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Topic-as-script and Topic-as-action in Language Assessment and Teaching

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Abstract: ‘Topic’ is a construct of great practical importance in the fields of language teaching and assessment. Topic organisation featured prominently as an object of early Conversation Analysis (CA) research (for example in Sacks’s (1992) lectures) but has fallen from the research agenda and become the Cinderella construct in discourse studies in recent years. This article considers two institutional settings in which ‘topic’ is foregrounded and becomes a prominent interactional organisation which drives the institutional business, namely language assessment and language teaching. The argument is that much remains to be discovered about how topic becomes adapted to institutional goals. In these specific settings, topic has developed a ‘dual personality’ in service to the institutional goals; ‘topic-as-script’ is the homogenised topic which examiners give to candidates and teachers give to learners, whereas ‘topic-as-action’ refers to the ways in which candidates and learners talk a topic into being. The movement from ‘topic’ as a single homogeneous script to a heterogeneous series of responses by different learners/candidates (topic-as-action) is the main focus of interest in this study. In both teaching and assessment settings, this transformation of ‘topic’ provides a basis for the analysis and evaluation of learner/candidate performance. Sacks (1992: 541) argues, in relation to ordinary conversation, that topical organisation is an “accessory” to turn-taking and sequence. By contrast, topic is, in the language classroom and language testing settings examined, employed in multiple ways on multiple levels as an organising principle for the interaction; topic is both a vehicle and a focus of the interaction. It is suggested that research into institutional talk should investigate more closely how topic becomes adapted to the institutional goal.

Keywords: Topic, Topic-as-script, Topic-as-action, conversation analysis, oral proficiency interview, IELTS test

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1 Introduction

Topic organisation featured prominently as an object of early Conversation Analysis (CA) research (for example in Sacks's (1992) lectures) but has fallen from the research agenda in recent years. This article considers two institutional settings in which 'topic' is foregrounded and becomes a prominent interactional organisation which drives the institutional business, namely language assessment and language teaching. The argument is that much remains to be discovered about how topic becomes adapted to institutional goals. In these specific settings, topic has developed a 'dual personality' in service to the institutional goals; 'topic-as-script' is the homogenised topic which examiners give to candidates and teachers give to learners, whereas 'topic-as-action' refers to the ways in which candidates and learners talk a topic into being. The movement from 'topic' as a single homogeneous script to a heterogeneous series of responses by different learners/candidates (topic-as-action) is the main focus of interest in this study. In both teaching and assessment settings, this transformation of 'topic' provides a basis for the evaluation of learner/candidate performance.

2 Topic in the CA tradition

Topic has been described as a "metapragmatic folk term" (Grundy 2000: 192), illustrating the fact that it is a term that is used in a technical analytic sense, but that derives from a common sense understanding of a pragmatic phenomenon. A common-sense understanding of topic is that it is a 'subject' or the 'subjects' of a conversation, and that a number of topics make up the content of conversation. A common-sense definition is that topic is "what is being talked about at any given time". However, this kind of definition can be problematic if adopted as the basis for an analytic perspective. One issue at stake is how to describe and define the given 'topic'. If a conversation revolves around, for example 'holidays', this is clearly divisible by analysts into a wide range of possible 'topics' or 'sub-topics'. Furthermore, this type of approach is likely to lead to a potentially infinite series of categories, which may or may not relate effectively to the participants' notion of "what is being talked about". So whilst definitions of topic rely on this common sense notion, CA analysis has tended to follow a different approach. The difficulties in defining what constitutes a topic and therefore its analyses are well recognised by research in many traditions (Levinson 1983; Brown and Yule 2003; Schegloff 1990). Within the CA tradition, Atkinson & Heritage (1984: 165) state that the obstacles are formidable: "... not

only is topical maintenance and shift an extremely complex and subtle matter, but also ... there are no simple or straightforward routes to the examination of topical flow.” Schegloff (1990) is similarly pessimistic about the possibility of determining what a topic is in talk-in-interaction and of the use of topic as an analytical tool.

Research into topic within the CA tradition has tended to focus on how topic initialisations, shifts, and endings are managed as an interactional achievement in the unfolding of the moment-to-moment interaction, from the participants’ perspective. This is in direct opposition to other approaches to discourse analysis that categorise and delineate between topics from an analyst’s perspective. One reason for the importance of this participants’ perspective is illustrated by Sacks’ observation that “the way in which it’s a topic for them is different than the way it’s a topic for anybody else” (1992: 75).

CA research has identified two distinct organisations for the management of topic (Sacks 1992; Jefferson 1984; Button and Casey 1984). The first of these, stepwise topic transitions, occur where there is a ‘flow’ from one topic into another. “It’s a general feature for topic organization in conversation that the best way to move from topic to topic is not by a topic close followed by a topic beginning, but by what we call a stepwise move. Such a move involves connecting what we’ve just been talking about to what we’re now talking about, though they are different.” (Sacks 1992: 566). The second are ‘disjunctive’ (Jefferson 1984), ‘marked’ (Sacks 1992: 352) or boundaried topic shifts, where an explicit marker is used to indicate the shifting of topic, in these cases they mark the end of one topic and the beginning of another. This is often employed when there is a larger ‘distance’ between the topics than in stepwise transitions. Sacks argues that “‘talking topically’ doesn’t consist of blocks of talk about a topic” (1992: 762) and that the quality of a conversation can be in part measured by the “relative frequency of marked topic introductions [which] is a measure of a lousy conversation” (1992: 352). Sacks (1992: 762) suggests that people discriminate between touched-off and topically coherent utterances, “specifically signalling touched-off utterances where they might not present such a signal with topically coherent utterances.” Sacks also identifies topic markers, which show that what is said is ‘same topic’ or ‘different topic’.

Early CA work into topic, then, generated important insights into the interactional processes by which topics are managed. Atkinson and Heritage’s (1984) collection contains a whole section (two chapters) on topic organisation. From that point, however, research interest in topic has seemed to fade away. This may be due to the aforementioned problems with topic as focus of analysis, or to an increased emphasis on structural issues: “Structures of social action ... can be described and analyzed in formal, that is, structural, organizational, logical,

atopically contentless, consistent, and abstract, terms” (Psathas 1995: 3). However, it is surprising that the ‘institutional’ turn in CA work did not regenerate interest into this phenomenon. Recent work has suggested that topic research within institutional settings, particularly educational ones, may be easier than ordinary conversation, as the topics are often determined by the ‘educator’ (Stokoe 2000). Drew and Heritage (1992: 28–53) list five dimensions of talk in institutions which constitute foci of research, but topic is not included. In the same way, in two excellent introductions to CA (ten Have 1999; Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998) topic does not feature as an index item. Topic, then, has become of peripheral interest, with two main exceptions. A recent development in CA in relation to topic (Heritage 2012) is interest in the ‘epistemic engine’ of talk. Heritage emphasises the significance of epistemic or information imbalances in motivating and driving talk until balance is achieved. Heritage introduces a hydraulic metaphor as follows. A participant may have a K+ (more knowledgeable) or K- (less knowledgeable) epistemic status, and the information imbalance will motivate talk to equalise this imbalance. Although not explicitly stated in Heritage’s paper, it follows from this claim that topic development provides a key mechanism for information exchange. Another exception can be found in Schegloff (2007: 169–180). Schegloff demonstrates how topic can be interwoven with the organisations of turn-taking, sequence and preference. In topic-proffering sequences, preferred responses tend to promote expansion of sequence whereas dispreferred responses tend to lead to closing-down of sequence. Schegloff (2007: 1) suggests that talk-in-interaction is better examined with respect to *action* than with respect to *topicality*. This study takes up this suggestion in relation to a specific variety of institutional discourse, firstly by investigating how topic becomes adapted to delivering institutional action, and secondly by looking at how topic becomes interwoven with other organisations. We look at data from two related areas of language education, namely language assessment and language teaching.

3 Background information on the IELTS speaking test

This article presents findings from two funded studies (Seedhouse and Egbert 2006; Seedhouse and Harris 2010) of the IELTS Speaking Test (IST), one of the four components of IELTS, (International English Language Testing System), the most widely used English proficiency test for overseas applicants to British and Australian universities. Over 7,000 certified examiners administer over 2.5

million ISTs annually at more than 1,000 centres, in over 140 countries around the world (<http://www.ielts.org>). For candidates, this can be a very high-stakes test in that it can determine their access to the degree programme of their choice. The IST aims to evaluate how well a language learner might function in a target context, often an academic one. There is a 9-band grading system from 1 (Non User) to 9 (Expert). ISTs are encounters between one candidate and one examiner and are designed to last between 11 and 14 minutes. There are three main parts. Each part fulfils a specific function in terms of interaction pattern, task input and candidate output. In Part 1 (Introduction) candidates answer general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of familiar topic areas. The examiner introduces him/herself and confirms candidate's identity. The examiner interviews the candidate using verbal questions selected from familiar topic frames. This part lasts between four and five minutes. In Part 2 (Individual long turn) the candidate is given a verbal prompt on a card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The candidate has one minute to prepare before speaking at length, for between one and two minutes. The examiner then asks one or two rounding-off questions. In Part 3 (Two-way discussion) the examiner and candidate engage in a discussion of more abstract issues and concepts which are thematically linked to the topic prompt in Part 2.

Detailed performance descriptors have been developed which describe spoken performance at the nine IELTS bands, based on the following criteria: Fluency and Coherence; Lexical Resource; Grammatical Range and Accuracy; Pronunciation. Topic is employed in the IELTS Speaking Band descriptors to differentiate levels. In some cases it is mentioned under 'Fluency and coherence'. It is used to differentiate band 8 "develops topics coherently and appropriately" from band 9 "develops topics fully and appropriately". At lower levels it is mentioned under 'Lexical resource' and differentiates band 3 "has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics" from band 4 "is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics". Key indicators for the criteria are available to examiners.

The primary raw data consist of audio recordings of ISTs, which number typically over 2.5 million per year. Secondary data included paper materials relevant to the ISTs recorded on cassette, including examiners' briefs, marking criteria, examiner induction, training, standardisation and certification packs (Taylor 2001). These data helped establish the institutional goal of the interaction. Using cassettes of ISTs recorded during 2003 and 2004, a sample of 606 was selected and 197 transcribed in total using CA transcription conventions. The aim of the sampling was to ensure that there was variety in the transcripts in terms of gender, region of the world, task/topic number and IST band score. Overall test scores ranged from IELTS 9.0 (high) to 3.0 (low).

4 The interactional organisation of the IST

This section sketches how IST interaction is organised in general terms. CA institutional discourse methodology attempts to understand how participants relate to institutional goals through their interactional conduct (Drew and Heritage 1992). In the IST, the organization of turn-taking, sequence, and repair are related to the institutional goal of standardisation of interactional input to promote valid assessment of English speaking proficiency. The examiner's questions are scripted and standardised in order to ensure all candidates receive exactly the same questions and input and hence have the same opportunity to display proficiency. Brown (2003) and Lazaraton (2002) have shown that, when examiners deviate from standardised scripts and instructions, they give some candidates an advantage.

The overall organization of turn-taking and sequence in the IST closely follows the examiner instructions (Seedhouse and Egbert 2006). Part 1 is a succession of question-answer adjacency pairs. Part 2 is a long turn by the candidate, started off by a prompt from the examiner and sometimes rounded off with questions. Part 3 is another succession of examiner question- candidate answer adjacency pairs, but these are intended to have a slightly less rigid organization than part 1. Trouble generally arises for candidates when they do not understand questions posed by examiners. In these cases, candidates usually initiate repair. Examiner instructions are to repeat the question once only but not to paraphrase or alter the question. Examiners very rarely initiate repair in relation to candidate utterances, even when these contain linguistic errors or appear to be incomprehensible. This is because the institutional goal is not to achieve intersubjectivity, nor to offer formative feedback; it is to assess the candidate's utterances in terms of IELTS bands. Overall, the organization of repair has a number of distinctive characteristics which may be typical of Oral Proficiency Interviews in general. These are the reduced importance of achieving intersubjectivity in the above sense, and an absence of verbally expressed evaluation and correction of errors by the examiner.

5 The organisation of topic in the IST

In a similar way to turn-taking, sequence and repair, 'topic' is standardised in furtherance of the institutional goal. In the IST, the topic of the talk is pre-determined, written out in advance in scripts and is introduced by the examiner. Examiner frames in part 1 contain connected questions on a topic, for example 'where you live':

- Do you live in a house or a flat?
- Tell me the good things about your house/flat.
- What is the area like where you live?
- Would you recommend this area as a place to live? (Why/why not?)

Candidates are evaluated on (amongst other things) their ability to develop a nominated topic (IELTS band descriptors). There are hardly ever any opportunities for candidate to introduce or shift topic and candidates are generally closed down when they try to do so. In the data, introduction of topic within the IST is almost entirely determined by the examiner's script and how this script is interactionally implemented throughout each individual interview. There are asymmetrical rights to topic management between examiner and candidate.

At this point a tension may be noted between the presentation in the CA literature of 'topic' as something, complex, fluid, subtle, shifting and elusive, and the conception of 'topic' in the IST as something pre-determined, scripted, fixed and equated with content. At this stage we therefore introduce the concepts of **topic-as-script** and **topic-as-action** in relation to interaction in the IST. **Topic-as-script** is the statement of topic on the examiner's cards prior to the interaction, whereas **topic-as-action** is how topic is developed or talked into being during the course of the interaction. Whether and how candidates develop topic-as-action is consequential for the grades they received and therefore of direct relevance to the institutional business. This presentation of a 'dual personality' of topic in the IST not only embodies the different conceptions of topic mentioned above, but also enables analysis and evaluation of interaction in the IST, as will be demonstrated below.

In parts 1 and 3 of the IST, there is an archetypal organisation which combines turn-taking, adjacency pair and topic-as-script, as follows. All examiner questions (with the exception of the administrative questions) contain two components a) an adjacency pair component, which requires the candidate to provide an answer b) a topic component, which requires the candidate to develop a specific topic. This organisation can be called a 'topic-scripted Q-A adjacency pair'. So in parts 1 and 3 of the IST, unlike conversation, topic-as-script is always introduced by means of a question. In order to obtain a high score, candidates need to do the following: a) understand the question they have been asked b) provide an answer to the question c) identify the topic inherent in the question d) develop the topic inherent in the question. So in the ISTs, topic is scripted and entwined with the organisations of turn-taking and sequence in order to ensure standardisation. A part 1 sequence (score 9.0) is seen below; the five IST extracts discussed below come from the corpus described above.

Extract 1

- 35 E: okay (0.7) so uh:: what qualifications or certificates (0.8) do you hope to
 36 get (1.3)
- 37 C: well (1.1) after I: (0.5) get my degree in May I'm hoping to:: (1.3) uh:m
 38 >probably work in England for a while and in order to do that I have to
 39 do further exams< hh (0.5) unfortunately bu:t uh:m (1.1) ·hh then I just
 40 hope to: (0.6) progress further i- in my field ((inaudible)) (0.2)
- 41 E: okay okay (0.7) ↑let's uh move on to talk about some of the activities
 42 you (0.6) enjoy in your free time (0.7) when do you have free time? (1.3)
- 43 C: rarely hh heh (0.3) ·hh uh::m (0.5) I try to pace myself generally (.) in
 44 terms of: getting a lot of work done during the week so I ca:n at least
 45 relax a bit at the weekends (0.5) I like to:: look at movies go shopping:
 46 hh heh (0.5) uhm have a chat with friends and (0.6)
- 47 E: okay and uh::m (1.5) what free time activities are most popular where
 48 you live? (1.6)

In the above extract, the 'topic-as-script' has been pre-determined and is read by E in lines 35 and 41. Let us examine how C develops 'topic-as-action'. The question "what qualifications or certificates do you hope to get?" could be answered quite directly and drily as "I hope to get an MBA". However, C constructs a four-phase narrative presenting a vision of his/her future. The topic is developed as an action which develops a personal identity and which has the potential to engage the listener with him/her on a personal level. In lines 41 and 42, E introduces two topics-as-scripts, namely what the activities are that C enjoys in his/her free time and the question of when s/he has free time. Of particular note is the way in which C engages in lines 43 to 46 with these two scripted topics in reverse order and connects the two. In line 43 C's utterance "rarely" answers the second question, but the answer to the first question about free-time activities does not come until line 45. C very skilfully manages a stepwise transition of topic in lines 43–45 to move seamlessly from the second topic-as-script to the first. The topical action required is to move from 'lack of free time' to 'free-time activities' and this is accomplished by the explanation of pacing him/herself to work hard during the week to free up relaxation time at the weekends. C's development of topic-as-action works on a number of levels simultaneously. It projects an image of C as someone who is ambitious and hard-working, internationally mobile, gaining a number of qualifications, someone who plans their time carefully and has a clear vision of their life and their future. If we ask how C has taken a topic-as-script and developed it into a topic-as-action in this case, it is predominantly that C has developed a narrative of his/her personal life which projects a certain identity and enables a listener to engage with this. Moreover, the narrative is carefully

structured in relation to temporal sequence; lines 37 to 40 portray four different time phases, one of which is not in linear order, whereas lines 43 to 46 show the ability to present generalisations about time.

In extract 1 we saw how C developed a topic-as-action and this simultaneously provided action on other levels: a) it answered the questions b) it projected C's identity c) it displayed C's level of linguistic and interactional competence d) it displayed C's competence in engaging in the testing activity. So although topic-as-script in this setting is static, monolithic and pre-determined, topic-as-action can be complex, dynamic and entwined with multiple actions on multiple levels.

However, not all candidates develop topic-as-action so successfully. In extract 1, we saw that C answered the questions and developed the topics. High-scoring candidates appear to be able to develop a topic-as-action concisely and without carrying on for too long, bearing in mind limitations of time. This demonstrates their competence in the assessment activity as well as their linguistic and interactional competence. In contrast to the successful example above, a candidate response may in principle a) answer the question but fail to develop a topic-as-action b) fail to answer the question, but say something which bears some tangential relationship to the general topic-as-script c) fail to answer the question or develop the topic-as-action. In cases a) and b), candidates will not achieve the highest scores for their responses and will receive the lowest ratings for case c). An example of a candidate answering questions without developing a topic-as-action is provided below:

Extract 2

- 142 E: do you think that you will travel mor::e in the future
 143 (0.4)
 144 C: → y[eah]
 145 E: [whe]n you're older.
 146 (0.3)
 147 C: → yeah
 148 (0.5)
 149 E: because you enjoy it (0.9) okay now ((name omitted)) in this
 150 part (0.7) i'm: going to give you a topic

In the above extract, the candidate (score 4.0) provides minimal answers to the questions, but does not engage with the topic in any way. We might also say that C provides a response to the topic-as-script but does not develop a topic-as-action. By contrast with the previous extract, there is virtually no display of linguistic competence or development of identity, and little evidence of competence relating to the assessment activity; it is possible that this is due to

a lack of understanding of what is required, or a lack of training, but we have no basis for speculation on this.

Answers may also develop a topic-as-action which bears some tangential relationship to the general topic-as-script, but which develops the topic in a different direction, as in the extract below:

Extract 3

- 40 E: okay (0.6) let's talk about public transport (0.5) what kinds of public
 41 transport are there (0.3) where you live (2.0)
 42 C: it's eh (0.5) I (0.4) as eh (0.4) a (0.3) person of eh (0.4) ka- Karachi, I
 43 (1.1) we have many (0.8) public transport problems and (0.7) many eh
 44 we use eh (0.4) eh buses (0.4) there are private cars and eh (.) there are
 45 some (0.3) eh (0.4) children (0.4) buses (0.8) and eh (1.9) abou- (0.2)
 46 about the main problems in is the (0.4) the number one is the over eh
 47 speeding (0.5) they are the oh eh (0.5) the roads (0.8) and eh (.) they are
 48 [on]
 49 E: → [I] didn't ask you about the problems (0.6) my question was (0.6) what
 50 kinds of public transport are there (.) where you live (0.7) (Part 1)

In line 49 above the examiner explicitly treats the candidate's answer as trouble in that it did not provide a direct answer to his/her question, even though it was on the general topic of public transport. If a topic-as-action deviates too far from that specified in a tightly-defined topic-as-script, there may be negative consequences.

Extract 4

- 9 E: ((name omitted)) (0.2) alright (0.3).hhh and can you tell me
 10 where you're from
 11 (0.7)
 12 C: i'm originally from the philippines (.) but for the la::st erm
 13 (0.3) it's like this before i came to canada in the year two
 14 thousand i was working in thailand. (0.5) for three years for
 15 an international organisation that dealt [with]
 16 E: → [okay] >sorry sorry-<
 17 sorry to stop you i don't mean to [(inaudible)] where are you =
 18 C: [ha ha okay]
 19 E: from (0.3) the philippines right?
 20 (.) (Part 1)

Some IELTS teaching materials (e.g. Jakerman and McDowell 2001) suggest that a good strategy in parts 1 and 3 is to provide an answer plus one extra piece of

topic-relevant information. The data suggest that this is indeed a feature of high-scoring interaction. In the extract above, we see a candidate who goes beyond this ‘one extra’ principle. In line 12, the answer is provided, then in lines 13 and 14 a single extra piece of information is added. However, when in line 16 further information is added on the business of the organisation, this is seen by E as going off-topic; E interrupts and initiates repair. A rational explanation for this is that the test has a limited duration and the examiner must get through a set number of questions and keep to a timescale. We have seen in extracts 3 and 4 that topics-as-action cannot, therefore, be allowed to be developed indefinitely, nor can they be allowed to diverge too far from the topic-as-script.

From a testing perspective, the archetypal organisation of topic-scripted Q-A adjacency pair in the IST appears to be highly successful in generating differential performance between candidates. From a CA institutional discourse perspective, the topic-scripted Q-A adjacency pair is a remarkably economical instrument for carrying out the institutional business; a single examiner move requires a candidate move in response, which can be used by raters to distinguish levels of performance in relation to multiple issues.

6 Topic development in the part 2 individual long turn

An individual long turn can be challenging for CA methodology, based as it is on turn-taking and sequence. In this section, however, we approach the analysis from the perspective of topic development, using as our analytical procedure a focus on how the candidate develops topic-as-action from the topic-as-script. In the candidate’s long turn in part 2, the expectation is that the candidate will a) answer the question or complete the task b) provide an extended development of a topic. By examining a long turn from part 2 with a high score, it is possible to identify some of the key features of topic development.

Extract 5

- 263 E: time is up (0.7) can you start speaking now please.
 264 (0.5)
 265 C: okay i think this job is er:: (1.3) being a doctor (0.3)
 266 medical practitioner (1.6) especially those who:: (0.5) erm
 267 (1.6) treat er (0.5) very (0.6) common diseases (0.4) not
 268 specialist (2.2) i think it’s (0.3) quite interesting because
 269 er you- (0.3) you meet a lot of people (1.4) different kinds of

270 people (1.1) and er (0.7) people who are having problems (0.3)
 271 people who are- people who are in pain (0.6) and er (0.7)
 272 you have to try as much as you can (0.7) to:: make them feel
 273 better (1.4) or try to solve your problems you cannot solve
 274 you- you put them in a state that they will feel more at ease
 275 (0.4) °with with him° (0.9) for example eh somebody (0.3)
 276 selling ah:: (0.6) let's say:: (0.8) erm::: (2) selling er::
 277 let's say:: (1.7) MALAria (0.4) the illness is common in my
 278 pla::ce (1) okay (0.4) the patients who have this ((inaudible))
 279 condition erm:: (0.3) vomiting and all (1) this is very::
 280 (0.2) ah:: troublesome (0.4) it (makes (0.2) makes you feel
 281 (mistaken) (0.7) (it's all) (.) it's up to the doctor to make
 282 you relax (0.4) even though your sick nearly won't go away
 283 (0.8) right after you see the doctor? but (0.7) the doctor must
 284 try to (0.3) er:: talk you to:: (1.2) er:: feel at ease (0.5)
 285 jus- (.) just to let you know that okay these are the
 286 medications i want to give you = these are the things you must do
 287 (0.8) and er (0.7) hopefully (.) it will work for you (0.8)
 288 (it's) all:: (0.3) i think that is a very interesting job
 289 (0.2)
 290 E: alright. (0.3) thank you

(Part 2: score 9.0)

The first point to note is that the candidate (score 9.0) clearly completes the task “describe a job you think would be interesting”. Having identified the job of medical practitioner, all of the subsequent talk is related to this job and why it would be interesting. In line 265, the candidate identifies the generic term ‘doctor’ and then narrows the focus to the sub-topic of types of doctor, moving to medical practitioner and non-specialists who treat common diseases (lines 266–8). In line 268 the topic shifts in stepwise fashion to why the job is interesting, the reason being because you meet many people and have to try to cure them. There is then an exemplification of an illness (malaria) which then leads stepwise to a description of symptoms and how patients feel and how the doctor should communicate with patients. So within the overall topic of the doctor’s job, there is a good deal of stepwise, flowing development of sub-topics as well as shifts of perspective, presenting illness from the patient’s and doctor’s perspectives.

In this section we have seen that, although it is difficult to analyse candidate extended turns in terms of turn-taking and sequence, it is much more feasible to do so in terms of topic development, by relating topic-as-action to topic-as-script. We argue that this is precisely because we have identified topic as the key construct in the interactional architecture of the IST, with its dual

personality delivering the institutional business. The idea that an analytical procedure or methodology can emerge from the structure of interaction is a familiar one in CA. When Sacks et al. (1974), examined the organisation of ordinary conversation, they discovered that the next-turn emerged from the structure of conversation as an analytical tool and proof procedure. So when we wish to analyse interaction in language teaching and assessment where topic is introduced as a script, a key analytical procedure should be to trace how the candidate develops topic-as-action from the topic-as-script, and it is suggested that this is furthermore a key to understanding how score relates to talk.

7 Topic-as-script and topic-as-action in language classrooms

It is also common in L2 classrooms for topic to be introduced in terms of a script in order to generate student talk. It is now well established in L2 classroom research that there may be differences between what is supposed to happen in terms of classroom interaction in terms of a script and what actually happens. Breen (1989) differentiated between task design or ‘task-as-workplan’ and the participant’s actual performance of the task or ‘task-in-process’ and Seedhouse (2005) suggested that the task-as-workplan is the intended pedagogy, the plan made prior to classroom implementation of what the teachers and students will do. The task-in-process is the actual pedagogy or what actually happens in the classroom. In the same vein, this section demonstrates that topic can have a ‘dual personality’ in the L2 classroom as well as in the IST. Furthermore, comparing topic-as-script to topic-as-action offers a means of analysis and evaluation of the talk. In this section we see that the same topic-as-script results in different speech exchange systems with respect to topic-as-action when performed by different teachers and students.

8 Data collection

Video and audio data of 11 lessons involving teachers and EFL students at a university in Thailand were gathered in 2014; for this paper two lessons were chosen for analysis. The teachers were two native speakers of English (one male and one female) teaching EFL in Thailand. Students were, at the time of the recordings, second and third-year non-English major. The students in the two classes studied the same English course and the two teachers implemented the

same topic-as-script, namely the text 'Dating Customs Around the World' as in Figure 1 below. The text explains dating customs in several countries, but leaves a space for dating customs in Thailand for students to complete and then share with the class. However, the text does not explain to the teacher how the topic-

Unit 4 Class 1

Oral Expression I

III: Dating Customs Around the World

These are some of the ways teens date in other countries of the world.

United States of America

- Girls and boys start dating in their early teens.
- Common places to go on dates are cinemas, nightclubs, parties, scenic spots, beaches, concerts, and restaurants.
- Men usually ask women out on dates, but women can ask men out, too.
- People from different social, economic, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds date each other.
- Men and women often share expenses on their dates.
- Usually after a date there is a goodbye kiss.

Europe

- Dating is usually a group event.
- In Finland, as many as 30 teens may attend a movie together.
- Slumber parties are common in Italy and Switzerland.

Australia

- Most teens go out in large groups and don't pair off until they are 18 or 19.
- Girls often ask out boys and pay for the date, too.
- Couples often go to dinner parties, barbecues or the beach.

Spain

- Teens join a club or a group of friends with the same interests, like cycling or hiking.
- Dating is done one-to-one and both girls and boys ask each other out and split the cost of the evening's entertainment.

Iran

- It is against the law to date in Iran.
- Teens are separated until they are of marrying age.
- Their families introduce them to each other and sometimes a courtship follows.

Japan and Korea

- Most high school students don't date or go to parties, but spend their time studying instead.
- Dating begins in college, when only boys do the asking and pay for the dates.

Discuss them with a classmate. How are they different from Thailand?

Thailand: What are three dating customs in Thailand? Be ready to share them with the class.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Topic-as-action

Figure 1 : Reading task/topic 'Dating Customs Around the World'.

as-script should be implemented as a classroom activity with the result that the two teachers implement it in different ways. So the same topic-as-script results in two different topics-as-actions in the two lessons.

8.1 Topic-as-action

The following Extract 6 is a follow-up activity in the female teacher's class. Prior to this, the group which read about dating customs in Spain had reported on their reading and discussion. In this extract, the teacher (a foreigner) asks about dating customs in Thailand. The participants are identified by their initial: T for the teacher, S for an unidentified student, Ss for the students as a whole, Gr for the assigned group, and the main eight students participating in the discussion are identified by the letters A to H.

Extract 6

30 T: girls okay what about if the girls pay
(0.6)

31 S: yeah

32 H: no

33 T: no? why not
(0.6)

34 H: because =

35 G: = it's very nice

36 Ss: [[[laughter and claps]]]

37 G: I alway pay na
(0.5)

38 T: [okay]

39 Ss: [[[laughter and nods]]]

40 T: why not ((hand gesture to S8))
(0.5)

41 H: it's not politely for men =

42 S: = Ye::ah

43 Ss: ↑OH::: [[[laughter and claps]]]

44 G: [↑OH:: OH]

45 T: what about sha::ring
(1.0)

46 B: it's okay

47 T: fifty fifty

48 Ss: [it's okay]

- 49 T: okay (1.1) what about if women ask men on a date
(1.5)
- 50 G: it's okay =
- 51 T: =do men say okay?
- 52 B: it's okay ((laughs))
(0.4)
- 53 T: girls? (1.4) it's okay?
- 54 F: no it's not
- 55 T: it's not? Why not
- 56 E: why not =
- 57 F: = why not =
- 58 B: = why not ((laughs))
- 59 F: that girl will look (0.5) not good (0.7) [will look] bad
- 60 T: [↑ah:::]
(0.9)
- 61 F: look raed na
- 62 E: ((laughs and slaps F in a joking way))
- 63 F: look raed
- 64 Ss: [((laughter))] look raed
(0.4)
- 65 B: slut
- 66 C: look raed
- 67 T: >okay okay< that's bad in the word
- 68 Ss: [((laughter))]
- 69 T: we shouldn't use that word (0.9) do you think it's tradition that says?
- 70 (0.6) that men should ask women?

T nominates the topic of whether it is acceptable for girls to pay on a date in Thailand in line 30. The responses are rather limited in terms of topic development, with H saying 'no' in line 32. T asks why not to try to develop the topic further and H eventually provides the reason in line 41, having been interrupted by G in line 35. G disagrees with H, saying that having the girl pay is a nice idea as he always pays. The topic is brought to life by being related to G's personal experience and the other students laugh and applaud this contribution. However, there is no further topic development. T then nominates the topic of sharing expenses in line 45 and this is accepted as a good idea by the class, but not developed as a topic in any sense. There is slightly more topic elaboration when T introduces the question of women asking men on a date in line 49. A gender difference is opened up as the male students agree with the idea

(lines 50 and 52), whereas female student F disagrees, providing the reason in line 59 (the girl would look bad), then using the Thai word *raed*, meaning ‘slut’ in line 61, which is echoed by other students in line 65. The teacher, as a foreigner, does not understand the Thai word *raed* until it is translated into English in line 65. From 67–69 the topic very briefly shifts to the non-acceptability of the word ‘slut’ in the classroom discussion, following which T introduces a new but related topic in line 69 of whether tradition dictates that men ask women out. So in 67–69 we see that talk which is generated during the interaction can itself become topicalised and the focus of the interaction.

In contrast to Extract 6 above, the following Extract 7 is a follow-up activity where the male teacher in the other class adopts the same topic-as-script, but the topic-as-action proceeds differently. In this class, the group who read about dating customs in Spain has only one member reporting their reading and group discussion, student R.

Extract 7

- 1 T: ((hand gesture)) okay (2.0) ((hand gesture)) Spain right?
- 2 S: Spain
- 3 T: [Spain]
- 4 Ss: [Spain]
- 5 S: ((laughs))
(1.0)
- 6 R: er::: in Spain teen join a club or a group of friend with the same
7 interest (0.7) like cycling or hiking (.) but (0.8) in Thailand (0.4) teen
8 join a group on facebook and find someone who want to date with.
- 9 T: oh:::
- 10 Ss: ((laughter))
- 11 T: good
(0.5)
- 12 R: and in Spain dating (0.4) is (0.5) done one to one and both girl and
13 boy ask each other out and split the cost of (0.5) de (the) (1.8) di
14 evening en entertainment but in Thailand the men ((hand gesture))
15 also pay all of the cost.
(0.7)
- 16 T: mm::: (0.7) interesting in Thailand
- 17 Ss: ((claps))

The first part of R's turn providing information about Spain is read verbatim from the (see Figure 1), whereas new information is presented in lines 7 and 8 on dating customs in Thailand. The teacher's change-of-state token "oh" (line 9), the students' laughter (line 10) and the teacher's assessment token "good" (line 11) provide a reaction to the new topical information received. Similarly, in lines 12–14, R uses the same pattern of verbatim textbook production when talking about Spain and provides only a single new item of information when talking about Thailand in line 14.

We should note that the way in which a topic is developed in both extracts is related to the organization of turn-taking and sequence. In extract 6, T asks questions to the whole class, who can self-select and compete for turns. So in lines 34 we see H start an answer and then be interrupted in line 35 by G. Students are also free to develop topics in a particular direction. F chooses to make a moral disapproval, using the Thai word *raed* and T then disapproves of the way the topic has developed. In extract 7, by contrast, T allocates the floor to one representative from each group, who then reads out a prepared report. There is no competition for turns and only the teacher provides feedback, apart from laughter and applause by the students.

If we compare the interaction in the two extracts, we can see that the topic-as-action in Extract 6 is a more complex, fluid and dynamic piece of talk-in-interaction compared with Extract 7, albeit based on the same topic-as-script. In Extract 6, the topic is jointly constructed by the teacher and the students. The number of participants in talk is greater. By contrast, in Extract 7, only one member of the assigned group takes a turn and the speech exchange system is restricted to only two parties: the teacher and the group representative. Other students carry out choral repetition and laughter, but they do not make any contribution to topic development.

Some students demonstrate their language ability by producing complete TCUs to develop the topic while most simply give multiple short responses and choral repetition without developing the topic. However, there is competition for the floor with interruptions, overlaps, and disagreement during the topic-as-action. The topic-as-action in this episode is more diverse in terms of turn-taking system and sequence organization. What is more, through the teacher's 'touched-off mechanism' (Sacks 1992) which provides a machinery for getting topics change by asking follow-up questions that require students to elaborate or justify their contributions, the space of interaction is expanded and the topic is fruitfully developed.

In Extract 7 the same speaker continues the topic in two extended or longer multi-unit turns leading to the larger turn size. Although the teacher and other students exhibit attention, they have nothing further to contribute on the topic after minimal responses. The teacher implements the initial inquiry sequence or 'topic proffering' (Schegloff 2007) and the topics are developed by the students, but never extensively in this extract.

9 Conclusions

Sacks (1992: 541) argues, in relation to ordinary conversation, that topical organisation is an “accessory” to turn-taking and sequence. By contrast, topic has, in the IST, evolved to become the key organising principle for the interaction and the key means of delivering the institutional business. The topics-as-scripts are the templates on which the interaction is based throughout the test. Topic-as-script is an integral part of the topic-scripted QA adjacency pair, the core organisation in parts 1 and 3, whilst a topic prompt is provided to candidates in the part 2 individual long turn. This multiple use of topic furthers the institutional business on a number of levels, namely the goals of standardisation of input and differentiation of candidate talk into scoring bands. Topic-as-script is pre-specified in terms of content and phrased as a question. Topic-as-script is homogeneous for all candidates, and it is institutionally necessary that they all receive the same input. However, when the question is answered by the candidate, we see how topic is developed as an action. Topic-as-action is heterogeneous and this differentiation by candidates enables differential assessment of their oral proficiency. Therefore, this ‘dual personality’ of topic is a key driver of the institutional business of valid assessment of differential performance. In the IST setting, the construct ‘topic’ has been modified and developed a dual personality to further the institutional goal. In a similar way, we have seen that in some L2 classrooms, topic has a dual personality. It is introduced as topic-as-script by the teacher and the way in which it is enacted, in terms of topic-as-action, by the students enables differential evaluation of their performances. In both settings, topic has become both an explicit focus of the interaction and an integral part of the organisation of the interaction in relation to the institutional business; topic is both vehicle and focus of the interaction. In both settings, the dual personality of topic enables analysis and evaluation of talk by students and candidates. Topic, then, has become reflexive on many different levels in the assessment and teaching settings.

This study has demonstrated that topic is an organisation which, like turn-taking, sequence and repair, may be adapted to the institutional goal. Atkinson and Heritage (1984: 165) have suggested that topic may well prove to be among the most complex conversational phenomena to be investigated, and it appears there is a great deal more to be discovered in relation to this phenomenon. This article suggests a re-examination of the role of topic in interaction. It is proposed that in some (but not all) institutions, topic may play a significant role in organising the interaction and furthering the institutional business; it therefore deserves greater attention in research. Research in institutional discourse should consider more closely how topic becomes adapted to diverse institutional goals, how it is related

to the organisations of turn-taking and sequence in specific settings, and how it delivers the institutional business on a number of levels. Scripts which specify how professionals should interact with clients are common in many institutional settings, and the relationship between topic-as-script and topic-as-action offers an angle to approach, analyse and evaluate institutional talk.

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Bionotes

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