersonal communication.[2]

Despite the weight that conversational topic has for the study of social interaction and interpersonal communication, a unified, precise definition of the concept remains elusive. As G. Brown and Yule (1983) stated, "the basis for the identification of 'topic' is rarely made explicit. In fact, 'topic' could be described as the most frequently used, unexplained, term in the analysis of discourse" (p. 70). Their observation, made more than two decades ago, still rings true today. Across the literature, conversational topic is defined inconsistently from various conceptual perspectives. As a result, the extant knowledge generated across each perspective is diverse and hard to grasp as a whole. Absent from the literature is an analysis of research on conversational topic that elucidates the various perspectives and the knowledge claims afforded within each perspective. Such an analysis would provocatively highlight the questions on conversational topic already answered and others remaining to be answered. To address this void in the conversational topic literature, we present an analysis of relevant research on conversational topic. Our overarching goal is to bring some meaningful order to the vast number of investigations on conversational topic. Our strategy is to explicate and analyze conversational topic across the literature by highlighting four different perspectives from which examinations of conversational topic have been approached.

CONCEPTUALIZING CONVERSATIONAL TOPIC

Our evaluation of the literature on conversational topic revealed various ways of conceptualizing the concept. There are various continua along which these conceptualizations of conversational topic fall (e.g., psychological-textual, structure-content, etc.). We find merit in each continuum and draw upon all continua in our explication of conversation topic; yet we primarily employ a single continuum (i.e., level of abstraction) for our discussion because, as we subsequently argue, the level of abstraction continuum provides the most parsimonious means of classifying the literature on conversational topic.

**The Level of Abstraction Continuum for
Conversational Topic and Its Four Perspectives**

Along a continuum of the level of abstraction, four different conceptual perspectives of topic emerge. These perspectives constitute research traditions (Laudan, 1977), in which "objects" are examined from different standpoints. ("Object" is especially apt here because a synonym is "point," which is one of the synonyms for "topic.") The four perspectives vary with regard to their level of abstraction or "size." The first and "smallest" perspective literally views topic as a noun phrase. Bypassing the difficulty with defining topic, the second notion treats topic as a bounded unit, concentrating on a topic's surrounding shifting devices. The third conception (i.e., topic as a perception of language users) focuses on individuals' understanding of topic. This third perspective highlights individuals' abilities to identify, segment, and make judgments about topics, and it situates topics accordingly. Finally, the most abstract perspective holds topic to be the subject matter of talk. This notion is not concerned with the segmentation of topics in conversations, but rather, it treats topics as large categorical entities about which individuals converse.

We refer to the four perspectives ranging in their levels of abstraction as separate categories; yet, important to remember is that the four perspectives fall along a continuum. In other words, fuzzy boundaries exist between the four perspectives, which are not mutually exclusive. The use of one perspective does not preclude the use of another. Rather, research on topic potentially can demonstrate slippage and overlap between perspectives, and we find this opportunity theoretically and methodologically advantageous. (We extend our discussion of this potential in greater detail toward the end of this chapter.) Thus, the four perspectives, falling along a level-of-abstraction continuum, demonstrate a useful and heuristic means of categorizing the conversational topic literature.

In fact, our most basic purpose in this chapter is to critically illuminate the relationships and differences among perspectives and thus inform a large and diverse group of scholars. We aim to demonstrate how research from one perspective can inform the other perspectives by analyzing the perspectives and suggesting avenues for future inquiry on conversational topic. We believe that our comments and suggestions can stimulate novel research and theory construction within and across the four perspectives. In addition, we draw from the four perspectives as a whole to generate a unified, precise conceptualization of conversational topic. In other words, we rely on the four perspectives and their similarities and differences in our explication to suggest a novel conceptualization for conversational topic. We develop a conceptualization of conversational topic that flows directly from our explication of the conceptual issues that surface within and across the four perspectives. In doing so, we

bring some unity to the literature and encourage continued interest in investigating those central questions awaiting answers within and across perspectives.

Other Continua for Conversational Topic

As previously mentioned, various continua cut across the conversational topic literature. As such, we could have organized the work on conversational topic along other continua besides the level of abstraction. For example, Goutsos (1997) noted that studies on topic could focus on how people structure topics relative to what people talk about. Studies on topic fluctuate from an emphasis on the form, organization, and construction of topical talk to an emphasis on the substance and content of topical talk (i.e., a structure-content continuum). Bifurcating this distinction, a structural emphasis treats topic as action-based, whereas emphasis on content treats topic as semantic-based. That is, topics are actions interlocutors perform (structure) or subjects in speech (content). Our inspection of the literature also suggests a possible continuum based on the source of emergence for topics (i.e., a psychological focus compared with a textual focus; e.g., van Dijk, 1977, 1980). In other words, topics vary with regard to the extent to which they emanate from people's mental processes or discourse (i.e., a psychological-textual continuum). Polarizing this continuum, topics are a part of one's cognitions or part of speech (or texts) separate from one's cognitions. Another continuum is based on the method of inquiry (cf., Bradac, 1999; Tracy, 1993). The core distinction of this continuum is between quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., experimental versus conversation analytic methods).

We find these additional continua notable, yet, as categorization frameworks, restricting. The structure-content continuum, for example, is useful for categorizing research examining how people change topics, but it poses limited utility for categorizing research on how topics can facilitate power and control, since both the structure (e.g., Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987) *and* the content (e.g., Palmer, 1989) of topics can influence power. On the other hand, the psychological-textual continuum can handle research on topical power and control well, because these concepts constitute psychological factors; however, this continuum leaves research on changing topics difficult to categorize because a focus on the person who changes the topic is more psychological, but a focus on the specific linguistic indicators of topic changes is more textual. The qualitative-quantitative methods distinction is also restrictive, given that research on most, if not all, aspects of conversational topic can be examined with different methods (Bradac, 1999).

We considered alternative continua as the categorization scheme for this discussion, ultimately concluding that a topic's level of abstraction was the most parsimonious because it provided an optimal means to capture the vast

amount of literature on conversational topic. We do not consider the level of abstraction to be flawless; still, it affords the most advantageous categorization system relative to other potential continua. Nevertheless, even though we employ the level of abstraction to organize our discussion, we do not ignore other continua and the issues they raise. In fact, whenever appropriate throughout our discussion, we highlight points suggested by other continua to demonstrate their significance in the literature. Furthermore, in our closing section, we discuss how the intersections of various continua that traverse the conversational topic literature can stimulate novel and meaningful research.

However, first we discuss each of the four perspectives in turn along the continuum of level of abstraction. Within each perspective, we review and critique the research on conversational topic, and we discuss conceptual issues that emerge in light of research within that orientation. Our chapter, thus, devotes four major sections to the four perspectives on topic, with each section partitioned into three subsections: definition and summary of research, critiques and suggestions for future research, and conceptual issues. We trust that this format is not unacceptably procrustean and that it will facilitate useful comparisons. In a section toward the end of this chapter, we offer general comments on the topic literature within and across the various continua, our own conceptualization of conversational topic emerging from our assessment of the literature, and a brief discussion of how our explication of conversational topic carries several implications for various areas within the field of communication.

TOPIC AS A NOUN PHRASE

Definition and Summary

This perspective on conversational topic treats topic at a micro level, literally as a noun phrase. Take the following example of two friends standing in front of speaker A's new car:

> **A:** The tires are great. Nice color, too.
>
> **B:** Anyway, did you get an extended warranty?
>
> **A:** No. But, I only paid 27,000 dollars and the mileage is great.

According to the topic-as-a-noun-phrase perspective, this short exchange contains seven topics (i.e., noun phrases): (the) tires; nice color; you; (an) extended warranty; I; 27,000 dollars; and (the) mileage. This perspective derives from the grammatical sense of the word (i.e., sentential or sentence

topic; see Reinhart, 1981, for a review). Hockett (1958) claimed that sentences contain a topic and a comment, wherein comments offer new information on the topic of each sentence. Therefore, at least in English, topics are usually subjects, whereas comments are usually predicates. For current purposes, conversational topic is literally a noun alone or that which is embedded in a noun phrase but not the topic-comment structure as reviewed elsewhere (Reinhart, 1981; Schlobinski & Schütze-Coburn, 1992). For example, Chen wrote, "Topic, being the basic information unit of discourse . . . , is defined as a noun phrase that refers to a concrete or an abstract entity. . . ." (1996, p. 3). Similar to Schank's (1977) view of topic as pairs of sentences, this notion of topic extends primarily from Prince's (1981) taxonomy of given new information, which "makes distinctions between five categories of topics, based on the cognitive availability, or familiarity, of the referent with respect to its location (contextual or textual) or logical connection to other topics" (Chen, p. 5). This distinction allows for an examination of the topic's familiarity to interlocutors, its degree of explicitness. Topic consists of a noun phrase referring to any entity (i.e., object, event, person, state, idea, etc.) and the interlocutors' cognitive awareness of the referent.

The limited amount of research that treats conversational topic as a noun phrase focuses mainly on topic management and has demonstrated the importance of relational and individual difference variables. In a series of studies, Chen and associates examined topic management in relation to intercultural communication. In the first study, Chen and Cegala (1994) discovered that more explicit topic development occurred (i.e., noun phrases were made explicit) for mixed native and nonnative speaker (MNNS) dyads, and, therefore, accommodation took place. Furthermore, they found partial support for the claim that Americans in MNNS dyads used more explicit and less implicit topic shifts than Americans in native speaker (NS) dyads, which again indicated accommodation. Thus, lending partial support for communication accommodation theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987), Chen and Cegala concluded that "MNNS dyads make a greater effort than NS dyads to accommodate by using topic-management strategies that render information explicitly available" (p. 407). Furthermore, according to Chen's (1995) research, compared with respondents with low interactional involvement, respondents with high interactional involvement empathized more with others and adapted their topic selection to their listeners in intercultural interactions. Examining interactional involvement and topic selection in intercultural and intracultural dyads, this study concluded that interactional involvement was linked to topic selection relative to relational qualities of the interaction (e.g., intercultural versus intracultural). Chen (1996) also examined cognitive complexity, situational influence, and topic selection in intracultural and intercultural interactions. Although this study did not find statistically significant differences

in topic selection between individuals high and low in cognitive complexity, significant results emerged when intercultural and intracultural interactions were considered. Specifically, communicators with high cognitive complexity employed fewer situationally evoked topics than communicators who scored low in cognitive complexity during intercultural interactions.

Finally, this body of research highlights differences between social classes in topic management. A study of adolescent discussion groups revealed that some syntactic differences attributable to social class result from different conversational styles (Hemphill, 1989). By referencing previously mentioned topics (i.e., using cross-speaker anaphora), working-class speakers used more cooperative topic management strategies than did middle-class speakers. Research from the perspective of topic as a noun phrase thus suggests how topic management can vary as a function of relational and individual difference variables.

Critique and Future Research

The first critique of literature from this perspective concerns the micro nature of conversational topic. Conceptualizing topic as a noun phrase allows strong operationalization, clear replication, and accurate comparison of results across studies. However, this conceptualization raises some important questions regarding its face validity. Is conversational topic in some sense larger than a noun phrase? Is it possible for individuals to talk about a specific topic but never mention it by name? In the example above, does that conversation about a new car include seven topics (i.e., the seven noun phrases) or simply one (i.e., a new car)? If the latter, how can we know that the topic is a new car if a corresponding noun phrase is not uttered? Thus, conceptualizing topic at a concrete level of abstraction, such as the noun phrase, is problematic because slippage may occur between researchers' technical definition and speakers' intuitive sense of what the topic is. Furthermore, such a micro conception of topic muddies discernment of how and when interlocutors change topics. As in the above example, is each noun phrase a different topic or a reinstantiation of the same topic? What is conceptually and methodologically lost by limiting topic to nominal forms? Future research could attempt to justify the use of the perspective of topic as a noun phrase, perhaps by replicating existing findings by the other three topical perspectives.

A strength of this perspective lies in its explanatory and predictive nature. Most of the topic literature is descriptive in nature. Descriptive research can be usefully heuristic. However, advancing theory with predictions and explanations has additional utility. The literature of the perspective of topic as a noun phrase is theoretical in terms of explanation and prediction, and it does not focus solely on description. For example, research from this orientation

has established the importance of relational and individual difference effects in topic management. Future research should continue to examine the antecedents for and consequences of the use of different types of topics (e.g., high versus low familiarity). No *necessary* connection exists between the perspective of topic as a noun phrase and theoretical motivation; it should be useful for the other perspectives to adopt a theoretical focus increasingly, particularly the perspective of topic as a bounded unit.

Conceptual Issues: Noun Phrase versus Topical Focus

We can think of many counterexamples that fail to support the claim that topics are nominal forms or are located solely in noun phrases. Consider the sentence "People shop on a daily basis." "Shop" and "daily" are both stressed in the act of utterance; the former is a verb and the latter, an adverb. Moreover, in many imaginable contexts, these stressed words carry most of the information, as evidenced by rewriting the sentence as "People shop daily." In all but unusual contexts, interactants understand that shoppers are people, so the first word provides little information. However, given "people," many options emerge: People walk, talk, eat, breathe, swim, and so forth, so the word "shop" eliminates these alternatives, reduces uncertainty, and, therefore, provides key information (Babrow, 1992). "Shop" also presents many options: People can shop frantically, furtively, frivolously, and faithfully, or they can shop in malls, grocery stores, their homes, and farmers' markets; again, by eliminating alternatives, "daily" clarifies "shop." A part of the topic of the sentence is clearly "shop," a verb. Some would suggest that the adverb "daily" is a comment on the topic (Hockett, 1958), but this word is highly informative, so by the criterion of informativeness, no basis exists for distinguishing between "shop" and "daily" as candidates for topic. Moreover, one can imagine the topic "shop daily" being extended, as in: "Yes, this is possible only in developed countries, where there is considerable wealth." Many examples of topical verbals can be offered, such as the discourse unit "Could you open something? It's stuffy. Open something?" and the exchange "What did you do?" "I lied." However, something of an illusion occurs in the distinction made between nominal and verbal forms in reference to topic, because verbal forms can be nominalized (and vice versa): "People shop daily" becomes "Shopping is done daily." Thus, the existence of topics is not necessarily limited to noun phrases.

Other cases merit consideration. Compare the sentences "John kissed Mary" and "John admired Mary." First, note that each word in each sentence carries information, about agents, patients, or actions. Second, verbs in the two sentences differ; "kiss" is a descriptive action verb, and "admire" is an experiencer state verb. Third, in these cases, the verbs produce different attri-

butions about causality, despite the fact that the sentences are structurally identical: John is the cause of kissing, but Mary is the cause of admiration. That these verbally induced differences in causal attribution participate in a general pattern has prompted considerable investigation and some debate (Corrigan, 2001; Rudolph & Forsterling, 1997). Notably, particular linguistic differences stress a certain *focus* of attention on varying causal agents and, more generally, on different features of the sentences.

Research from other literatures also underscores the importance of individuals' emphasis on certain linguistic aspects relative to others. Many linguistic devices function to direct a hearer's or reader's attention; that is, these devices control or influence the orientation. One of the *linguistic masking devices* of Ng and Bradac's (1993) is labeled *permutation*, which refers to the ordering and re-ordering of words within a sentence for the purpose of controlling attributional prominence. For example, in the sentence "John kissed Mary," "John" is more prominent than in the sentence, "Mary was kissed by John" (Turnbull, 1994). Ng and Bradac hypothesized that attributional prominence increases assignment of responsibility to the entity made positionally prominent. So, in the first sentence, "John" has a high probability of being seen as the causal agent as a result of both permutation and verb type. Turnbull referred more generally to "thematic structure," which denotes any linguistic devices used to convey attributional prominence in a narrative (compare Halliday, 1970). Turnbull suggested that, "compared to nonthematic information, thematic information receives more [cognitive] processing, is more integrated and organized, and, therefore, more accessible [cognitively]" (pp. 134–135). Furthermore, his research offers support for a "thematic structure effect": "judgments of responsibility of thematic as compared to nonthematic targets are more accessible and extreme" (p. 135).

Critical linguists and others also demonstrate the importance of one's focus during comprehension. They have noted that adjectives denoting socially marked categories (e.g., African American, young) should be and typically are adjacent to the noun that they modify in order to maintain or enhance stylistic acceptability (Thomas & Wareing, 1999). For example, "the hasty young man" is better formed than "the young hasty man," and "the hasty African American man" is better than "the African American hasty man." The general principle seems to be: Place important, marked, cognitively salient adjectives adjacent to the words modified. Comparing "the young black man" with "the black young man" suggests that ethnicity is more salient cognitively in this society than is age (Bradac, 2000). "Adjectival adjacency" signals prominence or focus.

Rather than conceptualizing topic as a noun phrase, we think that conceptualizing topic as the *object of focus* is more accurate and useful. Actions (i.e., verbs) can be this object as well as people and things (e.g., nouns). Not

infrequently, the object of focus can be a compound of elements, as in "You lied." The focus can expand and contract during a segment of conversation. Many linguistic devices and strategies may establish the object of focus, as highlighted above. Often these strategies co-occur with interactional devices such as "grabbing the floor." So, someone may say as she interrupts her colleague to grab the floor: "The real problem is that you are *distorting* the facts," to which the colleague may respond: "I am not distorting."

TOPIC AS A BOUNDED UNIT

Definition and Summary

The line of research viewing topic as a bounded unit concentrates on the communicative devices that signal the shifting, transitioning, or changing of topics in conversations. This perspective recognizes the difficulty of segmenting topics accurately and consistently in a sense that is larger than the noun phrase or utterance. In fact, some of this research openly acknowledges "that a shift or a shade defines a new topic" (Crow, 1983, p. 155). Furthermore, most of this research holds "that studies of topicality in conversation must not merely pay attention to 'content' but must address matters of 'structure' as well" (Maynard, 1980, p. 284; i.e., the structure-content continuum). When compared with the view of topic as a noun phrase, this perspective would not claim that every noun phrase in a conversation constitutes a topic, but that topics exist between certain segments of a conversation linguistically or paralinguistically signaled by topic-shifting devices. Interactants indicate changes in topical talk by various structures. To refer to the "new car" example above, topics would not change until signaled as such. Therefore (assuming no paralinguistic indicators) three topics (e.g., "the car's aesthetic appeal," "the car's warranty," and "the car's specifications") would be separated by the use of the two discourse markers, "anyway" and "but." Stated differently, this approach comprises a "black-hole" conception of topic: you cannot easily see black holes, but you can infer their existence from forces that they exert. Similarly, researchers from this perspective emphasize the examination of topics via the forces they exert, just as an astrophysicist would investigate a black hole through an analysis of its influence on other objects.

Much of this research is typological by nature; it focuses on beginnings and endings of topics and how conversationalists change topics. One of the first typologies of topic shifts (Maynard, 1980) has its roots in the model of turn-taking developed by Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson (1974). As Maynard argued, the basic premise of this classic conversation analytic study is that topics change because of failed speaker transitions. In other words, the turn-taking

system provides ways to change topics. Various indicators of topic changes include silences, token responses (e.g., "um"), the ending of a story, "[t]he absence of recipient talk at a transition relevance place" (p. 270; i.e., absent solicits), refocusing, disagreements, and combinations thereof. Maynard provided many illustrative examples from actual conversations, to which readers are referred for more details. According to Maynard, when the turn-taking system "falters" (e.g., no response from a speaker is made), a new topic can be introduced.

Another typology of topic-shifting strategies centers on the beginning of a topic and its relationship to the prior utterance (i.e., coherence or lack thereof). Crow's (1983) typology of topic shifts stem from a corpus of couples' conversations. His categories of topic shifts emphasize the nature of the shift in terms of its relationship to the previous topic. After acknowledging various maintenance devices, which advance topics (see Reichman, 1978), Crow described four types of topic shifts: coherent shift, renewal, noncoherent shift, and insert. A coherent shift includes topic initiation, which involves an attempt to bring up a new topic after speakers close a previous topic, and topic shading, which introduces a new topic by explicitly relating the topic to the current topic. A renewal, or "shift back to an earlier topic after one or more other topics or topic-shifting attempts have intervened" (p. 144), marks the second category of shifts. Third, noncoherent shifts are abrupt shifts unrelated to the current topic. Inserts constitute the last type of shift, resembling noncoherent shifts in terms of abruptness; however, speakers do not advance them. Using this typology of topic shifts in an examination of couples' conversations, Crow found that "the longer the couple has been together the more topic shifts they perform in their conversations" (p. 153). Thus, this typology offers a coding scheme to identify and describe the relational nature of topic shifts, and it illustrates how these shifts occur, and, consequently, section topics in conversations.

In a series of articles, Button and Casey (1984, 1985, 1988/1989) describe the mechanisms for generating new topics in conversations via topic-initial elicitors. Within a conversation analytic framework, these studies examine various conversations and detail various ways in which topics can be initiated. Speakers introduce new topics in such a way that they flow from (i.e., they are related to) the previous topic and "are disjunct or segmented from prior topics" (Button & Casey, 1988/1989, p. 62). Again, the general argument is that topics are bounded within various indicators that speakers use to initiate topics.

Howe (1991), realizing that much of the topic-changing literature concentrates on topic beginnings, examined topic closings or endings. In her discussion of topic change in conversations, Howe concluded that topic closings are marked by the use of summary assessments, acknowledgment tokens, repetitions, laughter, and pauses. The last three indicators are self-descriptive,

whereas the first two are characterized by specific content or words, or intonation pattern. Furthermore, these topic-ending devices occur before a new topic begins and can function together to end a topic.

Most of the research viewing topic as a bounded unit is descriptive/typological in nature. Further examples include a study by Jefferson (1993) that illustrated how minimal responses, recipient assessments, and recipient commentary signal topic shifts, as well as research by Drew and Holt (1995, 1998) that demonstrated how figures of speech (e.g., "take it with a pinch of salt") "occur regularly in topic-transition sequences, and specifically in the turn where a topic is summarized, thereby initiating the closing of a topic" (1998, p. 495). A significant amount of other research focuses on an assortment of indicators (e.g., intonation, emotions) that signal a topic change.[3] Additional research has examined topic-shifting indicators in languages other than English, such as Greek (Bakker, 1993) and Korean (Song, 1996). In addition to this descriptive research, which importantly demonstrates that speakers change topics via highly specialized linguistic and paralinguistic devices, another body of research uses comparative analyses.

In a comparison of American and Japanese business conversations, Yamada (1990) showed how cultural differences in the nature of topic-shifting strategies could possibly lead to stereotype confirmation and miscommunication. Using a conversation analytic framework to study intercultural interactions, Yamada found that "American participants used formulaic talk to close explicitly and shift topics, whereas the Japanese participants did not explicitly close topics, but used silence to shift topics instead" (pp. 249–250). Following a discussion of the different strategies, Yamada argued that stereotypes (e.g., "Americans get the last word" and "Japanese are evasive") may be reinforced and miscommunication could occur if these different strategies are used in intercultural interactions. Thus, this study, along with another contrasting Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and American topic introduction patterns (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991), makes valuable contributions to the topic literature by pointing to cultural differences in the use of topic-shifting devices, the introduction of topics, and the interpretation of these differences, all of which have important consequences.

Additional comparative studies suggest differences in the use of topic-shifting devices relating to power. Utilizing and adding to Maynard's (1980) typology, Ainsworth-Vaughn (1992) closely examined 12 physician-patient encounters. This study, concerned with power differentials, illustrated how two main types of topic transitions (i.e., reciprocal and unilateral) varied in conversational dominance. Female physicians employed more reciprocal topic transitions, which evenly allocate power, whereas male physicians used more unilateral transitions, which allocated more power to the speaker. A similar study (Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987) detailed how foreign doctors, who were

accustomed to power asymmetries in physician-patient relationships, prevented patients from bringing up certain topics (e.g., stories that help explain a medical condition) by controlling the topic through devices, such as close-ended questioning and interruptions. Using a comparison technique, these studies underscored the importance of considering group membership and power differentials during the study of conversational topic.

Other studies compared topic-shifting techniques of men and women. First, West and Garcia (1988) revealed that men initiate twice as many topics as women do overall. Furthermore, they determined that no sex differences existed in topic changes when such changes were collaborative (i.e., both interlocutors wished to change the topic) or after an exhausted topic (i.e., no additional talk on the current topic occurred). However, men initiated all unilateral topic changes. Men unilaterally changed topics "in the course of women's turns-in-progress . . . in the midst of ongoing topic development . . . [and] in ways that curtailed such development" (p. 568). Second, using strangers in dyads, McLaughlin et al. (1985) conducted an experiment in which one of the two interactants was instructed to insert a predesignated brag. Among other findings, their study suggested that females used more reciprocal questions and topical control strategies than men, although these results approached statistical significance. Importantly, these studies affirm the importance of examining topic across groups, particularly men and women.

The latter half of the studies in this section advance descriptions of the former half by showing how different factors relate to the use of topic-shifting strategies or devices, which are central to this perspective. Other examples include studies comparing topic-shifting devices between normal individuals and individuals with dementia of the Alzheimer type (Garcia & Joanette, 1997) and acquainted and unacquainted peers (Maynard & Zimmerman, 1984). Again, these studies point to differences in how speakers use topic-shifting strategies.

Critique and Future Research

A strong aspect of this literature is the classification and categorization of topic-transition indicators, which stem from the use of rich, illuminating examples (from the qualitative side of the method continuum). Many linguistic and paralinguistic topic-shifting devices/strategies have been described within this perspective. Furthermore, some of the research using this perspective goes beyond typological studies by comparing the topical use of different groups of people, which is beneficial because comparisons are fundamental to the creation of knowledge (Bradac, 2001; Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

On the other hand, research of this descriptive nature is limiting. For example, most of the studies from the perspective of the topic as a bounded unit,

even those studying unique situations such as focus-group discussions (Myers, 1998) and political interviews (Nofsinger, 1988/1989), do not offer comparisons. With this limitation in mind, future research could involve comparative studies that utilize the extant typologies of topic-shifting indicators to examine how these devices can illuminate differences in other factors such as gender, power, intergroup relations, relational intimacy, situation, politeness, etc. More specifically, the following research questions could be addressed: At what level of explicitness do men and women use topic-shifting devices, and what are the antecedents for and consequences of any sex differences? Do particular types of situations yield more explicit topic shifts than do others (say, formal versus informal); if so, why? Does the non-normative use of shifting devices affect impressions of the communicative competence of topic shifters? More broadly, do people view others differently, depending on type of shifting device used? Finally, what mechanisms explain the effects of intimacy and culture on topic shifts?

Although important, studies that compare the uses of shifting devices do not necessarily advance theory. In fact, most of the studies that offer comparisons do not provide theoretical explanations for the observed differences. Thus, the application of current communication theories to the literature on topic as a bounded unit could prove meaningful. For example, employing communication accommodation theory (Giles et al., 1987), future research could examine how convergence and/or divergence manifest in topic-shifting devices (e.g., perhaps interactants who use divergent dialects in order to reinforce their different group identities are relatively more likely to use topic shifts as a means of control). Applying conversational constraint theory (Kellermann & Park, 2001) to topics in order to explore the appropriateness and efficiency of various topic-shifting tactics and other factors could shed light on the use of these devices and help to advance the theory. No doubt, this perspective includes other potentially valuable and relevant theoretical applications as well.

Finally, an implicit assumption that we drew from this literature is that virtually *all* topics are bounded or contain borders that signal the transition between topics. "This type of approach to the analysis of discourse is based on the principle that, if we can identify the boundaries of units—where one unit ends and another begins—then we need not have a priori specifications for the content of such units" (G. Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 95). G. Brown and Yule cautioned, however, that "[S]peakers often do not provide such explicit guidelines to help . . . select chunks of discourse for study" (p. 69). Therefore, when using this perspective, scholars must be cognizant of possible difficulties in identifying topic shifts. Quantitatively inclined scholars will likely want to check the reliability of their own or others' coding of topic shifts and indicators. Perhaps more importantly, future research could investigate the accuracy

of this assumption in relation to other factors. Topic shifts might not be signaled in certain situations (e.g., those demanding great urgency to change a topic, such as an emergency) compared with other (non-urgent) situations. The level of explicitness of topic-shifting devices may change because of urgency, formality, and other situational dimensions. Such a research agenda will make meaningful contributions to the literature.

Conceptual Issues: Topical Boundaries and Points of View

The bounded-unit perspective and other traditional conceptions of topic, such as topic/comment and global/local, suggest that topics are discrete entities with clear boundaries. This conception is handy for analytic purposes; it allows the investigation of topic maintenance and change, for example. This orientation seems reasonable, to the extent that interactants, indeed, perceive topics categorically in the way that they orient to phonemes of a language. Certainly, some pairs of interactants will immediately agree on "basketball" when asked, "What were you talking about?" (Lin, Harwood, & Bonnesen, 2002). In other cases, however, one interactant may say "basketball" and the other "Shaquille O'Neal," and this reference may indicate more than loose representation. One interactant may have focused on O'Neal, whereas the other may not have even known who O'Neal is. The permeability of topical boundaries makes coordination possible in the following hypothetical case that we generated as an illustrative example.

> **A:** The playoffs are starting on Saturday.
>
> **B:** Yeah, the Heat again. They've got Shaq. He can do anything. Just overpowers everyone.
>
> **A:** I think Sacramento. I grew up there, so maybe I'm biased. The whole team is aggressive.
>
> **B:** Yeah, like Shaq. He's a fighter. I love his slam-dunk.
>
> **A:** In the West, it's going to be the Suns, I think, as good as they are. Maybe the Spurs.
>
> **B:** The Spurs have two very good players, but neither is as good as Shaq. I mean, when it's the Spurs versus the Heat, it's Shaq all the way.

In this example, speaker A may view the topic as talking about "basketball," whereas speaker B may say the topic is "Shaquille O'Neal." Despite this misalignment in the speakers' topical points of view, the conversation is coordinated. Coordination is facilitated by the topical boundaries, which are per-

meable (i.e., not rigid); this lack of rigidity can endure (i.e., withstand) misalignment. Specific to the example, coordination between speakers A and B occurs because their different viewpoints (on what the topic is) are unproblematic, as the fluidity or permeability of the topical boundaries allows slippage between "O'Neal" and "basketball."

Bradac (2002) supported this argument when briefly conceptualizing *message*:

> The notion of coherence suggests that messages are perceived as units; they are bundles of significance. But the boundaries of these bundles shift or even change drastically as message recipients change perspectives and purposes. For example, a film constitutes a message for many casual viewers, and global judgments of this message are made: "*The Negotiator* was really good." On the other hand, for film students analyzing a film closely, particular scenes will constitute messages, even short scenes: "That visual transition is excellent—it establishes appropriate expectations." A film analyst's significant scene may not even be noticed by the casual viewer. Messages are meaningful units, the boundaries of which vary across occasions, purposes, and recipients. . . . (p. 49)

Topics are not "bundles of significance" (i.e., messages), but they are constituted in these bundles. On the other hand, like messages, a topic may be construed differently by different conversational participants with dissimilar goals, motives, and interests, as in the basketball example. Despite differences in speakers' topic construals, coordination typically occurs. This conversational accomplishment is provocative and interesting. Likely, for whatever reasons, interactants typically assume that remarks are relevant (Grice, 1975). Furthermore, differences in topical orientation will not usually be noticed and will not disrupt the flow of conversation, even when they become clear post facto when the interactants are asked, "What was the topic?" In a sense, they may perpetuate the illusion of topical agreement and adherence. This situation may be a subtle form of miscommunication that does not lead to negative outcomes (Coupland, Giles, & Wiemann, 1991). It reflects the pervasiveness of the assumptions of interactional cooperation and individual coherence (Kellermann & Sleight, 1989); the former assumption (in some form) may even be made by apes (Goody, 1995). We have no idea how frequently this type of subtle misalignment may occur. This hypothesis could be used to probe, perhaps illuminate, various aspects of conversation (e.g., miscommunication, coordination, and coherence), and it could be tested against interactants' perceptions, possibly after they view a videotape of a candidate conversation.

This conceptualization treats topic as a multilayered phenomenon, with slippage between and among the layers. Interactants collaborate to sustain a

conversation, even when they have different goals and interests and, therefore, different perspectives and at least somewhat different points of view on what the topic *is*.

TOPIC AS A PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE USERS

Definition and Summary

The individual language user is central to the third perspective. This perspective on topic extends from the idea that individuals, as users of the language, are equipped to make judgments about topics, just as they are about sentence grammaticality and acceptability (Bradac, Martin, Elliott, & Tardy, 1981). This perspective is based on the assumption that "the analyst is often forced to depend on intuitive notions about where one part of a conversation ends and another begins" (G. Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 69), as well as other judgments about topics such as coherence. This perspective differs from the previous two by focusing not on the language *used,* but on the language *user* (who may be a respondent, a coder, or a researcher) to make judgments about topics, regarding segmentation, coherence, and other factors (i.e., the psychological side of the psychological-textual continuum). Referring to the "new car" example again, this perspective concentrates on the perceptions of language users, who may categorize the exchange as talk about one topic (i.e., "speaker A's new car"). Various models of topic (e.g., G. Brown & Yule, 1983; Goodenough & Weiner, 1978; Goutsos, 1997; Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976; Mentis, 1991, 1994; Svennevig, 1999; van Dijk, 1977, 1980) exist within this perspective. In the following, research supporting the current perspective is discussed. Then work within this perspective is reviewed.

Over a series of studies, Tracy and colleagues (Planalp & Tracy, 1980; Tracy, 1982, 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Tracy & Moran, 1983; see Tracy, 1985, for a review) examined topical coherence, which is a part of successful topic management. The study by Planalp and Tracy demonstrated that naïve subjects can reliably identify topic changes in conversations, and it supported the basic assumption that individual language users can make decisions about topics. Across all of their studies, Tracy and associates concluded that individuals have a global perception of topic rather than a micro or local sense of topic.

Much of Tracy's research is based on the hierarchical structure of conversations termed issue-event (see Reichman, 1978), in which "an issue is an abstract principle, a generalization, what we typically think of as the main point . . . [and] the event is an episode, a concrete example of the more abstract issue" (Tracy, 1985, pp. 40–41). The issue focuses on a global topic,

and the event (i.e., local topic) is a specific advancement of the global topic. Using this idea and concerned with coherent topic maintenance, Tracy (1982) found that people tend to identify the issue as the topic. Tracy (1983) also discovered that issue extensions (i.e., a subsequent remark on the global topic) were viewed as more competent than event extensions (i.e., a subsequent remark on the local topic). Thus, support exists for the contention that certain advancements of topics (i.e., those that extend a macro topic rather than a micro topic) are preferred over others. Subsequent studies (Tracy, 1984a, 1984b; Tracy & Moran, 1983) showed that individuals respond to utterance pairs either maintaining a global topic or relating a new topic to a global topic rather than to a local topic. Investigations from other lines of research (Palmer & Badzinski, 1986; Cegala et al., 1989) revealed that people are able to agree on the shifting and segmentation of specific topics in conversations at the global level. Thus, support abounds for the current perspective on conversational topic, namely, that individuals as users of the language can make judgments about topics. Furthermore, this research affirms that communicators prefer to maintain topic continuity or conversational coherence at a global level, which is an issue discussed and examined by others as well (e.g., Bublitz, 1989; Bublitz, Lenk, & Ventola, 1997; Craig & Tracy, 1983; Orletti, 1989; Tannen, 1990a, 1990b).

Another group of investigations indicated how individuals actively and strategically orient toward topic. In a discussion of topic progression, Bergmann (1990) contended that speakers are concerned with the context or present situation, a notion that he dubbed "local sensitivity." This paper argued that individuals employ the environment or current situation (via talking about it) to influence the progression of topics. Similarly, Foppa (1990) reasoned that language users behave intentionally, and, therefore, an examination of topic must be concerned with individual intentions. Specifically, "any deviation from or violation of the principle of neutral coherence may be taken as an indication of the existence of certain strategic, interactive or 'what for' intentions on the part of the violator" (p. 198). Öhlschlegel and Piontkowski (1997) drew on this concern in a study of topic progression and social categorization. They found that individuals violated neutral coherence toward the outgroup members when intergroup categorization was highly salient. This study demonstrates that individuals strategically used topic progression when building and maintaining intergroup and intragroup relationships. Furthermore, Folger and Sillars (1980) found that interactants perceive topic changes as dominant, and Palmer (1989) concluded that the more a speaker directed a conversation away from the current topic, the more the speaker was perceived to be dominating the conversation. Overall, these studies highlight how interactants actively utilize topic strategically, which has significant consequences for social dominance and power.

Another body of research, viewing topic as a perception of language users, takes a developmental slant on conversational topic. This research can be partitioned into two major areas. First, the development of topic management strategies in children has been explored. Not surprisingly, the general finding of this research is that children learn topic management skills as they develop. A number of studies detail the specifics of this developmental trend.[4] Some noteworthy findings include the following: the number of topic changes in children's conversations decreases with age (e.g., Brinton & Willbrand, 1980); mothers assist children in learning topic management skills (e.g., Wanska & Bedrosian, 1985); and children initially talk about the here and now but acquire the ability to talk about the past, future, and fantasy over time (e.g., Marvin, 1994; Moerk, 1975). The second area, dealing with developmental issues, emphasizes mental disabilities that result in topic-based speech pathologies.[5] This research generally compares typical individuals with mentally disabled individuals to shed light on the learning of topic-management skills and to determine ways of providing effective therapy in order to improve these skills. These two areas of research significantly contribute to the literature by directing attention to the processes by which users of the language gain knowledge of and utilize topic.

Overall, research from this perspective highlights the language user. That is, this perspective examines language users' understanding of topic and conceptualizes topic accordingly.

Critique and Future Research

Notably, this research has established that naïve individuals have a general understanding of topic, which includes a global view of topics, when topic changes occur, how to maintain coherence, etc. In fact, some of the models even lay out a representation of how individuals use and understand topic. This emphasis on the language user is distinct from any other perspective in that the others (for the most part) ignore issues centering on the language user. Hence, this perspective concentrates largely on the psychological side of the psychological-textual continuum, relative to research in other perspectives. Despite the psychological focus, many of the assumptions of this research depend heavily on researchers' notions of topic and not on how individuals *actually* understand "topic" in everyday discourse. Researchers' assumptions are implicitly conveyed in items on researcher-designed measures, for example. Thus, future research could elucidate individuals' intuitive notion of topic more so from the language user's viewpoint relative to the researcher's point of view. A goal of this kind of research might be to formulate a "lay theory" of topic, based on data reflecting naïve respondents' implicit knowledge. Lay theories describe the concepts and structures that people use to understand a

particular phenomenon, such as electricity (D. Gentner & D. R. Gentner, 1983), intelligence (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, & Bernstein, 1981), and loneliness (Lunt, 1991). Various methods can be used to construct lay theories, but a common approach initially uses open-ended questions about the phenomenon of interest and then, on the basis of these responses, creates more structured tasks that yield data amenable to multidimensional scaling, for example (Cole & Bradac, 1996). Using such a procedure, researchers may examine what people believe about the nature of topics, the basis for segmenting topics, and so forth.

Furthermore, a portion of the research within this user-perception perspective explores how individuals strategically use topic. Although an important step, much more can be learned within this realm. Do individuals use topic manipulation for purposes other than achieving conversational dominance, and, if so, how (see Kellermann & Palomares, 2004)? For example, how do individuals use topic for communicative goals, such as compliance gaining, relational escalation (and de-escalation), information seeking, comforting, etc.? How does topical use vary as a function of one's communicative goal? Does the strategic use of topics facilitate the achievement of certain goals more than it does for others, and, if so, how, why, and what characteristics inherent to the goals explain this phenomenon? Examining the various ways in which individuals utilize topic with various goals would be advantageous. Not coincidently, this observation leads to the next section.

Conceptual Issues: Global versus Local Topics

A few more things can be said about the communicative uses of topical globality. The global-local distinction is clear to speakers in everyday contexts, as suggested above. In 2002, a friend of one of the authors was talking about Al Gore's presidential viability and then began to comment at some length about his shaved beard. At some point, she realized that she had been talking about his beard for quite a while (too long, by her judgment) and signaled a shift back to the global topic, saying "Anyway. . . ." This kind of lay understanding of the global-local distinction is codified in the phrase "going off on a tangent." Many stock expressions indicate speakers' primary orientation to global topics: "Getting back to the point . . . ," "We're getting off track," "What's that got to do with anything?" "Stick to the point," and so on. Protracted deviations from globality violate a pragmatic rule—specifically, Grice's (1975) relevance maxim. Indeed, adherence to the global issue is what Grice appears to mean by "relevance."

Globality and locality of topics can be used by speakers in performing perlocutionary acts. An often used device of comedy writers is having one character talk about global topic A, often sexual, and a second character talk

about global topic B, normally innocuous, in a situation where neither character realizes that two different topics are being discussed. The result is that local things said regarding global topic B take on a double meaning, and one of these meanings is unintended by and unknown to the speaker discoursing about B, who often appears foolish—a situation of *double entendre*. In real life, two speakers may initially raise different global topics, but typically, confusion will soon arise and will be dispelled quickly as the speakers coordinate their local efforts. A person who pursues global topic B, while others are talking about global topic A, may be labeled stereotypically as senile or "crazy" if the behavior is perceived as unintentional or may be judged to be "clowning around" if the behavior appears intentional—the "madness or badness" attributional syndrome (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The stereotypical attribution of senility or absentmindedness also may be produced by a speaker's frequent and lengthy extensions of local topics without regard to the global topic (Ruscher & Hurley, 2000).

In some situations, a speaker may be asked a local topical question about global topic A and may be reluctant to address this local topic. A paradigm case constitutes a press conference where a reporter asks the secretary of defense or presidential press secretary a question about a military operation that is in progress. Here, the speaker has five options: to remain silent, to state that he or she will not answer the question, to answer the question directly and truthfully, to give a direct answer which is a lie, or to evade the question.

The first option (i.e., silence) will not satisfy most questioners. Some politicians frequently use the second option (i.e., refusal). This option can be used by a speaker with legitimate authority who has the *right* not to answer; accordingly, it may produce or reinforce an impression of power (Ng & Bradac, 1993). Answering the question truthfully, the third option, may be disadvantageous; if there is no disadvantage attached, the speaker has no reason not to be truthful. The fourth option (lying) may be risky if the question is posed unambiguously and the truth is likely to surface. Evasion, the final option, may be a good choice if some conditions are met. Evasion occurs when a speaker is asked a question about local topic A, subsumed by global topic Z, and s/he responds with an utterance that corresponds to a different local topic B *yet maintains* the global topic Z. To be effective, an evasive utterance must *not* be perceived by hearers as irrelevant to local topic A or global topic Z, and, furthermore, it must be a defensible response when the truth surfaces subsequently. Both of these requirements may be met in various ways, such as through the use of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1998, 2001); one plausible but topically irrelevant meaning can be favored by the speaker presentationally, and later the speaker can claim to have intended the second meaning, which corresponds more closely to the surfacing truth. This move has been labeled "devious evasion" (Bradac, Friedman, & Giles, 1986; Ng &

Bradac, 1993). Speakers accomplish devious evasion in a number of ways, including responding to a local topical question, "Will we win the war?" about a global "war" topic with a diversionary local topical response that maintains the global topic "the war": "We've made several substantial incursions. I won't map them out for you for obvious reasons, but I can tell you that we are moving in a northern province and the terrain there is very challenging, as you know." In this case, the local topic in the question, "winning the war," was diverted by maintaining the global topic "the war" through statements about other local topics (e.g., "strategic war movements," "war terrain"). From our perspective, this kind of response occurs frequently in military briefings and political interviews (compare Galazinski, 2000).

This globality-locality tactic also may be used to delay the development of an uncomfortable topic in a friendship context. Research on equivocal communication (Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990a, 1990b) holds that certain communicative contexts create a conflict situation wherein people face telling either a hurtful truth or a punishable lie. Because people are averse to both of these options, communicators do not alter *what* is said (i.e., the truthfulness of their response), but rather "*how* it is said, that is, whether it is clear or equivocal" (Bavelas et al., 1990b, p. 137). We offer a different explanation for the phenomena examined by Bavelas and colleagues based on the current conceptualization of conversational topic; that is, "equivocal" messages are *not* alterations of clarity—they deviate from the local topic, while maintaining the global topic. In other words, when faced with telling a hurtful truth or a punishable lie, communicators do not necessarily respond equivocally (i.e., ambiguously); people simply change local topics while maintaining the global topic. An increase in response clarity is not *always* the solution.

An actual example taken from research by Bavelas and associates (1990b) best illustrates the topical globality-locality explanation for utterances in conflict (i.e., avoidance-avoidance) communicative situations. When participants who hated a particular theatrical play were asked, "How did you like the performance?" by someone who had a vested interest in the play, which created a situation "where both true and false messages were problematic" (p. 155), participants responded by uttering statements such as, "You'll probably go to a better showing that I did" (p. 157). An utterance of this kind is *not* necessarily ambiguous or unclear (i.e., equivocal); rather, the message *is* clear and unambiguous (i.e., not equivocal), while maintaining honesty. Alternatively, based on our conceptualization of topic, the response extends from a new local topic (i.e., "going to a different showings of the play") while maintaining the global topic (i.e., "the play/performance") *and* ignoring the local topic (i.e., "enjoyment of the play/performance"), both of which were invoked in the question (i.e., "How did you like the performance?"). That is, the person answering the question advances a different local topic, while sustaining the

global topic, yet sidestepping the local topic and avoiding telling a hurtful truth or a punishable lie. Research on news interviews also supports this explanation (e.g., Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991; Nofsinger, 1988/1989). Despite a news interviewer's question on a specific local topic, an interviewee can choose to advance a different local topic while maintaining the global topic. According to Nofsinger, discussion of the global topic is maintained, while the interviewer and interviewee vie over what the local topic(s) should be.

TOPIC AS A SUBJECT MATTER OF TALK

Definition and Summary

The perspective that views topic as a subject matter of talk maintains that people's talk can be sorted into various categories. This perspective assumes that people talk about certain things or subjects, and it does not focus on accurately and reliably segmenting topics in specific conversations, as some other perspectives do. This view does not center on how people maintain conversational coherence, how people change topics, or how topic management occurs. This perspective on conversational topic is primarily concerned with topic as the content, subject matter, issues, foci, or ideas on which individuals converse (i.e., the content side of the structure-content continuum). Stated differently, this perspective values classifying the topics that people discuss (and do not discuss), the antecedents for and consequences of talking (and not talking) about certain topics, how these broad topics occur in conversations, and similar issues.

Relating this perspective to the "new car" example, this view of topic would not be concerned with a speaker using a topic-shifting device to change the topic from talking about "the car's warranty" to talking about "the car's specification." Furthermore, this perspective would not include the emergence of seven or three topics or how people change the topic to maintain coherence. Rather, scholars holding this view would claim that no topic change occurred in the conversation, and that "cars" or, more abstractly, "transportation," not "the tires," "the car's warranty," or "speaker A's new car" count as topics. Thus, the perspective of topic as a subject matter of talk treats a topic as a relatively large categorical entity about which people talk (and do not talk).

In a program of research (for a review, see Kellermann, 1995) examining what strangers talk about during initial interactions, Kellermann and associates (Kellermann, 1991; Kellermann, Broetzmann, Lim, & Kitao, 1989; Kellermann & Lim, 1989, 1990) argued that conversational behavior is both routine and flexible. They contended that interactants cognitively represent topics as scenes in memory; conversational partners organize topics (or

scenes) within a larger cognitive structure called a conversation memory organization packet (MOP). Within a conversation MOP, speakers cognitively organize conversational behavior such that a set of prescriptions emerges for how conversations flow. Pertinent to the topic literature, Kellermann et al. (1989) found that a conversation MOP exists for initial interactions. Therefore, Kellermann (1995) asserted: "Individual scenes (topics) are weakly ordered, but . . . groups of scenes (topics) are strongly ordered. In other words, at any particular point in time, multiple scenes (topics) are likely, although the nature of the scenes that are appropriate at different points in time in the conversation varies" (p. 188). Thus, topics occur regularly and in a loosely ordered pattern during interaction between strangers, as influenced by the initial interaction MOP. Furthermore, Kellermann (1995) asserted that a universal scene exists for any given topic, such that talk on most topics (e.g., hometowns, religion, etc.) follows a similar pattern: (a) get facts, (b) discuss facts, (c) evaluate, (d) explain, (e) discuss goals/intentions, and (f) discuss enabling conditions for goals/intentions. That is, talk on any given topic follows the same loosely ordered pattern. This line of research has shown that cognitive frameworks or MOPs loosely determine when and what to talk about with strangers and how to talk about any specific topic.

Another line of research within this perspective deals with taboo topics or topic avoidance (i.e., topics that are not to be discussed) in close relationships. One of the first examinations of topic avoidance (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) found that 97% of participants avoided talking about at least one topic (i.e., the relationship's current/future status, extra-relationship activities, relationship norms, prior relationships, conflict-inducing topics, and negative information) with their relational partners. Further research has confirmed and advanced these findings (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b). Moreover, related research has examined the reasons for and the consequences of avoiding topics in close relationships.[6] Roloff and Johnson (2001) also pursued the antecedents for and consequences of reintroducing taboo topics, finding, among other results, that "topics can be reintroduced when the original conditions leading to their banishment are no longer relevant" (p. 46), and yet other research has investigated the consequences of employing various topic avoidance strategies in different relational types (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Additional studies investigated disclosures (i.e., revealing information on specific topics) in close relationships (e.g., Aries & Johnson, 1983; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Petronio & Martin, 1986). For example, Petronio and Martin probed gender differences in the anticipation of positive and negative ramifications of disclosures on four different topics (i.e., parental, achievement, sexual, and global) and discovered that men expected more negative ramification for disclosures on achievement than women. In general, these investigations point to the importance of examining what topics are not dis-

cussed and the ramifications of not talking (and talking) about taboo or sensitive topics.

Research within the perspective of topic as subject matter of talk has reached the overall conclusion that men and women tend to talk about different things. Specifically, this body of literature pursues what men and women converse about when talking with others (usually friends). In a review and meta-analysis of the gender topic literature from 1922 to 1990 (i.e., Bischoping, 1993; Carlson, Cook, & Stromberg, 1936; Kipers, 1987; Landis, 1927; Landis & Burtt, 1924; Meil, 1984, as cited in Bischoping, 1993; Moore, 1922; Sleeper, 1930, as cited in Bischoping, 1993; Stoke & West, 1930; Watson, Breed, & Posman, 1948), which included her 1990 replication of Moore's 1922 study, Bischoping concluded that women and men, consistently, but to varying degrees, have talked about different topics since the 1920s. Women discuss the opposite sex and appearances more than men do, whereas men converse about work and money more than women do. The following two investigations, although similar to the previous set in their interests, used different techniques. First, Haas and Sherman (1982) asked male and female respondents about the frequency of various topics they discuss with diverse types of individuals. Again, this study revealed gender differences. Women's talk focused more on family, relationship problems, men, health, pregnancy and menstruation, food, things they have read, movies, television, clothing, and rape than men's talk. Men, on the other hand, talked more about women, sex, money, news, sports, hunting, and fishing than women. Martin's (1997) investigation of conversations with same-sex and cross-sex friends found similar results. In this study, participants were asked to identify conversations taking place between male friends, female friends, or cross-sex friends and to indicate what features of the conversation influenced their conclusions. Martin discovered that respondents were better than expected by chance at accurately distinguishing the conversations, with the topic of talk as the most common indicator of dyadic sex composition. Specifically, men most frequently discussed sports, women, fighting, and other topics, while women talked most about relationships, men, clothing/changing clothes, and other topics. Consistency across these and other studies[7] suggests that differences between men and women exist in topical talk.

Along similar lines, researchers have examined disparities in topical talk among various cultures. Haviland (1977) cataloged topics of casual conversations among Zinacantan Indians in southern Mexico. The majority of the topics pertained to social matters, whereas less frequent topics included sexual activities, divorce, child support, drunkenness, kin disputes, violence, murder, quarreling, and nicknames, as well as nonsocial topics such as work, wealth, and religion. Hinkel (1994) examined topical appropriateness in cross-cultural conversations. Comparison of judgments of topical appropriateness of Chi-

nese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Arabic, and American speakers highlighted cultural differences. Specifically, the topics of age, money, life in the United States, recreation, weather, travel, self, and residence were perceived to be inappropriate to discuss by non-Americans. These studies point to cultural differences in what people talk about and what they perceive as appropriate to discuss.

Critique and Future Research

Taken as a whole, these analyses within the perspective of topic as subject matter of talk exhibit various important features. First, topics relate to each other, such that during informal initial interactions, discussion of specific topics at particular moments in conversations is not erratic. Certain topics are more likely to appear than others, and these topics surface in a loosely organized fashion. Future research could expand on this notion by examining the interconnectedness or relatedness of various topics in an attempt to understand the ways in which conversations typically progress. Studies could take a network analysis (Monge & Contractor, 2003; Wasserman & Faust, 1994) standpoint on topics to examine topical networks. In conversations, are transitions between more related topics, such as sports and weather, more common than transitions between less related topics, such as sports and religion? Do speakers judge changes from one topic to another as more appropriate or acceptable than other topic changes (see Parker, 1980)? What topics constitute the most central nodes in topical networks of various relational types, and why (see Jefferson, 1984)? How does the relational type of a dyadic conversation influence topical networks? Answering these and other questions would shed light on the ways in which conversations flow from certain topics to others in foreseeable ways via topical networks. A final suggestion combines the bounded-unit perspective to the subject-matter perspective: Do interactants signal topic changes more explicitly between relatively unrelated topics (e.g., changing from travel to persons known in common to personal faults) than changes between more related topics (e.g., changing topics from education to long-term goals/intentions to occupation)? Answering these and other related questions could be useful for understanding how conversation is concomitantly dynamic, flexible, and predictable (see Kellermann, 1995).

Second, research within this perspective has shown that speakers do not discuss all topics equally. The motives for people not talking about certain topics and how to bring such topics back on the table in intimate relationships have been studied and shown to be important. Future research could investigate these findings further by examining the topics that interactants avoid in different types of relationships (e.g., brother-sister, grandchild-grandparent, employee-employer, student-instructor, etc.). The consequences of and

antecedents for such variation also could be explored. The reverse also could be studied: what topics are *most* likely to be discussed in various types of relationships? Do people talk about different things, depending on their conversational partner; do such distinctions lead to variance in relationship development and decline (see Kellermann & Palomares, 2004; Lin et al., 2002)? Investigating topic avoidance strategies and their effectiveness in various relationships as well as the impact of topic avoidance strategies on relational development will shed more light on the dynamics of topic avoidance (see Dailey & Palomares, 2004).

Finally, this literature demonstrates variations between men and women in their topical use. Although this is important, more can be explored. For example, why do gender-based topical differences exist, and what role does gender identity play (Cameron, 1998)? Are some topics considered more appropriate for one gender than for the other, and why? Do men and women avoid different topics and for what reason(s)? Why and how does talk on certain topics, relative to others, increase the extent to which gender is salient for individuals (e.g., Palomares, 2004; Postmes & Spears, 2002)? What consequences emerge when people converse on certain topics in mixed-sex compared with same-sex interactions, and why? Future research could also investigate interaction effects with sex, intimacy of relationship, formality of situation, relational goals, etc.

A few problems also exist within this perspective. First, this "largest" view is perhaps the most experimental (i.e., nonqualitative). Thus, despite significant contributions, an overriding problem with the literature using this macro notion of topic stems from its generalization of specific conversations into broad propositions and claims. Should research about such an idiosyncratic phenomenon (i.e., conversation) be unconcerned with its various idiosyncrasies? More specifically, what theoretically meaningful information is gained and lost in the process of topical abstraction? Although important to note, this discussion is more appropriate for metatheoretical deliberations (see, for example, Berger, 1977; Bradac, 1999; Bradac & Giles, 2004; Cushman, 1977; Delia, 1977; Monge, 1977). A second problem involves finding appropriate labels for topics, which reflects a deeper problem of deciding what level of abstraction to use for the categorization of topics (see Kellermann & Palomares, 2004). Comparisons between studies will be impossible if one researcher's "social activity" topic includes conversations at work, whereas the same category for another researcher does not. If a researcher conducts a cluster analysis or some related technique to group specific topics into higher order constructs (as do Kellermann & Palomares, 2004, and Lin et al., 2002), it becomes important for other researchers attempting a replication to define the constructs with reference to the same topics or to have a good reason for not doing so. An indefinitely large number of topics can emerge, depending on topical

categorization. For example, concerning talk about someone's pet cockatiel, should the topic be labeled as a very concrete topic, such as a pet cockatiel named Freddy, or as something progressively more abstract, such as cockatiels, birds, pets, animals, creatures, or things that make people happy? What level of abstraction, in other words, is most appropriate for the labeling of a particular topic? Finding labels for topics is a considerable problem that must be addressed accordingly. Kellermann and Palomares, in their examination of participants' recollections of 500 conversations from various relational types (e.g., parent-child, co-workers, doctor-patient), generated a list of 90 topics (based primarily on participant-generated topical labels at a midlevel of abstraction) that could be utilized in future research. Third, this perspective does not easily allow for an examination of topic management (as it privileges content over structure) because it overlooks the action-based processes surrounding topics. Despite some underlying problems, this perspective adds much to the literature by examining the *substance* of conversation—the "what" of interpersonal communication—which may be what most people mean by "topic" in the everyday lexicon.

Conceptual Issues: Topical Abstractness, Categories, and Fuzzy Sets

The preceding discussion indicates that researchers working within the subject-matter perspective have operated at a high level of abstraction compared with, say, researchers within the bounded-unit perspective. Yet, the former investigators, at least, have not discussed the implications of this fact. Abstractness is not an easy concept, but it has largely been taken for granted in research on conversational topic. Notably, the level of abstraction is relative, such that compared with "bird," "chicken" is concrete, but compared with "free-range hen," "chicken" is abstract. So, "chicken" cannot be categorized simply in terms of an absolute level of abstractness;[8] it depends on the particular conversation, the surrounding verbal context. Even apart from the relativistic effect of verbal context, a given concept participates in a hierarchy of related concepts with an indefinitely large number of members: animal/two-legged animal, with feathers/fur, male/female, large-beaked/small-beaked, dirty/clean, and so forth. Also, although quantitative techniques exist for grouping empirically derived topics into higher-order units (e.g., cluster analysis), the attributes that characterize and differentiate the units must be specified through the use of other statistical techniques, such as multidimensional scaling. Thus, the abstractness concept as usually conceived is problematic—a dimension with an unknowable number of unstable levels, with intervals of varying sizes.

Despite these problems, abstractness has been a useful variable in some areas of research, such as research on "intergroup linguistic bias." Semin and Fiedler's linguistic category model (1988; Arcuri, Maass, & Portelli, 1993;

Cole & Leets, 1998; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) distinguishes among descriptive action verbs ("He hit John"), interpretative action verbs ("He hurt John"), state verbs ("He hates John"), and adjectives ("He is hurtful"). As one moves from descriptive action verbs through adjectives, the state of affairs depicted becomes more abstract and less bound to a particular time and place. So, abstractness here varies inversely with the extent of temporal and spatial connection. People are more likely to use abstract forms when speaking about negative behaviors of outgroup members and to use concrete forms when speaking about positive outgroup behaviors. The converse is true for discourse about ingroup behaviors (Cole & Leets, 1998; Maass, et al., 1989). In short, interactants tend to indicate the fleeting nature of negative ingroup behavior and the enduring quality of positive ingroup behavior, while suggesting the fleeting character of positive outgroup behavior and the enduring aspect of negative outgroup behavior.

Nominal forms can also participate in the process described by the linguistic category model. Ng and Bradac (1993) offer the concept of *linguistic masking devices*, three of which pertain here: truncation, nominalization, and generalization. Regarding truncation, a speaker may use agent deletion: "Jim hit John" versus "John was hit." The latter utterance is more abstract because of its relative inclusiveness: Anyone may have hit John. From another perspective, it omits potentially important details. Similarly, by the transformation of adverbial phrases into noun phrases, significant information can be deleted: "I will hit John" versus "Hitting will occur." Generalization resembles categorical abstraction as discussed above: "People are aggressive toward John" versus "I am likely to hit John." The language variable *verbal immediacy* is also pertinent here (Bradac, Bowers, & Courtright, 1979; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1967); the utterance "I really like your hat" is less immediate than "I really like you." In this case, the more immediate utterance also is more abstract, as a result of its nonselectivity—"you" includes many unspecified attributes, not just a hat.

Verbal immediacy, linguistic masking devices, and the linguistic category model assume that abstraction can be operationalized with reference to *specific* linguistic criteria and within *specific* domains (e.g., times and places; Bradac et al., 1979; Ng & Bradac, 1993; Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Perhaps topical abstraction can be examined along these lines rather than the line of a simple hierarchy of categories, discussed above, which differentiates categories without reference to specific criteria. Importantly, these three areas of language research suggest that abstractness can be manipulated by speakers to produce effects (although often speakers remain unaware of their use of high or low immediacy, state verbs, nominalization, and so forth). If the topic is "our romance," for example, one partner could say, "I really like you," and the other could respond, "I really like my times with you too." This response

could be an attempt to achieve a relational de-escalation or nonadvancement goal on the part of the second speaker. Thus, topical abstractness can be conceptualized as the extent to which a label for a topic is removed from the immediate situational and contextual utterance (i.e., the distance a topical label is from an utterance). Arguably, the topical label "our romance" is less removed from the statement "I really like you" than from the statement "I really like my times with you too." On the other hand, the topical label "our times together" is more removed from the first statement than the second. Topical abstractness is conversationally specific; a topical label for one conversation may be more or less abstract relative to another conversation.

In a discussion of topical abstractness, the notion of "category" arises because speakers invoke a hierarchy of discrete classes, the members of which are increasingly inclusive as one ascends the structure. This kind of hierarchy works very well in taxonomic sciences such as botany or zoology, where clear criteria for categorical membership are specified, but in everyday life, the classification of objects is much less tidy. There is evidence that people typically do not think categorically, but instead, spontaneously, naively, and variously group commonsensically, as related to objects in fuzzy sets on the basis of prototypicality (Aitchison, 1994).

A fuzzy set has indefinite boundaries, organized according to degree of prototypicality, with prototypical members at the center and other members dispersed increasingly toward the periphery as prototypicality decreases. Despite between-person variability, some cultural consensus exists on prototypicality (Rosch, 1978), such that for many Americans, apples and bananas are at the center of the set containing fruits, whereas mangoes are less central, as are guavas, and kiwi fruit and breadfruit would typically be highly peripheralized. Increasing prototypicality should be associated with an increasing number of consensual responses to the question, "What is the first fruit that comes to mind?"; decreasing recognition time (i.e., decreasing response latency) in a word-recognition task; higher likelihood of nodal activation in a semantic network; and so forth.

Modeling "topic" from our theoretical standpoint of prototypicality, rather than categorical classification, might be stimulating and useful. Communicators may view conversational remarks in terms of their *degree* of adherence to the global topic and the *extent* to which topically local remarks advance global topical progress. Indeed, this orientation seems likely. Some remarks may adhere closely to the prototypical topic, say the opening of the baseball season: "I'm not sure of the exact date, but it's early in April" or "I wonder if there will be a lot of homers again this year." Some may seem coherent, but relatively peripheral: "Yeah, this time of year always makes me think of spring flowers." Others may be highly peripheral: "I always like hotdogs." Still others may fall outside the set: "What time do you have?" or

"Cute baby." Situational contingencies explain some remarks that fall outside of the set; these remarks may be seen as introducing appropriate side issues and, we hypothesize, often will be less noticeable and will be perceived as less deviant than highly peripheral remarks within the set. Generally, as peripherality increases, remarks may be recognized as increasingly deviant, and if these remarks are made frequently by the same speaker across situations, hearer attributions of speaker communicative incompetence may occur. Tolerance for and noticeability of peripherality may vary with hearers and situations. Courtroom trials and charged negotiations likely require a narrow latitude of acceptance for peripherality.

Remarks close to the prototypical topic will be transparent, that is, they will not be noticed by an interaction partner; the necessity to explicitly signal such prototypical topic changes will be minimal. At some point, as remarks deviate from the prototype, they will become noticeable or opaque (i.e., explicitly signaled); they will be taken as a sign of deviance. This kind of pattern, where interactants may not notice behavior close to a model or norm but negatively evaluate large normative departures, is a familiar one in other domains of communication, such as linguistic complexity (Bradac, Desmond, & Murdock, 1977) and the negativity effect (Kellermann, 1989). We expect, however, that remarks far from prototypicality will be more or less explicitly signaled, depending on the constraints (e.g., appropriateness and efficiency) that guide changes in topic (Kellermann & Park, 2001).

COMMENTS AND CAVEATS

Recognizing (with optimism nevertheless) that most "formal attempts to identify topics are doomed to failure" (G. Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 68), the preceding discussion focused on an explication of conversational topic viewed along a continuum of perspectives (based on the level of abstraction). In this section, we detail comparisons across the four perspectives, examine the intersections among the various continua that cut across the literature, synthesize the conceptual issues that we discussed throughout the chapter to suggest our own conceptualization of conversational topic, and, finally, draw on our explication of conversational topic to inform a wider range of research about implications for the empirical examination of human communication.

Cross-Perspective Comparisons

Each perspective on conversational topic has merit; each poses unique advantages and disadvantages, some of which already have been discussed. The goals and purposes of future researchers should determine the perspective

taken, not any inherent superiority of one perspective over another. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the four perspectives are not intended to represent mutually exclusive categories. Rather, fuzzy boundaries exist between perspectives, and research does not necessarily reside solely within one perspective at any particular point along the level of abstraction continuum. In other words, a study could approach conversational topic from multiple perspectives. We find this multiperspective approach conceptually and methodologically profitable. Rather than confining research to a single perspective, future research might usefully bridge or combine perspectives on conversational topic, which might yield more powerful tests of hypotheses through conceptual and methodological triangulation. Such triangulation could be used advantageously in attempts to replicate previous findings.

Indeed, some research already discussed in this chapter utilizes two or more perspectives to varying degrees. For example, Kellermann's (1995) work on the conversation MOP arguably could embrace the language-user perspective as well as the subject-matter perspective. Research within the bounded-unit perspective (i.e., Boden & Bielby, 1986; de Beaugrande, 1992) explores how topic changes occur through talk on the subject-matter topics of historical life events and emotion. These examples and others highlight one perspective while concomitantly drawing on another. Fusions of multiple perspectives typically occur at an implicit level. Future research can benefit from an explicit, thoughtful integration of perspectives because results that transcend the idiosyncrasies necessarily confounded with any single perspective are *ipso facto* more robust than perspective-bound results and because integration could produce arresting hybrids.

Each perspective imposes distinct modes of concept operationalization in research, which engenders distinct issues and problems. Each perspective has special strengths and weaknesses, so in empirical research, multiple conceptualizations and operationalizations used within and across studies to test a given hypothesis or to explore a conversational pattern are highly desirable. We have already suggested several cross-perspective blends. For example, how do language users perceive different types of topic-shifting devices? Are topical transitions between related subject matters signaled less directly than transitions between unrelated subject matters? Do language users consider noun phrases topics, or are noun phrases too specific? Using multiple perspectives in examinations of conversational topic will cast a brighter light on the concept, as each perspective targets particular types of questions (cf., Bradac, 1999; Tracy, 1993).

Cross-Continuum Intersections

Just as cross-perspective hybrids engender utility for the understanding of topic, so do the intersections among the various continua. We relied heavily

on the level of abstraction continuum for our synthesis of the conversational topic literature; yet, the other continua (e.g., structure-content) maintain significance. In particular, intersections between the various continua provide novel and interesting ways of exploring aspects of conversational topic and related phenomena.

Special insights, for instance, surface at the intersection of the level of abstraction and the structure-content continua. Research focusing on language users' perceptions has demonstrated topic's significance across the structure-content continuum; users of the language attend to both the content *and* structure of topics. Conversationalists assert power via *how* they construct topical talk (e.g., Folger & Sillars, 1980), as well as *what* they choose to talk about (e.g., Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987). Although arguably less apparent, examining topic within the noun-phrase, bounded-unit, and user-perception perspectives can reveal topic's integral role in the structure (i.e., management) and content (i.e., substance) of conversation. For example, the subject-matter perspective, characterized by an abstract, molar approach to topic, has largely ignored details of discourse structure and processes; yet we have suggested how this perspective could be used to probe topical structure and management in novel and exciting ways (e.g., *how* do interactants switch and chain abstract subject-matters unobtrusively to gain control and exert influence?). At the intersection of the abstraction and structure-content continua, links between the molecular bounded-unit perspective and the molar subject-matter perspective also emerge in productive, harmonious ways; the occurrence of certain topic-shifting devices may depend on the content of what is being said. These illustrations reveal the utility of considering the intersection of the structure-content and the level of abstraction continuum; at any given level of abstraction, topic can be examined with regard to content *and* structure.

Other continua cut across the level of abstraction continuum. For example, research with a qualitative focus has shown that conversational topic can be used strategically at various levels of abstraction; simultaneously, research with a quantitative focus has accomplished the same. That is, the intersection of the quantitative-qualitative continuum with the abstraction continuum has illuminated novel pieces of the puzzle. Notably, to an extent, methodological emphasis and level of abstraction have been confounded. The "micro" noun-phrase perspective and the "macro" subject-matter perspective have been associated mainly with a quantitative social scientific method, whereas the "middle range" bounded-unit perspective has been associated with a qualitative conversation analytic method. Uniquely, the language-user perspective has drawn from both types of methods. This confounding has not been driven by conceptual factors, but rather, it has been

based on convenience (e.g., ease of operationalization), on accident, and perhaps on the special (and limiting) training of the researchers. As we suggested above, future work should be goal driven, based on meaningful research questions and hypotheses, rather than on reflexively (i.e., instinctively) chosen methods. Furthermore, the full spectrum of the intersection of these two continua warrants investigation.

Our discussion of the various cross-continuum intersections is not exhaustive. Other intersections are possible between the level of abstraction continuum and other continua. Moreover, the level of abstraction continuum need not be included in cross-continuum intersections; for example, research could be approached at the intersection of the structure-content and psychological-textual continua. We find examining topic at the crossroads of the various continua advantageous.

An Emerging Conceptualization

We have implied our own conceptualization of conversational topic throughout the chapter, which serves as an alternative to the conceptualizations inherent in the four perspectives, yet capitalizes on many of the conceptual issues emerging within and across the four perspectives. Summarizing across our explication of topic, a conversational topic is the interactive object of focus, whether viewed by interaction participants or researchers, which can be abstracted at different levels and advanced globally or locally to varying degrees of prototypicality and overlap, across interactants and observers with unique points of view as a result of dissimilar goals, attitudes, and interests. This definition is spawned from the conceptual issues that emerged across the perspectives discussed throughout the chapter. We drew from the diverse literature on conversational topic, which approaches the concept from various perspectives, to present a novel conceptualization for conversational topic.

This definition is a relatively fluid and dynamic conceptualization, which suggests new research questions. Most obviously, can researchers and lay respondents identify shifts in the object of focus—established by permutation, verb type, adjectival adjacency, and other prominence-controlling linguistic features? How do these objects differ from or relate to topics identified as noun phrases and subject matters, particularly? What demonstrable advantages do we gain in viewing topic as a shifting object of focus—say, advantages in predicting relationship type from topic (as do Kellermann & Palomares, 2004, from a subject-matter perspective)? If large-scale topic shifts are, indeed, linguistically signaled (Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Maynard, 1980), are the relatively subtle and ductile topical gradations suggested by

our conceptualization indicated similarly or differently? Lay respondents perceive global to local shifts (and vice versa) conceived as dichotomous variables (Tracy, 1985); if globality and localization are viewed as continuous variables (e.g., as members of a fuzzy set), do interactants perceive finer gradations? Are other types of topical gradations perceived? If the dynamic and fluid gradations suggested by our conceptualization are signaled and if lay respondents actually perceive these gradations, do they have interactional and evaluative consequences? If the answer to some concrete version of these sequential questions is "yes," our conceptualization may well merit further development.

Implications

At the start of our discussion, we maintained the significance of topic as a broad communication concept; we argued that topic is fundamental to empirical examinations of human communication because it spans many divisions in the field. We end our discussion by briefly considering some potential ways in which the research, issues, perspectives, and conceptualization offered on *conversational topic* have implications for various subdisciplines in the field of communication.

Implications for social interaction across interpersonal contexts. Conversational topic is important to social interaction and interpersonal communication across several communicative contexts. A major aspect of conversational topic involves its facilitation of power for interlocutors. Talking and not talking on particular topics provide individuals with ways to maintain, gain, subvert, and negate power in a wide range of communicative contexts. For example, in professional settings, talking about specialized topics in ways that lead to attributions of high intelligence and expertise could generate power for a speaker. Also, compared with using a relatively indirect and polite topic avoidance strategy (e.g., displaying physical affection or complimenting), a child who abruptly avoids a topic with a parent using a direct and rude strategy (e.g., threatening or being offensive) in a familial interaction likely will have a significant impact on their relative levels of power (cf., Dailey & Palomares, 2004). In health contexts, studies that we reviewed (e.g., Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992; Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987) revealed how medical doctors demonstrate power over patients by controlling the topic and directing the conversation. In political contexts (e.g., debates), perhaps power is asserted through topical talk in both the structure and content of topics. In fact, research has demonstrated that presidential candidates, over the latter half of the twentieth century, who talked about policy more than personal character topics rel-

ative to their opponents were more likely to win elections (W. L. Benoit, 2003). In a wide range of communicative contexts, topic plays a key role in power relations among conversationalists.

Conversational topic also affects various communicative contexts in that communicators' cognitive representations of their interactions with others rely on topics. Kellermann's (1995) conversation MOP work, which established that people use topics as basic building blocks in their cognitive representations of initial interactions with strangers, focused on a restricted form of interaction; yet topics likely play a role in the cognitive representations of other forms of interaction. Individuals process, store, recall, and report conversations at a topical level rather than at an utterance level (Brinton & Fujiki, 1989; Daly, Bell, Glenn, & Lawrence, 1985; Housel, 1985; Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000; Stafford, Waldron, & Infield, 1989). In fact, even after a significant delay, people can remember the content of their conversations at relatively high levels of accuracy when recalling at a topical level, but not at an utterance level (P. J. Benoit & W. L. Benoit, 1988, 1994; W. L. Benoit & P. J. Benoit, 1990; Hjelmquist, 1984; Hjelmquist & Gidlund, 1985; Murphy & Shapiro, 1994). We expect that people maintain topical level information as scenes in MOPs that organize topical talk in their interactions with others across various communicative contexts (cf. Kellermann & Palomares, 2004). These cognitive structures, in other words, facilitate the structure and content of topics in conversation so that people can perform interaction routines, fulfill communicative functions, and achieve their goals. The cognitive representation of topics in MOPs, for example, corresponds to actual topical talk when people get to know each other during an initial interaction (Kellermann, 1995). Conceivably, the cognitive organization of topics also corresponds to the progression of topics in other contexts, such as when people seek help from doctors in health contexts or comfort a friend or family member. These topically based cognitive representations may even determine the topics people talk about and when and how they talk about them in various communicative contexts.

Implications for other areas of communication. Not only can the issues we presented on conversational topic inform work within the area of interpersonal communication and social interaction, but these issues could be transported into other areas of communication to inform the broader concept of topic. Public speaking might consider the potential for misalignment of the speaker's point of view on what the topic is relative to the audience's point of view. The global-local topic distinction might provide novel insights the delivery of a speech. For example, do the judgments that an audience makes regarding a speaker or the effectiveness of a speech depend on the

extent to which local topical advancements are peripheral (i.e., deviant from the topical prototype)? Media research using content analysis could explicitly contemplate the level of abstraction that is most appropriate for topic. A content analysis with a specific interest in sex, for example, may wish to distinguish between various sexual topics at a relatively concrete level of abstraction (e.g., Farrar et al., 2003). Other content analyses of the media, on the other hand, might be concerned with topics that require a higher level of abstraction. Zhao and Gantz's (2003) content analysis of fictional television programs, for example, used a relatively abstract topical distinction of work versus social topics, as that level was most appropriate for their research purposes. A consideration and justification of the level at which topics are abstracted will benefit content analysis research. Media effects research also may find utility in issues such as the topical prototypicality of media messages. Perhaps media effects are greater when messages are more prototypical as opposed to peripheral. Moreover, the extent of a particular media effect might depend on the media consumer's point of view on the topic of a media message. Research on group decision making could take into account the various sifting devices used to gain control and power in a group, as well as whether group members value certain statements on a particular issue, depending on the topical prototypicality of the statements. Group leaders, for example, could be more effective when their topical advancements are closer to the topical prototype relative to peripheral topical progressions. In their use of the broader concept of topic, these and other areas within the communication field may profit from a consideration of the conceptual issues pertaining to conversational topic.

Pragmatic implications across communicative contexts. The conceptual issues surrounding conversational topic have practical implications for communicators. The relationship between topic and power suggests pragmatic ways in which speakers can use topics to acquire power, particularly when they do not readily have access to such power. Patients in health contexts, for example, can be more actively involved in their health care once they become aware of the ways in which doctors may control the topic, thereby implicitly exerting power over patients. By recognizing the ways in which doctors direct conversations to particular topics, patients can refocus the conversation onto topics about which they are most concerned. Students in pedagogical contexts could profit as well. Students might receive higher accolades from instructors when their comments are topically prototypical as opposed to peripheral. Perhaps teaching effectiveness depends on whether the topical points of view of students and instructors overlap; as topical overlap increases, so does teaching effectiveness. Additional pragmatic implications emerge when conversational topic is considered.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the literature, scholars have approached conceptual discussions of conversational topic with both negative and positive sentiments. Ellis (1992), for example, stated that "it is probably impossible to be precise about the nature of topicality, or to assume that we can formally specify the relationship between texts and topics, but the concept still has strong explanatory value" (p. 119). Our primary purpose of this essay was to demonstrate that, although conceptual integration is an arduous task, conversational topic is not immune to it. That is, we intended to bring some meaningful order to the relevant literature in our explication and analysis of conversational topic by highlighting four different perspectives from which scholars examine this area. We hope that our comments and suggestions stimulate novel research and theory construction across the four perspectives on conversational topic and other areas in the field of communication that draw on the broader concept of topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Media research typically uses the term *content* to refer to what media messages are about (i.e., the content of media messages). A synonym of *content*, however, is *topic*; both terms broadly refer to what a message (i.e., communication) is about. Thus, media research does not always explicitly refer to topic; yet researchers implicitly use the term *topic* when referring to the content of media messages. That is, media researchers' explicit focus on the content of media messages implies a focus on the topic of these messages (i.e., what messages are about).

2. Henceforth, the terms *conversational topic* and *topic* are used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

3. These indicators include redundancies (Marlin & Barron, 1972); intonation patterns (G. Brown & Yule, 1983; Holdgrafer & Campbell, 1986; Schaffer, 1984); returns to a prior topic (Sirois & Dorval, 1988); shared historical life events, time periods, and social experiences (Boden & Bielby, 1986); emotions (de Beaugrande, 1992); topic initiation in Usenet newsgroups (Gruber, 1995), and topic asides or side sequences (Grimes, 1982).

4. See Bedrosian (1985), Bloom, Rocissano, & Hood (1976), Brinton & Fujiki (1984), Brinton & Willbrand (1980), Dawson (1937), Flannagan, Baker-Ward, & Graham (1995), Foster (1981, 1986), French, Lucariello, Seidman, & Nelson (1985), Garvey (1977, 1984), Kavanaugh, Whittington, & Cerbone (1983), Keenan and Schieffelin (1976), Kertoy & Vetter (1995), Lucariello (1990), Marvin (1994), Marvin, Beukelman, Brockhaus, & Kast (1994), McShane (1990), Moerk

(1975), Mulcahy (1973), Raffaelli & Duckett (1989), Schober-Peterson & Johnson (1989), Wanska & Bedrosian (1985, 1986), and Wanska, Bedrosian, & Pohlman (1986).

5. See: Adams & Bishop (1989), Bedrosian (1993), Bedrosian & Willis (1987), Brinton & Fujiki (1989, 1993), Brinton, Fujiki, & Powell (1997), Fey (1986), Fox, Sohlberg, & Fried-Oken (2001), Kuder & Bryen (1993), Mentis (1991, 1994), Mentis, Briggs-Whittaker, & Gramigna (1995), and Ridley, Radford, & Mahon (2002).

6. See Afifi & Burgoon (1998), Afifi & Guerrero (1998, 2000), Baxter & Wilmot (1985), Caughlin & Afifi (2004), Caughlin & Golish (2002), Dailey & Palomares (2004), Golish (2000), Golish & Caughlin (2002), Goodwin & Lee (1994), Guerrero & Afifi (1995a, 1995b), Roloff & Ifert (1998, 2000), Sargent (2002), Vangelisti (1994), and Vangelisti & Caughlin (1997).

7. See Chambliss & Feeny (1992), Clark (1998), Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott (1997), Haas (1979), Klein (1971), Komarovsky (1967), Langer (1970a, 1970b), Levin & Arluke (1985), Samter, Burleson, Kunkel, & Werking (1994), and Stuart, Vanderhoof, & Beukelman (1993).

8. R. Brown (1978) refers to the basic object level to indicate a degree of abstraction where the object in question is at the highest level it can be while still being visualizable. A "fruit" cannot be visualized, whereas a "banana" can be. This level may be a kind of absolute anchor point. As one departs from this point, going upward, abstraction increases ("organic thing"); with downward departure, abstraction decreases ("brown banana"). Perhaps a rigorous way to quantify abstraction would be to score a concept at the basic object level 0 and give one point for each particularizing attribute: brown banana = 1, fuzzy brown banana = 2, limp fuzzy brown banana = 3, and so forth; the higher the score, the less abstract the object. However, this metric works only for downward departures from the basic object level—if banana = 0, what is the score of "organic thing"? Is it −2 or −10? Moreover, even for downward scoring, things become absurd in the realm of actual sentences. How does one score "The duck who swam in the deep pond ate fat worms"? The depth of the pond and the size of the worms have some connection to the duck, but not the same kind of connection as swimming and eating.

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