

Discontinuity of Conversational Topics*

Kawai Chui

National Chengchi University

This paper studies the structuring of conversational topics in order to examine the linguistic manifestation of topic discontinuity which arises when the speech participants start a new subject. Since the change of topic is an important event in discourse, the speaker who initiates the change is found to pause longer and produce more repairing utterances. Moreover, markers for time, event, and character discontinuity are also used at the topic-shift boundary. Concerning the content of the new subject, about half of the new topics are introduced immediately without background information. Alternatively, a new topic can be oriented by background information in various ways. The most common way is by asking questions because they typically invite other speakers to converse about the new subject.

Key words: conversational topic, topic discontinuity, topic chain, discontinuity markers, background information

1. Introduction

Daily conversations proceed as speakers continue talking about various topics. Previous studies have largely focused on continuity or coherence within topics (Halliday and Hasan 1976; van Dijk 1981; Givón 1983; Cheng 1988). This paper, however, will investigate the linguistic manifestation of topic discontinuity which arises when the speech participants change their subject for talk.

The corpus of data includes four commonplace, multi-party interactions among friends: the first conversation had four participants, the second involved five, and the last two had three speakers. The conversations were twenty-minute excerpts from longer recordings.

* I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions. None of them is responsible for the final shape of this paper.

The next section studies how conversational topics are structured. Section 3 analyzes the linguistic marking of topic discontinuity with respect to pausing, self-repair, discontinuity markers, and grounding. The last section provides concluding remarks.

2. Structuring of Conversational Topics

Former studies define the notion of ‘topic’ in various ways with different terminology. First, to discuss discourse continuity, Givón (1983) has proposed ‘thematic paragraph’ within which thematic continuity, action continuity, and topic/participant continuity can be discussed. Van Dijk’s (1981:180) ‘episode’ refers to ‘a sequence of propositions of a discourse that can be subsumed by a macroproposition’. For Chinese, Tsao (1979, 1988, 1990) suggests that ‘topic chain’ is the basic discourse unit, which can be characterized as a series of sentences sharing the same topic. The initial NP of the first sentence is the topic which, in turn, functions as the topic of the whole chain. Shi (1989:227), on the other hand, regards ‘topic chain’ as a syntactic category, i.e., ‘an NP that can license a gap across the sentence boundary in a sequence of sentences’, and that can be the subject, the object, or the specifier of the subject NP, etc. Li and Thompson (1979) define ‘topic chain’ for the purpose of interpreting Chinese zero anaphors, in that the topic of the first clause in a topic chain is the referent for the unrealized topics in the chain of the following clauses. Finally, You’s (1998) terminology is ‘topic continuity’, within which the referents of zero anaphors in written narratives can be recovered. In short, these various terms have different thematic scopes.

The present study still employs ‘topic chain’ to discuss the structuring of conversational topics. Yet, it goes beyond syntax; it is based on the semantic relationship between utterances. Thus, a sequence of clauses about the same subject matter constitutes a conversational topic; a conversational topic, or more commonly, a number of semantically-connected topics then form a topic chain; topic chains sharing an identical theme further constitute a larger topic chain. Three levels of topic chains

were identified for the present corpus: ‘topic chain’, ‘sub-topic chain’, and ‘sub-sub-topic chain’.

First, a topic chain (TC) includes a set of related topics of the same theme, whose boundary represents major changes in time, place, event, or character(s). This can be exemplified by three consecutive topic chains in Table 1, namely ‘Seafood’, ‘Car Accident’, and ‘Doctors’.¹ In the corpus of data, the four conversational texts total 37 topic chains.

Table 1. An example of topic chains

TC	Time	Place	Event	Character(s)
‘Seafood’	one day in Boston	Boston	quality of fish	fish
‘Car Accident’	one day in Oregon	Oregon	car accident	a boyfriend
‘Doctors’	one day in Boston	Boston	medical diagnosis	a doctor, a patient

Within each topic chain there may be more than one subsidiary topic chain of the same theme, i.e. ‘sub-topic chain’ (sub-TC). In Table 2, the topic of job promotion consists of three sub-TCs: speaker Z’s recent promotion, the general promotion in Japanese firms, and the promotion at the speakers’ company—MITT.

Table 2. An example of sub-topic chains

TC: ‘Job Promotion’				
<u>Sub-TCs</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Character(s)</u>
‘Speaker Z’	a year ago	MITT	Z’s promotion	speaker Z
‘Japanese Firms’	generic	generic	promotion in Japanese firms	Japanese
‘MITT’	years ago	MITT	promotion at MITT	employees

¹ For general discussion of a subject, the topic chain does not include a particular time or a specific place.

A topic chain boundary may coincide with its first sub-topic chain boundary. In the present tabulation, it was counted as an instance of TC. Thus, excluding the eighteen overlaps, there are 57 sub-topic chains in total.

The sub-topic chain can further be divided into ‘sub-sub-topic chain’ (sub-sub-TC) whose content is directly subsidiary to its host sub-TC, but indirectly related to the topic chain as a whole. Table 3 indicates two sub-sub-TCs about speaker B’s first boyfriend (sub-TC1) which is part of the speaker’s romance at senior high school (TC). Again, a sub-topic chain boundary may overlap with its first sub-sub-topic chain boundary. Eight of the 22 sub-sub-topic chains are of this type.

Table 3. An example of sub-sub-topic chains

TC: ‘B’s Romance at Senior High’				
Sub-TC1: ‘First Boyfriend’				
<u>Sub-Sub-TC1</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Character(s)</u>
‘Meeting the Boy’	first year in senior high	a meeting place	how speaker B met the boy	B, the boy
<u>Sub-Sub-TC2</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Character(s)</u>
‘A Girl Confiding about the Boy’	third year in senior high	school	the boy wrote about speaker B	a girl, B, the boy
<u>Sub-TC2</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Character(s)</u>
‘Second Boyfriend’	senior-high-school time	street	how speaker B met and got along with the boy	B, the boy

In short, conversational topics display a hierarchical organization, and most of them proceed sequentially. Whether a topic is well discussed or being developed into sub-topics is negotiated and determined by speech participants at the moment of speaking. Changing the subject from one level of talk to another level constitutes topic discontinuity along with time, place, event, or character shift. The corpus includes 108 instances of topic discontinuity.

3. Topic Discontinuity

Halliday and Hasan (1976) state that topic discontinuity causes incohesion, in that two sequences of clauses are subsumed under two different macropropositions. Van Dijk (1981:181) proposes a number of grammatical markers that may signal the change of episodes in spoken discourse: pauses and hesitation, time change markers, place change markers, ‘cast’ change markers, possible-world introducing or changing predicates, introduction of predicates which cannot be subsumed under the same (macro-)predicate, or which do not fit the same script or frame, and change of perspective markers. Their claims, however, may not be generalized to Chinese because the notions of ‘macroproposition’ and ‘episode’ are different from that of ‘topic chain’ used in this study.

Based on the structuring of topic chains, this section investigates the linguistic manifestation of topic discontinuity at the ((sub-)sub-)TC boundary with regard to pausing, self-repair, discontinuity markers, and grounding, in order to understand how Chinese speakers signal thematic shift. The three levels of topic chains need not be differentiated because of their similar structuring (Chui 2001); thus, ‘TC’ used in this section refers to any of the three levels of topic chain.

3.1 Pausing

Erbaugh (1987) has studied the types and the length of initial pauses, as well as errors during speech production. ‘The relative importance of the event being described is critical in prompting speakers to pause, err, or correct themselves, while language background has astonishingly little influence’ (Erbaugh 1987:109). Since the change of topic is an important event, the prosodic influence on marking topic discontinuity will first be examined.

Two kinds of pauses were distinguished in the conversational texts: empty pauses and filled pauses. Empty pausing at intonation-unit (IU, see Appendix B) boundary is typical and largely less than 0.6 second, so only ‘long pauses’ exceeding 0.6 second were considered. Filled pauses include *eh*, *uh*, *ah*, and *jiushi* ‘that is’. When more than one filled pause occurred at a TC boundary, it was still counted as one

token of ‘filled pause’. Sometimes, both empty and filled pauses appeared simultaneously.

The topic in example (1) is about ‘cockroaches’, which includes two sub-topics: one concerns speaker A’s own experience of killing cockroaches (IUs 1-7), and the other centers on what her family members do after killing cockroaches (IUs 8-15). At the topic-shift boundary, the speaker does pause longer, for 0.8 second, and with the pause filler *na*.

- (1) 1 A: ...Na zhanglang jiu hui si zai,\
PRT cockroach then will die at
2 ...yi tan huhu de dongxi limian.\
one CL thick ASSC thing inside
3 B: (0)<@<A Hao erxin A>@>,-
very be:disgusting
4 A: ...(H)<@ Ta jiu hui% @>,\
3SG then will
5 ...ta zai nage shui limian,\
3SG at that water inside
6 ...huozheshi nage,-
or that
7 ...niannian salatuo na zhong,\
viscous dishwashing liquid that CL
8 → ...(.8)Ran^hou,\
then
9 → ...na%,\
PF
10 ..women mei ci dou nongwan zhihou,\
1PL every time all finish:do after
11 ...Jiu bu gan qu ba ta qinglidiao.\
then NEG dare go BA 3SG finish:clean up
12 ...ranhou,\
then
13 ...di er tian,\
ORD second day
14 ..<@ ^deng renjia dasao deshihou @>,-
wait other person clean when
15 ...zai ba ta chulidiao.\
again BA 3SG finish:handle

A: ‘The cockroach will die inside something thick.’

B: ‘(It is) very disgusting.’

C: ‘Then it will be...it will be in the water or in the viscous dishwashing liquid. Then, every time we have done all these, (we) don’t dare to clean it up. Then, (we) wait for the other person (i.e. a maid) to handle it when (she) cleans (the house) the next day.’

Table 4. Pausing and topic discontinuity

	TC boundary		Non-TC boundary	
	n	%	n	%
None	51	47.2	1453	75.0
Empty Pauses	48	44.4	399	20.6
Filled Pauses	3	2.8	34	1.8
Empty & Filled	6	5.6	50	2.6
Total:	108	100.0	1936	100.0

Does the speaker pause more frequently at the boundary of topic discontinuity? First, it is necessary to compare pausing at the TC boundary with that at the non-TC boundary. In the four conversations, 1936 clauses were produced at the non-TC boundary. Table 4 shows that when the subject is changed, pausing longer silently and/or using filled pauses (52.8%) are two times as common as those without topic shift (25%).² Thus, pausing, be it empty or filled, does play a role in marking topic discontinuity which usually requires greater cognitive effort.

3.2 Repair

Besides pausing, Erbaugh (1987:109) also noted that ‘the pivotal events [the most important events in the narrative] were the most difficult for people to describe fluently. More peripheral, backgrounded events, and editorial comments which were outside the plot line, were described more fluently’. Self-repair is a kind of disfluency (Chui 1996), as exemplified by (2). In the previous TC, the speakers discussed the relationship between handwriting and computer documentation. When speaker L changes the topic to a colleague’s promotion, the first clause at the TC boundary is not uttered fluently: the modal *yinggai* ‘should’ is replaced by the negative form *bu yinggai* ‘should not’; the last syllable of the nominal *gongchengshi* ‘engineer’ is cut off and repaired in the next IU.

² The X^2 test for pausing at TC boundary and at non-TC boundary: $*X^2.95(1)=40.76$.

- (2) L: ..<L2 m L2>91.\
M91
...(1.9)uh <L2 document L2>dou hen nankan.\
PF document all very be:ugly
- H: ..dui a.
Right PRT
((fourteen IUs omitted))
- L: ...(2.3) Qishi o=,_
in fact PRT
- ..ta **yinggai**% --
3SG should
- ...**bu yinggai** sheng **gongcheng**—
NEG should promote REPAIR
- ..**gongchengshi** name kuai de.\
engineer so fast PRT
- L: 'M92, (their) documents are all very ugly.'
L: 'Right.'
(Fourteen IUs omitted)
L: 'In fact, she should...she shouldn't be promoted as an engine...engineer so fast.'

If the change of topic is believed to require more planning and effort, are the utterances at the topic-shift boundary more likely to be produced disfluently with more self-repairs? This is borne out in Table 5, in that self-repairs are significantly more frequent in topic discontinuity.³ Thus, at the TC boundary, speech production is relatively error-prone.

Table 5. Repair and topic discontinuity

	TC boundary		Non-TC boundary	
	n	%	n	%
With repair	31	28.7	324	16.7
Without repair	77	71.3	1612	83.3
Total:	108	100.0	1936	100.0

3.3 Discontinuity Markers

Concerning the content of the utterances, discontinuity markers also signal topic change. The purpose of this section is to examine the linguistic markers indicating

³ The X^2 test for repair at the TC boundary and at the non-TC boundary: $*X^2.95(1)=10.21$.

shifts in time, event, and character. The first type is what van Dijk (1981) termed ‘time change markers’, such as *na shihou* ‘at that time’ in example (3). When speaker Z changes the topic from programming a software (IUs 1-7) to commercializing the software (IUs 8-10), the new topic is introduced by *na shihou*, which indicates temporal discontinuity. Other time change markers can be *houlai* ‘later’ and *you-yi-ci* ‘once’.

- (3) 1 → L: ... (2.8) Bei zhuadao riben gai,
 BEI catch:accomplish Japan change
 2 ... Hao ^lei o=, _
 very be:tired PRT
 3 ... (1.7) Dangchang gai=, _
 on the spot change
 4 W: .. Ta de dongxi=, _
 3SG POSS thing
 5 ... ^xie de shi shenme, _
 write NOM COP what
 6 .. genben dou wang% --
 basically all REPAIR
 7 ... (1.2) quanbu wangji le=, _
 all forget PRF
 8 → Z: ... (1.1) Na shihou%, _
 that time
 9 ... xiaoze bushi shuo=, _
 Xiaoze NEG say
 10 → .. yao <L2 commercialized L2> ma?/
 have to commercialized QST

L: ‘(If you had to) go to Japan to change (the program), (you) would be very tired. (You had to) change (it) on the spot.’

W: ‘What (I) wrote about the thing, (I) totally forgot.’

Z: ‘At that time, didn’t Xiaoze say (the product) had to be commercialized?’

The major change of the speech event at TC boundary is signaled by *jieguo* ‘in consequence’ in example (4), when speaker B stops talking about how she interacted with a boy in a gathering (IUs 1-2), and starts a new topic about an incredible matter—a girl would tell speaker B about the boy writing about B for a school journal (IUs 3-9).

- (4) 1 B: ... Ta meiyou liudianhua gei wo a, _
 3SG NEG give:telephone number to 1SG PRT
 2 ... Houlai jiu buliaoliaozhi le.\
 later then have:no contact PRT
 3 → ... (1.4) ^Jieguo o, _

- in consequence PRT
- 4 → ...**bukesiyi de shiqing** fasheng,_
incredible ASSC matter happen
- 5 ...Jiu dao gaosan deshihou a,_
then arrive the third year in senior high when PRT
((seven IUs omitted))
- 6 ..renshi henduo waixiao nansheng de na zhong,_
get to know many outside boy NOM that kind
- 7 ...nusheng a,_
girl PRT
((eight IUs omitted))
- 8 ...ta jiu shuo,_
3SG EMP say
- 9 ...ni you ^babing zai wo shouhang o,_
2SG have evidence at 1SG hand PRT

B: 'He didn't give me his telephone number. Later, (we) had no contact. In consequence, an incredible matter happened. When it came to the third year in senior high, (seven IUs omitted), a girl who got to know many boys outside, (eight IUs omitted), she said, 'I have (some) evidence about you.''

Some event change markers do not bear a direct semantic relation with the following main clause. The first type consists of formulaic expressions, such as *wo gaosu ni* 'let me tell you (this)', or *wo bu zhidao you mei you gen ni jiang guo* 'I don't know if I have told you (this)' as in example (5), when speaker A shifts the topic about *xingxiang* 'personal image' to that about an argument between a man and a woman.

- (5) → B: ...Ta de ^**xingxiang**,\
3SG POSS image
...jiu yizhi shi na ge yangzi]]\
then always COP that CL way
- C: (0)^Dui=\
right
..meihao de xingxiang\
beautiful ASSC image
- A: ...**Wo** <A **bu zhidao you mei you gen ni jiang guo** A>\
1SG NEG know have NEG have with 2SG say EXP
...Jiushishuo,/
that is
...(9)^ni=,_
2SG
...(2.6)^piru zheyang haole,_
for instance like this okay
...<A Wo ju ge hen jian dan lizi A>\
1SG give CL very simple example
...^Pirushuo <A ni jintian gen% A>\
for example 2SG today with

→ ..ta **chaojia**,_
3SG argue

B: 'Then his image is always like that.'

C: 'Right, the beautiful image.'

A: 'I don't know if I have told you or not. That is...okay, let me say in this way. Let me give a very simple example. For instance, you argue with him...'

The second type includes single words that are also not related to the meaning of the following utterance. Concerning the topic chain of social gathering in (6), speakers C and B are discussing how to avoid having people gather at a specific location for food. Then, speaker A utters the word *dengyia* 'wait' to suspend this ongoing topic in order to bring up a new one about entertainment.

(6) C: ...<A Wo juede,_
1SG feel
→ ..[^]ji yi da dui ren zai naban A>,_
crowd one big pile people at there
...<P ye [^]bu hao a P>,_
also NEG be:good PRT

B: (0)<PP Mhm PP>,_
PRT

→ A: ...<A **Dengyixia** A>,\
wait
..women%,_
1PL
...chule yao chi dongxi,_
except need eat thing
..hai yao ganma?/
still need do:what

→ B: ...(1.)ni de **biaoyanjiemu**.\
2SG POSS performance

C: 'I think it is also not good to have a big group of people crowding there.'

B: 'Mhm.'

A: 'Wait, besides eating, what do we need to do?'

B: 'The performances you (have as entertainment).'

In example (7), the word *hao* 'okay' functions like *dengyia* in the previous example, by which speaker C shifts the topic from the cost of the place where the social gathering is being held to table making.

(7) B: ..<A Ruguo ni% A>,_
if 2SG

- ...zhi yao **changdi**,\
 only need place
 ...Ni bu ^yao,\
 2SG NEG need
 ...(.8)jiushi%,_
 that is
 ...ni bu yao ta ^nong shenme dongxi de^hua%,\
 2SG NEG need 3SG make what thing if
 ...(.7)^Jiu yao wu qian kuai.\
 then need five thousand dollar
- C: ...**Hao**%,_
 Okay
 ..^na women,/
 then 1PL
 ...qu nali,\
 go where
- ...<DIM jie na zhong hen da de **zhuozi** DIM>,\
 borrow that kind very big ASSC table

B: 'If you only need the place, (and) you do not need, that is, you don't need him to make things, then (the rent) is five thousand dollars.'

C: 'Okay. Then, where can we borrow that kind of big tables?'

The last type of discontinuity marking found in the corpus signals the major change of characters in a new TC. In (8), the speakers were negotiating whether they should just talk or play the beer game. Then, using the address form *dage* 'big brother', speaker L shifts the subject to a traffic accident and the main character only refers to a specific participant, i.e. the big brother.

- (8) H: ...(1.6)Ta bu yao,\
 3SG NEG want
- ..bu yao **hanquan** la,\
 NEG want play:beer game PRT
- ...Women **liaotian**.\
 1PL chat
 ...Gen nimen liaotian zheyangzi.\
 with 2PL chat like this
- L: ...Zheyang ho?\
 like this QST
- ...**Dage** ni.. ziji yao,\
 big brother 2SG SELF have to
 ...baozhong yixia a=?/
 take care a bit PRT
- H: (0)Ganma,\
 do:what
- L: ...(1.4)Na yi ci yaoshi **chu da yidian de pilou** ho?/
 that one time if make big a bit ASSC mistake PRT

Z: ...Jintian yiding yao [song ta].. ^huijia=.\
 today must need accompany 3SG go home

L: [bu haoguo a=].\
 NEG feel:good PRT

H: 'She doesn't want, doesn't want to play the beer game. We (just) chat. (I just) chat with you guys.'

L: 'Is that so? Big brother, you have to take care of yourself.'

H: 'What?'

L: 'If (you) had made a bigger mistake last time,'

Z: '(We) must accompany him to go home today.'

L: '(We) would have felt bad.'

In short, except for the change of place, this section has shown shifts in time, event, and character(s) by virtue of discontinuity markers at the TC boundary.

3.4 Grounding

This section will discuss how the new subject comes into discourse. Two kinds of utterances need to be distinguished: foregrounded clauses and backgrounded clauses. The foregrounded clauses introduce and move the topics forward with major characters within their local TC domain. Backgrounded clauses, on the other hand, are orientations, descriptions, elaborations, and digressions with minor characters. As the foreground-background distinction is typically used to characterize narrative events, utterances in conversation do receive different grounding status (Chui 2001).

One of the conversational topic chains is 'Handwriting and Computer Documentation' that consists of three sub-TCs: 'the person Z's handwriting and documentation', 'the person Lu's handwriting and documentation', and 'the person Gi's handwriting and documentation'. All the utterances in the second sub-TC are presented in example (9). It has two foregrounded events moving the topic from computer documentation (IU2-3) to Lu's handwriting (IU6-7), and includes the major participants—the person named *Lu*, and the entities *ta de document* 'his document' and *ta de zi* 'his handwriting'. The clause *ni kan ta de zi* 'you look at his handwriting' (IU5) is backgrounded to orient the major character from 'Lu's document' to 'Lu's handwriting'. The last clause (IU8-10) elaborates that Lu's pretty writing has many different styles.

- (9) 1 L: ...(.7)<A Meiyou A>.\
 NEG
 2 → ..xiang lu o=.\
 like Lu PRT
 3 → ...(1.)ta de <L2 document L2> dou nong de hao piaoliang
 3SG POSS document all make COMPL very pretty
 dui bu dui,_
 right NEG right
 4 Z: ...<PP Hm= PP>.\
 BC
 5 → L: (0)Ni kan ta de zi,_
 2SG look at 3SG POSS word
 6 → ..Ta nage zi o=,_
 3SG that word PRT
 7 → ...zhende hao piaoliang.\
 really very be:pretty
 8 → ...(1.1)erqie ta ziji benshen de zi=,_
 moreover 3SG SELF *per se* POSS word
 9 → ..benshen ^jiu hen you hen% --
per se EMP very have very
 10 → ...(.7)you henduo ^butongde <L2 style L2>.\
 have many different style
 11 H: ...<PP oh= PP>?/
 BC

L: ‘No, like Lu, his documents are all very pretty, right?’

Z: ‘Hm.’

L: ‘You look at his handwriting. His handwriting is really very pretty. Moreover, his own writing...he can write in many different styles.’

H: ‘Oh.’

In topic discontinuity, the speaker can shift to the new subject immediately, in that the first clause in the new TC is foregrounded. Alternatively, the speaker can provide some background information before going into the new topic. Table 6 shows that of all the 108 instances of topic shift, the frequency distribution of the foregrounded and the backgrounded clause at the beginning of a new TC is about equal.

Table 6. Types of clauses at the beginning of a new TC

	n	%
Foregrounded clauses	56	51.9
Backgrounded clauses	52	48.1
Total:	108	100.0

Table 7 further shows that whether topic change is initiated by the same speaker or by a different speaker, the proportions of foregrounded and backgrounded clauses at the beginning of a new TC are also very similar.

Table 7. Types of clauses and speakership

	Same speaker		Different speaker	
	n	%	n	%
Foregrounded clauses	15	53.6	41	51.3
Backgrounded clauses	13	46.4	39	48.8
Total:	28	100.0	80	100.0

Table 8. Number of backgrounded clauses at topic-change boundary

	n	%
One clause	29	55.9
Two clauses	10	19.2
Three clauses	6	11.5
Four clauses	3	5.8
Five clauses or more	4	7.6
Total:	52	100.0

For the speaker to change the subject without providing any background information, topic discontinuity can still be indicated by discontinuity markers. On the other hand, the speaker can provide background information as topic orientation. Table 8 shows that 86.6% of the 52 clauses that include background information in the new TC express the background information within three clauses.

How does the speaker orient a new topic before the major event comes into discourse? First, 46.2% (24 out of 52) of backgrounded clauses are questions. In (10), speaker B asks a yes-no question about wearing long hair at junior high school, hence orienting the subject from C's romance to wearing long hair.

- (10) C: ...(.8)ranhou jiu dajia... zou le,_
 then EMP everyone leave PRF
 ..wo jiu zai zhengli dongxi,_
 1SG then PROG manage thing
 ...ranhou zhe nande,_

then this boy
 ..zong hui liu xialai oh,/
 always will stay down PRT
 ...(.7)ranhou jiu hui shuo,/

then EMP will say
 ...wo gen ni huijia ^hao bu hao?/
 1SG with 2SG go home good NEG good
 ((eight IUs omitted))

B: ...^Eh,/ PRT

→ ..nimen guozhong toufa,_
 2PL junior high hair

→ ..keyi liu name chang ma?/
 can wear so long QST

C: ...Keyi.\ Can

C: 'Then, everyone left. I was managing things. Then, this boy would always stay behind. Then, (he) would say, 'May I go home with you?''
 (Eight IUs omitted.)

B: 'Could you wear such long hair at junior high school?'

C: '(We) could.'

The wh-question in (11) introduces two new characters into the new topic on publishing departmental directory: one is the speakers' own department in form of *women* 'we'; the other is the page number of the directory.

(11) B: ...Ranhou <A tamen zuo% A.\
 then 3PL make
 ...wu bai wushi ben,\
 five hundred fifty CL
 ...(.9)<A ranhou yiwang ^ba A>.\
 then ten thousand eight

D: ...<P Keneng% P>./
 possible

B: ...<A Keneng A>tamen zuo yi bai ^ye.\
 possible 3PL make one hundred page

→ ...(.1.)Women shi ^zuo ji ye?\
 1PL COP make how many page

...(.8)Nimen zai zuo% A> --
 3PL PROG make
 ...women shi% --
 1PL COP

D: (0)<P Wushi ^ye eryl a P>._
 fifty page only PRT

B: 'Then, they make five hundred and fifty (copies of the directory). Then, (they cost) eighteen thousand dollars.'

D: 'It is possible that...'

- B: 'It is possible that they have one hundred pages. How many pages do we have? You are having...we....'
 D: 'Only fifty pages.'

In (12) speaker W employs an A-not-A question to orient the old topic about a car accident to the new one about medical judgment. The major character also shifts to a new one—*meiguo de yisheng* 'American doctors'.

- (12) Z: ..Hen yanzhong.\
 very be:serious
 ..Buguo ta hen [xinyun].\
 but 3SG very be:lucky
 L: [Naozi%] –
 brain
 → W: (0)**Buguo meiguo de yisheng shi bu shi bijiao** ^ben a.\
 but America ASSC doctor COP NEG COP comparatively stupid QST
 ...(1.)Zuotian wo% --
 yesterday 1SG
 ...zuotian wo laoshi<@ bu tai @>,_
 yesterday 1SG teacher NEG very
 ...<A Bu shi zuotian la A>,_
 NEG COP yesterday PRT
 ...qiantian wo laoshi bushi zai jiang shuo,_
 the day before yesterday 1SG teacher NEG PROG say COMPL
 ..<A Zuotian hai qiantian A>?/
 yesterday or the day before yesterday
 ...Zuotian,_
 yesterday
 → ... (1.) (H) ta bushi jiang shuo shenme **mangchanyan** a,_
 3SG NEG say COMPL whatever appendicitis PRT
 ...Na shuo shenme ^duzi hao tong la,_
 then say whatever belly very hurt PRT
 ...Na jiu gei ta zhitongyao chi chi chi,_
 PRT then give 3SG medicine for relief of pain eat eat eat

 Z: '(The accident) was very serious, but he was very lucky.'
 L: 'The brain....'
 W: 'But, are American doctors comparatively stupid? Yesterday I...yesterday my teacher was not very.... It's not yesterday. The day before yesterday didn't my teacher say... Is it yesterday or the day before yesterday? It's yesterday. Didn't she say (someone) had appendicitis. (She) said (the person's) belly hurt very much. Then (the doctor) just gave him the medicine for relief of pain.'

Finally, the rhetorical question in (13) requires a reason that functions to introduce *duishou* 'competitors' as the new subject for talk.

- (13) → W: ...[^]Weishenme **jiujin** xie **zhuanli**,_
 why recently write patent
 → ..**xie** **name** **qinkuai** jiushi=,_
 write so industriously that is
 ...(2.)You [^]dui% --
 have REPAIR
 → ...you [^]**duishou** jiu dui le.\
 have competitor EMP right PRT

W: ‘Recently, why did (we) write patents so industriously? That is (because) there are competitors.’

Besides questions, 26.9% (n=14) of backgrounded clauses suggest the major character’s mental state, as exemplified by the first main clause in (14), i.e. speaker C’s weird feeling toward the boy.

- (14) C: ...<A Jieguo houlai% A>,\
 as a result later
 ...zhidao ta xihuan wo yihou,_
 know 3SG like 1SG after
 → ..**Wo jiu juede hen qiguai**.\
 1SG then feel very weird
 ...Na shihou kuai fenban le,_
 that time almost class segregation PRT
 ...(.7)<F Hen qiguai o F>./
 very weird PRT
 ...Ta meici,\
 3SG every time
 ...[^]xiake Jiu kaishi,_
 after class then start
 ...<A zou zou zou zou zou A>.\
 walk walk walk walk walk
 ..a jiu cong wo pangbian zou guoqu=/
 PRT then from 1SG side walk go:there
 ...zai cong pangbian zou guoqu=/
 again from side walk go:there

C: ‘As a result, later, after knowing that he liked me, I then felt very weird. At that time, our class would be segregated soon. It’s very weird. Every time after class, he started to walk and walk, walking by my side and then walking by my side again.’

Moreover, 9.6% of backgrounded clauses (n=5) start the new topic with time and space orientation at the TC boundary. In (15) the new topic about speaker C’s interaction with her boyfriend in class is oriented both by the temporal clause *mei ci wo*

shangsuxue ‘every time I attended the math class’, and the locative clause *ta zuo zai wo you bian* ‘he sat on my right side’.

- (15) C: ..Ranhou%,\
then
→ ...**(1.2)mei ci wo shangsuxue,**
every time 1SG attend the math class
→ ...**Ta jiu zuo zai wo you bian,**
3SG then sit at 1SG right side
...Women shi%,_
1PL COP
...nusheng yi bian,_
girl one side
...Nansheng yi bian ma,_
boy one side PRT
B: (0)<P Uh= P>,/
PRT
C: ...<A Ranhou wo zhe bian zheyangzi%,_
then 1SG this side like this
...yanzhu dou%,_
pupil all
...yizhi A> ^kan ta zheyangzi,_
continuously look 3SG like this
- C: ‘Then, every time I attended the math class, he sat on my right side. We had girls sitting on one side, and boys sitting on the other side.’
B: ‘Uh.’
C: ‘Then I kept looking at him from this side (i.e. the girls’ side).’

Five instances describe the attribute(s) of the major character or the main event in the new topic, such as the height of speaker A’s high-school boyfriend in (16).

- (16) → A: ...**Guozhong nage xihuan wo nage%**,_
junior high that like 1SG that
→ ...**ta hen gao a,**/
3SG very be:tall PRT
→ ...**(.9)<P Yiqijiu,**
one hundred and seventy nine
...you% P>.\
have
...<A Keshi A> ta xianzai% --
but 3SG now
...**(.7)kuai%** --
soon
...kuai yao%... chujia le,_
soon will be:a monk PRT

A: ‘The one who liked me at junior high, he was very tall. He was one hundred and seventy nine (cm) tall. But now he will soon become a monk.’

Two instances provide a pre-announcement, as exemplified by the first clause in (17) that introduces a new matter into discourse; the matter it refers to is using a software named MIRA, which is uttered after identifying the main character, Nakano—another type of background information.

- (17) → W: ...<L3 A hai you yi jian shiqing=, _
PRT still have one CL matter
...Nage=, _
PF
- ...<(1.)ni. ^ji bu jide you yi ge=, _
2SG remember NEG remember have one CL
- ...<(1.5)<L3 nakano L3>?/
Nakano
...<L3 Nakano L3> <@ gen nage= @><L3 tanikao L3> youyici lai=, _
Nakano and that Tanikao once come
- Y: ...Wo zhidao=, _
1SG know
..Yige..[yige=, _
one one
...man ^shuai de nage], _
quite handsome ASSC that
- W: [Wo qu ^shilin yeshi] he?/
1SG go Shilin night market PRT
- L: (0)Mhm=, _
BC
- J: (0)Ribenren, _
Japanese
- W: ..Ranhou% --
then
- L: (0)yige hen ^shuai.\
one very handsome
..Ranhou yige=, _
then one
...kanqilai [hen cunpu de <A yangzi A>].\
look very simple:unsophisticated ASSC look
- Y: [Yige% --
one
..yige hen keai=], _
one very be:cute
- W: [Hao hao hao=, _
okay okay okay
...jiu], _
then
- Y: ..Yige kanqilai hen ^ku de yangzi, _
one look very cool ASSC look

→ W: (0)Ta jiu xie <L2 fax L2> guolai shuo,_
 3SG then write fax here say
 ..yao..^yong women de <L2 mira L2>.\
 want use 1PL POSS MIRA

W: 'There is one more matter. Do you remember the person called Nakano? Nakano and Tanikano came here once.'

Y: 'I know. One...one was quite handsome.'

W: 'I went to Shilin night market (with them).'

L: 'Mhm.'

J: '(They were) Japanese.'

W: 'Then...'

L: 'One was very handsome, and one looked very simple and unsophisticated.'

Y: 'One...one was very cute.'

W: 'Okay, okay, okay, then...'

Y: 'One looked very cool.'

W: 'Then, he wrote a fax and said (he) wanted to use our MIRA.'

Finally, two instances provide a generalization which is instantiated as the major event in the new TC. In (18), for speaker A's family to kill cockroaches by dripping things on them is a generalization. The variables of *women* 'we; the family' and *dongxi* 'things' are specified as *wo* 'I; speaker A' and *likebai* 'the correction liquid' in the new topic.

(18) A: ..Ranhou%,\
 then
 → ...women%,_
 1PL
 ...jiushi%,\
 that is
 ...fanzheng%,_
 anyway
 → ...jiushi yong dongxi di ta,_
 that is use thing drip 3SG
 ...(.8)Deng ta fan guolai zhihou,\
 wait 3SG turn back after
 ...ni% --
 2SG
 ...^yong likebai,_
 use correction liquid
 → ...<A wo you yong guo likebai A>,_
 1SG PRF use EXP correction liquid

A: 'Then, we, that is, anyway, that is, drip things on it, after it has flipped over. You (can) use correction liquid. I have used correction liquid.'

In short, a new subject for talk can be oriented in different ways. Questions provide information about the new character(s) or the major event. The backgrounded statements can be time and space orientation, a reason, the main character's mentality, the attribute(s) of the main character or event, a pre-announcement, identification of the main character, and a generalization. Moreover, the various kinds of backgrounded clauses may co-occur, such as questioning and time orientation in (12), the main character's mental state and time orientation in (14), time and space orientation with a reason in (15), a pre-announcement with character identification in (17). Finally, among the various kinds of background information, questions are the most common in the present database, because they function as the first pair part which typically requires for the response of a second part, a way to invite other speakers to join the new topic.

4. Conclusion

This paper first examined the structuring of conversational topics which is preliminary to study how Chinese speakers signal topic discontinuity. This pragmatic phenomenon was investigated from three perspectives. First, as topic shift bears more burden in cognitive processing, the speaker who initiates topic shift is found to pause longer and produce more repairing utterances.

Second, the speaker can also use markers for time, event, and character discontinuity at the topic-shift boundary, since topic discontinuity always involves these various kinds of changes. More data will be needed to examine whether these discontinuity markers might differ across various levels of TCs.

Finally, grounding was considered in order to distinguish two ways to introduce the new subject. About half of the new topics come into discourse without background information. On the other hand, the speaker may orient a new topic with background information in a variety of ways. The most common way is by asking questions because they typically invite other speakers to converse about the new subject.

Appendix A: Abbreviations of Linguistic Terms

1PL	first person plural
1SG	first person singular
2PL	second person plural
2SG	second person singular
3PL	third person plural
3SG	third person singular
ASSC	associative morpheme
BA	the morpheme BA
BC	backchannel
CL	classifier
COMPARE	compare morpheme
COMPL	complementizer
COP	copula verb
DLM	delimitative aspect
EMP	emphatic adverbial
EXP	experiential aspect
NOM	nominalizer
NEG	negative morpheme
ORD	ordinal morpheme
PF	pause filler
POSS	possessive
PRF	perfective aspect
PROG	progressive aspect
PRT	discourse particle
QST	question particle
REPAIR	repair phoneme(s)
SELF	reflexive morpheme

Appendix B: Transcription Conventions

‘Intonation unit’ (IU) is defined as a stretch of speech uttered under a single coherent intonation contour, which tends to be marked by a pause, a change of pitch, and a lengthening of the final syllable (Du Bois et al. 1993) .

Units

{ carriage return }	intonation unit
--	truncated intonation unit
{ space }	word
-	truncated words
:	identity/turn start
[]	speech overlap

Transitional continuity

.	final
,	continuing
?	appeal

Terminal pitch direction

\	fall
/	rise
—	level

Accent and lengthening

^	primary accent
=	lengthening

Pause

...(N)	long
--------	------

...	medium
..	short
(0)	latching
<u>Vocal noises</u>	
(H)	inhalation
%	glottal stop
@	laughter
<u>Quality</u>	
<@ @>	laugh quality
<Q Q>	quotation quality
<A A>	allegro: rapid speech
<F F>	fast tempo
<P P>	piano: soft
<PP PP>	very soft
<DIM DIM>	diminuendo: gradually softer
<MRC MRC>	each word distinct and emphasized
<u>Specialized notations</u>	
<L2 L2>	code switching from Mandarin to English
<L3 L3>	code switching from Mandarin to Japanese
(())	transcriber's comment

Relevant expressions in examples are in boldface; the lines where the relevant expressions in question appear are marked by the arrow sign '→'.

References

- Cheng, Chin-chuan. 1988. Communication-based Chinese discourse grammar. *Shijie Hanyu Jiaoxue* 1:6-13.
- Chui, Kawai. 1996. Organization of repair in Chinese conversation. *Text* 16:343-372.
- Chui, Kawai. 2001. *Topic Chain and Grounding in Chinese Discourse*. Taipei: Crane Publishing.
- Cooreman, A. 1987. *Transitivity and Discourse Continuity in Chamorro*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Du Bois, John W., Stephan Schuetze-Coburn, Susanna Cumming, and Danae Paolino. 1993. *Talking Data: Transcription and Coding in Discourse Research*, ed. by Jane A. Edwards and Martin D. Lampert, 45-89. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Erbaugh, Mary S. 1987. Psycholinguistic evidence for foregrounding and backgrounding. *Coherence and Grounding in Discourse*, ed. by R.S. Tomlin, 109-130. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Givón, T. 1983. *Topic Continuity in Discourse: A Quantitative Cross-Language Studies*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Halliday, M. A. K., and Ruqaiya Hasan. 1976. *Cohesion in English*. New York: Longman.
- Hopper, Paul. 1979. Aspect and foregrounding in discourse. *Discourse and Syntax*, ed. by T. Givón, 213-241. New York: Academic Press.

- Jiang, Zixin. 1990. A constraint on topic in Chinese. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 18:231-260.
- Li, Charles, and Sandra A. Thompson. 1979. Third-person and zero-anaphora in Chinese discourse. *Discourse and Syntax*, ed. by T. Givón, 311-335. New York: Academic Press.
- Li, Naicong, and David Zubin, 1990. Discourse continuity and perspective taking. *Chicago Linguistics Society* 26:253-268.
- Pu, Ming-Ming. 1989. Topic continuity in written Mandarin discourse. *Berkeley Linguistics Society* 15:256-267.
- Schegloff, E. 1987. Recycled turn beginnings: a precise repair mechanism in conversation's turn-taking organization. *Talk and Social Organization*, ed. by G. Button and J. R. E. Lee, 70-85. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Shi, Dingxu. 1989. Topic chain as a syntactic category in Chinese. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 17:223-261.
- Tomlin, R. S. 1984. The treatment of foreground-background information in the on-line descriptive discourse of second learners. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 6:115-142.
- Tomlin, R.S. 1985. Foreground-background information and the syntax of subordination. *Text* 5:87-122.
- Tsao, Feng-fu. 1979. *A Functional Study of Topic in Chinese: The First Step Toward Discourse Analysis*. Taipei: Student Book Company.
- Tsao, Feng-Fu. 1988. Topics and clause connectives in Chinese. *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 59: 695-737.
- Tsao, Feng-fu. 1990. *Sentence and Clause Structure in Chinese: A Functional Perspective*. Taipei: Student Book Company.
- van Dijk. 1981. Episodes as units of discourse analysis. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, ed. by D. Tannen, 177-195. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- You, Yu-ling. 1998. *Interpreting Chinese Zero Anaphors within Topic Continuity*. Illinois: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

[Received 25 February, 2002; revised 5 June, 2002; accepted 12 June, 2002]

Department of English
National Chengchi University
Taipei, TAIWAN
kawai@nccu.edu.tw

會話主題之不連續現象

徐嘉慧

國立政治大學

「主題不連續」是指說話者改變話題的情況。本論文首先分析會話主題的結構,以探討主題不連續現象的文法表現。研究發現當說話者要改變主題的時候,停頓會比較長,話語的自我修正也較多;說話者也使用表示時間、事件、人物改變的語言標記。至於內容方面,大約一半的新主題不必經由背景訊息引介而被直接談論。那些被背景訊息引介的新主題,引介方式很多,而最常使用的是問句形式,因為當其他說話者回應問題時,自然就參與討論新話題了。

關鍵詞: 會話主題、主題不連續性、主題鍊、主題不連續標記、背景訊息