This paper analyzes prosodic cues to discourse topic in interaction. Following Zellers and Post (2012) who argued for such a mixed-methods approach, this analysis combines Conversation Analysis (CA) and Instrumental Prosody.

A number of prosodic cues to new topics in English have been found in the literature, among them pitch parameters such as higher onsets (Nakajima & Allen 1993), more range variation (Zellers 2013) and F0 peaks (Swerts & Geluykens 1994). Working on spontaneous spoken data makes it very challenging to measure pitch reset because of turn taking, overlap between speakers, hesitations and restarts. The present study re-examines previous findings about register span (pitch range) by looking at a 2-hour corpus of conversations from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois et al. 2000-2005). This paper is part of a bigger project looking at different types of cues to topic transition besides prosody: discourse markers, questions, and new referents.

Topic transition was analyzed from a CA perspective, in which topic is not exterior to the participant or setting but a joint project created in real time (Mondada 2001). The corpus was segmented into turn-constructional units (TCUs, Selting 2000), so that the minimal unit could be an interactional unit – even though the original transcriptions of the Santa Barbara corpus in intonation units were also maintained and used. The identification of topic transitions was checked with an inter-rater agreement on 25% of the corpus, which yielded a substantial agreement (Cohen’s kappa, κ=0.73).

Three parameters in particular were analyzed: median F0, register span, and maximum F0. Statistical analysis showed that key is not a good indicator of topic transition, as Transitions and Continuity did not show a significant difference. These results are concordant with Zellers (2013). On the other hand, I found that speakers use an expanded register span and higher maximum F0 for their topic transitions. These are slightly different results from Zellers (2013) who did not find an expanded register span at the moment of topic transition, but in the following turn. However, Zellers (2013) focused on a subtype of topic transition: stepwise topic transitions introduced through a linguistic expression of contrast. By contrast, the present study took into account all the types of topic transitions.

The results hold for the two types of topic transition traditionally distinguished in CA literature, i.e. stepwise and disjunctive topic transitions (Jefferson 1984, Holt & Drew 2005). It is often assumed that only disjunctive transition is cued by a prosodic upgrade and that stepwise transition is less marked. This study brings evidence that the two types of topic transition may be designed with similar prosodic cues.

Besides, different individual profiles were found, as a minority of speakers did not systematically mobilize said prosodic cues. This is in line with the multi-domain approach of this study, which also looks at other types of cues.
References


