

**Topical Strategies and
Transition Markers in
Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations**

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Abstract

The current study is a conversation analysis that tackles the topical strategies employed by Mosuli Arabic speakers to change the subject of the casual conversation as well as the transition markers used with each strategy . The aim of this study is to show how these strategies and transition markers are used in Mosuli Arabic as well as the reasons to change the subject of the conversation. The data comes from a survey conducted on 50 Mosuli Arabic speakers in addition to three hours of recorded multi-party conversations. The model of analysis adopted is Stenström's (1994) classification of topic strategies. The analysis showed that Mosuli Arabic speakers use seven topical strategies which are: introducing , terminating , changing , shifting, drifting, digressing and resuming. In addition , Mosuli Arabic speakers used different transition markers with each strategy and stated sixteen reasons to change the subject of the conversation.

الاستراتيجيات الموضوعية ودلالات الانتقال في المحادثات الموصلية العرضية

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تحليل المحادثة للاستراتيجيات الموضوعية المستخدمة من قبل متحدثي اللهجة الموصلية لتغيير موضوع الكلام في المحادثات الموصلية العرضية بالإضافة الى علامات الانتقال المصاحبة لكل استراتيجية. تهدف الدراسة الى عرض استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات وعلامات الانتقال الموضوعية بالإضافة الى اسباب تغيير موضوع المحادثة. البيانات تأتي من استبيان اجري على 50 متحدث للهجة الموصلية بالإضافة الى ثلاث ساعات مسجلة من المحادثات العرضية المتعددة الاشخاص. نموذج التحليل المستخدم هو تصنيف (1994) Stenström للاستراتيجيات الموضوعية. اظهرت البيانات ان متحدثي اللهجة الموصلية يستخدمون سبعة استراتيجيات موضوعية وهي : التقديم ،الانهاء ،التغيير ،الاستبدال ،الانجراف ،الاستطراد ،الاستئناف. اضافة الى ذلك ، استخدم متحدثو اللهجة الموصلية علامات انتقال مختلفة مع كل استراتيجية وذكروا ستة عشر سببا لتغيير موضوع المحادثة.

1-Introduction

Managing a conversation in real life presents some challenges whereby people often find themselves in a social situation where they must talk , either in first-time encounters or with some acquaintances. Furthermore,

Learning effective conversation skills can be considered one of the significant social abilities, and one of which is the transition from one topic to another. Some conversations contain only one topic or some unrelated topics. Moreover, a topic tends to split into subtopics dealing with particular aspects of the main topic. Researches in the tradition of conversation analysis suggest that transitions between topics of conversation (what the speakers talk about) are accomplished in a systematic, structured way (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). During conversations, participants usually talk about a topic that they are interested in and also share ideas back and forth. They ask questions and respond with enthusiasm. When silence occurs, then the conversation topic usually comes to its natural conclusion. This does not mean that the entire conversation is over too, but it is time for speakers to change the subject. Participants move on to another topic using some expressions and transition phrases and this is a skill which requires changing the topic while still keeping the conversation going on. This study sheds light on how speakers of Mosuli Arabic move from one subject to another and presents the expressions they use to achieve this transition.

2-Literature Review

The notion of topic has been tackled by many linguists. Some display the difficulties in the treatment of topic. Brown and Yule (1983) deplore that the topic should be described as the most frequently used, unexplained term in the analysis of discourse. Sacks (1992) explicitly mentions his early reluctance to consider topic as a worthwhile subject of study. He considers topic to be an artifact of the tying structures of interaction. Gontsos (1997) concludes that there is a complete lack of consensus on the notion of topic. Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001) mention that social scientists have paid little attention to what speakers talk about. Nevertheless, Grobet (2002) notes that despite the arguments to dismiss the notion of topic, an ever-growing body of work still uses this concept.

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974:710) show that turns contain topics in them and display certain features which work together in building a related sequence of topics. Maynard (1980) mentions that the

topic is what the conversation is about. Similarly, Yule (1980) explains that the topic is what is generally being talked about. A similar view is given by Stenström (1994) who suggests that the topic is what the speakers talk about. Chafe (1994:128) defines topic as "the totality of information that is semi-active at one time". Riou (2015) mentions discourse topic and defines it in terms of aboutness as what a portion of the interaction is about. Similarly, Gilmartin and Vogel (2018) state that the topic is often used to segment conversation at a level above the utterance and consider it in the sense of 'aboutness' of a stretch of talk. Topic change has also received a lot of attention. Crow (1983) insists on the importance of shifts and frontiers between the topics and focuses on topic boundaries and shifts. Jefferson (1984) focuses on stepwise topic transition, i.e. when participants gradually move away from one topic to another. Howe (1991:122-124) says that a topic change is a collaborative activity of participants over a certain period of time, in which several topic change indicators seem to appear. Ishihara (2009) reveals that daily conversations commonly consist of various transitions from one topic to another and explains six commonly perceived techniques for achieving topic change. These include: prefatory disjunctives, questions, declarative clauses, explicit topic change expressions, formulaic expressions, and summary assessment. Riou (2015) studied the interactional action of transitioning to a new discourse topic, as well as the different linguistic strategies that participants have at their disposal. The main types of cues investigated are: questions, discourse markers, and pitch register.

As regards the strategies for changing the subject, Stenström (1994) mentions seven strategies which include: introducing, terminating, changing, shifting, drifting, digressing and resuming. This view is convenient for the present study and going to be adopted. Kim (2017) presents four strategies to introduce a new topic which comprise changing the subject by: asking a question, introducing a new topic, creating a distraction, and changing the subject abruptly.

3-The Data

The data comes from a survey conducted on 50 speakers who were asked to state the words or expressions they use with each strategy. In addition,

the study utilizes extracts taken from three hours of recorded casual multi-party conversations between friends and family members. To avoid any effect on the speakers' conversations, they were unconscious of the recording process. The participants gave their consent to the recording process after it had ended. The target population are twenty educated adult Mosuli Arabic speakers (males and females) ranging from 20-60 years old. They were asked to answer survey questions concerning the use of transition markers with each topical strategy and the reasons that make speakers change the topic of the conversation.

4-Aim of the Study

The study aims to show the topical strategies and transition markers used in Mosuli Arabic casual conversations as well as the reasons to change the topic of the conversation.

5-Findings and Discussion

5.1 Reasons to Change the Topic

Kim (2016) mentions the reasons that impel the speakers to change the topic of the conversation. They are as follows:

- a) Having nothing to say on a particular topic.
- b) The subject isn't appropriate.
- c) The subject is difficult.
- d) The subject is boring.
- e) The subject makes the speaker feel uncomfortable.
- f) The subject is too personal.
- g) The subject puts the speaker on the spot and makes him feel like the
- h) focus of attention when he does not want to be.
- h-The speaker is not interested in the subject.
- i) The subject has been going on for too long and it is time to bring up a new subject.

After examining the survey results, Mosuli Arabic speakers added the following reasons to change the subject to the previous ones:

- 1- The subject is embarrassing.
- 2- The discussion is unpleasant.
- 3- The speaker wants to avoid argument.
- 4- The speaker wants to avoid gossip.
- 5- The discussion is useless.
- 6- The subject may compromise a secret.
- 7- The subject may oblige the speaker to make a commitment to do something when she/ he doesn't want to.

5.2 Topical Strategies and Transition Markers

Casual conversation is a social activity involving two or more participants who talk about something. Participants talk for the sake of talking and the duration of such interaction can vary from short conversations to ongoing interactions. Such talk is thought to build social bonds and avoid unfriendly silence. In casual conversations participants have equal speaker rights and can contribute at any time (Stenström,1994; Gilmartin and Vogel,2018). In addition, participants talk about one or more topics which in their turn may consist of one or more subtopics To have a better idea about conversations in Mosuli Arabic, the following topical strategies are going to be discussed :

5.2.1 Introducing and Terminating:

Most conversations begin with an opening like greetings, laughs, and compliments. Before a topic is introduced in a conversation, there is generally a warming-up period when the parties engage in phatic talk which usually has the following ingredients(Stenström,1994):

- 1- Questions about health.
- 2- Comments on the weather.
- 3- Comments on personal matters.
- 4- Polite phrases.

In the following extract , the two speakers first exchange greetings, and then ask each other about their health and personal affairs:

A: istarîhu .ashshon aĥwâlkum a iššiĥa ?
(Sit down . How are you ? aa.. Your health ?)

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B: : alḥamdu lil lāh.

(Thank God)

C: ahlan wasahlan.

(Welcome)

B: ashshōnak yāba ? umūrak ? aḥwālak?

(How are you dear? Your affairs ? Your condition ?)

A: alif hala . ashshōnak ?

(A thousand welcome . How are you ?)

B: hala ḥabībi . alif hala bīk .

(Welcome dear . You are a thousand welcome)

Extract no.1

Now let us examine the first topical strategy:

1-Introducing means bringing up a first topic at the beginning or a new topic in the course of the conversation (Stenström,1994). It is likely to introduce the first topic by means of some expression or a transition

marker which helps the speaker to get started and prepare the listener for the speaker's next action. The following extract is an example:

A: kawi fi'lan ilwaraq .

ilwaraq ishshitrānj mirtibit bilfiker.

(Cards game is truly. Cards, chess are related to cognition)

B: ishshitrānj ana aghsha'u akthagh.

(I see that chess is more)

Extract no.2

We notice here that speaker A uses the word "kawi" as a transition marker to start a topic and draws the listener's attention.

The survey conducted on Mosuli Arabic speakers revealed that they use different transition markers for introducing a new topic as it is shown in the following table:

Introducing Markers	Meaning	Introducing Markers	Meaning

kawi	Notice that	dastashīrak	I consult you
ēh	yes	dasalak	I ask you
akhūy allah ikhallīk	My brother God protect you	dastafsir minnak	I enquire from you
daḥḥiq	look	il'afu	Excuse me
ballah	For God sake	Iḏa mumkin ?	Is it possible ?
asalak	I ask you	aqūl	I say
ṭab'an	of course	daqillak	I tell you
ti'ghif?	Do you know..?	ḥaqqa	By the way
mā'ghifit	You didn't know	lāḥadit ?	Did you notice?
Ash tqūl ?	What do you say?	bilmunāsaba	By the way
simi'tu	I heard	'la fikra	By the way
yaba	Hey	laḥḍa	A moment
tamam	Really	ḥaqqa	By the way
ighshi'it ?	Did you see ?	itḏakkartu	I remembered

Table 1: Introducing Markers in Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations

2-Terminating a topic involves closing the old topic before introducing a new one or before closing the entire conversation. Silent pauses may serve as termination markers and sometimes the current talk comes gradually to an end and there is no need for a marker to indicate the termination (Stenström,1994). Extract no.3 is an example where it is obvious that both A and B realize that there is nothing more to say and the silence after A's turn marks terminating the topic and starting a new topic in the next turn:

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A: hāy N assa' tala' it (Silence) ashshōn issōq assa' ?

(This is N just came out now (Silence). How is the market now ?)

B: nafsī shshē (It is the same)

Extract no.3

A pretext for leaving is a most forceful termination marker in that it terminates not just the current topic but the entire conversation (Stenström,1994), as in the following example:

A: tismaḥūli 'indi shighil

(Excuse me . I have some business.)

B: alla ma'āk

(God be with you.)

The survey conducted on Mosuli Arabis speakers revealed

The following terminating markers used to end a topic of the conversation:

Terminating Markers	Meaning	Terminating Markers	Meaning
Silence		mashshi	Let it go
dīgh ilmawdū'	Turn the subject	iqlib išsafḥa	Turn the subject
ghayyir ilmawdū'	Change the subject	siddu ilmawdū'	Close the subject
yalla	It is okay	'ala kullin	Anyway
hāi hiyya ikaffi	That's it enough	kaffi baqa	That's enough
ilghō ilniqāsh	Cancel the discussion	iḥkō 'an shē illākh	Talk about something else
mā'alēna	Not our affairs	khallīna hassa'	Leave it now
lif issālfa	Cancel the story	'al 'umūm	In general

ikaffi baqit	That's enough	ilmuhim	The important thing
Alla karīm	God is generous	asha'ghif	I don't know
hāḏa huwwa	That's it	lif ilmawḏū'	Cancel the subject
iqlib ilmawḏū'	Turn the subject	inhi ilmawḏū'	Terminate the subject

Table 2: Terminating Markers in Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations

5.2.2 Changing, Shifting, and Drifting:

These topical strategies are used to move from the current topic to a related or unrelated topic (Stenström,1994) :

1-Changing the Topic:

Changing involves abandoning the current topic in favour of a new, unrelated topic(Stenström,1994). A new topic can be introduced after the previous topic has been terminated by one of the terminating markers mentioned in Table(2), as in the following example:

A: ilmawād ghilyit ?

(Did the prices of things rise?)

B: ma'ghif

(I don't know)

A: mā'alēna asalak akhbār C ?

(Not our affairs. I ask you what about C ?)

Extract no.4

A terminates the old topic by the terminating marker (mā'alēna) and tries to go on to a new topic using the introducing marker (asalak) .In informal conversations between intimate speakers new topics tend to be brought up at once without using any transition marker (Stenström,1994) , as in the following extract:

A: ash 'imilti halyōm bāmya ? (What did you cook today ? okra?)

B: ē

(Yes)

A: ēh taibi . ghihtu 'alsōq ilbēha

(Yes delicious. I went shopping yesterday)

Extract no.5

Here A starts a new topic without using any introducing marker

2-Shifting from the Topic:

Shifting involves moving from one topic to a related topic or from one aspect of the current topic to another and it is usually initiated by a shifting marker(Stenström,1994). The shifting marker does not introduce an entirely new topic. Instead, it marks the transition between two related topic, as in the following extract:

A: ashwaqit itnāqish irrisāla .

bishshahigh ittāsi'?

(When are you going to discuss your thesis ? In the ninth month?)

B: ma'al wajba ththāniya , aa ya'ni ma'al ikmāliyi . bilithna'ish

(With the second group . aa I mean with the make-up group .

In the twelfth month.)

A: ēh wšadīqak ?

(Yes, and your friend?)

Extract no. 6

Here A in the first turn talks about B's thesis, then in the second turn he shifts to talk about a related topic which is B's friend.

The following table shows the shifting markers in Mosuli Arabic conversations. What is worth mentioning is that introducing markers and shifting markers are partly realized by the same items, like silence:

Shifting Markers	Meaning	Shifting Markers	Meaning
Silence		Zēn iōa	So if
tismahūli aḏīf ?	May I add ?	Mā ykhālif bas	It is okay but

'indi ra i	I have an opinion	aqūl	I say
daḥhiq	look	tamām	True
balla ...?	For God sake..?	šadaqit	You said the truth
asalak	I ask you	Jayyīk bilhaki	Going to say it
tab'an	of course	bas	But
ti'ghif?	Do you know..?	'ala mūd mawdū'	Concerning
hassa'	Now	aghīd aḏīf	I want to add
mā bas hāḏa	Not only this	Aqūl shē	I say something
ḥaqqā	Really	ashnu ra yak iḏa ..?	What is your opinion if ..?
isma' hāi	Hear this	ḏīf 'ala hāḏa	Add to this
azīdak 'ilim	I add to your information	Shē illākh	Something else

Table 3: Shifting Markers in Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations

3-Drifting from the Topic:

Drifting involves moving almost imperceptibly from one topic to another. The speaker shifts in an inconspicuous way. The speakers gradually move to talk about a new unrelated topic, therefore, there are no drifting markers because topic drifts are linguistically unmarked. Nevertheless, there is a link between the old and the new topic (Stenström,1994). The following is an example:

A: aku aḥhad aa gharīb ?
(Is there any aa stranger?)

B: balē bas sit aa maghit C . ti'ghifa ?

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(Yes, only Mrs. aa C's wife . Do you know her?)

A: ē C šadīqi min baghdād . khōsh insān

(Yes, C is my friend from Baghdad. He is a good person)

Extract no. 7

Here A in the first line asks a question about the guests, then B responds and directs a question . When A answers B's question, he drifts to talk about C who is not among the guests.

5.2.3 Digressing and Resuming:

These two topical strategies imply leaving the current topic for a while and going back to the same topic:

1-Digressing from the Topic:

Digressing involves moving away temporarily from the current topic. Some digressions are spontaneous and others are deliberate (Stenström,1994) . The following digression has no connection with the current topic. The two speakers have been talking about (studying) when A suddenly talks about (the weather):

A: ash akhbār

ildirāsa?

(How is study?)

B: māshīyyi

(Going on)

A: khōsh jaw hilyōm . hāfid 'ala darsak

(Nice weather today. Keep your study)

Extract no. 8

Some digressions are linguistically marked (initiated by a digression marker) while others are not. The following table shows the digressing markers used by Mosuli Arabic speakers:

Digression Markers	Meaning	Digression Markers	Meaning

bilmunāsaba	By the way	hassa'	now
biĥāqīqa	Actually	aqūl	I say
'indi ra i	I have an opinion	daĥkīlak	I tell you
daĥhiq	look	aghīd aqūl	I want to say
Balla ?	For God sake ?	'indī iqtirāḥ	I have a suggestion
asalak	I ask you	ba' ī d 'an ilmawdū'	Away from the subject
tab'an	Of course	Tōakkartu shē	I remembered something
ti'ghif?	Do you know..?	Wī mā qultūlak	Oh I didn't tell you
tamām	True	daqīqa daqillak	Just a minute I will tell you
mā 'alēna	Not our bussiness	'indi mudākhala	I have something to say

Table 4: Digressing Markers in Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations

2-Resuming the Topic:

It involves ending the digression and going back to the old topic as in extract no.8 (Stenström,1994). The Mosuli Arabic speakers used the expressions mentioned in the following table to resume the topic:

Resumption Markers	Meaning	Resumption Markers	Meaning
nirja' il mawūd'na	We go back to our subject	kinna 'anqūl	We were saying
Kammil	Complete the	nirja' il	We go back to

ilmawdū'	subject	sālfitna	our story
ē mā qilitli	Yes you didn't tell me	mā jāwabitni	You didn't reply to me
bilbidāya qilitli	At the beginning you told me	Nirja' lilmuhim	We go back to what is important
mithil mā qilit	As you said	bilnisba ilmawdū'ak	Concerning your subject

Table 5: Resumption Markers in Mosuli Arabic Casual Conversations

6-Conclusion

This research has studied topic transition in Mosuli Arabic interactions focusing on audio recordings of spontaneous conversations between friends and relatives. Moreover, a survey is conducted on 50 speakers of Mosuli Arabic who were asked to show the transition markers that accompany each kind of topical strategies and the reasons that make them change the subject of the conversation. The main object of inquiry is topical strategies that participants have at their disposal to achieve the interactional action of transitioning to a new topic as well as the different transition markers associated with each strategy.

The study has demonstrated that participants used seven types of topical strategies which include: introducing, terminating, changing, shifting, drifting, digressing and resuming. Furthermore, participants gave sixteen reasons to change the subject. In addition, different types of transition markers used by participants are demonstrated. Moreover, the study reveals that some transition markers are realized by the same items. i.e., some transition markers are used with more than one topical strategy.

Based on the findings, it is planned to investigate if there are any expressions which are specifically correlated with speaker change and the continuation of a subject which is another aspect of the interaction. It will also be interesting to see if there are certain nonverbal signals like gaze, gestures, and body movement associated with speaker change.

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Appendix 1 : Transliteration Symbols

A: Consonants

Symbol	Phonetic Value	Example	Meaning
a	[ʔ]	amal	Hope
b	[b]	bēt	House
p	[p]	parda	Curtain
t	[t]	tīn	Figs
th	[θ]	thōgh	Ox
j	[dʒ]	jamal	Camel
ch	[tʃ]	chanta	Bag
h	[ħ]	hūt	Whale
kh	[x]	khēt	Thread
d	[d]	dūlāb	Cupboard
ḏ	[ð]	ḏēl	Tail
r	[r]	rādyo	Radio
z	[z]	zēt	Oil
s	[s]	sikkīn	Knife
sh	[ʃ]	shamis	Sun
š	[ʂ]	šāhin	Dish
ḍ	[ɗ]	ḍamīr	Conscience
ṭ	[t̤]	tabīb	Doctor
'	[ʕ]	'īd	Feast
gh	[ɣ]	ghada	Tomorrow

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f	[f]	farīq	Team
v	[v]	vīdyo	Video
q	[q]	qalib	Heart
k	[k]	kitāb	Book
g	[g]	gōl	Goal
l	[l]	laḥim	Meat
l̥	[l̥]	aḷḷāh	God
m	[m]	maṭagh	Rain
n	[n]	nās	People
h	[h]	hōni	Here
w	[w]	walad	Boy
y	[j]	yōm	Day

B: Long Vowels

Symbol	Phonetic Value	Example	Meaning
ā	[a:]	kitāb	Book
ū	[u:]	būq	Trumpet
ī	[i:]	fīl	Elephant
ō	[o:]	yōm	Day
ē	[e:]	'ēn	Eye

C:Short Vowels

Symbol	Phonetic Value	Example	Meaning
a	[a]	ḏahab	Gold
u	[u]	muhanndis	Engineer
i	[I]	kitāb	Book
o	[ɒ]	rādyo	Radio

Appendix 2 : Survey Questions

- 1- اضعف الى الكلمات والعبارات التالية ماتستخدمه لبدا الكلام عن موضوع جديد في اللهجة الموصلية: كوي/ اي / اقول/ دحق/ بالله...؟/ اسالك...؟/ طبعاً/ تعفف...؟.....
- 2- اضعف الى الكلمات والعبارات التالية ماتستخدمه لانتهاء الكلام عن موضوع جديد في اللهجة الموصلية: السكوت/ غير الموضوع/ الغو النقاش/ اقلب الموضوع/ احكو عن شي اللاخ/ ماعلينا/.....
- 3- اضعف الى الكلمات والعبارات التالية ماتستخدمه للانتقال الى موضوع اخر يتعلق بالموضوع الاول الجاري الكلام عنه في اللهجة الموصلية: اغيد اضعف/ اقول شي/ تسمحولي اضعف/ مابس هدا/ عندي راي/ دحق/ بالله/ اسالك/ هسع/ تعفف؟/ طبعاً/.....
- 4- اضعف الى الكلمات والعبارات التالية ماتستخدمه للاستطراد (للخروج من موضوع الحديث مؤقتاً) في اللهجة الموصلية: بالمناسبة/ بالحقيقة/ اقول/ عندي راي/ دحق/ بالله/ اسالك/ طبعاً/ تعفف؟/ هسع/.....
- 5- اضعف الى الكلمات والعبارات التالية ماتستخدمه للعودة الى موضوع الحديث بعد الاستطراد (الخروج من موضوع الحديث مؤقتاً) في اللهجة الموصلية: نرجع لموضوعنا/.....
- 6- اضعف الى التالي سببا يدفعك لتغيير موضوع الحديث:
الموضوع غير ملائم.
الموضوع صعب.
الموضوع ممل.
الموضوع يجعل المتحدث يحس بعدم الراحة.
الموضوع شخصي جداً .
الموضوع يجعل المتحدث مركز الاهتمام حيث لا يريد هو ذلك.
المتحدث غير مهتم بالموضوع.
الموضوع جرى الحديث عنه لفترة طويلة وحان وقت تغييره.
ليس للمتحدث شي لأضافته.