Coherence and understanding in informal conversations between native and non-native speakers of English

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Summary

How non-native speakers communicate with native speakers has been investigated extensively, both in the context of classrooms and in other institutional interactions and is often seen as problematic. However, far less is known about the communicative behaviours of native and non-speakers in informal, social encounters.

This study investigates informal conversations between native English speakers and international students living and studying in the UK.

10 NNS participants recorded themselves during conversations with native speakers. The audio-recordings were transcribed and a fine-grained, qualitative analysis was employed to examine how the participants jointly achieved both coherence and understanding in the conversations, and more specifically how the NNSs contributed to this achievement. The key areas of investigation focused on features of topic management, such as topic initiations, changes and transitions, and on the impact which any communicative difficulties may have on the topical continuity of the conversations.

The data suggested that these conversations flowed freely and coherently, and were marked by a relative scarcity of the communicative difficulties often associated with NS-NNS interactions. Moreover, language difficulties were found to have minimal impact on the topic development of the conversations. Unlike most previous research in the field, the data further indicated that the NNSs were able to make active contributions to the initiation and change of topics, and to employ a range of strategies to manage these effectively and coherently.

The study considers the implications which the findings may have for teaching and learning, for second language acquisition research, and for non-native speakers everywhere.

Keywords: NS-NNS interactions, topic management, side sequences, conversational coherence, understanding in intercultural communication

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

The starting point for this research project was personal and professional curiosity about how my own learners of English coped during informal conversations with the native speakers with whom they came into contact. The initial intention, therefore, was to collect relevant data of such interactions and to explore and describe what was found. This has remained the key aim of the research, with a specific focus on the contributions which non-native speakers make to such interactions.

The learners in question are predominantly European undergraduate students who spend a year at a British University in order to improve their English language skills. As well as having extensive classroom exposure and instruction in the target language they might also be expected to benefit from interactions with native speakers. However, both anecdotal evidence and interviews with learners revealed that the amount of time they spend interacting with native speaking peers is extremely limited, and that they tend to perceive such interactions as problematic.

The problems which learners mentioned related both to language production, comprehension and interactional outcomes. The learners were concerned, amongst other things, that they would make mistakes, and not be able to find the right words quickly. They feared that rapid speech, regional accents and slang expressions used by native speakers would hinder understanding. They expressed concern at the *prospect* of not understanding and of not being able to make themselves understood. In addition, they often felt uncertain about how to start a conversation and what to talk about. It is possible, therefore, that lack of confidence may be one factor which works towards minimising contact between native speakers and non-native speakers, and minimal

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contact may in turn affect the potential language acquisition benefits to be gained from engaging in informal discourse.

Some of these problems associated with being an international, non-native speaker in the target language country were encapsulated in the comments made by one of the participants in the research study, and the relevant extract can be seen below.

Claude, a French student, was talking about student life in general with Ben, an English classmate. Ben has just commented on the tendency for international students to stick together.

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115   Claude     yeah it's true that you don't systematically don't go to eh
116              real English native [students
117   Ben                          [uh
118   Claude     so yeah we tend to be like friends together or with
119              other German people [ or
120   Ben                            [ ye::s (xxx)
121   Claude     just like ACES students
123   Ben        (xxx xxx)
124   Claude →   'cause yeah I think these people are all talking
125              slower
126   Ben        uh
127   Claude →   so and we all have the same difficulties so (..) we we
128              get on well (..)
129   Ben        you can understand each other more I suppose that's
130              the problem with eh English people I think they don't
131              understand what it's like for people speaking a foreign
132              language
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Claude mentions some of the reasons why international students may prefer the company of other non-native speakers, hinting at a difficulty in approaching the *real English native students*, and alluding to some of the perceived communication problems. He says in lines 124-125 that other international students *are all talking slower*, and in line 157 that they all *have the same difficulties*. Ben in turn provides a supportive comment, showing understanding of the difficulties. They would seem to share the perception referred to by Ife (2005:291), that "second language speakers are more at ease if no native speakers are present."

Ironically, this extract comes from a conversation where language problems did not cause any communicative difficulties, and where native and non-native speaker alike managed to understand and to be understood, at both a linguistic and an interpersonal level. This is in contrast, then, both to the perceptions of many international students, and also to much of the research on intercultural communication.

1.2 Native speaker – non-native speaker conversations

The extensive literature on interactions between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) has tended to show such communications to be fraught with difficulties, and those difficulties, more often than not, are shown to relate to the linguistic deficiencies of the NNSs, be they second language (L2) learners or users. The following quote from Gass and Varonis (1991:122) is not untypical in terms of how NNS-NS conversations are perceived:

> when participants have little shared background (be it cultural, linguistic, or personal), the conversation is likely to be peppered with interruptions for clarification of content or language form. In conversations involving NNSs, this becomes readily apparent.

This quote, which comes from the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies, highlights several of the issues with which this thesis is concerned.

The implications are, firstly, that mutual understanding and coherently flowing discourse are difficult to achieve in interactions with NNSs. Increasingly, evidence is accumulating to indicate that this is not the case, and that language differences in conversations between both NSs and NNSs and between NNSs and NNSs do not necessarily present substantial barriers for achieving understanding and successful outcomes of interactions (Davies 2003; Gardner and Wagner 2005; Kurhila 2005; Lesznyák 2004; Springer and Collins 2008). This will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

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A second problem with the statement above lies in the assumption that NNSs form a homogenous group, and that they all share similar characteristics and levels of language expertise. Taking into account that an estimated 500 -1000 million people (Leung 2005:133) actually use English as a second language for business, educational and social purposes on a daily basis, this is clearly an untenable argument, and brings home the fact that there can be no such thing as a 'typical' NNS conversation.

The many different contexts in which English as a second language is spoken worldwide leads us to a third issue, namely that different types of communicative events may require different language skills, make different types of demands on participants and present different types of challenges and constraints. This in turn means that generalisations can not be made about features of NNS interactions which reliably apply in all these different contexts.

A final point also relates to context of communication, in so far as there is likely to be a considerable difference between the discourse features which may be evident in naturally occurring communications and those which are produced under experimental conditions. For example, in many researcher-led studies participants are given set topics on which to talk, or, in the case of SLA studies, are asked to complete pedagogical tasks. This means that features of spontaneous discourse may be absent, and that the outcomes may show a distorted picture of NNSs' discourse abilities. In SLA, according to Firth and Wagner (1997:288) the research focus is frequently on "the foreign learner's *linguistic deficiencies and communicative problems*", leading to a view of the learner as a "defective communicator" (ibid:288).

In contrast, studies from the field of Conversation Analysis (CA) rely exclusively on naturally occurring data to investigate discourse, and although it has traditionally been concerned with NS talk, CA researchers are now also beginning to explore what happens in NS-NNS conversations. In spite of a more positive perspective on problematic discourse in NS-NNS interactions, the use of the term *not-yet-competent* (Wong 2000) applied to NNSs seems

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somewhat demeaning and signals an underlying comparison with competent, i.e. NS talk.

NNS performance is frequently measured against an idealized NS competence, which is both unrealistic and unnecessary. It is unrealistic, because, as Leung (2005:130) says, "there isn't a universal model of native speakers' use of language." It is unnecessary because, in a great many contexts, all that is required is communication which is good enough for the participants involved and for the purposes of the interaction. Moreover, judging NNS performance solely against native speaker norms belittles the efforts and achievements of anybody who attempts to learn and to communicate in a foreign language.

As pointed out earlier, communications involving NSSs take place in a wide variety of contexts. Research into both NS-NNS and NNS-NNS interactions has, however, tended to concentrate on instances of institutional talk, rather than purely social encounters. The features most commonly associated with institutional talk, whether in a business or classroom context, are goal-orientation, the frequently asymmetrical nature of the interactions, which affects the turn-taking system, and constraints on the subject matters which can be discussed (Lesznyák 2004:105). Informal, social conversations, on the surface, pose no such restrictions, either in terms of what can be talked about, nor who can contribute to the talk at any one time. There are, nonetheless, conversational conventions which may present challenges for NNSs, such as the management of topic organisation, which is the theme of the current study.

NNS participation in informal interactions with NSs has not been the subject of a great deal of research, and calls for more research in this area have come from several quarters (Brouwer 2003; Eerdmans and Di Candia 2007). Firth and Wagner (2007:812), for example, assert that "much more research into the specifics of social interactions in L2 environments is clearly necessary" in order to gain a better understanding of the links between learning and interaction. Lafford (2007:747) suggests that "We need to study learners'

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linguistic successes as well as their failures in order to get a fuller picture of how people face communicative challenges." The results of research from such a perspective might contribute to a more positive image of the skills and abilities demonstrated by non-native speakers when engaged in intercultural interactions.

The discussion so far has outlined the broad context within which this thesis is positioned, and it will, to an extent, attempt to address the two key issues of whether NS-NNS discourse is inevitably *problematic* discourse, and, if it is not, how successful interactions are accomplished.

The next section will provide more detail about the research approach and focus and the specific research questions which the study seeks to answer.

1.3   The research focus and research questions

The main purpose of this exploratory study will be to examine the nature and effects of NNS contributions in informal conversations with NSs. The context, therefore, is one which has been comparatively under-researched. One reason for this may lie in the difficulties involved in obtaining recorded samples of naturally occurring, spontaneous discourse, an issue which will be discussed further in Chapter 3. The conversations which will be discussed in the chapters to follow do, nonetheless, come as close as possible to being natural, in so far as no researcher was present and no parameters for the topics were set in advance. Furthermore, the NNS participants chose their own conversational partners as well as the time and locations for the talks. We can only talk about these interactions being 'artificially elicited' in the sense that NNSs were asked if they would volunteer to record a conversation with an NS friend or acquaintance.

The study will draw on research findings from the fields of intercultural communication, from SLA and from CA to explore aspects of these interactions. A qualitative, broadly based discourse analytical approach has

been employed, though the research perspectives and the analysis of key features have been strongly influenced by the principles of CA.

The conversations will be examined in the light of some of the supposed characteristics of NS-NNS interaction, as highlighted in the quote by Gass and Varonis (p. 3), namely that understanding can only be achieved by means of innumerable interruptions to the conversations, and that, by implication, such conversations lack coherence.

The first set of research questions, then, which the research attempts to answer are the following:

1.   .   What was the nature of any difficulties which arose, how were they resolved, and what was their impact on the continuity of the interactions ?

While most research on communicative difficulties in NS-NNS interactions has focused on the process of 'repairing' the problem, this study will also examine the overall impact on the interaction, looking specifically at whether the topic was resumed after the 'disruptions', and if so, how the topic resumption was accomplished.

Based on an initial analysis of the interactions, topic management emerged as a major coherence-organising element, and this led to the second set of research questions:

2.   How do the NNSs contribute to the overall topic management of the conversations ? Specifically, which strategies do they use to effect topic shifts and how effective are their strategies ?

This investigation follows the CA perspective that talk is jointly constructed, "and thus shaped as much by recipients as by speakers" (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992), and it explores how these NNSs, during informal conversations with their NS partners, contribute to the joint construction of understanding and coherence.

1.4   Contribution of the research

It should be stressed that no generalisations about the nature of NS-NNS interactions can be drawn from the findings of this research, as the comparatively small number of participants involved can not in any way be taken to be representative of the vast number of NNSs across the world who successfully communicate with others in one or more foreign languages.

However, this investigation will add to the existing body of knowledge about NS-NNS interactions, particularly with regard to non-institutional, naturally occurring talk.

As the NNS participants are L2 learners as well as L2 users, it should also throw some light on the ways in which learners use language outside the constraints of the classroom, and consequently how they function on a social level in the target language community.

Finally, although not a focus of the research, a comparison between 'natural' interactions and classroom discourse may prove of value to SLA studies and to the teaching profession.

1.5   Outline of contents

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the research which was found relevant for the study. This covers aspects of intercultural communication, the nature and purpose of informal conversations, the role of coherence, as well as aspects of topic management.

Chapter 3 describes the data collection, the methodological approach, and sets out the framework for the analysis of the data extracts.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the major findings of the study. Chapter 4 looks at topic management, and at topic changes in particular, while Chapter 5 discusses topic transitions. Chapter 6 looks at sequences of talk where

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meaning and understanding are negotiated, and relates these sequences to their impact on topic management. Finally, Chapter 7 presents a summary and discussion of the major findings, and draws attention to pedagogical implications and to avenues for further research.

Chapter 2

The literature review

2.1 Introduction

Talk between native and non-native speakers has been the subject of a considerable amount of research in a number of different fields, particularly those of inter-cultural communication and second language acquisition (SLA). It is, therefore, primarily from these two areas that research studies will be discussed, together with their relevance to the current study. The more specific focus on topic management strategies will draw mainly on research from the field of Conversation Analysis (CA).

This chapter will start with a discussion of some of the key terms which have been applied to participants in native speaker - non-native speaker interactions. Section 2.3 will consider the role of the non-native speaker and indeed the 'nature' of the non-native speaker as widely portrayed in the literature in the context of inter-cultural communication. The key studies here will be those which have investigated interactions where the NNS is respectively a *learner* or a *user* of an L2.

As the context of this study is in the area of informal conversations, the general features of such interactions, for example communicative goals, will be discussed in Section 2.4. The major focus in Sections 2.5 to 2.8 will be on the notion of conversational topics and their organisation and management, with a great deal of the research on these aspects of talk coming from the field of Conversation Analysis, as mentioned above.

Key issues in inter-cultural communication are those of understanding and misunderstanding, and Section 2.9 will compare different approaches to describing communicative difficulties, outline the approach taken in this study, and explain their relevance to issues of topic management.

2.2 Terminology and definitions

Before looking in detail at previous research, it is necessary to define certain terms which will be used in the study.

The term *non-native speaker* is frequently used for those who are not communicating in their mother tongue, irrespective of how many languages they may actually be capable of using for communication. There is considerable debate (Brutt-Griffler and Samimy 2001; Cook 1999, 2002; Davies 1991, 2003; Liu 1999; Rampton 1990) about the appropriacy of the term, 'non-native speaker', with its implications of limited competence and a one-dimensional identity, and various attempts have been made to circumvent the issue. Jæger (2001:1) suggests that 'intercultural speaker' would be more appropriate, while Gardner and Wagner (2005:16) chose to employ what they consider the more neutral terms of 'first' and 'second' language speakers. In this study the participants were initially referred to as NES (native English speaker) and NNES (non-native English speaker), in order to reflect the fact that all the 'non-native' speakers can speak not just one, but two or three languages apart from their first language. However, this attempt to reflect their multi-lingualism felt somewhat contrived, and it was decided, in spite of the somewhat problematical aspects associated with the words native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS), to retain the use of these terms, as they provide a convenient and familiar short-hand for referring to the respective participants in the interactions. For the purposes of this study, a non-native speaker is simply someone who has a mother tongue other than English.

Two other terms which will be used are those of NNS *learner*, as someone who is still in the process of acquiring expertise in the second language, and NNS *user*, as someone who, in Cook's words (2002:2) "are exploiting whatever linguistic resources they have for a real-life purpose". As Cook also points out, these roles or identities frequently overlap, depending on the communicative context. The communicative event which the current study describes was of an informal, social nature, and the primary identities of the NNS participants were therefore not those of learners, but of users of the L2.

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We will see, however, that the *learner* identity at times came to the fore and affected the nature of the interactions, but also that the effect on the conversations was not necessarily a negative one.

2.3   The Non-Native Speaker

In presenting an overview of what is and is not known about non-native speakers' (NNS) participation in interactions with native speakers (NS), an appropriate first step would be to consider what has been said about the NNS.

Judging from much of the literature (e.g. Harder 1980; Thomas 1984; Tyler 1992; Ulichny 1997; Wong 2000; Trillo 2002), it is easy to get the impression of a poor, befuddled character who is forever upsetting the native speaker because of linguistic and interactional mismanagement. This seems to apply equally whether the NNS is a *learner* who fails to measure up in classroom performance, or a business *user* of an L2 who fails to impress sufficiently to negotiate an important deal. Irrespective of the languages involved or the communicative contexts, the focus of much research seems to be firmly on what the NNS cannot do in a communicative sense, or can only do badly, or with difficulty (Barraja-Rohan 2002; Cheng and Warren, 1999; Cutrone, 2005; Olshtain and Cohen, 1990; Wong 2000).

This section will provide an overview and some examples of both the perceived 'deficiencies' of NNSs and the potential effects of these.

Harder (1980) is well-known for coining the phrase 'reduced personality' in connection with the difficulties of self-expression which NNSs sometimes face. He went so far as to describe 'the foreigner' as "a coarse and primitive character from an interactional point of view" (ibid:268), pointing out how NNSs are often not able to say as much as or even what they would like.

A study by Ulichny (1997) would seem to confirm this view, or at least go some way towards explaining how this perception may come about. On the basis of her data of NS-NNS interactions she found that "repairs are

extremely common. In fact, they constitute the basic pattern of interaction between the speakers." (ibid:233), and such a state of affairs would obviously make communication difficult. She further remarks (ibid:246) that "the conversational work that is required to introduce a repair or any other conversational gambit out of sequence is beyond the capability of many NNSs." This issue will be discussed in more detail in Section 2.9 and in Chapter 6.

It seems that no aspect of NNS discourse has escaped the researcher, and often to the detriment of the image of the NNS. Aston (1993:236), for example, refers to "the widely noted long-windedness and prosaicness of NNS discourse", citing Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), Kasper (1989) and Aston (1988). Thomas (1984:226) cautions that inappropriate pragmatic strategies may lead to the NNS being perceived as over-assertive and domineering, while Trillo (2002:779) comments on Spanish speakers' limited use of certain discourse markers, stating that

> .. the lack of these devices may prevent them from carrying
> out interactions effectively, for example, being incapable of
> drawing the attention of the addressee in a way which is
> seen as polite, or of expressing personal opinions with the
> expected attenuating "well".

Issues of politeness were also under investigation in a study by Olshtain and Cohen (1990:45). They found that NNSs make less use of intensifiers when apologising, which might result in them sounding less sincere. Another of their findings related to the lengths of utterances used by NNS when apologising, and they found that NNSs tended to use "too many words" (ibid:55). The baseline for comparison was native speaker norms, the implication being that violations of these native speaker norms could lead to pragmatic failure.

Cheng and Warren (1999:293) referred to the "perceived shortcomings" of Chinese speakers in their corpus-based study on the use of inexplicitness in conversations. They assert (ibid:301) that "inexplicitness is a sign of a competent native discourser", and find that NNSs often tend to be

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inappropriately explicit, particularly through excessive use of repetition, and that this is likely to be detrimental to successful understanding and communication.

This same perspective of the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural encounters is shared by Wei, Hua and Yue (2001:135) who state that "culturally-based differences in conversational styles often result in miscommunication in intercultural transactions", and they go on to show how business negotiations may be adversely affected as a result. White (1997:338) also notes that "much inter-cultural miscommunication is manifested in very subtle ways." One of the implications emerging from his own research seems to be that the Japanese use of back channels "may create a false impression of accord with the propositions being articulated by the American party" (p.339). It would appear from this conclusion that it is not just as speakers, but also as listeners that NNSs may be judged as lacking.

Tyler (1992) compared NS and NNS discourse management strategies and claimed support for the hypothesis that

> .. the failure of non-native speakers to adhere to target-language norms in articulating discourse-level relationships contributes to native listeners judging the discourse as difficult to follow (ibid:14).

This statement brings home the fact that there are several issues to consider when discussing NNSs and their performance in talk. One relates to their so-called 'failures' to communicate effectively, while another relates to the effects of such communication, or at least to the perceptions created in the minds of the people with whom they are communicating - sometimes, but not always, native speakers. In fact, NNSs are far more likely to use English with other NNSs, and research into the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is increasingly showing how such encounters can be successful (Firth 1996; Gardner and Wagner 2005; Meierkord 2000; Pölzl and Seidlhofer 2006). However, many NNSs still find themselves in a position of having to or indeed

wanting to communicate with NSs, both in social and educational contexts, as is the case with the NNSs in this study.

Several research papers (e.g. Lindemann 2002; Spencer-Rogers & McGovern 2002; Wilkinson 2002; Williams 1992) attest to the fact that not all the communication problems faced by NNSs are in fact due to their inherent lack of skills, but stem, at least in part, from the attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of the NS interactants.

The above-mentioned study by Ulichny (1997:242), for example, demonstrates how communication problems can lead to a situation where the NS presumes that "a lack of linguistic competence assumes a lack of other personality and worldly competences" – perhaps another instance of Harder's 'reduced personality'.

That the perceived *effects* of NNS interactions can be far-reaching and wide-ranging is clear from just a small selection of studies. One example comes from Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002:7) who found that "Many American college students reported feeling uncomfortable, impatient and frustrated when encountering communication difficulties with the international student population on their campuses." Furthermore, Mei (2002:96) argues that "... the wider sociocultural context plays a pivotal role in the way one interprets language use and language behaviour", and points out that such different interpretations have "led to perceptions of impoliteness and *a lack of cooperation by native speakers* in intercultural communication situations" (my italics).

Maynard (1997:54) investigated listener responses as an aspect of interactional management, and points out that "interactional signs such as back channel expressions are more likely to be interpreted as a social style readily identified with the personality of the participant." This perception in turn may then contribute to a situation where:

> Conversations between native and non-native speakers of English, even when phonologically and grammatically correct, often evoke a feeling of "disengagement", "foreignness", "estrangement", and moreover, "a lack of respect", which unfortunately sometimes takes the form of "sympathy" – or a disguised sense of superiority – over the weaker non-native.
> (Maynard 1997:37).

The effects extend even further than to the personal characteristics and qualities of NNSs, as can be seen from the study by Garcez (1993; cited in Gimenez 2001:169) who investigated authentic business negotiations between Americans and Brazilians. He concluded that "the cross-cultural behaviours he observed had a negative effect on the negotiation, not only on the flow of the bargaining process towards a satisfactory outcome, but also on the quality of the relationship among the participants" (ibid. p.112).

From specific events and contexts these negative effects can spread to take in entire languages, as Llurda (2000:297) found in her investigation of NS responses and attitudes to NNS accents, and where she concluded that "certain languages are subject to negative stereotyping."

Negative stereotyping is a particularly damaging aspect of how NNSs are sometimes perceived. Cutrone (2005), like Maynard above, investigated the use of backchannels in conversations between Japanese-British dyads. He noted (ibid:263) that the British interlocutors interpreted the frequent use of backchannels by the Japanese as interruptions or signs of impatience. This had a negative effect on the communications and supported the hypothesis that "backchannel conventions, which are not shared between cultures, contribute to negative perceptions and stereotyping " (ibid:273).

Further telling evidence of the lack of esteem accorded to NNSs comes from Duff's (2002:310) research in an interethnic school in Canada, which revealed that local children "... *couldn't* have friends who didn't speak English well ...",

while Ravid et al (2003:90) refer to a model proposed by Smith et al (1991) which seeks to explain "native speakers' frustration, effortful speech patterns, and infelicitous accommodation strategies when engaged in foreigner talk."

Overwhelmingly, the outcomes of the studies I have considered so far seem to conclude not only that NNS are deficient communicators, but also that the effects of any miscommunication are detrimental to both the goals of the interaction and to the ways in which NNSs are perceived.

However, the notion of the NNS as a deficient communicator is increasingly being disputed. One particularly vociferous voice in defence of the NNS is Cook (1999), who argues for an end to the setting of 'native speaker norms' as the eventual goal of L2 use and L2 learning. He argues, convincingly, that it is a goal that will remain unattainable for NNSs, a point to which we will return later. Another key point in the debate to which Cook draws attention is that many L2 users are actually multi-competent in several languages, a very different picture from the impoverished communicator described earlier.

A more recent contribution to the debate comes from Gardner and Wagner (2004), who, in their introduction to an edited collection on second language conversations, state that

> the primary focus of the studies in this volume is on how participants manage to achieve successful outcomes in their interactions rather than on the 'deficits' they may have as 'non-native' speakers (ibid:2).

In view of this claim it seems somewhat ironical that the majority of the chapters in Gardner and Wagner's book focus on instances of communicative trouble. The editors do point out, though, that "several chapters demonstrate that apparent linguistic deficits often are not interactionally significant to either the first- or second-language-speaking participants " (ibid:2).

A similar conclusion was reached by Hosoda (2006), who, in the context of Japanese L1-L2 conversations found that "...participants' disfluencies or

linguistic errors were usually not treated as interactional trouble" and indeed that "... the interlocutors did not orient to less-than-perfect language use during much of their interaction"(ibid:43-44).

It is not just in the area of language difficulties that the perspective is changing; an increasing number of studies testify to the fact that NNSs are able to demonstrate skilful use of language in encounters with NSs and other NNSs, and that they are *not*, in the words of Firth and Wagner (2007:807) "interactional dopes". They go on to demonstrate (ibid:808) how NNSs "deploy, make available, share, adapt, manipulate and creatively apply communicative resources in an on-going attempt to construct meaningful and consequential social interaction."

Belz (2002:64) found codeswitching to be employed as a creative resource and declared that learners should not be seen as exclusively deficient communicators, but instead as creative, resourceful and multi-competent language users.

In contrast to Harder (1980:28), who said that "being a foreigner entails not understanding jokes", Davies (2003:1364) discovered that "... even beginning English learners are able to initiate and participate in joking behaviour with each other and Americans." She comments further (p. 1381):

> This focus on the achievement of communication in cross-cultural situations stands in contrast to and attempts to provide a counterbalance to research using a similar approach which analyzes cross-cultural *miscommunication* as a point of departure.

Piller's (2002) research on the performance of advanced users of an L2 also focused on achievements rather than deficiencies, and furthermore suggests that the interactional context will have an impact on conversational performance:

..high-level achievement in the L2 may be audience-specific. The more 'at home' someone is with their interlocutors, the better the performance. It might be argued that partners in an intimate relationship meet as individuals rather than as representatives of a group (e.g. 'native' vs, 'non-native' speaker). Piller (2002:197)

Her article also draws attention to the inherent difficulties in comparing L2 performance to native speaker competence and performance. What does it mean, then, to be a competent L2 speaker, and on whose terms?

2.3.1 Speaker competence

Comparisons between NSs and NNSs are frequently based on somewhat idealized notions of NS talk, and this is an approach which several researchers quite rightly caution against taking. This is firstly because there is no one variety of English which is universally recognised as a standard against which to measure 'competent' speech (Leung 2005), and secondly because native speakers themselves frequently use language which is far from perfectly formulated or fluently produced.

Riggenbach (1991:424), for example, in her study on non-native fluency points out that those features of speech which are commonly associated with fluency are seldom found "in the actual speech data of native speakers, where a great deal of hesitation and repair does in fact occur." Kasper (1997:8) takes a similar line when she argues that non-native speakers are not necessarily ideal communicators, and that ideal communication is not a requirement for *successful* communication. The term she uses is communication that is "good enough for the purpose at hand", and she further states that "It would be unreasonable and unrealistic to place higher demands on L2 learners' communicative abilities than those of NS".

Cook (1999:5) stresses that "L2 users have to be credited for what they are – L2 users. They should be judged by how successful they are as L2 users, not by their failures compared to native speakers..."

This perspective would seem to provide a much sounder basis from which to examine those NS-NNS interactions which take place outside the classroom, such as the ones in this study. Indeed rather than use the term 'competence', it seems more appropriate to refer to NS-NNS interactions, in line with Hosoda (2006), following Rampton (1990), as demonstrating *differential language expertise*, not least because this reflects, in the words of Hosoda (2006:26) how ..."even within one activity, the participants may shift roles of relative expert and novice."

The most well-known description of what it means to be communicatively competent is that put forward by Canale (1983), who proposed four components of competence: grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. While all of these competencies play a part in creating effective communication, this study is concerned primarily with aspects of discourse competence, and specifically with the ability to participate effectively in conversations. Effective participation would include elements like back channel use, topic management, and also interactional skills, such as the ability to respond appropriately, and to pay attention on a personal level to the content of a partner's utterances; the ability to build and sustain rapport, and to create alignment and understanding. The emphasis, however, is not intended to be on a demonstration of whether the NNSs in the study are overall discoursally competent communicators, but rather to explore and describe how they employ specific discourse strategies, and what effect these have on the conversations.

The ability of NNSs to deal with certain dimensions of discourse competence, such as the management of topic organisation in conversations, has not been the subject of much research (but see du-Babcock 1999; Itakura 2002; Holtzer 2002; Scollon and Scollon 1991; Stokoe 2000; Eerdmans and Di Candia 2007), and the current study will contribute to knowledge in this area.

2.3.2   Research perspectives

We have seen that much of the research into NS-NNS interactions has tended to lean towards what Koole and ten Thije (2001) describe as "the collision perspective", i.e. where the focus is mainly on the negative outcomes of communication attempts, and which, in Shea's (1994) view tends to put the onus for misunderstanding unfairly on the NNS. He furthermore contends that this type of analysis "is potentially disempowering for NNSs because it unintentionally supports the political and economic status quo of a society unjustly biased against minority cultural groups" (ibid:358). He instead proposes the pursuit of "a broader analysis of intercultural interaction, one that recognizes the way discourse is interactively structured within the social activity of interaction" (ibid:361). This means looking at patterns of participation and interactional control, and he demonstrates convincingly how these change, largely depending on the responses of the NSs.

I would, however, take issue with his conclusions that "the native speaker's response is a critical means of constructing the non-native speaker's discourse" (ibid:378), and that "NNS fluency is partly a function of NS response" (ibid:382). This would seem to again reduce both the interactional skills and the personality of the NNS to the status of someone who is both powerless and inept.   If it is indeed the case that all interaction is co-constructed, then it must follow that NNS responses will also play a part in shaping any communicative outcomes.

Just such a perspective is proposed by Koole and ten Thije (2001), when they suggest that a more appropriate analytical focus for intercultural communication would be to focus on *how participants mutually shape discourse*, rather than focusing on how cultural differences shape discourse in specific ways. While acknowledging that intercultural discourse can generate misunderstanding, they also point out that "Despite the many cases of intercultural misunderstanding attested to in the literature, in intercultural and interethnic communication, one is more often understood than one is misunderstood " (ibid: 584).

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This, then, is the perspective which will be pursued in this investigation, with a focus on the strategies which NNSs use to sustain interactions with NSs, looking not primarily at the ones which fail, but, more crucially, at the ones which lead to successful participation.

Furthermore, while intercultural research has primarily focused on institutional discourse, the present study will examine informal, *social* interactions between NSs and NNSs where the goals of the interactions may be less clear-cut. The following section will discuss the nature of such social interactions.

2.4 Informal conversations

While the nature of the interactions in the studies described so far varied from the formal to the informal, from transactional to interactional, from tightly to loosely structured by the researchers, what we will be dealing with here is a specific type of communicative event, namely informal conversations.

2.4.1 Characteristics of informal conversations

Informal conversations differ from institutional talk and indeed from talk in other contexts in many ways. Researchers (Stubbs 1983; Eggins and Slade 1997; Coupland 2000) have come up with a variety of both definitions and names to describe this phenomenon: everyday talk, small talk, ordinary, natural, or casual conversation. Most, however, are in agreement on the basic features, which tend to be based on what Sacks (1970:413) called "the technology of conversation", in other words the "rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims... that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in ... conversations." One of the most important of these conversational mechanisms is without doubt the turn-taking system identified by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), together with other features of the structural design of conversations such as sequence organisation, and the role of, for example, adjacency pairs. However, as Schegloff (1999:409) points out

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not only is there an underlying ordering to the way in which turns are distributed among participants and constructed by them (even when this ends up sounding disorderly): what is *done* in these turns is orderly as well - 'orderly' in the sense of non-arbitrary and non-random. This is often called 'coherence', and has most commonly been understood to pertain to matters of topicality and topical organisation.

It is in large part this form of topical orderliness and overall conversational coherence which the current study will be concerned with, looking in particular at how NNSs contribute to this.

Accepting that language is fundamentally an instrument for carrying out social activities (Clark 1996), such as "gossiping, getting to know each other, planning daily chores, transacting business, debating politics, teaching and learning, entertaining each other ... and so on" (ibid:23), then that aspect of language use which we refer to as conversation can be defined as a means by which social and personal relationships are initiated and maintained. This is probably how most people understand the essence of conversation, and this is echoed to some extent by Goffman's (1981:14) definition :

> Thus, conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as talk occurring when a small number of participants come together and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks: a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule; everyone is accorded the status of someone whose overall evaluation of the subject matter at hand – whose editorial comments, as it were – is to be encouraged and treated with respect; and no final agreement or synthesis is demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as unprejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants.

One significant feature here is the fact that the talk is not part of an instrumental task, that no final outcome is needed, that the talking is an end in

itself. Indeed, Eggins and Slade (1997:19) define casual conversation as "talk which is NOT motivated by any clear pragmatic purpose."

They do, however, also point out that this seemingly trivial activity is the location of a very important social undertaking, that of the construction of social reality (ibid:16) : "the apparent triviality of casual conversation disguises the significant interpersonal work it achieves as interactants enact and confirm social identities and relationships." They further state that "interacting is ... a process of making meanings. As we take turns in any interaction we negotiate meanings about what we think is going on in the world, how we feel about it, and how we feel about the people we interact with."

Their position leads them to a consideration of how social identities are constructed through language use, but this study will turn instead to a consideration of how language and conversational strategies are used to create meanings in the specific context of intercultural encounters, and how such meanings are coherently and jointly negotiated.

A discussion about informal conversations would not be complete without some reference to the vast increase in knowledge about the specific linguistic and interactional characteristics of this genre of talk which has resulted from large-scale corpora of natural interactions. McCarthy (1991,1998, 2003), in particular, has drawn attention not just to the details of such characteristics but also to the pedagogical importance of including features of everyday spoken language in language teaching. He refers to, for example, grammatical structuring like heads and tails, use of ellipsis; areas of lexis like vague language and fixed expressions, as well as interactive features like tags, discourse markers and back channels. He also points out (1996: 69) that what is characteristic of much informal conversation is

> the seemingly random topic switching and topic overlapping. Questions remain unanswered or the answers are postponed; questions and answers overlap; turns are punctuated by hesitations and false starts. On the surface there appears to be much divergence, disconnection and incoherence.

However, there is nonetheless a large measure of convergence by repetition. ... and (this repetition) serves to create a strong sense of rapport and interpersonal involvement.

This description of how native speakers conduct conversations bears some interesting similarities to the following description of NS-NNS conversations by Yano, Long and Ross (1994:192-193):

> Where content is concerned, conversation with NNSs tends to have more of a here-and-now orientation and to treat a more predictable, narrower range of topics more briefly, for example, by dealing with fewer information bits and by maintaining a lower ratio of topic-initiating to topic-continuing moves. The interactional structure of NS-NNS conversation is marked by abrupt topic-shifts, more use of questions for topic-initiating moves, more repetition of various kinds (including semantic repetition or paraphrase), and more comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests, expansion, question-and answer strings, and decomposition.

The difference between the two descriptions, however, lies in the implication by Yano et al (ibid) that non-native speaker use of the above features may require considerable conversational adjustments by the participants; they are seen here, in other words, as less 'desirable' features of conversation.

The analysis of the conversations in this study will focus in detail on some of the features mentioned by Yano et al, looking specifically at the role of interactional modifications, and whether these are perceived and treated by the participants as a normal or disruptive part of the conversations. The other key feature in the quote above relates to topic content and topic management, and the following sections will address these in detail, as this is primarily the conversational aspect of NNS contributions which is under investigation.

2.5   Conversational topics

There is a general lack of agreement on what exactly constitutes the topic of a conversation. Thus, when Craig and Tracy (1983) asked several researchers to identify the topics in the same conversation, the number of topics identified varied from seven to thirty-six. Craig and Tracy concluded that this disparity attested to "the multiplicity of perspectives and the inadequacy of our present notions of topic." On the other hand, some studies (Planalp and Tracy 1980; Schneider 1987) report that participants in the conversations under investigation had no problems identifying the topics which they had talked about. It seems likely that most conversational partners will have a common-sense notion of what their talk has been about.

However, the perspective which is brought to bear by participants recollecting, and indeed by 'lay-people' on viewing, a completed conversation is likely to be different to the perspective of participants *during* a conversation, and their view of the 'in-text', 'in-progress' topic. There would thus seem to be distinct differences between topic as a 'finished product', and topic as a dynamic, jointly constructed concept.

In research terms, not only is topic an elusive concept, but definitions are highly dependent on the research perspective involved.. This point is highlighted by Kellermann and Palomares (2004:309-310) when they say that

> ...researchers approach the notion of conversational topic from differing *perspectives* (how we structure talk versus what we talk about), analysis *units* (sentence versus discourse level), and *referents* (contents / ideas versus expression / particular constructions.

Abu-Akel (2002:1788) similarly points out that the widely divergent views and research perspectives make it difficult to reach a consensus on how to address the notion of topic and to understand its role in discourse.

Palomares, Bradac and Kellerman (2006) draw attention to the vast amount of literature dealing with conversational topic, and to the consequent difficulties

of getting to grips with it, due to the varying conceptualizations of topic which exist within different disciplines. In the following sections an attempt will be made to disentangle some of these various perspectives and their definitions, and to put forward the definition and concepts which will be employed in this thesis. This will be followed by a discussion of topic management and organisation, and conclude with a review of studies which have explored how non-native speakers manage the topical aspects of discourse.

2.5.1   Definitions of 'topic'

As this study is concerned with discourse beyond the level of the sentence, definitions and perspectives which relate to grammatical realisations of topic, such as noun-phrases, or topic-comment, will not be discussed. Instead I will consider definitions which focus, variously, on the content of conversations, on the ways in which this content is structured or manifested in talk, and also on the interpersonal relevance of topic content. The eventual definition of topic will draw on all of these elements, show how they are interlinked, and how they in turn link with coherence and understanding in conversations. 'Topic' will be presented, not as a purely linear, sequential process, but as a dynamic, multifaceted entity which is at the core of conversations, and the establishment and maintenance of which is very much a collaborative project.

Looking first at some definitions which focus on *content*, Brown and Yule (1983:71) provide the most well-known comment about this, namely that topic is simply "what is being talked about". Simply put, without something to talk about, there can be no conversation. However, as Craig and Tracy's (1983) research indicated, it is far from easy to agree on what constitutes this 'aboutness'. Some researchers refer to intuition as a means of establishing what the topic consists of, with Schneider (1987: 247) commenting that "hard as it may be to define topic precisely, analysts can legitimately rely on their intuition about sequences of utterances constituting a whole." Such a common-sense notion of what was being talked about was initially used to label each of the conversations in this study.

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Other content-based definitions have come from, for example, Cook (1990:25) who defines topic simply as "the information carried in the message", and, along similar lines, from Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) who propose the following definition of a discourse topic: "the proposition or set of propositions about which the speaker is either requesting or seeking information." One of the shortcomings of this definition, according to Tryggvason (2004:227), is that "it focuses more on single sentences than on longer stretches of discourse." Furthermore, it would seem to put a premium on transactional rather than interactional intentions, and thus ignores the interpersonal aspects of topical content and selection.

In addition, such an approach to topic identification runs into the problems already referred to by Craig and Tracy (1983), and one which is also highlighted by Stokoe (2000:196), namely that "Treating topics as discrete, identifiable units is problematic because defining topics is highly subjective and may be different for all the participants, as well as for the analyst."

Abu-Akel (2002:1790) circumvents the problem by proposing that a topic can be identified by the following characteristics: "A single topic as an independent entity is a topic that is not linked thematically (propositionally) or linguistically to the preceding topic." This definition, though, brings its own problems, insofar as it then becomes necessary to define one topic in relation to other topics in the talk. However, as Crow (1983:137) points out: "Defining 'topic' with any greater specificity than 'what a conversation is *about*' at any particular moment usually entails focusing on topic boundaries and shifts."

This, in fact, is an approach which is favoured by many researchers, for example Maynard and Zimmerman (1984). They state that

> By focusing on "procedures" for introducing topic, we depart from those who define conversational topics as objects, activities, events, or ideas that are talked about. ... More precisely, we discuss topical *content* (what is talked about) as secondary to topical *structure* (how topical talk is done and done properly). (ibid:301).

The 'procedures' referred to by Maynard and Zimmerman include strategies not just for opening topics, but also for closing and changing them, and they concentrate therefore on what Abu-Akel (ibid:1800) calls "the 'technical' aspect of the conversational dynamics and or structure". This is possibly the most frequently researched aspect of conversational topic, with research by conversation analysts being particularly prominent (e.g. Button and Casey, 1984; Jefferson, 1984; Drew and Holt, 2005).

In part such a perspective entails looking at topic in relation to the turn-taking system, to the semantic and prosodical relations between sets of utterances, the referential connections which link one utterance with the next, and the ways in which these signal the general subject matter, the focus, or themes and sub-themes of a conversation. It is most likely the recognition of such signals that give rise to the common-sense, everyday understanding of what the topic is.

An approach which examines topical boundaries and how these are realised will also be employed in the current research; firstly, because it provides a viable method of analysing topical movements, and secondly, because this area has been under-researched as far as non-native speaker contributions to conversations are concerned. Topic, then, for the purposes of *identification* in this research will be defined as stretches of discourse which have an identifiable and sustained focus, and which are bounded by specific moves that lead to a recognisably complete or partial change of focus. Section 2.7 will discuss topic boundaries in more detail.

Issues relating to both content and organisation contribute to clarifying what is meant by 'topic' and together provide the overall skeleton or the basic structure for the creation of a coherent conversation. The role of topic as a coherence-organising device is reflected in Svennevig's (1999:164) definition of topic "...as a process, that is a set of techniques for establishing boundaries and coherence patterns in discourse." According to Bublitz (1988:138) 'topical actions', such as introducing, establishing and terminating topics, serve to "create, maintain and restore a continuous flow of

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conversation and help to prevent an·incoherent, unstable conversational situation." Geluykens (1997:36) expresses a similar view when he says that topic organisation is a reflection of conversational coherence, and also notes that such coherence is achieved collaboratively. Topical coherence, in the words of Tannen (1990:168), "refers to how speakers introduce and develop topics in relation to their own and each other's prior and projected talk."

As the concept of coherence is both complex and crucial for the discussion and analysis of non-native speakers' topical contributions to conversation, some of the definitions of coherence and the features which are commonly agreed to constitute or at least contribute to coherence in discourse will be outlined below. A more detailed discussion of specific coherence relations will be undertaken in Chapter 3.

2.6   Features of coherence in talk

Starting with a basic dictionary definition, Collins Concise English dictionary (1993:257) defines *coherence* as a "logical or natural connection or consistency", while the first definition of the adjective *coherent* is "capable of intelligible speech", followed by "logical, consistent and orderly", and thirdly "cohering or sticking together".

These definitions seem to imply that there are two different dynamics at work, indicating that coherence operates on several levels. A logical connection, for example, would be where the same theme is addressed in different turns at talk, while the cohesive dimension refers to the linguistic signals which enable a text to 'stick together', - what Rickheit and Habel (1995:ix) call "facets of linguistic connectedness." The most common method of establishing cohesion in a text, whether spoken or written, is by way of cohesive ties, which Bloor and Bloor (1995:95), following Halliday and Hasan (1976), classify into four main types: "reference, ellipsis and substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion". In this study it is primarily the use of lexical links which will be discussed, as this feature was particularly prominent.

While such linguistic signals or cohesive devices help to make the connections in talk explicit, they are not always sufficient or necessary to ensure that a stretch of spoken discourse or a change in topical direction will make sense. The focus of attention can remain on the same theme or idea without there necessarily being any instances of lexical repetition or use of the same referents.

Where logical connections between utterances exist, we can talk about propositional coherence. If we take the proposition of an utterance to refer to the main idea, message or piece of information contained in it, then any subsequent utterance should in some way relate to this same idea or information. There is, in other words, a requirement that contributions to talk should be relevant. It was the Birmingham philosopher Grice (1975), who, as one of his principles of co-operative conversations, included the maxim: *be relevant*. Thornbury (2005:70) translates this to mean that

> ..unless given instructions to the contrary, speakers assume that each other's utterances both relate to a mutually agreed topic and follow on from one another. Even where the relevance is not explicit, we will attempt to infer it.

The quest for relevance in talk also pertains to non-native speakers, as several studies have found (Cameron and Williams 1997; Cheng and Warren 1999; Taguchi 2002). These studies have focused on NNSs' search for relevance where meaning is implicit rather than explicit, i.e. the focus has been on comprehension rather than production processes. Two of the major outcomes from Taguchi's research are, firstly, that L2 learners are generally able to arrive at the implied meaning of utterances, and, secondly, that they use a range of inferencing strategies to arrive at the most relevant interpretation.

The interpretation of an utterance is thus crucial for the formulation of any next utterance; in other words, coherence in talk is created through the

interplay of participants as hearer and speaker respectively, and becomes therefore an interactional achievement. According to Bublitz (1999:2)

> ..coherence is not a state, but a process, helped along by a host of interacting factors situated on all levels of communication (from prosodic variation to textual organisation, from topic progression to knowledge alignment).

Thornbury (2005) suggests that we can talk about coherence in speech as operating at both micro- and macro-levels, i.e. at a local, sentence level, and at a more global level in terms of the organisation and expectations involved in specific types of speech events. At a macro-level, a speech event such as a political interview, for example, may exhibit global coherence at the content level, in so far as certain themes may come up for discussion and certain questions are likely to be asked. Informal conversations, on the other hand, are unlikely to have such an underlying topical structure to contribute to coherence; instead, as West and Garcia (1988:552) observe:

> In any particular conversation, a topic may be raised, dropped, and then returned to later. Two topics may be intertwined, developing almost simultaneously, and segments of talk may emerge that have no discernible "topic" at all.

While this is likely to be a very common pattern, there are nonetheless occasions when topical content in informal conversations may contribute to the overall organisation and thus to the global coherence of the talk. Three of the conversations in the data provide examples of different types of global coherence. In one of the conversations, 'Hot curry', all the talk can be subsumed under the easily identifiable label of 'food'; this then provides an over-arching global topic, with a number of 'sub-topics' emerging from and being linked to this. A second type of organisational pattern is evident in 'Universities' by virtue of the activity which the participants are involved in *while* they are talking, namely the completion of an application form; this activity therefore provides a topic which is recurrently returned to. In 'The tabloid' conversation the setting likewise provides opportunities for renewing

topical talk. By virtue of such shared contexts participants can legitimately re-introduce material which relates to these aspects without loss of coherence. When, for example, the NS in 'Education' suddenly changes the topic and says *You have to put your parents' address here,* the meaning is easily retrieved by her partner, because it is part of the global unity of their conversation. Lenk (1998:256) states that "participants in conversation are constantly engaged in processing incoming information towards an understanding of the overall connectedness of parts of discourse", and in the example above topical content may confer a degree of global coherence.

Linguistic devices like discourse markers can be instrumental in contributing to global coherence by connecting "parts of the discourse that are not immediately adjacent, and that are not topically related " (Lenk 1998:256). At this structural level they may, for example, be employed in the opening and closing of topics, and the extracts in Chapter 4 will illustrate examples of this.

At the local or micro-level, coherence can be manifested in any number of ways, but a key feature, according to Rickheit and Habel (1995:ix), lies in "the way in which the utterances from each participant mesh together to form a co-ordinated exchange." Craig and Tracy's definition (1983:14) also draws attention to this aspect of the notion when they say that "Coherence refers to the fact that utterances produced by competent speakers in conversation usually seem to be connected to each other in orderly and meaningful ways." One such orderly method of connecting utterances relies on the sequential relations implicit in the use of certain types of conversational procedures, such as adjacency pairs like questions and answers. We will see in Chapters 4 and 5 how a variety of coherence relations are employed by the participants in the conversations, and, more importantly, see how "it takes two to cohere" (Geluykens 1997:35). This point was also stressed by Levinson (1983:315), as his description below makes clear:

> ... topical coherence cannot be thought of as residing in some independently calculable procedure for ascertaining (for example) shared reference across utterances. Rather, topical coherence is something *constructed* across turns by

the collaboration of participants. What needs then to be studied is how potential topics are introduced and collaboratively ratified, how they are marked as 'new', 'touched off', 'misplaced' and so on, how they are avoided or competed over and how they are collaboratively closed down.

Coherence then has many facets, and its role in topic management specifically will be taken up again in the description of topical boundaries below.

2.7 Topical boundaries

Deciding where one topic in a conversation ends and another begins is not always an easy matter. Brinton and Fujiki (1984:356) state that "The complexity of topic manipulation in spontaneous discourse has made the analysis of topic patterns particularly challenging." It is an area in which a great deal of research has been done, but while there is some agreement on the mechanisms involved in topical movements from one subject to another, there is considerable terminological confusion in the descriptions of the various topical changes of direction that can occur during conversations. Thus we get references to not just topic change, but also topic drift (Hobbs 1990), topic shift (McKinley and McVittee 2006) topic leaps (Svennevig 1999), topic shading (Brinton and Fujiki,1984; Crowe 1983), topic pops, (Schank 1977), and topic transition (Drew and Holt 1998). As these aspects of topic organisation will be examined in detail, it is important to clarify the terminology which will be used.

In the literature the terms *topic shift, topic transition* and *topic change* are often used interchangeably to indicate both the type of change where an entirely new topic appears, and those subtler changes of direction where, for example, one sub-topic blends into another. In order to highlight the distinctions between these mechanisms, these terms will be used with the specific meanings described below.

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In this thesis *topic shift* will be retained as an umbrella term for both types of topic moves mentioned above. Topic *change* will be used to refer only to those instances which segment talk into clearly boundaried and unconnected sequences. Topic *transition* will be reserved for those moves which show a connection of some sort to the current or to a previous topic, and which also contribute to maintaining the topical flow of the conversation.

A special category of topic transition is one which initiates a side sequence, (Jefferson 1972; Svennevig 1999) where the current topic is temporarily suspended to deal with an extraneous matter. This may be a case of seeking clarification before the topic can be continued, or, in the case of NS-NNS interactions, dealing with a linguistic issue. Side sequences will be the subject of further discussion in Chapter 6.

Extracts from the conversations will illustrate how the NNSs managed these different stages of the talk in progress, what specific strategies they used, and how effective these strategies were in maintaining or contributing to conversational coherence and mutual understanding. They will also show how the NNSs take an active part in initiating both entirely new topics and in opening up different directions for the current topic. But first these topical features will be described in more detail.

2.7.1   Topic change

Bearing in mind that topic was initially defined on two levels, as the content of the talk, and by virtue of the bounding moves displayed in the talk, a topic change is identified as one where a new topic is introduced which has no lexical or propositional link with aspects of immediately preceding topics. On the basis of this definition it becomes possible to identify topic changes in conversations. As Brown and Yule (1983:69) point out "There do exist ways of identifying the boundaries of stretches of discourse which set one chunk of discourse off from the next."

Button and Casey (1984) identify three sequential environments in which such changes can be found. One obvious situation is at the very beginning of talk when interlocutors first get together, and need to get the talk under way. Conversational beginnings have been particularly fruitful areas for research, as this is where an initial topic is introduced and negotiated. Button and Casey (ibid) provide typical examples of the sorts of general enquiries which may follow the opening components of talk, often along the lines of *What's up? What's new?* etc. It is, in effect, an oblique way of saying *What shall we talk about?* The topic, in other words, is up for negotiation.

A second environment is that of conversational closings, while a third follows topic-bounding turns when a previous topic has seemingly been exhausted and closed off. Due to the nature of the conversations in this study 'standard' conversational openings and closings are rare, (see Chapter 4) and it is therefore primarily this third type of topic change which will be examined. There would seem to be three main reasons why a topic change might be initiated. Firstly, it is inevitable that a particular topic will run its course in a conversation; there comes a point when no further useful contributions can be made to it, and a topic change most commonly occurs when the current topic has run out of steam (Maynard 1980). Secondly, a topic change might be occasioned by some event external to the conversation, which requires immediate attention, such as a child crying, or the phone ringing, and which may therefore need to be commented on. Tryggvason (2004) provides examples of such topic changes occurring during a family dinner conversation. Thirdly, a conversation-internal event may need attention and disrupt the flow of the current topic, such as the afore-mentioned instances of potential misunderstanding or need for clarification. However, this latter type frequently has more in common with topic transitions; as there will usually be a connection of some sort to the current topic. We can therefore talk about two different types of topic changes, namely one which follows the pattern of gradual closure, and another where the topic may be shifted in a more abrupt or disjunctive manner.

In terms of signalling topic changes a number of strategies have been identified. While explicit signals like *By the way* and *Anyway*, together with other formulaic expressions, may be used in such cases, it is, in the words of Brown and Yule (1983:69) more often the case that "...speakers do not often provide such explicit guidelines to help the analyst select chunks of discourse for study." Nor would it seem to be necessary to use such explicit signals to help the conversational partner realise that a topic change is under way. What we get instead tends to be a gradual closing down of the current topic, followed by a negotiated introduction of a new one. Topic change, in other words, is frequently a two-stage process, consisting of topic closure and topic initiation.

The different ways in which participants collaborate in closing down a topic have been investigated by several researchers. Abu-Akel (2002:1790-1791), for example, points out that "Several discourse operants are often used to mark topic boundaries." He goes on to mention specific marking devices which can function as possible indicators of topic boundaries, such as prosodic features, hesitancy, and Uh...or Well + New Topic. Howe (1991:1) produced an overview of those "topic-ending utterances which mark disjunctive topic changes." She found in her study that "Summary assessments and pauses seem to be the most common such indicators and were also most commonly found together, with pauses following summary assessments." (ibid:8). In addition to summary assessments and pauses as topic-ending indicators, she also includes acknowledgement tokens, such as *yeah, okay, hmm*; repetition and laughter. Such boundary markers will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Where a topic has not been closed by means of one of these strategies, a new topic may be introduced by way of a disjunction marker, such as *By the way* or *Oh, before I forget*, or even by making an explicit reference to the current topic as in *Talking of X...* A new topic can be introduced via either a statement or a question, and frequently a question preceded by *So* signals that a new topic is starting. Whichever method is used, it is the case that

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... once a new topic has been introduced, or rather proposed for introduction, by a participant, then it needs to be negotiated and acknowledged by the other participant(s) in order to become integrated into the conversation (Geluykens 1997:36 in Bublitz et al 1999).

A similar process of negotiation takes place during the second type of topic shift which will be discussed in the next section.

2.7.2   Topic transitions

While the boundaries of topic changes make this category relatively easy to identify, that is not the case with the category of what will be referred to as *topic transitions.*

The terminological confusion referred to earlier makes it additionally difficult to compare research findings in this area. One example is the study by McKinlay and McVittie (2006) where topic shifts, change and even jumps are used interchangeably, and at times would seem to refer to very different discourse events or topical moves. Instances, for example, where there are clear global links, or where participants move from talk about one aspect of the current topic to another aspect of the same topic are referred to not just as topic changes, but as 'abrupt' topic changes.

Terminology apart, some researchers have identified certain features which distinguish topic changes from transitions. Holt and Drew (2005:41), for example, make the point that "topic transitions in conversation rarely have clear-cut boundaries", while Abu-Akel (2002 :1798) states that "The shift in the focus of the topic is often discrete and does not require the speaker to explicitly indicate the transition point."

Sacks (1972:15-16) describes a stepwise topical movement in which one topic flows into another, in contrast to the clearly boundaried topical movements in topic changes, and he provides a very apt description of this difference between topic change and topic transition:

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> A general feature for topical organisation in conversation is
> movement from topic to topic, not by a topic-close followed by a
> topic beginning, but by a stepwise move, which involves linking
> up whatever is being introduced to what has just been talked
> about, such that, as far as anybody knows, a new topic has not
> been started, though we're far from wherever we began.
> (cited by Jefferson 1984: 198)

Crow (1983:142) refers to a similar process as topic shading, "which introduces a new topic by first establishing its relevance to or connection with the topic that has been on the floor." He goes on: "The new topic may be quite closely related to the prior one, particularly if it maintains the same characters, situations, feelings, ideas or other salient features." Topic transitions therefore can initiate talk which involves a change in focus as well as entirely new topics.

In cases where a new topic is introduced, there will be a clear lexical or propositional link with previous talk, either at a local or at a global level, though a shift in topic or topical direction will not be explicitly signalled. There is, in other words, quite often a gradual transition from one aspect of a topic to another, a smooth movement which nonetheless creates a shift of focus.

Such gradual transitions are probably the ones most commonly used in conversations. However, as Svennevig (1999:209) points out, "it has proven utterly difficult to distinguish gradual transitions from mere development within a single topic." This is echoed by Crow (ibid :155) when he says about topic shading that it is "perhaps the most important, though most elusive, mechanism for extending a conversation." It is consequently very difficult to operationalise the concept, but for the purposes of this study topic transitions will be treated as those instances of talk which, by a variety of means, take the topical content in a different direction, while maintaining either lexical or propositional links with previous talk.

The techniques by which such stepwise moves can be accomplished are many and varied. Holt and Drew (2005:43) observe that

in sequences of interaction in which each turn is fitted to the prior with no disruption to the coherence of the talk, there may be a single turn or a number of turns that speakers exploit as a resource in initiating a shift from one matter to another.

On looking through the transcripts of the conversations in the current study it was comparatively easy to identify individual lines which contained the germ of a topic transition, a 'trigger' so to speak. Jefferson (1984:46 in Holt and Drew 2005:46) refers to such instances as *pivots:* "a turn that connects to the prior turn but makes talk about other matters relevant." It was more difficult to to trace the development of the talk to see what had led up to this point, or at which point the initiation became accepted as the new topic. Topic transitions were not always, in other words, dependent on purely local and immediate coherence.

Coherent topic transitions can, according to Crow (1983 :155) be performed by, for example, eliciting information, recounting a past event and predicting a future state i.e. via shifts in the temporal frame. Several other strategies were in evidence in the data. It would appear, for example, that many topic transitions are effected not via questions, but statements. There are also indications that talk may move from the general to the more specific or personal, and that an introduction of personal matters may function to trigger a topic transition. On a linguistic level, repetition of previous elements also plays an important part (see Chapter 5).

What is clearly important is to employ such techniques in a manner which will maintain the coherent flow of the talk. In the case of both topic change and topic transition, "collaboration is a crucial component" (Gelyukens 1997:37), and the contributions of both interlocutors will therefore influence the development of the talk.

Chapter 5 will examine some instances of topic transitions, and show how the NNSs in the study draw on a range of both linguistic and personal resources

in making new and relevant topical contributions to the talk in progress. An overview of research relating to NNSs contributions to topic management will be given in the section below.

2.8   Topic management and non-native speakers

Systematic attempts to investigate how non-native speakers handle the management of conversational topics in the context of informal, social situations are rare, and much of what is known about such topic management comes from experimental studies into aspects of second language acquisition, (see for example Chen and Cegala 1994; Chen 1995, 2003; Chun et al 1982; Crookes and Rulon 1988; Gaies 1981; Gass and Varonis 1984; Hinkel 1994; Holtzer 2002; Itakura 2002; Li 1999; Long 1983; Toyoda and Harrison 2002). It should also be pointed out that in much of this research references to topic management have often been largely incidental, with the main focus on other aspects of interaction, such as turn-taking, interruptions, dominance, and use of back-channels, and also that more attention is usually paid to the role of NSs in ensuring successful communication. Both the research focus and the types of interactions involved will therefore affect the outcomes. Furthermore, Gass and Varonis (1984) acknowledged that their results might have been different if they had been based on natural data, and stressed the need for such research.

Yet other studies come from specific fields such as intercultural business communications (Du-Babcock 1999; Yamada 1990) or medical settings (Cameron and Williams 1997) where talk often has institutional characteristics, with set agendas, topics and turn-taking conventions. The relatively new field of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is also making contributions to knowledge about topic management in NS-NNS interactions (Freiermuth 2001).

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What many of these studies from very disparate fields have in common is the picture they paint of NNS difficulties in handling conversational topics, and this section will provide an overview of the most relevant of these research results.

Foremost, and most influential amongst these are the studies by Long (1981, 1983), which, in common with other research into NS-NNS interactions in the field of second language acquisition, looked primarily at the contributions made by NSs, and how NS discourse modifications might facilitate such interactions. For example, the 1981 study found that NSs used questions to encode topic-initiating moves more frequently when addressing NNS than in interactions with other NSs.

In terms of topic management, Long's 1983 paper concluded that NSs tended to use a wide range of strategies to "avoid conversational trouble" (ibid:131). As these strategies are relevant for the current study, they are presented in detail below.

1. "... native speakers will often attempt to pass control of current and subsequent conversational topics to the non-native speaker." (p.132)
2. The use of or-choice questions is more frequent than in NS-NS interactions.
3. NSs select *salient topics*, physically or temporally. "The preference for salient topics also manifests itself in a tendency for NS-NNS conversation to be more oriented to the 'now' of the 'here and now', as in caretaker–child conversation. (Cross 1977). " (p.133).
4. "There is a tendency in NS-NNS conversation for a large number of topics to be treated briefly, rather than a smaller number in more detail and at greater length. The idea seems to be to lighten the non-native speaker's conversational burden by eliciting a simple confirmation or denial of a proposition, often by means of a Yes/No question, and then to move on. This favors discourse built around series of question-answer sequences rather than series of reacting moves in the form of statements which are more common in NS-NS talk."(p. 133)

5. "Native speakers do a lot of work to make new conversational topics salient for the non-native speaker" (p.134). Long lists the following strategies which are used to achieve this purpose:

- framing "to mark closure of old topics and introduction of new ones", for example, OK, So, Well, Now
- moving topics to front or end of utterances, or by left-dislocation
- slow pace, stressing words, and pausing
- use of questions to encode topic-initiating moves (as a turn-allocation device)
- 'decomposition'
- accept unintentional topic-switch by NNS

The picture which emerges from this account is one where the NNS would seem to be a very passive participant, entirely reliant on the NS to keep the conversation going and to select topics for discussion. Questions seem to predominate as a method of initiating new topics, and the only information we get about topic initiations performed by the NNSs is by implication that they are 'unintentional'. How questions are employed to initiate topics by both NS and NNSs in the current study will be examined in chapters 4 and 5.

It is, however, not so much for the results on topic management that Long's study is known, but for the identification of comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks and the role which these strategies play in negotiation of meaning and supposedly in consequent interlanguage development. The role of these interactional modifications will be discussed further in section 2.9.3 and in chapters 3 and 6.

Two problems with Long's study were, firstly, that the NNSs involved were at a fairly low level of proficiency, and hence could not be expected to make major contributions to the discourse, and, secondly, that the interactions were at least quasi-experimental, i.e. not naturally occurring. Gaies (1981) replicated Long's 1981 study with high proficiency NNSs, but reached fairly similar conclusions. He did concede, though, that the level of proficiency of

the NNSs and the extent of shared knowledge between participants affected the frequency of discourse modifications used by NSs.

More importantly, these studies do not provide much information about what NNSs actually did or contributed in the interactions. The notion that successful communication in NS-NNS interactions is largely due to the work done and to the contributions made by the NS is reinforced by other studies. The NNS is portrayed as following the leads provided by the NS, and of being unable to initiate new topical directions, or even to follow the ones which are presented by the NS. Lesznyak (2004:72) in her review of studies in interlanguage pragmatics lists the following as a key finding: "NNS may fail to connect their turns to the turn of the previous speaker", something which would have obvious implications for coherent topic development. Bremer (1996:55) observes that "Another area in which non-native participants are dependent on greater explicitness is the transition to a new topic." Chen and Cegala (1994:391) also mention that "more explicit topic development is used in NS-NNS dyads", while Holtzer (2002:236) states that "A change of topic initiated by the native speaker can pose a risk for the non-native speaker".

The research findings of Bardovi-Harlig et al (1991:6) "...revealed that learners of English are often unable to end, or close, conversations appropriately.", and Wilkinson (2002), reporting on the conversational difficulties of students abroad, concluded that

> these students' heavy reliance on the roles and norms
> of the instructional environment was limiting at best and
> often inappropriate in out-of-class conversations.
> (Wilkinson 2002:168).

This reliance manifested itself in a reluctance to initiate topics and an inability to comprehend more subtle topic initiations which did not involve the use of questions.

An ability to initiate topic change is seen by Riggenbach (1991) as one element of fluency, and she comments about one of the NNS subjects in her

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study that the lack of questions asked " hints at an inequality of topic control.." (ibid:438). Itakura (2001) discusses the effects of conversational dominance and topic control, and points to the significance of initiations, which are often framed as questions, as instrumental in both maintaining and changing topics, and therefore in ensuring control of the direction of the conversation. He concedes that the format of his own research meant that "the data contain a relatively high proportion of question-answer sequences and a relatively low proportion of sequences in which topics are developed through successive mutual commenting " (ibid: 1863). It is this latter type of more subtle topic shift which is particularly under-researched with regard to NNSs, and which is a major focus in the current study.

The picture which emerges, then, is one of overall topical dominance by the NS, at least in so far as topic management strategies are concerned.

2.8.1   Topic content

Where topic content is concerned the picture is slightly different, though again this is, as noted by Zuengler and Bent (1991:392), an under-researched area: "Despite the important role of content in any conversation, only a few studies to date on NS-NNS interactions have addressed it." Brown (1989:107) seconds that when she says that "Applied linguists have tended to ignore the cognitive content of what is being talked about as a feature which may either facilitate or deter the confident production or comprehension of language." There is, however, general agreement that familiarity with content will facilitate NS-NNS conversations, as was illustrated in the studies conducted by Woken and Swales (1989), Zuengler (1989) and Zuengler and Bent (1991). Zuengler (1989: 230) concluded that "...relatively greater knowledge of discourse domain may lead the NNS to greater conversational participation, despite unequal linguistic competence." Woken and Swales (1989:224) stated that "The present study .... has shown how certain features such as task-status and topic expertise can have a powerful impact on the conduct of the conversation", and they also noted that "The non-natives' status as topic

experts may have interacted with language proficiency level (Gaies,1981; Gass and Varonis, 1984) to suppress the tendency of natives to lead non-natives linguistically " (ibid:218).

Cameron and Williams (ibid:435) similarly stress the effects that topic knowledge, and in their case, professional expertise, can have on the ability of the NNS to initiate and sustain topical contributions. From a different angle, one of the key findings of the study by Gass and Varonis (1984:74) was that "...familiarity with topic (in this case, topic based on real-world knowledge) plays a major role in the comprehensibility of nonnative speech."

Other researchers, however, have seemingly found evidence that points to a pre-occupation by NNSs with the 'here and now'. This was the case with Bremer (1996:57) who reports that

> The regularity with which *questions about possible planned events* are misunderstood even by participants with a quite advanced competence in their second language is both striking and surprising. They are almost always misunderstood in the same way, that is, as questions about the real situation, the 'here and now' which shows how this is foremost in the learner's consciousness ....

While it is debatable whether this is invariably the case, and indeed whether it applies exclusively to NNSs, Bremer does, quite rightly, point out that "...it is not mere chance that in encounters where the choice of topic is open (as is the case in conversations) the 'here and now' is nearly always taken as the starting point " (ibid:56).

How conversations progress from this starting point will very much depend on the relationship between the participants, on the social context, and on the interpersonal or other goals of the conversation. Kellermann and Palomares (2004) identified 90 different topics across 500 conversations, with the most commonly occurring topics being those "most central to these participants' lives – education, work (occupation), goals/intentions, family and personal

relationships." (ibid:321). As well as these personal topics, conversations may also involve an element of 'setting talk', where reference is to objects, people, or events in the immediate environment, or to the situation itself. A great deal of conversational talk focuses on what Svennevig (1999:218) refers to as 'encyclopedic' topics, and which he describes as encompassing "the wider socio-cultural context." Furthermore, in informal, social conversations between familiars content often relates to personal experiences, feelings and opinions, where each participant is his or her own expert. In the current study both NSs and NNSs draw on personal experiences to initiate and develop topics, while NNSs have an additional topical resource which they can and do draw on, namely their status as 'non-natives'. While topical content per se will not be a major feature of this report, it will be referred to, partly to investigate whether there is any substance to the claim that NNSs tend to rely on 'here-and-now' topics, partly because topic content is implicated in different types of topic shifts, and lastly because the content of a conversation clearly has an impact on both the level of involvement and on the developing or existing relationships of the interactants, as well as on the establishment of rapport and mutual understanding.

The discussion in the sections so far has centred on issues of topic management and its role in conversation, and how topic works to help establish coherent and therefore understandable interactions. In the next section we will look at a different aspect of understanding in NS-NNS discourse, and how understanding can be achieved when differential language expertise is involved and communicative trouble arises.

2.9   Miscommunication

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant." This quote, which has been credited to Alan Greenspan, chairman of Federal Reserve, America's central bank (The Independent 23.4.2003:23), neatly sums up the

complexities involved for both hearers and speakers when trying to generate meaning and create understanding in human discourse.

It also makes it clear that there is great scope for *not* understanding when engaged in talk with others. Talk, in other words, does not always flow smoothly, irrespective of whether the interactants are in all respects of 'equal status' or not. Weigand (1999) in fact bases her discussion of misunderstanding on what she calls 'the standard case', i.e. interactions between equals:

> .. we have to presume that the standard case of language use presupposes co-membership, and deals with communication between members of the same community and the same cultural world. (p. 764)

The point that communication problems are not exclusive to intercultural communication is also made by Coupland et al. (1991:3), who observe that ".. language use and communication are in fact pervasively and even intrinsically flawed, partial and problematic." They further state that ".. miscommunication is a deceptively familiar misnomer for what is in fact a family of normal as often as exceptional communicative processes and strategies." (ibid:11). The substantial CA literature on repair also bears witness to the common occurrence of miscommunication in ordinary, that is predominantly NS, talk. Before discussing issues of miscommunication in NS-NNS interactions, some definitions of communication problems will be provided.

2. 9.1   Defining trouble in talk

Problems in communication have been variously referred to as misunderstanding, miscommunication, non-understanding, as well as embracing what sounds like rather more serious problems such as communicative failure and break-down. While the first three signal that something has gone wrong, the latter two focus on the effects of the perceived trouble. What they all have in common is an indication that the

intended meaning of an utterance has not been received as such by the recipient, and that this will have an impact on the talk in progress.

According to Collins Concise English Dictionary the prefix *mis-* means 1. wrong or bad; wrongly or badly, and 2. lack of; not. Miscommunication and misunderstanding are often understood in the first of these two senses, i.e. wrong or bad, (in an evaluative sense) while the second definition applies to non-understanding. In other words a key difference between these types of trouble is that in the first two instances the *wrong* message has got through, whereas in the second type of communication the message has not got through at all, or only partially.

A further distinction which is often drawn between these types of communicative difficulties relates to the degree of awareness which participants display. Gass and Varonis (1991:142) define a misunderstanding as an instance "in which it is not immediately obvious that the message received is not the one that was intended." An incomplete understanding, or a case of non-understanding, on the other hand, is one "in which interlocutors recognize a problem and thus seek to negotiate meaning before returning to the main topic of discourse." .

Having discussed what constitutes trouble talk, some mention is necessary of how it comes about, of who or what causes it to happen. Here again the blame is more often than not laid at the door of the NNSs: either they fail to comprehend what the NS has said, or their own attempts to communicate are so flawed that they in turn can not be understood.

If we look first to the possible causes, Bazzanella and Damiano (1999:818) propose "five levels at which misunderstanding can arise: phonic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic." They point out that of these factors, "the semantic level is by far the most 'productive' with regard to misunderstanding."

Schegloff (1985:214), on the other hand, claims that "troubles in reference interpretation" is a very common cause of misunderstanding. These authors are all referring to NS-NS talk, but it seems probable that NNSs are likely to pay a great deal of attention to *semantic* processing during interactions as the most immediately – and easily - accessible means to understanding and being understood. If a particular word is not understood, or, in the case of NNS production, cannot be retrieved or is not known, then what is most likely to result is non-understanding or partial understanding rather than misunderstanding.

The process whereby participants in talk jointly resolve what Kasper and Rose (2003:18) call "moments of communicative difficulty" has been described and analysed in distinctively different ways in the fields of CA and SLA respectively, and the next two sections will consider how each of these approaches relate to the current study.

2.9.2   The notion of 'repair'

Schegloff (2000: 207) defines repair as follows: "By repair, we refer to practices for dealing with problems or troubles in speaking, hearing, and understanding the talk in conversation." The CA perspective is one which very much focuses on the mechanics for handling such repairs, in terms of their place in the orderly progression of conversational sequences. Linked with this is an interest in *who* initiates the repair, that is whether repair attempts are self- or other-initiated, and at which particular location in the course of the talk a repair takes place. A further defining feature of CA repair is that ".. the ongoing trajectory of the interaction has been stopped to deal with possible trouble, and that marks this interlude of talk-in-interaction as repair " (Schegloff 2000:209).

Within CA the term 'repair' is applied to an extremely broad range of interactional practices. Schegloff (2000:209) describes them as follows:

..the sorts of actions underwritten by the practices of repair are not limited to 'correction', nor are their targets limited to 'errors' – hence the use of the terms 'repair' and 'repairable' or 'trouble-source'. There can be trouble grounded in other than mistakes – the unavailability of a word, such as a name when needed (or of a name *recognition* on the recipient's side); hearing problems engendered by interference by ambient noise; an uncertain hearing or understanding in search of confirmation, and the like. And on the intervention side there can be practices directed to other than correction – for example, searching for a word, requesting repetition, or offering a candidate hearing or understanding for confirmation or replacement (Schegloff et al. 1977: 362-3).

This all-embracing inclusiveness means that little distinction is made between the nature of the different 'trouble-sources', nor why they may have occurred in any particular interaction or context. This means that in some instances it becomes difficult to distinguish between, for example, those questions which are necessary for the progression of the topic of the talk, and questions which result from either mis- or non-understanding, or for other reasons.

Traditionally CA has concerned itself with talk between native speakers, but researchers are increasingly turning their attention to the fields of intercultural communication and second language acquisition (van Lier, 1988; Seedhouse,1997; Wong, 2000; Mori, 2002; Gardner and Wagner, 2005). While there seems to be broad agreement that NS-NNS conversations are 'normal' conversations, the focus of CA research also seems to remain firmly fixed on what can and does go wrong in NS-NNS (and NNS-NNS) conversations. Gardner and Wagner (2005), for example, while choosing to look at instances of repair in a positive light, i.e. how participants successfully deal with 'trouble talk', include fewer illustrations of talk which proceeds smoothly, nor of how this is accomplished.

Taking a more selective approach, the term repair seems better suited to those instances in NS-NNS conversations where some specific language-related trouble occurs, and such instances will be discussed in the following section.

2.9.3 Negotiation of meaning and understanding

The term 'negotiation of meaning' features strongly in Second Language Acquisition research and is primarily associated with Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1981, 1983) which claims that it is through the process of interaction, and particularly through the interactional modifications required for successful communication that acquisition takes place. Whether or not this is actually the case is not the concern of this study, but the key features of negotiation of meaning are ones which are relevant to issues of mis- and non-understanding in NS-NNS discourse, because SLA research relates these processes specifically to instances in talk where there is some sort of communication problem, and more specifically where this problem is related to language use by NNSs.

The process of negotiation which takes place in such instances is defined by Varonis & Gass (1985:39) as:

> exchanges in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete and there is a resultant attempt to clarify the non-understanding.

The discourse strategies, or, to use SLA terminology, interactional modifications which are associated with the negotiation process have already been referred to in this chapter, namely confirmation checks, comprehension checks and clarification requests. They are defined by Doughty and Pica (1986:306) as follows:

> *Clarification requests* occur when one interlocutor does not entirely comprehend the meaning and asks for clarification. In making *confirmation checks* the listener believes he or she has understood, but would like to make sure. In making *comprehension checks* the speaker wants to be certain that the listener has been understood.

While these terms are particularly identified with SLA research and the concomitant focus on problematic discourse, the actual strategies are, of

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course, ones which can be found in any conversation, not just those between NSs and NNSs. They do not, therefore, refer exclusively to language difficulties, but can relate to any number of uncertainties which arise in the process of reaching or negotiating mutual understanding in conversation. Firth and Wagner (1997:290) make the point that "people cannot say what they mean in an absolute sense; meaning is ineluctably negotiated." Since such negotiations are a normal part of conversations, the term 'negotiation of meaning' is used in this study in the sense described by Wagner (1996:222) "as a metaphor for the sense-making activity of both partners. It is not reducible to a repair process."

In the context of social interactions between NS-NNS differential language expertise may well occasion a need to negotiate meaning, but so may differential knowledge about a topic, interpersonal differences, and cultural issues. As Mey (1994:256) so aptly puts it, "..the word is nothing out of its environment: understanding the users' *world* is a necessary requisite for understanding their *words*." In the process of discovering and understanding the *world* of a partner in conversation, the strategies of asking for clarification and of checking for comprehension and confirmation become very useful conversational resources. Employing these strategies displays not just a need to understand the linguistic meaning of a word or phrase, but a desire to understand what the other person is trying to express in the context of their interpersonal interaction. While their appearance in talk does not invariably signal that there is a problem in communication or understanding, they may nonetheless have the effect of temporarily halting the topic in progress, leading in turn to an interlude of negotiation in order to actively confirm that mutual understanding has been reached.

Because these interactional devices offer apt descriptions of the intentions of a participant's utterance, they provide a useful analytical tool and a means of exploring interactional processes in NS-NNS conversations. In the current study they will be employed to investigate not just the nature of any communicative difficulty, but also the process of reaching understanding, as well as the impact which the deployment of these strategies may have on the

smooth progress of the topics of the conversations. In particular, the analysis will focus on the way in which the current topic is resumed after a negotiation sequence, and how the NNSs manage this aspect of topical talk. These issues will be discussed in more depth in chapter 3, and extracts from the conversations where meaning is negotiated at linguistic, intercultural and interpersonal levels will be presented in Chapter 6.

2.10   Summary

This chapter has attempted to explain some of the major influences and theories which have been instrumental in shaping the research. Starting from a review of literature on NS-NNS interactions it moved from a focus on the negatives of such interactions to a position that also considers positive aspects of NNS contributions to talk. It then reviewed some key features of informal conversations, which is the context in which the research is set, and discussed in detail those aspects of topic management which form the major focus of the study. It finally moved on to consider the impact of negotiation sequences on topical talk and on the achievement of mutual understanding.

The next chapter will outline the research process and methodology and the overall framework for analysis of the data.

Chapter 3
Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider issues of methodology, with section 3.2 looking at the overall aims and approach to the research. Sections 3.3 and 3.4 will discuss how the aims influenced the data collection process, and will also provide a description of the NNS participants and of the practical and ethical aspects of data collection. In sections 3.5 to 3.6 issues of transcription and analysis will be discussed, while section 3.7 will outline the analytical framework relating to topic management. Finally, section 3.8 will present key perspectives on communicative difficulties in NS-NNS interactions.

3.2 Aims and approach

Any approach to research depends on the aims and the subjects of the research itself, and the questions which the research seeks to answer. As Flick (2002:1) notes, "...qualitative methods cannot be regarded independently of the research process and the issue under study." The basic question which initiated this research was *What happens in conversations between native and non-native speakers ?*, and the focus was therefore on "the practices and interactions of the subjects in everyday life." (Flick 2002:5). This ties in with what Richards (2003:10) sees as the broad aim of qualitative enquiry, namely "to understand better some aspect(s) of the lived world" through the study of "human actors in the context of their ordinary, everyday world".

A qualitative approach brings certain assumptions and perspectives to bear on studies of human activities. One such assumption is that behaviour is best studied in its natural context rather than under artificial conditions. This, then, is one of the defining characteristics of qualitative research, as highlighted in Denzin and Lincoln's (2005:3) definition, when they say that:

> ...qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

A second characteristic referred to by Denzin and Lincoln relates to what is done with any data which are collected. The process of data analysis becomes one of exploring and describing the richness and complexity of the subject of the research, rather than, as in much quantitative research, of isolating specific variables in advance and quantifying their appearance in the data. As Foster and Ohta (2005:403) say, "Quantification may be used to gain a partial understanding of a data set, but categories for quantification must emerge post-hoc from the data being analysed." A further feature of a qualitative approach, then, is that there is no attempt to present pre-specified categories for analysis, and the study presented here follows what Markee (2008:2) refers to as "CA's methodological principle of unmotivated looking".

Hence the study falls within the parameters of qualitative, empirically-based research, in so far as it investigates one of the most fundamental of human activities: casual conversation, and analyses a range of features in these conversations in a purposeful manner, in order to throw more light on the nature and effectiveness of the contributions made by the NNS participants.

The emphasis on working within naturalistic settings has implications both for the type of data collected and the methods of collection. While Denzin and Lincoln (2005:7) acknowledge that qualitative research does not "have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own", the various theoretical or disciplinary perspectives which inform qualitative research may privilege one method over another, as, for example, the emic perspective and exclusive use of naturally-occurring data in Conversation Analysis.

In the context of investigating how learners or non-native speakers communicate, the debate about suitable data collection methods has become linked to the tensions between qualitative and quantitative research, and the

consequent different conceptions of what constitutes 'good' research. The debate, as it relates to the current study, has raged particularly strongly within the field of research into Second Language Acquisition, with Firth and Wagner (1997) being prominent figures. They argue strongly for the position that there is a need to base further research on a broader data base, i.e. one which does not "assign preference to (researcher manipulation of) experimental settings rather than naturalistic ones", and which does not "give preeminence to the research practice of coding, quantifying data, and replicating results." (ibid:288). A key concern about experimental data is that it does not take sufficient account of the social and interactional dimensions of NS-NNS communication, and Liddicoat (1997), for example, demonstrates convincingly how, in an interview situation, it is the constraints of the context and the social relationships of the participants which determine the interactional patterns and outcomes.

Kasper (2000:17) cautions that certain types of elicited data, for example from roleplays, place heavy demands on learners, and "may result in an underrepresentation of their discourse abilities." In other words, how subjects under investigation behave may vary considerably depending on whether the context is natural and familiar, or whether it is contrived and therefore introduces elements of less natural behaviour. I will return to this issue when describing the data in Section 3.3.

The current study therefore uses data collected in a naturalistic setting in order to reach a greater level of understanding of a specific social situation, not with the aim of being able to make generalisations about it, but to understand better the complexities.

Another criticism aimed at SLA research, this time by Wagner (1996:225), was that "experimentally acquired data are taken to represent FLI (Foreign Language Interaction), and that results are generalisations about NNSs' role in conversation." Edge and Richards (1998:345) take a similar stance with regard to generalisation when they stress that

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naturalistic enquiry will not deliver a generalisation which can be abstracted and 'applied'; instead it seeks to produce understandings of one situation which someone with knowledge of another situation may well be able to make use of.

In the context of this study an increased understanding of how native and non-native speakers converse outside the restraints of the classroom may well prove valuable to not just teachers, but also to non-native speakers and learners themselves, and to the many researchers (e.g. Firth and Wagner 1997; Kasper 2000; Liddicoat 1997; Piller 2002; Springer and Collins 2008; Nakahama et al 2001) who state that there is a need for more studies of this nature. The implications of the study for all these groups are discussed in Chapter 7.

The following sections will describe the data, the process of collection and the participants of the study.

3.3 The data collection

Collecting examples of natural, spontaneous conversation, which is essentially a very private and personal enterprise, raises considerable problems. The only feasible way of collecting truly natural examples of conversations is of course by recording talk covertly. This, however, raises both ethical and practical issues. The alternative is to seek permission and co-operation from potential research participants, thereby sacrificing some naturalness, but remaining well within ethical boundaries, and this was the path taken for the current study.

A total of ten NNSs participated in this study, nine of whom were students in one of my classes. They were undergraduate students on a one-year exchange programme with a British university, where they attended a course in English Studies. As part of this course they attended, together with English undergraduates, modules in French and German politics, translation studies, and The European Union, as well as one-hour weekly lessons in Written and Spoken English. I was their tutor for the Spoken English module and for an

optional course on British Media. Information about students' language levels or language entry requirements was never made available to the teachers, but it was assumed they had all studied English for several years and had reached at least an intermediate level of competence. There were, inevitably, wide disparities within this level. With the exception of two Japanese participants, they all spoke at least one other foreign language in addition to English.

The recordings were done with two different groups of students over a period of two years, and the participants had been in England for between 10 weeks and 8 months at the time of the recordings. They are all in their early twenties; two are male, and eight are female. Both the males are French; the females are German, Turkish-German, French, Slovakian, Belgian; two are Japanese.

The tenth NNS participant, a Norwegian, was not a student on the course, but a girl who a friend of my sons met in a pub. She was aware of the research and agreed to the recording. This conversation represents a discrepant case in many ways, not least because it took place between strangers and was recorded by the native speaker. It will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

All the other conversations were recorded by the NNSs themselves, without the researcher being present. The students had been asked if they would be willing to audio-record an informal conversation with a native English speaker. The volunteer participants were given a handout (Appendix 1) which broadly explained the purpose of the research, and which also covered the ethical issues of anonymity and permission to use the data for research and possible publication. The handout also made it clear that participants could erase anything they did not want included, so they had complete control of the contents of the recordings. There are no indications of the tapes being stopped for reasons other than phones ringing or other people arriving on the scene. The conversations took place in a variety of settings, between participants who were already known to each other in various capacities.

Their conversation partners were variously described by the NNS participants as classmates, flatmates or friends. International students in the department are partnered with a NS 'foster student' to encourage integration, and in the case of the Spoken English group with a 'Language Partner' to promote opportunities for using the target language, as this is often an issue for international students. The NSs were predominantly other (English) undergraduates, most of whom were not known to the researcher, but was in one case the foster student of the NNS. Most of the NS participants are likely to have had some experience of interacting with NNSs in the intercultural context of university life.

A brief profile of the participants is provided in Appendix 2. As these profiles indicate, there are variations in the degree of friendship, familiarity or acquaintance between the conversation partners, and this is an issue which, as Maynard (1980) has observed, may well affect features of talk like topic changes, and which will be discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.

The participants had complete freedom of choice with regard to topics, setting and co-participants; nothing had been specified in advance. The recordings are, then, as close to being naturally occurring, spontaneous conversations as one can get without resorting to covert recordings, a possibility that was excluded in this research for ethical reasons. However, it cannot be denied that the presence of a tape recorder may well have an intrusive effect on conversations, causing participants to feel uncomfortable about talking as freely and as naturally as they normally would. There are indications on the tapes that this presence was unwelcome by at least one of the NS participants, and there is also one instance of a NS addressing the 'listener' directly at the end of the talk, saying: *and I hope anyone who listens to this tape can understand what we talked about,* and ending with the following remarks: *Good listening people. Enjoy. Take care.*

The topic moves and content in one particular conversation, 'Newspapers', might similarly indicate that the participants orient to it, at least in parts, as something other than an informal chat between friends. There is a sense at

times of it being a 'performed' conversation, with an awareness of the audience and possibly some pre-determined agenda of topics to be discussed. This aspect of their conversation will be discussed in Chapter 4.

It is likely that some discussion may have taken place beforehand about how to conduct the recordings and the talks. It is difficult, therefore, to overcome the well-known *Observer's paradox* which means that participants' behaviour or talk may not be as natural as when no observer or listener are present.

However, the NNS participants were used to being recorded in class, so it should not have been quite such an uncomfortable experience for them, though the knowledge that their teacher would eventually listen to the conversations may well have affected the choice of topics, and how those topics were treated or discussed. It is conceivable that any awkwardness would be most noticeable at the start of the recording, and that is possibly why most of these recordings have been started when the conversation is well under way. One effect of this is that there are few natural conversational openings available. In some cases the conversations also stop very abruptly, either because they have come to the end of the first side of the tape, or because the tape-recorder was switched off. However, given the focus of the study, where present, initial conversation openers and some topic closures have been included in the analysis.

One of the drawbacks of relying on volunteers to record conversations is that there is no control over either quantity or quality. This meant, for example, that there were great variations in the duration of the conversations, with some as short as eight minutes, while others lasted 35 minutes (see Appendix 2). The hand-out had suggested a minimum of ten minutes as a guideline, and in retrospect it might have been better not to mention possible duration.

As far as the quality of the recordings is concerned, this did become a major issue. The participants were issued with small handheld recorders, Sony TCM 20DV with both a built-in microphone, and additional small microphones, which could be either clipped to clothes or put on a table. Several tapes were

returned where only one of the participants was audible, or where the background noise (often loud music) drowned out most of the talk, and even one where nothing could be heard because the microphone had not been switched on. In addition, actually doing the recording and returning the tape often took a considerable amount of time – in one case six weeks.

As a result, out of a total of 20 conversations collected, only 10 were, for various reasons, useable. This raised the question of how much data was needed, an issue which again relates to the aims of the research. Van Lier (1988:4) says about classroom research that one lesson may yield as much useful information as ten or even fifty lessons, and that "Small amounts of data can provide powerful analyses". As the purpose of this study was not to make any quantitative comparisons, but to conduct an in-depth investigation of interactional moves, it was decided that the ten conversations provided a very rich data resource which would be sufficient for the intended purpose.

The collection of naturalistic data presents additional problems, not least those relating to an ability to control a number of variables which might affect the outcomes. As the data for this research relied on volunteers, it was not possible, for example, to arrange to have a balanced gender representation, and the genders of the conversational partners may well have influenced the styles of interactions.

A very wide range of nationalities is represented in this project, which makes it different from most research into NS-NNS interaction, where the NNS participants tend to be a homogenous group. While this makes it more difficult to define categories or patterns which may hold across nationalities or language groups, it also removes any temptation to associate the use of specific strategies with a particular nationality. Moreover, such a multi-national mix should contribute to a richer picture of who the non-native speaker is, and what he or she can accomplish in a second, or indeed a third language.

The total duration of the conversations is 2 hours and 51 minutes, (see Appendix 4), and they were all transcribed by the researcher. Each

conversation has been given a title, based on one of the topics in the conversations, and the names of participants and people mentioned in the conversations are pseudonyms.

In spite of the inevitable weaknesses mentioned, and given the difficulties of collecting these data, they come as close as possible to being natural and form an appropriate data set for the purposes of the research.

3.4   Transcription issues

McCarthy (1998:13) describes the transcription of spoken data as "The black hole on the trail to infinity", with reference to the amount of detail which could or should be included. This is just one of many issues facing researchers during the process of converting spoken words to written text, and these issues will be discussed below.

Researchers need to make both practical and theoretical decisions about what makes an acceptable transcript, and this in turn depends very much on the aims of the research. As Kasper (1997:308) puts it:

> How data is transcribed, analyzed and presented depends on the researcher's objective, the researcher's theoretical commitment, and, not least, the context of presentation.

As in this research, spoken data is usually recorded for fairly specific purposes, in pre-determined contexts, with a focus on particular interactants, and those recordings therefore constitute the primary data of any research. However, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005: 209) remind us that "The transcripts of the recordings are not the data, but rather a representation of the data." During the process of transcription listening is as important as writing, and it becomes clear, for example, that the many nuances of speech which make someone's voice immediately recognizable cannot be transferred to paper. A transcript will therefore be understood differently by a reader and by the researcher who has listened to the recordings, because, for the researcher, these voice qualities will leave an invisible trace in the transcripts. In addition,

a researcher's interests, and, as in this case, possible familiarity with some of the participants may affect what is heard, and what gets written, so transcription can never be a neutral, mechanical activity. Indeed Huberman and Miles (2002:226) compare the transcription of discourse to photographing reality, and refer to it as "an interpretive practice".

I will return to the issue of interpretation and analysis during the transcription process, but will turn now to the question of how best to represent the spoken language in transcribed form.

The 'messiness' of everyday talk becomes all too apparent when one listens to recordings and tries to transcribe them. Capturing an accurate version of the talk which has taken place can be extremely difficult and time-consuming. Even repeated listening can throw up several seemingly incompatible versions of the same utterance, and indeed different listeners may hear different things. Overlapping talk can be particularly difficult to disentangle, and where a single word or phrase is completely inaudible, the meaning of a longer stretch of talk can be obscured. Audio-recordings also lack the important communicative dimension which is carried by body language, and it may well be the case that a particular utterance is made in response to a physical gesture or look rather than to what was audibly heard on the tape. With these points in mind I agree with Huberman and Miles (2002:225) when they say that "There is no one, true, representation of spoken language."

Having accepted that a faithful representation is not possible, that then leaves the question of deciding what is or is not significant in the talk, and what will need to be included in the transcript. This is a major research decision, and the researcher can only be guided by the objectives of the research.

The transcription of the conversations in this research follows the three criteria proposed by Richards (2003:199) for acceptable transcripts, namely fitness for purpose, adequacy and accuracy, and as indicated above, these criteria are very much interlinked. The accurate representation of these conversations has been achieved by repeated listening to the tapes, and the actual

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transcription, which was all done by the researcher, has included sufficient detail to make possible an in-depth analysis of the features relating to topic management and the negotiation of understanding.

With regard to the presentation of transcripts, a prime concern is that of accessibility. Transcripts which contain more transcription symbols than words, such as those employed by conversation analysts, can be hard to read, and such level of detail has not been deemed necessary for this study. This may mean that some details will be lost, such as detailed indications of intonation patterns. Instead, the sort of compromise advocated by van Lier (1988:80) of "finding a reasonable balance between accuracy and simplicity" has been followed, and the transcripts make the individual verbal actions of the participants clearly visible and readable.

The transcription conventions which have been used are based on those suggested by Richards (2003:173-174), and are outlined in Appendix 3.

I would like to return now to the issue of the integration of interpretation and analysis which may take place during the transcription process in connection with a brief overview of the initial data analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

Silverman (2005:185) cautions that in qualitative research premature theory construction is to be avoided. It is, however, likely that some assumptions or expectations will be present in the researcher's mind at the start of a project, and that these may affect the interpretation of the data.

This was the case with the conversations in this investigation. Because international students had frequently commented on the problems which they experienced in informal interactions with native speakers, there was an expectation that a range of communication problems would be present in the recordings, and that these would be a major focus of analysis. Each conversation was listened to in full before any transcription was undertaken,

and it came as something of a surprise that, in fact, the conversations appeared to progress quite smoothly, with little evidence of communicative difficulties.

It then became a matter of more detailed analysis to confirm if this really was the case, and to discover, in the words of Silverman (2005:105), "what verbal and behavioural and contextual resources are being used here" - to achieve conversations which were, on the whole, orderly and coherent.

This shift in perspective came about through repeated listening to the conversations in conjunction with hand-written, initial transcriptions, and eventually brought into focus those features which appeared pivotal in ensuring the smooth running of the conversations, namely those relating to topic management and the negotiation of understanding. At this point, then, a rough, initial coding of the data was performed, and this first stage of data analysis was consequently, in the words of Heritage, (1984:243 cited in Silverman 2005:185) "...strongly 'data-driven' – developed from phenomena which are in various ways evidenced in the data of interaction."

The key features of the data are consequently ones which are associated with broader discourse management strategies, and before going on to describe the more detailed analysis of these features in section 3.7, I will briefly discuss some of the different approaches which can be employed to analyse spoken discourse, and outline the main principles which were followed in this research.

3.5.1   Analysing spoken discourse

According to Tannen (1989:7) the analysis of discourse is embraced by no fewer than nine disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, rhetoric, philology, speech communication and philosophy. She also points out, however, that:

> the term "discourse analysis" does not refer to a
> particular method of analysis. It does not entail a

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single theory or coherent set of theories. Moreover, the term does not describe a theoretical perspective or methodological framework at all. It. simply describes the object of study: language beyond the sentence.

Schiffrin (1994:21) distinguishes between two approaches to the study of discourse, the formalist and the functional, with the latter focusing on aspects of *language use*, in other words not restricted to an analysis of linguistic forms, but including "the analysis of the purposes and functions of language in human life." (ibid:31). It is this sense of discourse I am concerned with here.

Schiffrin (ibid.) also demonstrates how different perspectives on discourse and on theories of language lead to different methods of analysis, and she discusses six major approaches. Stubbe et al (2003:352) point to "the contrasting theoretical and conceptual features of different approaches, emphasizing their very different objectives, and the consequences for what their practitioners regard as relevant for their analyses." They show the effects of such differences by analysing the same data from different perspectives.

The field of discourse analysis is referred to by van Dijk (1997) as the study of actual language use, and more specifically the study of naturally occurring talk. He also draws attention to the range of approaches used to study discourse, and furthermore to some of the principles which can be expected to guide such studies. These principles or features have informed the analysis of the interactions in this study, and are outlined below.

He mentions, firstly, *contexts* because "some contextual properties may influence production and interpretation of talk". In this case the fact that the interlocutors are known to each other, the fact that they are all university students, young, and not least the fact that they are involved in intercultural communication may all have an impact on the interactions.

A second aspect relates to *membership categorisation* and refers to the various identities we bring to interactional encounters, and the bearing which these may have on the talk and in the talk at different points. That different

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identities can be "made relevant and instantiated" (Firth and Wagner 1997) during the same conversation will be clear from the extracts to follow. Relevant examples of such identities are those of both 'non-native' of the target language country and non-native *speaker* of the target language.

A third principle, *sequentiality*, plays a key role in topic management, and is described by van Dijk as follows:

> The accomplishment of discourse is largely linear and sequential, in the production and understanding of both talk and of text. This first implies that at all levels, structural units (sentences, propositions, acts) should be described or interpreted relative to preceding ones, as is most obvious in various forms of coherence. This discursive relativity may also involve functionality: later elements may have special functions with respect to previous ones.

In this study the use of repetition in particular is analysed in connection with its role in negotiation sequences and in creating coherence in these conversations.

Van Dijk (ibid) refers, fourthly, to *meaning and function* because "this principle has functional and explanatory implications: Why is this being said/meant here ?" The participants' desire and need to create meaning and understanding is one of the key issues under consideration, and is investigated in the context of how meaning is negotiated, particularly during side sequences.

The final principle under consideration relates to *strategies,* and he comments here about language users that they "know and apply expedient mental as well as interactional strategies in the effective understanding and accomplishment of discourse and the realisation of their communicative and social goals." The ways in which non-native speakers use a variety of interactional strategies form a major part of the study.

The principles outlined above clearly share features with CA, and the current study owes much to this approach to the analysis of interactions, for example in its careful attention to turn-taking and to sequential details, as well as to the conversational concepts under investigation, such as repair and side sequences.

However, CA insistence that only those aspects of the context which are visible in the data can be taken as valid, seems to exclude a dimension of discourse which may provide additional insight into these interactions. McHoul et al's (2007:2) argument that "...the understanding of a stretch of talk is not always available from the literality of the transcript as such..." gains validity in one particular conversation, as will be seen in Chapter 4. Stubbe et al (2003:356) note that "what is enough for participants may not be enough for analysts, and we may need additional help to interpret what the participants are saying/thinking." Furthermore, O'Connell et al (1990:348) state in their critique of the CA research tradition "...many aspects of turn-taking are indeed determined by contextual factors...", and they further argue that turns should not be conceived as the key elements of conversation, "but rather as part of the overall dynamic of the social interaction of interlocutors engaged in the purposeful activity we call conversation." (ibid:370).

In spite of these reservations, the approach to and method of analysis shares many features with CA, for example in perceiving of discourse as a joint accomplishment, and in conducting a careful micro-analysis of each utterance in the conversations, though only those features deemed relevant for the investigation were transcribed. In addition, CA has made substantial contributions to knowledge about what goes on in conversations, not least in the area of topic management, which is a major theme in this study, and the analysis will therefore draw heavily on insights from researchers working within this tradition.

The second major theme of the research is that relating to negotiation or side sequences where repair or communicative trouble may be evident. Here the CA notions of self-or other-initiated repair have been combined with what Ellis

and Barkhuizen (2005:166) refer to as interactional analysis, where the forms and functions of negotiation of meaning strategies have a considerable bearing on communicative outcomes, both in terms of understanding and topic management. Although this approach comes from the opposite end of the spectrum of discourse analytical approaches, and has as its main aim the investigation of second language acquisition, the strategies in question can nonetheless provide useful insights into spontaneous conversations as well as classroom interactions.

In summary, then, the approach which has been taken to the analysis of these conversations can be described as an interactionally orientated, micro-analytic approach, with attention paid to all features of language use and interactional impact. It is based on certain principles which are considered common to several discourse analytical approaches and has borrowed elements specifically from two such approaches, but primarily from CA. Such an eclectic approach is not unusual. For example, Stubbe et al (2003:352) comment about the data in their study that "most members described taking an eclectic approach to their analyses, applying elements of one or more models as relevant to their research objectives." Coffey and Atkinson (1996:13) also suggest that a variety of approaches can be used, though stress that "it is always necessary for research methods to be used in a disciplined manner."

The next section will describe the specific analytical procedures which were employed in the current study.

3.6   Analytical procedures

Section 3.5 described the effects which listening and transcribing had on the specific direction of the research into these NS-NNS conversations, and the fact that certain key themes emerged from this process. The key themes identified in the data were those of topic management and the negotiation or construction of meaning and understanding, and the relationship between

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them. Such data-driven research has been described by Thomas (2003:3) as following a 'general inductive approach', where "data analysis is determined by both the research objectives (deductive) and multiple readings and interpretations of raw data (inductive)." He makes the further point that "The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the raw data into a model or framework that captures the themes or processes judged to be important by the researcher."

The process of assigning codes to qualitative data is a matter of organising the data, based on an initial analysis. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:27) describe the purpose of this process of attaching codes to segments of data as one of establishing links of various sorts between different instances from the data, of identifying categories which are in some ways related, by "having some common property or element."

Following the identification of the general themes of topic management and understanding, the data were subjected to further scrutiny, in order to find all instances and to establish definitions of relevant categories of the talk. Both handwritten and typed versions of the transcripts had already been annotated with detailed notes and potentially interesting sections relating to topic management and to participants' indications of both communicative difficulty and understanding had been highlighted in different colours. This process now became more systematic, with specific colours for six separate categories, and examples of these were put into separate documents. The categories which were arrived at initially were those of topic maintenance, topic shift, topic change, and topic transition, as well as sequences representing negotiation of meaning and negotiation of understanding respectively. The latter two sequences were distinguished according to whether there was a need or an attempt to establish understanding at the linguistic level (negotiation of meaning) or at the interpersonal or intercultural level (negotiation of understanding). (See Chapter 6 for more detail.) Furthermore, these sequences were examined for their effects on the topical flow of the conversations.

Major problems arose in trying to categorise and identify examples of talk where topic management was involved. Chapter 2 has drawn attention to the difficulties inherent in concepts relating to topic, and to the elusive nature of their definitions and operations. It was decided to conflate two categories which were initially coded as topic shifts and topic transitions, because they appeared to have many features in common, for example, the strategies which the participants used to link their utterances. *Topic shift* was instead, as already mentioned, employed as an umbrella term. It was also decided to leave the issue of topic maintenance for future research, as the required analysis of a range of additional linguistic and interactional features would dilute the focus of the study.

Continued close readings of the transcripts indicated that the topic change and topic transition categories were extremely difficult to capture, and sample extracts did not always fit easily into one category or the other. As Tannen (1984:41) so rightly said,

> It is often the case in discourse analysis that, much as a phenomenon can seem discrete in theory, trying to identify instances of that phenomenon in actual interaction yields more equivocal than clear cases.

Individual instances were discussed with supervisors and fellow researchers to check for consistency across categories, and comparisons made between analyses done at very different stages in the research showed considerable consistency across categories.

The coding and categorisation process is, however, merely one step in the analytical process. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:27) stress that "The important analytical work lies in establishing and thinking about such linkages, not in the mundane process of coding." They point out (ibid: 31) that coding is about "conceptualizing the data, raising questions, providing provisional answers about the relationships among and within the data, and discovering the data." The next step in the process, therefore, is one where the relationships between particular patterns or elements are laid bare, and where potential

interpretations of or theories about these relationships can be developed. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005:266) "In order to arrive at the concepts, analysts need to read and re-read the texts very carefully. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this line-by-line scrutiny of the data as *micro-analysis*." Zuengler and Mori's (2002) overview of micro-analyses of classroom discourse draws attention to how researchers working within different methodological frameworks will focus on distinctly different phenomena in their analysis. As this study is concerned primarily with topic management, once the categories had been established, a micro-analysis was conducted of all the sequences, by looking carefully at each utterance, their sequential placement, as well as links over longer stretches of talk, with a view to discovering a) where a topic change or transition was in progress or impending, b) whether it was the NS or the NNS who was instrumental in initiating a shift in focus, c) which strategies were employed, and d) if the strategy employed was effective in enabling the proposed topic to be taken up and developed.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:31) note that "Much of the effort that goes into data analysis is concerned with formulating and reformulating the research problem in ways that make it more amenable to investigation.", and during this process of micro-analysis it became clear that coherence relations played a crucial part in the strategies used for ensuring effective topic organisation. How these coherence relations were analysed and classified will be discussed in Section 3.7. This focus on coherence in turn ties in with the overall perspective of the research, namely that non-native speaker discourse is not necessarily 'incoherent' discourse.

Where negotiations of meaning or understanding appeared in the data, they were examined from the perspective of their impact on the topical flow of the conversations. The eventual framework which was developed for the final and most detailed stage of the analysis is described in the next section.

3.7 Analytical framework

This framework was arrived at through a process which is common to qualitative data analysis, and which Miles and Huberman (1994:12) describe as a "continuous, iterative enterprise". This means returning again and again to the data, and assessing them against the concepts, questions and categories which inform the research, and in turn refining the categories to match what is found in the data. The final categories presented here can in no way be said to cover all eventualities as far as the very complex movements of topics in conversations are concerned. However, based as they are on a fairly comprehensive notion of what constitutes 'topic', they should help to illuminate some of the complexities involved, and also to throw some light on the specific topical manoeuvres used by the NNSs.

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, the analysis and discussion of how NNSs manage the organisation of topical moves in their talk will be considered from the perspectives of conversational goals and processes. We can talk, in a sense, about a conversation operating on two different levels, the interpersonal or interactional on the one hand and the more 'technical' conversational practices on the other. In reality, of course, it is not possible to make a clear separation, as they are inextricably interlinked.

The topic shifting moves which occur during the conversations were analysed with respect to the dimensions of coherence, interpersonal orientation, and topic types, as discussed in Chapter 2 and were examined to see whether the shifts in direction were successfully negotiated and led to further talk on the new or related topic. Since coherence relations are implicated in the distinctions between different topic moves, this forms a major analytical category, with moves being characterised according to the degree and nature of those coherence relations.

The classification of types of coherence relations has drawn on studies by Ainsworth-Vaughn (1992), Svennevig (1999) and Tryggvason (2004), who all

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propose that topical coherence operates on a scale from non-coherent to stronger or weaker degrees of coherence.

While Svennevig's (ibid) aim was to provide a model of coherence relations in talk, the primary aim of this research is to investigate whether the topic moves of NNSs are effective, and while coherence relations are part of this, they are not the whole picture. It was therefore decided that a less detailed categorization of coherence would suffice, and this was substantiated by the analysis of the data which consistently showed certain types of coherence patterns in topic shifts.

The main distinguishing feature of these patterns was whether or not topic initiations showed a connection to previous talk. This then provided for the two major categories of coherence relations which linked with the definitions of topic change and topic transition respectively, namely whether there was no connection at all, or whether there was a partial connection. The terms 'local' and 'focal' connections were employed by Svennevig (ibid.), with the former indicating an immediately sequential connection, and the latter referring to a content-related connection. Both types of connections can be present in the same topic transition. To this was added a third category, that of global connection.

Each category will be illustrated with a brief extract from the data, with arrows signalling the utterance which initiates the new topic. These extracts will be discussed in detail in later chapters. Individual extracts are numbered according to the chapter in which they appear, and their sequential appearance in the chapter.

Obviously in cases where one speaker's utterance is fully coherent, both locally and focally, with that of the previous speaker's talk, it is a sign that talk is on-topic, in other words there is topic continuation, maintenance or development. The extract below shows such an example.

The tabloid 4 [1]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

733	Laura	I think I'll postpone this to the June and then I
734		hope I'll get to Cornwall
735	Claire	oh yeah
736	Laura	for for I don't really know how to do it it doesn't
737		seem possible for for one day
738	Claire	Well it might be worth going and staying in a
739		bed and breakfast for one night there

Where there is no connection at all with previous talk, we find:

1. Non-coherent topic changes.

These fall into the following two categories:

1.1 Disjunctive topic changes

Such moves display no connection, either local or focal with the previous topic, are usually initiated without closure of the current topic, and the change to a new topic is therefore sudden and abrupt.

The tabloid 4 [2]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

345		Sundays in Slovakia the big the big market stores=
346	Claire	=yeah=
347→	Laura	=are open on Sundays You are starving and you are
348		(xxx xxx) only <u>half</u> of it
349	Claire	yeah but I've gone past you know when you haven't=
350	Laura	=uh

1.2 Marked topic changes

These always follow signals of closure of the previous topic, but show no connection, either local, focal or global with previous talk.

Computers 5 [1]   Oda (NNS) Claire (NS)

160	Joan	do you know where Sally's gone ? Is she here this
161		weekend or has she gone away ?
162	Oda	ah I haven't seen her recently
		(background noises and pause)
		(7.0)
163→	Joan	do you think it's been ten minutes now ?
164	Oda	uhm:: yep

2. Partial connection (topic transitions)

These are topic initiations where local links to immediately preceding talk exist, but a shift in focus is introduced. These then are topic transitions, leading either to related talk, to a sub-topic, or to sequences of negotiation. This is a category which contains a great variety of topical initiations; for example a sub-category here is one of *delayed* local connection, i.e. the link with previous talk is not immediate, but is only revealed as the transition sequence progresses. The extracts have been loosely categorized according to the most salient feature of the coherence relations evident in the topic initiations, and some of the ones which will be discussed in Chapter 5 are illustrated below.

2.1 Structural-linguistic connections

Newspapers 3 [1]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

229	Fay	so that's all I know about her
230	Will	(xxx xxx)
231	Fay	yeah but I don't think you're interested in Belgian politics
232→	Will	tell you what I <u>am</u> interested in
233	Fay	yeah
234→	Will	Belgian chocolates
235 ·	Fay	(laughs) Belgian chocolates oh eh you haven't tried any

2.2 Propositional connection

Computers 3 [1]   Oda (NNS)   Joan (NS)

060		interesting so I thought if I'm going to do a degree for the
061		next four years I might as well do it in a subject that I'm
062		interested in so (..)
063	Oda	yeah
064	Joan	you know ?
065→	Oda	yeah (...) I love that about the English education that like
066		eh that a lot of students have (? part-time too courses is it

2.3 Contextualised initiations

The tabloid 3 [3]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

811	Claire	You've got I don't know you've got to get out (..)

812		and it's cold as well I'm not good at sleeping on
813		the floor and stuff
814	Laura	No
815	Claire	I like a bed (xxx xxx)
816→	Laura	It's not the problem of having a bed but really when
817		when it's cold I'm <u>freezing</u> I'm freezing cold I we went
818		eh with our from our school to Northern Germany in
819		May
820	Claire	Uh

2.4   Side sequences

Side sequences maintain a connection of some sort with the current topic, but this is temporarily suspended while other matters are dealt with.

Modern art 3 [1]   Sara (NNS)   Ann (NS)

296	Sara	=and there is a famous eh Royal Royal family called eh (....)
297	→	oh my God what're they called ? Bauer ? Baron ? something like
298		this Baroness
299	Ann	baroness
300	Sara	something like that and they (..) eh (....) they are collecting (..)

3.   Global connection

Topic moves with non-local, non-focal coherence show some connection in one of three ways: firstly, there may be a link with earlier topics; secondly, where the conversation has a global topic, this may be invoked in topic moves, and thirdly, the setting or the activity which participants are involved in may provide for recurrent returns to issues relating to these aspects. Only where such topic initiations provide a distinct break in topic continuity, have they been classed as topic changes.

3.1   Connection with earlier talk

Hot curry 3 [1]   Aya (NNS)   Fiona (NS)

123	Aya	yeah but I like a spicy food but not this real Indian food
124	Fiona	when it burns your mouth and you can't=]
125	Aya	] yeah
126	Fiona	= taste anything
127→	Aya	and after that we have to you know he asked us to eat
128		with hands
129	Fiona	uh hu

3.2   Connection with global topic

Education 3 [1]   Pierre (NNS) Rose (NS)

032   Pierre   do you want to go for a a coffee later ?
033   Rose   uh hu (...) uh hu
034   Pierre → so what what does your mum (..) think about the
                  applications ?

3.3   Connection with activity or setting

The tabloid 3 [4]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

386   Claire   so nice so nice
387   Laura   (xxx xxx)
388   Claire   yeah hehe it was well tasty
389   (...)
390 →   Laura   what is that one doing ?
391   (...)
392   Claire   he's tackling a wasp nest

In looking at how NNSs create coherence with their conversational partners during topic moves, it is both the degree and the nature of the coherence relations which are of interest, i.e. how these coherence relations are realized in the talk. The *degree* of coherence then provides a first layer or stage of the analytical framework, and provides for a separation of topic moves into topic changes and topic transitions respectively. For the purpose of answering the research questions, it is the degree of coherence relations which is of primary importance. The *nature* of the coherence relations involved constitute the second stage of analysis, and due to the complex nature of topic transitions in particular, only some aspects will be examined. Some of the specific strategies which the NNSs employed for these conversational categories will be described in detail in the next 3 chapters.

3.8 Perspectives on topic suspensions and communicative difficulties

This section will discuss the approach which was taken to analyse those occasions in the conversations when the current topic was for some reason temporarily suspended. Both language problems and gaps in interpersonal or cultural background knowledge may lead to breaks in topic continuity, and one aim of the research is to explore the following questions:

What was the nature of the interruptions, and what was their impact on topic continuity? More specifically, was the topic always resumed after the interruptions, and if so, how was the topic resumption accomplished ? In the case of communicative difficulties resulting from language problems, how were these signalled and resolved ?

Issues relating to communicative difficulties were discussed in Chapter 2 and touched on some of the similarities and differences between SLA and CA approaches. Both approaches tend to stop short of looking at how topics or conversations are resumed after an episode of communicative trouble, and refer to similar discursive procedures, such as requests for clarification and repetition to signal, respectively, the need for remedial action before the conversation can continue, and the resolution of the problem. Where they differ is, firstly, that repair means different things, and secondly, that it has different functions. In CA 'repair' refers to any problems of hearing or understanding, however caused, while in SLA the trouble is always related to inappropriate or inaccurate language use. In SLA, therefore, the function or purpose of the repair process is *to correct* and to promote more accurate language use, with the possible expectation that language acquisition will take place as a result of the correction. In CA, on the other hand, the explicit aim of repair is to re-establish understanding between participants, specifically so that the talk can continue, and continue on a basis of *better* understanding.

The terms *repair* and *repair process* will be used in this study to refer exclusively to sequences of talk which exhibit communicative difficulties related to language use on the part of either the NS or the NNS. As we are

concerned with social and not instructional interactions, their function will be that of establishing *semantic* meanings for the purpose of reaching interpersonal understanding and achieving communicative goals.

The construction of mutual understanding is not dependent on language use alone, but, in the context of intercultural communicators, also on the existence or establishment of personal or cultural background knowledge relating to the topics under discussion. The process involved in negotiating understanding at this non-linguistic level will not necessarily constitute a communicative difficulty, but it may, like language repairs, temporarily divert attention away from the main topic.

Sequences of talk which seem to constitute in a sense 'time out' from the main business of the talk have been identified in the CA literature as side sequences. Jefferson (1972) described such temporary hold-ups in the progress of the talk and showed how they fitted into the overall conversational structure, so that there would be an ongoing sequence, a side sequence and a return to the ongoing sequence. Svennevig (1999: 256) describes the overall function of side sequences as being one of aligning contextual resources to enable participants to negotiate common ground, which in turn provides the foundation for mutual understanding.

Svennevig distinguishes between a number of different types of side sequences, and three of his categories have been adapted for the analysis of relevant sequences found in the conversations. He proposes two types of meta-communicative sequences which "..concern the communicative process itself and thus involve a departure from the informational focus of the talk." (ibid:277) One of these is *repair sequences* which he terms

> a special type of metacommunicative sequence aimed at assuring common ground based on linguistic co-presence, that is, establishing mutual manifestness of assumptions expressed in, or implied by, prior discourse.

Repair sequences in the data encompass only those instances where repair is initiated by the hearer, where, in other words, the repair process is other-initiated.

A second type of meta-communicative sequence is a *monitor sequence,* to which he allocates several functions, but the function which is relevant here is where the speaker stops "to signal problems of production" (ibid:279), and the repair process is therefore self-initiated. In the context of these NS-NNS conversations this type of sequence is mostly initiated by the NNSs, though as Svennevig's research involved NS-NS interactions (in Norwegian), it is clearly the case that such monitoring of what needs to be said next and how best to say it is a problem which is not exclusive to non-native speakers.

The third type of side sequence is what Svennevig calls a *resource scanner* (1999:284). He describes the communicative function of such sequences to be "the scanning (establishment) of contextual resources for talking about the topic at hand. By contextual resources he means "background knowledge and attitudes related to the topic." They do not, therefore, focus on linguistic problems.

A key point to be made about side sequences is that they retain a degree of coherence with previous talk. Svennevig (1999:288) observes that "They establish both *continuity,* by referring anaphorically or cataphorically to (parts) of the main sequence, and *discontinuity,* by changing the focus on the topic."

The analysis of side sequences in the data will focus on the procedures which participants employ to establish understanding, looking not just at the trouble source, how this is signalled, and what the outcome is, but also at the eventual restoration of the original topic. Particular attention will be paid to the process of negotiating meaning. In the context of SLA, Pica et al (1996) define negotiation as

> an activity through which L2 learners and interlocutors work together linguistically to repair or resolve impasses *[sic]* in communication and come

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to an understanding of each other's message meaning.

However, the participants in these conversations are L2 *users* rather than L2 *learners,* so I depart from the SLA position by considering these negotiation sequences as being less about language repair and correction (or acquisition) than about establishing mutual understanding for the purpose of enabling the conversation to continue. Besides, such negotiations apply equally to occasions where the 'impasses' are due to cultural differences, rather than language problems. I will, though, retain the terminology which has come to be particularly associated with the SLA sense of negotiation of meaning, the so-called interactional modifications or repair initiators: clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks, and will look at the impact which the use of these has on the process of working towards re-establishing the topic.

This chapter has provided an overview of the research approach and the processes involved in analyzing the data, concluding with an outline of the framework used to describe some of the ways in which these NSs and NNSs mutually achieve understanding and coherence in talk. It is now time to examine the conversations in more detail.

Chapter 4

Topic management

4.1 Introduction

This chapter and the following will look in detail at topic management in the data, analysing those sequences where some change to the content or focus of the talk takes place. Both chapters will describe how the NNSs in the conversations managed to attend to both the interpersonal and the more technical processes involved in topic organisation, and how they handled specific topic moves, in other words, how they initiated new topics, how they responded to topics initiated by their partners, and how they collaborated on getting topics established.

There is a good deal more to topic management than just being able to introduce new topics into a conversation. Equally important are the skills involved in being able to develop a topic which has been proposed, for example by adding new and relevant information or examples, and also in helping to maintain a topic by employing effective listener skills, in the form of backchannels, interjections, questions and assessments. A detailed investigation of how NNSs manage these aspects of talk is, however, beyond the scope of this study, and will only be referred to where they are implicated in topic changes and transitions.

In this chapter a description will be given of the main strategies used to establish the initial topics at the beginnings of the conversations, and also of how these conversations were brought to an end. This will be followed by a discussion of the different types of topic changes which were found in the data, and an analysis of the most notable topic-changing procedures.

Topic changes will be discussed from the perspectives outlined in Chapter 3, with an analysis of those topic changes which occur following signals of closure, as well as a description of specific signals which introduce new topics,

such as discourse markers, and concluding with extracts showing disjunctive topic changes.

4.2 Beginning a conversation

In their investigation of communication problems experienced by Chinese students studying abroad, Xiao and Petraki (2007:8) found that "one of the most notable difficulties was finding a suitable topic to get the conversation going on", so a look at conversational beginnings may throw some light on whether or not any such difficulties are apparent for the NNSs in the conversations in this study.

Due to the nature of the data collection process the beginnings of the conversations vary greatly, as noted in Chapter 3. In the case of the conversations recorded for this study, the participants will clearly have needed to engage in at least some prior discussions about where, when and for how long these conversations should go on. The beginnings are not, therefore, as spontaneous as ones where, for example, two friends meet each other in the street and start talking. Starting the conversations has consequently had to be a much more conscious decision than would normally be the case. So although the beginnings of the conversations may not conform to what would normally occur in spontaneous conversations, analysis may throw some light on the participants' awareness of the conventions involved in initiating conversations and consequently also the initiation of the first topics.

Distinctly different approaches were taken to beginning the recording of these conversations. Some start by referring to the business of recording of the conversations; some make no reference to the fact that, at the point of switching the tape recorder on, the talk has moved from private to more 'public' discourse, and yet others start by making very explicit references to finding a topic to talk about. However, these variations and the strategies employed at the very beginning of the talks already give some indication of the processes involved and of the initiatives employed by the NNSs to get the

conversation going. An analysis of the beginnings of the conversations will therefore illustrate how first topics are negotiated and taken up for further development, and the part played by the NNSs in effecting this.

In half of the conversations it was the NNSs who made the first conversational move, possibly because they felt they were responsible for this 'project', which was how it was perceived by at least one of the participants. Looking at *who* initiates topics is not a sufficient measurement of active conversational participation; *how* topic initiations are responded to is equally likely to impact on the conversational development; in other words the participants jointly negotiate the topics of the talk.

4.2.1   Setting the scene

The first type of opening shows an attempt, or a need, to set the scene, by introducing the participants or referring to the reason or context for the conversation. This is the case in 'Cheesy Beans', 'Education' and 'Modern art'. In the first of these it is the NNS who does the introductions (see Extract 4 [1] below), while in the second extract the NS starts by introducing himself at some length. The third tape starts with talk about the practicalities of the recording, and because this conversational beginning combines two approaches, it will be discussed in section 4.2.2.

In the first extract from 'Cheesy beans' we can see a very clear example of an explicit 'scene-setting' approach, and of how Bella, the NNS, exploits aspects of the setting or situation to get the conversation going.

Cheesy beans 4 [1]   Bella (NNS)   Max (NS)

001   Bella   Hello today Max and eh me, Bella, are going to:: take part in
002   the:: project in Spoken English so I'm now recording a
003   conversation between us. It's lunchtime (...) and Max is eating
004   (..) I think a =
005   Max   = cheesy beans on toast

At the start of the tape Bella addresses the listener directly (*hello*), introduces both participants by name, and goes on to mention what she perceives as the context of the conversation. It is not clear from her reference to a 'project' and to the course of Spoken English what exactly her expectations are, but she gives this as the reason for recording the conversation. She then goes on to provide further details about the time and the situation. Her description of what is happening provides the 'hook' for the first topic of the conversation, namely the nature of Max's meal. In line 003 she hesitates briefly over the description of the meal, pausing and saying *I think*, and is on the point of offering a description, which is then co-operatively supplied by Max's latched remark. This may be not just an attempt to help her out, but also part of a joint effort to set the scene for the listener. The scene-setting talk could effectively have ended there, but in the next turn Bella takes the initiative and the floor, and offers a comment which both initiates and invites an expansion on the topic of the meal her friend is eating.

Cheesy beans 4 [2]   Bella (NNS)   Max (NS)

```
006→ Bella   yeah it's typical typical English it's very strange That's a very
007          strange aspect
008   Max    I think I put too much cheese on
009   Bella  right too much cheese he he he
010   Max    it's all melted
011   Bella  whaa:: it's awful
```

In line 006 Bella briefly acknowledges Max's description with a *yeah*, and then expands on the topic by giving her opinion on the nature of the meal, and by making an assessment, she invites a response to this (Pomerantz 1984). She has therefore effectively topicalized Max's previous utterance, and turned an aspect of the setting talk into a more substantial topic.

Bella also demonstrates her non-nativeness in this introductory section, by referring to the food not just as typically English, but also as very strange (many international students find the fondness which their English counterparts have for baked beans surprising). By drawing attention to this cultural difference in eating habits, she is exploiting what is a useful topic resource in intercultural encounters.

Following her remark about the Englishness of the dish, she expands on the topic by commenting specifically on the way this particular version looks. Although this is phrased in a way that shows L1 interference, meaning presumably that it *looks* strange, Max does not appear to have any difficulty in understanding and provides an appropriate explanatory comment. His explanation in line 008 that he put too much cheese on may also be a defensive response to the implied criticism in Bella's remark. However, they clearly know each other well enough to be able to tolerate criticism and teasing, as Bella's comment in Line 011 and in other parts of the conversation indicate.

Bella's contribution to this topic initiation then demonstrates some skill in using several resources for opening up the conversation, and for generating a topic for more substantive talk, such as building on her partner's previous utterance, using her non-nativeness as a resource for topic-making, and drawing a response from her partner by offering an assessment.

In 'Education' (Extract 4 [1]) it is Dave, the NS, who starts the conversation at the beginning of the tape, and there is a sense of this being a prepared introduction. The personal details he provides are addressed to the unseen listener, as the two participants clearly know each other quite well. Following this somewhat contrived beginning, however, the talk soon reverts to the more common turn-by-turn talk, with his NNS partner picking up on aspects of the introduction from which to fashion a suitable topic.

Dave, the NS participant, attended classes which I was teaching, and he was invariably a very willing and very vocal contributor in classes. His self-presentation covers a good deal of ground, and could conceivably have continued if Jana had not interrupted with a question, - which may indicate that she, too, is aware of his tendency to go on at some length. It may also be the case that Jana is conscious that the purpose of the recording is to produce a conversation, not a monologue. There may, in other words, be an awareness that there will be an 'audience' to their talk, so this could

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demonstrate how the observer's paradox may affect the collection of naturally occurring data.

Education 4 [1]　　　　　Jana (NNS)　Dave (NS)

001	Dave	My name is Dave xxxx. I'm eh an Aston student I've been
002		here for about two years I study eh Information
003		Techno[logy
004	Jana	[Uhm=
005	Dave	=for Business I've been living in Erdington for
006		well I lived on campus for one year in Lakeside which is
007		very [nice
008	Jana	[(xxx)
009	Dave	and I (...) this year I live in Erdington I [have
010→	Jana	[why ?=
011	Dave	= three
012		flatmates
013→	Jana	why do you live in Erdington ?
014	Dave	I live in Erdington because eh when students go into the
015		second year the general rule of thumb is that they eh (..)

This of all the conversations is the one which contained by far the most instances of overlap and interruptions, and these were often difficult to transcribe. It is not clear, for example, what Jana was trying to say in line 008. Her bluntly interruptive one-word question in Line 010 does not succeed in stopping Dave's flow of talk, and in line 013 she repeats the question, while also repeating parts of Dave's utterance; this has the effect of clarifying exactly what the question was referring to. It may be that she genuinely wanted to know the answer, or alternatively that she felt she needed or wanted to take a more active part in the conversation, or indeed that she wanted to change the topic, as she presumably already knows most of this information about her friend. It could also be that this particular piece of information is indeed new to her, and therefore merited a request for more information. Her motives are obviously not available to the analyst, but irrespective of whether or not the somewhat intrusive interruption was necessitated by the conversational style of her partner, the outcome is that Jana has taken the initiative and has succeeded in effecting a topic transition, which maintains both coherence and other-attentiveness, but still shifts the

focus away from Dave's self-presentation, and therefore leads into the first more substantial topic of the conversation.

These two extracts have shown several features which are commonly present in conversational openings. Hellermann (2007:84), in the context of investigating task openings in classrooms, points out that

> Research on conversation has noted the phenomenon of opening talk as consisting, often, of a "false first" or transitional topic (Sacks, 1992), such as the weather, or talk about the setting (Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984; Stokoe, 2000). Such talk serves the purpose of ensuring mutual recipiency and shared understanding, which is especially important for participants engaged in talk-in-interaction when they lack an intimate knowledge of one another (Chafe, 1974).

While it is not the case that these participants are strangers to each other, it is the case that the setting talk in these extracts has functioned not just to set the scene, or clarify understanding about the purpose of the talk, but it has also demonstrated how such 'false firsts' or transitional topics can be exploited to move the conversation forward, and how the NNSs took an active part in accomplishing this.

A slightly different approach to the question of how to open a conversation and then generate a topic is illustrated in the next section.

4.2.2   Negotiating first topics

In 'Modern art' we can see a combination of two approaches, exploiting setting talk and conducting more explicit topic negotiation. The tape starts with the sounds of laughter; in other words talk has been going on prior to the tape-recording being made. Lines 001 – 009 deal with the setting up of the equipment, and in lines 009-014 we see explicit reference to finding a topic and also see how the emerging topic is negotiated by the two participants.

Modern art 4 [1]   Sara (NNS)   Ann (NS)

001   Sara   (xxx) something (xxx xxx)
002   Ann   do you want (xxx)
003   Sara   yeah I just try it (....) I think it's enough if I put (xxx) because
              because Muna eh told me that the microphone is eh broken or is
005   not good enough for this recording (....) yeah have it that way
006   Ann   that should work (xxx)
007   Sara   .I just I think it's enough if we just make one one side
008   Ann   (xxx)
009   ((both laughing))
010   Sara   ok eh I don't know (..) what what we can talk about (..) it's quite
011   Ann   anything
012→ Sara   anything Well I must say it really is nice nice area (xxx)
013   Ann   it can be a bit What do you like about it ? What do you find nice?
014   Sara   well you know I was I was walking across the park
015   Ann   yeah

The talk in the first nine lines centres on setting up the equipment, and deciding on the duration of the recording. Ann's response in line 008 is not audible, but results in mutual laughter. Following the laughter, Sara in line 10 takes the initiative to signal a change in focus by her use of the discourse marker 'Ok'. She is using this in the sense and with the purpose described by Condon (2001:509):

> A rich resource for conversational practice is the implication that transitions marked by *ok* move to a mutually understood and expected business at hand. For example, *ok, alright, so* and *anyway* mark transitions from off-task and off-topic talk back to on-task and on-topic talk both in ordinary interaction and in elicited decision-making interactions. Therefore, use of *ok* reflects not only participants' perceptions of the structure of their talk, but also their perceptions of 'what is going on'.

At this point, then, Sara is getting down to the business of the talk, and her next comment in line 010 indicates that she sees this as a task which she does not quite know how to make a start on. Her comment seems to contain an implied appeal for topic suggestions.

The statement also indicates her personal feelings of uncertainty about how to proceed, and she seems about to expand on this when Ann responds. This

reply (line 11) does not offer a topic, but instead responds to the uncertainty expressed by Sara, and passes the floor back to her. Sara responds by repeating the word *anything*, thus using lexical repetition to link her contribution to what has already been said. She then produces a topic initiation, by making a positive comment on the area in which her friend lives. She has thus chosen a topic that shows other-orientation, that is relevant for her conversational partner, and which is therefore more likely to be accepted. Ann's comment in line 013 could express partial agreement or be an abandoned disagreement, and she passes the floor back to Sara by asking two questions, thereby effectively inviting Sara to expand on the topic. Sara does this by contextualising her answer before describing which particular aspect she found appealing. So although they work together to establish a first topic, it would seem that Sara has to do a great deal of the work, firstly by offering a specific focus for the talk, and secondly by providing a response to Ann's invitation to expand on it. She rises to the challenge quite effectively, insofar as the topic she proposes is accepted by her partner, and it is continued over several further turns.

In the next extract from 'Computers' it is also the NNS, Oda, who, after the formulaic start, does the work of getting a first topic off the ground.

Computers 4 [1]   Oda (NNS)   Joan (NS)

001	Joan	Hello Oda How are how are you today ?
002		((joint laughter))
003	Oda	I'm fine thank you. It's a pretty nice day
004	Joan	yeah it's really warm
005→	Oda	I really wanna go out today but like you I've got a lot
006		of homework as well
007	Joan	yeah=
008	Oda	=yeah
009	Joan	a whole essay to type two thousand words I don't know
010		how I'm going to do it

Joan, the NS, employs what is a standard opening format for a conversation, and the mutual laughter indicates that they are both aware that it is not

entirely appropriate in this case, as they will obviously have been talking before the tape was started. This is possibly why Oda does not complete what would be an expected second pair part in such a greeting, of asking in turn how Joan is.

She does, however, provide a comment which functions as a topic initiation in line 003, and again it is a fairly conventional one in terms of conversation starters: namely a comment on the weather. But the weather as a topic is usually a fairly short-lived one, and so it proves in this case. After Joan's agreement and brief comment in line 004, it is up to Oda to build on this contribution in an attempt to establish a more substantial topic. She does this, quite smoothly, by maintaining a link with the previous topic: because it is such a nice day, it would be nice to go out. In lines 004-005 she then goes on to give the reason why she cannot go out and enjoy the nice day: she has too much homework. She has then offered a new topic which is likely to be of mutual interest, namely homework. She also quite specifically draws attention to what they have in common here by saying *like you*. This comment elicits agreement, and then Joan in line 009 shows her acceptance of this as a suitable topic by providing a comment which expands on it, giving additional, new information, and they continue to talk about essay writing difficulties over the next many turns. While there is no explicit reference to starting a topic in this extract, the participants nonetheless demonstrate their awareness that certain conventions are common at the beginning of a conversation, and they build collaboratively on these beginnings to generate a topic which can sustain more extended conversational talk.

Very explicit reference to topic initiation is made in the next extract from 'Newspapers'. This extract also provides an exceptionally clear instance of what is required for a topic to be acceptable, and of how the topic negotiation process unfolds, and in this case it becomes quite an extended process before an eventual topic is agreed on.

Newspapers 4 [1]　　　　　　　Fay (NNS)　Will (NS)

001	Will	Let's talk about something (..) relevant to our everyday lives. Let
002		let let's talk about how bad the buses are (..) in Birmingham
003	Fay	yeah (laughs) but that's that's relevant but it's not very interesting
004	Will	oh I don't know
005	Fay	(laughs)
006	Will	(xxx) go by bus every day so it's something that affects me
007	Fay	really ?
008	Will	yes
009	Fay	It doesn't really affect me
010	Will	you get the buses
011	Fay	well (..) it doesn't really bother me
012	Will	but ..
013	Fay	I can be patient
014	Will	not even when you're waiting for twenty minutes in the evening for
015		a bus that
016	Fay	…hhh
017	Will	that turns up
018	Fay	well
019	Will	without its lights on
020	Fay	well maybe from now on it will affect me when it's really cold outside
021	Will	exactly
022	Fay	yeah
023	Will	yeah
024	Fay	maybe
025	Will	'cause then you'll]
026	Fay	] but now it's really freezing outside and I don't
027		want to wait twenty minutes for a bus 'cause that's (…) not human
028		anymore
029	Will	there's no bus going back to your house anyway so:::
030	Fay	not now but I mean (…) if I come from Aston University
031	Will	(xxx xxx)
032	Fay	like yesterday evening I had to wait for eh (…) ten minutes (…)
033		which was long enough
034	Will	ten minutes is nothing (laughing)
035	Fay	no::: it is. Well I think it's long enough
036	Will	when I have to go to Sandwell I have to leave here at if I have a
037		lesson on a Monday at 6 p.m. so I've got to leave here at half four ((very heavy interference – some inaudible exchanges))
038	Fay	yeah continue .
039	Will	(xxx)
040	Fay	yes (xxx) (..)
041	Will	ok
042		(5.0)

In the first utterance heard on the tape Will starts by making an explicit suggestion for a topic, namely the disadvantages of public transport, and justifies his choice by claiming that it is relevant to both of them. Fay laughs

and agrees that the topic may be relevant, but also proposes what could be considered another requirement for conversational topics: that they should be interesting. Will in line 004 implies that indeed this topic might be interesting which elicits another laugh from Fay. He then mentions how going by bus affects him personally, thereby underlining the relevance of this as a topic. Fay's *really?* in line 007 invites further talk, either more information or confirmation, which he provides with a brief *yes* in line 008. At this point Fay states that it does not affect her, so she is again questioning the relevance (or interest) of the topic. Will points out that she goes by bus, and consequently she must be affected. He continues, in other words, to pursue the topic, and she in turn continues to stress that going by bus is not a problem for her, with her comments in lines 011 and 013 that *it doesn't bother me*, and that she *can be patient*, the implication being that it is not, therefore, a sufficiently interesting or relevant topic for her.

It is only after Will's comment about long waits in line 014 that she responds with a noticeable, indrawn breath, presumably as this is a situation she can identify with, and she eventually concedes that he may have a point. In line 020 she makes this explicit, though with some reservations, expressed by *Well maybe*, and Will produces a triumphant *exactly*. It is not until line 026 that she finally volunteers a comment on the situation, and thereby demonstrates her acceptance of the topic. That she has indeed accepted it, can be seen in line 038, where, following some background interference, she invites Will to continue talking on this topic. It may be that the interference has disturbed the trajectory of the talk, for in lines 039 to 042 they both make only minimal contributions, one of which is Will's *ok* in line 041, which could signal acceptance of Fay's previous utterance, though this is not audible, or it could indicate that the topic is in the process of being closed down. The pause in line 042 would seem to confirm that the latter is the case.

It is of course unusual to find such explicit reference to the issue of what the participants might want to talk about, or to the need for finding a topic. It is equally unusual to find such resistance on the part of an interlocutor to agree to a proposed topic, but the NNS is able to hold her ground in the negotiation

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process. Both the above extract and the next one from the same conversation provide good examples of how initial and subsequent topics are negotiated, though they differ in the degree of explicitness by which it is done.

With the initial topic having run out of steam, a new topic now needs to be found, and again we can see a sequence of talk which makes explicit reference to finding and agreeing on a topic to talk about.

Newspapers   4 [2]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

043→	Will	anyway if you don't want to talk about the buses
044	Fay	yeah we can talk about something else but it does affect us of
045		course it does but I think I think
046	Will	it's our local ((ogres ?))
047	Fay	yes but I think I think I've become used to it
048	Will	ok
049→	Fay	I think there are worse things in life than buses
050·	Will	li:::::ke ?
051	Fay	like eh
052	Will	(xxx) how horrible those burgers are
053	Fay	no I was thinking about the poor people eh

After the pause Will in line 043 starts with the disjunction marker *anyway*. In spite of the fact that this usually signals a complete break in topic continuity, Will here links his comment to the previous talk by referring to the buses. He also orients to the concerns of his partner by implicitly inviting Fay to nominate a new topic for them to talk about.

Fay's response in line 044 does not propose another topic; she merely accepts that they can talk about something else, but she then concedes that the previous topic did actually have some relevance for them, and in line 047 she summarises her position on the matter. Will's *ok* in line 048 could indicate that he sees this as the end of the matter, and in line 049 Fay links her comment with a projection of other potential topics about things that are worse than buses, and which therefore may be more interesting topics. Will's drawn out *li:::ke?* in line 050 invites a more specific suggestion, and Fay repeats the *like* followed by a hesitation marker. This gives Will the opportunity to make a somewhat joking suggestion of his own, at which point

Fay makes reference to the topic she had in mind, namely *poor people*, and the topic which she proposes is, after some further negotiation and laughter, eventually taken up and discussed. The NNS here takes an active part in working towards the generation of a new topic, firstly by indicating a potential feature of a new topic, namely something more serious than buses, and secondly by responding to the NS's invitation to produce a concrete example of such a topic.

A less explicit and less protracted negotiation process is evident at the beginning of 'Hot Curry'. Aya, who is Japanese, had been invited to dinner by her foster student, Fiona, and they have now finished eating.

Hot curry 4 [1]   Aya (NNS)   Fiona (NS)

001	Aya	about that dinner of course
002	Fiona	dinner ?
003	Aya	yeah
004	Fiona	you liked it ?
005	Aya	o::h my God what's the name ? Fish pie ?
006	Fiona	fish pie yeah
007	Aya	I need the recipe it was really good

Aya's opening turn in line 001 could well be (and this is speculation) a response to a question like: *What shall we talk about then?*, as the tape recorder is being switched on. In spite of the *of course*, it is therefore offered as a possible topic, a topic nomination. As Button and Casey (1984) point out, whether a nominated topic is taken up or not will depend on the response of the second speaker. In this case, Fiona's repetition of the word *dinner* with rising intonation signals both surprise and an invitation to Aya to confirm it as a topic. She does so in line 003, and Fiona's request for more information confirms her acceptance of it, and further invites Aya to develop the topic. She does this by expressing her appreciation of the meal, and after asking Fiona to confirm the name of the dish, asks for the recipe because it was so good. This consequently leads to extended talk about the cooking of this and various other dishes. It is, then, a good example of how, in the words of

Button and Casey (1984:184), "speakers interactionally and mutually generate a topic for talk."

Judging from the next two extracts, it seems likely that the point at which the tape recorder is switched on is used to introduce a new topic into what are actually on-going conversations, with this action constituting a natural break in the talk.

The first extract shows a topic initiation by the NNS, and one in which the discourse marker *so* followed by a question is used as the means of initiation.

Football 4 [1]   Claude (NNS)   Ben (NS)

001	Claude	ah so eh (..) are you going to follow the World Cup ?
002	Ben	ah a little bit (..) I'm not really much of a fan. What
003		about you ?

The content here is topical in the sense that this football event was very much in the news at the time. It is also other-oriented, as it attempts to find out what Ben's opinion is on the issue. In spite of the fact that neither of them is particularly interested in this topic, it remains a surface topic over several turns, while becoming a vehicle for the introduction of other matters which are of greater interactional importance, and which allow the participants to get to know each other better. The presence of the discourse marker *So* might indicate that a previous topic had been finished (see section 4.4.2.2), and that it was now appropriate to move on to other matters.

The final extract shows not just how the first, 'public' topic becomes established, but also how much other interactional work can be accomplished during this process. Although there are many instances in the data where a 'bald' question is employed to effect a change of topic or direction, there are also instances of a more subtle use of questions by the NNSs, i.e. where a question is either preceded or followed by an additional item which does other work, for example face saving.

The conversation between Laura (NNS) and her English flatmate Claire takes place while they are looking at a newspaper or magazine. It would have been

interesting to know whether there had been a deliberate decision to use the reading material as a 'prop' for the conversation. At the very beginning of The Tabloid, Laura, with reference presumably to a photo of a celebrity in the paper, hedges her question to save face in case her assumption is wrong:

The tabloid 4 [1]　　　　Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

001	Laura	This is Britney or am I blind ?
002	Claire	no that's eh who is it ? Rod Stewart (xxx) Penny Lancaster
003	.	it <u>does</u> look like Britney, though, doesn't it ?
004	Laura	uh the same eyes the (xxx)
005	Claire	uh
006	Laura	she's a bit older face
007	Claire	yeah
008	Laura	who's the other ?

Not only does Laura initiate a potential topic in line 001, but she also invites reassurance by the implied uncertainty expressed in the second part of her question. Claire's response attends to both of these concerns. She gives the information asked for, in other words accepts the proposed topic, but does so in a form which could signal alignment with Laura: the hesitation and the rhetorical question. Following this, she directly picks up on the request for reassurance by expressing her agreement that there is indeed a likeness. She finishes with a tag question which effectively invites consolidation of the agreement thus established.

Laura in line 004 responds with a minimal acknowledgement token and then expands on her reasons for assuming a likeness, thus justifying both her own question and Claire's agreement. This receives merely a minimal back channel response from Claire, signalling acceptance, which in turn encourages Laura to continue, this time with a comment about the differences between the two celebrities. This comment may be intended as saving face, a way of saying *Yes, I see what you mean*, in other words accepting Claire's initial disagreement in line 002. She, like Claire, thus shows considerable interactional subtlety in the way she responds to the conversational management on several levels. She uses an appropriate responding move to

indicate she has heard or accepts the information, produces an additional comment to develop the topic, thus taking an active part in building the conversation, and finally pays attention to the relational aspects by showing support for the position taken by her partner.

Having examined conversation beginnings and the first topics, which showed that NNSs took an active part in spite of claims (Dörnyei and Thurrell 1994:42; Thornbury and Slade 2006:131) that this is an area of difficulty for second language speakers, we will now take a brief look at conversation closures, as these are similarly thought to be problematical. Bardovi-Harlig et al (1991:6), for example, state that "... learners of English are often unable to end, or close, conversations appropriately."

4.3   Conversation closures

As with conversation beginnings the participants used different ways to terminate their talk. There is one instance where the talk comes to a halt when one side of the tape has finished; two where the tape recorder is switched off without any previous signals that this is about to happen. In 'Cheesy Beans' the conversation between Max and Bella effectively comes to an end when they are joined by a third person. Only in three of the conversations is there evidence of an overt winding down of the talk ('Computers', 'Education' and 'Universities').

In two of these conversations it is the NS participants who make the necessary moves to end the conversations. In one instance, 'Universities' there is evidence earlier on in the conversation that the NS participant is less than keen on having the talk recorded, and the concluding remarks in the extract below refer to a wish to have it ended.

University 4 [1]   Pierre (NNS) Rose (NS)

161   Rose   I know but it's like it's applying to somewhere I don't want
                 to <u>be</u>
162   Pierre   yeah ?
163   Rose → yeah exactly (..) Is it finished yet ? (plaintively)

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164   Pierre   yeah we will finish this now.

Rose's question in line 163 follows a somewhat acrimonious exchange between the partners and her tone of voice clearly indicated that she would like the recording to finish.

In 'Computers', too, the closing move by the NS would seem to imply a wish for the recording to be stopped, but here there is more evidence of the sort of signals one could expect when conversations are being wound down. Two substantial pauses followed by consecutive topic changes, which are not developed by either partner, could indicate that the conversation is coming to an end.

Computers 4 [2]   Oda (NNS)   Joan (NS)

158	Oda		Well it's English examination so like they're they're
159			really complaining about the examination
		→	(4.0)
160	Joan		Do you know where Sally's gone ? Is she here this
161			weekend or has she gone away ?
162	Oda		ah I haven't seen her recently
			(Background noises)
		→	(7.0)
163	Joan		Do you think it's been ten minutes now ?
164	Oda		uhm:: yep

Oda has attempted to introduce a new topic, but Joan does not acknowledge her contribution in lines 158-159. Instead there is a 4-second silence, after which Joan asks a totally unrelated question. Oda answers the question, and it may be the background noises which prevent any further development of this topic. There is then another long pause, and Joan's next unrelated question refers to the duration of the recording, possibly indicating that she would like it to finish. So the fact that the conversations are being recorded is employed as a strategy to conclude at least the public parts of the talks. We can see an example of this in the next extract as well where Will is talking about the working hours of a friend.

Newspapers 4 [3]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

808	Will	so I think she's well well over thirty hours (xxx xxx) thirty-eight
809		hours is your full-time so I think she's ( ) probably at at the
810	→	full-time hours I'm sure (xxx xxx) Are we running out of tape ?
811	Fay	no it's=
812	Will	=I hope she finds this interesting
813	Fay	yeah well I just ( ) hope it'll work good

Tape recorder is switched off.

In three of the conversations the NSs, then, seemed to signal their discomfort at being recorded, leading to the conversations being closed down, while none of the NNSs gave any such indications. They had all experienced being recorded in a classroom context, and so may not have felt it to be such an uncomfortable experience.

'Education' also concludes with reference to the tape recording of the conversation, but this is preceded by a more conventional closing process. It is the NNS, Jana, who takes the initiative to move towards closure, and she does this by employing a pre-closing remark, following a lengthy pause.

Education 4 [2]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

500	Dave	I've forgotten most of it
501		(12.0)
502→	Jana	yeah so I have to go now I've got a lecture eh
503	Dave	what lecture have you got ?
504	Jana	European Cultures
505	Dave	nice nice ok I've a lecture too so
506	Jana	yeah so thank you for the conversation
507	Dave	it was a pleasure
508	Jana	oh really ? (laughs)
509	Dave	yeah I hope it's useful too (...) and I hope that anyone
510		who listens to this tape can understand what we
511		talked about
512	Jana	yeah I think so
513	Dave	ok that's good
514	Jana	that's not difficult to understand
516	Dave	well we hope so hey good listening people enjoy
517		take care

In line 502 Jana makes a brief and delayed acknowledgement token in response to Dave's utterance about forgetting the German he learnt at school, and uses *so* to indicate a move to a different stage of the talk. Taken together these could be seen as pre-closing moves, thereby providing what Schegloff and Sacks (1999: 271) term a "kind of warrant for undertaking to close a conversation." She then announces that she has to go because she has a lecture; she is in other words saying that the conversation will have to end, and provides a suitable justification for doing so. Such an announcement would most commonly lead in to a so-called terminal exchange where the final goodbyes are said, and a "proper closing" (ibid:272) accomplished. However, Schegloff and Sacks (1999:272) demonstrate that "Closing sections may, however, include much more", and can become quite extended. This is exactly what happens here, as Dave's question in line 503 about her lecture could conceivably open up a new topic. Jana's response is brief and to the point, giving the title of the lecture and no more. Dave does not pursue the topic, but provides merely a brief evaluative response, before uttering an acceptance of the situation *ok*, and announcing that he, too, has a lecture. The final *so* leaves unsaid that for him as well it is time to end the conversation, and he is therefore aligning with Jana in collaboratively moving towards closing the conversation.

One of the things which Schegloff and Sacks refer to as being potentially included in closing sections is that of "using the closing section as a place where recognition of the type of conversation can be displayed" (1999:273), and we see in line 506 that Jana thanks Dave for the conversation. This could be the equivalent of someone saying *It's been nice talking to you*, or could be intended to refer to the conversation as 'task', and the thanks then would be for helping her to complete the task. Aston (1995:71) refers to the issue of "mutual acceptability of the outcomes" as being implicated in closures. The concluding utterances here draw attention to the nature of the talk, i.e. the fact that it is a recording, and the final remarks directly address the unseen listener.

The conversational closures in the data are the places where it becomes most obvious that these are not entirely natural or spontaneous conversations, and that they are being conducted and recorded for a purpose other than the normal, social interactions which these participants would be likely to have with one another, though we saw in the last extract that there was an attempt to emulate a standard closing format. These closures also highlight the fact that it is extremely difficult to obtain data of entirely natural conversations. However, between the beginnings and the closures we get conversational talk that flows smoothly. This was in no small measure due to the types of topic transitions which were employed, and those will be discussed in Chapter 5. The rest of this chapter will examine how entirely new topics were introduced, negotiated, and closed down during the conversations.

4. 4   Topic changes

In line with Maynard (1980:264), who says of topic changes that "they are unrelated to the talk in prior turns in that they utilize new referents, and thus they implicate and occasion a series of utterances constituting a different line of talk", topic changes are ones where there are no propositional or lexical connections with immediately previous talk. One of the key questions which the following sections will seek to answer is whether the NNSs tend to use more such sudden or 'abrupt' i.e. disjunctive or non-coherent topic changes as outlined in Chapter 3, and if so, what effect this may have on the topical development and on the conversation as a whole. Schwienhorst (2004:35), for example, comments that "..some researchers on native-speaker/non-native speaker discourse have claimed that native speakers initiate the majority of topics, and that non-native speakers preferably initiate a topic by using questions." He cites the studies by Long that appeared to show that "topics are initiated to a large extent by NSs (Long, 1983b, p.133)", and that "NSs accept more readily new and abrupt topic introductions by NNSs (Long, 1981b, pp.135-136)".

Topic changes, as opposed to topic transitions, are in fact relatively rare in these conversations. Two of the conversations contain no topic changes at all, and in the remaining eight conversations only a total of 29 topic changes were identified. Eight of them occurred in one comparatively short conversation, namely 'Universities'. In contrast, one of the longest conversations, 'Modern art', has only one instance of an outright topic change; this comes right at the start of the conversation, and has already been discussed in section 4.3.2. Table 1 below shows the total number and the distribution of topic changes produced by NSs and NNSs respectively in each conversation.

Table 1 Distribution of topic changes in the conversations			
	NNS	NS	Total
Football	0	0	0
Lord of the Rings	0	0	0
Newspapers	1	3	4
Universities	4	4	8
Hot Curry	0	1	1
Cheesy Beans	4	0	4
Computers	0	2	2
Education	2	2	4
The Tabloid	3	2	5
Modern Art	1	0	1
Total	15	14	29

Table 1   Distribution of topic changes in the conversations

There were an almost equal number of topic changing initiations performed by NSs (14) and NNSs (15), and there is no evidence, therefore, to indicate that these NNSs are any more prone than their NS partners to changing topics frequently or abruptly, nor that they rely on NSs to do the work of introducing new topics. Furthermore, as will be shown in Chapter 5, the great majority of topical shifts were effected via topic transitions, meaning that the talk flowed smoothly from one topic to another, and the coherent flow of the talk was not disrupted.

While the topic changes in Table 1 were clear-cut examples, it should be pointed out that there were a few instances where non-coherent topic changes *might* have been in progress. However, parts of the relevant sequences were inaudible, and could therefore not be analysed with any accuracy.

It was clear from a detailed analysis of those topic changes which were identified as such, that several types of topic changes occurred, and that both the number and types of some of these changes were to a large degree context-dependent. In other words, topic organisation was affected partly by other activities which participants were doing concurrently with the talking, such as looking at newspapers and filling in an application form and partly by the nature of the conversation as an 'externally imposed project'. It is, for example, suggested in the discussion below of extracts from 'Newspapers' that participants' perceptions of the event may have been a factor which influenced the topic changes. The two fairly short conversations, 'Cheesy Beans' and 'Universities', where participants were engaged in some other activity while talking, were the ones which contained the greatest number of non-coherent topic changes, and consequently fewer topic transitions. These activities in fact proved to be useful topical resources which participants could and did draw on to keep the talk moving. It might well have been the case that doing the recordings contributed to the participants' choice of topics, and had the recorder not been there, we might have seen an entirely different conversational structure and management.

In the following sections we will look in detail at the different types of changes, which were found in the conversations, at the environments in which they occurred, and at the procedures used to bring them about. While the changes will be discussed according to specific features which they exhibit, in the context of the very complex processes involved in topic management, watertight categories are rare, and there will inevitably be cases where more than one feature is in evidence. Consequently, extracts which display several features will be discussed in more than one section.

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4.4.1 Explicit reference to topic change

"I know this is off the topic, but.." and *"Not to change the topic, but..."*, are phrases which are sometimes used in informal conversations to signal a topic change, with the latter doing exactly the opposite of what it says. There are obviously times in a conversation when we remember something that needs to be conveyed, and this may occasion an urgent change of direction. The fact that this may then be marked explicitly by phrases such as the ones above indicates that a departure from the norm is taking place. Although conversational partners will be alert to signals of impending change, as we will see, such awareness of the structural properties of talk is rarely made explicit in informal conversations. Svennevig (1999:168) observes that

> Explicit, metacommunicative negotiations concerning what is or should be the topic of the conversation are sometimes found, but ordinarily the topic is established implicitly by a set of techniques that allow participants to propose topics and to take them up or reject them.

In section 4.2.2 we saw how the participants in both 'Modern art' and 'Newspapers' explicitly negotiated the opening topic. In 'Newspapers' there was additionally overt discussion of what constitutes a 'suitable' topic, and there are further instances of such meta-talk throughout the conversation. As mentioned in Chapter 3, certain features appear which suggest there may be a pre-determined agenda of topics to be discussed. A broader view of the conversation indicates that the participants may orient to it -at least in parts- as something other than an informal chat between friends. This manifests itself particularly at the boundaries of topic changes (<u>not</u> in topic transitions), both with respect to how topics are closed down, and how new ones are introduced. In fact, all the four topic changes found in this conversation make explicit reference to a change of topic, and in this respect it is an unusual case. The first of these topic changes, Newspapers 4 [2] was discussed in section 4.2.2, and the other three will be discussed below.

The talk prior to the first extract from 'Newspapers' below had focused on the amount of information about Libya in the press, and Will has given the

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Lockerbie trial as an example. The fact that Fay had been attending a course titled Media Review, focusing on British Press and TV, which I was teaching, may be a relevant factor in the interpretation of this and the next extract. The course was optional, so was attended by students who had an interest in the subject, and Fay's awareness that her teacher would listen to the conversation may have been an additional incentive for ensuring that this subject also became a topic in the conversation.

Newspapers 4 [4]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

```
143   Will   two years ago when they were doing the trial of the Lockerbie
144          bombers when they were doing it and then (xxxxxxx )
145          were they there's this the court they'd set up in the
146          Netherlands
147   Fay    in Den Haag probably
148   Will   yeah
149   Fay    uh
150   Will   yeah something like that
151→  Fay    and eh [maybe we
152   Will          [ (xxx xxx ) which was good
153→  Fay    (xxx) we should pass on to eh newspapers ?
154   Will   newspapers ?
155   Fay    do you read The Guardian ?
156   Will   I do read The Guardian every every Monday excellent=
```

In lines 143 to 146 Will is linking previous talk about Libya to the trials of the Lockerbie bombers. Lines 147-150 constitute a side sequence, and Will's final remark in line 150 could be taken as closing this down with a partial agreement. It is conceivable that Fay sees this as a closure, not of the side sequence, but of this topic, as she, in line 151, starts to initiate a new topic. However, Will's comment in line 152 (not entirely audible) which overlaps with Fay's attempted initiation may serve to indicate that he is still focused on the previous topic, not of the side sequence, but of the Lockerbie trial. This may explain his rather surprised sounding repetition of the word *newspapers,* following Fay's initiation in line 153 of a completely new and seemingly unrelated topic. The surprise may also be occasioned by the fact that their previous talk was already related to aspects of the press and newspaper coverage of Libya. Fay seems to see the repetition as sanctioning acceptance

of the topic, and of giving her the go-ahead to expand on it. She does this by asking a personal question, which in turn requires an answer from Will. As he has previously indicated that he reads the Guardian, the question might seem superfluous, and may in fact be nothing more than a deliberate strategy to get this topic off the ground.

On first hearing this topic change, it struck me as 'dysfunctional' – very abrupt and unrelated to the rest of the conversation, in other words a disjunctive change. However, there are, I think, several grounds for considering it a coherent element of this conversation. First of all, it is feasible that Fay interpreted Will's utterance in line 150 as closing the topic. Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that coherence in talk can be seen at both local and global levels; in other words it is not always dependent on the sequential relations between immediately adjacent utterances. Support for the notion that this is a case of global coherence comes partly from its links with prior talk, which to a large extent has been concerned with reports of what has been read in the papers. It may therefore be the case that Fay addresses what Waring (2003: 420) terms a "larger, *unstated* topic". Thirdly, the strategy she uses here for initiating the change and thus taking control of the conversation is with an *and*-prefaced question. Heritage and Sorjonen (1994: 1) claim that

> While *and* as a question preface is rarely found in ordinary conversation between peers and acquaintances, it is a commonplace feature of interactions in "institutional" settings, (.. where the parties are occupied with a restricted set of tasks, or address one another as incumbents of particular social roles).

Heritage and Sorjonen do, however, base their discussion on examples which involve a series of such questions, and propose that such questions "play a role in constituting and maintaining a joint orientation to the larger activity-focused courses of actions which the questions implement." (ibid: p.5), and that they are *agenda-based*. Fay's choice of phrase or verb form here *we should pass on to newspapers* would seem to confirm such an interpretation.

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More interesting, and possibly more pertinent in this context, is the suggestion by Heritage and Sorjonen (ibid:22) that

> This display of a task- or agenda-orientation can also be used as a basis for curtailing troubles talk or, more generally, for progressing the talk away from some undesired topic. The device is thus useable to imply a routine, task-centred motivation for questions which might otherwise be treated as troublesome by virtue of their content *or by virtue of their placement in a sequence of talk.*(my italics).

It is noteworthy, too, that Fay, as in the earlier sequence from the beginning of this conversation, asserts her right to take an equal part in choosing topics, and that she does not drop the topic after her first unsuccessful initiation, a communication strategy which NNSs are thought likely to use (Dörnyei 1995; Rubin and Wenden 1987:26).

Later on in the same conversation we can see further evidence of the participants showing their orientation to the talk as "semi-institutional" in character, and again using meta-talk to refer to impending topic change.

Newspapers 4 [5]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

```
279   Will   I'm full you're full so
280   Fay    yeah I don't want anything
281   Will   exactly ( laughs )
282          (...)
283   Fay    now it's ok
284→ Will    so another (xxx ) ?
285→ Fay     yeah eh newspapers yeah so eh you said that you read The
286          Guardian
287   Will   yes that's correct
288   Fay    e::hm would you (xxx xxx ) ?
289   Will   eh apart from The Guardian and The Daily Mail eh::
290   Fay    have you read other newspapers ?
```

The previous topic is mutually closed down, and following a slight pause, Will in line 284 produces a topic-eliciting question, and effectively says: *we've finished with that; what shall we talk about next ?*   Faye produces an

agreement token, and, after a slight hesitation, nominates a new topic *newspapers*. She uses an explicit reference to earlier talk *so eh you said* to link this initiation as a continuation of their previous discussion about newspapers, and in this sense it may be more of a re-initiated topic rather than an entirely new one. Fay's initiation invites confirmation or a response, and the way Will phrases his response here could also be taken as indication of this being other than informal chat: *that's correct.*

The last example also shows orientation to an agenda of sorts, and explicit reference to changing the topic. Will's comment in line 484 following his assessment of the Viz comic, starts with a disjunction marker *But anyway*, and an explicit indication that enough has been said about the topic: *that's magazines and newspapers covered.* Fay's *So* in line 486 followed by a pause prompts Will to propose a possible new topic, which over the next few turns is negotiated and eventually accepted, when Fay invokes her non-nativeness by referring to the weather in Belgium in line 493.

Newspapers 4 [6]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

477	Fay	is it for men ?
478	Will	no well not <u>really</u> I'd say it's just a ( ) ah yeah probably
479		for men (laughs)
480	Fay	(laughs)
481	Will	it's supposed to be a dirty cartoon strip (xxx) most famous
482		people out of it are The Fat Slags ( ) that's the name of the strip
483	Fay	ah ok
484→	Will	the comic strip but it's very ( ) nasty (xxx xxx) ( ) but anyway
485		that's magazines and newspapers covered
486→	Fay	so
487		(....)
488→	Will	the weather ?
489	Fay	no it's too
490	Will	you think it's too cold ? to go back to the weather ?
491	Fay	it's too cold to go back to the weather
492	Will	ok
493	Fay	but over in Belgium it's the same weather at the moment
494	Will	do you get the same weather as us ?

The NNS in these extracts shows herself to be determined and skilful at ensuring her participation in the negotiations over choice of topics. The

reason for the protracted negotiations is not clear, but the answer may possibly lie in the nature of the relationship between the participants, who exhibit a fair amount of mutual and good-natured teasing. Apart from these instances of explicit topic changes other topic shifts were managed coherently, and the rest of the conversation flowed smoothly, with no obvious disturbances to the coherence of the talk.

We will now move on to look at instances from the conversations which display more conventional procedures for managing topic changes.

4.4.2 Non-coherent topic changes

As mentioned previously, the key feature of non-coherent topic change is its lack of connection with immediately preceding talk. Chapter 3 outlined the existence of three types of non-coherent topic changes, the first of these being collaborative topic changes which are preceded by signals of topic closure. It is, in other words a two-stage process where an existing topic is closed down, and a new and unrelated topic is introduced into the conversation. In the second type, disjunctive topic change, there are no signs of the current topic being closed prior to the introduction of a new and entirely unconnected topic. Finally, some topic changes show a relation to more distant talk, and are classed as globally, but not locally coherent.

The following sections will discuss some of the ways in which sequences of non-coherent topic changes come about and are managed, with a particular focus on the part played by the NNSs in getting a new topic introduced and established, and in responding to topic changes initiated by their NS partners.

It was noted in Chapter 2 that certain non-verbal signals such as pauses and laughter could be indicators that a topic is being wound down, or mutually brought to close, and we will start this section by looking at instances from the data where such signals led to or initiated a change in topic. It should be

pointed out, however, that such signals do not *have* to lead to a topic change, and indeed the data showed that they do not invariably do so.

4.4.2.1   Pauses and laughter

Pauses were previously mentioned as one possible signal of impending topic change, and are also likely to be present when the conversation itself is coming towards an end. Overall there were few long pauses in any of the conversations, another sign that the participants were able to keep the talk flowing. More often than not pauses were present in conjunction with other signs of impending topic change, for example, reaching mutual agreement on an issue, producing sequential assessments, and quite prominently, instances of laughter.

Some instances of pauses being instrumental in closure were shown in section 4.3, and they are repeated here for ease of reference. The first extract shows two successive topic changes initiated by the NS, Joan. In both cases her questions are entirely unconnected with what has been said before and are preceded by substantial pauses.

Computers 4 [3]   Oda (NNS)   Joan (NS)

154	Oda	Yeah but eh another Chinese student eh well an exchange
155		student as well eh they take the examination of IELTS. Do you
156		know IELTS ? (xxx)
157	Joan	No I don't know (xxx)
158	Oda	Well it's English examination so like they're they're
159		really complaining about the examination
→		(4.0)
160	Joan	Do you know where Sally's gone ? Is she here this
161		weekend or has she gone away ?
162	Oda	Ah I haven't seen her recently
		(background noises)
→		(7.0)
163	Joan	Do you think it's been ten minutes now ?
164	Oda	Uhm:: yep
165	Joan	Have you been timing it ?
166	Oda	Ah I'm not sure but I think so.That's alright
167	Joan	That will do. Goodbye
168	Oda	Yeah
169	Joan	Thank you

The first substantial pause follows what appears to be an unsuccessful topic initiation or development by Oda, which will be discussed in Chapter 5. It is not clear whether the background noises may have had an impact on further development of the topic concerning Sally, but there is in any case another substantial pause. Joan's question in line 163 no doubt refers to the duration of the conversation, which is confirmed in her next question. The implication may well be that she would like the recording to finish. Oda accepts this by saying 'That's alright' with Joan in turn expressing the same sentiment.

Another instance came from the end of 'Education', when there is a long 12-second pause, after which Jana starts to bring the conversation to a close.

Education 4 [2]   Jana (NNS)   Dave (NS)

```
500      Dave        I've forgotten most of it
501                  (12.0)
502→     Jana        yeah so I have to go now I've got a lecture eh
```

Whether Jana's *yeah* is a belated response or acknowledgement of Dave's comment on his forgotten German skills, or merely a way of attempting to link the next phase of the talk is not clear. What is clear is that she does not intend for this topic to be developed any further.

Pauses were most frequent in the conversation between Pierre and Rose, and in the following extract we can see an example of a 5-second pause apparently signalling the end of a topic.

Universities 4 [2]   Pierre (NNS)   Rose (NS)

```
096      Pierre      no I understood that you have to do it (..) as soon as
097                  possible
098                  (5.0)
099      Rose        (( laughs ))
100      Pierre      what's wrong ? (( laughing ))
101      Rose        nothing  (( laughs ))
102      Pierre      you think I think you sound funny ?
```

Following this lapse in the talk, it is Rose's laughter in line 099 which is made the topic of the conversation. In line 100 Pierre attempts to find out what has caused the laughter, as there is seemingly nothing in the immediately preceding talk to have caused amusement. The way he phrases the question may in fact indicate that he is aware of this, as he asks *what's wrong* ? while joining in the laughter. This together with his follow-up question indicates that he is trying to establish a relevant link with what has gone before, thus showing awareness of the need for coherence in the talk.

While the laughter in the extract above functioned to generate further talk following a pause, there were other cases where laughter itself was one of the signs which indicated that a topic was in the process of being closed down, where it functioned, in a sense, as a final comment on a topic. Laughter, of course, has many functions in talk. "Laughter can do such conversational work as displaying involvement and interest" (Glenn 2003:264). Stewart (1997:7) identified, amongst others, a meta-linguistic function, where "Laughter helps with the management of conversation serving as a turn-taking cue or a topic-ending indicator." The evaluative function of laughter can serve, for example, to express an attitude to what has been said, and to display "like-mindedness among speakers." (ibid:5). A couple of extracts will show how both of these functions were present at points where topics were closed down.

The first one comes from the beginning of Modern art, and the relevant lines are repeated here from section 4.2.2.

Modern art 4 [2]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

```
007   Sara   I just I think it's enough if we just make one one side
008   Ann    (xxx)
009          (both laughing)
010   Sara   ok eh I don't know (..) what what we can talk about (..) it's quite
```

The shared laughter here could indicate agreement about the duration of the recordings, but without access to Ann's utterance in line 008, no definite analysis is possible.

The second example comes from The Tabloid, where Laura and Claire are looking at another celebrity photo in the newspaper.

The tabloid 4 [2]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

013   Claire   Oh he's horrible isn't he ? He's actually horrible
014   Laura   ((laughs))   (4.0) What does this say (..) there ?
015   Claire   She's going running (..) in Notting Hill

Laura's laughter in line 014 can be seen here as showing appreciation of Claire's comment on Rod Stewart, and possibly functioning as a substitute for an expressed agreement (or disagreement). It is followed by a pause, after which Laura takes the initiative to introduce a new topic, which will be discussed further in section 4.4.2.3.

Although there were other similar examples in the data where laughter was implicated in topic changing sequences, one more example will suffice to illustrate this form of topic closure.

This is part of a longer sequence which contains a number of topic changes in fairly quick succession, and which will serve as the lead-in to a discussion about some of the procedures used for the initiation, as opposed to closure, in topic changes.

Universities 4 [3]   Pierre (NNS)   Rose (NS)

020   Pierre   yeah I liked it
                     (3.0)
021 → Pierre   why're you laughing ? Because we're =
022   Rose   (laughs)
023   Pierre   = recording this conversation ?
024   Rose   how long's it have to be ?
025   Pierre   it doesn't have to be anything really it's just (1.0) I mean
026   between five and ten minutes so::eh (..)

027	Rose	are you going to play it back to me ?
028	Pierre	I won't play it back to you =
029	Rose	= I don't want to hear it I hate hearing my voice on tape
030	Pierre	uh (1.0)
031 →	Rose	I think you can do most of this (xxx·xxx) address ?
032	Pierre	yeah (xxx xxx)
033	Rose	uh hu
034→	Pierre	do you want to go for a a coffee later ?

Pierre's comment in line 020 refers to a university he visited and which, in response to a question from Rose, he confirms that he liked. There is then a brief pause, and at this point Rose's laughter, although not audible on the tape, triggers the change in topic. Pierre asks not one, but two questions, the first referring to the cause of the laughter and the second to a guess about the possible reason for it. Rose in line 024 does not give a direct answer to the questions, but instead asks another question about the duration of the recording, which could indicate that she is not entirely comfortable with it, and that her laughter is indeed related to the recording. Pierre starts his reply in line 025 with a re-formulation of Rose's question, and then goes on to produce a more specific reply. His use of the word 'just' may be intended to reassure her that it will be short, and, according to Raymond (2004:190), a turn-final stand-alone 'so' is "produced to project an unstated upshot [and are produced] in a position that anticipates a response from their recipient." He specifically points out (ibid:189) that the person who produces it will not go on to produce the upshot, leaving instead the recipient to effectively draw their own conclusions and to provide a response. Pierre in this sequence shows quite sophisticated use of both language and interactional management skills. Rose's response in line 027, in fact, does not acknowledge or reply directly to the information about the duration of the recording, but instead she asks another question related to a different concern about it, namely whether she will be expected to listen to it. Pierre reassures her in line 028 that he will not play it back to her. He uses a repetition of Rose's question to do this, an echo answer, thus providing more emphatic confirmation, and in this case reassurance. Such echo answers, according to Svennevig (2003:291), frequently occur as preferred answers after yes/no questions, and display "speaker alignment or agreement with the previous speaker." So as well as

facilitating language processing, this type of repetition has an important communicative function in helping to establish, or in this case possibly to *maintain* rapport. Garrod and Pickering (2004: 10) liken this process of what they call 'interactive alignment' to the way in which conversationalists will often align their postures with others, and claim that repetition of language structures or lexis will have the same function of signalling that they share common ground or are in fundamental agreement.

Rose's latched remark in line 029 provides a justification for asking the question in line 027 about having to listen to the recording. This receives no more than a brief acknowledgement from Pierre. Following this acknowledgement and the very brief pause Rose changes the topic back to an item on the application form which Pierre is in the process of completing, by asking Pierre to confirm he knows how to fill in a section. He confirms this, and Rose acknowledges his reply. We then get another topic change from Pierre in line 032, this time asking Rose if she would like to go for a coffee later, in other words when they have finished the recording and maybe the application form.

While this last topic change is seemingly disjunctive with what went before, it may well tie in with earlier talk in lines 020 to 029 about doing the recording, and may therefore serve an interactional purpose of 'sweetening the pill', of promising something pleasant in return for putting her through the recording. These two themes of the application form and the recording of the talk are resorted to recurrently throughout the conversation, and therefore constitute useful topical resources in a conversation where one of the interlocutors is a somewhat reluctant participant. This fact may help to explain the comparative frequency of non-coherent topic changes, and the consequent appearance of what looks like the "question-answer sequences" referred to by Long (1983:133) as typical of NS-NNS conversation. These were, however, the exception rather than the rule in the conversations in the current study, and related to the nature of the conversation rather than to the linguistic skills of the NNS participant.

Downing (2000:2) draws attention to the two main strategies which speakers can employ to introduce a new topic: "they either inform, by means of an informing statement, or they enquire, by asking a question." Questions were by far the most common method of initiating a new topic in non-coherent topic changes, with 18 out of the 29 topic initiations performed by way of questions. They were employed equally by NSs and NNSs, 9 of them by the NSs and 9 by the NNSs. With respect to topic changes, at least, this would indicate that these were symmetrical conversations, with equal rights of participation and topic control equally shared by the participants (Itakura 2000).

In the next section we will take a closer look at some of the questions used in topic changes, and how these were marked linguistically.

4.4.2.2   *So* and *So what....?*

The discourse marker *so* featured prominently in many of the non-coherent topic changes. Fung and Carter (2007:413) comment that *so* exemplifies the multifunctionality of discourse markers, and also "their use as a flexible interactional resource in summarizing, marking boundaries of talk, switching topic, establishing consequences, etc." They draw particular attention to the structural function, which is to

> provide information about the ways in which
> successive units of talk are linked to each other and
> how a sequence of verbal activities, the opening,
> closing, transition, and continuation of topics, are
> organized and managed.
> (ibid:420).

They also note that *so* was one of the discourse markers which in, their Chinese learner corpus, was less frequently used by the learners than by native speakers. In the current study it was employed in equal measure by NSs and NNSs during topic changes at least. Thus Jana, as seen in section 4.3, signalled the topic change and the upcoming termination of the conversation with a *so.*

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Education 4 [2]

428→ Jana   yeah so I have to go now I've got a lecture eh

Schriffrin (1987:218) points to the role of *so* as a turn-transition device, and shows how it can be used to allocate "interactional responsibility to the hearer" (ibid:256). We saw, for example, in section 4.4.1 how Fay used *So* to invite Will to initiate a new topic, and how he offered 'the weather' as a potential topic. The extract is repeated below.

Newspapers 4 [6]

484→ Will   the comic strip but it's very ( ) nasty (xxx xxx) ( ) but anyway
485   that's magazines and newspapers covered
486→ Fay   so
487   (....)   .
488→ Will   the weather ?

In the next extract from 'Education' an episode of teasing has come to an end, and Dave's *so* in line 268 could be both a means of summarizing or finalising this episode and of inviting Jana to take the floor and to introduce another matter to talk about. She does this by producing first an acknowledgement token, and then asking a personal question. She therefore shows that she understands the interactional function of the discourse marker, and responds appropriately to the challenge of taking responsibility for introducing a new topic.

Education 4 [3]   Jana (NNS)   Dave (NS)

265   Dave   you're too lazy anyway and you're a Siebkopf
267   Jana   uhm yes I am
268   Dave →   so (...)
269   Jana →   yeah do you have any brothers and sisters ?
270   Dave   two brothers
271   Jana   younger than you ?

Where *so* is combined with a question to initiate a new topic it then becomes a way of linguistically marking such a change, of explicitly indicating to the hearer that a new topic is being proposed. Below is an example from 'Cheesy beans'.

Cheesy beans 4 [3]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)

```
011   Bella   whaa:: it's awful
012   Max     no it tastes good though
013   Bella   it tastes good ?
014   Max     yes do you want to try it ?
015→  Bella   no I don't want to try (laughs) (...) so what
016           (..) what did you do last night ?
017   Max     last night I went to Pounded and got pounded
```

In line 011 Bella's expresses her opinion about the look of Max's meal of baked beans with cheese on top. Max defends the taste, while Bella in return repeats his statement with questioning intonation. This repetition clearly functions to seek confirmation, but may also contain an element of assessment, as in *Are you serious ?* – expressing surprise or disbelief that something that looks so awful can taste good.

Max in line 014 confirms that it tastes good, and by suggesting she tries it, effectively responds to the implied disbelief. Bella laughs and declines, again using a repetition of Max's phrase. This would seem to be an example of what Svennevig (2003) calls an 'echo answer', an expanded response "that contains elements of the question". Where such an expanded response is employed, he argues that "the repetition marks a strengthened affective commitment by the speaker." (ibid:286).

This summarising repetition and laughter are potential signals that the topic may be coming to a close, and these are followed by a third signal, namely the brief pause just before Bella's change of topic. She starts her topic initiation with the discourse marker *So* as a way of signalling a new stage in the talk. According to Bolden (2006:670), "'So' often prefaces utterances that function as proffers of various addressee-centred topics". It is, then, an example of a discursive practice which signals "other-attentiveness", as Bolden calls it (ibid:662), in other words an interest in the conversational partner. She goes on to say that "Ways in which interlocutors inquire into the lives of their conversational partners or tell about their own lives are crucial to

the everyday construction of their relationship." (ibid:682). Bella's topic changing strategy is therefore quite a skilful one, in so far as it attends to both technical and interpersonal elements of topic management, and succeeds in engaging her partner in further talk.

A similar *So what* combination is used by Pierre in the next extract. The topic change in line 034 follows the completion of an adjacency pair, and Pierre's *So what..?* proposes a new topic.

Universities 4 [4]   Pierre (NNS)   Rose (NS)

032	Pierre	do you want to go for a a coffee later ?
033	Rose	uh hu (...) uh hu
034→	Pierre	so what what does your mum (..) think about the applications ?
035	Rose	yeah she I mean she liked Exeter but she thinks I should apply to Nottingham as well now
037	Pierre	why ?

Like Bella he shows skill at explicitly signalling the change, and at ensuring attentiveness to his partner by proposing a topic which is likely to be of concern to her. This is particularly pertinent here, as Rose is a rather reluctant participant in the conversation.

According to Planalp and Tracy (1980:244) speakers may *cue* the listener in various ways about the context of upcoming information in topic changes in order to save the listener from "the effort in searching for an appropriate context." *So* is obviously one such clue, but there were instances where additional information was provided prior to a topic-proposing question. Two such examples can be seen in the following extract.

Education 4 [4]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

390	Dave	so you know my parents always used to say : Dave the
391		harder you work the better you'll [do in life
392	Jana	[(laughs)
393	Dave	and I eh never really listened to them ha (...) yeah
394	Jana	yeah that's a shame.
395	Dave →	so eh listen Christmas is coming up what're you going
396		to buy me for my present ?

397	Jana	nothing why should I buy you something ?
398	Dave	'cause I've helped you write this tape well not write it but
399		(...) come on you have to eh (..)
400	Jana	no I just say thank you instead that's it.
401	Dave	ok (...) hey no I know what you're going to do hey no I tell
402		you what you can take me out to lunch just a simple you
403		know three pound Macdonald's we can go to lunch
404	Jana	ok for three pounds ok three pounds is nothing much.
405	Dave →	ok (...) so since you've been in England do you think your
406		English has improved ?
407	Jana	ehm yeah
408	Dave	you[do ?
409	Jana	[(xxx xxx)
410	Dave	I mean how long have you been here ?
411	Jana	ten weeks

Following Jana's teasing assessment in line 394 about Dave not listening to the advice of his parents, Dave signals a change in topic, starting with *So*. This change is made additionally explicit by the exhortation *listen*, and then the context is introduced: *Christmas is coming up*. Once the context has been established, he asks a question related to this event, thus proposing a new topic. Once they have agreed on a meal, with Dave's *Ok* in line 405 presumably accepting the proposal, he again uses *So* to initiate another change in topic, and the question is one which shows attention to his conversational partner and an interest in her experience of living in England.

A similar example of contextualisation before asking a question comes from 'Cheesy beans', though here the initiation was not immediately successful.

Cheesy beans 4 [4]   Bella (NNS)   Max (NS)

028	Max	'cause in the Guild they play music that's just too cheesy for
029		most people
030	Bella	Yeah it's true
031	Max	so in order for people to enjoy themselves they've got to get
032		very drunk
033→	Bella	(laughs) yeah (xxx xxx) so yesterday eh
034	Max	I don't think people get that pissed when they go out on Broad
035		Street
036	Bella	You sure ?
037	Max	I'm pretty sure because for one the drinks are much more
038		expensive
039	Bella	Yeah (..) so they just buy drinks before

```
040  Max    Uh
041→ Bella   Uh (..) Uhm eh yesterday I brought my friend ( xx ) too he's
042          [French
043  Max    [ yeah
044  Bella   and he he liked the party [obviously
045  Max                              [ uh
046  Bella   but now he's tired and (.. ) so eh he's asking me that we
047          should not be going out tonight. What do you think ? (...)
```

The discussion here is centred on the drinking habits of English students, and Max jokingly suggests that students have to drink in order to tolerate the type of music played in the Students' Guild. In line 033 Bella laughs and expresses agreement. Her additional comment was not audible, but she then attempts to initiate a new topic in line 033, beginning with *so yesterday.* Her hesitation allows Max to take the floor again, and he continues to talk about drinking. Bella responds appropriately to his comments, and when the topic slows down as evidenced by minimal responses by both parties in lines 040 and 041, Bella·re-introduces the topic initiation which she started earlier, this time by repeating the word *yesterday.* The information about her French friend provides a context for the question in line 047, which asks for Max's·opinion. Bella, then, shows her topic management skills on several levels; she uses the discourse marker appropriately to signal a change of topic; she supplies relevant contextual information in preparation for asking a question, and she does not drop the topic in spite of an initially unsuccessful attempt at introducing it.

Planalp and Tracy (1980:256) suggest that

> The most competent types of topic change are those where the context is most salient to the listener, either because the attention is focused there, or because the context is explicitly cued.

In this section we have seen that the NNSs can competently both initiate and respond to topic changes, making fairly skilful use of both the discourse marker *so* and of questions which engage their partners in continued talk.

In the next two sections we will discuss two other types of non-coherent topic changes, which depend on context for creating understanding of their appearance in the talk, but which are not necessarily or explicitly signalled as topic changes.

4.4.2.3   Re-initiated and globally coherent topic changes

The classification outlined in chapter 3 included a category of topic shifts which showed no local connection at all to the talk or topics in progress, but which contributed a sense of global coherence by being connected to earlier talk or to the activities which participants were engaged in while they were conducting the conversations.

Where other activities are taking place concurrent with the talk, we get what Carter and McCarthy (1997:58) call 'language-in-action conversations' "where people do not need to mention directly things which are obvious and right in front of them at that moment." Instead we see greater use of referents like *this, that, there*, which help to establish the context. Furthermore, it is to some extent the activity which structures the conversation, and which provides a resource which participants can draw on to keep the talk moving, and there are, as already indicated, several instances of new topics emerging out of the activity.

We have already seen an example of this in the extract 4 [3] from Universities, (reproduced below) where in line 029 Rose returns to the topic of the university application form, and although there is no immediate, local connection between this and the previous topic, there is still a global, conversational link, in so far as this topic is one which runs like a thread through the whole conversation, and references to it are frequent. It is, therefore, a re-initiation of a previous topic.

Universities 4 [3]   Pierre (NNS)   Rose (NS)

028   Pierre   uh (˙1.0)
029 → Rose   I think you can do most of this (xxx xxx) address ?

```
030    Pierre    yeah (xxx xxx)
031    Rose      uh hu
```

A similar strategy for introducing new topics can be seen in both 'Cheesy beans' and 'The tabloid', where the setting and the activities provide a topical resource to draw on at various stages in the talk. In 'Cheesy beans' it is primarily the NNS who employs this resource on a number of occasions.

Cheesy beans 4 [5]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)

```
119→ Bella   Ah so at 3 you're cutting (xxx) your hair (xxx xxx) Is it good
120          your beans ?
121   Max    Uh (...)
122   Bella  I don't want to try
123   Max    They're mature but the Cheddar cheese isn't very mature
```

Immediately after a comment which summarises the previous topic, Bella re-introduces a focus on Max's lunch, asking if it is good. Having summarised previous talk, it then becomes legitimate to introduce a new and unrelated topic. Although there is no immediate connection with the topic of Max's haircut, there is a clear link to the on-going activity of eating the lunch, which has been discussed before, and it is therefore a re-initiation.

In 'The tabloid' it is the newspapers or magazines which provide the resource for the introduction of entirely new topics; they are not, in other words, re-initiations, but by virtue of the activity provide global coherence. Both the NS and the NNS make use of this resource, as can be seen in the following extracts.

The tabloid 4 [4]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

```
013   Claire   oh he's horrible isn't he ? He's actually horrible
014→ Laura    (laughs) ( 4.0 ) what does this say  (..) there ?
015   Claire   she's going running ( ..) in Notting Hill
```

In line 013 Claire sums up her opinion of Rod Stewart, and Laura laughs in response. There follows a 4 second pause, and then Laura changes the topic

by asking a question relating to another item in the newspaper, thus taking responsibility for initiating further talk and for keeping the conversation going.

In the next extract it is Claire who uses a similar strategy to introduce a new topic by expressing her opinion on something she sees in the paper. Laura's response to this is not audible, but she may have queried which item Claire was referring to, as Claire specifies *that bloke there* in line 152. Laura follows this up with an acknowledgement token, and Claire repeats the number and adds a further comment. In line 157 we see the first indication that Laura accepts this as a topic, and her comment about it being unhealthy and disgusting shows that she aligns with Claire's opinion in the initial initiation in line 150.

The tabloid 4 [4]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

149	Laura	yeah
150→	Claire	oh God that is horrible (coughs) (….)
151	Laura	(xxx)
152	Claire	that bloke there (….) (sniffs) <u>three hundred and</u>
153		<u>fifty</u> body piercings
154	Laura	uhu
155	Claire	three hundred and fifty must have got like a hundred on
156		his face
157	Laura	it must be so unhealthy and so so disgusting

Later on in the same conversation there is yet another instance of the newspaper being used as a resource in the conversation. This follows the closure of the previous topic about pizzas, with Claire's summarising statement in line 388 that the one she had eaten was '*well tasty*'.

The tabloid 4 [5]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

388	Claire	yeah hehe it was well tasty
389		(…)
390	→Laura	what is that one doing ?
391		(…)
392	Claire	he's tackling a wasp nest
393	Laura	wasp nest ?
395	Claire	yeah fucking hell look at them all
397	Laura	uh
398		(…)

```
        Claire sniffs
399             (7.0)
400   Claire     I'd want a bit more protection it doesn't look like
401             he's wearing that much to me I want full on kind
402             of a box around me
403   Laura      (laughs)
404   Claire     if I was going near wasps like that (smiling voice)
405   Laura      (laughs) well he's wearing quite a lot on the his
406             hands I know he has gloves on them
407   Claire     yeah that's ok (...)
408   Laura      a father of one of my friends in Slovakia was a eh
409             what's it called the bee sting so he was he has
410             been stung ?
```

Laura's question in line 390 about *that one* obviously refers to a photo in the paper, and Claire's answer describes what the person in the picture is doing. It is not clear whether Laura's follow-up to the answer is a request for clarification or confirmation, but Claire's yeah in line 395 treats it as a request for confirmation. She then provides a frank assessment which is very briefly acknowledged by Laura. There is then a significantly long pause, which more often that not would signal that this topic is not going anywhere. Unusually, though, Claire pursues the same topic in line 400 by expressing her opinion on the dangers involved in going near wasps without a great deal of protection. Laura laughs at her comments, and a smile can be heard in Claire's voice when she continues in line 404, indicating that they are share similar perceptions of the event. Laura points out that he is at least wearing gloves, and this is her first substantial comment on the topic, an indication that she is now collaborating in establishing this topic. Claire concedes the point and in line 409 Laura starts the beginning of an anecdote. Before she can get this fully launched, she conducts a word search relating to the appropriate past tense version of sting. How this impacts on the topic will be discussed in chapter 6, but the main point here is that she shows an ability to develop a surface, 'setting talk' topic into a more substantial one.

One difference between the three examples of topic change in this conversation is that while Claire expresses her opinion of a newspaper item, Laura uses questions to ask Claire to explain or clarify. It is not possible to

say why this is the case, but the outcome is that the topics are in all cases taken up and developed, and Laura takes an active part in the process.

4.4.2.4 Disjunctive topic changes

This type of topic change falls at the extreme end of the scale of non-coherence, as the new topic which is introduced is not only entirely disconnected from any topic in the previous talk, either immediately previous utterances or earlier in the conversation, but there is also a complete lack of boundary makers, such as pauses or other signs that the previous topic has been closed.

A further distinguishing feature of this type of change, as found in this study, is that it is the current speaker who initiates the change of topic. No speaker change is involved, but the topic is changed within the current speaker's turn. In one sense all topic changes (and transitions) are collaborative, as a topic initiation will not get off the ground unless the recipient shows signs of finding it acceptable or interesting. As West and Garcia (1988:552) point out "...shift work is largely a collaborative accomplishment – the result of speakers' joint activity or inactivity."

In their study of such shift work, which focused on topic changes in male-female conversations, they did, however, find evidence that some changes were unilateral (and most frequently employed by males). Ainsworth-Vaughn (1992) in her study of topic transitions in patient-physician interviews links unilateral transitions to issues of power and control, saying that "...unilateral topic transitions are assumed to allocate power to the speaker " (ibid:409). Both West and Garcia and Ainsworth-Vaughn class such unilateral changes as sudden, disjunctive topic changes which have no connection with previous talk, and which also failed to acknowledge, or even interrupted, contributions by the current speaker. The unilateral changes which are described in the following extracts differ in that they are initiated by the current speaker.

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There were only three instances of such disjunctive, unilateral topic changes in the conversations, two of them performed by NSs, and one by a NNS, Laura, which can be seen in the extract below.

The tabloid 4 [6]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

341	Laura	and on Saturdays it's till mid- midday and then it's (..)
342		oh but not in <u>Germany</u> they don't don't open on
345		Sundays in Slovakia the big the big market stores=
346	Claire	=yeah=
347 →	Laura	=are open on Sundays You are starving and you are
348		(xxx xxx) only <u>half</u> of it
349	Claire	yeah but I've gone past you know when you haven't=
350	Laura	=uh

Here Laura and Claire have been comparing opening hours of shops and clubs in their respective countries, when, in line 347, Laura's attention is seemingly diverted by something happening in the immediate environment. Audio-recordings, unfortunately, do not reveal the physical actions, gestures or facial expressions which can say as much as language in a conversation, and it is therefore not possible to guess what may have caused this switch in attention from the opening hours of shops to Claire's half-eaten pizza. It is possible that Claire had at some point earlier in their talk referred to 'being starving', maybe while the tape recorder was switched off. Laura's remark is other-oriented, showing concern for and interest in her conversational partner, and of relevance to the person it is directed at. Although Laura's topic initiation is framed as a statement, it contains an implied question, and so requires a response.

Claire's *yeah* and subsequent explanation in line 349 signal her acceptance of the remark as an appropriate one at this point in the talk, and in fact the talk soon moves on to a discussion of pizza preferences. This is in itself an unusual outcome of what is effectively setting talk, as such topics generally, tend to be rather short-lived. Maynard and Zimmerman (1984:304) refer to setting talk as "a 'false topic' in the sense that it is quickly exhausted...". Svennevig (1999:216) states that "setting talk may have a transitional

character in that it is regularly used as an intermediary for entering into other topics." This seems to be in accord with the general discourse pattern which prevails in this conversation, where several extended topics emerge out of talk which refers to on-going activities.

Another example of a unilateral and disjunctive topic change comes from the same conversation, though the analysis of this example proved more difficult.

This time the topic is initiated by the NS, Claire.

The tabloid 4 [7]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

596	Claire	but then do wasp stings actually have a purpose ?
597	Laura	no eh
598	Claire	so (I don't care ?) (laughs)
599	Laura	they <u>have</u> not for us they have for the nature
600	Claire	yeah
601	Laura	for the flowers
602	Claire	ah yeah
603	Laura	not for us (..) everything has its purpose the
604		ugliest and the <u>most</u> unsympathetic (laughingly)
605		animal has its purpose in this world
606	Claire →	it does yeah (sniffs) the daffodils are looking
607		nice now.
608	Laura	(xxx xxx)
609	Claire	did you buy two bunches then ?

The talk here follows a lengthy discussion and exchange of anecdotes about being stung by bees and wasps. Claire's question in line 596 about the purpose of wasp stings draws an initial negative reply and hesitation marker from Laura, which might signify that she has more to say on the topic. Claire's follow-up is not entirely audible, but in line 599 Laura expands on her response, commenting on the role of wasps in nature. Claire responds to this with minimal acknowledgement tokens, and a final emphatic *it does yeah*. Having possibly indicated in line 598 that she does not much care either way, the minimal responses indicate that for her the topic may no longer be of much interest. The sniff is not necessarily significant here; she does have a cold and sniffs throughout, but she makes a sudden topic initiation in the

same turn, by turning her attention to something in the immediate environment, a bunch of daffodils.

This shift in direction of the talk was initially classed as a topic transition on the basis of the propositional and lexical link with the word *flowers* used by Laura in line 601, and therefore could conceivably be seen as an

> ... example of a topic shift through what Sacks calls "co-class membership; that is, to accomplish, for example, a shift in topical talk from cigarettes to cigars by virtue of their co-membership of the class' things people smoke'. (Sacks, April 17,1969 in Maynard 1980:271).

However, the lexical link here seems too tenuous, too far removed to merit it being a transition. The main topic is still *wasps* rather than *flowers*, though of course there is a close association between the two. Therefore, and on the basis that it is part of the current speaker's flow of talk, and that it shifted the topic completely away from wasps, it was classed as a disjunctive and unilateral topic change.

Laura's response to the sudden change was inaudible, but appears to have indicated sufficient interest for Claire to continue with this topic by posing a question about the purchase of the flowers. This subsequently leads to Laura telling an anecdote about the purchase. In spite of the abruptness of the change in topic, the NNS here appears able to respond spontaneously and appropriately.

This example shows how difficult it can be to establish a clear-cut classification, and how the researcher at times has to rely on informed judgement.

The other example in the data where there was a totally disjunctive topic change in the sense that there was seemingly nothing to signal its coming was in the closing extract below from 'Newspapers' which was discussed in Section 4.4, and repeated here.

Newspapers 4 [7]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

808	Will	so I think she's well well over thirty hours (xxx xxx) thirty-eight
809		hours is your full-time so I think she's ( ) probably at at the
810	→	full-time hours I'm sure (xxx xxx) Are we running out of tape ?
811	Fay	no it's=
812	Will	=I hope she finds this interesting
813	Fay	yeah well I just ( ) hope it'll work good

Tape recorder is switched off.

This comes towards the end of the conversation, when talk has been about the long hours worked by Will's friend, and he suddenly switches topic and asks *Are we running out of tape ?* This might have been in response to a gesture or look by Fay, or indeed for a desire for the tape to come to an end. There may be some support for this interpretation, as Fay's response which starts with a *no*, is interrupted by Will's comment on the possible interest to the researcher. In return Fay expresses her hope that the tape will *work good*, and at this point the tape recorder is switched off.

What is remarkable about this type of sudden change of direction is that they do not appear to cause any difficulties for the conversation partners, either Ns or NNS, as in all three instances the topic is taken up and immediately responded to, and at least in the first two, developed into fully independent, new topics. As these topic initiations are in all cases related to the situations or settings which the participants share, appropriate responses are easy to provide; there is no need to explicitly signal a change, because the context will provide for understanding. Both the physical presence of the items referred to, and quite likely also body language like eye gaze and pointing, would help to draw attention to the new topic. All other instances of non-coherent topic change relating to setting talk contain at least minor indications that there is an opportunity for introducing new matters into the talk, or provide some indication or justification for such a change, and besides they were mainly instances where the topic change occurred as a result of speaker change.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has drawn attention to some of the discourse strategies involved in managing the closure, introduction, and establishment of new topics in the conversations. Given that the data base is fairly small, and that the NNS participants come from a range of different language backgrounds, no generalisable conclusions can be drawn about their topic management skills. There were no discernible patterns or differences with regard to either NS or NNS frequency or strategies for initiating disjunctive or non-coherent topic changes.

What was noteworthy, though, was the fact that there were comparatively few topic changes overall in the conversations, and that there was no evidence to suggest that NNSs resort to either abrupt or frequent topic changes. Moreover, they showed themselves able to participate equally and effectively in the management of topic changes.

The next chapter will examine how topics in the conversations were changed in a more subtle and more complex fashion by means of topic transitions, and how the NNSs contributed to these.

Chapter 5

Topic transitions

5.1   Introduction

While topic changes, as we saw in Chapter 4, introduce new and unrelated matters into the conversation, topic transitions retain some connection with on-going talk and are in this sense always coherent. The topic transition procedure commonly involves the incorporation of a response or comment relating to a previous utterance, while also effecting a shift in focus. What we will be looking at here are not just isolated utterances which may contain a 'trigger' for a transition, but equally longer sequences where both parties contribute to jointly establishing a new topic for the conversation. How the NNSs managed such topic transitions and thus contributed to coherent conversations will be the focus of this chapter.

We will examine how the NNSs achieve coherence in the topic transitions which they initiate, in other words which strategies or procedures they employed, and whether their initiations were effective in enabling the proposed topic to be understood, taken up and developed.

Before moving on to look at extracts from the conversations, the key feature of topic transitions, namely their connection or 'fit' with preceding talk, will be discussed briefly in order to illustrate the approach taken to the analysis of the data. There are of course innumerable ways in which this 'fit' can be realized. Crow (1983:153), for example, suggests that performing a coherent topic transition can involve eliciting information, recounting a past event, or predicting a future state, while Holt and Drew (2005) discuss the pivotal role of figurative expressions in topic transitions. A wide range of procedures for initiating new topics were found in the data, for example, using lexical repetition of one or more elements of the previous speaker's utterance, or picking up on the information content of a previous utterance, but taking it in

a different direction. This may involve moving talk from encyclopaedic to personal topics, from general to specific aspects of the topic, focusing on a sub-topic of the overall global topic, if one is present in the talk, or introducing an anecdote. Anecdotes can move talk from the general to the personal, and this is a strategy which occurs on a number of occasions. The interpersonal element therefore plays a strong part in topic transitions, and this can also be seen where such initiations involve a shift from self-to other-oriented talk, and vice versa. Talking about oneself and showing interest in one's conversational partner are fundamental to interactional success or satisfaction, for NNSs as much as anybody else. In intercultural communications this aspect of talk takes on additional importance as the parties to the talk will possibly share less common ground because of their different backgrounds, but they will nonetheless be able to share and exchange personal experiences. While the relative status of the participants as native and non-native speakers became relevant at various points in the talk, it was not a feature which predominated, (nor was it necessarily an issue which was more evident in connection with problems in talk). As Ikeda found in her research (2005:63), it was instead the case that this status was treated as relevant at particular points in the interactions, and in the present study it was employed on occasion as a resource for effecting topic transitions.

It is the nature of the coherence relations which has provided the organising principle for the presentation of the topic initiations performed in the conversations. This approach ties in with the view of 'topic' outlined in Chapter 2, namely that it operates on several levels in informal conversations, relating to structural organisation, to topic content as well as to communicative purposes. Analysis of the topic transitions found in the data led to a classification along similar lines. The strategies have been loosely classed under the categories of structural/linguistic, propositional and interpersonal, though with the caveat that the topic transitions are more often than not very complex mixtures of several elements from two or all of these categories. These categories merely provide a convenient method of presenting the analyses of the extracts. The categories have obvious parallels with the communicative metafunctions of textual, ideational and interpersonal levels,

all of which, according to Bloor and Bloor (1995:9) "operate simultaneously in the expression of meaning." Redeker (2000:246), in her discussion of coherence relations, makes the point that usually one component may be more salient than others in an utterance, and it is on this basis that the extracts have been selected.

The structural-linguistic category relates to surface features and will include strategies of using statements or questions to effect a topic transition, as well as the use of referential and lexical links.

Propositional strategies rely on making associations between the themes or ideas which participants are talking about. Such associative focus shifts can be expressed or manifested by means of a move from talk about a general matter to a more specific element of the same topic, or the transition may shift to a sub-topic, i.e. another, but distinctly different aspect of the same topic. This category also includes anecdotes as they are usually linked by association with themes which are currently under discussion. A special strategy in this category is that of contextualised topic transitions where the associative (or indeed lexical) link is not immediately apparent, but becomes evident only after several turns by both the initiating speaker and the co-participant.

The final category relates to interpersonal strategies, which includes moves from talk about general matters to personal experiences of the same topic or events; making comparisons at a personal level, and lastly instances where aspects of cultural differences feature in the topic transition.

The extracts have been chosen as representative of the range of strategies or procedures which were employed by both NSs and NNSs in the conversations to bring about topic transitions, and because of the complexities mentioned above, each analysis will pay attention to how a transition functions at other levels, and not just the category under which it is presented.

Section 5.2 will present an overview of topic transitions in the conversations, while the remaining sections will present examples of specific types of transitions. Section 5.3 will deal with structural/linguistic strategies, section 5.4 with transitions involving propositional links, while section 5.5 will examine interpersonal strategies. Section 5.6 discusses a small number of problematic topic transitions, before the chapter finishes with a summary of the findings.

5.2   Number and distribution of topic transitions

A true comparison across conversations is not feasible due to the differences in duration, but all the conversations, with the exception of 'Universities', featured more topic transitions than topic changes. This is most likely the norm for most conversations. Crow (1983:151) noted that in the informal conversations of his study "nearly 60 % of the observed shifts were coded as coherent shifts". Svennevig (1999:213) also found that the majority of topic shifts in his data were accomplished by means of coherent topic transitions rather than non-coherent topic changes, and he concludes that "...the participants, in introducing new topics, most often use the contextual resources already deployed in the conversation up to that point."

Table 2 below shows the relative distribution of topic initiations across the conversations. (The Lord of the Rings conversation has not been included due to its brevity and special nature).

Table 2 – Number and Distribution of Topic Transitions			
	NNS	NS	Total
Hot Curry	6	5	11
Universities	2	4	6
Cheesy Beans	8	2	10
Football	5	5	10
Computers	7	0	7
The Tabloid	21	16	37
Newspapers	12	8	20
Modern Art	13	17	30
Education	8	9	17
Total	**89**	**74**	**164**

Table 2   Number and Distribution of Topic Transitions

These results appear to show that in contrast to much previous research into topic management by NNSs, these NNSs do not rely on abrupt or incoherent discourse procedures to organise topical development, but instead are able to employ a range of strategies to effect smooth transitions from one topic to another.

The different natures and individual styles of the conversations make it difficult to make any sort of reliable comparison in the quantity of initiations performed by the NSs and NNSs respectively. However, as Table 2 shows, there are in most cases an equal or even greater number of initiations produced by the NNSs. This, then, demonstrates that the NNSs are able not just to participate actively in the talk, but are also capable of taking control of the topic development of the conversations. A similar result, showing "almost equal participation by NSs and NNSs in topic initiation" was found in a study by Schwienhorst (2004:46).

The smooth flow of the conversations was in no small measure due to these effective topic transitions. In addition, they contributed to understanding between the conversational partners throughout the talk, as coherent transitions are evidence of participants' mutual understanding. They are, as

Maynard (1980:263) states, part of "the *procedures* conversationalists utilize to display understanding and to achieve one turn's proper fit with a prior." Topic transitions therefore are part of the process of achieving understanding in talk. .

Because of the amount of overlap between procedures it was not possible to determine any overall predominance of one type of procedure over another, and there did not appear to be any noticeable differences or preferences between NSs and NNSs in their choice or use of topic transition strategies. As was the case with topic changes, there were differences between individual conversations, and a tendency in one conversation, 'Cheesy beans', to rely on a limited number of strategies, such as repetition.

The next section will describe some of the specific strategies which were employed by the NNSs to effect topic transitions.

5.3　　Structural- linguistic connections

Downing (2000:2) draws attention to the two main strategies which speakers can employ to introduce a new topic: "they either inform, by means of an informing statement, or they enquire, by asking a question." She goes on to describe the basic difference between these two strategies as being an interpersonal one: "by informing, the speaker assigns him/herself the role of topic supplier, or controller of topic, whereas by questioning or more exactly by eliciting a topic this role is offered to an interlocutor in the discourse." This, though, would seem to simplify the picture somewhat, as it is far from certain that a topic which is offered via a statement will necessarily be taken up by the conversational partner, and, while a question may offer the floor and the next turn to a partner, the content of the topic will have been decided by the speaker. The issue of topic control is not straightforward, and the common notion that NSs ask more questions and therefore control the topics would seem to be overstated.

5. 3. 1   Questions

Questions are claimed to play a major part in topic management in NS-NNS conversations, being supposedly used more frequently to initiate topics by both NSs and NNSs (Long 1983), but we have already seen in Chapter 4 that they were not prominent in topic changes, and were not used inappropriately or frequently. This section will examine their occurrence and functions in topic transitions. Their role in negotiation sequences, which also involve topic transitions, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

As was the case with topic changes, there were variations between individual conversations. In two of the conversations, 'Modern art' and 'Hot curry', questions were only used once in each conversation to effect topic transitions, while in 'Education' and 'Football' questions used as topic-initiators were noticeably more frequent. This is conceivably because the participants in these two conversations did not know each other very well. The nature of many of the questions they ask each other, eliciting basic personal information, would seem to confirm this supposition. Both Maynard (1980) and Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) found question-answer pairs to be a frequent pattern in talk between unacquainted conversationalists. It is not, therefore, necessarily the NNS status of one of the participants that contributes to this particular pattern. This might go some way to explaining the results of other research into NS-NNS conversations, which has tended to be based on experimental conditions where the conversationalists were not known to each other, and where therefore questions were a common feature of topic management.

Two examples of questions used to effect transitions can be seen in the extract below. It comes from near the beginning of the 'Football' conversation (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.2), where Claude and Ben had already established that neither of them was particularly interested in football.

Football 5 [1]   Claude (NNS)   Ben (NS)

004   Claude →   (xxx xxx) not like football so but you know George my

005		friend eh is a bit he's a great fan (xxx) everything about
006		football so he's a (...) trying to have eh to watch all the
007		matches so I know a bit more about football now but (xx)
008	→	(sounds really good ?) You know they're going to show
009		eh England versus Sweden on Victoria Square ? Are
010		you gonna [xxx
011	Ben	[no I didn't know that I might go and watch
012		that 'cause it'll be quite good It's always good to go for
013		the (..) atmosphere as well
014	Claude	yeah you don't really have this in France eh well we
015		have the café but that seems a bit different
016	Ben →	uhm do most French people go to (..) follow their
017		country not eh other countries 'cause in England most
018		people support (..) England but (..) they don't go to watch
019		other matches it's only 'cause our country is playing (..)

In lines 004-005 Claude contrasts his own disinterest in the sport with his friend's enthusiasm for it. He links the fact that this has provided him with more knowledge about football to what he knows is happening currently and locally, namely an outdoor, public showing of one of the World Cup matches. He then in lines 008 and 009 changes his orientation from talk about himself and his friend to Ben by eliciting personal information. Ben provides an extended response, thus showing his acceptance of the topic. Claude's reference to *this* in line 014 is not entirely clear but presumably relates to publicly televised shows of football matches. He draws attention to the contrast here between the UK and France, and so uses his non-nativeness as a resource for furthering the talk. Ben produces a brief acknowledgement token in line 016 and then proceeds to ask a question about French football fans, no doubt occasioned by Claude's mention of France. This question similarly appeals to the knowledge of his conversational partner and draws out further information.

In these two instances we see questions employed to generate shifts in focus within the same overall topic of football, and furthermore shifts which are occasioned by the interactional goals of the conversation, to establish common ground, or to find out how much common ground there is between them, by eliciting and providing information to increase familiarity. These questions would seem to differ from mere expansions or developments by

virtue of their attention to a different aspect of the topic and/ or to changes in orientation.

Svennevig (1999:242) points to the role which encyclopaedic topics play in establishing not just initial acquaintance, but also greater familiarity and alignment. These types of topics do so by allowing participants to establish areas of common interest, and to display their respective attitudes to the topics they are talking about. The process of establishing common ground enables participants in conversations to move towards greater affiliation and alignment. In other words, the topic content or type of a particular initiation may be encyclopaedic, but the orientation is more often than not personal, or other-oriented, in so far as it shows interest in the conversational partner, and seeks to explore common ground between them. It was in this context that questions were predominantly employed, and moreover, they frequently functioned to elicit *reciprocal* information.

The conversation between Laura and Claire provides a good example of this type of reciprocal questioning. There is a long sequence in the conversation in which the topic, initiated by Laura, is about films, and they attempt to find out which ones they have both seen and like.

The tabloid 5 [1]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

063→	Claire	it's a bit like eh Toy Story that kind of level Do you like
064		Toy Story ?
065	Laura	I haven't seen Toy Story (laughing)
066	Claire	I've got Shrek Oh no I think Anna might have got it
067→		have you seen Shrek ?
068	Laura	no

In line 063 Claire makes a comparison between two films, and then checks if Laura likes Toy Story. She laughingly replies that she has not seen it. This reminds Claire of yet another film, and she asks if Laura has seen this one. The reply is again negative. The intervening talk before the next extract concerned the borrowing of films from the university library. Laura had suggested they choose and watch one together, and attempted to find out

what sort of films Claire likes, and at the start of the extract below we can see Claire's answer.

The tabloid 5 [2]

```
097   Claire      yeah I don't like eh (...) eh cheesy teeny American
098               sort of (..) I don't know
099   Laura→      have you seen American Pie ?
100   Claire      yeah oh yeah that was really funny I I only saw it recently
101   Claire      like (...) almost everybody my age has watched it ] =
102   Laura                                                      ] uh
103   Claire      = and I only saw it recently but it was really funny ] =
104   Laura                                                      ] uh
105   Claire→     = it was quite good Have you seen Rage yet ?
106   Laura       uh hu
```

In line 097 Claire is trying to articulate what sort of films she does not like watching. Her final *I don't know* in line 098 may signal that she does not have any more to add at this point. Laura's question in line 099 is lexically linked, by repetition of the word *American,* and she reciprocates Claire's previous questions from Extract 5 [1]. It has the effect not only of showing interest in her partner, but also demonstrates that here is a film which Laura is familiar with, in contrast to the ones mentioned by Claire. It is a good example of an NNS taking the initiative in the conversation to help it move forwards, at a point where the uncertain contribution by the NS might have stalled it.

A similar strategy can be observed in the extract below from 'Education'. Dave has been asking Jana about the subjects she studies.

Education 5 [1]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

```
040   Jana        and French
041   Dave →      and French so you speak French as well ?
042   Jana        yes
043   Dave        ah ok ça va ?
044   Jana        oui ça va bien (laughing)
045   Dave        uhm eh I like French it's a nice language nicer than
046               English I think
047   Jana →      do you speak German ?
048   Dave        ehm no=
```

Jana's comment in line 040 refers to the second of the subjects she studies, the first being English. In line 041 Dave repeats her utterance as a link to his next contribution, a confirmation check. Because this question arises out of current talk, it does not take the topic in a new direction, but merely expands on the topic. Jana provides only a one-word answer to this, which does not allow for easy topical development. Dave, however, acknowledges receipt of the information in line 043, and then shows off his own knowledge of the French language with a formulaic question. Jana laughingly replies, also in French, after which Dave comments that French is nicer than English. Jana does not respond to his comments, which could be expected to elicit an expression of agreement or disagreement. Instead she asks a reciprocal question, namely whether he speaks German. While staying within the general topic area of languages, she nonetheless effects a shift in focus from one language to another, as well as a shift in orientation, which shows her interest in finding out more about her partner.

If we return to the 'Football' conversation between Claude and Ben, we can see further examples of this type of reciprocity in the questions which they employ.

Having established that neither of them is very interested in football, they exchange comments about people they know who are big fans of the game. We see here an example of parallelism with similar anecdotes being exchanged, contributing to establishing further common ground. In Claude's case the reference is to his friend, George, while Ben refers to *the two people that I live with*. At this point Claude starts a side sequence, asking for more information about these people. Once he has been told that they are Ben's housemates, Ben resumes the topic in line 046 below.

Football 5 [2]   Claude (NNS)   Ben (NS)

046	Ben	yeah (..) so they really love football so they always try
047		and get everyone to come and watch it in the pub and
048		(xxx xxx)
049	Claude →	yeah where are where are you staying ? You're on
050		you're not living on the campus ?

051	Ben	no it's eh just outside of Birmingham in Erdington
052		[it's near to. =
053	Claude	[oh right
054	Ben	=Spaghetti Junction
055	Claude	there seems to be a lot of students because when I
056		hear about students who are not living on the campus
057		they always tell me that they're living in Erd-
058		[Erdington

In line 049 Claude acknowledges Ben's previous comment and then asks where he is staying. In the context of what has gone before, i.e. talk about house mates, the question has some relevance and propositional connection. (Ben would have been more likely to refer to flat mates if he had been living in campus accommodation). Claude follows up with a second question, seeking confirmation that Ben does not live on campus. Claude has therefore initiated a new direction for the conversation, and possibly sees this question as a way of getting away from the topic of football. In contrast, a question like the following would merely expand on the current topic:

| 068 | Claude | is it a little bit like a campus I mean or no ? |

This question follows Ben's description of the area where students tend to live, and Claude is merely eliciting more information about this particular type of area.

Ben reciprocates this mutual interest when, in line 097, he asks Claude his views on living at Aston.

Football 5 [3]

094	Ben		yeah it's a lot nicer but the only thing is it's a lot harder
095			(..) in terms of transport trying to get back to the house
096			and things like that 'cause it costs 88 pounds for a bus
097		→	pass so (xxx) that's a lot (...) how do you find Aston ?
098	Claude		Aston well you know when I was in France it was a bit eh
099			dull on my campus really not living at all eh I mean I was
100			alone in my flat you know because I wasn't sharing

Claude's answer starts with a repetition of the words *Aston*, followed by *well*, which gives him time to formulate a reply, and he continues by contrasting it with his experience of campus life while at university in France. The questions associated with these topic transitions are in many instances what drive the conversation forward, and furthermore work towards establishing solidarity and increased understanding and familiarity.

Asking questions and even asking frequent questions in a conversation is not necessarily a result of limited language skills or limited conversational competence, but can instead, as we have seen in these extracts, be an expression of purposeful, goal-directed behaviour.

5.3.2   Statements

While questions are other-oriented, showing interest in the experiences and attitudes of the conversational partner, statements tend to be self-oriented, relating a topic initiation to something relevant to the *speaker's* life or interests.

When utterances take the form of a question, i.e. the first pair part of an adjacency pair, it becomes obligatory to respond to them. This also applies to certain types of announcements, as noted by Maynard (1980:283):

> Thus, an announcement forms the first pair part of an adjacency pair, and provides for the conditional relevance (see Schegloff 1972b:364) of a second pair part: an acknowledgement, assessment or question.

He refers to the role of announcements as "reliable devices for insuring at least one turn transition", and observes that they ".. strongly implicate a series of turns in which a complete account of the news may be given and received." (ibid:283). Although he mentioned this role in connection with topic changes, the same procedure can be employed to effect a coherent topic transition. They are not, in other words, solely employed to deal with instances where "topical talk has faltered" (ibid:283), but function also to keep topics on the move.

A fairly typical example of a news announcement can be seen in the extract below, where Fay and Will have been discussing the quality of different newspapers.

Newspapers 5 [1]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)


```
187   Will .  so it's not as good but it's a nice sort of [(xxx)
188   Fay→                                           [oh there's
189          something in the news at the moment about The Daily Mail and
190          eh the Prime Minister's wife
191   Will   eh is that with the fraudster ?
192   Fay    yeah I don't really understand that because I
193   Will   yeah I think
194   Fay    do you know more about it ?
195   Will   the::: I think the whole case around (...) there's there's some ( )
196          some guy who bought some property on behalf of Cherie Blair (...)
197          eh [ (xxx)
198   Fay       [ and she claims that she has nothing to do with it
```

In line 187 Will sums up his views on The Daily Mail, saying that it is not as good as the Guardian; he also makes a positive comment which is not entirely audible. Fay's announcement in line 188 overlaps with this final evaluation, as she comments on something she has recently heard or seen about the same newspaper. Her explicit mention of the name of the paper provides a cohesive link with previous talk. She starts the announcement with the newsmarker *Oh*, as something suddenly remembered about this particular paper. This use of *oh* concurs with that found by Bolden (2006), as signalling the introduction of what she terms a "self-attentive topic". In this instance, though, it is not, as Bolden claims is often the case, because the *oh*-pre-faced sequence necessarily provides "a means of advancing a temporarily stalled conversation" (ibid: 674).

Will follows up in line 191 with a confirmation request, which seeks to find out exactly what she is referring to. The initial hesitation marker may simply be because he is unsure if this is the news item she is referring to, or because this turn, in spite of the obvious connection, represents a major shift in focus,

from a discussion about the quality of different papers to a specific news item. Fay's next turn in line 192 provides confirmation, and she also indicates she does not understand what happened, thereby implicitly inviting Will to provide more information. Will's turn in line 193 may be the start of an explanation, and Fay asks him directly if he knows more about it. They work together to get the topic established, and proceed to jointly construct the story. They then continue to talk about Cherie Blair, and Will adds further comments on the wives of former British prime ministers. (These lines are omitted).

Fay has remarked on her lack of knowledge about these women, commenting variously *Well I don't know I mean ( ) it's my first year in England so,* and about John Major's wife : *I've never seen his wife.* In line 225 she then makes a statement that shifts the topic to an area which she *does* feel competent to comment on.

Newspapers 5 [2]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

225   Fay→ I know that the wife of <u>our</u> prime minister sings in a choir
226   Will   of <u>your</u> prime minister ?
227   Fay   yeah of <u>our</u>
228   Will   yeah of <u>your</u> country
229   Fay   so that's all I know about her
230   Will   (xxx xxx)
231   Fay→ yeah but I don't think you're interested in Belgian politics

Will's previous utterance was not audible, but in line 225 Fay emphasises the word *our* to provide a contrast and to signal a shift to talk about Belgian as opposed to British prime ministerial wives. The connection is clearly lexical and therefore coherent, but other features of this transition are important. With a focus on her own native status she is able to introduce talk about matters about which she has more knowledge than her NS partner. The topic, however, is not developed, and Fay herself brings it to a close with her remarks in lines 229 and 231.

Employing statements, rather than questions, is a strategy Fay uses on several occasions throughout the conversation, and they are always effective

in generating more talk on the topic that has been introduced in this manner, and therefore in giving Fay control of the topic, as in the following example.

Newspapers 5 [3]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

```
390   Will    or The Sport even that's always [(xxx)
391   Fay→                                [yeah Leo in eh my house
392           he always reads The Sun or The Daily eh Mirror or The Daily
393           Mail uh or what is it The Daily ?
394   Will    The Daily Sport
395   Fay     yeah for the sport yeah
396   Will    yes (xxx)
397   Fay     (xxx) first I thought Oh my God he's obsessed by sex because I
398           only saw the nude pictures in it ( ) and I thought Oh my God why
399           does he read that newspaper and then he told me it was only for
400           the sport Ah ok I see
```

After some joking references by Will to various tabloid newspapers, Fay initiates a topic transition in line 391 by announcing that one of her house mates reads one of the tabloids. Following a short clarification sequence she proceeds to comment on the friend's reading matter, thus consolidating the newly introduced topic. Rather than newspapers being the topic, it is now focused on a related aspect of which she has personal knowledge and information to contribute.

Statements can work, then, not just to introduce something newsworthy into the conversation, but can also move the talk from general to more personal issues, and from less to more familiar ground, as in the extracts above.

One type of statement functioning as a topic initiation was found to be used exclusively by NSs. The example below comes from 'Modern art'. Sara and Ann are coming to the end of a discussion about the works of the painter Miro, which Sara has seen, but Ann has not.

Modern art 5 [1]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

```
Sara   197   [yeah alright
Ann    198   [yeah
```

Sara   199   it is very colourful and (..)
Ann→ 200   I tell you what I <u>do</u> want to see is the (..) Bodyworks (..) ehm (..)

The topic tails off with overlapping agreement tokens in lines 197 and 198, and Sara then provides a final summarising, though incomplete, comment. Ann links her next contribution by referring to the works of another artist which she would like to see. She starts her initiation with the phrase *I tell you what I <u>do</u> want to see*. The phrase is used to draw attention to some new and upcoming information, while maintaining a link with and indicating a contrast to previous talk.

This formulaic phrase is used on several occasions by at least three of the NSs, both in topic changes and transitions, but not by any of the NNSs, so it may be unfamiliar to them as a device for topic management. In 'Newspapers' it was used very effectively by Will following Fay's mention of the wife of the Belgian prime minister, and the extract below also shows how Fay responded to this initiation.

Newspapers 5 [4]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

231   Fay→ yeah but I don't think you're interested in Belgian politics
232   Will→ tell you what I <u>am</u> interested in
233   Fay   yeah
234   Will→ Belgian chocolates
235   Fay   (laughs) Belgian chocolates oh eh you haven't tried any
236 · Will   I've not tried them yet I think [I
237   Fay   [you should you should try them
238   Will   the the thing is if I open them I know I'll eat them all so eh
239   Fay   that's what I did (laughs)

Following Fay's closure-implicative comment about Will not being interested in talking about Belgian politics, Will's response in line 232 signals implicit agreement with this statement. His phrase *tell you what I <u>am</u> interested* signals a contrast and upcoming, new information, without specifying what it is. Fay's *yeah* signals agreement to go ahead, and in line 234 the topic is presented: not Belgian *politics*, but Belgian *chocolates*. Fay responds with laughter, repetition of the topic words, and an additional comment which

establishes the topic as having been accepted for further talk. There is, then, very much a joint negotiation of this new topic.

Repetition of both key words and complete phrases (*interested in, haven't tried*) figure prominently in this extract to link turns and topics, and the next section will look at how NNSs employ lexical links to initiate topic transitions.

5.3.3   Lexical links

The type of lexical repetition which featured in the 'Newspaper' extract above, is described by Bloor & Bloor (1995:100) as "the strongest cohesive force", and the use of repetition, either of individual words or phrases is prevalent in many topic transitions. Thornbury (2005:70) views repetition as having at least two functions:

> it binds utterances together, thereby enhancing the sense that speakers are being relevant. It also creates a sense that all participants are in harmony – that they are 'singing to the same hymn sheet'- and thereby supports conversation's interpersonal function.

These constructive functions of repetition present a contrast to the way in which NNS use of repetition is often seen as symptomatic of communication problems. Wiberg (2003:405), for example, suggests that NNSs resort to repetition to deal with difficult communicative tasks, and that repetition at the beginning of a turn is used primarily "as a confirmation that the speaker has understood, and can reuse the correct expression prompted by the NS." No studies to my knowledge have examined how NNSs employ repetition as part of the topic management of informal conversations. Because repetition also features in side sequences, its role will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6 together with the re-initiation or resumption of topics following the side sequences.

This section will focus on examples from the conversations which indicate how the NNSs used repetition in different ways to enable a coherent topic transition to take place.

The first example, from the 'The Tabloid' conversation between Laura and Claire, shows how the repetition of just one word in a previous utterance can move the talk in an entirely different direction. They have been talking about the problems associated with mothers buying clothes for them, and Claire then explains in line 253 that she started buying her own clothes with her pocket money.

The tabloid 5 [3]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

244	Claire	yeah I know your mum's not going to buy you
245		something that she don't like
246	Laura	(laughs) no
247	Claire	Mums don't do that (..) I've bought my own clothes
248		for ages no my Mum buys me some but not anymore
249		like I buy all my own
250	Laura	uh
251	Claire	pretty much (..) If my Mum's going to buy me clothes
252		(xxx) for Christmas but ever since like I started
253		getting pocket money I used to save to buy clothes
254	Laura→	uh hu (...) I never really got pocket [money
255	Claire	[oh
256	Laura	[every week I
257		only got money when I needed it
258	Claire	yeah

Laura laughingly agrees with Claire's comment in line 254 about mothers buying clothes and then uses lexical repetition to pick up on the issue of pocket money, contrasting her own experience with that of Claire. She therefore maintains conversational coherence, while still succeeding in initiating a new topic. Claire's response is crucial in whether or not this gets accepted, and the *Oh* expression signals surprise at this new or unexpected information. If we hear something unexpected, we generally want to find out more about it, so it also functions as encouragement to continue. Laura goes on to explain the pocket money arrangements in lines 256 to 257, and Claire shows continued interest. The repetition of the one word has enabled Laura to take control of the topic and to move it from talk about clothes to talk about a different aspect of her life.

The topic transition and the follow-up talk in this extract may have worked towards engendering greater alignment and understanding, but that is not the case with the next example, where repetition of one word is also implicated in the topic transition.

This extract comes from 'Universities' where the key topics for Pierre and Rose centre on discussions about which university to choose for post-graduate studies, about the respective qualities of the cities where the universities are located, and about aspects relating to the practicalities of completing the application forms. As they are both going to apply to a university, they discuss possible options for both of them, and this in itself constitutes a trigger for transitions, i.e. when the focus changes from one participant to the other. Moreover, the interpersonal context may well have an additional impact in this conversation, as the participants are in a relationship, and a move to different cities to study may make it difficult to continue seeing each other on a regular basis.

This extract comes towards the end of the conversation. Following a phone call from Pierre's mother, they have talked about his mother's views on various cities and universities. Rose has expressed her own opinion regarding the *size* of various cities, and following a couple of inaudible exchanges, she concludes as follows :

Universities 5 [2]   Pierre (NNS) Rose (NS)

151	Rose	yeah but Exeter is not big
152	Pierre→	no I could apply eh to Exeter too
153	Rose	why ? you don't really want to
154	Pierre	no but my parents like Exeter
155	Rose	but why would you apply ?
156	Pierre	no I'm not going to apply
156	Rose	then why say it ?
157	Pierre	I said I could
158	Rose	yeah you could but you don't want to it'd be like me
159		applying to (..) Aston again if
160	Pierre	you don't have to apply you're already in Aston
161	Rose	I know but it's like it's applying to somewhere I don't want to be

162	Pierre	yeah ?
163	Rose	yeah exactly (..) is it finished yet ? ((plaintively))
164	Pierre	yeah we will finish this now.

Exeter is not one of the university options which has been discussed so far, but in line 152 Pierre now presents this as another potential choice for his application, and thereby moves the conversation in a more personal, and, as it turns out, rather unpopular direction. He does this quite smoothly, by, in the same turn, agreeing with Rose's assessment of the city and repeating the word 'Exeter' to lead in to his personal comment. So while there is in this case a direct lexical link, there is also a shift in focus from the general to the personal. Although the topic in this instance was taken up, it results in a somewhat acrimonious exchange, possibly related to the potential difficulties a long-distance relationship might bring.

A more constructive outcome is achieved by the participants in the next extract from 'Computers'. Joan has been talking about her essay, the topic of which is child psychology.

Computers 5 [1]   Oda (NNS) Joan (NS)

113	Joan	it's like research into child development and then we've got
114		to evaluate the ways in which it's carried out
115	Oda	Uh
116	Joan	so the good and bad points about research methods really
117		which is really boring
118	Oda→	Really boring ? but if you if you become mother like it could be
119		really useful ·
120	Joan	Yeah but not yet ((laughs))
121	Oda	((laughs))
122	Joan	I'm not planning to become a mother for a long long time
123	Oda	Ah I see yeah I'm not sure that I'm going to get married in the
124		future (..) but I haven't got you know I haven't planned any (xxx)
125	Joan	Well (..) I'd like to get married but it's just so hard trying to (xxx)
126		a decent man

In line 117 Joan makes a negative assessment of her essay topic. In such cases it is convention for a conversational partner to match or to "up" this assessment, or at least to comment on it. Oda does this by repeating the

assessment exactly, but with questioning intonation, which could indicate either surprise or disagreement. Her follow-up comment (line 118) helps to clarify her meaning – that it can not possibly be boring because it could be useful in the future. Joan expresses agreement with Oda's comment, and proceeds to elaborate, laughingly. Oda joins in the laughter, and in line 122 Joan expands on her statement. This elicits a somewhat neutral acknowledgement token from Oda in line 123, which is almost certainly L1 interference from her native language, Japanese, but she immediately follows it up with a related comment about her own future plans, thus making a connection between becoming a mother and getting married. The topic initiation which she introduced in line 118 has now resulted in the conversation moving from talk about essays to talk about getting married. It is the non-native speaker who has taken the initiative to introduce a new topical direction. She uses repetition to effect this, which maintains coherence, while also showing interest in and alignment with her conversational partner, and together they jointly negotiate the new topic. She thereby demonstrates some skill in building on previous talk to keep the conversation going and to introduce a new and potentially interesting topic.

In the extracts we have seen so far the lexical element has been repeated in the sequential or follow-up turn, which has had a strongly cohesive effect in these topic transitions. The next example departs from this pattern, because the lexical item which is repeated appeared not in the immediately preceding utterance, but somewhat further back in the conversation.

Newspapers 5 [5]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

```
126  Fay   yes yeah
127  Will→ did you hear about eh Colonel Gadafi eh of Libya eh he held his
128        own little beauty contest
129  Fay   (laughs)
130  Will  for whatever reason I don't know but to promote to promote I've
131        got it in a copy of the Guardian eh promoting Libya he (brief laugh)
132        held his own beauty contest and eh the girls couldn't ( ) reveal too
133        much so ( ) the costumes they wore basically they wore T-shirts
134        with his face on and things like that it it was very weird
135  Fay   and when did this happen ?
```

```
136  Will    it's eh a couple of weeks ago it's the most [ bizarre thing
137  Fay                                                 [ strange very strange
138          (laughs)
139  Will    indeed indeed
140→ Fay     but Libya you don't hear too much about Libya
141  Will    not well you did
142  Fay     uh minor articles
143  Will    two years ago when they were doing the trial of the Lockerbie
144          bombers when they were doing it and then (xxxxxxx )
145          were they there's this the court they'd set up in the
146          Netherlands
```

Fay and Will have been talking about newspaper reports of the Miss World contest held in Nigeria, and Will in line 127 performs a topic initiation by contrasting this with a similar contest in another African country, Libya. After explaining what took place, they both agree that this was a strange event. The sequential assessments and the final *Indeed indeed* from Will in line 139 effectively close down this topic. Fay then initiates a new topic in line 140 by repeating what was a key word at the beginning of the previous topic, namely *Libya*. Furthermore, her use of the contrastive conjunction *but* signals that she has something else to say on this topic which is not related to the previous talk about Libya. By repeating the word *Libya* she manages to make this a coherent transition, and her statement is one which invites a comment. The topic is taken up by Will in line141, and this use of repetition by the NNS has therefore proved effective in generating new topical talk.

Both NSs and NNSs employ repetition to initiate topic transitions, and they generally prove successful in effecting smooth transitions between topics. More examples of lexical links will be evident in some of the remaining extracts, but we will now turn to examples of a different kind of connection.

5.4   Propositional links

This section will be concerned with topic transitions where the propositional content is salient in a shift of focus for the conversation. There may in such cases be an obvious association between ideas or themes, which enables one of the speakers to take the topic in a different direction. Such a method of

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initiating new topics related mostly to anecdotes, and finding examples where it happened without the presence of other linking elements, such as lexical repetition, or changes in orientation, proved difficult, but two examples are illustrated below.

The first extract is from 'Computers', and follows on from Extract 5 [1] in section 5.3.3, where talk had moved to motherhood and getting married.

Computers 5 [2]   Oda (NNS) Joan (NS)

```
125  · Joan  well (..) I'd like to get married but it's just so hard trying to (xxx)
126           a decent man
127   Oda→ uh yeah yeah yeah and eh but I::: yeah yesterday was
128           Valentine's Day
129   Joan  oh don't even mention that
130   Oda . (( laughs))
131   Joan  that was horrible
132   Oda   (( laughs )) yeah
133 · Joan  Not one card
134   Oda   (( laughs )) I I sent text message to my friend eh who are
135           doing in Language Department who is studying in Language
136           Department and eh she she said eh eh because I like to have
137           some (..) some I'd like to eh chat with with her today about she
138           said like No yesterday it was Valentine's Day this weekend I'm
139           really busy and this eh (..) last eh yesterday was Valentine's
140           Day and then really for me it's really romantic day so and today
141           I have to study so (..) can't make it
142   Joan  A::h
143   Oda   (( sighs )) (xxx) yeah but eh for some people it's really important
144           day
145   Joan  Yeah It's not it's not really that important to me it's just another
146           day but would've been nice to get card from somebody
147           ((laughs))
148   Oda   ((laughs)) yeah ( xxxx )
```

In line 127 Oda agrees emphatically with Joan's comment, that it is hard to, presumably, *find* a decent man, and then flounders rather in her attempt to take the topic further, eventually producing a blunt statement: that *yesterday was Valentine's Day*. The association which Oda makes here is between the romantic nature of Valentine's Day when cards are sent to existing or potential spouses or partners, and Joan's remark that it is difficult to find a decent man to marry. It is the NNS who takes charge of the topic and the development of the conversation by offering a different angle on a closely related topic. The

topic of Valentine's Day is continued for the next 25 lines, and this sequence contains much mutual laughter and agreement. This is in spite of a somewhat incoherent account by Oda in lines 134 to 141 of a failed meeting with a friend. Joan does not attempt to 'negotiate the meaning' by asking for clarification, but instead offers a sympathetic *A::h*, thus responding to the gist of what was said, and showing appreciation and understanding of the feelings of her co-talker. It proved, then, to be a very successful topic initiation which worked to increase rapport between the two women.

The second example of an associative focus shift comes from 'Modern art' where Sara and Ann have been discussing the relative status of different occupations. At this point it should be mentioned that Ann's parents are originally from India.

Modern art 5 [2]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

596		want to be a PE teacher
597		(joint laughter)
598	Sara	but why not ? it is [it is
599	Ann	[oh God yeah it's a good job yeah
600		but my my at the Asian community it's like "she's a PE
601		teacher" (Indian accent) they just thought it's a <u>stupid</u>
602		little job because I couldn't do anything else but you
603		know you need 2 AAs lovey to be a PE teacher so that's
604		the same as medicine nearly
605	Sara	yeah
606	Ann	that's the same as for law for medicine you need
607		straight As for law you need an AAB or straight As (xxx)
608		I'm AAB (xxx xxx)
609	Sara	(laughs)
610	Ann	it's silly
611	Sara→	my family is completely different
612	Ann	yeah ?
613	Sara	(xxx xxx) they have my family members has they just
614		made apprenticeships
615	Ann	oh
616	Sara	and eh
617	Ann	people don't do that here anymore (...) in England
618	Sara	in Germany it's it's just a basic education system

Ann had earlier revealed that Asian parents have high expectations of their children. In line 596 she talks about her own ambition to become a PE teacher,

and mimics the reactions she has had or expects to get from the Asian community. She defends her choice of profession, with Sara in line 605 providing a supportive *yeah,* and laughter in line 609, after which Ann concludes with an assessment: *it's silly.* Sara does not respond directly to Ann's account of this situation; instead she draws a parallel with her own family situation. Although there are no immediate sequential links in this topic initiation, it is clearly propositionally coherent with previous talk as it concerns similar topic matter. Ann had referred to her parents, her sister and cousins, and Sara starts her initiation by referring to *My family.* Her use of the hyponym shows a measure of linguistic and interactional sophistication. This term very effectively encapsulates the propositional content, and while her statement addresses the issues which Ann have been talking about, it also effects a change in orientation and introduces a new focus. Ann signals her interest by a *yeah* with questioning intonation in line 612, thus encouraging Sara to provide more information. Sara explains that their families are different because apprenticeships rather than formal education were the norm for her family. Ann responds with the newsmarker *Oh* which invites more talk. Sara starts to elaborate in line 616, but hesitates which allows Ann to insert a comment about apprenticeships in England, and Sara in turn (line 618) comments on the situation in Germany. After this they continue to talk about the benefits of apprenticeships. Sara's topic-initiating statement has therefore led to a new and mutually agreed focus for their talk.

The next section will show further examples of the NNSs effecting topic transitions by way of propositional associations.

5.4.1   Anecdotes

The telling of anecdotes probably provides one of the clearest examples of how an association of ideas can trigger topic transitions in conversations. Anecdotes are one of several genres of talk which have been identified in informal conversations, and which exhibit certain characteristics. With anecdotes there are set stages to be embedded into the talk to alert the listener to what is coming and to the sequence and significance of events.

Eggins and Slade (1997:243) point to the fact that there may be culturally different expectations and structures with regard to anecdotes, but their purpose is likely to be shared across cultures. The function of anecdotes is primarily one of providing entertaining talk, but also, according to Eggins and Slade (ibid:243) "to enable participants to share a reaction to a remarkable event." Such sharing of reactions in the context of revealing personal information is likely to help the process of generating rapport and understanding.

Eggins and Slade (ibid:236) describe the generic structure of anecdotes as including a number of different stages: Abstract, Orientation, Remarkable Event, Reaction and Coda, with the Abstract and the Coda being optional. For the purposes of this discussion it is the start of the anecdote, the Orientation, which is important, as this constitutes the beginning of the topic transition. The purpose of the orientation stage is to provide background information about the time, place, participants, and other relevant aspects of the setting for the anecdote.

The following extracts will show how the NNSs incorporated anecdotes into the talk, and employed the orientation stage to effect topic transitions. The first example comes from 'The tabloid'.

The topic started with discussion of a newspaper photo of a man covered in wasps, and Laura has already told one anecdote about a friend's father who was stung by wasps (see Chapter 4, section 4.4.2.3). The talk proceeds on-topic about bee and wasp stings respectively.

The tabloid 5 [4]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

441	Laura	yeah it it depends also <u>where</u> they sting
442	Claire	yeah
443	Laura→	once in Germany I sat on my balcony because
444		I had a very small room with a nice balcony
445	Claire	o:::hhh
446	Laura	and I I left a box of juice opened and eh (xxx) there
447		maybe for a couple of hours and then I came back
448		and I was so thirsty I knew there is only a bit on eh

449		the bottom so I took it and I drank from the box
500	Claire	yeah
501	Laura	and there was one
502	Claire	a:::h
503	Laura	and it it it stung ? =
504	Claire	=yeah=
505	Laura	=stung me on my lip I'm not not sure anymore
506		where it was on my upper lip (xxx xxx) and eh
507		I was really lucky because if I would have
508		swallowed her
509	Claire	yeah
510	Laura	it could have stung me=
511	Claire	=stung you on your neck like=
512	Laura	=yeah=
513	Claire	=or your throat

The start of Laura's initiation in line 443 *Once in Germany* signals that there is a story coming up, and what follows is that part of the orientation which provides relevant information about the setting. Claire responds with an *o::h*, showing her interest in this information, and Laura then describes the event which is the focus of the anecdote: that there was a wasp in the carton of juice. The elliptical expression *and there was one* which she uses in line 501 reveals the specific connection with the previous talk about bee stings. The reference to *one* is immediately understood from the context by Claire, who produces a drawn-out *a:::h*, signalling her understanding and sympathy. Laura continues with the story, seeking confirmation in line 503 about the form of the verb *stung*, and explains that, although she was stung, it could have been worse. Claire's latched contributions in lines 511 and 513 show her involvement and interest in the story which her partner is telling.

In the next extract Claire follows up with a similar story, again starting by giving relevant background information about the occasion, the place and time of the event.

The tabloid 5 [5]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

517	Claire →	I was on holiday in Newquay (..) it was a few years
518		ago and one stung me like on my thumb
519	Laura	uh
520	Claire	and literally (laughing) my thumb blew up to about

521   that size

There is no doubt about the connection here or the meaning of the referential *one* as referring to yet another wasp. Sharing similar experiences is one way in which people can feel closer, and which can help to strengthen the bonds of friendship.

The dialogue between Laura and Claire provides a very good illustration of the conversational situation described by Maynard (1980:266):

> Often one person at a time is given responsibility for developing a topic. Nevertheless, topical talk is a collaborative phenomenon in that while one person does topic-developmental utterances, the other may produce questions, invitations, continuers, and so forth, to keep the line of talk going.

Throughout the reciprocal telling of anecdotes, and indeed throughout he conversation, they both contribute extended sequences of talk, which are attended to with frequent backchannel continuers and acknowledgements by the partner.

The reciprocal sharing of experiences and reactions to them is also evident in an anecdote from 'Hot Curry'. The extract starts at the end of Aya's description of how to make a Japanese curry.

Hot curry 5 [1]   Aya (NNS) Fiona (NS)

060	Aya		you know put the water and this eh you know prepared
061			seasoning and that's it
062	Fiona		that's Japanese curry
063	Aya		yes curry and it's not so hot a::hh oh my God=
064	Fiona		=some of the curries a::hh
065	Aya	→	once an Indian lad came to our kitchen you know and
066			first I cooked the Japanese curry because he liked and
067			so you know I can show you=
068	Fiona		=a curry yeah

Aya concludes her description by saying *and that's it* at which point Fiona shows her understanding with a summarising comment, which is confirmed and partly echoed by Aya in line 063. She then adds an evaluative comment to the effect that Japanese curries are *not so hot*, and proceeds to gasp and use an expletive which is immediately understood by Fiona to refer to curries which <u>are</u> very hot, and she, too, uses a drawn-out *a::hh*, showing she shares Aya's feelings about hot curries. In line 065 Aya starts a topic initiation with the phrase *Once an Indian lad...* The shift in focus here is occasioned by their shared opinion of the strength of some curries, so moves from the specifics of Japanese curries to curries of other nationalities, and Aya uses this association to introduce a topically related anecdote about a very hot curry cooked by an Indian acquaintance. The coherence relations therefore are clearly propositional, as well as lexical, because the association of 'Indian' with 'curry' is a commonly understood one in the UK. Fiona makes this connection at an earlier point in the talk, and Aya has no problem understanding the culturally specific reference (see section 5.4.2).

Aya uses words which are common temporal and sequential features of anecdotes *once* and *first*, indicating that there is more to come, and she has therefore successfully taken the floor. Fiona in line 067 produces a latched completion, and throughout the telling shows her interest and involvement. One way in which she does this is by initiating brief, parallel accounts related to eating very hot food, for example about a friend who does *not* like hot food, and about her mother who uses very hot spices in cooking.

Towards the end of the comments about her mother's cooking Fiona summaries her opinion, and we see the lead-in to another topic transition by the NNS.

Hot Curry 5 [2]   Aya (NNS) Fiona (NS)

122	Fiona	I eat hot food but her food is really very very hot
123	Aya	yeah but I like a spicy food but not this real Indian food
124	Fiona	when it burns your mouth and you [can't=
125	Aya	[yeah

126	Fiona		= taste anything
127	Aya	→	and after that we have to you know he asked us to eat
128			with hands
129	Fiona		uh hu
130	Aya		and I understand that in India they they eat with you know
131			eh they eat with hands but we are all in UK and we are
132			(xxx) so
133	Fiona		((laughs))
134	Aya		(xxx xxx) I don't know I did it only once in Singapore
135			when I travelled there you know I went to an Indian
136			restaurant and everyone was using the hand I said ok ok
137			why not and [I
138	Fiona		[in Thailand as well

In lines 122 to 126 they again show their shared opinions of very hot food, with Aya making specific reference to 'this real Indian food', and Fiona collaboratively completing the sentence and referring to some of the effects previously described by Aya during the telling of her anecdote. This opens up an opportunity for her to return to this topic, and she does this in line 127 by using another sequential feature of anecdotal talk *and after that*. Because she mentions *he*, there can be no doubt about who she is referring to, as no other male has up to now been mentioned in the talk.

It is conceivable that what she intended to say here was more along the lines of 'On top of it being hot, he also asked us to eat with our hands.' She may, in other words, be using the expression inappropriately here. She does, however, succeed in shifting the focus from eating very hot food to using hands instead of cutlery, and this aspect of the global topic subsequently becomes accepted, with Fiona contributing her knowledge and experience of similar occasions in Thailand. So again they are working towards comparing and sharing experiences and opinions.

In both these extracts (e.g. lines 060, 065, 067,127, 130, 135) and indeed throughout the conversation, it is notable that Aya makes very liberal use of the discourse marker *you know*. It is likely that for her it fulfils both the function of contributing to more fluent production, as mentioned by Erman (2001:1338),

and those of reflecting shared attitudes and enhancing common ground (Fuller 2002:22).

The extracts shown here would seem to indicate that the NNSs have some familiarity with the formulaic beginnings and with the structures of anecdotes, and some understanding of their usefulness and function in initiating new directions in the conversations and providing entertaining and relevant talk. Telling anecdotes thus enables the NNSs to make substantial topical contributions, and in sharing their own experiences with their conversational partners, they contribute to the process of getting to know each other better and of generating mutual understanding.

The orientation stage of anecdotes contextualises what is to come, and this feature is shared by the type of topic initiation which will be discussed next.

5.4.2   Contextualised topic transitions

In the anecdotes above the topic initiations were introduced, not by linking them to immediately preceding talk, but by providing some seemingly unrelated information. This, then, would seem to be a strategy which legitimises a topic transition by first establishing the context before introducing the matter which is related to previous talk. Such contextualised initiations differ in various ways from anecdotes in that there is no recognisable orientation phrase, nor is there in all cases a 'story' as such. There are several examples in the data of this sort of strategy being used, i.e. there is no immediately apparent link to previous turns, but some additional information is provided, before the topical relevance becomes apparent. Examples of contextualised initiations were also evident in some of the topic changes discussed in Chapter 4 ('Education' 4 [4] and 'Cheesy beans' 4 [4]).

An example of a contextualised initiation can be seen in the extract below from 'The tabloid'. Here the talk has moved from a discussion about places of

interest for Laura to visit to discussion about the problems of camping, - being wet, cold and not having a bed to sleep in.

The tabloid 5 [6]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

815	Claire	I like a bed (xxx xxx)
816 →	Laura	it's not the problem of having a bed but really when
817		when it's cold I'm _freezing_ I'm freezing cold I we went
818		eh with our from our school to Northern Germany in
819		May
820	Claire	uh
821	Laura	eh and we stayed there in an international camp (xxx)
822		a really good thing
823	Claire	uh
824	Laura	(xxx) students from eh schools from six European eh
825		countries
826	Claire	ah nice
827	Laura	yeah and they always they always got eh each year
828 .		they got another of those countries
829	Claire	yeah
830	Laura	it's like each year another school is the hosting school
831	Claire	ah I see
832	Laura	and eh sometimes they somehow managed to
833		provide accommodation and sometimes we had to
834	→	sleep in tents and we had to sleep in tents eh in eh
835		Northern Germany and it was _May_
836	Claire	::hhh
837	Laura	it's it's similar weather like here it was we didn't have ,
838		too much rain
839	Claire	yeah
840	Laura	not at all it was quite clear and nice summer and
841		sunny but the wind
842	Claire	aa::h
843	Laura→	there was such a freezing cold]

In this topic transition sequence Laura uses several strategies to initiate a new angle on the topic of camping. Firstly she addresses the content of Claire's previous utterance by introducing a contrast, while also maintaining a lexical connection (_bed_ in line 816). For her the main problem with camping is being cold, and it is only after she has established this connection that she introduces a temporal shift which starts an anecdote about a school trip. There is then a considerable build-up of establishing background information, before the connection with the initiation in line 817 and indeed the whole point

of the anecdote eventually become clear: that they were sometimes sleeping in *tents*, (line 834), and that it was *freezing cold* (line 843). It is, then, quite a sophisticated display of topic management skills by the NNS. Claire throughout this context-building sequence indicates her interest and encouragement to continue by backchannels and short interjections.

Because there is an expectation that turns in talk will be relevant to preceding turn(s), contextualised initiations may sometimes throw the hearer momentarily off track and cause surprise at the direction the conversation is taking, and there was an instance in one of the conversations where this appeared to happen. The extract from 'Newspapers' can be seen below.

Newspapers 5 [6]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

504	Fay	my mother told me Oh you can't imagine how cold it is in
505		Belgium at the moment I said Oh
506	Will	yeah
507	Fay	I can it's the same weather here (laughs)
508	Will	yeah yeah I think today it hit zero
509	Fay	probably
510	Will	it did but with the wind a:::h ( ) so cold
511	Fay	uhm yeah
512	Will	I need some my ears I need earmuffs
513	Fay	yeah
514	Will	that's what I need (xxx xxx)
515	Fay→	and eh you know Melanie=
516	Will	=yeah=
517	Fay	=that was in last week eh she'll probably go to Russia next year
518	Will	oh right
519	Fay	for 3 months
520	Will	nice weather=
521	Fay	=maybe to eh Siberia
522	Will	great (laughs) ( ) eh summer time I'm hoping
523	Fay	no (smiling voice)
524	Will	winter ?
525	Fay	from September till December
526	Will	why ? Is she mad ?
527	Fay	I don't know
528	Will	does she has she got family there ?
529	Fay	and eh no no no It's just eh with the Erasmus programme
530	Will	(laughs) ok
531	Fay	and eh one of eh the fellow students is in Siberia at the moment
532		and she told her it was (..) freezing (laughs)

This extract starts with a comment from Fay about a telephone conversation which she had with her mother in Belgium about the weather in England. The weather was a topic which she had earlier rejected when it was suggested by Will. This could conceivably explain her brief and fairly non-committal responses to Will's humorous comment in line 512 and his follow-up in line 514.

In line 515 she starts a topic initiation with the conjunction *and*, which would normally signal a link to immediately preceding talk. Instead she hesitates briefly, and uses *you know* without questioning intonation, so it is a way of drawing Will's attention to the focus of this topic initiation. Will confirms that he knows who she is referring to, and her latched remark in line 517 provides brief additional information about Melanie before delivering the key piece of news: that Melanie is going to Russia. This information is received with a newsmarker *Oh right* by Will after which Fay adds that she will be there for 3 months. Will's next remark shows that he can now see the connection to what they were talking about earlier, namely the weather. This connection is reinforced by Fay's next remark, that Melanie may be going to Siberia. Will shows continued interest, and they collaborate in the development of the topic. In line 532 Fay delivers the punchline with reference to the *freezing* conditions. She has thus made a direct link to Will's *zero* in line 508, and has succeeded in making a reciprocal, humorous contribution.

In the extract below from 'Computers' we can see a rather different example of a contextualised initiation. The topic here has moved from talk about Joan's essay to talk about the computers which are available to students at the University.

Computers 5 [3]   Oda (NNS) Joan (NS)

```
034   Joan   the ones in the Business School are really nice though
035          they're like up-to-date and they have XP on them a:nd (.)
036   Oda    oh really ?
037   Joan   yeah
038   Oda    Powerpoint as well ?
039   Joan   yeah
```

```
040  Oda   ok
041  Joan  they have everything on there
042  Oda   ah
043  Joan  whereas (..) ours just have just old
044  Oda→ uh yeah another another Japanese eh student my friend eh
045        came from the same (? village ? ) eh was studying in Business
046  ·     School so (..) I sometimes sometimes think I should have
047        come to study Business here but eh (..) I don't know about
048        anything about Business
049  Joan  you don't need to know anything about Business when I first
050        started I wanted to do Business here because this university
```

Joan makes some positive comments in lines 034 and 035 about the computers in the Business School, and Oda shows her interest by eliciting additional information, providing brief acknowledgement tokens, and finally agreeing with Joan's comment in line 044. In the same turn she then starts to talk about a Japanese friend who is studying in the Business School. It is the mention of the Business School by Joan in line 034 which triggers this new line of talk: 'Now that you mention the Business School, it reminds me of something else we can talk about.' She is, therefore, basing her contribution on elements of the previous talk and creating a coherent bridge to a new topic. Although there is an obvious lexical connection here, it is not immediately apparent at the start of the topic initiation how talk about *another Japanese friend*, and possibly the additional information that this friend may come from the same village, is going to fit with talk about computers. This initial information merely provides a context and a justification for taking the talk in an entirely new direction, and the main focus now becomes a personal one, when in line 046 she wonders if she should have studied Business. Abu-Akel (2002:1798) observes that a shift in focus

> is often discrete and does not require the speaker
> to explicitly indicate the transition point. However,
> it is the speaker's responsibility to make sure that
> the participants can understand the relevancy of
> the speaker's decision to shift the focus of the
> topic (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Having presented the link, the justification in effect for mentioning her friend, she then proceeds to introduce the new topic, using *so* to give her reasons for

what is coming: the possibility of studying Business. Her concluding comment that she does not know anything about Business is taken up by Joan in her response, so the initiation has been successful.

We can see here how several different layers or levels blend together in one topic transition, and how the personal element is used to *accept* a topic initiation and to develop it further. Joan makes a comparison with her own experience to continue talking on the topic which Oda initiated. Similar procedures can be seen to operate for topic development as for topic transitions, which is the reason it can be so difficult to distinguish between them. It is usually only in retrospect that a topic transition can be identified as such.

Personal comparisons like the one made by Joan above were a feature of several topic transitions, as we will see in the next section.

5.5 Interpersonal strategies

Bolden (2006:681) comments that the state of a particular relationship "not only affects or is affected by the kinds of topics that can (or should) be discussed but also by *how* or *when* various matters are brought into the conversation." One important function of topic transitions, therefore, is that of helping to meet the interpersonal goals of conversations, to establish common ground, to maintain or create rapport and a feeling of solidarity. These goals can be met by showing interest in and involvement with the topics selected by the conversational partner, by responding to their topic initiations, and by the initiation of topics which the partners are likely to be interested in.

We have already seen examples of how attention to the interpersonal element is present in the topic transitions, for example in the parallel anecdotes they tell, and in the reciprocal questions which participants ask of each other. Comparing or exploring differences and similarities is one way in which

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participants can increase familiarity and establish the extent to which they share common experiences and attitudes, and it is one of the strategies examined in this section. A strategy of paying more explicit attention to the interests of the partner can be accomplished by effecting a topic initiation which moves from talk about general or encyclopaedic matters to related, but more personal aspects. Some examples will be shown below.

5.5.1 Explicit other-attentiveness

In this part of the conversation Ann has been bemoaning the fact that she does not know anybody who likes to visit art galleries with her.

Modern art 5 [3]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

282	Ann	as people are brought up my elder sister she's really into art
283		museums (..) all her friends from university will go with her
284		'cause the majority of them are foreign students (...) they
285		they're really into this stuff (.) I found round here (..) people
286		just <u>don't</u> wanna go to museums and art galleries
287	Sara	no ?
289	Ann	no [(xxx xxx)
290	Sara	[(xxx xxx)
291	→	in Madrid you can see a lot of a lot of paintings famous
292		paintings which eh you <u>would</u> like you
293	Ann	ahh I really wanna
294	Sara	(xxx) museums there
295	Ann	one day one day I shall go =
296	Sara	=and there is a famous eh Royal Royal family called eh (....)

At the start of the extract Ann compares this situation with that of other people who <u>are</u> interested in art, and then in line 286 returns to the point that *round here* people do not want to go. Sara expresses surprise and seeks confirmation in line 287, and there are then a couple of inaudible, overlapping exchanges. In line 292 Sara maintains a link with the previous topic of art by making a statement to the effect that Ann would like the many paintings which can be seen in Madrid.   She therefore indirectly addresses the concerns expressed by Ann earlier, and explicitly initiates talk on a topic which Ann has expressed her interest in. In a sense she establishes a warrant for introducing this topic, which at the same time constitutes topic matter of which she has personal knowledge. It may be that the desire to talk about a familiar topic is

the over-riding motivation for this initiation, as Sara does not acknowledge Ann's comment in line 295 that one day she will go to Madrid. Instead she continues with a latched utterance to talk about a specific collection of paintings owned by members of the Spanish royal family. She can presumably rely on an assumption that any further information about the topic of art will be of interest to Ann, who does indeed show her interest and involvement in the topic as it progresses.

The type of other-attentiveness which is demonstrated in the next initiation is not related to the topic type as such, but more explicitly towards a show of personal appreciation of the conversational partner. The extract comes from 'Computers', and the topic they are currently talking about deals with some of the difficulties associated with studying.

Computers 5 [4]   Oda (NNS) Joan (NS)

070	Joan	yeah A-levels are really hard
071	Oda	a::h
072	Joan	yes but apparently eh they say it's supposed to be harder
073		than doing a degree
074	Oda	ah doing a degree we::ll I see
		(2.0)
075→	Oda	I think you're really hardworking
076	Joan	ME ?
077	Oda	yes
078	Joan	(laughs)
079	Oda	yee:s
080	Joan	If I was really hardworking I'd have my essay done by now
081	Oda	(laughs)
082	Joan	and be relaxing but no
083	Oda	A::h
084		((inaudible overlaps))
085	Oda	I I wanted to say eh I think it's really eh it takes
086		a lot of time to eh to to to get ready for writing I mean eh
087	Joan	That's what I'm still doing now I've got so many books
088		that I haven't looked in yet

Oda's acknowledges, a little ineptly, (line 074), Joan's comments about A-levels being *really hard* and *harder than doing a degree*. After a 2-second pause Oda initiates a more personal topic in line 075 with a complimentary

remark about Joan: *I think you're really hard-working.* This is received with amazement, and deprecation by Joan, - a common enough way for women to respond to compliments. In this instance Oda would seem to build on previous lexical items: *hard / harder* to move the talk from the general to the personal, – a strategy which she also employs on occasion to expand on the conversation.

In lines 080 and 082 Joan laughingly points out that if she had been hardworking, her essay would have been done by now. This is received with another *a::h* by Oda, and then both parties start talking simultaneously, with Oda being the one to gain the floor in line 085. Her contribution addresses the proposition expressed by Joan in 080, i.e. that the reason Joan has not finished the essay in not because she does not work hard, but because the *preparation* takes a long time. In spite of the many hesitations she manages to get her point across, and Joan in line 087 accepts and responds to her contribution.

The type of personal orientation to be discussed in the next section is less explicitly other-oriented, and relies on comparisons of personal experiences and different cultural circumstances to promote understanding and to bring about topic transitions.

5.5.2   Personal and cultural comparisons

The comparison of attitudes, knowledge and experiences is a common feature of interactions which works towards establishing greater familiarity and the building of common ground between participants. Where participants are from notably different cultural backgrounds, the search for familiarity and common ground may function as an additional resource in the conversations, as some of the examples below will indicate.

In the first extract from 'The tabloid' we will see how Laura and Claire engage in this process. Laura has been talking about how she used to travel by train to school, and how she sometimes fell asleep and missed her stop.

The tabloid 5 [7]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

301	Laura	I was able to fall asleep for ten
302		[twenty
303	Claire	[uh
304	Laura	minutes no problem (..) when I was
305		tired (..) and I _was_ tired every
306		morning ((laughs))
307	Claire→	I bet·you were. What time were you
308		getting up then?
309	Laura	yeah the earliest was quarter to
310		five
311	Claire→	oh my god (..) That's horrible I'm
312		sometimes awake by quarter to five
313		but that's only 'cause I haven't
314		gone to bed yet
315	Laura→	((laughs)) it's the same with me I
316		mean since sometimes since eh I've
317		I've been going to the discos and so

The extract starts with further comments from Laura about sleeping on the train when she was tired in the mornings. Claire responds with a sympathetic agreement and a follow-up question in lines 307-308. Laura answers the question, and Claire maintains her sympathetic stance and provides an evaluative comment. She then makes a personal comparison, using partial repetition of Laura's answer: getting up at quarter to five. She contrasts this with not getting to bed early, and Laura shows alignment by explicitly drawing attention to their similarities in line 315 with the expression: _it's the same with me_; in other words, they share similar experiences, and this helps to create understanding and to consolidate their friendship. This sequence demonstrates how topics are mutually˙ negotiated and established over several turns, with little clear indication of when talk stops being about Laura's experience of travelling by train to a new topic of going to discos.

Making comparisons at the level of individual experiences and attitudes was not an uncommon strategy for effecting topic initiations. The cultural differences between the participants provided yet another resource for

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making comparisons and for initiating topics which touched on those differences.

In the extract below from 'Newspapers' Fay has been talking about the difficulties of passing the interpreter exams at her home university in Belgium. Here the new topic is initiated by the NS.

Newspapers 5 [7]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

693	Fay	some eh students fail their examinations for interpreter ( ) so
694		if you wait and just I'm not going to do that and I don't think
695		. my parents will allow me to do an extra year
696	Will →	is it expensive to go to university in (..)
697	Fay	no not at all not at all
698	Will	not like this ?
699	Fay	no uh no
700	Will	how how do you pay for it there ? Is it all (..) do you get taxed

She continues talking about the topic in line 693 by focusing on her own intentions, which are not to wait another year in case she had to retake the exam. She adds that her parents would probably not allow her to do an extra year. Will's question in line 696 is possibly based on the assumption that it is because of the expense that her parents might object to an extra year, and his question shifts the topic to a more general focus on the cost of higher education in Belgium.

However, more often than not it was the NNSs who exploited cultural differences as a topic resource and initiations, as the examples below will illustrate.

Computers 5 [5]   Oda (NNS) Joan (NS)

090	Joan	I just need to start writing it
091→	Oda	yeah I think the way the way you write essay is different
092		eh here from eh Japan because I've never I've never read
093		a lot of books for writing because we don't have to do that
094	Joan	uh hu
095	Oda	we just like you know from your opinion just in your opinion
096		you could write you can write anything about you know about
097		the topic but (xx) here you have to read (xxx) you know (.)

This extract follows on from Oda's compliment about Joan being hardworking, her unfinished essay and still having a lot of reading to do. Having pointed out in line 090 that she still needs to write it, Oda acknowledges her point, and proceeds to compare approaches to essay writing in Japan which seemingly does not require a lot of reading. Following Joan's continuer in line 094, she expands on the topic, while keeping the comparative aspects in the foreground. She has therefore succeeded in moving the topic from talk about Joan's personal issues regarding essay writing to a focus on culturally different aspects of academic requirements, and her topic initiation has been accepted for further discussion. While her choice of topic ties in with what they, as students, have in common, her use of *we* in line 093 signals her membership of a different group, and enables her to introduce an alternative perspective, and one from which she can speak with ease and authority.

The next extract also shows an example of an NNS explicitly aligning with non-members of the target culture. This extract comes from 'Hot curry'.

Up until this point the talk has been about the fish pie which Fiona had cooked for their dinner, and her description of how it is cooked, which she concludes in the beginning lines of the extract below.

Hot curry 5 [3]   Aya (NNS) Fiona (NS)

021	Fiona		and put it in with some vegetables and put some mashed
022			potato on top (.)
023	Aya	→	I think that eh (...) I don't know all of international
024			students we have eh kind of bias of you know bad
025			English food and eh (.) for example so far I think that
026			I've just tried eh pizza and eh fish and chips
027	Fiona		pizza is Italian
028	Aya		yeah I know but you eat quite often
029	Fiona		yeah
030	Aya		and also you know in each country you have a different
031			pizza because they change a little bit the [taste
032	Fiona		[yeah
033	Aya		for you know for (..)
034	Fiona	→	in England the favourite dish=
035	Aya		=Uh hu=
036	Fiona		=is is an Indian like the most eaten

037	Aya	(xxx)
038	Fiona	like Chicken Tikka Masala or something
039	Aya	yes
040	Fiona	which is really embarrassing

In the previous part of the extract Aya has already expressed her appreciation of the meal and commented on the method of preparation. In line 023, following the very brief pause at the conclusion of Fiona's description, she starts to express a personal opinion, but hesitates before completing it, and instead of referring just to her own opinion, she aligns herself with other international students. By using the inclusive 'we', she shows her solidarity with and membership of that particular group. That membership becomes relevant insofar as the members share a common perception of British food as being 'bad'. This presumably is in contrast to the English meal she has just eaten. She goes on to qualify this opinion by saying that she has only eaten a limited number and types of British meals. Her inclusion of pizza as an example of British food brings a swift correction from Fiona in line 027: that pizza is not an English dish. Aya shows her awareness of this, and justifies her remark in line 028 by stating that it is eaten a lot. Fiona not only concedes the point made by Aya, but goes on to exemplify the international dimension of English food by reference to the British fondness for curries. She has by now accepted the topic initially offered by Aya in line 023, namely that of British food, and in line 040 to some extent aligns with the opinion Aya expressed, in the sense that British food is so bad that it needs help from other international cuisines *which is really embarrassing.*

This topic initiation by the NNS, then, is a successful one, insofar as it displays coherent connections with previous talk; it has moved the focus from Fiona's dish as an example of English food to English food in general. The topic is taken up and developed by the NS partner, and it helps to generate alignment between them, that is, it works towards establishing mutual agreement on a particular issue. The strategy used by the NNS to offer this topic for discussion shows some interactional sensitivity in the hesitation markers and hedging which she employs; there would seem to be some awareness that criticising her host's national cuisine could be a potentially

face-threatening act. It is also an instance where the NNS exploits her non-nativeness as a resource for topic making. Another example of this can be seen in the continuation of this part of the conversation.

While Fiona does not actually use the word 'curry' in the extract above, but instead refers to it variously by the colloquial term *an Indian*, (line 036) and by the name of a specific type of dish, (line 038) it is clear from Aya's next topic initiation that she understands these oblique cultural references when she subsumes these terms under the hyponym 'curry', and proceeds to shift the focus from English to Japanese food.

Hot curry 5 [4]   Aya (NNS) Fiona (NS)

```
041   Aya    →    but you know eh ((laughs)) I don't know uhm a curry is
042                also one of the we consider really a Japanese food
043                [because
044   Fiona        [really ?
045   Aya          so yeah eh common food in Japan and (...) ehm for
046                example here in UK you buy a you know a prepared
047                sauce in a=
048   Fiona        =jar=
```

She signals an upcoming contrast by using *but*, and the laugh after *you know* may well be directed at the similarity in cultural contexts, namely that both the UK and Japan have 'adopted' the curry. It would then function to show alignment with her partner. Fiona shows her surprise and interest with *really?* in line 044, which functions to encourage further contributions from Aya. She summarises her previous statement and goes on to contrast the curry found in the UK with that eaten in Japan. Her eventual description of how to make the curry parallels that of Fiona's description of the fish pie. This transition is quite sophisticated, taking in both understanding of culturally specific associations, and lexical transformation.

The ability to draw on culture-specific knowledge puts the speaker in a position of contributing new and potentially interesting information to the talk,

and in the case of NNSs greater familiarity with culture-related topic content enables them to talk about it with authority.

While some researchers (Chen 1995; Chen and Cegala 1994) suggest that lack of shared cultural knowledge may lead to difficulties in topic selection and management, the evidence from the conversations in this study would suggest instead that cultural differences can be usefully exploited to initiate topic transitions and to build common ground between participants.

Where topic selection and topic transition proved troublesome, it was not due to cultural or language differences, as we will see in the next section.

5.6 Problematic topic transitions

In all the extracts seen so far the topic transitions have been relatively smooth, and the topics which were initiated were in all cases taken up. There were, however, a few occasions where the process of initiating and establishing a new topic did not go quite so well, either because there was reluctance to engage with a particular topic, or because the topic was not taken up at all.

In spite of most of the participants in these conversations seemingly having established comfortable relationships with each other, these relationships should still be considered relatively new, given the short length of time the NNSs had been living in the UK. It takes time to fully get to know another person, and consequently also to get a feel for which topics might be 'safe', and which topics might cause embarrassment or unease. Hinkel (1994) found considerable differences in the types of topics which were considered appropriate among different language groups. Talking about oneself, for example, is seen as inappropriate in many cultures, and topics like the weather and travel were negatively evaluated by some language groups (ibid:171). What are considered sensitive topics, then, will vary, not just

because of different cultural evaluations, but also because of personal sensitivities.

5.6.1 Sensitive topics

References to race or ethnicity are often considered potentially threatening topics, particularly if participants do not know each other well, and are not aware of each other's opinions and attitudes. This is the topic which is raised in the extract below.

Dave and Jana have been discussing Jana's views on Birmingham. The fact that Jana is Turkish-German may have a bearing on the topic content in this extract.

Education 5 [3]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

171	Dave		they may know <u>where</u> Birmingham is but they don't
172			necessarily want to <u>go</u> to Birmingham you've had the
173		→	experience now what do you think of Birmingham ? (..)
174			for the you know the area the people the shops
175	Jana		yeah the shops are good
176	Dave		yeah
177	Jana		yeah
178	Dave		and ?
179	Jana		but Birmingham is ugly (...) so yeah you can't (...)
180	Dave		why's it ugly ?
181	Jana		I don't know you can't visit anything like I don't know
182			maybe a castle or (...) (laughs)
183	Dave		oh ok there's no tradition there's no culture here ok
184			uhm (...)
185→	Jana		there's a lot of Asian people here yeah I've never seen
186			so many Asian people before
187	Dave		yeah Birmingham is a (...) eh (...) well (...) [eh
188	Jana		[Asian and
189			black people when you go to the city centre you only see
190			Asian people and black people
191	Dave		ok eh (...) it's not like oh well yeah ok

Dave's reference to *they* in the first line of the extract refers to German students who Jana claims have better knowledge of European geography than their British counterparts. He concedes they may know where

Birmingham is, but they may not necessarily want to go there, thereby possibly implying that it is not an attractive place. He then in line 173 produces a change in orientation by asking Jana's opinion of the city, suggesting particular items to focus on. Jana responds that the shops are good, Dave agrees, and Jana merely confirms the agreement in line 177. This leads Dave to prompt her to supply more information with a questioning *and ?* Her reply to this in line 179 may provide a clue to her earlier reluctance to expand on her opinion: she thinks that Birmingham is ugly. She starts to give a possible reason, then hesitates, being possibly reluctant to give offence. Dave takes advantage of the hesitation and asks her directly (line 180) why she thinks it is ugly. She gives as an example the fact that there are no interesting places to visit. She is then effectively responding to another of the items which Dave had suggested in line 174: the area.

In line 184 Jana introduces a new angle to the topic, by continuing the almost rhythmic, repetitive pattern in Dave's previous turn *There's...* and at the same time seemingly introducing a contrast: there may be no tradition or culture, but *there's a lot of Asian people*. Her opinion of the people was also asked by Dave at the start of the extract (line174). She adds that she has never seen so many Asian people. Dave does not produce a coherent response to her comments, as indicated by the incomplete sentence, the hesitations and the fillers in line 186. According to Pomerantz (1984:156): "If a recipient does not give a coherent response, the speaker routinely sees the recipient's behaviour as manifesting some problem and deals with it", and this is exactly what Jana proceeds to do. She expands on her statement, starting with an initial repetition and adding more specific information in lines 187 to 189. This could, then, be an example of her employing one of the strategies mentioned by Pomerantz, namely dealing with the lack of response by checking presumed shared knowledge. Although Dave's response in line 190 does contain a couple of agreement tokens, it also contains more hesitations, fillers and another uncompleted sentence. In not taking up her proposed topic, he may be signalling reluctance to engage with it. A number of reasons suggests themselves for this reluctance; it is possible that he sees Jana's comments as an example of why Birmingham is ugly, and that by implication she may

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consider the presence of Asian and black people to be a negative aspect. This of course would mark her comments as racist, and therefore potentially offensive. An alternative explanation is that Dave perceives Jana herself as being Asian, as she is of Turkish extraction and distinctly Asian in appearance. An appropriately sensitive response may therefore not come easily to hand.

At this point Jana appears to change the topic, and asks him a question also related to place, so maintaining a degree of coherence.

Education 5 [4]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

191	Jana	so are you from London ?
192	Dave	yeah I'm from London
193→	Jana	is it the same in London ?
194	Dave	eh (..) is what the same in London ? The mix [of
195	Jana	[yeah
196	Dave	Asians and blacks, white ? Uhm it's more mixed I'd say
197		than [Birmingham
198	Jana	[uh hu
199	Dave	Birmingham does have a high proportion of Asians, you
200		know, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs (..) but eh (..) where I live
201		I mean (..) eh (..) it's not in Central London, it's just ...

Dave confirms that he is from London, and Jana immediately follows this up with another question in line 191, which refers back to the previous topic. Her use of the word *so* at the start of the question in line 191 could be seen to function as what Bolden (2006:666) refers to as a *pursuit question*, suggesting that "what follows is a pending matter that has not yet been resolved."

Jana's use of the referent *it* in line 193 is ambiguous, and leads Dave initially to seek clarification, and then in the same turn to ask for confirmation that she is referring again to the cultural mix. Jana's overlapping *yeah* provides confirmation, and Dave responds with a somewhat general comment on London's multiculturalism, followed, after another continuer from Jana in line 198, by a slightly longer comment on Birmingham's cultural mix. Having provided an answer to the initial question, he produces more hesitations, fillers, and finally shifts the topic to talk about the location of his home area in London.

Jana can be seen, then, to pursue a number of different strategies to get her topic on to the agenda and to get a response from her conversational partner. The fact that she does not entirely succeed does not in any way diminish the interactional accomplishment.

In the next extract from 'Modern art' it is the NS who initiates a topic which seems to meet with a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the NNS. Sara and Ann have been talking prior to this extract about Olympic stadiums, their architecture and the uses to which they are put after the event.

Modern art 5 [4]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

376	Ann	frustrating
377	Sara→	but I think I think the next Olympia Games=
378	Ann	= Germany=
379	Sara	=will take place in Berlin
380	Ann	uhh Germany ?
381	Sara	definitely the World Cup Football is is the next
382	Ann →	wasn't the last Olympic Games in Berlin when Hitler
383		was around ?
384	Sara	yeah it's a I don't know eh
385	Ann	I thought it was then when it was boycotted and loads of
386		countries didn't turn up (..) Was that it ? Was that (.) in
387		Germany ? In forty was it ? thirty-eight ?
388	Sara	forty yeah
389	Ann	forty
390	Sara	no thirty-eight] something like that yeah
391	Ann	] (xxx) Was it ? Was it ? Yeah
392		that's right (xxx xxx) was in Berlin (xxx) I thought
393		(xxx) when Hitler was (...) (xxx) ((short laugh))
394	Sara	yeah I don't know if Germany was (xxx)
395		a little earlier than this I can't remember I can't
396		remember I think I think it's the last time (xxx)
397	Ann	I think it was (xxx)
398	Sara	yeah it was it was
399	· Ann	(xxx) and some countries didn't turn up because of
400		the war
401	Sara→	ah I know I know Berlin has (xxx xxx) and they've
402		spent so much money on this on this eh stadion
403	Ann	so hopefully get some money in. Do you think that's
404		the aim ?

In line 376 Ann makes a final assessment relating to the amount of money which has been spent on stadiums rather than on the health service. Sara then introduces a related comment about the next Olympic games, namely that they will take place in Berlin, though she appears to change her mind in line 381, saying that it is the World Cup instead. The shift of focus here moves from general talk to talk about a specific event. A similar strategy is employed by Ann in line 382 when she asks about the previous Olympic Games held in Berlin. Mentioning Hitler and the associated dark chapter in Germany's history is something that even today can make younger generation Germans uncomfortable. Although Sara responds to Ann's question with an emphatic *yes* in line 384, the rest of her comments indicate uncertainty of how to respond. Ann continues to pursue the topic in her next turn in lines 385 to 387, asking questions about the games being boycotted and seeking confirmation of the year it happened. Sara agrees that it was in nineteen forty, which Ann then confirms in line 389 before Sara changes her mind and corrects it to thirty-eight, though she expresses uncertainty about the date. There is some inaudible talk in the next few utterances, but the focus of the talk still seems to be on the timing of the event, until Ann in line 399 returns to the issue of a boycott by other countries. This receives no acknowledgement at all from Sara, who instead brings the focus back to Berlin and what she knows about it: that a new *stadion* is being built. It cannot, of course, be said with any certainty that her lack of response is due to the nature of the topic, though the fact that she makes no substantive contributions and no comments which expand on the topic, could indicate reluctance to engage with the topic. It could also be that she feels she has more to contribute by talking about the topic which she is now initiating. Ann responds with a comment which links with their earlier talk about the expense of building Olympic stadiums, and asks a follow-up question. She therefore shows her readiness to engage with the topic which Sara has initiated.

5.6.2 Unsuccessful topic initiations

There were two instances where potential topic initiations were not taken up at all. The first one comes from 'Hot curry'. At the beginning of the extract Aya is talking about her first experience of eating food with her hands during a visit to Singapore. This ties in with her anecdote about the Indian friend who came to cook for her and her flatmates, and who had asked them to eat the meal with their hands.

Hot curry 5 [5]   Aya (NNS)   Fiona (NS)

134	Aya	(xxx xxx) I don't know I did it only once in Singapore
135		when I travelled there you know I went to a Indian
136		restaurant and everyone was using the hand I said ok ok
137		why not and [I
138	Fiona	[in Thailand as well
139	Aya	ah yeah
140	Fiona	but you have to eat with your (..)
141	Aya	right hand
142	Fiona	right hand
143	Aya	because the left is a dirty hand
144	Fiona	Yeah
145	Aya	yeah and you use it
146	Fiona	(xxx) shake hands with if you touch you mustn't
147		touch anyone on the head and if you touch people
148		with the left hand that's really [rude and
149	Aya	[oh yeah ?
150	Fiona	all this in Thailand I don't know I mean if you're
151		Western they just sort of (xxx xxx) you know
152	Aya	(laughs) they don't really mind it because they know
153		that we [don't know
154	Fiona	[uh hu
155	Aya	(for once?)
156	Fiona →	they were really friendly in Thailand when we were in
157		Thailand all the Thais
158	Aya →	but ok but can you imagine when I eat curry in
159		Singapore you know in Indian restaurant
160	Fiona	uh hu
161	Aya	ok I ate I ate with the hands but you know it was just
162		a naan but this time it was rice
163	Fiona	oh rice really ?

The sequence continues with discussion of using hands for eating, with high levels of involvement evident in their talk in the form of laughter, co-operative completions and repetition. Having mentioned Thailand on two occasions in connection with eating with hands (lines 138 and 150), Fiona uses this association with her trip to initiate a shift in focus in line 156, from how food is eaten in Thailand to the friendliness of the people there. This is the only instance during the conversation where the focus shifts away from the main, global topic of 'food'.

Aya starts her response in line 158 with *but ok*. While *but* signals an upcoming contrast, *ok* could be either a belated, token acknowledgement of Fiona's information, or used to signal a change in participation structure and content. As she then repeats the word *but,* it could conceivably have been used as a hesitation device to give herself time to formulate her next contribution. She does this by reiterating her comment about eating curry in Singapore, which is acknowledged by Fiona in line 160. She then resumes the telling of her earlier, interrupted anecdote, – that they were expected to eat not just *naan,* but *rice* with their hands. She first establishes the relevance of this point by reference to the Singapore experience, and then brings in the contrast with *this time.* It may be because this was such a very crucial point that she did not take up the topic transition offered by Fiona. Fiona's response in line 163 to this new information shows her surprise and *really ?* encourages expansion on the topic. Aya has therefore succeeded in keeping her own topic on the table, in getting the key point across and in stimulating further talk on this topic.

This was one of the very few instances in the conversations where a topic initiation was not taken up or in any way responded to. In the second instance below from 'Computers' it was a topic initiation by the NNS which was not taken up.

The extract is a continuation of Oda and Joan's talk about Valentine's day, which was discussed in Section 5.4.

149	Joan	I know somebody whose birthday is on Valentine's Day
150	Oda	ah
151	Joan	so:
152	Oda	ah yes
153	Joan	that's quite strange
154→	Oda	yeah but eh another Chinese student eh well an exchange
155		student as well eh they take the examination of IELTS do you
156		know IELTS ? (xxx)
157	Joan	no I don't know (xxx)
158	Oda	well it's English examination so like they're they're
159		really complaining about the examination
		(4.0)
160	Joan	do you know where Sally's gone ? Is she here this
161		weekend or has she gone away ?
162	Oda	ah I haven't seen her recently
		((background noises and pause)) (7.0)
163	Joan	do you think it's been ten minutes now ?
164	Oda	uhm:: yep
165	Joan	have you been timing it ?
166	Oda	ah I'm not sure but I think so. That's alright
167	Joan	that will do. Goodbye
168	Oda	yeah
169	Joan	thank you

The topic of Valentine's Day peters out following Joan's comment in line 149 about a friend whose birthday is on Valentine's Day. Oda's only response to this is a minimal *Ah*, and Joan follows it up with a *so::*, which could be inviting a comment or an assessment. This is not forthcoming in Oda's next turn in line 152, which merely consists of a somewhat inappropriate *Ah yes*, and Joan therefore provides an assessment herself. in line 153: *that's quite strange*. This, too, receives only a minimal acknowledgement by Oda, and is followed (line 154) by what may be an attempt to introduce, by contextualisation, a related topic, as implied by the contrastive conjunction *but eh*. She then mentions *another Chinese student*, which is somewhat confusing, as she herself is Japanese, - though *another* may relate to the information she adds on – *an exchange student as well,* i.e. like her. Whether the comments about the IELTS exam are then intended to provide incidental or contextual information, or whether this is intended as the main topic is not clear. Oda attempts to get Joan involved in the talk by asking a question to establish whether she is familiar with this aspect of the topic which is an

interactionally sound move. In response to Joan's brief answer in line 157 she gives a brief explanation and then comments on the students' feelings about the exam. This receives no response at all from Joan, and following a 4 second pause, Joan introduces a complete change of topic in line 160 by asking a question about an unrelated matter, and this leads up to the closure of the conversation. This was one of the most abrupt topic changes in all the conversations, and it is difficult to see why Oda's attempted topic initiation was ignored. It could be that it was simply of no interest, or that the seeming lack of coherence with previous talk made it difficult to follow, or indeed that Joan wanted the recording of the conversation to come to an end. Her motivation for not engaging with the topic may well remain a puzzle without an answer, because, as Hinds (1984:471) said about topic continuity: "What must be kept in mind, however, is that the motivations an individual participant has for either maintaining or not maintaining a specific topic may be inaccessible to the analyst."

5.7 Summary

The extracts which have been presented and analysed in this chapter should go some way towards demonstrating the complexities involved in topic transitions. It is no mean accomplishment, then, that the NNSs in these conversations showed that they are able to skilfully manoeuvre the many elements which together make up the intricacies of effective interpersonal communication. They managed to 'fit' topic initiations coherently with prior talk; the topics they introduced covered a much wider range of content than merely 'here-and-now' situations, and their initiations showed attentiveness to the interests and concerns of their conversational partners.

They made competent use of a wide variety of strategies for moving the topic in a different direction, such as the use of repetition to maintain a coherent link while introducing new information, telling a related anecdote, and, not least, explicitly or implicitly comparing and contrasting experiences.

Interpersonal concerns are therefore strongly implicated in topic transitions and contribute to building mutual understanding.

It was notable that a great many of the transitions related to the achievement of interactional goals, such as generating alignment and greater knowledge of each other. This confirms the point made by Bolden (2006:682) that "Ways in which interlocutors inquire into the lives of their conversational partners or tell about their own lives are crucial to the everyday construction of their relationships."

While both coherence and mutual understanding are manifested in most of these extracts from the conversations, there were nonetheless occurrences during the talks which required the topics to be temporarily or partially suspended in order to clarify some matter to ensure that full understanding was either restored or accomplished, before the topic could be resumed. The next chapter will examine some of these occurrences.

CHAPTER 6

Negotiating understanding

6.1 Introduction

"To understand and to be understood" has been described as the fundamental purpose of conversation (Winograd, 1977 in Planalp and Tracy 1980:241); and this chapter will be concerned with questions of how understanding is achieved in these intercultural interactions, and how the process of negotiating understanding may affect topic continuity.

The main aim of the chapter is to explore those occasions on which conversational topics were temporarily put on hold due to either language problems or differences in either interpersonal or cultural background knowledge, and where, consequently, understanding had to be negotiated before the talk could continue. It will address the following questions: what was the nature of the interruptions, and what was their impact on topic continuity ? More specifically, was the topic resumed after the interruptions, and if so, how was the topic resumption accomplished ? In the case of communicative difficulties resulting from language problems, how were these signalled and resolved ?

The main focus of the chapter will be on the linguistic issues which emerged in the talks; these are invariably prominent in NS-NNS interactions, and, moreover, in this study were the main causes of side sequences. They did not, however, always lead to communicative difficulties. Section 6.2 of the chapter will discuss extracts from the conversations where the participants themselves, both NSs and NNSs, draw attention to the fact that they are involved in intercultural communication, and that differential language expertise may be an issue.

Section 6.3 will discuss the role and prominence of language difficulties in the conversations, and move on to present an overview of the extent to which communicative difficulties led to topic suspensions and negotiation sequences.

Sections 6.4 to 6.7 will look at the negotiation processes involved in the three types of side sequences, which were presented in Chapter 3, and which, for various reasons, cause, if not a disruption, at least a temporary suspension of the topic. These are *monitor sequences* where the speaker signals that there is some problem of production and initiates a repair process; *repair sequences* where the hearer rather than the speaker initiates repair, and finally, *resource scanners*, which focus not on language difficulties but on filling in potential gaps in cultural or interpersonal knowledge. Resource scanner sequences do not necessarily constitute or lead to communicative difficulties, but, like the other side sequences, are part of the process of establishing mutual understanding. Because side sequences retain a connection with immediately preceding talk, there is usually a fairly smooth transition, and although the main topic may be temporarily abandoned, overall coherence stays intact.

Section 6.8 will examine the only three examples of outright misunderstandings which were found in the ten conversations.

6.2   Being a non-native speaker

The participants in these conversations were all known to each other beforehand, with the NNSs participating in their capacity as friends, classmates or flatmates of the NSs. They were interacting, in other words, as language *users* rather than language *learners*. Although their differential language expertise became relevant at various points during the conversations, it was rare that it was explicitly discussed. The issue of being a non-native speaker was, however, referred to on a few occasions. The participants dealt with the issue in very different ways, and each instance had very different interactional outcomes.

In the first extract we can see how the difficulties of communicating in a second language are discussed in a general way.

The extract comes from 'Football', the conversation between Claude and Ben, and is part of the extract which was referred to in Chapter 1. It is the NNS, Claude, who brings up the topic of being a non-native *speaker*. They have been talking about socialising and making friends, and Claude explains that he and other foreign students tend to make friends amongst themselves rather than with "real English native students".

Football 6 [1]   Claude (NNS) Ben (NS)

124	Claude	'cause yeah I think these people are all talking
125		slower]
126	Ben	] uh
127	Claude→	so and we all have the same difficulties so (..) we we
128		get on well (..)
129	Ben	you can understand each other more I suppose That's
130	→	the problem with eh English people I think they don't
131		understand what it's like for people speaking a foreign
132		language]
133	Claude	] but
134	Ben	so they haven't got any patience to (...)
135	Claude	yeah but I mean I remember the the students from Aston
136		that were in France last year (..) in my university and it
137		was the same peop-French people didn't didn't really
138		talk to them or or go go to them to to try to to socialise
139		with them (..)
140	Ben	uh
141	Claude→	so I mean it's a bit the same so
142	Ben	yeah

These people, which Claude refers to in line 124, are other international students who are doing the same course, and who tend to stick together. At this point Claude makes his status as a non-native speaker relevant by pointing out that the other NNSs speak more slowly, and, by implication, are easier to understand and to converse with. He implies, in other words, that language, more specifically rate of speech, may be a barrier to communicating with English students. Following Ben's acknowledgement

token, Claude summarises by saying that sharing common difficulties helps them get on well. This is followed in line 129 by a supportive comment from Ben, showing understanding of the difficulties. He then locates these difficulties, not in NNSs' linguistic deficiences, but in NSs' lack of understanding and patience. In line 135 Claude's *Yeah but* signals partial agreement, while also introducing a contrast, based on his personal knowledge of a similar situation for other non-native speakers. That he agrees with the basic proposition can be seen from his statement (lines 136-137): *and it was the same.* Thus the topic of being a non-native speaker effectively works to generate alignment and understanding between the participants, as evidenced by their similar accounts of the reluctance of both French and British people to engage with non-native speakers.

A second case appeared in 'Education' where a large part of the conversation is about the respective merits of the German and British education systems, and there is generally a good deal of good-natured teasing between the two interlocutors. Dave is very much the dominant partner in terms of the quantity of his contributions to the talk, and he seems to show his awareness of this in the extract below, where he has been explaining proposed changes to the A-level system.

Education 6 [1]   Jana (NNS) Dave (NS)

309	Jana	= yeah maybe it's better
310	Dave	yeah
311	Jana	you know 'cause eh (..)
312	Dave	yeah 'cause then you get a better scope of (..) eh (...).
313→		sorry you talk go on.
314	Jana	no no
315	Dave	no go on tell say what you were going to say
316→	Jana	no I don't know the English word.
317	Dave	describe it explain it.
318	Jana	no I can't.
319	Dave	you get a better scope (...) you know like a (..) eh (...)what
320→	Jana	yes what do you mean ?
321	Dave	you your the knowledge that you acquire is more general
322	Jana	<u>yes</u> that's what I mean when you're at school in
323		Germany ...

Jana comments in line 309 that the proposed changes may be better, and Dave agrees. Jana then starts to give a reason why she thinks the changes may be better, but hesitates with *eh* and a fractional pause. This allows Dave to take the floor with an agreement token *yeah* and a repetition of *'cause,* thus attempting to give a reason in turn. His utterance peters out with minimal pauses and a hesitation marker. In line 313 he apologises and invites Jana to continue. He is evidently aware that he may have spoken 'out of turn' and not allowed Jana to finish. She declines, and in line 315 again Dave encourages her to say what she was going to say. In line 316 Jana gives as her reason that she does not know the right vocabulary. She, then, is the one who makes her non-native speaker status relevant and draws attention to her limited language proficiency. His response to this is to encourage her to try without relying on a particular word, - a sound compensatory strategy. However, she declines to take advantage of this, and he consequently picks up the thread from line 312, - and again seems to struggle to express himself clearly. At this point (line 321) Jana asks him outright to explain himself, and this exhortation has the effect of forcing him in his next turn to finally clarify the point he has been trying to make. Following Dave's clarification in line 322, Jana uses an emphatic *yes* to state that this was exactly what she meant. She then goes on to make a comparison with education in Germany, and has consequently contributed to restoring the original topic in spite of the lengthy negotiation sequence.

Apart from showing how the status of being a non-native speaker can become interactionally relevant, this extract also highlights the fact that NS talk is not always easily comprehensible, clear, or grammatically accurate, and consequently may contribute to making understanding difficult for NNSs.

The third instance occurred in the 'Lord of the Rings' conversation, where, as already mentioned, the NS is not used to talking to NNSs, and the two participants have only just been introduced by a mutual friend.

This conversation was initially between several people, and as it was recorded in a noisy pub, there were many inaudible exchanges. Throughout the short exchanges between Bob and Inga, the Norwegian girl, it is Bob as the native speaker who repeatedly makes her non-native speakerness relevant. The effect is that, in spite of Lord of the Rings being the ostensible topic, it is Bob's treatment of repair which comes to dominate the conversation.

Prior to the extract below they have been talking about some of the characters in the film, and in the first line of the extract Bob asks her if she found the characters scary.

Lord of the Rings 6 [1]   Inga (NNS) Bob (NS)

```
061    Bob    yeah  did they scare you ?
062    Inga   yes they did very much (laughing) I was frightened
063    Bob    ah::: shame (....)  you weren't ?
              SEVERAL INAUDIBLE EXCHANGES
065    Bob→  sorry they call me Bob gullible Bob (..) oh my God  do
066           you know that word gullible ?
067    Inga   no (laughing)
068    Bob    eh
069    Inga   gullable ?
070    Bob    yes gullable It's eh easily taken in
071    Inga   ea::sily taken in
072    Bob    to be easily taken in is gullable that's two new English
073           words (xxx) in this conversation
074    Inga   I'm writing this
              (Inaudible exchanges)
```

Lines 61-65 develop into a teasing exchange between the two interlocutors. Bob's question about being scared of the film characters is responded to with a laughing confirmation by Inga. He provides an assessment in line 63, followed by a very brief pause, and then he produces a request for confirmation that she was not really scared, but was just joking. In line 65 he defends his (pretended?) misreading of the joke by referring to himself as gullible. His subsequent exclamation *oh my God* and the question of whether she knows this word may be uttered in response to a puzzled expression. It could conceivably also be the case that, as a result of the confusion already caused by his use of the word *philistine* earlier in the conversation (see

section 6.6.1), Bob has now become more aware that his choice of words might potentially be misunderstood.

The NNS laughingly admits to not knowing the meaning of the word, and following Bob's hesitation marker in line 68 she repeats the word with questioning intonation, i.e. a clarification request. She also mispronounces the word, a fact which Bob seemingly ignores in his next utterance, where he repeats this incorrect pronunciation. Ikeda (2005:73) found evidence of NSs using such a tactic as a way of 'normalizing' the word choices or pronunciations of NNSs, and that may be what is happening here. Firth (1996:10) also found evidence of such a practice in lingua franca conversations, where speakers would incorporate *marked* expressions or words used by their partners into their own talk, thus making them seem 'normal.'

Bob proceeds to explain the meaning of the word (line 70), though choosing a phrasal verb to explain is possibly not the best policy, as this is a notoriously difficult area for L2 learners. Although Inga repeats the phrase in line 71, she gives no indication of whether she has actually understood the meaning or not. Bob, after repeating his definition (line 72), points out that there have been two *new* English words in their conversation, and may be drawing attention to the learning opportunity which this represents. The fact that Inga's last audible comment in the extract is *I'm writing this* may indicate that she, too, sees this particular communicative trouble spot as a learning opportunity.

In this extract we have seen how it was the linguistic difference between the two participants which became a dominant feature, and which highlighted their differential expertise with the language, and also how this issue was very explicitly addressed by Bob, the NS. This, together with the other two extracts, illustrate how, in the words of Egbert (2003:1495) "It is the coparticipants who co-construct interculturality by making relevant linguistic and regional categories in their momentary activity."

The linguistic differences and their effects on understanding and on topic continuity will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

6.3 Language and communicative difficulties

Based on the literature and on both formal and informal feedback from L2 learners, there was a certain expectation that language would be a source of potential misunderstandings and difficulties. The first listening to the tapes and subsequent rough transcriptions showed that this was in fact not the case. A detailed, line by line analysis of the transcripts confirmed this finding.

Although the NNSs in this study vary greatly in their levels of language competence, and even the most advanced amongst them make errors, both lexical and grammatical, little evidence was found to indicate that participants oriented to language errors as problematic for the purposes of the interaction. Hosoda (2006:32) comments on

> the importance of distinguishing between *observable* displays of limited language expertise that the participants may or may not *register* but which they do not treat as *relevant* to the interaction, and differential language expertise that the participants *orient to* through their interactional conduct and thus treat as relevant.

There were several occasions on which the NSs clearly employed the tactic of 'let it pass' described by Firth (1996:7), where infelicitous expressions were simply ignored because they were not consequential for the conversation, in the sense that they did not hinder understanding.

Self-repetition within turns, which is often taken to signal a lack of fluency, was employed by some of the NNSs, but would appear in some cases (for example Sara in 'Modern art') to be an idiosyncratic style of communication, rather than necessarily a language problem. It is likely that such self-repetitions may also have fulfilled the function referred to by Rieger (2003:47), namely that

...repetitions of one or several lexical items are considered part of the self-repair organization when their function is to gain linguistic and/or cognitive planning time for the speaker or when used to postpone the possible transition-relevance place.

Self-repetition also seemed to function in a search for accuracy of expression, as in the two examples below from 'Cheesy beans' and 'Modern art', and neither of them can be classed as causing either communicative or conversational difficulty.

Here Sara is describing the works of Gustaf von Hagen, and she works hard to find exactly the right way of describing what he does, to ensure she gets the meaning across. That she succeeds can be seen from Ann's response which addresses the content of the final part of her utterance, while paying no attention to the dysfluencies.

Modern art 6 [1]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

241	Sara	Impressive (..) and you can see every single muscle (..) and eh
242	→	or you can can see how how he cut eh cut his cut cut a human
243		being in (xxx) (laughs) you can see it
244	Ann	I <u>so</u> want to see that

In 'Cheesy beans' we see a very similar operation. Max has announced that he is having a hair cut, and Bella is concerned that it will be cut too short. In line 113 we can see her struggling to find the right grammatical format, but Max, like Ann, responds to the content of her utterance, and furthermore addresses the concern which she had expressed earlier that *it* (his hair) might end up looking ugly if cut too short.

Cheesy beans 6 [1]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)

113	Bella	yeah but how will you cut have them have it cut ?
114	Max	I won't cut it too short (...) maybe a few centimetres

The point is that the NNSs here *do* complete their turns, and that, although they may not be entirely accurate, their meanings are understood by their partners, as evidenced by the replies they receive. These self-repetitions, or dysfluencies, therefore have no effect on the development of the conversation, that is, they do not lead to disruptions of the topic or to negotiations of meaning.

Further evidence for the assertion that the participants were not focused on language difficulties comes from the fact that only a couple of instances were found where NSs corrected any of the many language errors made by their NNS partners. This finding corresponds with that of several other research studies. For example, Chun et al (1982; cited in Nakahama et al 2001)) found that "relatively few errors by the NNS friends were treated as triggers for repair negotiation, suggesting that in social settings error correction is avoided. Kurhila (2001), too, in NS-NNS institutional discourse found that "overt correction occurs rarely" (ibid:1100). Long (1996:444, cited in Braidi, 2002:11) comments about natural NS-NNS conversations that "a metalinguistic focus is lacking and [...] attempts at overt error correction is avoided." Springer and Collins (2008) investigated NNSs in a target language volunteer context and found that "unsolicited language assistance (in the volunteer context) was rare [...], and was related to vocabulary or to pronunciation when it interfered with comprehension" (ibid:52).

Only one example of what appears to be an unsolicited error correction by an NS was found in the data, and the extract is discussed below.

Laura (NNS) and Claire (NS) are discussing the types of pizza toppings which they like.

The tabloid 6 [1]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

367	Laura	and the ham is also ok but not salami eh
368	Claire →	eh pepperoni
369	Laura	no eh pepperoni I like I like eh spicy food
370	Claire	uh
371	Laura	pepperoni ok but not too many

372	Claire	I don't like pepperoni at <u>all</u> on pizza
373	Laura	uh
374	Claire	I don't like spicy beef or anything like that I don't
375		I like quite boring pizza I had a really nice one the

In line 367 Laura declares that she likes ham, but not salami, and then produces a hesitation marker. In line 368 Claire in turn hesitates before producing the word pepperoni. The hesitation here could signal a softening of the potential face threat of correcting her partner, if indeed this is a correction. It could conceivably be a cultural rather than linguistic issue, as people in the UK are more familiar with the pepperoni variety of sliced meat rather than the salami type more prevalent in Europe. Alternatively, Claire could be either putting pepperoni forward as a comparison with salami, or making a suggestion of her own in terms of the pizza toppings she likes or dislikes. Judging by Laura's follow-up in line 369, this might well be how she understood it, as she comments that, in contrast to salami, she does like pepperoni, as well as other spicy foods. Claire's response in line 372 and the subsequent resumption of the topic focuses on a comparison with her own preference, which in this case disagrees with that of Laura, who merely produces an acknowledgement token. Claire goes on to describe her own preferences as *quite boring*, which may be an attempt to mitigate the disagreement she has expressed. She follows this up with a account of a recently enjoyed pizza, and the conversation continues on track with further discussion of pizza topping preferences. In spite, therefore, of the apparent correction, (and the disagreement) both the participants show willingness to stay on topic, and the correction itself is easily integrated into an on-going topical contribution by the NNS.

Having established that it was only on rare occasions that NNS errors led to communicative difficulties, it was nonetheless the case that in some instances language use presented problems which needed to be solved if understanding was to be reached and the conversations able to continue. The next section will discuss the nature and extent of the communicative difficulties which emerged in the conversations.

6. 4 Communicative trouble spots

This section will be concerned exclusively with those instances of language difficulty which had an impact on the topic continuity of the conversations, in other words where the participants stopped the topic in progress in order to focus on a related matter that required clarification. These instances were identified as communicative 'trouble spots' on the basis that both participants attended to them as such, in the sense that they worked together to resolve them to enable understanding to be reached. Once the trouble had been resolved, this allowed the conversations to continue on the same topic as before the side sequence. The different side sequences where understanding is negotiated are discussed in later sections.

It was a surprise to find relatively few such instances of communicative trouble caused by language production or comprehension problems in these conversations. Only 24 instances were identified which could be directly attributed to language-specific problems out of the total of almost 3 hours of talk between 10 conversational pairs of different nationalities and different levels of NNS language expertise.

Four out of the ten conversations contained no such communicative trouble spots at all. This was the case in 'Hot curry', 'Football', 'Universities', and 'Computers'. In the other six conversations the communicative difficulties were distributed as outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3 – Number of communicative trouble spots	
The Tabloid	3
Education	1
Newspapers	4
Modern Art	9
Lord of the Rings	3
Cheesy Beans	4
Total	**24**

Table 3 Number of communicative trouble spots

The picture which emerges, then, is not of conversations which are 'peppered with interruptions', as suggested by Varonis and Gass (1991:122), but of orderly conversations where the most important focus is on communicative goals, and not on differential language expertise.

This finding is in contrast to, for example, Nakahama et al (2001) who in their research found a total of 89 repair sequences in 3 comparatively short conversations between NS-NNS interactants. (The NNSs in their study would appear to be at approximately the same level of language competence as the participants in the current study). One factor which might account for the difference is that Nakahama et al. included all clarification, comprehension and confirmation checks, but, as will be shown, not all such negotiations of meaning, or indeed instances of misunderstanding, are necessarily the result of language difficulties.

In the current study only 8 repair processes were initiated by the NSs, while 16 instances of repair were initiated by the NNSs. 6 of these were other-repairs, and 10 were self-initiated self-repairs. Self-initiated repairs by the NNSs thus formed a large proportion of the overall total, and the general preference for self-repair in conversation, noted by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977), may also apply to NNSs.

The following section will discuss the side sequences which resulted from the self-repair attempts.

6.5 Monitor sequences

The NNSs frequently monitored their own speech production, as we saw in the previous section, by repeating or searching for words during a turn. The instances to be discussed in this section will be exclusively those which led to a joint negotiation process for dealing with the trouble word or phrase and to effect a return to the topic.

A total of 10 such monitoring sequences were found in the conversations and led to a temporary suspension of the topic. Different types of word searches were undertaken and for different reasons. In some cases a specific word was essential for meaning to be conveyed, while in others the actual word was less important for meaning, but revealed either NNS uncertainty about a word. or simply a desire to know the appropriate word to use in the context under discussion.

A search for words might involve the production of one or more 'candidate items' as suitable approximations, and 'try-marking', where the speaker produces a word with questioning intonation. This strategy, according to Hosoda (2006:47) "...is used when a speaker is uncertain whether for this recipient a certain recognitional form (usually a name) he/she used is appropriate to secure recognition (Sacks and Schegloff 1979: Schegloff 1996)." He points out that it is a strategy which is also employed by NSs. Word searches may be resolved without intervention by the NSs, but more often than not there were direct or indirect appeals for help from the NS partner.

6.5.1   Word searches

Most of the word searches in the data which involved both participants were fairly quickly sorted out and had minimal impact on the conversations, as demonstrated by the example below from 'Newspapers'. Fay is talking about the course work she will have to do, and whether to write it in English or French.

Newspapers 6 [1]   Fay (NNS) Will (NS)

598	Fay	have special lecture on how to write an essay (..) it could be
599		interesting if you're writing your eh final thesis or eh disser-
600		dissertation
601	Will	dissertation yeah
602	Fay	dissertation in English eh but I won't because I decided to write

In her comment in line 014 Fay hesitates slightly before *final thesis* and again before the cut-off word : *disser-*. However, she immediately provides the full

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version of the word, in other words she does know which word she wants or needs to use here. Will's repetition of the word plus the confirmatory 'yeah' would seem to indicate that he is responding to her 'uncertainty markers', as well as confirming that she has got the right word, and to confirm his own understanding. Fay in turn repeats the word, not as up-take, but in order to continue on-topic, which she does by providing additional information. It is, then, a very minor blip in the smooth progress of the talk.

A similar example comes from the conversation between Sara and Ann. Sara, in fact, is the NNS who produces the most self-repetitions and word searches, though not all of them involve reactions from her partner, or require any form of negotiation. In the extract below she is describing features of her hometown in Germany to Ann.

Modern art 6 [2]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

528	Sara	and there's a small town Frankfurt
529	Ann	uh
530	Sara	next to the Polish Oder and eh this town is having
531	→	eh ship eh type eh com- company or manufacture
532	Ann	all right yeah yeah manufacturing yeah
533	Sara	manufacturing very (xxx xxx) that will create work
534	Ann	that will create lots of jobs
535	Sara	like thousands like thousands like thousands jobs
536	Ann	uh which will be really beneficial for them won't it ?
537	Sara	yeah yeah because eh if you compare that streets

In line 530 she struggles to find the exact words she wants to use, trying out a variety in quick succession, with the final word being *manufacture*. Ann responds in line 532 with not one, but several acknowledgement tokens, as well as a repetition of the key word to signal that she has understood what Sara has been trying to say. A common tactic by NNSs when a word has been confirmed or provided seems to be to offer a repetition, before continuing or picking up the topic again. As we saw in the extract from 'Newspapers' such repetitions work to re-connect with the topic which has been momentarily put on hold. Sara in line 533 repeats the word *manufacturing* and then continues to make the point that it will create work.

Ann shows her understanding by effectively repeating the same point. We see again that the disruption has been momentary and brief, and that the topic is successfully resumed.

A slightly different version of a word search is in operation in the next extract from the same conversation. Sara is about to tell Ann about a collection of paintings owned by the Spanish royal family.

Modern art 6 [3]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

296	Sara	=and there is a famous eh Royal Royal family called eh (....)
297	→	oh my God what're they called ? Bauer ? Baron ? something like
298		this Baroness
299	Ann	baroness
300	Sara	something like that and they (..) eh (....) they are collecting (..)

In line 296 Sara starts to talk about the Spanish royal family, but is uncertain about the exact royal title. In line 297 she abandons the main topic, i.e. what she was going to say about the royal family, and instead hesitates, and then produces an explicit word search marker *what're they called ?* Brouwer (2003:537) says about such explicit word search markers that, although they may take the form of a question, they do not interactionally "function as a question posed to the interlocutor." They are not in other words, a request for help with unknown vocabulary, but "rather a technique that is used to produce a mutually recognizable reference in otherwise problematic talk." That it is not a request for help in this case can be seen from the fact that Sara immediately after her question 'try-marks' various names as being suitable approximations. At the same time she shows awareness of not being quite accurate by adding the phrase *something like this*.

Ann repeats the word *baroness* in line 299, possibly as confirmation, and Sara again reiterates *something like that*, in other words she acknowledges Ann's contribution, but retains a sense of its inaccuracy. That the exact name is not crucial can be seen from the fact that she then carries on with the main point of her story. Although there are what may be called some perturbations in her speech at this point – the slight pauses and the hesitation marker, she uses

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and they to continue what she intended to say about the Spanish royals, and she has therefore successfully retained her grip on the topic, in spite of the momentary interruption.

6.5.2   Appeals for help

Hosoda (2006:32) compared word searches in both NS-NS and NS-NNS conversations, and found that

> ...the L2 speakers also engaged in a particular repair-initiating practice in which they made their limited L2 expertise relevant: they occasionally stopped the turn constructional unit (TCU) in progress in order to check the correctness of the vocabulary item they had just produced.

We can see an example below of an NNSs stopping in mid-turn to make a direct appeal to her NS partner for help with a vocabulary item. The extract comes from 'Cheesy beans', and Bella is laughingly commenting on why she is not keen to try Max's beans on toast.

Cheesy beans 6 [2]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)


```
153    Bella  (laughing) I have prejudices because (..) it doesn't look very
154→          eh how do you say you don't really want to eat it How do you
155           say ?
156    Max    it doesn't look very appetising
157    Bella  yeah appetising
158    Max    no appetising is you want to eat it
159    Bella  yeah ah yeah but finally it's good
```

Bella is about to give a reason when she stops and asks Max to help find the right expression. She provides a competent paraphrase of what she wants to say, and then repeats her request. Max in line 156 provides not just a word, but a full sentence in explanation. Bella provides an acknowledgement token and repeats the key word to show she accepts this as an accurate representation of what she wanted to say, and that this was exactly the vocabulary item that she was searching for. It would complete and fit with her initial, unfinished utterance from line 153: *it doesn't look very...* This repetition

may function partly to display her understanding, and may also contain a 'learner' element of repeating new information to help memorise it.

However, in line 158 Max steps in with a correction, which appears both unnecessary and inappropriate here. Whether this is because he misunderstood Bella's repetition as indicating *she* had misunderstood *appetising* to mean *not appealing* is not clear. However, his correction means that the negotiation sequence extends for longer than strictly necessary. In line 159 Bella again uses acknowledgement tokens to indicate that she has indeed understood how the word is to be used. In the same turn she returns to the topic by commenting that in spite of the way it looks, it does taste good.

A direct appeal for help was also used by Sara on several occasions, two of which are detailed below. She did not, however, always get the response she was expecting.

In this extract Sara is explaining aspects of the political systems in Germany to Ann, whose knowledge about it is a little shaky.

Modern art 6 [4]　　　　Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

487	Ann		I thought it was just supposed to be Germany
488			now (laughs)
489	Sara		you know you know you know East Germany
490			belongs to the communism ?
491	Ann		oh right
492	Sara		and the communism isn't
493	Ann		oh right
494	Sara		putting money into [the economic
495	Ann		[(xxx xxx)
496	Sara		the West German part must do this right now
497		→	and eh (xxx xxx) local authorities I don't know how you
498			say it
499	Ann		but you know how when communism fell down didn't
500			like a lot of people from eh the communist side move
501			over to eh (xxx xxx) was there a communist West ?

Sara's comments in lines 492 and 496-98 focus on the economic situation resulting from the re-unification of East and West Germany, and she suggests it is the responsibility of West Germany to provide financial support to the former East. In line 497 she refers to *local authorities*, adding *I don't know how you say it,* thus explicitly appealing to Ann for language assistance. Ann's response in line 499, however, completely ignores the appeal, and is entirely focused on the content of Sara's message, and on gaining more information about the situation. It could simply be that in this case there was 'good enough' communication, and hence there was no need to confirm the meaning.

It is quite likely the case that NNSs are more aware of their language shortcomings than their NS interlocutors are, and that they are mostly understood well enough for the purposes of the interactions. Springer and Collins (2008:54) found this to be the case with NNS volunteers in schools who were able to achieve their objectives, in spite of "the non-native aspects of their language".

Most self-initiated repairs were easily and quickly dealt with; however, there were a few occasions when rather more protracted negotiations were required before the language trouble could be resolved, as in the extract below from 'Modern art'.

Sara has been talking about the paintings she has seen in various museums in Spain, and which Ann had expressed a desire to see.

Modern art 6 [5]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

```
307   Sara  you can you can find eh (...) every every so many paintings
308→        of  lot of of different  ? epochs ?  epochs ?
309   Ann   I don't know (...)
310   Sara  time periods
311   Ann   oh right periods yes periods
312→ Sara   epoch ? epoch ?
313   Ann   I don't know that word
314→ Sara   epochs ?
315   Ann   it probably is a word
```

316	Sara	I know how to write it
317		(joint laughter)
318	Sara	you know from the Middle Age
319	Ann	yeah
320	Sara	or from the=
321	Ann	=yeah ok=
322	Sara	=New Age or something like that
323		(2.0)
324	Ann	one day

In 308 Sara uses the word *epoch*, repeating it twice with questioning intonation – possibly in response to a look of incomprehension, possibly because she is uncertain of the pronunciation. Ann's comment in line 309 *I don't know* could relate to either of these: she does not understand or she does not know how to pronounce it either. In line 310 Sara uses a paraphrase *time periods* to explain what she means, and Ann shows her understanding in several ways: first by an oh-receipt, followed by a repetition of the word, then a confirmatory yes, and finally a further repetition.

At this point it would seem that the trouble had successfully been resolved, and the talk could continue on track, but instead in line 312 Sara returns to the trouble source, either to seek clarification about the use or the pronunciation of the word. Sara's identity as a second language speaker is made relevant here, and she is orienting to her NS partner as a language expert.

Ann states that she does not know the word, which may cast doubt on the language competence of Sara. She repeats the word; she may be testing her pronunciation, or inviting Ann to recognise a different pronunciation of the same word. When Ann responds (line 315) that it *probably* is a word, Sara counters by saying that she may not know how to pronounce it, but knows how to write it, -in other words she defends her use of the word, and her competence with the language. At the same time she acknowledges that her competence is not total. This comment is followed by shared laughter, which at this point could be aimed at mitigating possible face threats, or it could equally be signalling alignment at their mutual uncertainty. There does seem to be an implication here that it is the native speaker who falls short of

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language competence, in other words, the vocabulary of the NNS may be wider than that of NS. Not all NSs are necessarily familiar with the less commonly used words of their first language, and in this instance an appeal for help from the supposedly more expert native speaker did not bring about the desired results.

It is not clear whether Sara's next utterance in 318 is a return to the main topic with a renewed reference to the paintings from different periods (line 307), or whether it is an attempt at further explanation. She does, however, go on to provide two more examples, which may be a little unnecessary as her paraphrase has seemingly already clarified the meaning for Ann. Following Sara's last phrase of *New Age or something like that* in line 322, there is a two-second pause, (unusually long in this conversation), and then Ann returns to the original topic, reiterating her desire to see the Spanish paintings. She does this by repeating two words from a much earlier utterance.

This extract brings home the point made by Hosoda (2006:43), who observes that, "... the categories of expert and novice are not stable interaction-external 'participant factors' but locally occasioned by the participants' efforts to achieve intersubjectivity."

In most cases when the NNSs first produced a 'candidate item', and then queried whether this is appropriate or accurate, the appeals seemed to have far less of a disruptive effect on the talk, as it was usually just a case of the NS confirming the accuracy of the 'guessed' item.

In the fairly long sequence which follows where Laura and Claire are exchanging anecdotes about bee stings, Laura on several occasions seeks confirmation from her partner that she is using the right word to describe what happened, and she uses several different strategies to elicit the information.

The tabloid 6 [2]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

408   Laura   a father of one of my friends in Slovakia was a eh

409		→	what's it called the bee <u>sting</u> so he was he has
410			been stung ?
411	Claire		yeah
412	Laura		stung by I think about twenty bees to the kop- eh
413			head
414	Claire		yeah
415	Laura		so he eh
416	Claire		yeah
417	Laura		he was unconscious and eh (xxx) so it's really
418			dangerous like for your life because it's been too
419			much
420	Claire		yeah
421	Laura		of the of the (xxx xxx)
422	Claire		yeah
423	Laura		(xxx xxx) normally I'm not allergic against those
424		→	eh is it <u>bites</u> ?
425	Claire		yeah
426	Laura·		ok so it happened it happened to me so many
427			times in the in the swimming pool when I played
428			volley ball and (xxx)

In line 409 we see the first indication that Laura is unsure of the right word, and she uses questioning intonation to check if her usage is correct. Claire briefly confirms that it is, and Laura repeats the trouble word and incorporates it neatly into the continuation of her story. A little further on she moves the talk to personal aspects of the same topic, and in line 424 she is again uncertain about a word, and this time she asks Claire directly if *bites* is the right word. Following Claire's confirmation, Laura uses *ok* to acknowledge receipt of the information, and continues to talk about instances of being stung by wasps or bees. This eventually leads into the anecdote discussed in chapter 5.

In line 501 she is building up to the main point of the anecdote with her remark *and there <u>was</u> one* (a wasp in her carton of orange juice).

The tabloid 6 [3]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

501	Laura		and there <u>was</u> one
502	Claire		a:::h
503	Laura →		and it it it stung ? =
504	Claire		=yeah=

505	Laura	=stung me on my lip I'm not not sure anymore
506		where it was on my upper lip (xxx xxx) and eh
507		I was really lucky because if I would have
508		swallowed her
509	Claire	yeah
510	Laura	it could have stung me=
511	Claire →	=stung you on your neck like=
512	Laura	=yeah=
513	Claire	=or your throat

Claire shows her appreciation and understanding with a long-drawn out a:::h, but before Laura can really get to the point, she again struggles with the same word as earlier, the past tense of sting. Her use of questioning intonation again elicits a confirmation from Claire, and as before she repeats the word and incorporates it into the continuation of the story. Interestingly, Claire also employs a repetition of the same word stung in her latched comment in line 511, but this time to show understanding and alignment with Laura.

The next fragment is from Claire's account of a similar event which happened to her.

The tabloid 6 [4]　　　　Laura (NNS)　Claire (NS)

526	Laura	uh
527	Claire	and like I pulled it [and
528	Laura →	[what do you call the thing
529		that keeps remains ?
530	Claire	a sting
531	Laura	the sting
532	Claire	yeah 'cause I pulled the wasp off
533	Laura	uh
534	Claire	and it left the sting in

In line 528 Laura interrupts Claire to ask for the word to describe the thing that keeps remains. Claire has no problem understanding what she is referring to and supplies the word, which Laura repeats. In line 532 Claire resumes her story, and judging from the way she phrases the resumption: yeah 'cause, she may be building on Laura's query about the sting, as this word features in the punch-line. Even this outright interruption, then, is not detrimental to topic continuity.

Below is the final example in this series of related word searches and queries.

The tabloid 6 [5]   Laura (NNS) Claire (NS)

587	Claire	yeah
588	Laura	we are and <u>they</u> have to die we've we've been
589	→	only stung, sting, stung
590	Claire	yeah
591	Laura	and they have to die after it so <u>we</u> are the bad ones
592		(laughing)

In line 589 Laura yet again try-marks the verb forms: *stung, sting, stung,* and Claire produces a *yeah* which could be either confirmation of accuracy or agreement with the opinion that bees are worse off than the people they sting. Laura links the continuation of the topic with *and,* adding a summarising statement and laughter. In spite, though, of these many requests for help with vocabulary, there is evidence of continued involvement and interest in each other's stories, and the momentary disruptions can not, therefore, be said to have a major impact on the topic development.

These examples have shown how the NNSs work very hard to get their meanings across without abandoning the topics in progress, and also how they successfully manage to resume or continue talking *on-topic* after the, generally, very brief interludes to clarify language issues. Their topic returns were invariably coherently managed, often with the help of a repetition. Hosoda (2006:43) found that, in contrast to L1-L1 conversations, "..the L2 speakers in the L1-L2 conversations usually accept the repair by repetition, which is uncommon in the L1 conversations in the corpus." The repetitions functioned both to link back to the main topic and to acknowledge receipt of confirmation and information. We have also seen how the NSs co-operate in this process, irrespective of whether or not they were actually called upon by their NNS partners to provide any help with language.

In none of these extracts where language issues and differential language expertise came to the fore was there any evidence of misunderstanding or lack of understanding. Instead the negotiation process worked to ensure that

mutual understanding was achieved. These extracts then, would seem to provide some support for the view expressed by Rieger (2003:68) that "...self-repair is a well-organized, orderly, rule-governed phenomenon and not a chaotic aspect of spoken discourse."

In the next section we will look at a different type of side sequence, where the repair is not self-, but other-initiated.

6.6   Repair sequences

In common with the monitor sequences discussed above, the talk which occurs within a repair sequence is peripheral to the current topic of the conversation. The repair item or trouble source which now becomes the focus of attention is, according to Svennevig (1999:262), "..marked as background information in that it is not presented as relevant in its own right, but only as support for some presentation in the previous or subsequent discourse."

The main communicative purpose of a repair sequence, then, is to resolve the linguistic difficulty so that the conversation can continue on track, i.e. with the on-going topic intact. Hence, repair sequences are part of the process of negotiating and achieving understanding, and not just isolated incidents of partial or non-understanding.

The key stages of repair sequences encompass the identification and resolution of the problem, acknowledgement of understanding and the return to the main topic. In the context of topic continuity and coherence, I will discuss how this return is accomplished, with particular reference to those instances where it is the NNS who performs the return. A further key feature for discussion is the nature and form of the utterance which leads to an intervention in the talk, as this proves to have a significant impact on the repair negotiation process.

Two examples from the same conversation will serve as initial illustrations of repair sequences; other examples will be presented in the next section. The

two extracts come from 'Newspapers', and in the first extract it is the NS, Will, who initiates the repair. Fay has been talking about her dissertation, and the fact that she is writing it in English and not her first language, French.

Newspapers 6 [2]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

620	Fay	and eh I think it's too late to change it now because I already
621		have a promoter
622	Will	a::: ?
623	Fay	somebody that helps you with your dissertation
624	Will	ok
625	Fay	already [eh
626	Will	[like a supervisor
627	Fay	(xxxx) my subject which are can't change it any more well
628		don't <u>want</u> to change it it's

In line 038 Fay uses a term which is more common in boxing than in education, and Will seeks clarification by means of a long-drawn out *a::: ?* with questioning intonation, thus prompting her to clarify the meaning. She immediately provides an explanation which Will accepts. She then picks up where she left off, with a repetition of the word *already*, but in overlap with her slight hesitation, Will interrupts, supplying the appropriate term for *promoter*, namely *supervisor*. There is no audible evidence that Fay acknowledges this contribution to her English vocabulary, or sees it as a repair, as she merely continues her talk on being unable to change the language of her dissertation. It could be that she does already know the correct word, or simply that it is not of great importance in this context. She has got her meaning across, and that is what matters. That it might matter more to Will, can be seen from the position of his correction, which does not arrive until she has resumed talking on-topic and as an interruption. This could be a similar case to the ones described by Hosoda (2006:43) where "By pursuing the L2 speaker's uptake, the L1 speakers oriented to their 'expert' identity."

It is clear that in this instance mutual understanding has been achieved, and achieved by a joint effort, by Fay offering a comprehensible paraphrase, an acceptance token by Will, and a consequent alternative lexical item. Meaning

in this case has been negotiated between the conversational partners, and a return to the topic has been effected.

In the second extract from the same conversation it is the NNS, Fay, who initiates a repair in response to an unfamiliar term used by her partner. They have been discussing the unfavourable treatment by the media of Cherie Blair, the then Prime Minister's wife.

Newspapers 6 [3]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

```
214   Will    but then before him was Margaret Thatcher wasn't
215           it and her husband Norman and he did nothing I think it's just
216           because Cherie Blair is probably so (..) high profile she's a QC
              she's a barrister
217   Fay→   what's that ?
218   Will    QC a it's just a (...) extra-qualified barrister
219   Fay     I see
220   Will    sort of higher (xxxx) but as I say it's just because she's such a high-
221           profile ( ) first lady if that's what you want to call her that they're
222           having a go
```

In line 216 Will is putting forward a possible reason for this unfavourable media treatment, namely that Cherie Blair's position as a barrister makes her high-profile. The fact that Will initially uses the abbreviation *QC* immediately followed by *barrister* may have been in response to a puzzled look from Fay, who in line 217 asks a direct question about the meaning, without specifying whether she is referring to QC or barrister. Will repeats the word QC, possibly on the understanding that this is the troublesome word, and provides an explanation. Fay accepts this with a brief *I see* to signal her understanding, after which Will adds a further, partly inaudible expansion of his explanation before resuming the topic with *but as I say*, which therefore works to link back to the original comment which he started in line 214.

The fact that some NSs tend to provide additional explanations, after the NNSs have signalled their understanding, could conceivably be because many NSs are unfamiliar with the process of explaining vocabulary items, and that they therefore 'overdo' it to make sure they have got it right. These

additional explanations are therefore not in response to lack of understanding on the part of the NNSs.

In these two extracts we saw very different means of indicating that there was a potential problem in the talk. The next section will take a closer look at the ways in which repair is initiated, as these repair initiators, rather than the problems themselves, proved to have more of an impact on the conversations.

6.6.1 Repair initiators

A variety of strategies are available to signal that there is a problem in understanding what a speaker is saying, and in Chapter 3 the strategies associated with interactional modification within SLA were defined: *clarification requests, confirmation checks* and *comprehension checks.*

In the other-initiated repair sequences in the data it was overwhelmingly clarification requests which were employed to signal a problem, while in the resource scanner sequences to be discussed in section 6.7, confirmation checks were the main strategy.

A request for clarification of an utterance can take several forms. Leibscher and Dailey-O'Cain (2003:376) point out that they "differ with respect to their specificity, or ability to "locate" the particular trouble source in another speaker's turn." They can be signalled by a raised eyebrow or a puzzled expression, and vocally can range from an unspecific *eh ?* or *what ?* to partial or complete repeats of the trouble source item(s), and to the more specific *What do you mean by x ?*

In the extracts to follow we will see how different types of clarification requests affected the repair process, and how, in some cases, they caused more confusion than clarification.

The first extract comes from Cheesy beans, where Bella and Max have been talking about what they are going to do later.

225

Cheesy beans 6 [3]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)

095   Bella so we go to the computer room ?
096→ Max   uh ?
097   Bella so you go so we are going to the computer room ?

The form which Max's clarification request takes makes it very difficult to see where the trouble in this case lies. There is nothing unclear about the lexis or structure that could conceivably lead to misunderstanding, though it is of course possible that this is a case of mis-hearing. Judging by Bella's response in line 097, which includes a syntactic modification, it was perceived by her as a request for clarification. There is, however, another possible interpretation of this extract, namely that this 'open class repair initiator' (Drew 1997:72) which does not specifically target the source of a trouble spot, instead expresses surprise at the mere fact of this question being asked at all. Foster and Ohta (2005:411) observe about both clarification requests and confirmation checks that "Rather than indicating a communication problem, they may in fact be performing some other discourse function, such as expressing agreement or encouragement to continue." That the "other discourse function" here may be surprise at the question can be seen from Max's subsequent reply in line 098:

098   Max no I've already got it printed out so we don't have to do that but

The next extract comes from the same conversation, and here it is the NNS who initiates the repair process.

Cheesy beans 6 [4]   Bella (NNS) Max (NS)

015   Bella no I don't want to try (laughs) (...) So what (..) what did you do
016   last night ?
017→ Max   last night I went to Pounded and got pounded
018→ Bella you got pounded ?
019   Max   yeah
020   Bella what what does it mean ?
021   Max   it means I got very very drunk
022   Bella ah ah no you got very very drunk
023   Max   uh

```
024    Bella  Yeah but it's very strange eh it seems to be the motivation of
025           most of the students when they go out just to to to be very drunk
```

The lexical trouble arises from Max's use of the words *pounded*, both as the name of a club and a descriptive adjective in line 017. Although I could, when I listened to the tape, hazard a guess at the meaning, I still felt the need to check with my sons that there was indeed a club by the name of Pounded, and that *getting pounded* is the latest slang expression for having had too much to drink. If inter-generational differences in language use can make understanding problematical, it is hardly surprising that the NNS does not understand the meaning.

The choice of lexis by the NS signals not just his membership of a particular age and social group, but also the expectation that his meaning will be understood. He does not, in other words, seem particularly conscious of a need to modify his speech in this interaction with a NNS. This becomes even more obvious when Bella's clarification request (line 018) is misunderstood by Max as merely a request for confirmation, i.e. he's not aware that more than confirmation is required in this instance. Bella therefore resorts to asking directly for the meaning of the word *pounded*, which Max provides in line 021.

Bella signals her understanding of *pounded* by repeating in full Max's explanation, but immediately prior to this her use of response tokens shows not just understanding of the meaning of the word, but also of the implications for Max: in line 022 *ah ah* signals the realisation of what actually happened to him, while the *no* could be a way of expressing commiseration, an assessment, in other words. She is responding, therefore, on several levels, both the linguistic and the interpersonal.

Bella, after a final acknowledgement token in line 024 to accept understanding of the language issue, continues with a *but* plus an assessment: *but it's very strange*. The *but* here does not really fulfil its normal function of introducing a contrast, but seems to be used primarily as a means of providing a link to the projected talk. Her assessment relates to the issue of student behaviour with

regard to getting 'very drunk'. She uses lexical repetition to effect a topic transition to a behavioural aspect which is a common source of incomprehension for most European students. There is a more fundamental issue of understanding at stake here rather than just a lexical one, and she succeeds in putting this issue on the topical agenda, as it is taken up for further discussion.

This extract goes to show how repetition in discourse is a two-edged sword, extremely useful and multi-functional, but with ambiguous meanings and purposes. It may be the case, therefore, that over-reliance on one particular conversational strategy to perform a range of different functions may have unforeseen and possibly undesirable interactional consequences, insofar as it may lead to misunderstanding and lengthier negotiation sequences.

A particularly extreme example of how a clarification request and the consequent negotiation process itself can be problematic is seen in the following extract from 'Lord of the Rings'. It starts with Bob asking Inga if she has read the book.

Lord of the Rings 6 [2]   Inga (NNNS)   Bob (NS)

027	Bob		have you read the book ?
028	Inga		no
029	Bob	→	Philistine
030	Inga→		sorry ?
031	Bob		Philistine
032	Inga→		Philistine ?
033	Bob		Philistine yeah
034	Inga→		what's that ?
035	Bob		eh have you not heard that expression before ?
036	Inga		no
037	Bob		it's like a (...) I don't know the Philistines were an ancient
038			race of people or something
039	Inga		yeah
040	Bob		Philistine I don't know how to explain it now. It's like eh
041			(...) how could you ?
042	Inga		aaah ok [ok
043	Bob		[like eh say say I really like eating ketchup with
044			sausages and if I say Do you eat ketchup with
045			sausages ?and you say No I eat mayonnaise (...) Aah

046		Philistine !
047	Inga	oh (..) how could you do something like that
048	Bob	yeah how could you do something
049	Inga	yeah ok
050	Bob	yeah did you see the film ?

Lines 29 to 49 in effect constitute one long repair sequence with the assessment *philistine* being the trouble source, but it takes Inga three attempts at seeking clarification before Bob realises that something more than confirmation and repetition is required. Inga's first attempt in line 030 is by way of an 'open repair initiator', signalling unspecified trouble with Bob's utterance. That it is in fact a request for clarification is not clear at this point. It could equally well be a mishearing, an expression of surprise, or even outrage at being called a philistine.

Bob in response merely repeats the same word, possibly as confirmation that she had heard right. Koshik (2005:209) in discussing repeats used by a non-native speaker found that such repeats were initially always taken to be indications of "candidate hearings / understandings proffered for confirmation". She suggests that

> It may be that, with adults at least, even with those who have limited proficiency in a language, repair is generally at first taken to express problems with hearing rather than problems with competency.

In this case Bob's repetition does not clarify the matter and therefore draws a more targeted query from Inga (line 032), who repeats the word with questioning intonation. Now most people who are used to speaking with NNSs would probably at this stage have realised that an explanation might be needed. However, Bob again repeats the word followed by a final confirmatory *yeah,* which may indicate that he assumes this to be the end of the matter. Inga, however, persists in her efforts to understand the meaning of the word, and in line 034 finally resorts to a direct request for an explanation. It is only at this point that Bob realises that there is a problem, and what that problem is, namely that Inga has not heard the word before. For Bob, Inga's most salient identity becomes that of non-native speaker.

Again we can see that the different functions of repetition here cause some unnecessary confusion and contribute to extending the negotiation sequence. Confusion may arise because, as Foster and Ohta (2005:408) note "A rising intonation and verbatim repetition of a partner's utterance may signal understanding and interest in further information just as easily as it may signal a lack of understanding and desire for clarification."

Bob struggles not only to understand that clarification and an explanation of vocabulary is required, but also how to explain the meaning of the word he used: *philistine*. Even language teachers can find it difficult to come up with sound explanations of vocabulary items on the spur of the moment, so it is no wonder that he is unsure how best to do it. After several abortive attempts and admissions of the difficulty, he finally resorts, in line 041, to a paraphrase, one which is commonly used to express disapproval or disagreement: *How could you* ? Inga's response to this is a long drawn-out *aaah*, followed by 2 *oks*. This would seem to indicate, firstly, a dawning realisation of understanding and then further confirmation of this understanding. Bob, however, in overlap with the last *ok* continues his explanation, this time with a rather mundane example of how disapproval or disagreement might be expressed. Inga responds in line 047 with an oh-receipt, followed by an extended repetition of Bob's original offering, presumably to show she has fully understood how the word is used. Bob in turn acknowledges this, and provides a partial repeat as confirmation. Inga further reiterates her understanding (line 049) with two acknowledgement tokens, and the repair sequence is concluded by a final *yeah* from Bob.

This extract shows how the NS contributions work to prolong the repair sequence rather than bring it to a swift conclusion and return to the topic. The implications of being called a philistine are not touched on, which they might well have been, had the negotiation process not been so protracted. Instead Bob initiates a new line of related talk by asking if Inga has seen the film.

It is somewhat ironical that interactional devices which are primarily thought to function to clarify meaning and understanding can, in some instances, have the opposite effect, in that they become the direct cause of extended negotiation sequences, because their forms and /or functions are misunderstood.

Eerdmans and Di Candia (2007:587) comment on what they call 'negotiative metatalk sequences' (NMS) in NS-NNS discourse that

> Despite its role in the co-construction of shared sociolinguistic knowledge and competence between native and non-native speakers, the NMS may sometimes constitute a potential disruption in the flow of conversation due to the prominent part its negotiatory structure plays in the 'disentangling' of conversational 'hitches'.

However, we have seen evidence that the participants in the conversations can successfully collaborate on finding solutions to language difficulties, and that the creation of understanding in discourse is a joint accomplishment. In the words of Weigand (1999: 770) "Meaning and understanding or misunderstanding an utterance is not an autonomous unit by itself but part of the dialogic interaction".

The extracts presented so far would seem to contradict the general perception that repair negotiations due to linguistic difficulties have a detrimental effect on the coherent nature and on topic continuity in NS-NNS conversations. The next section will examine extracts from the conversations to see if this also holds true for resource scanner sequences.

6.7   Resource scanners

We have seen how in monitor and repair sequences the purpose was to establish understanding of a specific word or phrase, but the concept of

understanding is of course much more complex than just knowing the meaning of what is being said at a linguistic level. Shared knowledge of what is being talked about is also a pre-requisite for mutual understanding, and in intercultural communication the existence of such shared knowledge can not be taken for granted. This section will examine the effects which gaps in presumed knowledge may have on the interactions.

Two of the key differences between the side sequences which initiated a language repair negotiation and the resource scanner sequences presented in this section are that their functions are different, and that different types of interactional modifications seem to predominate. Rather than dealing with a troublesome language issue or gap, these sequences deal with gaps in factual, interpersonal or cultural background knowledge, and one of the participants may 'scan' or check whether the co-participant has the required content knowledge to enable talk on the topic to continue. Alternatively, the hearer may check that there is shared knowledge about a particular reference, for example to a place or event. In many of the resource scanner sequences a simple confirmation check was often sufficient to establish the existence of what Svennevig (1999:284) refers to as "the *necessary* expertise for continuing the main sequence in a certain way".

In the two extracts below we can see how the triggers for a resource scan are names of a place and a paper respectively that the native speakers would be familiar with. They clearly make the assumptions that they are also known to their NNS partners.

In the first extract from 'Modern art' Ann is talking about the unspecified types of gardens or green areas which Sara had referred to earlier in the conversation, and says that they/it are plentiful in Sutton, a prosperous area whose full name is Sutton Coldfield, but is often referred to by the abbreviated version that Ann uses in line 026. This is quite likely the explanation for Sara's confirmation check in line 027, where she repeats the abbreviation followed by a candidate replacement of the full version. She is, in other words, aware

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of the existence of such a place, but felt the need to check that they were indeed talking about the same town.

Modern art 6 [6]   Sara (NNS)   Ann (NS)

026   Ann   if you go into Sutton get across into Sutton you'll see it all there
027→ Sara   Sutton ? Sutton Coldfield ?
028   Ann   yeah=
029   Sara   =yeah yeah there's (xxxx)

Ann confirms that she has the right place, and Sara resumes the topic with another confirmatory *yeah*, before going on to comment further on the same topic. Although her entire utterance is not audible, she includes the words *there's* which would appear to link with *there* as used by Ann in line 026 before the start of the side sequence, and she has therefore successfully contributed to the resumption of the topic.

The next extract from 'Newspapers' shows a similarly short negotiation process and also involves a confirmation check.

Newspapers 6 [4]   Fay (NNS)   Will (NS)

178   Will   or The Mail I used to like The Mail
179   Fay→   The Daily Mail ?
180   Will   yeah
181   Fay   but that's eh a totally different different newspaper

In the discussion about their preferences for various newspapers, Fay checks that she has understood correctly which newspaper Will is referring to. This is sensible in so far as the local (Birmingham) newspaper is often referred to as The Mail, and it could equally well be that paper which Will is talking about. He, however, confirms the accuracy of her query, and she then proceeds to give her opinion of this paper. In other words, the main business of the talk is resumed by the NNS after this peripheral side sequence.

In most cases, then, confirmation checks used in resource scanner sequences proved effective in enabling understanding to be achieved with minimal disruption. In one conversation, however, its use proved problematic.

The extract comes from near the beginning of the talk between Laura and Claire when they are discussing a newspaper photo of the actress, Julia Roberts.

The tabloid 6 [6]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

015	Claire		she's going running (..) in Notting Hill
016	Laura	→	in Nottingham ?
017	Claire		Notting <u>Hill</u>
018	Laura		Notting <u>Hill</u>
019	Claire		yeah in London

In line 018 the NNS, Laura, repeats parts of Claire's previous utterance, thus specifically targeting the name of the place as the source of the hearing or understanding problem. This is a 'candidate understanding', whereby "the speaker indicates his or her interpretation of the trouble source turn. Candidate understandings imply "Do you mean" at the beginning of the repair initiation, though this is rarely stated in the turn itself." (Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain 2003: 384) The trouble is soon cleared up by Claire who repeats the name with stress on the last, troublesome, part. This in turn is repeated exactly by Laura to signal understanding, and Claire, for good measure, adds that it is in London, in contrast to the Midlands town mentioned by Laura.

While this confirmation check proved relatively straightforward, that was not the case with the one which was used in the immediately following section of the conversation.

The tabloid 6 [7]   Laura (NNS)   Claire (NS)

020	Laura		really ?=
021	Claire		=yeah
022	Laura		I was there I've met her
023	Claire	→	you've met her ?
024	Laura		I <u>have</u> met her

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025	Claire	you never bumped into her when she was on a jog
026	Laura	does she live there or what ?
027	Claire	I don't know that's what I was thinking

That Laura's next confirmation check in line 020 refers not to the immediately preceding utterance, but to the information in line 015 is clear from a later point in the conversation and also from her comment in line 022: she already knows that Notting Hill is in London. Her claim to have been there, and to have met the actress they are talking about, is met by what is probably an incredulous request for confirmation by Claire. This looks very much like the typical modification request described by Long (cited in Foster and Ohta 2005:410) for "the interlocutor either to furnish more information or recode information previously given." However, instead of responding to this implied invitation for more information, Laura merely confirms, by repetition, the information she has already given. What is of relevance here is that there is essentially a misunderstanding about the type of response which is required following a confirmation request. It is not, in other words, always sufficient to merely confirm the accuracy or appropriacy of the information which has already been provided. Having failed with the confirmation check, Claire then tries a different tack for finding more information. This time she frames it in a joking manner, and the comment relates back to the start of this topic, about a photo of the jogging actress. Laura, instead of responding to Claire's remark, asks a related question, thus returning the focus of the talk to the actress rather than herself, and Claire in turn accepts this new focus.

It was not only confirmation checks which were employed in the process of checking that participants shared sufficient contextual information to enable understanding to take place. In the next extract from 'Modern art' we can see one of the very few comprehension checks which appeared in the conversations.

Sara and Ann have been talking about the lack of attractions in Birmingham, and in line 072 Ann comments on and compares this city with London.

Modern art 6 [7]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

```
072    Ann    no eh yeah but Birmingham really doesn't offer a lot but neither
073           does London when you come down to it
074    Sara   yeah
075→   Ann    London's only got like the London Eye and I mean do you know
076           the London Eye ?
077    Sara   yeah yeah =
078    Ann    =the big wheel =
079    Sara   =yeah=
080    Ann    = eh and what else does London have ? Tours of Buckingham
081           Palace which you can't go in you can only look on the outside
```

Ann's claim that London does not have a lot to offer is met with an acknowledgement token by Sara, after which Ann mentions the London Eye as the only attraction. Before going any further she produces *I mean* and checks that Sara knows this attraction. Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) claim the basic meaning of *I mean* to be one of warning of an upcoming adjustment in the talk, and that it may also mitigate potential face threats, and these seem likely functions here. Ann shows awareness of Sara's status as a 'non-native', and a concern to ensure that common ground is established. That Sara is indeed familiar with the London Eye can be seen from her repeated *yeah yeah*, but Ann nonetheless gives additional confirmation by providing a brief description, which in turn receives further confirmation from Sara in line 079. Having thus established that they share the requisite background knowledge, Ann can pick up the thread of the main business of the talk, that is, what London has to offer. This, then, has constituted a side sequence, but unlike most of the ones we saw earlier which involved linguistic repair to establish understanding, this one has focused on a potential knowledge or cultural gap, and the steps taken to overcome it. As in some of the previous extracts we can see how Ann produces a hesitation marker and the use of *and* to effect the topic resumption.

The next example of a resource scanner sequence also features the use of a discourse marker to promote mutual understanding, in this case *you know*. Fuller (2003:188) suggests that one function of *you know* is to "present unknown information which the speaker wishes to have accepted by the hearer." She also quotes the core meaning proposed by Schourup (1985)

which is "... to check the correspondence between intended speaker meaning and hearer information state." This seemed to be a frequent function in the conversations in the study, but would warrant closer analysis, and ideally of a larger data base. The extract below from 'Hot curry' shows an example of its use to generate understanding between the participants.

Hot curry 6 [1]   Aya (NNS)   Fiona (NS)

```
092   Fiona        and like if you put chilli in Bolognese just to make it taste
093          →     you know the ] middle bit=
094   Aya   →                  ] I know
095   Fiona        =just to make it taste=
096   Aya          yes
097   Fiona        =she's always like Uh it's really hot
098   Aya          oh yeah ?
```

Aya and Fiona are still talking about hot food, and Fiona is explaining that she sometimes puts chilli in spaghetti sauce, using *you know* in this instance to elicit understanding of meaning from Aya, which she provides in overlap in line 094, and thereby shows her involvement and interest, as well as signalling that she follows the meaning which Fiona intended.

As in NS-NS conversations, such discourse markers were clearly intended to reflect and to ascertain shared understanding of opinions and topics. They contribute therefore to successful communication at the meta-communicative rather than the propositional level (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002:728).

We have seen how the participants employ a range of strategies to negotiate meaning and understanding, and the extracts have shown that both NSs and NNSs do their utmost to ensure that the interactional goals of the conversations are achieved, and furthermore that they are achievable in intercultural encounters without causing serious disruptions to topic continuity and coherence. It would seem that there is a general tendency to want to effect a topic return after sequences which require any sort of negotiation of meaning or understanding, and that the NNSs are equally capable of effecting such returns.

6.8   A note on topic returns

In the great majority of cases it was the NNSs who took responsibility for performing a return to the topic in those instances where they had initiated a side sequence. It is not feasible to provide any generalisations about the strategies used by the NNSs to effect a return to the topic, and no discernible patterns were evident in the examples found. What *is* evident, though, is their ability to provide some sort of link with prior talk at the point of topic returns.

There were some indications that repetition of key words plus the addition of new information was one way in which a coherent topic return could be accomplished. We saw this, for example, in the extracts from 'Newspapers' and 'Modern art', both of which are repeated below.

```
016   Will    dissertation yeah
017   Fay     dissertation in English eh but I won't because I decided to write
```

Fay repeats the trouble word *dissertation*, and integrates it with new information. This is a very similar procedure to that used by Sara in the excerpt below, where the trouble word was *manufacturing*.

```
532   Ann     all right yeah yeah manufacturing yeah
533   Sara    manufacturing very (xxx xxx) that will create work
```

Interestingly, none of the NNSs applied the method used on occasion by NSs, namely repetition of their own initial utterances, i.e. immediately prior to the start of the side sequence. An example will be shown in the next section on misunderstandings.

The use of the conjunction *and* also made fairly frequent appearances in topic returns. Turk (2004:234) suggests that

> *And* may be used to mark a speaker's continuation of an unfinished unit of talk that has been interrupted either by an aside comment from the speaker or by another conversation participant. In this way, *and* is shown to be a text-building device and an interactional marker that organizes ideas and performs actions in conversational discourse.

Schriffrin (1987:147) similarly points out that "*and* marks a speaker's definition of what is being said as a continuation of his/her own prior talk". Moreover, she notes that *and* can impose "a continuative effect on discourse whose structure had actually warranted otherwise", as might be the case with side sequences and other interruptions.

An example of this function of *and* was seen in extract 6 [3] from 'Modern art'.

300   Sara   something like that and they (..) eh (....) they are collecting (..)

Sara uses *and they* to pick up the thread of her talk about the Spanish royal family and their collection of paintings, so effects the return via *and* plus the referential *they*. Because this side sequence was quite short, there can be no doubt about who *they* refers to, and she can continue on-topic, safe in the knowledge that sufficient coherence has been re-established to ensure the listener can follow. The brief pauses and hesitation marker which follow this may, though, be evidence that she needs to re-connect with her thoughts before being able to proceed.

Ann, the NS in 'Modern art', also shows signs of hesitation in line 080 below, prior to the *and* which is used to resume her comments on the topic.

080   Ann   = eh and what else does London have ? Tours of Buckingham

So there are indications that, in some cases and in spite of an ability to return to the current topic, some disturbance has been created. Eerdmans and Di Candia (2007:587) note that a return to ongoing talk following negotiation sequences "is regularly treated as problematic by participants". In their study participants used "prefatory discontinuity markers" like *Well* and *Ok* to effect a return to the topic. No such markers were found after side sequences in the current study, possibly indicating that these interludes were not sufficiently severe to merit explicit marking of a return to the topic.

A final extract from 'Hot curry' will show not just how the word *and* was used in returning to the topic, but also how the NNS persisted in effecting a return,

in spite of abrupt interruptions for clarification and confirmation by her NS partner. Aya is in the process of telling Fiona about the very hot curry cooked by her Indian friend and that they were expected to eat it with their hands.

Hot curry 6 [2]   Aya (NNS) Fiona (NS)

167	Aya	and we're all Oh my God and eh first you have to mix
168		eh rice with curry and then (makes slurping sounds)
169		like this and we're like a:::hh
170		(both laughing)
171	Aya	and [after that
172	Fiona →	[where ? in your flat ?
173	Aya	yeah [and
174	Fiona →	[even eh what's her name from Morocco?
175	Aya	Nahida
176	Fiona	Nahida
177	Aya	and we were (xxx xxx) like this
178	Fiona	yes

Following their laughter in line 170 at Aya's description, she attempts to continue the story, but is interrupted by a request for factual information from Fiona in line 172. She provides the confirmation and attempts to resume with *and*. However, at this point Fiona has another question, which elicits not just confirmation but also information about the name of the person from Morocco. Aya in fact only responds by giving the name, which Fiona then repeats, and Aya for the third time produces *and* in line 177 to get on with the topic and her story, and this time she succeeds. The resource scanner here would seem to operate on the interpersonal level, in so far as Fiona is clearly aware of the existence and possibly names of Aya's friends, and also, judging from her question of *even eh what's her name,* has some knowledge of the character of this person. In this sequence, therefore, it is not just that factual information is needed for understanding, but also that common ground is displayed and made relevant in the interaction.

We have seen in several extracts from this conversation that the participants employ a number of strategies to generate understanding, and that there were no repair sequences at all. It was, however, in this conversation that one of

the three misunderstandings appeared, and this, together with the other two instances, will be discussed in the next section.

6.9   Misunderstandings

There were only three instances in the data which could be classed as outright misunderstandings, where the participants were initially unaware that there was a discrepancy between the meanings they were trying to express.

The first example comes from 'Hot curry'.

Hot curry 4 [3]   Aya (NNS)   Fiona (NS)

202	Aya	Yeah uh that's true I think that I can eat naan with
203		hands but not rice
204	Fiona →	Do you all cook different pans in your flat ? You all
205		cook your like home food for everybody else=
206	Aya	=no=
207	Fiona	= or not (xxx) ?
208	Aya	It depends but usually we eh in our flat yeah eh yeah
209		we cook just eh separately but usually for almost the
210		same time
211	Fiona →	no I mean like would you do you have you all cooked
212		for each other at some point like have a big meal
213		together ?
214	Aya	uh::: in term two sometimes but now eh not] anymore
215	Fiona	] (xxx) .
216	Aya	not really because we=
217	Fiona →	= it is term two
218	Aya	it is term two ? no
219	Fiona	yeah
220	Aya	yeah
221	Fiona	oh but =
222	Aya	= [(xxx)
223	Fiona	[(xxx)
224	Aya →	no in the term one oh I said term two
225	Fiona	you said term two
226		(both laughing)
227	Aya	so term one
228	Fiona	term one you
229	Aya	I cooked for example curry and he came=
230	Fiona	=yeah ok
231	Aya	yeah yeah and yeah eh in term two we had more
232		like a French] party

In line 202 Aya summarises the opinion which they both share about eating naan and rice with hands. This relates to Aya's anecdote about the meal she cooked in her flat; (student flats are usually shared by up to 6 people, often of different nationalities). In line 204 Fiona then tries to find out if the flatmates often eat together. After her initial question referring rather oddly to *pans*, she reformulates the question. Aya responds with a *no*, but after Fiona's inaudible query in line 207, qualifies her answer, explaining that they usually cook separately. Although this would seem to answer Fiona's question, she now comes in with a further clarification, somewhat confusingly expressed, using *would you, do you, have you...* Aya replies that it happened sometimes in term two, but not anymore. Fiona's overlapping utterance in line 215 was not audible, and in line 216 Aya continues with the start of an explanation. Fiona then produces a latched utterance, pointing out that it *is* term two. This time reference then is the source of the confusion, and is most likely a slip of the tongue. They work together to jointly resolve the trouble item, with Aya realising in line 224 that she had mentioned the wrong term. Following their laughter at the confusion and relief at having solved the problem, they jointly negotiate the return to the main topic. Aya in line 227 is the one who resumes the topic by repeating the correct term (one), preceded by the discourse marker *so*. In this turn she starts to pick up the thread quite effectively, and Fiona co-operatively reiterates, thus signalling agreement of a return to the main topic. Aya then goes on to give examples of meals and parties, thereby eventually answering the question which Fiona asked in line 211. In spite, therefore, of the fairly lengthy negotiation process to re-establish mutual understanding, the disruption to topic continuity is only temporary.

The other two examples of misunderstandings were both found in the same conversation, namely 'Modern art'. In the first example below Sara and Ann are talking about the exhibitions of dead bodies by Gus von Hagen, which Ann has earlier expressed a desire to see, and which it now turns out that Sara actually *has* seen.

Modern art 6 [8]   Sara (NNS) Ann (NS)

Ann	212	the actual Bodyworks ?
Sara	213	yeah
Ann	214	aaah I wanna see that (.) I saw it on the news and then he just
	215	eh eh (xxx) autopsy on TV
Sara	216→	he he made a life you know he showed eh (..) a dead body to a
	217	public
Ann	218	yeah the autopsy
Sara	219	uhm
Ann	220	that's an autopsy
Sara	221	autopsy ?
Ann	222	yeah (.) I saw it on Channel 4 (..) and then I so wanted to see it .

In line 212 Ann expresses her amazement and requests confirmation that Sara has seen his major exhibition *the actual Bodyworks*. Following Sara's brief confirmation, she restates her wish to see it, explaining that she only saw it on the news and mentioning the word *autopsy*, though the exact context is not entirely clear.

The problem here arises from Ann's use of the word 'autopsy' in line 215 which is clearly not understood by NNS, as she talks about the same thing in the next turn without seeming to realise it. She is either not aware that she has not understood, or does not want to admit to the fact, or is simply focused on the general trend of the conversation. It could be that she is expanding on the topic of the Bodyworks, wanting to make her own contribution to it, based on her personal experience. She does not stop to check the meaning of the word, but is able to continue to focus on the content of what is being talked about. In line 216 she gives her own version of the autopsy, and Ann provides an acknowledgement token to confirm that she is following, but also adds the words 'the autopsy' to describe what Sara is talking about, and to confirm that they are indeed talking about the same thing.

The back-channel from Sara in line 219 may have been accompanied by a puzzled facial expression, because Ann proceeds to explain that this is indeed the word which describes the event that they are both talking about. Sara then repeats the word with questioning intonation, which may be to seek confirmation, or, as a learner, she may be tentatively trying out a new word.

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Her identity as a non-native speaker becomes salient at this point. Ann provides brief confirmation of the appropriacy of the word. She then returns to the main topic, by repeating a slightly modified version of her statement from line 214. Coherence is maintained both locally and globally, and the overall topic of the Bodyworks has remained on the table throughout the negotiation sequence.

How exactly the misunderstanding comes about in this next extract is not so clear-cut. Prior to line 401 Ann and Sara have been talking about Olympic Stadiums, and how these can be used after the Olympic events.

Modern art 6 [9]   Sara (NNS)   Ann (NS)

401	Sara	ah I know I know Berlin has (xxx xxx) and they've
402		spent <u>so</u> much money on this on this eh stadion
403	Ann	so hopefully get some money <u>in</u>. Do you think that's
404		the aim ?
405	Sara →	uhm pardon ?
406	Ann	do you think it'll be they've spent so much money they're
407		thinking if we put all this money into the stadium all the
408		tourists [(xxxx)
409	Sara	[no it's not the stadium. It's also Berlin is
410		having a new a new eh train station and it's important
411		for the economy (xxxx)

Following Sara's reference to Berlin and some inaudible words, she comments on the amount of money which has been spent on *this eh stadion.* Ann's response to this in line 402 refers to the possibility of recouping the outlay by *bringing money in.* Sara expresses her lack of understanding with a request for clarification, in response to which Ann elaborates on her previous point: that a profit can be made from tourists visiting the *stadium.* Now Sara realises that they are talking about different things and are therefore at cross-purposes, and in line 409 she interrupts Ann to point out that she is not referring to a *stadium*, but to a new train *station.* On the surface this might appear to be a misunderstanding caused by a pronunciation error on the part of the NNS, whose native language is German where the words *stadion* (=*stadium*) and *station* are similar, and because they had previously talked about *stadiums*, this could have been a slip of the tongue. Once the confusion

has been cleared up, Sara continues the topic by providing additional information about the economic impact of the new station; in other words, she takes control of the topical development here.

6.10 Summary

The conversation extracts which have been presented in this chapter indicate that reaching understanding in talk between native and non-native speakers is not invariably a problematic issue. Nor is it the case that the need to overcome linguistic differences and differential personal or cultural knowledge will necessarily result in either communicative break-down or serious disruptions to topic continuity.

What is clear from the examples given here is that both parties to the conversation will go to considerable lengths to ensure that trouble spots are clarified and mutual understanding is reached. What is equally clear is that the participants themselves see the collaborative negotiations to establish meaning and understanding as temporary hold-ups of the main topic, as these are in all cases resumed.

The final chapter will consider the findings which have emerged from the investigation of these NS-NNS conversations, and will discuss some of the implications which these findings may have for second language learning and teaching and for further research.

Chapter 7

Discussion and implications

7.1 Introduction

The main aim of this thesis has been to present an exploratory study of what happens in informal, social conversations between native and non-native speakers. The research focus has therefore been on an area of discourse which has been comparatively neglected, both in the context of intercultural communication, and in the context of second language learners. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 2, much of our knowledge about NS-NNS interactions has come from studies which were researcher-led, meaning that the discourse which was thus generated was likely to lack features of naturalness, either because topics had been determined beforehand, because certain tasks or goals had been set, or because the conversational pairs were unacquainted. In contrast, the current investigation was based on participant-led discourse recorded in social situations between partners who, with one exception, were already acquainted. From these perspectives, then, the research is treading fairly new ground and hence producing new insights into NS-NNS interactions.

This final chapter will discuss the analyses presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 by going back to the research questions and considering the extent to which they have been answered. Potential implications for language teaching and for second language acquisition research will also be explored, but first I would like to draw attention to some of the research limitations and to issues which are still unresolved.

7.2 Limitations of the study

Although the data collected for this study provided interesting and useful insights into the nature of NS-NNS interactions in an informal context, a number of issues require further consideration and additional research.

One of these issues relates to difficulties of obtaining what are genuinely natural conversations. This is a researcher's dilemma, which, to my knowledge, few have managed to overcome other than by doing covert or surreptitious recordings (see Warren 2006). As soon as a researcher decides to introduce recording equipment of any type, some naturalness will inevitably be lost. The best that can be hoped for is that the process of recording will not have too much of a detrimental effect on the talk. Audio-recordings are in this respect possibly less intrusive than video-recordings, though the latter would have been able to reveal what Markee (2008:3) sees as integral aspects of interactional competence, such as "the co-current organization of eye gaze and embodied actions".

Some of the participants in this study showed awareness of or discomfort at being recorded, possibly because they had come together specifically to "do a conversation." However, other participants would appear to have come together for social purposes, like sharing a meal, with the recording of the conversation being something which could be fitted around this activity. In spite of these aspects of artificiality, it was still possible to extract useful data from the conversations. It is conceivable that more guidance about the context, purpose and set-up of the interactions may have produced, in some cases, less strained conversations, for example by stressing to the NNSs that the recordings were not in any way related to the Spoken English course they were doing, and that the recordings would not have any effect on eventual assessments. It might also have been better to leave out any guidelines on the hand-out for possible duration of the conversations as these appeared, in some cases, to have been seen as requirements rather than suggestions, and may consequently have had a constraining effect on the conversations.

Another important issue concerns the selection of informants for research. The population in the current study was heterogeneous in terms of age and occupation, but because it was self-selected, it was not possible to control for the many other factors which may have had an impact on the interactions. This applies to variables such as gender, nationality and first language, level of language competence, as well as to the nature of the relationships between

participants, their length of acquaintance, and the duration of their stay in the target language country. Had different students and different *combinations* of students elected to participate, different outcomes might have been obtained. In retrospect, therefore, a more careful and more researcher-controlled selection of participants, rather than self-selection, might have been a better option, as it might have allowed for some uncertainty-reduction with regard to, for example, the possible impact of gender-related issues or differences in the interactions.

A related, and possibly unanswerable, question concerns the size of the data base. How much talk is enough if we are to draw useful conclusions about regularities in, for example, topic shifting strategies ? The comparatively small data base in this study can only give an indication of what it is possible for some NNSs to achieve in terms of communicative outcomes, and the results are therefore not generalizable to other NS-NNS interactions.

A cause for some regret with regard to this study is that the transcripts were not discussed with any of the participants, either NSs or NNSs. Such discussions could not just have helped to clarify areas of analytical uncertainty, but would also have provided valuable insights into participants' perceptions of their conversations, and might have further validated the conclusions drawn.

These limitations provide some pointers towards possible avenues for further research in the area of informal conversations between NSs and NNSs. It would be enlightening, for example, to investigate whether the same NNS converses differently with another NNS, whether conversational conventions of a particular language transfer to L2 conversations, and, as Springer and Collins (2008) suggest, to investigate differences in conversations inside and outside the classroom.

There are additional unresolved issues relating to the research methodology. One of these concerns the complexities surrounding the terminology, definitions and manifestations of topics in conversations, and the most suitable methods of categorising and analysing them. The definitions and

methods proposed in this thesis cannot be taken as definitive, though for the purposes of the research they proved adequate and able to account for all instances found in the data.

A final, unresolved concern about the thesis relates to the use of the terms native and non-native speaker. In spite of current dissatisfaction in many quarters with their use, suitable or appropriate alternatives have yet to emerge or to be widely accepted. However, it is to some extent the contention of this thesis that being a non-native speaker is in fact a major achievement, and something which should be applauded rather than denigrated.

The following sections will discuss some of the communicative achievements of the NNSs in this study.

7.3   The initial research question

The broad general question which inspired this research *What happens in informal conversations between native and non-native speakers?* produced some unexpected answers.

Firstly, the communicative difficulties which were expected to be a major feature of the conversations did not materialise, or at least not to an extent where they made communication between the participants either awkward or impossible.

Secondly, the conversations proved to be unexpectedly varied in very many different ways. This should not have come as such a surprise, since individual differences in all aspects of human behaviour make any sort of generalisation problematic.

Thirdly, the focus on these conversations as specifically between native and non-native speakers, or as examples of intercultural interactions, is a researcher's perspective on what is taking place. The fact that the participants

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were from different cultures and spoke different first languages was not necessarily a major pre-occupation for them.

What happened in the conversations, therefore, depended on the individual relationships as much as on the cultural and linguistic differences. And clearly a great deal more *happened* than it has been possible to convey in this thesis. While some measure of success has been achieved in showing that the NNSs can manage aspects of topic organisation, it was beyond the scope of the study to investigate, for example, how topics were developed and maintained once they had been initiated and accepted.

Overall, though, these were conversations primarily between familiars, who organised their talk to take into account both different and mutual interests, and as the extracts have shown, these NNss, in spite of language differentials, were able to demonstrate fairly skilled attention to both topic management and interactional procedures.

The key feature of these conversations was that they all appeared to flow smoothly. There were, for example, very few long silences either between or within turns. The NNSs made substantial contributions to the talk, and their contributions were both relevant and coherent. Furthermore, they were able to take the initiative in controlling the direction of the conversations. In addition, there were not many instances of hesitations or searching for words in the NNS contributions and little evidence of comprehension problems, nor was there evidence of language simplification by the NSs.

The positive outcomes notwithstanding, these interactions, as is the case with most conversations, at times displayed a need to resolve or prevent communicative difficulties, and the relevant findings will be discussed in the following section.

7.4   Research questions: communicative difficulties

The position taken in this thesis with regard to the capabilities of NNSs in interaction departs from what has almost become standard: that interactions involving NNSs are defined by the communicative difficulties which may ensue. Granted that much current research now emphasises the successful resolution of such difficulties, the main focus of research still tends to rest on difficulties rather than successes in communication. Although this current study also concerns itself with communicative difficulties, it does so in a somewhat different manner, in that any difficulties are seen as a) a normal part of human interactions, and b) are examined from the broader perspective of their effects on the topical development or continuity of the conversations, and not just as isolated incidents of lack of understanding or non-understanding.

The research questions focused on the nature of any communicative difficulties, how these were resolved, and on their potential impact on the topical continuity of the conversations.

The analyses in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have shown emphatically that these were not conversations where communication or language difficulties predominated. As we saw in Chapter 6, there were only three cases of outright misunderstandings, and 4 out of the 10 conversations proceeded without any apparent communicative problems, while the remaining 6 varied greatly in the extent to which action was needed to remedy what was said or heard. These variations can to some extent be accounted for by the different lengths of the conversations and the different language levels of the NNS participants.

Although language inaccuracies in the speech of the NNSs were plentiful, there were few examples of these leading to problems of understanding, and they did not, on the whole, interfere with mutual understanding. The findings therefore mirror those of others referred to in Chapter 2, section 2.3, such as Hosoda (2006), who noted that differential language expertise was mostly not

relevant to the participants in the interactions under investigation. This was clearly the case in my own data, too.

Those language difficulties which participants *did* orient to were almost invariably related to individual words, so the problems were primarily ones of lexical usage. Lexical items usually carry important informational content, and consequently have greater bearing on understanding, with a concomitant need to clarify meaning if they have been used inappropriately or not been understood.

It was not just NNSs' lack of familiarity with lexis while producing the language which on occasion led to communicative trouble, but also the use of unfamiliar and particularly of informal lexical items by the NSs. This would seem to confirm the anecdotal comments from international students that this is an area of concern, and one which in turn may have implications for teaching.

Where problems related to production, attempts at self-initiated self-repair predominated on the part of the NNSs. In this respect they are no different to NS conversationalists, as this is the preferred or standard method of dealing with trouble in talk, as CA research has conclusively shown (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977).

It was notable, too, that in some cases where NNSs initiated self-repair, it was not so much due to lack of understanding or failure to produce an accurate lexical item, but out of a concern to confirm its accuracy or appropriacy in a particular context. These instances, therefore, may well have provided learning opportunities by consolidating or expanding lexical knowledge and understanding.

On the whole, though, language differences were not problematic in these encounters, a fact which is confirmed by the finding that only on 24 occasions was it necessary to temporarily suspend the topic in progress in order to deal with a related language issue.

Intercultural differences similarly proved largely unproblematic for these conversational participants. Such differences instead seemed to function as a resource for topic making and as a focus for making interpersonal comparisons, thereby contributing to greater understanding between the parties. We saw examples of this in some of the resource scanner sequences, and of how the uncertainties relating to different cultural backgrounds could be quickly resolved. These instances were in many cases not so very different from what could be found in a conversation between two native speakers from different parts of the UK, who are not familiar with each other's geographical and social territory. Research which takes a 'problem' approach to intercultural interactions would probably class such instances as evidence of 'difficulty', whereas for the participants they may not present any serious obstacles to communication.

Differences in common ground, be it linguistic, cultural or personal, can contribute to topics being suspended in NS-NS as well as in NS-NNS conversations. The concept of side sequences proved a useful tool to distinguish some of the different sources of potential trouble in the interactions, with the three categories of monitor, repair and resource scanner sequences proposed by Svennevig (1999) being particularly useful for the analysis. The mere fact that communicative trouble spots were dealt with in side sequences demonstrates that there was a return to the main topic, and that communicative difficulties therefore did not permanently disrupt the topics in progress.

There were some indications in the interactions that different types of devices were employed to signal the start of different types of side sequences, with clarification requests being more frequent in repair sequences and comprehension checks more prevalent in resource scanner sequences. More research, based on a larger database, would be required to establish whether this is a common feature, and if so, whether it is one which it might be useful for L2 learners to be aware of.

That the side sequences evolved in some instances into lengthier disruptions to the topics was to a large extent due to the confusion inherent in the forms and functions of the interactional devices of clarification requests, confirmation checks and comprehension checks. Where these took the form of a repetition, either partial or complete, of the item or items causing uncertainty, confusion occasionally resulted with a consequent longer sequence needed to clarify the problem. The problem, in other words, was not necessarily the original item, but uncertainty about the function of the interactional device. Such uncertainty was displayed at times by both NSs and NNSs in the conversations.

With regard to the effect on the topic under discussion, this was in the great majority of cases resumed, following side sequences to clear up communicative uncertainties. Here repetition frequently played a role in making links with previous talk, so that an element of coherence was maintained. In these conversations, at least, communicative difficulties caused minimal disruption to the talk in progress. It would seem that there is not, in essence, a great deal of difference between the sorts of 'repair issues' which occur in 'normal' conversations, and those which are found in these NS-NNS conversations. If we take the position that trouble in talk is an everyday, unexceptional occurrence, then we could extend this view to communication in an intercultural context, and state that it is merely to be expected that there will be, in the words of Kasper and Rose (2003:18), "moments of communicative difficulty". In terms of finding solutions to the communicative difficulties which arose, the NNSs showed initiative and skill in their choice of a variety of strategies and in their persistence to succeed.

7.5   Research questions: topic management

Topic management by NNSs in informal interactions has received comparatively little attention from researchers, and receives surprisingly little attention in second language learning. This aspect of discourse has formed the major focus of the research, and the findings contribute to knowledge

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about NNSs' skills in this area, as well as point the way to further areas for investigation, and for possible classroom relevance.

The second set of research questions related to topic management in the conversations, asking first of all *how* the NNSs contributed to this aspect of the discourse. This question in turn entailed a close examination of topic shifting procedures or strategies and their general effectiveness in enabling topics to be introduced and taken up for further talk.

Although the study did not look specifically at topic dominance or control, in spite of this also being an area where NNSs are thought deficient, the analysis of topic changes and topic initiations indicated that these were as likely to be effected by NNSs as by NSs. Indirectly, therefore, this would suggest active participation and shared responsibility on the part of the NNSs; they did not, in other words, need to rely on their NS partners to introduce new topics into the conversations. This contrasts with the picture painted by, for instance, Shea (1994) (Chapter 2, section 2.3.2) of NNSs who require the support of NSs to manage discourse.

The duration and depth of exploration of individual topics were not investigated, but would certainly be a worthy area for future research. The individual differences in the conversations, and to some extent the suggested timing on the handouts, as well as the fact that these were, in a sense, *required* conversations, would all have had an impact on the nature and length of topics under discussion. Any further research would need to bear in mind that in informal conversations it is common practice for topics to be changed frequently and to be left unexplored and unfinished (McCarthy 1998, Tannen 1989). In the longer conversations, at least, the participants discussed some topics at length, for example, exploring similar past experiences of holidays in 'The tabloid', and discussing different educational values in 'Modern art'. There was thus considerable evidence of NNS ability to move beyond talking about the concrete and the 'here-and-now' (Bremer 1996; Long 1983; Yano et al 1994).

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Topical continuity is thought to be difficult to achieve for NNSs with the apparent result that such conversations may appear disjointed and incoherent, and may contain frequent changes of topics. Thus Meierkord (2000:8) found that NNSs in a lingua franca context not only tended to prefer safe topics, but also tended to deal with them superficially, employing largely short turns. Richards (1990:70), similarly, claims that "The inability to take up long turns in a conversation is a feature of many second language speakers, who keep short turns and appear to be less than collaborative conversational partners."

This was not the case with the conversations analysed here. The NNSs were able to take longer turns, for example, in the telling of anecdotes, and showed clearly their ability and willingness to collaborate through their use of backchannels, interjections and repetition. A major feature of the conversations was the fact that topics flowed smoothly, and that shifts from one topic to another were effected co-operatively and without disturbance to the coherence of the talk. Moreover, once a topic had been initiated, it was only rarely the case that it was not taken up by the conversational partner, and there were no instances where a topic was dropped or avoided for linguistic reasons. That the NNSs were able to bring about effective shifts in topics was evident in both the topic changes and the topic transitions which were analysed and presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

The type of abrupt or disjunctive topic changes thought to be associated with NS-NNS conversations were not prevalent in the conversations, and there was evidence of the NNSs employing a range of appropriate strategies to effect such changes. It was shown, for example, how non-coherent topic changes were either the result of a previous topic being closed down, with appropriate signals of impending closure, or they related to the current activity which participants were involved in, and therefore maintained an element of global coherence in the conversation. They did not, therefore, 'come out of the blue', and were not employed because the participants were unable to continue talking, or unable to manage effective topic shifts. Except for one

conversation, explicit markers of topic change, such as *By the way* or *That reminds me...* did not feature in the conversations, in spite of their prevalence in language course books.

Instead questions were the most frequent means of effecting topic changes, and they were used equally by NS and NNSs, indicating that what Steensig and Drew (2008:7) refer to as the 'controlling' force of questioning was shared equally in the topic initiations in these conversations. Two particular types of questions or question formats would merit further investigations. One relates to the use of the discourse marker *So* either on its own or in the phrase *So what..* The other feature was where a question was preceded by some information which contextualised the question, and consequently presented a justification for asking it, thus making understanding and responding easier for the hearer.

This feature of contextualisation was also found in topic transitions, where it often served to link with previous talk, before moving the topic off in a different direction, or serving as the lead-in to an anecdote. The collaborative aspect of topic initiations was obvious on many occasions, both in questions and statements. What was particularly striking was the way in which there was a great deal of parallelism both in the use of reciprocal questions and in the telling of anecdotes, signifying mutual intentions to show interest and establish familiarity.

The overall tendency in these conversations was to employ topic transitions rather than changes to initiate new topics, that is to incorporate an element, a comment or response to a previous utterance while at the same time introducing new or related matters into the talk. This had the effect of maintaining continuity and coherence in the talk, and it was a feature which was used equally by NSs and NNSs.

It is likely that there are many more methods or strategies for effecting topic transitions than were employed in these conversations; however, it was clear that, on the whole, the NNSs were not limited to using merely one or two

approaches, and only minor differences were discovered between those used by NSs and NNSs respectively. Maynard (1980:284) described the ability to change topics easily and quickly in social conversation as "no mean thing", and these NNSs demonstrated some considerable skill in attending to all the multi-dimensional aspects of topic shifting, at the structural, interpersonal and content levels.

Topic management is a very complex area, and one which merits far more research, particularly as it is played out in conversations between native and non-native speakers. This investigation has only been able to provide a small indication of how some NNSs manage the processes of moving from one topic to another in conversations. It is, however, an area which is of crucial importance for successful interpersonal interactions, and hence one which could be expected to be on the agenda for second language learners in classrooms across the world. Discourse management, and particularly in an interactional context, tends to be noticeably absent from language course books and language classrooms. In the next section we will look at some of the learning and teaching implications of the study.

7.6   Pedagogical implications

We have seen how the learners who participated in this study were, on the whole, able to hold their own in the conversations with their native speaker partners. The study has not considered how they may have acquired the ability to participate effectively. It is likely that several factors will have contributed: they had all studied English for several years in their respective countries, and had reached a reasonable level of competence. In addition, they had already spent varying amounts of time in the target language culture at the time of the recordings, and last, but not least, they were interacting with people they knew, in a context which was free of the pressures to perform.

Language learners tend to value opportunities to talk with native speakers, or with other speakers of the target language, not just to practise or improve

their language skills, but also for social purposes. It is, for many at least, a major reason for learning a language. However, for some learners communication with native speakers can be a complex and worrying undertaking. We saw in Chapter 1 that some international students reported being reluctant to engage in talk with NSs, and Jenkins (2004:495) also found that the NNSs in her study "were inhibited by communication apprehension from engaging in everyday conversation."

Much classroom time and effort is expended on promoting learners' communicative competence, in order to help them to communicate effectively and confidently outside of class. With greater awareness of the features of non-classroom discourse we may be in a better position to help them achieve this aim. Thus analysis of learners' out-of class discourse can reveal which strategies are effective in achieving conversational goals, and which might therefore be worth incorporating into classroom teaching. This goes, for example, for ways of showing interactional awareness by negotiating topics of mutual interest, a skill which is not easily practised in classes where the focus is not so much on the conversational partner as on the final outcome of a task or activity.

Classroom talk is essentially institutional talk, and will inevitably be strongly influenced by the goal-oriented nature of the tasks and activities which learners are involved in. As Walsh (2002:4) points out, "participants in the EFL classroom are to a large extent restricted in their choice of language by the prevailing features of that context." This in turn means that there may be limited opportunity for learners to take the initiative (but see Garton 2002), or to make either equal or substantial contributions to talk. It also provides little scope for the practice of the sort of spontaneous, unpredictable and 'messy' interaction which can be found in informal talk.

In spite of the increasingly prominent role which the teaching of communicative skills has acquired, there is still a surprising neglect of the interpersonal dimension of interactions, both in the many classrooms I observe, and in current course books. Tomlinson et al (2001) found that

course books failed to promote interactional language skills, and in an investigation of pair work activities, Morris-Adams (2004) found that they rarely encourage genuinely interactive talk, leading instead to either very structured dialogues or alternate monologues with communication as a one-way event, i.e. talking in turn rather than turn-taking. As for specific conversational skills these are most often described in terms of 'useful phrases', relating to, for example, appropriate register, or how to express functions such as agree and disagree. Occasional reference can be found to strategies for opening and closing conversations, but there is little information about what happens in between these stages, i.e. how to develop, sustain or change topics.

Classroom discourse, then, constitutes a genre of talk which in very fundamental ways differs from the talk which learners experience in the outside world. Whether or not it is possible or desirable to try to replicate 'real' conversation in the classroom is the subject of much debate (Seedhouse 1996; Richards 2006), but there would certainly seem to be a case for a greater focus on the teaching of conversation skills as one element of communicative competence.

Topic management, in particular, might merit more classroom attention, because, as Riggenbach (1991:439) observed, the ability to initiate topic changes is an important aspect of conversational fluency. Kramsch (1987:3) argues that "If students are to take an active part in interactions, they must be shown how to control the way topics are established, built and, sustained". Savignon and Sysoyev (2002:513) similarly stress that "Learning how to shift the subject of the discussion to another topic gives students an additional resource." We have seen in this study that there are innumerable ways in which this can be done. However, while questions can be a useful means for lower level learners of maintaining participation and involvement in interactions, at higher levels learners also need to know, as Wilkinson (2002) suggests, how to use and recognise non-interrogative topic initiators, such as the ones used in this study.

The challenge for teachers then becomes one of considering how we can implement the teaching of these conversational features and give learners access to the sort of discourse practice that will benefit them outside the classroom.

One approach, advocated by Dörnyei and Thurrell, (1994) would be for learners to practise the micro-skills of conversation, such as turn-taking and conversational openers. Another possibility would be to include a space in lessons where learners can talk freely, without teacher interference, without the constraints of structural or vocabulary practice, and more importantly where learners can choose the topics. One such space could be when classes resume after the weekend, when everybody is likely to have something newsworthy to report. A 10-15 minute slot could be allocated for 'free' conversation. Such a slot could also be used for learners to discuss topics they have previously nominated as interesting. An alternative would be for the teacher to set a 'starter topic', and then let learners continue, possibly recording the talks and, with learners, analysing relevant discourse features.

It would also be worth exploiting any opportunities which arise during classroom activities to move out of 'classroom mode' and engage in more natural and more personal interactions, i.e. by responding to topics raised spontaneously by learners, letting other learners comment, and using backchannels and assessments to encourage them to continue talking. It has been suggested (Kumaravadivelu 1993; Morris-Adams 1997; Ohta 1999) that participation in such exchanges may provide opportunities to enrich learners' language development and discourse skills. Thornbury and Slade (2006:240) maintain that "the success of a conversation is evaluated less on its outcome than on the quality of the conversational process itself", and therefore learners could benefit from greater classroom exposure to and participation in this process.

Another discourse feature which was employed frequently in the NS-NNS conversations and which deserves far more attention in language teaching is that of repetition. In this study Bella was found to make extensive use of

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repetition, and it enabled her to make many and coherent contributions to the talk. Fung (2007) draws attention to the important interactional and interpersonal functions of repetition in discourse, and learners could usefully be made aware that it is a very useful resource with many and distinctive uses, not just in terms of fluency, but equally to link turns and topics in conversation.

Repetition plays a prominent role in classrooms, and the functions which it has there may transfer, inappropriately, to other discourse types. House (1993:173), for example, refers to a tendency by NNSs to repeat part of a NS's utterance as a *"defensive habit acquired in the foreign language classroom"* (my italics), and Hosoda (2006:43) comments with regard to repetition that "even in casual conversation, where L2 speakers orient to their 'novice' roles, the interactional structures may become similar to those in the classroom". Additionally, over-reliance on one particular conversational strategy, such as repetition, to perform a range of different functions may sometimes have unforeseen and possibly undesirable interactional consequences, and may lead to misunderstanding. We saw in Chapter 4 how this was the particularly the case when repetition was employed in side sequences to clarify understanding. Similar confusion may arise in classrooms in the context of error correction when learners are exposed to teachers' use of clarification requests and confirmation checks in the form of repetition. Ellis (2005:173) comments about error correction that it is often imprecise and indirect because ".. teachers use the same overt behaviour (for example, 'repetition') to both indicate that an error has been made and to reinforce a correct response".

What we teach our learners about dealing with miscommunication or trouble in talk, or indeed about the discourse features of error correction, is an issue which is generally not given a great deal of attention, and the sort of interactional strategies which featured in this study deserve a more explicit focus in the classroom. Furthermore, if learners participate in classroom activities which promote negotiation of meaning, it can help them to become familiar with a variety of ways of asking for clarification or confirmation, and to

learn which of them are most effective. This in turn may help them to feel more confident in interactions with NSs.

While more research is clearly needed to establish the extent to which classroom interaction patterns may transfer to the outside world, a useful starting point for teachers would be to investigate the discourses which prevail in our own classrooms. Walsh (2006:139) argues that ".. developing interactional awareness has to begin with the teachers' own data, analyzed by teachers..". Such investigations could, for instance, throw light on the ways in which features of topic management compare with those found in 'real-life' discourse, and may also reveal what form and function of clarification requests we typically use, and what effects these may have.

Not only teachers, but also learners can gain from an analysis of transcripts of 'real' discourse. Examples of authentic and successful NS-NNS and NNS-NNS dialogues could be used as a basis for awareness-raising and classroom activities and could potentially provide useful and encouraging models for learners. Moreover, they would be models of interaction with which learners could identify, and which could help to equip them with the discourse skills and the confidence to communicate in the world outside the classroom.

Learner awareness of and familiarity with features of conversational organisation may also benefit them in the context of spoken language testing. Assessment of learners' oral competence takes place in a discourse context where lack of awareness of discourse features may be as disadvantageous as a lack of appropriate vocabulary.

We have seen how interactions in this study were consistently co-constructed by the participants, with the NNSs taking an equal part. Oral proficiency tests are, in contrast, examples of asymmetrical encounters, but here, too, the co-constructed nature of talk can play a crucial part, as demonstrated by Brown's study of two different interviewers examining the same candidate (2003). The very different ways in which the two examiners employed, for example, topic initiations and closures affected the nature and quality of the candidate's talk,

and led to very different perceptions of her competence. Examiner training, then, would do well to include a focus on the interactional impact of conversational management.

From a test-taker perspective there are likewise benefits to be gained from greater familiarity with a range of discourse features. This would, for example, be the case in part 3 of the IELTS test which is described as a two-way discussion, and which, albeit based on examiner questions, should therefore still provide scope for the more unpredictable progress found in 'natural' conversations. An ability to incorporate elements of the examiners' topic initiations in responses, to employ smooth topic transitions or to introduce anecdotes in support of arguments or opinions may contribute to a candidate's fluency and coherence and consequently to a positive perception and rating of communicative competence. Such strategies could usefully be incorporated into exam preparation courses.

Language learning, of course, does not stop once the learners leave the classroom. However, Springer and Collins (2008:39) make the point that

> 'real-world' and classroom experiences offer different but complementary opportunities for oral interaction. The nature of the difference is not well documented, however, which makes it difficult to assess the relative contributions that interaction in the two environments may make to the language learning process.

In the next section I will briefly consider some further implications of investigating 'real world' interactions between NS and NNS.

7.7　　　Wider perspectives

The NNS participants in this study were at one and the same time second language users and learners, two of many identities which at various points came to the fore in the conversations. The great majority of L2 learners of English become L2 users as well, by necessity or by desire, before they have acquired complete mastery of the L2, and it is highly likely that the interactions

in which they engage will contribute to further development of language and communicative skills. The perception that language learning (or acquisition) takes place in the context of doing conversation is not new, and Celce-Murcia and Olshtain reiterated the point in 2000 by stating that, in the context of acquiring communicative competence:

> It is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized. And it is in discourse and through discourse that the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed. (ibid:16).

The discourses which L2 learners engage in may take place both inside and outside the classroom. In a classroom context studies by Cekaite (2007) and Markee (2008) have demonstrated how interactional competence can be encouraged or promoted through classroom discourse between teacher and student, while Yagi (2007) showed similar progress in interactional skills by students who participated in 'situated learning', i.e. outside the classroom. Firth and Wagner (2007:807) claim that "learning is an inseparable part of ongoing activities and therefore situated in social practice and social interaction" and refer to this context as 'social-interactional learning'.

This study has not been concerned with language learning, but with language use; there were, nonetheless, a few occasions during these social interactions when it would appear that learning may have been taking place. Notably, this was not just the case as a result of negotiating (lexical) meaning, but also because the NNS participants actively sought confirmation of words they might have been trying out for the first time.

Based on the extracts from these conversations, there may, then, be some grounds for assuming that side sequences where interactional modifications are employed may lead to gains in vocabulary acquisition, though in no instances were these devices employed to deal with grammatical issues. Zuengler and Bent (1991) found very few interactional modifications in the NS-NNS conversations they investigated and suggest that "The lack of such

tokens may be meaningful, reflecting instead interlocutors' efforts to keep the interaction going smoothly, to maintain rapport, and to negotiate social, not strictly linguistic meaning" (ibid:410). In contrast, Nakahama et al (2001) found more interactional modifications in a conversation-style activity than in a more structured classroom task, so there is clearly scope for more research into the functions, forms and language acquisition potential of these devices in more informal interactions. Nakahama et al (ibid:377) conclude that "… results suggest that conversational interaction has the potential to offer substantial learning opportunities at multiple levels of discourse". They furthermore suggest that negotiation of meaning should include other discourse dimensions such as hedges, reformulations, and demonstrations of understanding. The NNSs in this study may well have acquired other aspects of language use or discourse skills, but we currently do not know enough about the learning processes which occur during 'real' interactions. Nakamura (2008:266) suggests that "Looking at informal (i.e. non-instructional) dyadic talk outside of the classroom offers us a unique and extended glimpse into how talk is co-constructed", and such investigations would offer an opportunity to expand the framework of second language acquisition research.

While it is beyond the scope of the study to enter into further discussion about issues relating to the future direction of SLA research, a few pertinent points from the debate are relevant to the position taken here. Firstly, there is, as mentioned above, and as Firth and Wagner (1997, 2007) have strongly advocated, a need to broaden the communicative contexts under investigation, so that we can learn from both experimental studies and natural interactions. A second point relates to the use of a NS model as the norm or ideal for successful or effective language use or learning. Savignon (2007:210) asserts that, in the context of intercultural communication, "reference to the terms "native" and native-like" in the evaluation of communicative competence is simply inappropriate". The extracts presented in earlier chapters would suggest that positive outcomes in intercultural encounters are perfectly possible without the use of 'native' or 'native-like' language by the NNSs.

Thirdly, and most importantly, I would suggest, as do Firth and Wagner (1997:289), that "a study of communicative successes – in addition to studies of perceived failures and problems - may provide new and productive insights into SLA", and furthermore that this needs to move beyond studying how communicative difficulties are successfully resolved.

7. 8   Conclusion

This thesis has presented an exploration of certain communicative behaviours in an informal conversational context between native and non-native speakers of English. The findings which have resulted from analysis of the data can clearly not be taken as representative of all such encounters. In fact, one striking feature of the data was the great variety of individual conversational styles, the existence of which should make us wary of making generalisations about NNS talk.

The NNSs in this study worked collaboratively with their NS partners to create conversations that were of mutual interest, and which moved fairly smoothly through a wide range of both personal and encyclopaedic topics, without many indications of the sorts of communication difficulties often described in the literature. The NNSs took an active part in the conversations, and showed they were able to make substantial contributions to the talk and to take the initiative in changing and initiating new topics. Analysis of the data indicated that these NNSs were able to contribute effectively to the creation of coherent topic management and to the achievement of mutual understanding in the conversations.

While it is encouraging to see that a great deal of more recent research into NNS management of interactions is increasingly focused on similarly successful outcomes of such interactions, there is still a sense in which the NNS is perceived as someone who invariably encounters (or creates) problems in communication. If we are to gain substantially in our

understanding of both intercultural communication and second language acquisition, we need to broaden the scope of research from one where communicative problems are perceived as the defining feature of non-native speaker talk and instead look at a much wider range of interactional features and how these can be (and often are) effectively employed in the joint construction of talk between native and non-native speakers.

By focusing on what NNSs are able to accomplish in informal conversations this thesis has taken a small step in that direction, and will also, it is hoped, make a contribution to dispelling some of the negative connotations so often associated with the term 'non-native speaker'.

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Appendix 1

Participant hand-out

Recording conversations

Thank you very much for agreeing to record one or more conversations.

The purpose of collecting this information is to examine certain features of informal conversations between native English speakers and those who have a different mother tongue. I don't want to bias the talks by saying which features I want to investigate, but I'm interested primarily in language use rather than the content of the conversations.

If there is anything you would rather not have listened to, just erase it. As this information will be part of a PhD thesis, some of the transcript will be read by other people. All participants will be given pseudonyms to disguise their identity, but please let me know if you would not be happy to have your transcript appear in this or any other publication.

The conversations do not need to be very long –anything between 5-20 mins. will be fine. (Longer is OK, too).

It would be very useful if you could let me know in what capacity you know your conversation partner (e.g. friend, relative, flat mate etc.).

The equipment is fairly straightforward to use, but remember to switch the microphone to the ON position while recording, and OFF again when you've finished. (The green disc on the back of the mike).

Background noise can sometimes be so overpowering that voices can't be heard clearly, so please take this into account.(In other words, the pub is not the best place to make recordings !)

Most people feel a bit self-conscious when they first record themselves, but you'll probably find that you soon forget about the tape recorder.

Have fun and thanks again.

Muna

Appendix 2

Conversation profiles

Lord of the Rings   **4 minutes**

Nothing is known about the Norwegian participant in this brief conversation, but Bob, the NS, is well-known to the researcher as a friend of the family. As well as being at the time an undergraduate, he also has an established career as an actor in a well-known radio programme. He invariably speaks very fast, and generally has a lot to say. The extract is part of a number of conversations recorded by Bob, all with other native speakers, originally intended for comparative purposes. He knew the purpose of the research and was extremely pleased to have also 'captured' a non-native speaker. This short extract forms part of a longer, multi-party, NS-NS conversation recorded in very noisy conditions.

Computers   **10 minutes**

The NS was described as a flatmate, and is not known to the researcher. The Japanese participant was a quiet girl, whose language competence was at the lower end of the intermediate level.

Hot curry   **8 minutes**

This Japanese participant, in contrast, was a fluent and very competent speaker. Her co-participant is her 'foster student', with whom she had become good friends.

Cheesy beans   **9 minutes**

The NNS here is French, probably linguistically the weakest of the participants, but nonetheless a willing and enthusiastic communicator, though not always clear. Her partner would seem to be someone she knows fairly well; his communicative style tends towards the mono-syllabic; this may be due to the contrast with Bella's style, or because he is in the process of eating while the recording takes place. Towards the end of their conversation they are joined

by a friend or flatmate. This part of the conversation has not been transcribed. There is quite intrusive background music.

Education   25 minutes

Jana, the NNS is of Turkish extraction, but born and living in Germany. She was a competent, but not always forthcoming communicator in class, whether due to shyness or lack of confidence. Dave, her NS conversational partner, was described as a friend, and they would appear to have established a good relationship which allows for a fair amount of mutual teasing. Dave was a student on a Communciation Skills course for 'home' (i.e. NS) students taught by the researcher, and was one of the most articulate and active communicators on the course.

Universities   8 minutes

Pierre, the French NNS is a good communicator with a dry sense of humour. The NS, Rose, is his English girlfriend.

Football   6 minutes

Claude is the only other male NNS, who is also French. He was one of the weaker students, but always willing to communicate. His partner was described as a classmate, and it would appear that they do not know each other that well.

The tabloid   36 minutes

The NNS is Slovakian, but has also lived and studied in Germany. Her English was competent, and she communicated well in class, though not always very accurately. Her partner is her flatmate, Claire.

Modern art   31 minutes

Sara is from the former East Germany, and a fast and enthusiastic, if not always very accurate speaker. She described her NS conversation partner,

Ann, as a good friend, whom she had met while they were both doing part-time bar work in a pub.

Newspapers   33 minutes

Fay, the Belgian NNS, is by far the most advanced of the participants. She is a very competent speaker with an exceptionally clear pronunciation. She was also enrolled on a Media Review course taught by the researcher, which may have affected the conversational topics. Her partner was merely described as a "Welsh friend", and he would appear to be a student at a different university.

Appendix 3

Transcription conventions

[	start of overlapping talk
]	end of overlapping talk where this is clearly audible
=	latched utterances
(xxx)	indicates inaudible word or short phrase
(xxx xxx)	indicates longer stretch of inaudible talk
(..)	pauses of less than one second –each dot representing 0.25 second
(2.0)	timed pause (seconds)
( )	descriptions of non-verbal sounds e.g. laughter
(( ))	explanation ; uncertain transcription
-	cut-off word
:	elongated vowel
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
_	emphasis
.hhh	inhalation
-----	fragments removed from transcript
Capitals	spoken loudly
→	signals example of feature under discussion

Appendix 4

List of audio-tapes

Cassette 1	Education
Cassette 2	Cheesy beans
Cassette 3	Hot curry
Cassette 4	Universities
Cassette 5	Computers
Cassette 6	Lord of the Rings
Cassette 7	Newspapers
Cassette 8	Modern art
Cassette 9	Football
Cassette 10	The tabloid