Episodes: coding and analyzing coherence in multiparty conversation

NATASCHA KOROLIJA and PER LINELL

Abstract

Episodes in conversation are topically and interactionally defined. They are boundaryed sequences at a structurally intermediate level, that is, above the level of utterance/turn but below that of the whole encounter and its major phases. We argue that episodes and topics are equally basic to conversation.

The initiation of a new episode involves, per definition, the introduction of something new. On the other hand, episode initiations are systematically dependent on textual and contextual resources that speakers take as given, when — in the interaction — they guide their interlocutors into doing or talking about something new. This paper presents the fundamentals of a model of episode structure and its relations to contextual resources. It also outlines a method, topical episode analysis, for coding and analyzing coherence in terms of episode structure in (especially multiparty) conversation.

1. Introduction: the relationship between episodes and topics in conversation

"Coherence in discourse] is, for the participants, programatically relevant" (Schegloff 1990: 73). Sense-making consists in the actor's (or analyst's) building of coherent links between chunks of discourse (that which has to be made sense of) and some kind of context(s), that is, things accessible to the conversationalist in prior context, in the concrete, surrounding situation, or in some kind of background knowledge.

But coherence with what is already given is counterbalanced by the need for renewal and progression in conversation. Each segment of discourse therefore represents some kind of resolution of the tension between the two opposing needs, that of staying on topic and that of renewing topics. Often, topics accrue by way of stepwise progression, but
at other times participants create more abrupt shifts with clear boundaries. In the latter case, partial fractures structure the conversational flow into — what we will call — episodes. These are discursive events or action sequences, each delimited from prior and subsequent discourse and internally bound together by a coherent topical trajectory and/or a common activity.

What is it that makes episodes internally coherent? The most common answer to this question is undoubtedly topical content. Episodes are usually “about” something, and this “aboutness” is what constitutes topicality. But topicality cannot be analyzed independently of sequential structure and activity type in discourse. Schegloff (1990) argues that local sequential dependencies are the most basic building-blocks in discourse, something that makes topical coherence possible (rather than the other way around). There are also coherent sequences, which exhibit virtually no topical coherence above and beyond adjacency (e.g. question-answer) pairs but whose overall activity structure binds the sequences (episodes) together; quizzes (e.g. of the “memory master” kind) and certain psychological tests are cases in point. Not all episodes can be defined topically.

One of our fundamental assumptions is therefore that topics, sequential structure, and participation structure must be analyzed together (Maynard 1980: 263; Erickson 1990: 207; Ainsworth-Vaughn 1992). The same thesis, though formulated within a different theoretical framework, shows up in Bublitz (1988), who regards topics as the combination of content (“topic subjects”) and the “topical actions,” which introduce, sustain, change, or close (what we term “topic episodes”). On this view, episodes are discursive events and collective actions. Structurally, they belong to an intermediate level, above utterances and turns but below whole speech events and their major phases. Exactly what we mean by episodes will emerge later in this paper.

We consider episodes to be suitable units of analysis for (especially) multiparty conversations, because episodes are, in general, natural units of social interaction, they are held together by a common floor and focus of attention, and they are usually topically continuous; and they represent a level where the interdependencies between discourse and its contexts are most clearly brought out.

There are episodes both in dyadic talk and in multiparty conversation. However, there are reasons to believe that boundaried events like episodes (as opposed to stepwise topic progression) are more clearly borne out in multiparty conversations, which, in comparison with dyads, involve more divergent possibilities of topic and action progression. For example, multiparty constellations increase the differentiation among actors in access to topics and knowledge (Drew 1991) and facilitate interventions by actors who have been temporarily disattentive, or simply off the floor. There may be several parties actively contributing to developing topic, rather than, as in many interviews, two people creating question-answer sequences with one party in control of topics and the other party responding to his or her questions. Among factors contributing to the multiplication of abrupt topic shifts in conversation, we might also expect the following:

- no predefined tasks or agenda (but still some demand for talk, i.e. a state of open talk);
- no ban on local sensitivity (Bergmann 1990; the more informal the situation is, the more probable are references to things in the concrete environment);
- people’s movements in physical space (which tend to disrupt discourse, relative to e.g. the interaction in a group seated at a table);
- limited conversational skills of some participants (e.g. children, aphasics, foreign-language speakers).

2. Episodes and the dynamics of topic progression

In the course of a dialogue, interlocutors both interact and develop topics in and through their discourse. Topic progression works on a response—initiative principle, that is, at each point in time interlocutors are expected to say something that ties up with, is relevant with respect to, what has been said before, or is otherwise given in the present micro-situation, that is, the current, local contexts. At the same time something new is introduced. Bergmann (1990) termed responsive vs. initiatory aspects “topic maintenance” and “topic progression,” respectively. If participants succeed in developing topics in this stepwise manner, the resulting discourse may look like a seamless web in which topics shade into each other (“topic shading,” Schegloff and Sacks 1973; “topic drift,” Hobbs 1990). However, interlocutors do not go on developing aspects of the “same” topic or closely related topics forever; sometimes they need to change topics. If these topic shifts are more or less abrupt, we get some sort of boundaries, that is, (at least partial) discontinuities or fractures within the discursive flow, dividing the resulting “text” into episodes.

Criteria for assigning an episode boundary (and the beginning of a new episode) include the following:

- a new episode is, at least by and large, about new referents in new constellations and situations; hence episode-internal cohesive devices (e.g. certain pronouns) are usually not used over boundaries.
b. conversationalists often form a new participation structure, for example a new main speaker, in the new episode (note also that a conversation can develop into several parallel episodes with separate floors) (see section 5 below);  
c. the prior episode has faded out, and the new episode often starts at a different prosodic level (in terms of pitch, loudness, speech rate, etc.);  
d. the new episode is initiated by means of a new contextual resource (section 3 below).  

Although topics and episodes tend to be mutually constitutive, there is no simple or necessary correlation between episode and topic. First, as we have already pointed out, although most episodes are topically coherent, this is not true of all episodes (e.g. quizzes). Second, topics do not remain constant and immobile within episodes. Topic maintenance is in itself a dynamic process (e.g. Foppa 1990), and there are always some topical trajectories within episodes. Sometimes these movements inside topic spaces are so radical that the end of the episode appears to “be about” something completely different from the topic of the beginning, without there being any recognizable internal boundary (a seamless, “stepwise topical transition,” Sacks 1992; topic “shift,” Bublitz 1988). Such episodes may be called bitopical or polytopical, as opposed to those relatively monotopical episodes, which, though continuously developing, appear to “be about” one single topic. Third, the boundaries between episodes are seldom completely abrupt, nor are most new episodes initiated totally “out of the blue.” Contexts at hand are deployed as resources when conversationalists initiate new episodes. It is this third point we shall develop in the following, where we will propose using these contextual resources for classifying episodes.

3. Resources for initiating episodes in conversation

Topics are notoriously difficult to analyze in substantial terms, that is, exclusively in terms of what the discourse is “about.” Most analysts therefore work with topic boundaries (and transitions), which are easier to identify. Using episode boundaries as a resource for unitization is in fact a common method of doing topic analysis (Brown and Yule 1983; Adelswärd 1988). Our model is based on transitions across episode boundaries. Boundaries, or fractures, involve greater leaps or more abrupt shifts (of topic or activity) than those between contributions within coherent stretches. In this paper, we will not be concerned with the mechanisms of episode-internal coherence. Instead, we focus on the means by which speakers manage to secure shared attention and understanding across boundaries. It appears that, across these discontinuities, there are other kinds of coherence mechanisms bridging adjacent segments or connecting talk with contexts, thus impeding the new episodes from appearing entirely “out of the blue.”

It appears that when a speaker, in collaboration with interlocutors, tries to initiate talk about something new (or interaction of another kind than just before), he or she does this most often by using some resource in the contexts potentially accessible to the interlocutors. Correspondingly, when a new episode has been initiated, we (as actors or analysts) can usually retrospectively find a contextual source for it. We may say that speakers implicitly assume that these contextual resources can be taken and treated as given. Our analysis is based on a theory of such contextual resources used in the initiation of new episodes; a new topic (or activity) must be anchored, that is, contextualized, and thereby understood, in relation to something. The relevant context types can be grouped in terms of prior discourse, concrete surrounding situation (interational setting), and (various kinds of) abstract background knowledge (Linell 1995), a triplet that also recurs in discussions of givenness.

4. TEA — a coding system

We will now proceed to outline the fundamentals of a topical episode analysis (TEA) based on theoretical premises of the kind accounted for above. TEA is a system of coding and analyzing episodes in conversation, especially multiparty conversation. As such, it is considerably more fine-grained and linguistically sophisticated than most previous attempts.

In the analysis of discourse and conversation, coding and quantification should be seen as complements to qualitative methods. The main reasons why researchers may wish to code and quantify conversations, for example by means of TEA, are  
- to identify relevant (in our case: “middle-range”) units of multiparty interaction, as a basis for further analyses; for example,  
- to describe the general patterns behind and beyond those examples selected for detailed qualitative analyses;  
- to describe the variation of episode and participation structure within a given data corpus;  
- to diagnose individual conversations, or individual actors’ achievements (e.g. for clinical purposes), using the overall averages and variations as standards for comparison.
Topical episode analysis looks at what happens when new episodes are initiated. It should be noted that this does not amount to an analysis of the topical content of entire episodes. Givenness and topicality are not the same (Givón 1995: 78 et passim). In our case, we must distinguish between, on the one hand, resources that are accessible and used at points where new episodes are initiated, and, on the other hand, topics as subjects of continued, sustained salience or importance. It is a contingent matter if topics to be sustained throughout major parts of episodes are already signalled effectively and exploited as coherence-building resources in the episode initiations.

In dialogue, an episode must involve the contributions of more than one speaker, just as it takes more than one to establish a topic. One may therefore want to require a certain minimal size for something to qualify as an episode. We have, for the purposes of TEA, chosen to define an episode as consisting of at least three turns, at least two of which must be substantial turns by different speakers.¹⁰

TEA analyzes conversation, as it evolves over time. However, unlike for example initiative–response analysis (Linell et al. 1988), it is a partly retrospective analysis, performed by analysts, as they look back at what has been accomplished over recent sequences in the dialogue. Thus, the analyst must first survey the discourse to identify which sequences develop into (topical or other) episodes and where boundaries are, and then retrace to categorize the resources by which the episode initiations were performed. In coding, it is mandatory that the analyst listen to the tapes several times before recording boundaries and codes in the transcripts.

Analyses of multiparty conversations of different sorts have led us to posit a TEA system of eight categories. Due to space restrictions, we must limit our account to brief definitions with a few examples.¹¹

**RC: Recontextualization of an element from the prior episode.** Some aspect or element in the immediately prior episode (typically occurring toward the end of that episode) is taken as a starting point for a new episode, in which the element is then placed within a new context space.¹²

There are two main types of RC:

a. recontextualization via an association to a fact, a concept, or a referent mentioned (but peripheral) in the prior episode (topically tangential or peripheral link);

b. recontextualization via a meta-comment on the form or meaning of some expression or action in the prior episode (meta-link).

The first type (RC:a) is exemplified in (1):¹³ five female colleagues, working at the same university, have gathered for a ladies’ dinner. They meet a couple of times a year in private, besides seeing each other daily at work. Our excerpt is from one of the informal gatherings. The hostess of the party is E. The excerpt is from the early evening, when the women, A, B, C, D, and E, turn over the pages in a magazine. They discuss a photograph of actors and actresses in an American soap opera. In turn A:10 (after an attempt in A:7), A recontextualizes the issue of face-lifting and thereby introduces a new episode, which evolves around political posters in an ongoing campaign:

(1) (Gruppssam: EVA: 196)

(ifrån en pågående episod))

C:1 hm (2.6s) dom har (.) ja vet inte dom har nån ansiktslyfta å har
* för jämna tändor särskilt dom äldre
B:2 ja (dom e de x)
E:3 (men de gäller) väl herrarna också (.) eller damerna också dom ser helt artificiella ut
B:4 ja (xx)
C:5 ja > (fast dom bryr ja mej inte om) < (.) av de skälet *så att säga*
E:6 nånå ((skratett 3s))
A:7 på tal om eh
C:8 = så att därför så ser ja inte de tror ja på samma sätt
E:9 nå (.) nå (1s)
RC********************
A:10 eh når vi pratar om ansiktslyftning lyfta men ja
D:11 ja
A:12 = fick en annan (0.5s) "tanke" alla dessa valaffischer va vackra
   dom e
E:13 hm
C:14 ja oh
D:15 javisst
A:16 ja gick (.) hem (1s)
C:17 mycke vackra ((skratett))
A:18 en annan väg häromdan så ja gi- passerade Gamla torget (.) å ja
   hade inte sett den här bilden av Mona Sahlin tidigare (.)
D:19 ("hon e snygg där")
A:20 nå de de e ju-
C:21 = så snygg e hon ju inte i verkligheten
   ((kvinnorna fortsätter att tala om valaffischer))
   (from an ongoing episode))
C:1 hm (2.6s) they have (.) I don't know they have some sort of face-
   lift an' they've got too even teeth particularly the older ones
B:2 yes (they are that's x)
A uses an English expression, "conversation piece." S, who probably sees it as his duty to demand an explanation, repeats this phrase with a questioning intonation in S:20. The following contributions develop this into a full episode with its own topic, rather than into a mere repair sequence:

(2) (Tema K: NKR 1:310) ((från en pågående episod))
A:1 =för annars så blir hon sur å kommer me pianotråd på måndag.
S:2 ja, okej. ja skriver-
H:3 = va? va ska hon ha den till? ((S skrattar till))
A:4 strypa sin chef.
H:5 ja förstår.
A:6 mm.
S:7 <Alexandra Ask.>
H:8 ja!
A:9 ja.

Although the phenomenon of face-lifting was mentioned in turn C:1, and hence was available ("given") as a cotextual resource, a new episode comes into being through the conversationalists' use of this resource in forming a starting point for talk about new referents and new situations (cf. sect. 2: criterion a). Moreover, the new topical focus is introduced by a speaker, A, who has been inactive for some time (cf. criterion b).

The meta-linguistic type (RC:b) is exemplified in (2), taken from a session in a long-running Swedish radio show, where four more or less permanent participants gather to discuss recent trends in fashion and society. In the example we have chosen, one particular trend, dealing with new interior decoration, has just been announced. However, the discussion has drifted away for a while. The host S of the show wants to bring the discourse back to the decoration trends (S:10), and he is now interested in the homes of the participants H and G. When H describes his home, A, who can be regarded as the current trend expert, emphasizes in what ways objects are to be installed or placed. In A:17,
S:25 jaha
H:26 ja
A:27 och då börjar vi alla prata om den istället för att fråga hur mår du
S:28 ja ja ja
((deltagarna fortsätter att tala om 'conversation piece'))

((from an ongoing episode))
A:1 = because otherwise she'll get cross with me and brings piano-
wire on Monday
S:2 yes, okay. I'll write-
H:3 = what? what does she need that for? ((S laughs))
A:4 to strangle her boss.
H:5 I see.
A:6 mm.
S:7 < Alexandra Ask. >
H:8 yes!
A:9 yes.

RF*******************************************************************************
S:10 well, what do the rest of you have to say? what do your homes
look like? are there plastic tulips, crying children and negro heads?
H:11 yes ehh... I find one's place is a little tasteless you know but I
didn't know that was trendy? (0.5s)
S:12 but you have always been tasteless?
H:13 yes
S:14 yes ha ha ha*
A:15 yes(.) but that con-, that depends on how you have it I mean you
can't have several tasteless objects that's-
H:16 no no no that's right. (I) mean the majority of the things are
supposed to be correct or, aren't they? and then a couple of
small ugly-
A:17 = yes, and then there must be a small conversation piece [[original
in English]] somewhere just insisting on being eh-
H:18 aha that's right
A:19 = being tasteless

RC*******************************************************************************
S:20 "conversation piece"? [[original in English]]
A:21 piece, that's nice
S:22 = that's that has to that must be explained
H:21 yes.
A:24 well that's something like when you get into this trendy room and
find a (?) negro statue from some kind of flea market and everyone
says "but hmmhm well.."
The reinitiated episode below, starting in T:53, must be understood in relation to the episodes leading up to it. It is Sunday afternoon at Arne and Elsa's home. They are visited by two of their adult children: Inga (aphasic) and Vera, with their husbands Erik and Ola. Tilde, Inga and Erik's youngest daughter, is also present. They are drinking coffee and waiting for late lunch, which Arne is preparing. At one point, Arne asks Inga about her plans for the following day, Monday, and Inga tells him and the others about her appointment at the hospital. Then a new episode about her health is elaborated, and after this, Tilde returns to the first, nonadjacent episode, beginning to tell everyone about her Monday plans in T:53, evidently tying back to her attempt in T:3, 50 turns earlier:

(4) (TEMA K; H99:510)
A:1 när ska du tibaka i morrn? (1.5s) jobbet? (2s)
I:2 ska va där klockan (1s) halv tie- näe n'-( ) kvart över (0.5s) nie ä de.
T:3 'ja ä inte hemma i morrn--' 0
E:4 kvart över nio? (1s)
((episoden fortsätter, en ny episod om Ingas hälsa följer, här återger vi endast de sista turerna på den:))
I:50 nä men ja va 'os dotorn för de här nu (.) för en månad sen (0.5s) eller ä de tid? (1s) när ja va 'onom? 
E:51 'ja de va. ett par män'ar sen.'(1s)
A:52 ja: ((harklar sig)) (4s)
R: Reinitiation (renewal) of, or return to, a prior, nonadjacent topic in the same discourse. The speaker goes back abruptly to a prior topic that was activated in a nonadjacent part of the preceding discourse. Reinitiations are sometimes cued by return markers like 'but anyway...', 'now..', 'to return to what we talked about before'.

A new episode is often triggered by some “local matter” (Bergmann 1990), something in the immediate, surrounding concrete situation, that is, the perceptually accessible environment with its physical spaces, persons, objects, artifacts, extradiscursive events, etc. Such matters are, by definition, given in the concrete situation but have so far not been topicalized in the immediately prior discourse space. Bergmann (1990) terms this phenomenon local sensitivity, and we distinguish here between two major cases, SE and SO (sensitivity to event and object, respectively).

A new episode can be triggered by some event, usually one occurring immediately before the utterance topicalizing it. The event involved attracts the attention of one or, more typically, several (or all) actors, which makes it easy for anyone of them to comment on the event without much ado.

The event that triggers the episode below, which is taken from the same encounter as example 3, is the fact that Eva happens to pour out a herring from a pot into the kitchen sink. Ulf, her husband, comments on that (U:5) by issuing a “response cry.” A short but focused episode evolves.

(5) (TEMA K: H202:1454)

((från en pågående episod))

U: 1 dom har inte smör på bröd som vi?
B: 2 när då man åter bara me vanlig sked
U: 3 så att såga, men va gott, men att (.) man måste kanske vänja själl
vid de ((man håller upp mer vin)) (3s)
A: 4 ja (2s)

SE: Reference to an event taking place in the situation. The new episode is triggered by some event, usually occurring immediately before the utterance topicalizing it. The event involved attracts the attention of one or, more typically, several (or all) actors, which makes it easy for anyone of them to comment on the event without much ado.

The event that triggers the episode below, which is taken from the same encounter as example 3, is the fact that Eva happens to pour out a herring from a pot into the kitchen sink. Ulf, her husband, comments on that (U:5) by issuing a “response cry.” A short but focused episode evolves.
V:1 = från Amerika
U:2 (xx xx)
V:3 inte våga åka hit för de va sån strålrisk här
T:4 nej
SE ****************************************
U:5 får du i hela håret i på där spännet?
V:6 nej de tror ja inte, ja har inte försökt
U:7 mm de e finns ju såna här långa spännten som man kan "ta hela håret"
V:8 =:a:a
N:9 mm
V:10 tänkte ja skulle köpa mej ett sånt
((ytterligare 4 ruder innan episoden ebar ut))
((from an ongoing episode))
V:1 = from America
U:2 (xx xx)
V:3 don’t dare to come here because of the radiation risk.
T:4 no
SE ****************************************
U:5 can you get the whole of her hair into that clip?
V:6 no I don’t think so, I haven’t tried
U:7 mm there are these long clips with which one can “fasten the whole of her hair”
V:8 = ye:s
N:9 mm
V:10 I thought I’d buy myself one of those
((4 more turns before the episode fades out))

SO: Reference to an object present in the situation. Here the presence of an object (person, arrangement, etc.), which has been there during (the whole or parts of) the discourse, is used as a resource for talk. In comparison with SE, this case usually demands more referential specification to guarantee a successful introduction.

The excerpt below is taken from the beginning of the evening that we described in example 1 above. The women are indulging in small talk about several issues while the host, E, is speaking on the telephone. Out of the small talk comes the episode about the cut-glass chandelier, introduced by C in C:4:

(7) (Gruppsam: EVA:33)
((från en pågående episod))
A:1 ja e lite allergisk för *nylon också*

C:2 ((skrattar) de e helt otroligt
D:3 ja tänkte säga nåt (.) de här ja redan glömt
SO ****************************************
C:4 gud, vilken söt lampa dom har där! (1s)
V:5 “lampa” (1s)
D:6 den lilla där uppe-
C:7 = ja gillar inte kristallkronor men den va fin
D:8 ja den va fin
C:9 hm
A:10 “ja ska bara”
D:11 den ser ”ja hm”
C:12 den var så oprententiös ”på nåt sätt” ((dörrklockan ringer))
D:13 ”hm”
A:14 ja den va vacker
((ytterligare några ruder följer innan episoden ebar ut))
((from an ongoing episode))
A:1 I’m a bit allergic to *nylon as well*
C:2 ((laughs)) that’s incredible
D:3 I was about to say something (.) I’ve already forgotten
SO ****************************************
C:4 gosh what a pretty lamp they’ve got there! (1s)
V:5 “lamp” (1s)
D:6 the little one up there-
C:7 = I’m usually not fond of cut-glass chandeliers but that one is neat
D:8 yes it’s neat
C:9 hm
A:10 “I’m just going to”
D:11 it looks “well hm”
C:12 it is so unpretentious “somehow” ((the doorbell rings))
D:13 “hm”
A:14 yes it’s lovely
((a few more turns before the episode ends))

AG: Reference to (some aspect of) the abstract activity type: taking up a predefined, agenda-bound topic or subactivity. AG covers all those cases in which somebody, drawing upon knowledge of the purpose of the encounter, activity type, or the task involved, takes up some point on the agenda assumed to be known in advance. Here belong all the cases in institutional, task-oriented discourse, where participants know in
advance what will or can be brought up and where such topics can therefore be nominated or elicited without further ado.

The next example is drawn from a criminal court trial on a case of shoplifting. The prosecuting attorney (P) is just closing his interview with the defendant (D) (in P:3), whereupon the judge J directly introduces a new topic (and trial phase), namely D’s personal record.

(8) (TEMA K: A14:16)

(från en pågående episod:)

P:1 men de anser du att du har inte gjort de för du hade inte avsikt å
(D: nå) å gå igenom kassan utan att betala för varorna
D:2 aldrig. De hade ja inte.
P:3 ja. (. ) tack.
AG******************************************************************************

J:4 ja, här finns ett personbevis beträffande dej, Lisa, som visar att du
e skriven i Askby, du e gift, förekommer inte i kriminalregistret, å
du e hemmefru å din man e upptagen till ungefär hundra tusen kronor,
din mans inkomst--
D:5 ja, de e väl något mer
J:6 å bostadsbidrag å tre barn har du hemma.

(from an ongoing episode)

P:1 but you do claim that you haven’t done it ’cause you had no
intention to (D: no) pass the cash-point without paying for the

D:2 never... I didn’t.
P:3 OK. (. ) thanks.
AG******************************************************************************

J:4 well, here is a personal identity document concerning you, Lisa,
that shows that you are registered in Askby, you’re married, don’t
appear in the criminal records an’ you’re a housewife an’ your
husband is registered for about a hundred thousand kronor, your
husband’s income--
D:5 well, I think it’s a bit more
J:6 an’ a housing allowance. an’ you have three children at home.

Certain (partly ritualized) activity types in private situations also involve
subactivities that are somewhat routinized and usually performed by a
certain role incumbent, such as the host giving a welcoming toast, a
dinner guest giving a speech of thanks, etc. These cases also belong to
AG. We can also classify encounter openings (greetings, how are you’s,
etc.) and closings (leave-taking, farewells) here.

The agenda-bound episode we have chosen here from an informal
situation is one of toasting, something that occurs frequently at the

midsummer celebration described above. The participants are all looking
out of the window, regretting the bad weather, when Arnold, the host,
proposes a toast again (A:3). Agenda-bound initiations in noninstitutional
texts rarely disturb the interaction, that is, they are more or
less allowed or expected to be interjected into ongoing activities.

(9) (TEMA K: H202:664)

(från en pågående episod)

A:1 ((harklar sig)) ja de e väl o- otäckt de me djuren å när de e sånt
härnt väder
(2s)
B:2 *mm
AG******************************************************************************

A:3 jaha, skål då!
U:4 "de va gott me en kall öl"
A:5 näe brr ((onomatop.)) (1s) brrr så otäckt de va
B:6 ((tyst skratt))
U:7 mm
B:8 ibland måste man ju tvinga sej
U:9 ja
A:10 ja
B:11 sill? ((erbjuder sill till de andra))
U:12 skicka en sillbit, ja
A:13 mj
(6s)
((U börjar berätta en vits; en ny episod börjar))

(from an ongoing episode)

A:1 ((clears his throat)) yes I guess it’s ho- horrible for the animals
an’ when the weather is like this
(2s)
B:2 mm
AG******************************************************************************

A:3 well cheers then!
U:4 "how nice with a cold beer"
A:5 no brr ((onomatopoetically)) (1s)
B:6 ((laughs silently))
U:7 mm
B:8 occasionally one has to force oneself
U:9 yes
A:10 yes
B:11 herring? ((offers, herring to the others))
BA: Invoking other topics that are situationally near at hand (belonging to situationally activated background assumptions). The next general category is in several ways difficult. It involves a number of topic initiations that share the property of being somehow near at hand in the situation given. When such topics are invoked, the initiations usually do not appear to be entirely out of the blue (cf. UA below). What is taken as given in BA (making this category somewhat akin to AG) is inherent in the social situation as such, but the situation is considered as a token rather than as a type; BA exploits background knowledge about the specific persons, place, and time, that is, assumptions about the “deictic center” of the situation (the persons, etc., indexed by ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘here’, ‘now’). There are several mutually related subcategories of BA, including (a) commenting on the social situation in general (the fact that people are there together), (b) exploring each other’s relevant biographies, (c) invoking items from a common biography, and (d) invoking topics about absent members’ activities.

That certain topics are near at hand, or inherent in the social situation, and “not out of the blue” (other than perhaps for an analyst) is illustrated by example (10) (BA: type d). We meet the same family as in example (4). Tilde is complaining about lazy parents, when suddenly (A:5) Arne, the grandfather, asks about one absent family member, Inga and Erik’s oldest daughter Stina. Topicalizing a piece of shared biographical knowledge, Arne does not have to frame or mark his request.

(10) (TEMA K: H99:552)

((från en pågående episod))

T:1 men du, de å Susanne som såger “men din pappa är väl hemma?”
“nå nå han- han kan inte göra de”
E:2 ja Ja gör inte särskilt mycket heller?
T:3 nämen Lenas mamma gör ju då.
(1s)
A:4 du gick hem då? ja. ((en dörr stängs))
(1s)

BA

A:5 vem va Stina hos?
E:6 nae, ja vet inte vem de va
I:7 ‘o å på (0.5s) ett (-) läger rå’ höll ja på å säga
E:8 hos nån pojkvän

A:9 å de ett läger?
I:10 nån
E:11 dom har fest dom har ute ja vet inte
T:12 Karin
I:13 å hennes mamma å pappa.
A:14 jaså ’ur går de me skolan?’
((deltagarna fortsätter att tala om Stinas skolgång))
((from an ongoing episode))
T:1 but you know, Susanne says “but your dad is at home, isn’t he?”
“no no he- he can’t do that”
E:2 well I don’t do very much either?
T:3 no but Lena’s mother does, you know.
(1s)
A:4 so by that time you went home? yes ((a door is shut))
(1s)

BA

A:5 so where did you say Stina was?
E:6 well, I don’t know who it was
I:7 she’s (0.5) camping I was about to say
E:8 she’s with some boyfriend
A:9 is that camping?
I:10 no
E:11 they’re having a party they are outdoors I don’t know
T:12 Karin
I:13 an’ her mother an’ father
A:14 I see. how’s school?
((participants continue to talk about Stina’s school work))

UA: Contextually unanchored episodes. This is the case when somebody brings up a topic “out of the blue,” without any grounding in prior discourse (RC, AN, RI), local matters (SO, SE), or such abstract background knowledge as is situationally relevant and intersubjectively available (AG, BA). Instead, the speaker seems to have made an opaque association or a sudden mental leap inaccessible to us as observers. It therefore appears to be completely new, and, in some cases at least, unmotivated even from the point of view of the interlocutors. Note that the speaker himself presumably sees some connection with, or is triggered by, something in the situation, but the defining characteristic is that the speaker and/or the others do not take anything like this for granted but must take pains to establish the new topic from scratch. Therefore, prototypical UA episodes either are marked by the speaker as locally
unmotivated (e.g. by the use of a “discontinuity marker,” either a general one, such as ‘by the way’, ‘incidentally’, ‘that reminds me of …’ [which may also occur with RC, AN, BA], or a marker more limited to UA, such as ‘before I forget …’, ‘if I may change the subject …’, etc.), or are marked by the addressee (or other interlocutors) as not (initially) understood as situationally relevant (through questions [‘why do you bring that up?’] and other means). UA is also something of a residue category, to be used when there is an obvious boundary but no strong evidence in favor of any other coding.

Below, in example (11) (from the same conversation as examples [1] and [5]), it appears to be difficult for the participants to understand A’s sudden and explicit change of topic (see turns 11–14). Here the five women are discussing androgynous individuals and their traits. In A:11, A all of a sudden changes the topic, indeed by announcing that act, but nevertheless surprising the other participants. There is quite a long pause and minimal feedback before D, in D:15, recognizes what A is referring to, while C at least still does not know (C:18).

(11) (Gruppsamtal: EVA2:1452)
((från en pågående episod))
C:1 ja läste nån teori om att människorna blir mer å mer androgyna (. ) då kommer också kvinnorna å få mer å mer hår på benen å skäggväxt-
V:2 hm
E:3 ja
B:4 ajajaj
E:5 men de (. ) >ja undrar om de e sant <
B:6 "e de inte?"
E:7 >biologist androgyn men däremot socialt androgyna < "blir dom väl"
C:8 ja jo
B:9 "hm" men de kanske yttrar sej även i biologin
C:10 >men de e ja menar de e väl biologin <
UA******************************************************************************
A:11 >välj ett snabbt vi (. ) eh (. ) skiftning av ämne här < (. ) dom där eh (. ) märkena i sådesfälten i England (2.5s)
D:12 "ja"
V:13 hm
E:14 hmm
D:15 ja såg de för de va alltså på på sexnyheterna ja
V:16 >(xx) nyheterna <
A:17 på sexnyheterna ja
C:18 va va de då
B:19 = >va va de ja <
A:20 dom påstog att de * va två gubbar* som hade gätt å gjort *dom hår*
D:21 ja just de, dom hade *bundit fast stora bräder* vid fotterna å så gätt fram så hår ((skrattar)) *i stora* (0.6s) cirklar
((gruppen fortsätter att tala om märkena))
((from an ongoing episode))
C:1 I read some theory about people becoming more and more androgy- nous (. ) women, then, will have more and more hair on their legs and growth of beard-
V:2 hm
E:3 yes
B:4 ohohohoh
E:5 but that (. ) >I wonder if that’s true <
B:6 "isn’t it?"
E:7 >biologically androgyrous but socially androgynous, on the other hand <, "I guess they’ll be"
C:8 yes yeah
B:9 "hm" but that might also be manifest in biology
C:10 >but it is I mean it is probably biological <
UA******************************************************************************
A:11 >very quickly we (. ) eh (. ) change of topic here < (. ) those eh (. ) marks in the corn fields in England (2.5s)
D:12 *yes*
V:13 hm
E:14 hmmm
D:15 I saw it it was on the six o’clock news yes
V:16 >the news <
A:17 the six o’clock news yes
C:18 so what was it?
B:19 = >yes what was it? <
A:20 they claimed that *two old men* had walked around making *these*\nD:21 yes that’s right that they had *tied big boards* to their feet and then walked like this ((laughs)) *in big* (0.6s) circles
((the group continues to talk about the marks))

Note that even in UA, participants (or at least speakers) may possess the resources to (tacitly) frame or contextualize contributions, that is, to make them understandable in situ and thus construe them as coherently used in context, but analysts may lack such knowledge (often parties')
biographical knowledge). The rule of thumb for the coder is, however, to try to take the interlocutor's (rather than the speaker's) perspective (thereby of course attending to the speaker's manifest attempts to take his interlocutor's perspective).

The different categories that can be used as contextual resources in the initiation of new episodes constitute a consistent system. Indeed, they can be roughly ordered in a hierarchy as follows:
- RC, AN, and RI are discursively (cotextually) anchored; in RI the topic may be said to be given in the context, although not in the immediately prior stretch of discourse; in RC and AN, some aspects (elements, precursors, seeds) of the new topics are somehow identifiable in the prior episode.
- SO and SE are cases where the topic is situationally evoked (motivated) but not cotextually anchored.14
- AG and BA involve references to referents or topical aspects that are anchored in, known to be part of, some kind of (supposedly) shared background knowledge, either the (abstract) situation definition (frame of the communicative activity) (AG) or the participants' own personal biographies (BA).
- UA comprise cases where the topic is treated as not given in any of the above-mentioned senses, that is, it is intersubjectively unanchored.

AG, BA, and UA are all, in one way or another, initiated "out of the blue,"15 neither cotextually bound nor (deictically) anchored in the concrete situation, that is, we deal with talk about absent referents or abstract aspects, introduced without premonition (grounding) in prior context. However, these are matters of degree; least "out of the blue" are agenda- or situation-defined topics (AG), whereas UA represent the other pole, and BA are cases in between.

These considerations may motivate collapsing the categories into fewer superordinate categories (below: T, R, S, and O), a move that has the advantage of raising levels of intercoder agreement. Such a collapsed system may include
- T = (locally) co-textually anchored initiations = (RC, AN);
- R = reinitiation of same topic = (RI);
- S = situationally evoked initiations = (SO, SE);
- O = other abrupt, out-of-the-blue, initiations = (AG, BA, UA).

5. Participation structure of episodes

The basis of TEA lies with its classification of episodes in terms of episode-initiation techniques. However, this is no more than a partial theory of episode structure. We therefore usually combine TEA core categories with analyses of, for example, the participation structure of episodes.

First, many episodes develop into dyadic interactions in multiparty settings also (Parker 1984). A classification into dyadic and polyadic episodes may tell us something important about the interactional dynamics of the group. Second, and even more importantly, in order to capture the division of communicative labor within the conversation, we need an analysis of participant roles in the episodes. Here, we can adapt a generalized (and simplified) version of the categories of Ochs and Taylor (1992), which were used by them to analyze narratives rather than episodes in general:

The initiator of an episode is the individual actor who elicits or triggers talk on a topic (later developed into an episode) by taking the first (substantial) turn in the new episode (uttering the first contribution[s] recognizably belonging to a new episode).16

The main speaker is the single most active speaker during an episode (the "owner" of the episode).17

The main addressee is the single most often addressed person in an episode, as witnessed by speaker selections (explicit addresses, nonverbal orientations, etc.) and response patterns.

Note that there are episodes with no single main speaker and/or main addressee.

Another category is of course main figure (protagonist). Here it might be of particular interest if the main figure is identical to the main speaker (topically self-oriented episodes; cf. Labov and Fanshel 1977: A-events), the main addressee (topically other-oriented episodes: B-events), or a third person (D-event).18

Additionally analyses of episodes may involve topic types and activity types (e.g. narrative, argumentative, confrontative, etc., episodes), whether episodes are issue-oriented (Dumesnil and Dorval 1989: "perspective-related") or not, etc.

6. Applying the system

Quantitative research methods are usually compromises, resulting from the tension between the urge to create more coding categories in the pursuit of validity and a desire to stick with a more workable and reliable, but less nuanced, coding framework (Heritage and Roth 1995).19 TEA is flexible within limits; more subcategories could be added to the basic system. In our studies (using the basic categories outlined above), we have reached intercoder agreement for unitization (assignment of bound-
aries) of around 65–70% and for categorization of around 70–80%. In comparison with agreement levels for other codings of authentic spoken interaction, these levels must be deemed entirely satisfactory (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 1993). If we collapse categories into overall categories (T, R, S, O), levels are naturally somewhat raised.

Although TEA was not designed for the analysis of any particular genres, we suggested earlier that episode structure is most conspicuous and varied in spontaneous multiparty conversation. So far, TEA has been applied mainly to such data.

For example, in a study of family gathering talk involving aphasic individuals, Linell and Korolija (1995) found several significant results using TEA analysis. The distribution of episodes in aphasic discourse showed that predominantly situationally evoked episodes evolved. Correspondingly, the number of cotextually anchored episodes was unusually low. The main reason for this was the aphasics' ways of participating in the conversations. The aphasic's own episode initiations — or what were taken up by the other participants as initiations — were 50–80% anchored in the surrounding situation. Furthermore, it was shown that aphasics were principally cast in the role of main addressee or third person; even when they actually initiated episodes, they were, due to their communicative abilities in the particular interactions, almost certain to lose main speakership. The contributions made by the aphasics, which at first sight appeared to be incoherent, were made part of the jointly produced episodes by being strategically positioned as well as collaboratively completed by a partner. Aphasics — perhaps more than other participants in conversations — secured at least one collaborator when they had something to tell. The division of communicative labor within episodes was the outcome of a dynamic negotiation of participant roles.

TEA has also been used for a study of multiparty conversations on the radio (Korolija 1996). Results from this analysis, which is based on six radio shows of the type we introduced in example (2) above, indicate that in these conversations, mainly cotextual episodes evolve. In various ways, the participants seek to recycle the preceding cotext. One reason for this is that there is little place left for situational or background contexts in this conversational genre. But in this kind of conversation, designed to be witty and entertaining, participants also stretch the limits of normal coherence rules. Thus, the data motivate an elaboration of the RC category.

7. Discussion

The theories and methods outlined in this paper are innovative in some important respects. First, we deal with multiparty conversations, especi-
- transepisode themes: narrative or topical themes (discourse threads) that become leitmotifs repeated or developed in and through a sequence of episodes or stories (cf. story session, story rounds); such a theme can also function locally as a resource for episode initiation (link over to new RC or AN episode, the theme being related to recontextualized aspect vs. basis of analogy, respectively).

Returning to TEA, results suggest a typology of conversational activities with regard to coherence, as defined by the different prevalences of episode initiation types. We could, for example, think of three types, characterized by overrepresentation of (i) deictic references to the concrete situation (SE, SO), (ii) cotextual coherence (few episode boundaries, many RC and AN), and (iii) global control (often an implicit or explicit agenda) (AG), respectively. The two last-mentioned types fit normative demands for ‘staying on topic.’ While (iii) is typical of many genres of institutional discourse, (ii) is what skillful conversationists are often normatively expected to accomplish (‘conversation’). The many concrete-situational dependencies of (i), on the other hand, are typical of talk supporting manual work, and situations characterized by an ‘open state of talk’ (Goffman 1983). In addition, this pattern seems to appear in many conversations with small children, and perhaps conversations with people with communicative disabilities. It is reasonable to suppose that the mental efforts needed to retrieve referential sources and to sustain focused attention are lower in this kind of talk exchanges.

Received 11 December 1995
Revised version received 8 March 1996

Notes

1. For valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper we wish to thank Kerstin Nordenstam, Jan Svennevig, and two anonymous reviewers. Correspondence address: Department of Communication Studies, Linköping University, S-581 83 Linköping, Sweden.

2. Dumesnil and Dorval (1989) distinguish between six levels of analysis for discourse: speech occasion, speech event, talk activity, episode, sequence, speech act. ‘Episodes’ appear at a ‘meso-level’ between phases of speech events and local sequences. Our units of TEA (see below) are in general slightly bigger than Dumesnil and Dorval’s ‘episodes,’ which — like Reichman’s (1978) ‘context spaces’ — correspond to what we would regard as “subepisodes.”

3. An analysis of the stream of social behavior in terms of “episodes” was proposed by Harré and Secord (1972), whose notion was later used by, among others, Hare and Blumberg (1988). Other researchers use the term “episode” in slightly different ways.

van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) seem to be influenced by the theory of episodic memory. Chafe (1979) proposes units such as episode/paraphrase and larger memories/stories (where “memory” and “episode” are cognitive units, and “story” and “paragraph” the corresponding “verbalized” units of expression.). For van Dijk (1982), too, episodes are semantic, rather than interactional, units.

Crow (1983) uses the term “conversational episode” in his analysis of topic progression in couples’ conversation. The concept also appears in the hierarchy proposed by Dumesnil and Dorval (1989) (cf. note 2).

4. We work with a notion of “topic” defined at a “middle-range” level of discourse structure (Givón 1983), rather than at a sentence/utterance level (cf. Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin 1976). Accordingly, we will also discuss given–new distinctions at the level of episodes. In the literature, hierarchies of “giveness,” “familiarity,” or “accessibility” have concerned smaller units than episodes, i.e. utterances or sentences, and have been used to explain regularities in the use of different sorts of referring expressions (Prince 1981; Clark and Marshall 1982; Hawkins 1978; Givón 1983; Ariel 1988; Gundel et al. 1993). For example, Ariel (1988) notes various regularities between the grammatical forms of referring expressions and the assumed accessibility of the corresponding referents in the hearer’s mind. If a referent is presented as entirely new, it is usually introduced through a full indefinite noun (phrase); full nominal expressions (definite descriptions) and proper names are therefore “low-accessibility markers.” Conversely, demonstrative expressions (this X, that Y, etc.) mark “mid accessibility,” and pronouns and gaps are used for “high accessibility.” A referent is treated as given or new, familiar or unfamiliar, easily accessible or less accessible, etc., depending on its cognitive status, its assumed accessibility in the listener’s consciousness, whether it has been mentioned in the local context, whether it is perceptually accessible in the situation, whether it belongs to background knowledge that is contextually activated, or whether it is assumed to be brand new for the recipient. Chafe (1994) discusses most of these theories and shows that several dimensions are involved. He also argues that the given/accessible/new hierarchy can be construed in terms of degrees of activation cost.

5. Cf. Reichman’s (1978) notion of “context space.” These units, however, are smaller than our episodes, i.e. we are more conservative in assigning boundaries between units.


7. Episode initiations, at least the abrupt ones, are more structured and salient than episode closings (cf. Ellis et al. 1983: 280). Fractures in discourse are thus achieved by the introduction of something new. Episodes are ended, or closed, in one of three basic ways; by explicit closing of a topic (quite frequent in institutional encounters), by fading out (as indicated by pauses, lowered tempo, the use of sequences of confirmatory and other topicless utterances), or by (being interrupted by) the initiation of a new episode. For an attempt to classify topic transition on the basis of (prior) topic closure types, see Ainsworth-Vaughn (1992).

8. Such triplets have a well-established tradition in the literature (e.g. Ochs Keenan and Schieffelin 1976; Clark and Marshall 1982). Clark and Marshall (1982) talk about “prior conversation,” “joint perceptual experiences,” and “joint membership” (i.e. mutual and shared background knowledge). Cf. also Givón’s (1989) notions of textual, deictic, and generic contexts.

9. For example, Crow (1983) has only a distinction between “renewal” (cf. our RI) and “noncoherent shift.” Crow’s other categories (maintenance, coherent shift, insert) concern (in our terms) episode-internal phenomena. Atkinson and Heritage (1984: 165) talk about “stepwise” vs. “boundaried” forms of topic transitions. The latter comprise (roughly) all our episode transitions. Similarly, for Reichman (1978), almost all our
episode transitions are "total shifts." Yet, our analysis shows that the shifts involved are neither "total" (Reichman) nor "incoherent" (Crow).

10. A "substantial" turn is, by definition, expanded beyond being a minimal response (Linell et al. 1988). This means that an episode cannot consist of an isolated turn, nor of only one substantial (but nonmonological) turn followed by only a minimal response (or several such responses). (Such short sequences may well represent attempts at initiating episodes.) However, if a speaker, in a dyadic or polyadic situation, manages to hold the floor for a long monological turn, this must be regarded as an episode. Under normal conditions, the speaker is then almost certain to receive some minimal responses or listener's support items (back-channeling) from the others, which will make the event jointly constructed also overtly, not only "virtually" (i.e., simply by being other-oriented).

A comprehensive manual is in preparation (Linell and Korolija 1996).

11. On the concept of (local, discourse-internal) recontextualization, see Linell (1995).

12. Examples are given first in the original (spoken Swedish), and then in rough English translations. For access to data from the data corpus Gruppsam, we thank Kerstin Nordenstam, University of Göteborg.

Transcription conventions: italics denote emphatic stress; underlinings denote overlap of (simultaneous) talk or other activities; (1a) a timed pause in seconds; (:) a micropause; (xxx) inaudible speech; = means that the following utterance is latched onto the previous one without any intervening silence whatsoever; -- means that current speaker is interrupted (or suddenly stops speaking). * * denotes speech in a low volume; * * indicates that the words enclosed are spoken with laughter in the voice; > < indicates that the words enclosed are spoken at a faster speech rate.

13. Referents in the new episodes can therefore often be introduced by anaphoric and deictic means in RC + AN + R1 and SE + SO, respectively.

14. In a still wider (and therefore uninteresting) sense, all initiations (in which, by definition, you don’t stay entirely on the prior topic) may exhibit features of "out of the blue" introduction.

15. This may be merely a "topic initial elictor" (Button and Casey 1984) such as "What's new?", "What're you doing?"

16. Bublitz (1988) also separates out "secondary speaker."

17. Svennevig (1994) shows, for example, that self- and other-oriented topics tend to be interactionally sensitive (face-threatening) in conversations among previously unacquainted people. Accordingly, self-oriented episodes tend to have more neutral initiations (not focused on the speaker’s self), or they are preceded by other such episodes, the focus on self being introduced via a tangential link (RC).

18. Coding and quantification of authentic discourse is theoretically and methodologically tricky, as long as one tries to identify and code meaningful actions rather than behavioral items (Marková and Linell, forthcoming). The difficulties have to do with the apparent contradiction between unitizing and categorizing as major aspects of coding practices, on the one hand, and fundamental dialogical principles, such as sequentiality, joint production, and act-activity interdependence, on the other. We argue, however, that TEA, as well as e.g. IR analysis of dominance and coherence across turns (Linell et al. 1988), is consonant with dialogism (Marková and Linell, forthcoming).

19. While such units are part and parcel of participants’ communicative interaction, a coding system is of course an analytic device that selectively focuses on some, but hardly all, aspects of episode structure; cf. note 19.

21. Cf. the musical term “theme.”

References


—; and Linell, Per (forthcoming). Coding elementary contributions to discourse: individual acts vs. dialogical interactions.


