1. Introduction:

1.1 Changing the topic

Early work on the organization of conversations highlighted the importance of relevance and topicality. Gricean maxims demand that speech “be relevant” (Grice 1973, p. 46). Schegloff and Sacks (1973) note that each conversational turn is expected to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of ‘Why that now?’:

[…] it appears that a preferred way of getting mentionables mentioned is to employ the resources of the local organization of utterances in the course of the conversation. That involves holding off the mention of a mentionable until it can ‘occur naturally’, that is, until it can be fitted to another conversationalist’s prior utterance, allowing his utterance to serve as a sufficient source for the mentioning of the mentionable […] (Schegloff and Sacks 1973, p. 301)

In contrast are topic-changing utterances, in which speakers produce talk turns that are not directly related to previous talk, in order to bring about “a new set of mentionables” (Maynard 1980, p. 280). These, however, are not necessarily in polar opposition to “relevant” turns: the occurrences, forms, and placements of topic-changes are constrained by factors related to politeness, group structure, conversation organization and flow, and even to relevance considerations. Thus, topic changes have a dual nature and can be considered both context free and context sensitive (Maynard 1980). That is, the content of topic changing utterances is not obviously connected to previous talk, but topic changes do appear “in specific environments and in characterizable ways” (Maynard 1980, p. 264).

Previous research on topic and topic change in conversation has largely focused on intimate dyadic conversations (e.g. Fishman 1977, 1983), and larger, task-oriented groups (e.g. West and Garcia 1988; Johnson, Clay-Warner, and Funk 1996; Skovertz and Fararo 1996; Okamoto and Smith-Lovin 2001). These studies have found that group member identity and status, among other features, plays a role in determining who can change the subject, and the form subject changes can take. All of these studies are based on conversations that can be characterized as either informal (e.g. intimate, free-flowing conversation between friends or romantically involved men and women) or formal (e.g. a task group composed of students who have not previously met). The current study, in
contrast, deals with a set of conversations that cannot be so easily categorized. The participants are a group of friends who meet in an informal setting to eat and discuss academic topics. This paper examines the nature and form of topic changes within the group and the ways in which group members negotiate the dichotomous divide between informal and task-oriented conversation.

1.2 The Group

Berkeley’s Syntax Reading Group was formed by two first-year linguistics graduate students in the spring of 2005. They have now been meeting for four semesters, focusing on a different topic in theoretical syntax each semester. The group is regularly attended by approximately five to eight graduate students. One professor also attends regularly, and others have also participated on sporadic occasions. The group currently meets on Wednesday evenings from 5:30-7:00 pm at the home of one of the members; meetings consist of concurrent dinner and discussion of an article or dissertation chapter, selected during the previous meeting and read (presumably) by the group members during the week preceding the meeting. Group members study in the same department at Berkeley, and, in most cases, know and like each other quite well, and the discussion is replete with outbursts of laughter, both during on- and off-topic discussions. In addition, the relatively late hour and the dinner setting give the discussion a much more informal spirit than found, for example, in a seminar or an on-campus reading group.

The group has been described by a member as having an “anarchic style of government” (Matthew, pc); it does not have a designated leader, the participating professor has in many ways equal standing with other group members, being present as a learner herself. Despite the attempt to establish equal footing among members who otherwise stand in an asymmetric power relation, asymmetries in topic-shifting techniques can be found in the conversation; at the same time, however, the faculty member often mitigates the asymmetries by utilizing the same sort of topic shifts as other group members.
**Group Members**

ANGE: 3rd year graduate student, group co-founder
MATTHEW: 3rd year graduate student, group co-founder
MORITZ: 3rd year graduate student
HAYLEY: 2nd year graduate student, host of meetings
RUSSELL: 2nd year graduate student
REBECCA/BECCEA: 4th year graduate student
THERA: 2nd year graduate student, occasional attendee
LINE: assistant professor (specializes in “syntax, semantics, morphology, Danish, philosophy of language”)

Not every member was present for every recorded meeting (specifically, Ange was only present for SG1; Becca only for SG2 and SG3). Other group members were also present when the recordings were made, but do not speak during the relevant portions and are therefore not listed above.

As an occasional attendee of this group, I have the advantage of familiarity with group structure, group members, and the general “feel” of meetings; I also have the possible biases that come with analysis of a group with which the analyzer is associated. On the one hand, an understanding of the group may prevent me from jumping to premature conclusions about the group participants and their motivations; on the other hand, my special “knowledge” is bound to be influenced by my personal (mis)perceptions of speaker intentions. To at least partially control for this, I have sought input from other group participants as to their own roles in the group. As far as possible, I will let the texts “speak for themselves”, including background information when necessary to explain utterances that, taken as “pure text”, might be misleading.

Recordings were made of three meetings, using a Sony MZ-M100 minidisc recorder. The recorded meetings recorded took place on 20 September 2006 (SG1, 38:18 recorded), 1 November 2006 (SG2, 1:22:32 recorded), and 8 November 2006 (SG3, 1:25:33 recorded).

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1 Line’s professional interests are taken from the department web page:
http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/people/fac/mikkelsen.html
2 Line is also the only English as a Second Language speaker in the group, a fact that may or may not be relevant for analysis. Line, whose first language is Danish, is an extremely proficient speaker of English, with near-native vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. However, we must not discount the possibility that certain speech patterns may be less related to Line’s role in the group than to her general speaking habits; it would be instructive to analyze her speech in purely informal and in classroom settings for comparison.
1.4 Goals of this paper

In this paper, I examine the topic changing strategies group members employ to shift between talk that is related to the formal, theoretical discussion (hereafter “on-topic talk”) and casual, friendly chat (hereafter “off-topic talk”). I analyze the patterns with regard to observations made in previous studies on topic change in conversation, and note several other emerging patterns. It is my hope that this paper will begin to round out the literature on topic change by looking at topic shifting strategies in a group format that can be characterized neither as strictly formal nor as strictly informal. For the present purposes, I will describe the group as “semi-formal”.

This paper is written from a perspective that leans towards that of Interactional Sociolinguistics. While the “pure” Conversation Analysis model (cf. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) is useful for examining the mechanics of topic change, the very nature of this subject demands a focus on the content of utterances, as well as discussion of speaker background and status within the group.

1.5 What this paper is not

This paper makes no attempt to quantify topic changes, nor to determine exhaustively which speakers were responsible for successfully/unsuccessful attempts to pull the group either on or off topic. There are several reasons why such an approach, while perhaps appealing at a surface level, is both impractical and undesirable here. First, the notion of “topic change” itself is nebulous at best. As Drew and Holt (1989) note,

“Generally, one topic of conversation merges almost imperceptively to the next, in a seamless 'stepwise' progression…Hence the precise points of topic shifts or changes, and how such shifts were managed, are often analytically opaque” (p. 509)

In addition, it is often difficult to determine who raises a topic, since topics may be raised quite indirectly, or collaboratively by several group members (cf. Tannen 1984 for further discussion). Furthermore, the distinction between on-topic and off-topic talk is gradient rather than discrete. For example, one conversation segment moves from examination of particular examples found in data tables, to an evaluation of the clarity of the tables, to a discussion of table aesthetics in general. Which of these may be considered

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3 Because the very nature of the group encourages both formal (academic) and informal (relationship building) discussion, these labels are not entirely apt: all talk is “on-topic” in that it serves (at least) one of these purposes. However, both for ease of notation and because the group’s view of the non-academic discussions as “off-topic” is strongly evident in the transcriptions, I will continue to refer to them as such.
“purely” on- or off-topic? Where precisely does the shift occur? Such questions are extremely difficult to answer, but answers would be required for quantification. Finally, although the recordings are fairly lengthy, they comprise only a small data set and deal with only one group of the semi-formal type. For these reasons, quantification of the data would be not only statistically insignificant, but also potentially misleading and intellectually dishonest, and I will avoid it.

2 Topic Shifts

In dealing with topic change as a rule-governed behavior, I will examine three main facets of shifts from casual conversation to formal discussion.

First, when can a topic be changed? That is, at what points in the conversation is topic change felicitous, and when is it dispreferred? What sorts of conversational features tend to occur prior to a shift from on-topic to off-topic discussion, and vice-versa?

Second, who can change a topic? How, if at all, does group participation and status influence individual speaker rights to shift to either on- or off-topic discussions? Are topic shifts managed collaboratively or are they unilateral efforts? Do some speakers’ topic-shift attempts meet with more success than those of other speakers?

Finally, how is the topic changed? What strategies do speakers use to occasion topic shifts, and do these vary between on- and off-topic shifts? This question is of course tied closely with the first two questions, because the placement of topic shifts and the identity of the topic shifter are likely to have a profound influence on topic-shifting strategies.

Acknowledging the heavy interplay of these three factors in topic shift, I will consider each of them in turn, making reference to the other two as appropriate.

2.1 When?: The Placement of Topic Shifts

Maynard (1980) notes that topic changes often occur “as a solution to failed speaker transitions” (p. 264). That is, when a topic appears to have come to an end, speakers are likely to ensure continuous talk by introducing a new topic. Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001) also observe that pauses and “unusually short utterance[s]” increase the chance that the next speaker will change the subject (p. 868). This is indeed the case in the syntax group. Shifts that take the group both off topic and back on topic are often preceded by fairly lengthy pauses, as seen in the following example:
(Ex 1)

(1) Line But you still have it which is satisfactory
(2) Male (?) Yeah.
(3) Line Satisfactory.
(4) Thera Yeah.
(5) (5s)
(6) Matthew Okay
(7) (6s)
(8) Line I had a small question about the focus and topic and focus thing?
(9) (SG1 15:38-15:55)

Lines (2), (3), and (4) all contain short utterances. Thera (to whom Line’s comment is addressed) and a male speaker both express agreement with Line’s statement in (1) but do not elaborate or encourage Line to do so. In (3), Line repeats the word “satisfactory”. After the short utterances comes a lengthy pause. Matthew’s “okay” in line (6) appears to acknowledge the awkwardness of the pause, and may possibly be an attempt to spur the group towards on-topic discussion, but it does not go as far as raising a new topic. This is only accomplished six seconds later, when Line brings the group fully on task with a specific question about the chapter.

Similarly, shifts that take the group off-topic are often preceded by lengthy silences. These are most often occasioned by behavior that is on-topic but non-verbal, such as paging through articles for particular references or examples. There are many possible explanations for this: for example, some group members may not be as engaged in the non-verbal task as others, and may take the opportunity to produce off-topic talk in a semi-constrained frame that may presumably end when other members have succeeded in their search. It is also possible that the prevalent tendency to produce talk during these periods of silences is related to a general preference for continuous talk; evaluating these claims, however, is not possible here.

In general, off-topic shifts tend to occur as procedural issues arise, as seen in the following example:

(Ex 2)

(1) Becca interrogatives and free relatives use the same word and
(2) Matthew Do you think we should write these down and send them to
(3) Line him? (.4s) the questions we [have?]
(4) Line [Is he thinking about publishing is

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4 It is unclear why she does this, but it may be related to a (very) slight non-native-like intonation on the first occurrence.
The conversation continues, becoming progressively more off-topic, for nearly a minute before the group returns to on-topic discussion. Procedural issues are a natural lead-in for off-topic talk, because they are sparked by on-task behavior and therefore do not come with any of the negative evaluations associated with unilateral off-topic shifts. At the same time, they are not on-topic in the sense of being theoretically oriented, so further (and less relevant) off-topic talk does not represent an abrupt shift.

The “food-trumps-all” rule (cf. Tannen 1996, p. 59) applies in this group, too. Comments related to the business of making sure everyone is adequately supplied with food and drink crop up repeatedly and without any obvious regard for previous talk. Unlike other topic shifts, food-related comments do not appear to occur with greater frequency after pauses or when procedural issues have been raised. In fact, food comments themselves may be regarded as procedural: they share with discussion-related procedural comments a sense of immediacy, and may even be considered on-topic in a sense, since a secondary purpose of the group is to share dinner.

(Ex 3)

(1) Line type shifting as a last resort with no syntactic correlate
(2) (1.5s)
(3) Matthew very (into like) ( ) as a question
(4) Becca eh doesn't it though?
(5) Group [laughter]
(6) Matthew I think ( )
(7) Matthew Want some more [( )]?
(8) Line [Can I] (.2s) no I'm wondering if I can
(9) Line put my plate on top of the [other ones (I usually do that)]
(10) Matthew [ôh
(SG3 25:45-25:59)

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5 See Appendix C for a transcript of the entire segment.
Finally, on-to-off topic shifts may occur within speaker turns, with no pauses or failure of previous topics. These happen when speakers use what may be called a “free-association” style. Becca is a prominent user of this style.

(Ex 4)

(1) Becca            […] other: Chomsky: possibilities
(2) Line             Yes
(3) Becca           and he (.6s) made a very nice table which I liked (.) which
(4) you know, showed the different predictions of each of- I like
(5) tables
(SG2 11:33-11:43)

2.2 Who?: Topic Shifts and Group Status

Topic shifts may be viewed as status-related behaviors; they “represent opportunities to participate in the group’s work” (Okamoto and Smith-Lovin 2001, p. 855). We might therefore expect group members with the highest status to occasion the most on- and off-topic shifts.

As noted above, the syntax group does not have a formal leader, and the group strives to maintain an atmosphere in which all members feel free to participate as they desire. Line has a subtly defined status in the group; she is both a member with equal standing and a faculty member with outside authority. She describes her own role as follows:

I perceive my role as a mixed one. On one hand I am a regular member, who is expected to prepare, contribute, and listen like everyone else. On the other hand, as the only faculty member there, I also feel that I have a more advisory and authoritative role, both on issues of content and on issues of a practical nature (Line Mikkelsen, pc).

This dual role is evident throughout the topic shifts. All group members successfully produce on- and off-topic shifts. However – as might be expected – Line shifts the talk back to on-topic conversation with the greatest frequency. Line also has the freedom to occasion off-topic shifts, as in the following example:

(Ex 5)

(1) Line    Ah d- is this’ a new type of m&m?
(SG2 53:01-53:02)

Line, however, is not the only group member to introduce topic shifts. All actively participating group members introduce on-topic and off-topic talk at some point. However, their attempts are less consistently successful than Line’s topic shifts. For example, in the following exchange, Hayley attempts to bring the group on-topic after thirteen minutes of
casual conversation by introducing the subject of the chapter being discussed that night. However, other group members\(^6\) resist the shift and return to off-topic talk:

(Ex 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>Ange</th>
<th>It was a good book.(^7) For a while.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>Female (?)</td>
<td>[laughter]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>Hayley</td>
<td>So (. ) how bout that uh conceptual strúcture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(3s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>Ange</td>
<td>um</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Thera</td>
<td>[laughter]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>Ange</td>
<td>You know what you need to do: Thera. Now that you have our permission to tápe us….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group members do often successfully shift the topic, however; their methods for doing so are discussed in section (2.3) below.

Speaker rights to topic shifting are also related to participation in prior talk. Later in the exchange following example 5 above, Line shifts the conversation back on topic:

(Ex 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>Line</th>
<th>So thánk you (. ) Did you bring them.=</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>=( [ ] )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>[I did bring them]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>Maziar</td>
<td>[chuckles]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(2.5s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Line</td>
<td>I mean at the sáme’ time as now we're sort of (.7s) I don't know being very critical which we shóuld be […]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001), this is a typical pattern in topic shifting; speakers who introduced a topic “have special rights to shift the topic to another matter of concern)” (p. 868). In addition, the group’s power structure may make it more difficult for others to shift on or off of Line’s topics.

Special rights for topic introducers may also account for Becca’s “free-association” style as seen in example 4 above. As the current speaker, she controls the topic and therefore enjoys special rights to shift on- and off-topic as she pleases.

Relatedly, speakers show both consideration towards the topic-raising rights of others, and a feeling of entitlement to their own rights. In the next segment, Matthew attempts to start on-topic conversation following a pause after off-topic talk. However, Becca, who had

\(^6\) who, it should be noted, had not all done the reading and therefore had strong motivations to avoid on-topic discussion!

\(^7\) Ange is referring to an unrelated book.
attempted to raise a topic before the off-topic talk began, recalls and insists on her topic-rights:

(Ex 8)

(1) Matthew Can we talk a little bit about the data? For those of us who
(2) Becca haven't like [ ] had a chance to fully assimilate or
(3) Becca [Yeah]
(4) Becca but can I [ . ] make my comments about that] section so
(5) Matthew [process them sorry I'm sorry]
(6) Becca so the thing was that there were a few things that he tested
(7) for...

(SG2 12:03-12:15)

In line (5), Matthew apologizes for his inadvertent attempt to take control and introduce a topic when it wasn’t “rightfully” his turn.

2.3 How?: Strategies for Successful Topic Shifts

Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001) discuss topic transitions as a continuum, ranging from topic changes that are collaboratively managed by the group, to shifts that are unilaterally created by a single speaker. In between these two extremes are “linked transitions,” which make reference to the previous speaker’s utterance before they introduce a new topic, and “minimally linked transitions”, which do not make explicit reference to previous turns, but acknowledge them through “minimal responses” (p. 862) such as mm-hmm or yeah. These short utterances, often associated with back-channeling, here serve quite the opposite goal: rather than encouraging the previous speaker to continue, they imply that the speaker’s turn should be over and the group should move on.

It is with regard to this continuum that on-topic and off-topic shifts diverge the most. Off-topic shifts are quite often managed collaboratively. See Appendix C for an example of a longer discussion in which the group progressively slides further off topic; in this example, the shift back to on-topic talk is also somewhat collaboratively managed. Off-topic shifts may also be unilateral; however, these are most often related to procedural issues or food talk. Few examples of non-procedural, unilateral off-topic shifts were found, though one might be found in the following example (repeated from (Ex 6) above):
Ange’s *um* in line (3) might, however, also be considered a minimal link.

In contrast to off-topic shifts, which are generally either unilateral and procedure related or collaboratively managed by the group, shifts back onto topic are usually minimally linked. This divide is not surprising, given the evaluation of previous talk implied by topic shifting. Okamoto and Smith-Lovin (2001) note that minimally linked, linked, and collaborative transitions “not only show increasingly more connection to and acknowledgement of previous talk [than do unilateral shifts], but […] also demonstrate progressively less negative evaluation of the current speaker’s ideas” (p. 856). In Syntax Group, where the atmosphere is intended to be laid-back and friendly, it might be expected that speakers will avoid “punishing” other members for their engagement in off-topic talk. At the same time, producing a linked or truly collaborative on-topic shift is challenging and time-consuming if the off-topic talk is completely unrelated to the theoretical discussion.

The evaluation effect of off-topic shifts is perhaps the opposite. When producing an off-topic turn, a speaker is potentially inviting negative evaluation of herself by other group members, who may be expected to view on-topic contributions more positively. Therefore, most off-topic shifts are either collaboratively managed, or they are procedurally related and therefore “unavoidable”, and negative judgments are minimized.

Perhaps the most common word used by group members to link off-topic talk and (re)introduce on-topic talk is “so”, seen in the following examples and many others:

(Ex 10)  
(1) Line So (.) Rebecca am I right in thinking now we've moved (.) sort of move is it okay to move [on] from that [issue] sort of the idea about the … [yeah]  
(2)  
(3) Matthew [yeah]  
(4) Male (?)  
(5) [yeah]  
(SG2 41:18-41:25)

(Ex 11)  
(1) Line So then maybe we should (.) start with the Caponigro  
(SG2 1:04:15-1:04:18)
“So” is a particularly interesting and useful conversation particle; it can refer to prior sequences, introduce a subsequent “summing up”, and is often used as a tool for conversation organization:

Quite regularly, speakers use “so” prefaced upshots to manage a turn’s embodiment of a course of action in its own right and its reflexive participation in something more encompassing” (Raymond 2004, p.188).

Speakers can use “so”-prefaced upshots to make evident from whom action is due, what action is due, and the like. In part, this outcome reflects speakers’ use of “so” to mark a transition, boundary, or connection between one activity and another (Raymond 2004, p. 189).

In introducing on-topic talk in Syntax Group, tiny “so” is thus able to minimally link to immediately preceding turns and minimize negative evaluations, introduce a new topic or return to an old topic, remind participants of the overall organization and structure of the conversation, and prompt participants to engage in further on-topic talk.

To accomplish these goals, “so” need not even be followed by on-topic talk by the same speaker. Raymond (2004) discusses the so-called “stand-alone ‘so’” and its numerous organizational purposes. Particularly relevant to these conversations is the use of stand-alone so as a “prompt” (p. 211):

For example, as an unfinished turn, the stand-alone “so” stops short of producing a determinate next action in the flow of events and instead invites […] a response to the action it is designed to call attention to. […] Moreover, by virtue of its design as an unfinished turn, the “so” claims that what a speaker is prompting the other to do or notice could already be known by them […]

That is, without producing any on-topic content themselves, speakers can utilize stand-alone “so” to convey to other group members that on-topic talk is expected and
appropriate. Line appears to utilize a stand-alone “so” in the following exchange to bring the group on topic after a procedural off-topic discussion; Becca takes up the cue and begins to share an evaluation of the paper.

(Ex 14)

(1) Hayley I'll do it as is (. ) as my (. ) duties in the kitchen allow.
(2) Line aww
(3) (3s)
(4) Line So’
(5) (3s)
(6) Becca I actually found myself slightly (. ) mmm
(7) (4s)
(8) Becca mmm (1s ) not (. ) disappointed? but a little dissatisfied (.5s)
(9) because I felt like he had in his mind that this was the
(10) analysis that he was going to do: ? and he said like look here
(11) are some things that (2s) that agree with this analysis? and
(12) here's like a who:le bunch of problems with this analysis but
(13) I'll just leave them for another time

Another issue in the production of topic-shifting turns (particularly those that attempt shift the group to on-topic talk) is their general construction. Topic-shifting rights are related to status within the group (cf. Okamoto and Smith-Lovin 2001) and may therefore be expected to be produced differently by different group members, in correlation with their respective status.

Johnson, Clay-Warner, and Funk (1996, p. 228) characterize task behaviors as either “active” or “passive”. Active task behaviors include such actions as “giving opinions, suggestions, or information to another person or to the group regarding the content of the task”; they may be directive, including “summary” statements (“statements recapitulating briefly what course of action the group will take or has just taken”) and “procedural” statements (“statements suggesting the direction that the group discussion should take”).

Passive task behaviors, which include “asking for opinions, suggestions, information, or orientation in regard to the task”, correlate with the active behaviors described above. Passive behaviors that move back to on-topic talk may include procedural questions (e.g.

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8 The lack of further turn content after stand-alone “so” is ambiguous: it might indicate that the speaker has no particular on-topic content to add at that point, or it may be a politeness device, conveying essentially that the “so”-producing speaker desires that talk be on topic, but gives the next turn-taker a degree of freedom in determining the exact content of the talk (which, presumably, should take into consideration previous on-topic talk).
“Does somebody want to start?”), summary questions, or redirective questions that gently prod the group back to on-topic talk (Johnson, Clay-Warner, and Funk 1996, p. 228).

As might be expected, the group as a whole tends to negotiate on-topic shifts through the use of passive task behaviors. These potentially allow members to steer the group back on task, yet avoid appearing overbearing or controlling. Line, as the only professor present, is the only group member who regularly uses active task behaviors:

(Ex 15)

(1) Line While we’re looking [cough] Becca could you say something about the language like (.5s) the family [me?]
(2) Becca [me?]
(3) (1s)
(4) Becca well (=)
(5) Line cause I mean we didn’t read that part of the
(6) Becca I will try to be neutral about Wolof
(SG2 13:40-13:50)

(Ex 16)

(1) Line The reason= Matthew =Let the cat out of the bag
(2) Line the reason we got into this just to let Russell (1s) get the context and Hayley if you could maybe (=)
(3) Hayley =that’s okay
(4) Line Rebécca was saying there’s something unsatisfying...
(SG2 9:54-10:04)

In example 15, Line moves the discussion along using a directive phrase which is syntactically, but not pragmatically (or intonationally), a question. In (Ex 16), she employs an active summary strategy to ensure that all group members understand the context of the conversation, and to move the conversation from a somewhat tangential discussion of idioms to a discussion that is more directly relevant to the paper being discussed.

In the example below, Becca produces one of the very few active on-topic-shift statements to be found in the recordings; out of frustration she demands to ask a question that has been repeatedly postponed by procedural issues and other discussion. Note that Becca’s procedural statement in line (1) is followed by a procedural statement on the part of Line (in line (8)). This could possibly serve as a validation of Becca’s right to determine the procedure.
By and large, however, turns that shift the discussion to on-topic talk are passive in nature. This generalization includes most of Line’s topic shifts as well. As noted above, Line’s dual role in the group passive, less authoritative-seeming topic shifts the preferred method. Other group members’ on-topic shifts are almost uniformly passive. Examples of passive topic shifts are seen in examples 18-21:

(Ex 18)

(1) Ange It was a good book. For a while.
(2) Female (?) [laughter]
(3) (3s)
→ (4) Hayley So (. ) how bout that uh conceptual strúcture.
(5) (2s)
(6) Ange um
(7) Thera [laughter]
(8) Ange You know what you need to do: Thera. Now that you have our permission to tápe us….
(9) Ange
(SG1 13:11-13:29)

In this example, Hayley uses a redirective question to attempt to get the group back on topic. However, the attempt is not ultimately successful. (Success and failure of passive task behaviors is discussed in more detail below.)

(Ex 19)

→ (1) Line So is it time for=
(2) Russell =that’s assuming we hire someone
(3) Line /coughs/ Ivano? [or
(4) Matthew [I think so
(5) Hayley Yes=
(6) Moritz =I think so=
(7) Line =Yeah
(8) (2s)

9 and her polite nature!
In lines (1) and (3), Line uses a general procedural question to draw the group towards on-topic talk. Moritz follows this in line (9) with a more specific procedural question that directs the group towards a particular line of on-topic talk. The progression from general to specific question is noteworthy: once the group has collaboratively agreed (lines 4-7) that on-topic talk is called for, Moritz – after a slight pause in which other participants presumably had the chance to take the next-speaker position – feels comfortable raising a specific line of talk.

Example 20 shows another use of a procedural question to shift the talk on-topic. This attempt, however, is ultimately unsuccessful (as shown in example 6 above) because it is superceded by the priority of Becca’s previously raised topic.

(Ex 20)

(1) Matthew Can we talk a little bit about the data? for those of us who
(2) haven’t like=
(3) Becca yeah=
(4) Matthew =had a chance to fully assimilate or
(SG2 12:03-12:07)

In example 21, Line uses a summary question. She moves the group away from off-topic talk about Hayley’s cat Naima by reminding them of where they had “left off” in the on-topic discussion, and then suggests a future course for the discussion:

(Ex 21)

(1) Moritz Despite her name?
(2) (4s)
(3) Becca It means pleasant in Hebrew
(4) Moritz Ah.
(5) Matthew What Naima?
(6) Becca Neima
(7) (6s)
(8) Line So Rebecca am I right in thinking now we've moved (.) sort of
(9) move is it okay to move [on from] that [issue] sort of the idea
(10) about the
(11) Matthew [Yeah]
(12) Moritz [Yeah]
(SG2 41:03-41:23)
A final issue is the *content* of turns that successfully shift the group to on-topic talk. Since these are generally passive, they run a greater risk of not being continued by the group than more active task behavior might. As can be seen throughout the examples discussed in this paper, less successful topic-shift attempts tend to be somewhat vague in comment, while the most successful shifts onto topic ask specific questions about the material, or state confusion about a specific facet in these articles. These types of turns naturally produce on-topic talk by creating question/answer (or confusion/clarification) adjacency pairs (cf. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974).

### 3 Conclusions and Residue

This paper represents a preliminary examination of shifts towards and away from on-topic talk in a semi-formal discussion group, finding that placement and content of topic-shifting attempts, as well as the status of the topic-shifter within a group, play a role in the success or failure of topic shifts. Shifts off-topic tend towards being collaboratively managed and often involve procedural concerns, while on-topic shifts are usually minimally-linked transitions and involve passive task behaviors.

Further examination and analysis of topic shifting within the group would doubtless produce many new insights. Of particular interest might be an examination of occurrences of (e.g.) interruptions, overlaps, latching, and silences at the time of subject-change attempts as compared with talk during the off-topic and on-topic discussions. To the extent that quantification of the data is possible, it might also be enlightening to compare the number, nature (e.g. passive, active, procedural, etc), and success of topic-shifting utterances by each group member. Because the semi-formal spirit of the syntax discussions creates a type of group that has been little studied, there is much to be discovered in the conversations that the group produces. It is my hope that this paper is a first step in that direction.
References


Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

**have**  –  emphatic stress

**fôcus**  –  primary stress

**thing?**  –  yes/no question (rising) intonation

( . )  –  short pause

(.4s)  –  .4 sec pause

 [...]  –  end of transcription, continuing text

( . )  –  undiscernable text

**(go ahead and)**  –  transcription uncertain

/[cough]/  –  extra-linguistic material

assû:med  –  lengthened vowel

One’  –  high pitch

ah-  –  abrupt stop, maybe with glottal stop

Line    The rea= Matthew    =Let the cat  –  latching

Line    [Thânk you Hayley    [I could be  –  overlap

Male (?)  –  unidentified male speaker

(SG3 25:45-25:59)  –  Recording number, time
Appendix B: Topic-Shift Continuum (based on Okamoto and Smith-Lovin 2001)

- **Collaborative Topic Transitions**
- **Linked transitions:** “[refer]s back to the prior turn at talk before introducing a new area of discussion.” (p. 861)
- **Minimally linked transitions:** “[refer] back to the previous turn at talk using only minimal responses or acknowledgment cues” (p. 862)
- **Unilateral Topic Transitions:** “a noncollaborative topic shift on the part of one speaker” (p. 854)

Appendix C: Conversation Excerpt

(1) Becca interógatives and free relatives use the same wórd and
(2) Matthew Do you think we should write these down and send them to him?
(3) (.4s) the questions we [have?]
(4) Line [Is he thinking about publishing is that what he's going to [do with it
(5) Matthew [Yeah
(6) Matthew [and he hasn't he's sort of ( ) and saying we should send them=
(7) Becca [We could have (. ) we could have Théra write them down for us=
(8) Line =Oh absolutely I think that (. ) yeah
(9) Hayley [chuckle]
(10) Matthew [I mean cause that seems pretty im[pórtant]
(11) Line [ ( ]
(12) Hayley [ ( )] buy myself a white board
(13) Line [To what ex-]
(14) Hayley becuase I I think we should really have something to write on here=
(15) (laughter)
(16) Matthew =Well if [Becca would just] [bring it (for once)
(17) Becca [uh well[ (.2s) [a ah how' am I supposed to bring' it
(18) Line The way Í brought it to your' house
(19) Hayley No that was [in the car
(20) Becca [No that's not true yes'!
(21) Group [laughter]
(22) Line You could borrow a câr [giggles]
(23) Becca Actually (. ) no to be honest
(24) Becca um if I- (. ) I should (. ) I could possibly get a ride here
(25) (laughter)
(26) sometime and
(27) Matthew just strap it on your back and bring it to the [department?
(28) Becca [No
(29) Moritz [Carry it on your head]
(30) Becca [No.]
(31) Line [loud laughter]
(32) Becca No
(33) Group [laughter]
(34) Becca That I can do I can get it to the department on my head I
can't get it here on my [head because I never have time] to
(35) walk=
(36) Matthew [Then] [Then (.) the rest ]
(37) Matthew =Then the rest of us bring it here
(39) Hayley So sorry to ( ) to create a tangent (.) but (.) I have a
can't get it here on my head because I never have time] to
(38) Line (.)
(40) Hayley So sorry to ( ) to create a tangent (.) but (.) I have a
can't get it here on my head because I never have time] to
(41) Matthew oh good
(42) Hayley Okay
(43) Moritz (?) Cool
(44) Line [Thank you]
(45) Hayley [I could be scribe]
(46) Line And then they could be shared between us before we send them
to Ivan (.)
(47) Hayley Yes but thinking about this has wiped my mind clean of what
we just said=
(48) Hayley and then they could be shared between us before we send them
to Ivan (.)
(49) Hayley Yes but thinking about this has wiped my mind clean of what
we just said=
(50) Line (okay)
(51) Group [laughter]
(52) Line Two things I guess I mean there's a type-shifting (.)
which is does he:
(SG3 21:58-23:03)