TOPIC SHIFTS IN CONVERSATIONS: FOCUS ON MALAYSIAN CHINESE TEENAGERS

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Abstract

Conversations serve as a means for people to interact and exchange ideas. In that regard, it is not surprising that speakers may shift from talking about one topic to another within conversations. Focusing on Malaysian Chinese teenagers, this study aims to identify the various topic shifts which occur in casual conversations. In this qualitative study, data was recorded by the participants during their daily discussions outside of class. Four tapes of their conversations lasting about 30 minutes each were accumulated and Jefferson's (1978a) notation for transcribing was used with adaptations to suit the depth of this study. Crow's (1983) typology of topic shifts (i.e. topic initiation, topic shading, topic renewal, and topic insertion) was used as the framework for analysis. Analysis indicates that three types of topic shifts predominate. Male participants performed more topic initiation and topic shading whereas female participants performed more topic insertion. In addition, nine strategies were employed by the participants in the process with the statement and question strategies being more prominent than others.

Keywords: topic shifts, teenagers, conversation, strategies, Malaysian Chinese

Introduction

Human interaction is a means of survival (Maslow 1954) and talking is one of the means. Talk or conversations function essentially to serve the needs of mankind which is to exchange ideas, share feelings, make known one's intention, and various other needs. While topics are being shared or discussed, those involved may agree or disagree with the topics or they may contribute or digress from it depending on their interest or knowledge level. Pridham (2001, p.2) defines a conversation as an interactive spoken exchange between two or more people. From this definition, it can be seen that conversations are the actions of individuals and this involves face to face exchanges like those carried out during lunch or dinners, in supermarkets while shopping and so on. Conversations may also include non face to face exchanges like telephone conversations or radio talk shows.

Various studies on conversations have been conducted and focus can encompass looking at openings, closings, adjacency pairs, politeness, speech acts and the application of Grice's maxims in conversations. Of the many interesting features of conversations, conversational topics and disagreements within conversations have grabbed the

attention of many. In conversations, speakers can move from one topic to another and Sacks (1992) say that conversation topics routinely move from one topic to another through a progression of conversational turns. Like all kinds of daily talks which occur in markets, restaurants or long roadsides, a conversation seldom evolve around one specific topic only. Being fluid members of society who can vary their minds and focus, speakers can shift from a trivial chat to a serious discussion. Conversations may also shift from a joke to serious issues of the country. Undeniably, speakers may also shift from simple gossips about movies to talks which reveal personal events or incidents. The process of talking only stops when the participants involved find the necessity to end it or when it is interrupted by something else. Conversations are made up of various speakers whose personal background varies in terms of age, gender, culture, values and upbringing. This is even more rampant in a multiethnic and multicultural nation like Malaysia. Doing a study on how young people shift topics in their conversations would bring about a better understanding of the people involved and this would thus create harmony and understanding.

It is a fact that in any conversation a speaker does not tell the hearer what the hearer already knows if the speaker is aware of this fact. The speaker is more likely to focus on a topic that would interest the hearer (Sacks 1978). As the conversation progresses, a speaker does not explicitly indicate that a topic shift is occurring as the conversation progresses (Coates 1996) so there must be some indications that would signify when a topic shift is about to occur within a conversation.

Aim of study

This study will highlight the types of topic shifts made by Malaysian Chinese teenagers and the type of strategies used to create the shifts. The findings will provide some understanding of the type of topic shifts made by males and females and in what way do they differ in the strategies used. This study will therefore attempt to answer the following research questions:

a.   What types of topic shifts are likely to occur in teenager conversations?
b.   Who shifts what types of topic the most?
c.   What are the common strategies used?

Methodology

Fifteen Chinese teenagers were selected based on their ethnicity, age and consent to participate. They were then grouped into 2 male groups and 2 female groups with each group consisting of 3 to 4 speakers. Classified as F1 and F2 (females) and M1 and M2 (males) respectively, the 18-19 years olds were students of a private university in the Klang Valley with all having acquired Chinese education from primary schools. Topics of conversations were not determined but they were told to hold their conversations outside formal classroom interactions. One participant in the group would tape record the conversations. Each conversation lasts about 30 minutes and a total of 120 minutes of data were extracted. Crow's (1983) typology of topic shifts was then used for analysis. The various communication strategies described by Tarone (1980), Bialystok (1990) and others were adapted for use.

Framework for Analysis

Crow's framework is explained in Table 1.

Table 1: Crow's (1983) typology of topic shifts

Topic shifts	Explanations
Topic initiation	An attempt to bring up a new topic after speakers closes the previous topic.
Topic shading	Introduces a new topic by explicitly relating the topic to the current topic.
Topic renewal	A shift back to an earlier topic after one or more other topics or topic-shifting attempts has intervened.
Topic insertion	An (often) abrupt shift that does not succeed in gaining the topical floor (p.148). It most often occurs within a turn. The shift is often tangential to the earlier topic but is not marked as in topic shading. In an insert, the impression is that the speakers do not want to abandon the last topic discussed.

Limitation

The data focuses only on the interactions of one particular community, Malaysian Chinese teenagers. Thus, data cannot be used to generalize for other teenage groups in this country.

Conversations and topic shifts

A conversation may be music to some or a distraction to others, depending on contexts. Nonetheless, just like music, there should be a flow where there is a continuation. In comparing it to a movie which also requires unity, it is clear that when a conversation is planned, the topics tend to flow because the speaker is aware of the need to connect his/her thoughts and ideas as he/she talks. However, the interlocutors may not be aware of where the conversation is going although there are clues which they may pick up as they listen. Reports seem to suggest that there might be continuity in topics in planned conversations such as interviews or counseling sessions but in casual conversations, participants tend to contribute to its flow either by initiating topics or by expanding on it. As is evident, speakers do not usually focus on only one topic in a conversation; speakers tend to shift from one topic to another almost unnoticed. Yahmini's (2009) thesis is one of the few local studies conducted on Malaysians to understand how types of topic shifts are performed.

The term *topic* is a very ordinary concept but various scholars define the term differently. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2002, p.1426) defines *topic* as 'a subject that you talk, write or learn about' but Maynard (1980) defines *topic* as 'what the conversation is about'. A conversation is often described as having several topics says Maynard but Geluykens (1992, p.181) says that 'the conversationalist has to negotiate through the turn-taking system in order to get topics into the conversation and so depending on speakers, topics may come and go at whim and fancy'. Bloom

(1994, p.172) suggests that a *topic unit* is a set of utterances which appear to relate to the same topic and this is not separated by an introduction of another topic nor is there a shift in a particular turn within that conversation. He further suggests that participants may show support for each other's discussion on a particular topic through various ways or they may divert from a particular topic. Speakers tend to do this for their own purpose whether to support other speakers or to ensure that the conversation moves as desired. If the speaker has nothing to say, then the conversation ceases until someone else revives it by initiating a new topic.

Types of Topic Shifts

Scholars in the field of topic shifts in normal speech have conducted various researches by employing different typologies. Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) for instance identified continuous and discontinuous speech as types of discourse in their study of conversations of children and adults. They further classified the collaborating discourse topic (a topic that relates to the previous statements) and incorporating discourse topic (a new topic derived from prior topic) as continuous discourse. The practice of reintroducing discourse topic (a topic is reintroduced at some point of the speech) and the practice of introducing a new discourse topic (a new topic which has no relevance to prior statements is introduces) were termed as discontinuous discourse. Nonetheless, these terms will not be used in this paper.

Gardner (1987) introduced six kinds of topic development: a) topic introduction, b) topic continuation, c) topic shift, d) topic change, e) topic recycling and f) topic reintroduction whereas Hahn (1995) suggested that three forms of thematic movements can take place in both written and spoken texts. They are a) constant theme (elaboration of one specific topic), b) continuous thematisation (continuous shift of topics) and c) derived theme (range of topics initiated in a conversation which share theoretical commonalities). Hanh's recommendation seems to be more elaborated in terms of the concept. In their works, Mentis and Prutting (1991) suggested that topic change, topic shift and on-coherent topic change can also be seen as three different types of topic development although to what extent is a topic development a shift, an insertion, a shading or an overlap, it was not made clear.

Of the many studies which focus on topic shifts and their various terms, it is Crow's (1983) ability to expand them that made it worthwhile to pursue the study. This is because Crow created four clear-cut types of shifts and they encompass typology of topic shifts which include coherent shift (topic initiation and topic shading), renewal and insertion. A coherent shift means that a new topic is introduced after a speaker ends the previous topic or that a new topic that is related to the current topic is being introduced. A topic renewal refers to a topic that is discussed again after one or more topics had been intervened and a topic insertion means that the speaker intends to introduce a topic because he/she does not want to end the conversation. Thus, even within a conversation, shifts can occur at any point of the conversation but when, it has not been clarified. It is hoped that this study can fill in the gap by providing the strategies used by Malaysian Chinese teenagers to shift topics as their conversations progress.

Petit (2005) looked at the nature and function of topics in the conversations of French single-sex friendship groups. Her study found that the topics of conversations are an important aspect in building friendship. Her data suggest that each gender is

likely to choose and use the topics of conversations in different ways as each has his/her own strategies such as questions and minimal responses during the conversation. Her study revealed that women were more open and can talk about intimate things because of the mutuality of their talk.

Another researcher, Chan (2007) investigated the placement and techniques of topic changes in Cantonese conversations among Hong Kong tertiary students. She analyzed the data by using theories of Conversation Analysis and her findings showed that placement of transition relevance and placement after silence were the most frequently used types other than placement of topic change. Her data also revealed that the use of questions and declarative clauses were the most common techniques used for topic change in English and Cantonese conversations. The use of conjunctions and adverbs may indicate either a new topic was going to be raised or it showed relevance to the prior topic.

Bloom's (1994) study focused on adult clinical populations. He found that topic shifts occur in the one-hour long communication among the selected group of patients. He reported that topic shifts which occur include topic initiation, topic shading, topic renewal and topic insertion. He also found that 'end of topic, decreased comprehension, failure to continue, outside stimulus' and 'repetitions' could be some of the reasons why subjects shifted topics.

Yahmini's (2009) study examined the topic shifts of three generations of Indian women. She found that all the four types of topic shifts: topic initiation, topic shading, topic renewal and topic insertion appeared among her subjects who had used nine strategies to effect these shifts. Her study indicates that topic initiation occurred most frequently across the three generations.

Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are part and parcel of the communication process and these strategies enable participants to say what is on their mind by using some form of mode to convey this need. Coined by Selinker (1972), the term communication strategy is often associated with second language learners. Of the many communication strategies detected, those more commonly prescribed are codeswitching, repetitions, paraphrasing, simplifications, appealing for help and so on. Tarone enlarges the scale by emphasizing on the interactional elements, saying that communication strategies refer to "…the mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared." (Tarone, 1980, p. 65)

Faerch and Kasper claim that communication strategies are "…potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (Faerch and Kasper, 1983, p. 36). Nunan (1995, p. 6) on the other hand mentions that "Research undertaking conversational and interactional analysis has also shown that interactions do not unfold neatly like textbook dialogues and that meanings do not come ready made. Participants have to work together to achieve mutual understanding through conversational skills including the ability to negotiate meaning with one's interlocutors." Many researchers view communication strategies as either verbal or non-verbal and that speakers use them as a way to negotiate meanings with their fellow speakers. Table 2 illustrates.

Table 2: Commonly used communication strategies

Communication Strategies	Explanations
Appeal for assistance	To request for support or help.
Code-switching	To use of more than one language in conversation where a bilingual uses features of two languages while conversing with another bilingual.
Language shift	A speech community of a particular language transfer to speaking another language.
Paraphrase	A restatement of a text or passage in other words to clarify meaning or to state in different way.
Repetition	The act or process of replication.
Simplification	To make it easy to understand by reducing the complexity.
Translation	The process of interpreting from one language into another.

(Adapted from Tarone, 1980)

Gender Differences

Gender is defined as 'the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female' (Connell, 2007, p. 8). Kessler and McKenna (1978, p. 7) define gender as "…psychological, social and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness". Gender difference basically refers to the characteristics or behavior differences of males and females who vary in the way they think, sense, act and behave all of which are often attributed to their biological or genetic difference in addition to their cultural behavioral expectations and training.

Tannen (1990) states that "men and women have different, but equally valid styles of communication where both genders can interpret the same conversation differently, even when there is no apparent misunderstanding" (Kelley, 1997, p. 13). "Men and women seem to experience the world differently, not merely because of the ways they were brought up in it, but because they feel it with a different sensitivity of touch, hear it with different aural responses and puzzle out its problems with different cells in their brains."

Most studies conclude that women are more verbal from young and a number of researchers have also highlighted that women's speech contain powerless features which seem to lessen women's social power. Coates (1996) says that the analysis of a conversation in terms of a topic provides us with only a superficial idea of the way women's conversations are constructed. Conversations among women friends can be filled with numerous topics and emotions and they should be analysed in terms of two components: narrative and discussions but this is not the focus of the present study. In addition to that, most studies which look at women talks found that these talks tend to circumvent around a story or a discussion and this may be unavoidable since it is through the sharing of stories that accounts are structured in a particular way, and depending on the cultures these women belong to, the structure of the women's

talks might also entail having a beginning, a middle and an end (Coates, 1996 cited in Yahmini, 2009, p. 8).

Both men and women have different but equally suitable approaches to communication (Tannen, 1990) and the difference is seen in the form of intimacy for female conversations where individuals negotiate complex networks of friendships, minimize differences, try to reach consensus, and avoid the appearance of superiority while interacting among themselves. These differences only emphasise on the independence of male talks because in a conversation, one primary means of establishing one's status is by instructing others on what to do and by taking the orders of a speaker a doer hence automatically lowers his own status (Tannen, 1990, p.17).

Findings

In this study, analysis of data will focus on the types of topic shifts occurring in the spoken conversations of 4 groups of teenagers. These topic shifts will then be compared between the genders to see which type of topic shift is more common and what strategies are used to create these shifts. The utterances are numbered while the speakers are indicated by letters and numbers. The conversations are presented the way they appeared in the transcriptions.

Topic Initiation among Female Participants

As has been mentioned, topic initiation suggests that a new topic has been created in a conversation. Extracts 1 and 2 illustrate how female Malaysian Chinese teenagers perform this type of shift.

EXTRACT 1
TURN

409	F1S2	You must take good care of your health *lah.*
410	F1S3	True.
411	F1S1	*Eh,* very colourful *lah* your timetable.
412	F1S3	Is it?
413	F1S2	Mine also *ma.*
414		All laughing
415	F1S3	Wah [
416	F1S1	] Wah…the number class bigger bigger some more.

In extract 1, F1S2 was advising F1S1 on her health in turn 409. F1S3 then gave a minimal response in turn 410 as a form of agreement to what F1S2 had said earlier. By turn 411, F1S1 initiated a new topic into the conversation. F1S1 seemed not interested in prolonging the previous topic, which was about F1S1's health, and so F1S1 took the responsibility to initiate a new topic by using the discourse marker "*eh*" as a strategy to get F1S2 and F1S3 to join her. F1S1's effort is considered successful because F1S3 responded in turn 412. Therefore, the topic initiation strategy succeeded in gaining the topical floor.

EXTRACT 2
TURN
290   F2S3   Wong can you hold this so that I can hang this thing up there? Thank you
291   F2S2   Why not you keep it up there?
292   F2S3   This this this…no *lah* very difficult
293   F2S2   Ok
294   F2S1   I feel like drinking something *lah*. You?
295   F2S4   *Ya* (Yes)… 100 plus also can
296   F2S3   *Eeh*… I don't like 100 plus
297   F2S4   It gives energy

In extract 2, topic initiation occurred in turn 294. Initially, F2S3 was requesting help from F2S2 to hold certain items so that she could hang them up. This can be seen in turn 290. F2S2, on the other hand suggested placing the items in some other place. F2S3 then conveyed her disagreement by stating, "it is difficult" in turn 292. In turn 293, F2S3 gave a minimal response 'Ok' agreeing to F2S3's statement. Out of the blue, F2S1 then made a statement in turn 294 saying that she feels like drinking something. Within the same turn, F2S1 also asked F2S4 if she felt the same way. F2S4 then responded to the question in turn 295. This illustrates a smooth adjacency pair where F2S4 said "*Ya* (Yes)" in response to F2S1's question and a short pause occurred. F2S4 continued after the short pause by saying she doesn't mind drinking 100 plus. In turn 296, F2S3 expressed her dislike for 100 plus and the conversation continued with the interlocutors talking about drinks. From the data, it can be said that topic shift had occurred in a smooth manner where F2S1 had used both the statement and question strategies to initiate a topic in turn 294.

Topic Shading among Female Participants

Topic shading refers to a speaker attempting to slide in a new topic within a conversation. Extracts 3 and 4 illustrate how the female teenagers attempted and succeeded.

EXTRACT 3
TURN
18   F1S1   15 pages of report or and 20 minutes of presentation, can't exceed
                  20 minutes [
19   F1S2   ] oh my god!
20   F1S1   I remember she saying you exceed 20 minutes, 1 minute 1 percent cut off.
21   F1S3   Per person or the whole group?
22   F1S1   The whole group.
23   F1S2   Some more look for the…
24   All laughing.
25   F1S3   We…how many assignments got to do? Like, like [
26   F1S2   ] two. *Ah* also the Economics
                  lah, I don't know how to do.
27   F1S1   You see [
28   F1S3   ] three *lah*
29   F1S1   *Ah*? Got three? Oh *ya*! English.

In extract 3, F1S1 was explaining about the time limit and penalty that will be given by their lecturer if they were to exceed the deadline for their coursework presentation. These utterances are shown in turns 18 and 20. In turn 21, F1S3 clarified her doubt about the penalty asking if marks would be deducted for individuals or for the entire group. F1S1 then responded in turn 22 by saying that it is for the whole group. F1S3 then shaded to a slightly different topic which is a topic still connected to the topic discussed earlier via turn 25. F1S3 questioned the floor on the number of assignments that they have to complete. In the subsequent turns, from 26 to 29, F1S1 and F2S2 gave their responses to F1S3's question. Data thus show that F1S3 had shaded in a sub-topic which is connected to the main topic. The term "sub-topic" (Sigman, 1983) used here refers to a talk about a range of subjects that can be considered related to the central topic. The question strategy in turn 25 was used by F1S3 to shade in a different topic. In this extract it seems apparent that F1S2 had interrupted as well as answered F1S3's question in turn 26. This indicates that the strategy was successful.

EXTRACT 4

TURN

336	F2S4	*Ya* (Yes) *lah*…always ordering people to do things one…big mama
337	F2S1	Whatever
338	F2S3	She would be immune to that name soon [
339	F2S1	] I think so…anyway I'm the eldest among all of you what
340	F2S2	Yes ah? When's your birthday?
341	F2S1	Who me?
342	F2S2	*Ya* (Yes)
343	F2S1	14th February
344	F2S3	*Wah*! Valentine day

In extract 4, F2S4 appeared to be justifying that the name "big mama" suits F2S1 well and this was done in turn 336. In turn 338, F2S3 then added that F2S1 would soon be used to the name as other interlocutors were already addressing F2S1 as 'big mama' quite frequently. F2S1 however, in turn 339 kept silent for less than 2 second before she proceeded to interrupting F2S3's statement. In the same turn, she mentioned that she was the eldest among them. F2S2 then posted a question in turn 340 which asked about F2S1's birthday. A response was provided by F2S1 in turn 341 when she asks 'Who me?' and F2S2 affirmed her question in turn 342. By the next turn, F2S1 replied that her birthday was 14th February. All these question and answer forms took place between turns 340 to 343. In turn 340, it was clear that F2S2 had used the question strategy to shade a new topic in. This strategy is considered as topic shading where the main topic was about F2S1 being the eldest whereas the sub-topic (shading) was the clarification of her birthday. Thus, the shading was successfully implemented.

Topic Insertion among Female Participants

A topic insertion is an abrupt shift that does not succeed in gaining the topical floor and most often, it would occur within a turn. Extract 5 and 6 illustrate how the female Malaysian Chinese teenagers attempted to insert a new topic but failed.

EXTRACT 5
TURN
304 F1S1 This shows that parents don't really communicate ↑, tell each other as they grow older.
305   All laughing
306 F1S2 They only communicate for the money.
307 F1S1 Yes, you are right. When come to money *ah*, *habislah* (finish).
308 F1S2 Salary *ah*…shouting… [*(Background noise)*
309 F1S3   ] *Ehhh…this Saturday can do work* [
310 F1S1   ] Last night I went to SS2 *pasar malam* (night market) you know [
311 F1S2   ] It's every night or last night only?

In extract 5, the speakers were talking about their parents' communication skills. This can be seen between turns 304 to 308. In turn 307 and 308, F1S1 and F1S2 supported each other as they were talking about money and salary. It is also noticeable that there was a slight pause in turn 308 which was made by F1S23. Nonetheless, the gap was filled by F1S3 in turn 309 who made a statement by suggesting that work can be done on a particular Saturday. This statement was however, interrupted by F1S1 in turn 310, who started telling the others about her experience of going to a night market. It appears that, F1S1 had used the discourse marker '*eh*' which was prolonged to gain attention and this attempt shows her desire to switch to a new topic. The discourse marker is seen as a strategy used by F1S3 to insert a new topic. The topic insertion however, did succeed in gaining the topical floor as it as data show that F1S1 and F1S2 continued to talk about the night market in turn 311.

EXTRACT 6
TURN
327 F2S2   Since you already have 2 husband
328 F2S4   No no no no no [
329 F2S3   ] Have to go to toilet. You want or not?
330 F2S2   Don't want. You go.

In extract 6, F2S2 was teasing F2S4 as having two husbands in turn 327. This is in pursuance to the conversation that took place earlier where F2FS mentioned about F2S4's crush on two guys. In turn 328, F2S4 denied it by saying 'no' repeatedly. Probably distracted by her own discomfort, F2S3 then inserted a new topic in turn 329 by claiming that she needed to go to the toilet. In the same turn, she also asked F2F2 if she wanted to go as well. F2S2 however, refused to go and told F2S3 to go by herself. This is seen in turn 330. The data seem to suggest that in turn 329, F2S3 posted a question to F2S2 without discussing the previous topic (joke about husband). Due to the fact that turn 329

was an unexpected shift from the main topic, it was thus identified as a topic insertion. It seems obvious that the insertion was unsuccessful in gaining the topical floor because her interlocutors did not pursue the topic any further as in elaborating on it although F2S2 did give a negative reply.

Topic Initiation among Male Participants

Where the above section displays the data of female participants, the subsequent extracts illustrate the data of male participants.

EXTRACT 7
TURN
178 M1S3   His friend is from Israel. He settle already…went to US [
179 M1S1   ] New York (P)
180 M1S4   Tonight we watch 'Hotel'.
181 M1S2   What's that? Comedy *ah*?
182 M1S4   Movie…horror movie

In extract 7, M1S3 and M1S1 were discussing M1S1's friend who were from Israel and who had settled down in New York. The discussion took place between turns 178 to 179. Data indicate that there was long pause [see (P)] in turn 179 probably because M1S1 had nothing much to contribute. When this occurred, M1S4 grabbed the opportunity to initiate a topic in turn 180 by making a statement about watching a movie titled 'Hotel'. His initiation was responded to by M1S2 who posed a question in turn 181 and in the same turn also clarified his doubt. M1S4 then responded in turn 182. This initiation (turn 180) is successful in gaining the floor.

EXTRACT 8
TURN
251 M2S1   ] I also don't understand that topic
252 M2S4   Ah? What a shocking news that you don't understand?
253 M2S1   Why not? I'm normal human being too what
254 M2S4   Ok ok…he's turning red
255 M2S2   Don't *lah* bully him you, Daniel [
256 M2S3   ] When we want do our short story? When we want to do our short story?
257 M2S1   Now also can
258 M2S2   Let's draft the plot first *lah*

In extract 8, M2S1 was expressing his difficulty in understanding a particular chapter of the subject in turn 251. M2S4 responded with a shocked expression in turn 252. This upset M2S1 who then asked a question in turn 253 as well as responded with a remark. Sensing the tension, M2S4 eased the situation by suggesting a stop and in turn 255, M2S2 requested M2S4 to stop the aggravation. It seems clear that M2S3 was not interested in pursuing the previous topic which was about teasing M2S1. Thus he initiated a new topic by interrupting their conversation in turn 256. It is clear that M2S3 had used the repetition strategy in turn 256 to make M2S1 and M2S2 join him. M2S3's

attempt at topic initiation is successful in gaining the topical floor as both M2S1 and M2S2 responded to his remark at turn 257 and 258 respectively.

Topic Shading among Male Participants

Like the female participants who attempted topic shading and succeeded, male participants also performed similar tasks. Extracts 9 and 10 illustrate the shift.

EXTRACT 9
TURN
180   M1S4   Tonight we watch 'Hotel'
181   M1S2   What's that? Comedy *ah*?
182   M1S4   Movie…horror movie
183   M1S2   Nice ah?
184   M1S3   Watch alone *ah*?
185   M1S2   Ask him *lah*…ask him *lah*
186   M1S4   Why?
187   M1S1   Can also but together *lah* (P)
188   M1S3   Must clean the house first if all of you coming today
189   M1S2   Floor very dirty?
190   M1S3   Must use soap water…
191   M1S4   Mop the floor, clean the floor…so long ready people never do [

In extract 9, M1S4 suggested watching a horror movie in turn 180. The rest of the interlocutors seem to support the idea and this is seen between turns 181 to 187. There was a long pause [see (P)] in turn 187. In turn 188, M1S3 filled in the gap by stating that the house must be cleaned first if all of them want to watch the movie together. M1S2 then inquired about the floor in turn 189. The statement made in turn 188 by M1S3 is identified as a strategy to shade in a different topic because a statement is usually accompanied by a response. As Crow (1983) has stated, topic shading introduces a new topic by first establishing its relevance to the previous topic. Turn 188 is identified as topic shading because the topic is associated to the preceding topic that is about watching movie in a group while the current topic is regarding cleaning the house if all want to watch together. Therefore, speaker M1S3 has successfully shaded in a new topic.

EXTRACT 10
TURN
1   M2S1   So what's the plan for today?
2   M2S2   We go bowling [
3   M2S3   ] bowling?
4   M2S1   *Ya* (Yes), fun what [
5   M2S3   ] but [
6   M2S2   ] 1U ok ready *lah*
7   M2S3   Don't want to go for movie?
8   M2S2   Movie? Tell what movie is nice [
9   M2S1   ] *Ya* (Yes), everything so boring one.
10   M2S3   ↑ Eh, the movie what… "The Shutter"…heard very scary. We go *lah*

In extract 10, M2S1 initiated a topic enquiring about the plan for the day in turn 1. M2S2 then responded with a suggestion in turn 2 and this was disagreed by M2S3 in turn 3 with a question and later on with an excuse of 'but' in turn 5. By turn 7, M2S3 developed a new topic. M2S2 and M2S1 then joined in the conversation by asking more about the movie in turns 8 and 9. The conversation proceeded with M2S3 suggesting the movie titled "The Shutter" in turn 10. Here, turn 7 is identified as topic shading because M2S3 seemed to have formed relevance between the current topic that was about movie going and the previous topic which was about the plan for the day. M2S3 had used a question strategy in turn 7 to shade in a different topic. M2S3's attempt to shade topic is successful in gaining the topical floor.

Topic Insertion among Male Participants

Male teenagers not only performed topic initiations and topic shading, they also performed topic insertions. Extracts 11 and 12 illustrate.

EXTRACT 11
TURN
55 M1S1   (Background noise-Muslim prayers). Eh, *sembahyang* (prayers) *ah*, cannot
                  concentrate ready! [laugh
56 M1S2   ] laugh [
57 M1S3   ] laugh…ohh, why [
58 M1S4   ] <u>What is that?</u>
59 M1S1   Tea
60 M1S3   Next sem still long

In extract 11, M1S1 talked about a distraction as shown in turn 55. M1S2 and M1S3 laughed in response via turns 56 and 57. M1S4 then interrupted in turn 58 probably on seeing something new, by asking, "What is that?" As questions are generally accompanied by responses, M1S1 then responded with "Tea" in turn 59. The data seem to suggest that M1S4 had used a question strategy to insert a new topic in turn 58 without discussing the previous topic in detail. The insertion is seen as sudden and this could be because of the background since the interlocutors were at a '*mamak*' stall. Therefore, turn 58 is identified as a topic insertion as it was an unexpected shift and it did not last for more than two turns.

EXTRACT 12
TURN
139 M2S3   ↑ Eh, for that economic assignment we download something from
                  Youtube *lah*…
140 M2S2   Something like?
141 M2S3   Relate to the topic *lah* [
142 M2S4   ] ↑ Take my picture for what?
143 M2S1   Handsome or not?
144 M2S4   Sure handsome [
145 M2S3   ] Many girls after him what
146   All laugh

147 M2S2 So (P)
148 M2S1 What time ready?
149 M2S3 1.50. Got time some more.
150 M2S4 For what?
151 M2S1 Consultation with Ms Leong

Extract 12 shows M2S3 and M2S2 discussing the issue of downloading a video for an Economic assignment. M2S3 made a suggestion in turn 139 and M2S2 asked for examples in turn 140. M2S3 then responded in accordance in turn 141. The flow of conversation was however, interrupted by M2S4 in turn 142 with a raised tone (see ↑) on the reason for M2S1 taking his pictures. This was responded to by M2S1 in turn 143 who showed the picture taken. On looking at his own photo (picture), M2S4 then agreed with M2S1's proposal in turn 144. Within the same turn M2S3 interrupted by adding on in turn 145. In this extract, M2S4 had used the question strategy in turn 142 with a raised tone (see ↑) to insert a new topic. The topic insertion clearly lasted from turn 143 to 145. Crow mentions that a topic insertion is only considered successful if it lasts more than two turns. In this case, it was successful before the floor was taken over by turn 147 which proceeds to the same discussion of the previous topic. M2S1 continued with the conversation by requesting about the time in turn 148 before it was responded to by MSS3 who said that they have "Got time some more" in turn 149, indicating a topic that was related to the previous topic. This was responded to in turn 150 and 151.

Summary of the occurrence of topic shifts detected

In summary, this study indicates that of the 120 minutes of recording which showed the 2 groups of male and female students interacting among themselves in casual contexts, female teenagers made a total of 20 attempts of topic initiations. The male teenagers on the other hand, made a total of 22 attempts of topic initiations. While female participants contributed a total of 12 topic shading occurrences, the male participants had made 20 attempts of topic shading in total. In topic insertion, the female participants had made 10 attempts but the male participants had managed with only 8 attempts. Table 3 illustrates.

Table 3: Summary of the types for topic shifts performed by male and female participants

Types of Topic Shifts	Total of attempts by Female groups	Total of attempts by Male groups
Topic Initiation	20	22
Topic Shading	12	20
Topic Insertion	10	8
Total topic shifts per group	42	50

Overall, the male participants had made the highest number of topic shifting which are 50 in total while the female participants made a total of 42 topic shifting instances.

Commonly used strategies:

Table 4 illustrates the frequencies of the various strategies used by all the interlocutors. The table suggests that the question strategy was used the most by the female group. It was used 15 times by the speakers to shift topics. The statement strategy was used 10 times and the discourse marker 'eh' was used 5 times. The discourse marker 'oh' on the other hand was used 3 times. At times, the speakers may also raise their tone and use 'eh' at the same time however, it occurred only twice.

The male participants used a total of 49 strategies while the female participants used a total 37 strategies with males inclined towards statement and females inclined towards questions. Table 4 illustrates the details.

Table 4: Frequency of the various strategies used by the teenagers

Commonly used strategies	Total of attempts by Female groups	Total of attempts by Male groups
Question	15	11
Statement	10	19
Discourse marker 'eh'	5	5
Raised tone & Discourse marker 'eh'	2	5
Raised tone	1	0
Discourse marker 'oh'	3	0
Discourse marker 'so'	0	1
Repetition	1	3
Raising tone & Question	0	5

Conclusion

This paper reports on the various topic shifts detected in male and female teenager conversations. It also highlights the strategies used by the Malaysian Chinese teenagers to create these shifts. The results show that male participants made more topic shifting instances than female participants. This implies that males tend to dominate conversation (Coates, 1993 and Salome, 2004). From a gender's point of view, the male's supremacy can be perceived to support the statement that men tend to dominate and control conversation (Pfeiffer, 1998, p.358) and as supporting the fact that men's use of language is based on power (Coates, 1993, p.136). This can be seen as male speakers had made more topic initiations and topic shadings in their conversations.

It is apparent that both males and females can initiate new topics, shade or insert topics which may be slightly connected to the initial topic in conversations. However, some interlocutors may not be successful while some may be fairly successful depending on the turns that lasted. Clearly, the use of communication strategies is an important aspect as it enabled the participants to join in the conversation through various means and this gave them confidence as interlocutors. The various communication strategies also helped to promote communication as they allowed the different interlocutors to maintain the conversation. The data of this study indicate that various strategies such as question, statement, discourse marker '*eh*', '*oh*' and '*so*', raised tone, repetition,

raised tone with question and raised tone with discourse marker 'eh' were used by the interlocutors to shift topics. A comparison however indicates that male participants prefer the statement strategy while female participants prefer the question strategy. Further studies may want to include teenagers of other ethnic groups so that the findings can be generalized for a wider group of participants in the same age group in the country.

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Notes

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