

Topic Shift in Urdu Conversation: A Gender-Based Analysis

Badar Zaman, M.A.

Abstract

This paper tries to explore the ways of topic shift in Urdu conversation. It investigates the use of minimal responses in topic shifting in Urdu conversation. Employing the methodology of conversation analysis, the researcher demonstrates that the topic shift in Urdu conversation is sudden as well as progressive and it depends on gender relation and status of the participants.

Key Words: *Topic Shift, Urdu, Gender*

1. Introduction

A topic sentence shows one's topic of conversation and the word shift refers towards the transition from one topic of discussion to another one. Topic is changed and transformed during a conversation one may start talking about one topic and finds himself latter talking about something quite different. The transitions and shifts are done abruptly or in a progressive manner depending on the context and participants or gender. The gender difference influences the topic shift in conversation. "The topics initiated by men are much more often developed than those initiated by women whereas the topics initiated by the women failed due to the failure of the men to respond and to do the international work necessary for the development of the topics" (Fishman, 1983: 97) . "In the conversation between same sex the boys do not pursue any topic for more than a few short turns and jump quickly from one topic to another, girls spend a much longer time developing each topic through mutual support work and unlike boys they make progressive rather than sudden topic shifts" (Tannen,1990:247). "Women use minimal responses, simultaneous speech, questions including tag questions, and laughter supportively to develop topics" (Coates, 1998: 237).

The shift in topic involves minimal responses that depend on the relation of participants and their gender. Men use less minimal responses and have sudden topic shift where as women use frequent minimal responses and have progressive topic shift.

The status of the participants also influences the topic shift. A senior or boss conversing with his subordinate uses less minimal responses and has sudden topic shift while listening to the boss the subordinate uses frequent minimal responses like “sir” and rarely initiates a topic. This research deals the topic shift in Urdu conversation using different minimal responses like “*achā*” (okay), “*thīk*”(right), “*haim*” (yes) and “*bilkul*” (certainly).In some contexts these minimal responses are used and in some topic shift is sudden or free.

Recording is used as a data collection tool and the participants are Minister-PS, principal-teacher, male friends and female friends.

2. Topic Shift in Urdu Conversation

In Urdu conversation topics are raised, dropped, changed and directed using minimal responses and without minimal responses depending on the context or the relation of the participants.

The minimal responses have different functions in Urdu conversation. These minimal responses also used for topic shift in Urdu conversation. Ayesha Sohail, (2010: p.78) states “The common minimal responses present in Urdu are “*Hmmm*”, “*Sahī*”, “*Thīk*” (right/ true), “*haim*” (yes) “*bilkul*”(certainly) and “*achā*” (okay)”.

“Different names are given to these minimal responses, acknowledgement token (Jefferson, 1983), back channels (Yugve, 1970), continuers (Schegloff, 1982; Katherine Lambertz, 2011), alignment token” (Ayesha Sohail, 2010: p.79)

In Urdu conversation, the participants are talking on one topic and one of them proposes to turn to some other topic of conversation. The participants display some attention to the

previous topic before introducing their own. It involves the use of acknowledgement tokens “*achā*”, “*Thik hai*”, “*Bilkul*”, “*haim*”.

The participants use these pre-shift tokens exhibiting attention to a previous talk and introducing their own topics. These acknowledgement tokens are well fitted to the work of topic closure because it allows a recipient to show attention to the preceding talk while at the same time delivering a summary or upshot of it. The transition in the topic depends on the context and the status of the participants and the gender of the participants.

“The women differ from men to a great extent in the way they develop and change topics. The male conversations are characterized by sudden changes of topics which are the results of interruptions and the absence of any response and minimal feedback from the listeners. Unlike the abrupt topic shifts made by men the women initiate new topics by linking them with the previous ones (Pilkington, 1998: 259)”.

The relationship of the participants also effects the development of the topics in conversation. In the formal conversation of boss and his subordinate the topic is developed mostly by the senior and the recipients acknowledges speaker’s talk with minimal acknowledgement tokens. In some situations the subordinate listener also changes the topic while asking about some matter. Mostly in this context the topics are initiated by the boss and the listener acts as a passive recipient.

Fragment 1 shows the topic shift pattern in the conversation between a Minister and his PS, in which speaker A is a minister and speaker B is his PS. Prior to this conversation speaker A has been busy in his office in listening the problems of different people gathered in his office. Speaker A calls speaker B by his name and asks about different official matters. This fragment is the continuation of that conversation.

(1) CON1

1 A: Rafique

- 2 B: *Jī sar*
Yes sir
- 3 A: → *Saktarī ko fōn kīyā?*
Did you make a call to secretary?
- 4 B: *Jī sar*
Yes Sir
- 5 A: → *Inqalabī se fail lāī?*
Have the file taken back from Inqalabi?
- 6 B: *Jī Sar (.) magr unūm° ne Sāin nahīm° kīyā*
Yes sir but he did not sign it.
- 7 A: *keyā kahtā hai?*
What does he say?
- 8 B: *PRO ko patā ho gā*
PRO knows
- 9 A: → ↓ *Achā cīf Engīnīar ko bhī bolāim° āj*
Okay call the chief engineer today
- 10 B: *Thīk sar*
Right sir
- 11 A: → *māim° mīyām wahīd se mil āūm°*
I will become back after meeting Waheed.
- 12 B: → *Thīk sar (.) Sar dariktar kāljaz kā keyā Kārñām° hai*
Right Sir (.) Sir what's about director colleges?
- 13 A: ↓ *Achā kuch socte haim°*
Okay we will think
- 14 B: *Thīk Sir*
Right Sir

This fragment begins with speaker A's calling speaker B and the speaker B instantly aligns to speaker A's talk and goes to speaker B. There is question-answer sequence from line 3-8.

Speaker A asks speakers B about making a call to secretary (line 3) and speaker B replies with minimal acknowledgement token “*jī sar*” (line 4). Speaker A is a minister and is the boss of the speaker B. the topic is introduced by speaker A while asking a question to speaker B about making a call to secretary and speaker B being the subordinate replies using minimal response “*Jī Sar*”. This minimal response exhibits alignment as well as the answer of speaker A’s question and it prompts speaker A to ask further questions about the secretary but speaker A changes the topic while asking another question about a file that was in the office of another minister, Inqalabi (line 5) and speaker B answers while using minimal response “*Jī sar*” after a pause he also explains to speaker A that file is not signed by the minister (line 6). Here speaker B’s pause is for explaining to speaker A that the file is without a sign. Speaker A asks the reason of not signing the file (line 7) and speaker B replies that PRO knows better about this (line 8). Speaker A acknowledges speaker B’s talk with minimal acknowledgement token “*achā*” with the falling intonation that shows his weak agreement with speaker B’s answer and he also uses this acknowledgement token to shift the topic (line 9) and asks speaker B to call chief engineer to his office. Here speaker A uses minimal acknowledgement token “*achā*” to acknowledge the previous talk and to change the topic and speaker B acknowledges speaker A’s talk while using minimal response “*Thīk sar*”(line 10) that prompts speaker A to continue his talk but speaker B abruptly changes the topic while saying that he is going to meet Miyan Waheed, minister of education schools (line 11) and speaker B acknowledging the talk with the minimal acknowledgement token “*Thīk sar*” changes the topic after a short pause while asking a question about director colleges’ matter (line 12). Here speaker B changes the topic while using minimal response “*Thīk sar*”. Speaker A replies that he will think about this and also uses minimal response “*achā*” with the falling intonation that shows his weak agreement with the previous talk (line 13) and speaker B acknowledges speaker A’s talk with minimal acknowledgement token “*Thīk sar*” (line 14). It is interesting to note that in this conversation mostly the topic is changed by speaker A while asking about different affairs and this change or shift in topic is abrupt and not progressive. Speaker A is a minister and uses less acknowledgement tokens to change the topic speaker A shifts the topic in lines 3,4,9,11,13 but he changes the topic abruptly while inquiring about different matters. In lines 9,13 he uses minimal acknowledgement tokens “*achā*”

to shift the topic while speaker A's subordinate speaker B uses minimal response "Thīk sar" (line 15) and after a pause and with a minimal response "sir" asks about the director colleges and in this way changes the topic.

So it is also notable that status of speaker also matters in changing the topic. Most of the time topic is changed by the senior and this change is also abrupt and subordinate if wants to change the topic he uses minimal acknowledgement token accompanied with a question in a polite manner.

In fragment 2, speaker A1 and B1 are two friends. Both are male and have met after a long time. Prior to this conversation they greet each other and express their pleasure on meeting each other. This conversation is a continuation of that talk.

(2) CON

- 1 A1: *University jāta haīm° keyā?*
Do you go to university?
- 2 B1: *hām° jātā hūm°*
Yes I go
- 3 A1:→↓ *Achā gahar wale kase haim°?*
Okay how are your family members?
- 4 B1: *Sab Thīk haim°*
All are fine
- 5 A1:→ *Thīk sādī kā keyā hūwā?*
Right what's about your marriage?
- 6 B1: *abhī kuch bhī nahīm°*
Nothing till now
- 7 A1: *Achā Kuch nahim°*
Okay nothing
- 8 B1:→ *Achā muje kuch ketābām° cāye thī*
Okay I need some books
- 9 A1: *Kāsī ketābām°?*

- What type of books?
- 10 B1: *Intarvīyū ke līye*
For interview
- 11 A1: *Kāsā intarvīyū?*
What kind of interview?
- 12 B1: *lakcārar kā*
Of a lecturer
- 13 A1: *Achā*
- 14 B1:→ *āp keyā karte hāim°?*
What are you doing?
- 15 A1: *Parhātā hūm°*
Teaching
- 16 B1: *Kahām°?*
Where?
- 17 A1: *Kālaj māim°*
In a college

In the above fragment speaker A1 and B1's talk starts when A1 asks B1 whether B1 goes to university (line 1) and speaker B1 replies with the minimal acknowledgement token "hām°" (line 2) and also repeats a part of previous talk 'jātā hūm°'. This shows alignment to the previous talk and B1's will to continue the conversation. Speaker A1 with the minimal response "achā" responds to speaker B1's talk and introduces his own topic and assigns that topic while asking about speaker B1's family members (line 3). Here "achā" is used as a pre-shift token to develop another topic for conversation and at the same time giving attention towards previous talk. Speaker B1 responds that his family members are fine (line 4). In line 5 speaker A1 uses the pre-shift token "Thīk" and suddenly imposes a new topic on speaker B1 to talk about that topic that is related to speaker B1's marriage and this minimal response "Thīk" is used to summarize the previous talk and to introduce a new topic. Speaker B1 says that nothing has been done for his marriage (line 6). At this speaker A1 uses minimal acknowledgement token "achā" with the repetition of prior speaker's utterance "kuch nahim°" (line 7) to show alignment to speaker B1's talk and to continue the conversation. Speaker B1 using minimal response "achā" (line 8)

changes the topic and bounds speaker A1 to talk on the topic assigned. Here “*achā*” is again used to preface the new topic. Speaker B1 asks speaker A1 to lend him some books and speaker A1 asks B1 about the kinds of books (line 9). Speaker B1 tells that he wants books for interview (line 10). A1 asks about the types of interview (line 11) B1 tells that he needs books for lecturership interview (line 12). Speaker A1 uses minimal acknowledgement token “*achā*” (line 13) to show his alignment to the previous talk. Here “*achā*” is not used as a pre-shift token but is used as an alignment token to continue the conversation and to bound B1 to talk on the topic being discussed .

But in line 14 speaker B1 abruptly shifts the topic and bounds speaker A1 to talk on that very topic while asking speaker A1 about his job. Speaker A1 tells speaker B1 that his job is teaching (line 15). Speaker B1 asks speaker A1 where he is teaching (line 16). Speaker A1 tells speaker B1 that he teaches in a college. There is a question-answer sequence from line (1-5) and again from (9-17) that also involves topics shift. In the above fragment from line (1-17) the male participants use less acknowledgement tokens to show alignment to the talk and to shift the topic of conversation. The acknowledgement tokens “*achā*”, “*Thīk*”, “*achā*”, “*achā*”, “*achā*” in lines (3,5,7,8,13) are used respectively to give an upshot of the previous talk and to change the topic of the conversation. But in line 14 the change in topic is sudden and without any acknowledgement token. It can be said that males’ topic shift is sudden and abrupt. It can be done while using acknowledgement tokens “*achā*”, “*Thīk*” or without using these minimal acknowledgement tokens involving question-answer sequence in the conversation.

In fragment 3 speaker A2 is the main speaker who talks about the rising prices of the things and speaker B2 acknowledges speaker A2’s talk using minimal responses both the speakers are female and shift the topic progressively.

(3) CON

- 1 A2: *āj kal bohat māhangāī hō geī hai*
It is dearth these days.
- 2 B2: *hmm*

- 3 A2: *kal mām° markīt geī*
Yesterday I went to market
- 4 B2: *hmm*
- 5 A2: *Kuch kapre lene the*
Had to purchase some clothes
- 6 B2: *hmm*
- 7 A2: *Līye tō sehī mgar*
Bought but
- 8 B2: *[mgar keyā]?*
[But what]?
- 9 A2: *bōhat mahange līye]*
Bought but expensive]
- 10 B2:→ *Achā kase sūt liye?*
What type of suits did you buy ?
- 11 A2: *farāk waghārā*
Frock etc.
- 12 B2:→ *hā::m° frāk se yād āyā*
Yes frock reminds me
- 13 A2: *[keyā?*
What?
- 14 B2: *tamhārī frand kī sādī kab hai*
When will be your friend's marriage?
- 15 A2: *Jolāī maim°*
In july
- 16 B2:→ *Achā śāping kar lī us ne?*
Okay has she done shopping?
- 17 A2: *hām° kar rehī hai*
Yes doing shopping
- 18 B2:→ *hā::m° yār tamhārā prājakt kahām° poncā*
Yes what's about your project?

- 19 A2: *ha [haha*
 20 B2: *batāo batāo*
 Tell tell
 21 A2: *ha [haha phir kāhbī*
 Ha [haha I will tell you later on

In the above fragment the conversation starts with speaker A2's talk about the rising prices of the things in the market and speaker B2 acknowledges speaker A2's talk with the minimal acknowledgement token "*hmm*" (line 2). The acknowledgement token of speaker B2 prompts speaker A2 to continue her talk. Speaker A2 says that she went to market the previous day (line 3) and speaker B2 acknowledges her talk with minimal response "*hmm*" (line 4). Speaker A2 tells speaker B2 that she had to buy some clothes (line 5) and speaker B2 acknowledges her talk with minimal acknowledgement token "*hmm*" (line 6) to exhibit alignment and to continue the topic. Speaker A2's talk remains incomplete when she says, "*Līye tō sehī magar*" (line 7). Here her utterance is overlapped by speaker B2 while saying "*magar keyā*" (line 8). This prompts speaker A2 to add comments on this. Speaker A2 comments that the things are very expensive (line 9). Speaker B2 acknowledges previous speaker's talk with minimal acknowledgement token "*achā*" (line 10). Here she also uses this *achā* to change the topic in a progressive way while asking about the types of suits and here she bounds speaker A2 to talk on that very topic and speaker A2 tells that she has purchased frock (line 11). Speaker B2 with pre-shift token "*hā::m*" (line 12) shifts the topic and tells speaker A2 that the frock reminds her something. Here speaker B2's talk is overlapped by speaker A2 when she asks "*keyā*" (line 13). Speaker B2 asks speaker A2 about the marriage of her friend (line 14) and speaker A2 tells her that her friend's marriage will be in July (line 15). In line 16 speaker B2 with the pre-shift token "*achā*" shifts the topic to shopping while asking A2 about the shopping for her friend's marriage and speaker A2 tells that her friend is doing shopping these days (line 17). In line 18 speaker B2 gives an upshot of previous talk with the acknowledgement token "*hā::m*" and shifts the talk to the personal matter of speaker A2 that shows their shared knowledge of that matter. Speaker B2's talk is supported by laughter by speaker A2 (line 19). Speaker B2 insists to tell her about that very matter while saying "*batāo batāo*" and her talk is

followed by laughter by speaker A2 and she tells speaker B2 that she will tell her about this matter later on.

In this conversation of girls the shift in topic is progressive and females use minimal acknowledgement tokens “*hmm*” “*achā*” “*hām*°” to show alignment to the talk. This also involves laughter.

In lines 10,12,16,18 the topic is shifted with minimal responses “*achā*”, “*hām*°”, “*achā*”, “*hā::m*°” respectively. This is the evidence that female speakers’ topic shift is progressive that involves pre-shift tokens to introduce and develop topics jointly and gradually rather than abruptly.

In fragment 4 the conversation is between male principal of the college and female teacher. Speaker A3 is the principal and speaker B3 is a teacher. The teacher is sitting in principal office.

(4) CON

1 A3: Mahnaz

2 B3: *sar*

Sir

3 A3:→ *tast cak hūwe*

Did you check the tests?

4 B3: *nahīm*° *sar*

No sir

5 A3: *cak karām*° *nā pārants ko rapot denī hai*

Check them we have to report the parents.

6 B3: *Ok sar*

Ok sir

7 (.)

8 A3:→ *Thīk hai āp logūm*° *kī selārī kā bhī kuch kartā hūm*°

Right I will do something for you people's salary.

9 B3: Thank you sir
Thank you sir

10 A3:→ *Usmān ko zrā bolaīm*°

Call usman for a moment.

11 B3: ok sar
Ok sir

In the above fragment the conversation starts with speaker A3's calling speaker B3 by her name and speaker B3 responds with minimal response "sar" (line2) speaker A3 introduces a topic while asking speaker B2 about checking the students' tests (line 3). Speaker A3 develops the topic without using any pre-shift token. Speaker B3 replies politely that she has not yet checked the tests. At this speaker A3 asks speaker B3 to check the tests of the students (line 5). Speaker B3 says "ok sar" (line 6) to acknowledge the talk, after that there is a pause and in line 8 speaker A3 uses minimal response "Thīk hai" to give the upshot of previous talk and introduces a new topic while telling her that he is going to do something for teachers' salary and speaker B3 thanks speaker A3 in a polite manner. (Line 9)

In line 10 speaker A3 does not use any pre-shift token to develop a new topic and suddenly changes the topic while asking speaker B3 to call another teacher, Usman in the office and speaker B3 acknowledges speaker A3's talk saying "ok sar" (line 11). The topics are changed by speaker A3 who is the male principal. The topic change is abrupt and sudden. In line 8 he uses minimal response "Thīk hai" to give upshot of the previous talk and to change the topic there is no progressive topic shift. So it can be said that gender and status of the speakers matter in shifting the topic during a conversation.

Conclusion

In Urdu conversation topic shift is sudden as well as progressive. The way of shifting, introducing, developing and controlling topic depends on the gender, relation and status of the participants. The topics in Urdu conversation are shifted and introduced with acknowledgement

tokens “*achā*”, “*Thīk*”, “*bilkul*”, “*hām*°”. These acknowledgement tokens are well fitted to the work of topic closure as these allow a speaker to show attention to the preceding talk while at the same time delivering a summary or upshot of it. Women’s topic shift is gradual and progressive that involves each other’s contribution in the conversation. Men shift topic abruptly and suddenly. The relation of participants also matters in shifting the topics in Urdu conversation. Male friends use less acknowledgement tokens and have free or open topic shift. The conversation of boss and the subordinate involves less minimal acknowledgement tokens on the part of boss to shift the topic and the topic shift is sudden and open and the subordinate acknowledges the boss’ talk using minimal responses to prompt the boss to continue the talk. If the subordinate wants to shift the topic he uses per-shift token “*bilkul*”, “*Thīk*” to exhibit attention to a previous topic while introducing his own.

References

- Sohail, Ayesha. (2010). ‘*Alignment Tokens in ordinary Urdu conversation*’. Kashmir Journal of Language Research 13 (1): 77-93.
- Coates, Jennifer (ed.) (1998). *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Oxford.
- Jefferson, Gail (1983). *Another Failed Hypothesis: Pitch/Loudness as Relevant to Overlap Resolution*. Tilburg Papers in Language and Literature, No. 38, 1-24. Tilburg: Tilburg.
- Schegloff, E. 1982. Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of uh huh and other things that come between sentences. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Tannen, Deborah (1990). *You Just Don’t Understand*. New York
- Fishman, Paul A. (1983). *Interaction: The work women do*. In Thome, B., Kramarae, C. and Henley, N.(eds.) *Language, gender and society*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House:89-101 .

Appendix

- [Beginning of overlapping speech
-] End of overlapping speech
- (.) Micro pause
- :: Stretching of the sound

- 1,2,3 Line numbering
↓ Falling intonation
→ Arrow points to a phenomenon of interest

Badar Zaman, M.A.
Lecturer in English
Majmaah University
PYP Building, Malik Khalid Road
P.O. Box 66
Almajmaah 11952
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
bzsiddiqi@gmail.com