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Topic shift and initiation from a gender perspective
- A study of conversational topic shifts among second language learners of English

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Titel: Topic shift and initiation from a gender perspective – a study of conversational topic shifts among second language learners of English

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Abstract: Studies carried out by different scholars have shown that the social roles society assigns to women and men create differences in how the genders use language. However, there is little previous research in the domain of gender and topic shift or initiation. This essay aims to investigate possible gender differences in topic shift and initiation in multiparty conversation among second language learners of English in upper secondary school. The three group discussions were recorded in a classroom setting and the data collected was transcribed. The topical shifts in the transcripts were coded using the Topical Episode Analysis (TEA) and the episode shifts in each conversation were analyzed on the basis of gender distribution and type of shift. In addition, the findings of the three groups were compared and discussed. The main result of this study was that the boys initiated 100 percent more shifts than the girls. The boys took up more linguistic space and dominated the topical shifts in the conversation which indicates that gender differences in topic shift and initiation exists, a finding that is consistent with previous research within the field of gender and language. In conclusion, gender differences were found between how the girls and the boys participating in this study shifted and initiated topics. The boys initiated more shifts than the girls in the multiparty conversations.

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1. Introduction and aims

Historically, society has assigned different social roles, rights and responsibilities to women and men. Language has a central role in constructing and maintaining social differences, something that has led different language scholars into the field of gender and language behaviour. Some have argued that many differences between how women and men use language are due to biological differences. However, the general view is that many of the differences we observe are a result of social conventions and norms. Gender, then, becomes a social construction connected to the two biological sexes and a social process where different roles are assigned to women and men, which are maintained and reconstructed in our everyday language. We all participate in this process of constructing both our own gender and that of the opposite sex, even though we may not be consciously aware that we are. This applies to both spoken and written usage of language.

Like language in general, conversations are also governed by rules and we all, more or less, follow these rules when engaged in a conversation. In English conversation the rules of turn taking, including rules for the right to finish a turn and avoiding two people speaking at the same time, are central and something children learn and experience at an early age. Another important aspect of conversation is coherence. By studying how turns and contributions to conversation are interconnected and how they make the interaction meaningful, we can learn, for example, topics are initiated, developed, abandoned and closed.

There has been little research carried out on possible gender aspects of topic shift and initiation. Since gender is a construction that we all have been brought up to enact and relate to in our everyday talk, it is not unreasonable to think that gender roles could be affecting topic shift and initiation. Few scholars have looked at this particular domain, but there is a great deal of research on other aspects of conversation and numerous studies focusing on language and gender in general that are relevant to this study. My aim with this paper is to investigate possible gender differences in how women and men shift and initiate topics in a multiparty conversation among second language learners of English.

2. Theoretical background

Few scholars have previously researched topic shift and initiation from a gender perspective. In this section I will therefore explore what different researchers say about

the rules governing conversation and the gender differences in language use. The studies presented form the basis of my own study and the findings will be compared with previous research.

2.1 Structures and rules in conversation

2.1.1 Turn taking mechanism in conversation

Languages are structured and governed by rules. In order to use a language successfully one has to know the rules governing that particular language (Zimmerman & West 1975:213-215). Communicative competence, which means to be aware of what is appropriate in a certain situation, is necessary when communicating with other people and conversations, like language in general, are governed by rules that determine what is appropriate. The order in which people take turns in a conversation is rule bound. The turn taking rules also determine the length of each person's turn in order to ensure that one person speaks at a time and that change of speaker takes place. Research on the turn taking mechanism that govern conversation has been carried out by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) who outlined the rules of a turn taking mechanism in everyday conversation. According to the rules of turn taking, the speaker-transition takes place at a given point in the conversation; there are three different ways how this can be done. The current speaker can name or direct a question to the next speaker, initiating a speaker change. If the change is speaker initiated, the new speaker has an exclusive right to speak and must do so (Zimmerman & West 1975:216). If the current speaker does not select the new speaker, the other participants in the conversation are free to speak (Coates 1993:108). It is up to the other speakers to self-select, to choose if they want to speak or not. If two speakers start to speak almost at the same time, the person who started first has the right to speak and finish the turn. If no self-selection or speaker initiation takes place, the current speaker is not obligated to continue speaking but can do so if she or he wants to (Zimmerman & West, 1975:216). These ways of taking turns in conversation make it possible for the participants to know when it is their turn to speak next. If the rules of turn taking are followed, the transitions between speakers are done smoothly; two people talking at the same time is avoided and each speaker is allowed to finish their turn (Coates 1993:109). Both the current speaker and the next speaker use different clues that signal that they want to speak next, or that they are coming close to the end of their utterance and

a possible transition point. All these clues and signs exist to avoid two people speaking at the same time and to avoid long silences in the conversation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:110).

According to the model described by Sacks *et al.* (1974) and developed in the field of conversation analysis research, participants in a multiparty conversation alternate between the roles of speaker and listener and change speaker according to the rules. But transitions between speakers and topics are not always done according to the model. When the rules of turn taking are not followed in a conversation, the normal pattern is in some way disrupted and the shift is not necessarily smooth. Zimmerman's and West's research showed that irregularities in the pattern existed in the form of overlaps and interruptions (also referred to as simultaneous speech) that both broke the pattern and disrupted the flow of the conversation (Zimmerman and West, 1975:214, 220). Zimmerman's and West's study will be described below.

2.1.2 Coherence in conversation

In order for a conversation to be coherent and understandable it must have an underlying structure that is previously known to the participants. However, this knowledge might not be conscious as it is rather something learnt in a social context that varies between cultures. Coherence in conversation is not something that lies within the conversation itself; it is rather, something that is created in the interaction between the speaker/s and the listener/s and has to do with both what the speaker produces and the listener interprets. Coherence can be measured in different ways, for example by looking at how the participants in a conversation act to create coherence (Korolija 1998:58-59). According to Linell (1998) and Korolija (1998) conversations are coherent because they can be broken down into *episodes*, which are basic units that make up the conversation. These episodes help us to make order and sense out of what we hear when talking and listening to others and to understand each other in a conversation. Episodes are closely related to topicality, as they are mostly about something specific. Both Linell and Korolija (1996:799-800) refer to this as *aboutness* and state that the construction of episodes in a conversation functions to create coherence and to support the topic. Episodes are more important from this point of view than single utterances about the topic itself (Linell 1998:182).

2.1.3 Topic shift and initiation

Episodes, the basic parts of a conversation according to Korolija (1998), have boundaries and a point where they start and end. Usually, it is in the transition between episodes that a shift or initiation of a new topic takes place. When this is the case, the episode is monotopical, i.e., it deals with one topic only within the episode. However, the topic can also be shifted within an episode, making the episode polytopical as more than one topic is discussed (Linell & Korolija 1996:799). Consequently, an episode can consist of just one or several topics.

When a new topic is introduced, it is usually connected with the topic of the previous episode or anchored in something in the situation or in something that is previously known to the participants in the conversation (Linell & Korolija 1996:803). When new topics are shifted or introduced in this way, their progression can be described as step-wise with no clear boundaries between the old and the new topics as they shade into one another. However, topics are not always shifted in a step-wise manner and can be shifted or initiated more abruptly. When a shift of topic is abrupt, the topic introduced is not connected to any of the previous topics introduced in other episodes; the topic is not anchored in the situation and is not based on common knowledge. This way of shifting the topic is called *"out of the blue"* and is rare in all communication, but has been demonstrated to be more common in multiparty conversations than in conversations between two participants (Linell & Korolija 1996:800).

2.2 Language and gender

Little research has been carried out in the particular area of gender and topic shift and initiation. In the following section I will give a brief review about studies on gender and language to which the results of my study will be compared.

2.2.1 Definition of sex and gender

Before going deeper into the differences in women's and men's language use it is necessary to define sex and gender. Females and males differ in their chromosomes; sex refers to these differences, and, accordingly, to the state of being biologically female or male. If sex is something biological that we are all born with, gender is a social construction referring to the behaviors and roles women and men are expected to learn and take on in our society. The prototypical idea of how to act and behave differs for

women and men and this creates and preserves gender differences between the sexes (Pearson, West & Turner 1995:6, Young & Fitzgerald 2006:35). Conceiving of gender as a social construction is relevant in linguistic studies, as gender is approached as a social rather than biological issue. At the same time it is important to be aware that gender is a generalization and the roles that women and men are expected to take on are stereotypical beliefs. It is not possible to say that the behaviors of all women or all men can be explained according to the gender they belong to (Young & Fitzgerald 2006:35-36). In this essay gender will be regarded as a social construction.

2.2.2 Gender differences in language use

A lot of research has been done in the field of gender and language, a field that is expanding. Trudgill (2000:79) writes the following in his book *Sociolinguistics – an introduction to language and society*: "Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them. Language simply reflects this social fact". Because women and men are brought up to be different it is hard to tell the stereotypical images apart from actual differences. However, research has shown that differences between the genders in terms of how they use language do exist. According to Coates (1993:107), women and men have different communicative competence and what is considered to be appropriate behavior differs between women and men. Due to this fact, the two genders are constructed, resulting in women and men having different ideals according to which they model their behavior to, something that can be seen in the use of language. The knowledge of what competences and behaviors are desirable for women and men is something most people in society have.

There are several differences in how women and men use language. Research has shown that men generally control and dominate conversation. This can be seen in research showing that men interrupt more and choose what to talk about more frequently than women (Pfeiffer 1998:358). However, men's dominance does not mean that women do not try to choose topics. Research has shown that women initiate conversations on different topics more often than men, but that their topics are often rejected (Poynton 1989:70-71). Pfeiffer (1998:359) cites Fishman who found 79 instances in her material where efforts were made by women to start a conversation or to continue an ongoing one. In Fishman's study men tried to start a new conversation 29 times and were successful in

28 of these instances. Women on the other hand were only successful in 17 out of the 47 times they tried. This was despite the fact that some of these women tried to keep the conversation going for as long as five minutes without being able to start a conversation on the topic.

Whereas men dominate in conversation, women encourage others to speak and tend to be more supportive of the other participants in the conversation. Women also tend to use more questions than men in cross-sex conversations. Another of Fishman's studies show that women tend to use questions to introduce new topics more often than men. Her study showed that the question 'you know?' was used five times more often by women than by men. Women also used 'you know?' before or after pauses where a response from the man was delayed (Fishman 1980:129).

The telling of tales is another difference that has been found in women's and men's language use. Men tell more tales than women and tend to avoid and exclude personal feelings when they speak. Women, compared to men who often have the leading role in their own stories, hardly ever use first-person narratives while speaking (Pfeiffer 1998:360). Another feature more frequently found among women than men is the use of *minimal responses*, utterances such as 'mmm', 'uhuh' and 'yeah' that function to support the current speaker and signal that the listener is active. Men do use minimal responses but tend to delay them, creating a silence in the conversation that can function to silence the speaker who often hesitates or repeats her or himself. A delayed minimal response signals a lack of understanding and support for the topic and for the speaker and disrupts the flow of the conversation (Coates 1993:111-112). Men also interrupt more than women in cross-sex conversations, which will be discussed below.

2.2.3 Gender and simultaneous speech

In 1975 Zimmerman and West carried out a study at a university campus recording conversation between women and men who were familiar to each other. Three years later, in 1978, they replicated parts of their study with people who did not know each other. In their studies of simultaneous speech they found that the tendency to interrupt and overlap depends on who the participants in the conversation are. Important to note is that Zimmerman and West only looked at interruptions and overlaps and saw them as instances of breaking the rules of turn taking. Minimal responses were not included in their definition of simultaneous speech as the function of such utterances is to support the speaker (West & Zimmerman 1983:104-105). The study carried out in 1975 showed that

interruptions rarely occurred in same-sex conversation. In the same-sex conversations studied, Zimmerman and West found a total of 29 instances where simultaneous speech occurred. When analyzing their material they classified 7 of these instances as interruptions and 22 as overlaps. The instances of simultaneous speech in the same-sex conversations were equally divided between the speakers (Zimmerman & West 1975: 223-224). In contrast to these results Zimmerman and West found that the cross-sex conversations they studied contained 57 instances of simultaneous speech, 48 interruptions and nine overlaps. Not only were the number of interruptions more than eight times as many as in the same-sex conversation, they were almost exclusively made by men, as men accounted for 46 out of the 48 interruptions found. According to the findings of this study, the tendency to interrupt and to be interrupted is closely connected to what gender a person belongs to. The study also showed that women are less likely to finish their turn when having a conversation with a man (Zimmerman & West 1975: 224).

2.2.4 Power and gender in conversation

According to Julé (2004:33-35) "…it is gender that provides the point of reference regarding power in conversations". Men's dominance and their greater right to speak and finish their turn in conversations where both genders participate are illustrated by the frequent interruptions found in the study described above. According to Coates (1993:136) solidarity and support are fundamental parts in women's speech. Women acknowledge what other speakers say and build their contribution to the conversation on it compared to men who tend to ignore other speaker's utterances and base their language on power. It is interesting to note that women do interrupt other women in same-sex conversations but hardly ever interrupt men in cross-sex conversations. This reflects women's inferior status in society as well as social the "rule" of not violating a man's turn while he is speaking (Coates, 1993:110, 136). The fact that men tend to delay their minimal responses in conversations with women can be seen as another signal of power. Delayed minimal responses create a silence in the conversation, which in itself is a violation of the turn taking rules, as the speaker is waiting for a proof that the listener is active (Julé 2004:34, Coates 1993:111). As mentioned above, Zimmerman and West found that delayed minimal responses often resulted in silence and that these silences were particularly common in conversations between women and men. Many times the silences resulted in the woman hesitating, repeating herself or that she stopped talking in conversations with men (Zimmerman & West 1975:227-228).

Scholars have found gender differences in the frequency of interruptions, overlaps, use of questions and in how powerful and supportive women's and men's speech are. However, very few scholars have looked at topic shift and initiation from a gender perspective. I am hoping to contribute to this area with my investigation by trying to capture possible gender differences in this particular aspect of women's and men's conversational behavior.

3. Material and methods

This study aims to investigate possible gender differences in topic shift and initiation in multiparty conversation among second language learners of English. In the following chapter the data I have collected will be described, as well as the method used for analyzing and coding the material.

3.1 Data

My own investigation consisted of audio-recordings of conversations between students in a classroom setting. The topic of discussion was provided by the teacher in order for the situation and the group discussions in the classroom setting to be as authentic as possible. The students were recorded by audio and not video for two reasons. Firstly, the school where the investigation was carried out had a policy against video-recoding the students without parental consent. Secondly, I wanted to distract the students as little as possible and did not think they would be able to act naturally with a camera present during such a short recording. During the recordings I sat at the back of the class room where I could not hear the discussions. I did not take part in the lessons in any other way than placing and removing the recorders. The parts of the lessons that I recorded were conducted in two International Baccalaureate[1] classes, at a Swedish upper secondary school located in a medium-sized town. The lessons were *Theory of knowledge classes*, a subject similar to philosophy and exclusive to the International Baccalaureate program. The students participating in the study were all (except one student who was bilingual) second language learners of English and had Swedish as their native language. A total of 16 students participated in my study, ten girls and six boys. The students were all seventeen years old and in their second year at International Baccalaureate.

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[1] International Baccalaureate, also known as IB, is an education in English that prepares students for studies at universities both in Sweden and abroad. All students in year nine can apply for International Baccalaureate.

A total of 1 hour, 51 minutes and 17 seconds was recorded altogether during two different lessons. 45 minutes and 44 seconds have been transcribed, coded and analyzed using the *Topical episode analysis* (Korolija 1998), explained below, to see who initiated the topic shift and how this shifting and initiating was done.

3.2 Groups

A total of four groups were recorded, but due to time limitations I selected three of these four to be included in my study, since the interaction in the forth group was less intense and not appropriate for TEA. The teacher had either already formed the groups or did so in the classroom by counting, thus dividing the students into groups randomly. This created a more unequal division of girls and boys in the study on whole and in the groups than I had wanted. However, I argue that the situation is as authentic as possible as it shows how groups are normally put together in a classroom. The groups were named Puzzle 1, Justice 2 and Justice 3, according to the task they were given and the lesson in which they participated. Puzzle 1 was recorded on another occasion than Justice 2 and 3, who were recorded during the same lesson. The topic of discussion in Puzzle 1 is therefore different from the topic discussed in the other two groups. In the results section, I have decided to present the results and analyses of the discussions one group at a time. This decision was made on the basis that the discussions differed in terms of their topic and type, and consequently, the results could be expected to differ in ways that would skew the overall findings of this study. A short description of the group will be given before the presentation of each group's result. All the students asked to take part in the study could choose if they wanted to participate or not; they all chose to do so. All the students have been given fictitious names and are completely anonymous in the transcripts.

3.3 Transcription of data

The data collected was recorded using two mp3 players. When transcribing the data I put simultaneous speech (overlaps and interruptions) within brackets [ ]. The inaudible parts of the data are marked with *((Inaudible))*, indicating one inaudible word. Longer inaudible sequences are marked and timed; *((Inaudible sequence)) (3s)*. Silences were also timed and marked. If the silence occurred within an utterance and was the result of a speaker hesitating, it was marked *(S2s)*. If the silence occurred between two utterances it was

marked *Silence (2s).* Laughter and mumbling were also timed and marked in the same way as silence between utterances.

3.4 Topical Episode Analysis

When analyzing the transcripts from the recordings in the classes I used the *Topical episode analysis*, from here on referred to as TEA. TEA is a coding system used to analyze and categorize episodes initiated in multi-party conversations. Episodes, according to Linell and Korolija, represent the fundamental part of a conversation that creates coherence. The analysis looks at what happens when a shift in topic takes place and what happens when an episode is initiated. According to Linell and Korolija, who developed TEA, an episode consists of a minimum of three turns and of these three turns, two have to be uttered by different speakers (Linell & Korolija 1996:803-804). In this study I have chosen to include even shorter passages in the definition of an episode. I have done so because this study is small and the overall purpose is to find out whether there are any gender differences reflected in topic shift. The shorter episodes are also acts which take up linguistic space in the discourse and including them is in line with the purpose of this essay.

TEA, as a method, looks back on what has been performed previous in the conversation and is therefore a retrospective form of analysis (Linell & Korolija 1996:803-804). TEA is based on several previous analyses of topics and episodes in multiparty conversation. The work of Tannen, among others in this area, can be mentioned. Even though previous models used to analyze coherence existed, TEA attempted to create a consistent system of analyzing episodes in multiparty conversation (Linell & Korolija 1996:825).

3.4.1 Coding

In order to understand TEA one has to be familiar with the system used to code the different transitions and initiations of episodes used in the analysis. I will give a short explanation of the different abbreviations used when coding the recorded material below (Linell and Korolija 1996).

RC: *Re-contextualization of an element from the prior episode*: Something in the prior episode is taken as a starting-point for the new episode and an object or an aspect from the

prior episode is put into a new context. RC can be divided into two types where the new episode is re-contextualized via:

a) Something that has been mentioned in the prior episode

b) Some expression or action in the prior episode.

AN: *Analogous episode to prior episode*: The topic of the initiated episode is connected and parallel to the topic of the prior episode. Somebody might initiate a story, telling of an experience or an argument with the same point as the one told in the prior episode.

RI: *Reinitiation (Renewal) of, or return to, a prior, non-adjacent topic in the same discourse*: The speaker suddenly starts to speak about a topic previously dealt with in the conversation. This initiation is often done by using 'but anyway' or 'as mentioned before' to mark the return to the prior topic.

SE: *Reference to an event taking place in the situation*: Something happens in the immediate situation that attracts the attention of the speaker and she or he starts a new episode about the event. The event functions to trigger the new episode. I have included the instances where the teacher initiates episodes in the SE.

SO: *Reference to an object present in the situation*: A person or an object that is present in the situation is used to initiate a new episode.

AG: *Reference to (some aspect of) the abstract activity type: taking up a predefined, agenda-bound topic or sub-activity*: This type of initiation is most common in formal settings and is when somebody takes up a point for discussion from an agenda that is previously known to the participants in the conversation. In this study the agenda is the instructions for the task at hand, given to the students by the teacher.

BA: *Invoking other topics which are situationally near at hand (belonging to situationally activated background assumptions)*: The topic initiated is near at hand in the situation and the participants share background knowledge about the topic initiated. Included in this type of shift is reference to absent members of a group.

UA: *Contextually unanchored episodes*: The topic introduced has no connection to the topics of prior episodes, is not anchored in the situation, nor based on common knowledge. The new topic is taken 'out of the blue'.

These eight categories can be divided into four groups depending on what motivates the shift or initiation of topic or in what the topic introduced is anchored. Linell and Korolija (1996:822) make the following division which I have used as a structure when presenting each group's result in section 4:

1. Topic anchored in the local discourse: RC, AN and RI
2. Topic motivated by something in the immediate situation: SO and SE
3. Topic motivated by shared background knowledge: AG and BA
4. Topic unanchored: UA

3.5 Limitations of the study

There are some limitations in the data collected for this study. Firstly, the interaction between the students was recorded in a classroom setting where the students had to talk on a specific topic they had not chosen themselves. The students were put together randomly by the teacher, resulting in students being separated from their immediate friends, which might have made some students more or less talkative. However, this is a common activity in classroom interaction and it can be argued that the recordings still represent a typical classroom activity, which is what I was interested in. Nevertheless, one has to be aware of the group dynamics in a class and the roles the different students take on and how that might affect the interaction as compared to recording on another occasion with different groups. Therefore, it is not possible to say that the findings presented would apply to other groups or activities. Another limitation in this study was the unequal number of girls and boys participating in the study on whole and the unequal number of girls and boys in each group. Nevertheless, the time divided between girls and boys did not indicate that the girls spoke more than the boys. Although this study is also limited in size as the quantity of the recorded material is rather small, despite this fact, I believe it is sufficient for the aim of this study. Since the TEA method has not been applied in gender research previously, the study is explorative, and the findings will provide suggestions for further research on gender and topic initiation.

4.   Results

In this section the result of this study will be presented. The results for each group will first be presented separately and then the combined findings from all three groups will be accounted for. Figures and examples from each group will first be presented in a table that includes abbreviations for different types of shifts; RC, AN etcetera and the total number of times each type was used during the conversation. The table shows if the shift was initiated by a girl or a boy, as well as the total number of initiations for each category. Examples have been included to illustrate the analysis; those chosen are either typical and clear examples of a particular type of shift or are interesting in the way they differ from the standard example. Some examples were also included because they were difficult to categorize. In some cases two examples of the same type are presented to indicate the difference in usage between speakers.

Working with the data involved three steps. As a first step, the recordings were transcribed. In the second step, the episodes were identified in the transcripts. The third step was to code the episodes using the TEA method (Korolija 1998). In order to ensure the reliability of the TEA coding in this study, an inter-coder did an individual coding of one of the three conversations (the inter-coder coded 20 percent of the total number of shifts and initiations in this study). Some differences in coding occurred between me and the inter-coder, mainly concerning the AG type, which is probably due to the fact that the inter-coder did not have full understanding of the task the students were given and therefore categorized these shifts differently.

4.1 Justice 2

Justice 2 consisted of a total of four people, one boy (who was bilingual) and three girls. The boy is referred to as A in the transcripts and the girls are referred to as E1, E2 and E3, as they all had the same first name. The task this group had was to discuss informants' answers to questions about justice and then together decide what to present in front of the rest of the class. In this group a total of 17 minutes and 58 seconds were recorded of which 15 minutes and 40 seconds have been transcribed. This group was put together by the teacher and had worked together during the previous lesson.

Table 1: **Episode initiations in Justice 2**

Type of shift or initiation	Initiated by a girl	Initiated by a boy	Total number of type
RC	2	1	3
AN	0	2	2
RI	0	1	1
SE	1	1	2
SO	0	0	0
AG	1	5	6
BA	1	1	2
UA	0	0	0
Total number of initiations	**5**	**11**	**16**

In Justice 2 the topic was shifted or initiated 16 times during the 15 minutes and 40 seconds of conversation that have been transcribed and coded. The actual total number of shifts in this conversation was 17. One shift has been left out since it was initiated by the teacher and would therefore have affected the total division of shifts between girls and boys if included. Eleven of the shifts in the conversation were initiated by the boy and five were initiated by a girl. Despite the fact that this group had a majority of girls, the one boy accounted for 69 percent of the initiations or shifts compared to the three girls who together accounted for 31 percent of the shifts and initiations. The boy's dominance could be due to the fact that he was bilingual and felt more secure in speaking than the girls. However, it is not possible to say that this is the case but it is important to point out that it could have affected the results. If the shifts would have been equally distributed between the speakers, each speaker would have made four shifts each. In this group the boy made eleven shifts and the three girls made 1.6 shifts per person.

4.1.1 Topic shifts anchored in the local discourse: RC, AN and RI

In Justice 2 the only boy did not only dominate the total number of shifts in the conversation on whole, he also dominated all categories of shifts, except for two. The only category of shift where the girls initiated more shifts than the boy was RC (re-contextualization of an element from the prior episode). In this category two shifts were initiated by a girl and one by the boy. Even though the numbers in the table above show a 100 percent higher usage for the girls than for the boy, this collection of data is small and

the result could be due to circumstances in the situation, such as the participant's personalities or the dynamics of the particular group. However, the fact that the only category that is dominantly used by girls is RC could also be seen as connected to the fact that women are more supportive of other speakers when engaged in conversation. Using RC shifts could be a way to support the previous speaker by continuing the conversation on the same subject. According to Coates (1993:136) solidarity and support are fundamental parts in women's speech. Women acknowledge what other speakers say and build their contribution to the conversation on it, compared to men who tend to ignore other speakers utterances. However, after taking a closer look at the two RC shifts initiated by a girl in my material I found that none of them could be viewed as supportive of the previous speaker. Instead of supporting the previous speaker, the girl initiating one of the shifts, is making a comment on the previous speaker's pronunciation of a word, which then starts a new episode. It can be argued that this is a supportive act of speech; she is in fact re-contextualizing an element from the previous episode. However, she is not doing that to support the previous speaker and keep the conversation going on the same topic. Rather she is making fun of the previous speaker's way of pronouncing a certain word, a conclusion that can be drawn from the tone of her voice. The RC shift described is shown in Example 1 below.

Example 1

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((From an ongoing episode))
75.     A:         mmm…he believes in democracy, that everybody should
                   decide together not only one. Because it is easier to
                   bring one person, but off course they can be mistaken
                   (S2s) the democracy can be mistaken as well, hm, to
                   live a successful life, he, or, ya he thought that
                   you should be satisfied, the key was being satisfied,
                   really statisfied.
RC***********************************************************
76.     E1:        Statisfied?
77.     A:         (S2s) do you think I have time when I wrote this, I
                   was like ok…ok..ok. so live in peace and be satisfied
                   with your body. [Hm]
78.     E2:        [statisfied]
79.     A:         tjoho!
80.     E2:        statis[faction].
81.     A:         [satisfaction].
82.     E2:        no, statisfaction.
RI***********************************************************
83.     A:         What is the meaning of life? Is it important to know?
                   (S3s) He thought that the reasons, eller or, the
                   meaning was to reach goals and die. Reach your goals
                   and die.
((Episode continues))
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The girls initiated no AN (analogous episode to prior episode) or RI (reinitiation or return to a prior topic) episodes. These two categories were dominated by the boy who did two AN shifts and one RI shift. The AN shifts I categorized in group Justice 2's conversation were both connected to the task, the telling of different examples of answers to questions the students had asked different informants. The boy initiated both his AN episodes after a sequence of either silence or laughter and they both told of his informant's answers to questions included in the task.

The RI shift was initiated by the boy to return to the topic of a prior episode after being interrupted by one of the girls, who started an episode about a verbal mistake that the boy had made. The RI shift brings the discussion back to the topic introduced by the boy 14 turns earlier. This is shown in Example 1 above.

4.1.2 Topic motivated by something in the immediate situation: SO and SE

During the conversation the members of group Justice 2 did not make any shifts of the type SO (reference to an object present in the situation).

A total of two SE shifts (reference to an event taking place in the situation), were initiated in the conversation and were both initiated after more than a ten second long silence. One SE shift was initiated by the boy and one by a girl. The shift initiated by the teacher, not included in the table above, was an SE shift. The teacher asked the students if they were finished with the task, creating a short episode in which the teacher and the boy participated. The SE shift initiated by the boy referred to an event taking place in the classroom. The boy made a comment on the fact that one of the other groups, who were also being recorded for the study, was talking loudly. The comment resulted in a long episode that included all members of the group. The SE shift initiated by the girl referred to something going on in the immediate situation, between the girls in the group. This initiation resulted in a shorter episode with four turns, possible to transcribe. The rest of the episode contains inaudible sequences in which all members of the group participate.

4.1.3 Topic motivated by shared background knowledge: AG and BA

The most frequently used type of shift in this conversation was AG (shift associated with an underlying agenda for the conversation). The fact that the students were given an assignment by the teacher explains the frequent occurrences of the AG type. The assignment in itself defines what to talk about and in what order to do so. Another aspect to take in consideration concerning the frequent use of AG shifts is the role as group-

leader the only boy took on, a role that is informal as he assigned it to himself. The boy did not verbally state that he took on the role but repeatedly invoked agenda-based shifts. Example 2 below show two AG shifts initiated by the boy as he is distributing the turns between the members of the group by asking questions closely related to the task.

Example 2:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
23.    E1:      ok
24.    A:       So she was kind of half funny. But that was the one
                [I me]
25.    E1:      [Just because] she was religious.
26.    A:       Ya
27.    E1:      Ya
AG**********************************************************************
28.    A:       So Emma, who did you meet?
29.    E2:      oh, I didn't meet anyone.
30.    A:       Ohoh! I got it on recording.
31.    E2:      Crap.
32.    A:       Ohhhhhh. (Sounds really dramatic)
Silence (2s)
33.    E2:      But I asked Daniel.
34.    A:       what did he [say?]
35.    E2:      [he was kind of] Not serious.
36.    A:       no. Ok, Emma, did you meet anyone?
37.    E3:      No.
38.    A:       talk to anyone and ask anyone questions?
39.    E3:      [No].
AG**********************************************************************
40.    A:       Ok. Emma, take you second one.
41.    E1:      Ok. [Hm]
42.    E2:      [maybe you should have started]
43.    E1:      one, (S2s) what does it mean to live a happy life?
                Make friends, (S2s) love and to be (S3s) ödmjuk
((Episode continues))
```

The other category where shared previous knowledge is invoked is BA (invoking other topics near at hand in the situation, such as background knowledge about present and absent members, or references to the social situation they find themselves in). This category, together with RC, was one of the two types of shifts that were not dominated by the boy. The total number of BA shifts in the conversation was two, one initiated by the boy and one by a girl. In both cases the BA shift was uttered after a silence and started a new episode that kept the conversation going. In Example 3 below the BA shift was initiated by a girl. She is starting a new episode by referring to the fact that the group has been talking for eight minutes, something that is close at hand in the situation as she can see the total number of minutes in the recorders display. The new episode lasts for five turns and two members of the group, her and the boy, are participating in the episode.

Example 3:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
Silence (4s)
BA*********************************************************************
100.    E1:        we have been talking in 8 minutes [or]
101.    A:         [ya]
102.    E1:        you have been [talking]
103.    A:         [ya, ya] this is really sad, we are talking just
                   because she is recording.
104.    E2:        ya. Hm
((End of episode, conversation continues))
```

Example 4 below shows the BA shift initiated by the boy. He starts a new episode by referring to a person that is absent, Sofia. If Sofia is an absent member of their group or is another student in the class is not clear. The initiation of the episode about Sofia leads the group into a discussion about their teachers that lasts for 20 turns and all members of the group participate in the episode.

Example 4:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
((Inaudible sequence with all members of the group participating and
silence)) (23s)
BA*********************************************************************
140.    A:         This would have, this would have ((Inaudible)) if
                   Sofia was here because she never speaks English, even
                   in English class when we discuss she speaks Swedish.
                   (S2s) Ya, and Caroline says ok this is an English
                   class ((Inaudible))
141.    E2:        English speaking [though]!
142.    A:         [ya,] that is Christine that is so [Christine].
143.    E1:        [ya]
((Episode continues))
```

The fact that the boy managed to start an episode where all members of the group participated and that lasted 15 turns longer than the episode initiated by the girl could be due to different factors. The topic introduced by the boy develops into a discussion about teachers, something that all members of the group can relate to and are therefore also able to contribute to the conversation. The topic introduced by the girl is rather limited and merely a way to break and avoid silence. However, the fact that the boy initiated the longer episode and managed to start and keep a discussion going on the topic could be compared to the findings of Fishman (see Pfeiffer 1998:359), whose study showed that men managed to start a discussion on a topic they introduced in 27 out of 28 times. These numbers can be compared to the number of times women tried and

succeeded; women only managed to start and keep a discussion going on a topic they had introduced in 17 out of the 47 times they tried.

4.1.4 Topic unanchored: UA

No UA shifts, (contextually unanchored episodes) were initiated in this conversation which supports the idea that initiations 'out of the blue' are rare and seldom occur (Linell & Korolija 1996:803).

4.2 Justice 3

The results of Justice 3 will be presented below. Justice 3 consisted of a total of four people, one girl and three boys. In the transcripts the boys are referred to as A, J and F and the girl as B. This group had the same task as Justice 2, described above. In this group a total of 17 minutes and 41 seconds were recorded of which 15 minutes and 17 seconds has been transcribed. This group was also put together by the teacher and had, like Justice 2, worked together during the previous lesson.

Table 2: **Episode initiations in Justice 3**

Type of shift or initiation	Initiated by a girl	Initiated by a boy	Total number of type
RC	1	3	4
AN	0	1	1
RI	0	6	6
SE	0	3	3
SO	0	3	3
AG	1	12	13
BA	1	3	4
UA	0	1	1
Total number of initiations	**3**	**32**	**35**

In Justice 3 a total of 35 shifts were initiated during the 15 minutes and 17 seconds that I have transcribed and coded. The three boys in the group accounted for 32 of the shifts and initiations and the only girl accounted for three of the shifts. In other words; the boys accounted for 91 percent of the shifts compared to the girl who accounted for 9 percent

only. This group consisted of four members. An equal distribution of the shifts between the participants would have been 25 percent, or 8.7 shifts per person. The fact that the girl made only three shifts during the conversation; means that she shifted the topic 16 percent less than what would have been an equal distribution. However, this does not mean that the three boys divided the 91 percent equally between them. One boy, in the transcripts referred to as J, dominated the shifts and initiations of topic in the conversation and accounted for 54 percent of the total number. Another boy, referred to as F accounted for 31 percent. When looking more closely at the transcripts from group Justice 3, I was surprised by the small amount of shifts the only girl made. But when looking closer at the data I realized that there was another member of the group who made the least amount of shifts and that was the boy, referred to as A. A made two shifts during the whole conversation which accounted for six percent of the total amount of shifts, three percent less than the girl. The division of shifts between girls and boys in this group show what previous research has shown; for example that men tend to dominate conversation and choose what to talk about (Pfeiffer 1998:358). However, the fact that the boy A was the one who shifted or initiated fewest topics during the conversation shows that not all men or boys dominate all conversations they are engaged in, which is important to keep in mind.

4.2.1 Topic shifts anchored in the local discourse: RC, AN and RI

During the conversation a total of four RC shifts were initiated in Justice 3. Three of them were made by a boy and one by the girl. In Example 5 below the shift initiated by the girl is shown. The element re-contextualized from the previous episode is 'harmony' as she explains that she got the same answer from one of her informants as the previous speaker. The RC shift shown below functions to support and build on the topic of the previous episode and could be compared to the description of women's speech as supportive and solitary (Coates 1993:136). The RC shift initiated by the girl starts a short episode that lasts for three turns with two other members of the group participating.

Example 5:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
107:    F:          well to be, to feel harmony, that's what she said the
                    meaning of [life]
108.    J:          [to be] in harmony
109.    F:          to be in [harmony]
RC***********************************************************
```

```
110.    B:          [that], I have that as answer for the second
                    question.
111.    F:          ya, she to, she as well. She [answered the same
                    basically]
112.    J:          [ya ya ya I did my super ((inaudible))]
((End of episode, conversation continues))
```

One of the RC shifts initiated by a boy is shown in Example 6 below. His shift does not have the same function as the shift initiated by the girl. By re-contextualizing the fact that the girl's informants did not have an answer to the question discussed, the boy starts a new episode making fun of the people questioned for the task. This new episode does not function to support and build on the topic of the previous episode. Instead this RC initiation has a disrupting affect on the flow of the conversation and moves the focus of the discussion away from the actual task. In line 242 the girl, B, initiates a new AG episode in order to return to the task. The other two RC shifts initiated by the boys could be seen as supportive of the topic in the previous episode.

Example 6:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
234.        B:      [I think I'm gonna take my woman]
235.        J:      [Alex doesn't] have to present.
236.        B:      ok,ok,ok, the first guy did not know number 3 and
                    the woman 70 said that there is no true justice and
                    then the last one, the woman 50 didn't have an answer
                    either. (S2s)
RC**********************************************************
237.        J:      did you only find stupid people? [oh no]
[laughter] (3s)
238.        J:      think if they could hear us (  )
239.        F:      it's my ears [(  )] (Funny voice)
240.        J:      [throwing] shit on them (S2s) that is not nice
241.        F:      I am not a communist (funny voice)
Laughter and silence (5s)
AG**********************************************************
242.        B:      ok, should we take [a forth one]
243.        J:      [haha, that is a good one]
244.        F:      so, ya, 17 year old (S1s) girl, hm, woman, whatever,
                    hm, [everyone]
((Episode continues))
```

Justice 3's conversation contained one AN shift initiated by one of the boys. This shift was connected to the task and the telling of one informant's answer which created an episode analogous to the previous one.

The RI shifts made in the conversation were initiated primarily by the boys who made a total of six shifts of this type. Three of the shifts were made by the same person, in the transcripts referred to as F. In Example 7 below F initiates two RI shifts after he or

another member of the group has been interrupted by J, another boy. In line 220 F returns to talking about the justice question, introduced in turn 212. He is interrupted in line 222 by J, who initiates a new episode. F returns to the justice question again in line 226 and continues to tell the rest of the group about his results.

Example 7:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
209.    J:       number threeee (silly voice)
210.    A:       that [was]
211.    J:       [justice]
212.    A:       justice question and none of my guys [answered it]
213.    J:       [no I just said] it would be the [same]
214.    A:       [I don't know] I don't know
215.    T:       that is too bad though
216.    A:       they were just like hm, no
217     J:       I don't know, I don't know. (S2s) ok, that is [that].
218.    A:       [wait], wait, wait, no I don't know
219.    J:       alright, ok. That is kind of what we [got]
RI***********************************************************************
220.    F:       [we got] 17 year old female (S1s) saying that
                 everyone are equally worth (S2s)
221.    J:       equally worth (S2s)
222.    F:       equally worth (S3s) to deep, 30 year old male hm, 60
                 year old smoking lady (S2s) that everyone should have
                 exactly the same things or the exact same
                 [privileges]
BA***********************************************************************
223.    J        [ya, she is a communist]
224.    F:       ya
225.    J:       smoking communist
Laughter (1s)
RI***********************************************************************
226.    F:       47 year old male, hm, that everyone should have the
                 same opportunities and rights. And 40 years old (S1s)
                 sucker ((inaudible))'s mom, true justice does not
                 [exist]
((Episode continues))
```

4.2.2 Topic motivated by something in the immediate situation: SO and SE

The only girl in the group did no SO or SE shifts. These two categories were predominantly initiated by the two of the boys, J and F, as they made a total of three shifts from each category. The boy A made no initiations in either the SO or the SE category. The three SO shifts were all initiated by the same person, J. In two of these initiations J is referring to the same thing; the fact that the papers with the questions are not in order. By doing so he is referring to an object in the situation, the papers in front of him. The fact that these shifts about the same matter is initiated by the same person is probably due to the fact that J has taken on the role as leader in the group and is the one who direct and

distribute questions and turns. In the third initiated shift J is referring to a person that is present in the situation, another member of the group, F. In all three cases the episodes initiated are short and last for a maximum of four turns before the topic is shifted again.

The three SE shifts were, like the SO shifts, initiated by the same person, in this case F. Two of the shifts referred to the task and were closely connected to something that was going on in the immediate situation within the group. The third SE shift F initiated was a comment on an event taking place in the classroom, as he commented on the actions of one of the other groups. This initiation did not start a discussion on the topic and was ignored by the other members of the groups.

4.2.3 Topic motivated by shared background knowledge: AG and BA

Like in Justice 2 the most common initiation of a topic was the AG shift. The conversation contained 13 AG shifts, twelve of them initiated by a boy and one by the girl. The fact that this type of shift was the most common in both groups is probably due to the fact that the task itself was determining what to talk about and to some extent in what order. The boy J, who accounted for 54 percent of the total amount of shifts, did a total of nine shifts within this category. The fact that he, like the boy A in Justice 2, selected himself as leader of the group is one explanation to why he used this type of shift more than the other members of the group. AG shifts were used when the discussion had to be brought back to the task, to the agenda, and it was natural for J as the leader of the discussion to take this as his responsibility. Seven of the AG shifts were initiated by the word 'ok'. In Example 8 below the use of 'ok' in turn 153 signals that the attention is again focused on the task after being focused on a topic outside the task. 'Ok' is often used to mark the closing of one episode and the beginning of a new one. According to Beach (1993:326-327) 'ok' is commonly used when shifting the topic in the conversation or "passing turns" as he refers to the concept. The use of 'ok' occurs in different situations within the discourse and can function as a way of getting "back on track", in this case going back to the agenda-based task (Beach 1993:345). The AG shifts that were not initiated with 'ok' contained other back-channel sounds, such as 'hm', a question or a direct reference to the task.

Example 8:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
150.       J:      I'll answer that next time someone asks me because
                   sleep [well]
151.       A:      [key to a] happy life (S3s) hästen (referring to the
                   bed)
```

```
Laughter (1s)
152.      J:      aaa, but I don't have hästen and I sleep very
                  happily.
Silence (1s)
AG****************************************************************
153.      J:      oh ok, Bella what do you have on the second question?
153.      B:      ok, male 19 says friends, pretty good job, hm, near
                  and dear, and (S2s) love.
((Episode continues))
```

A total of four BA shifts (invoking other topics near at hand in the situation, such as background knowledge about present and absent members, or references to the social situation they find themselves in) were made during the conversation in Justice 3. In Example 9 below J is starting a new episode by initiating a topic near at hand in turn 187. By referring to the fact that the informants asked for the task are giving vague answers to the questions, he is connecting to what the teacher is saying in turn 186, that the answer is circular. The new episode lasts for 20 turns and three members of the group, as well as the teacher are active in the discussion.

Example 9:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
183.      J:      key to successful life was have it good.
184.      T:      ok, it would not be have it bad.
185.      J:      ya
186.      T:      it is a little circular that though, how do you have
                  it good?
BA****************************************************************
187.      J:      but a lot of people, a lot of peoples are really
                  vague when they are asked these questions.
188.      T:      they left? (the teacher is standing by their table)
189.      J:      one left, [when]
((Episode continues))
```

4.2.4 Topic unanchored: UA

During the conversation in Justice 3 one of the boys initiated one UA shift. The shift seems to have been initiated out of the blue as the topic had not been discussed in any of the previous episodes. However, the fact that the shift was preceded by an inaudible sequence makes it hard to classify. Despite this, I argue that this is a shift of topic that is initiated out of the blue. The inaudible sequence preceding is short and could not contain much information. The episode itself contains no information that had been included in any of the previous episodes in the discourse. UA shifts are rare (Korolija 1998) and the classification of such can always be discussed. The UA shift from my data is shown in Example 10 below.

Example 10

```
((From an ongoing episode))
159.   F:          ok, and [what]
160.   B:          [and] (S2s) my 50 year old woman. Hm, harmony. That
                   you feel harmonic? (S1s) or something, that you found
                   your life place (S2s) ya
161.   J:          [ok]
162.   B:          [I think] did she say in society [or]
((Inaudible sequence with three members of the group participating))(3s)
UA*****************************************************************
163.   F:          do you know what ((inaudible)) is?
164.   J:          ya, off [course]
165.   B:          [((inaudible))]
166.   A:          repeats what I just said ((inaudible))
Laughter (1s)
167.   J:          that is last year, right? Ohhh
Laughter (1s)
((End of episode, conversation continues))
```

4.3 Puzzle 1

Puzzle 1 consisted of a total of eight students, six girls and two boys. The girls are referred to as G1, G2, G3, G4, G5 and G6 in the transcripts and the boys are referred to as B1 and B2. This group's task was to put a puzzle together; the participants were unaware of the fact that some pieces were actually missing. In this group, a total of 37 minutes and 12 seconds were recorded of which 14 minutes and 47 seconds transcribed. This group was put together by the teacher who randomly assigned different numbers to the students.

Table 3: **Episodes initiated in Puzzle 1**

Type of shift or initiation	Initiated by a girl	Initiated by a boy	Total number of type
RC	1	0	1
AN	0	0	0
RI	8	4	12
SE	6	0	6
SO	4	3	7
AG	0	0	0
BA	0	0	0
UA	0	0	0
Total number of initiations	**19**	**7**	**26**

The topic was shifted 26 times during the conversation in Puzzle 1. 19 of these shifts were initiated by a girl and seven by a boy. The six girls in the group initiated 73 percent of the shifts. Important to note is that one of these six girls did not take part in the conversation and did not make one single turn during the 14 minutes and 47 seconds of recording that has been transcribed for this study. The two boys in the group accounted for 27 percent of the shifts and initiations. An equal distribution of shifts between the eight members of the group would have been 3.25 shifts per person. If the shifts initiated by the boys were to be divided equally between them they would have initiated 3.5 shifts each. If the same thing is done with the shifts initiated by the girls, the number is 3.1 shifts per person. The boys, in fact, initiated more shifts per person than the girls, despite the fact that there were three times as many girls. This is an interesting finding; however it is important to keep in mind that this is a distribution of shifts between girls and boys as gender groups that is not included in the actual division of shifts between individual speakers within each group.

The fact that the task this group had at hand was an activity, rather than a topical discussion, focused the shifts on three types; SO, SE and RI. These types refer to events and objects in the immediate situation as well as to re-initiated topics. This is expected considering the nature of the task: putting a puzzle together. It is therefore natural for the participants to talk about how the pieces go together.

4.3.1 Topic anchored in the local discourse: RC, AN and RI

One RC shift was initiated during the Puzzle 1 conversation by one of the girls. No AN shifts were initiated by either the boys or the girls. The type of shift used most commonly in this conversation was the RI shift. RI was used a total of twelve times to shift the topic, eight of the shifts were made by a girl and four by a boy. The RI shifts initiated episodes that were mostly about the different pieces of the puzzle, topics that were reinitiated several times during the discussion. In Example 11 below one of the re-initiated topics is shown. The topic is introduced in turn 11 as one of the boys presents the idea that some of the pieces in the puzzle might picture the Eiffel tower. This topic is re-initiated four times during the conversation, in turn 24, 51, 100 and 254. The fact that the members of the group come back to talking about the Eiffel tower so many times during this short recording is connected to the purpose of the task at hand: putting the puzzle together. Example 11 shows only three of the four re-initiations in the conversation.

Example 11:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
10.    G2:        I think this is a part of the (S2s)
11.    B2:        Eiffel tower
12.    G2:        ya, the Eiffel tower
13.    G1:        it looks like it
((End of episode, conversation continues and the topic is re-initiated
21 turns later))
RI**********************************************************************
34.    G1:        I think, I still think it is [Paris]
35.    G:         [tada] (managed to put some pieces together)
Silence (5s)
36.    G1:        it is the Eiffel tower [so]
37.    B1:        [((Inaudible)) like that] wasn't it
38.    G1:        yes or no maybe no
((End of episode, conversation continues and the topic is re-initiated
13 turns later))
RI**********************************************************************
51.    G3:        it seems like it is going to be the Eiffel tower
Other girls agree
52.    G1:        ya I think it is
53.    G3:        oh, ok
((Inaudible sequence)) (6s)
((End of episode, conversation continues and the topic is re-initiated
47 and 201 turns later))
```

4.3.2 Topic motivated by something in the immediate situation: SO and SE

The members of Puzzle 1 initiated seven SO shifts during the conversation. Four of the shifts were initiated by a girl and three by a boy. The episodes the SO shifts initiated were all about the different pieces of the puzzle. Example 12 below show one of these shifts initiated by a boy.

Example 12:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
25.    B1:        we got all four corners.
26.    G1:        ya
27.    G2:        any edges, no
SO********************************************************************
28.    B2:        does anyone have a sign [piece]
29.    G2:        [oh, oh, oh] I saw one, it said real on it
30.    B2:        oh ok. ((Inaudible))
31.    G4:        this looks like it's the same colour [oh]
((Episode continues))
```

The six SO shifts that the conversation contained were initiated by a girl. The shifts referred to something taking place in the situation and in this case all the SE shifts were connected with the task and were anchored in the immediate situation. However, it could be argued that some of the shifts I have categorized as SE could also be BA; as the topics introduced are close at hand for the participants. In Example 13 below one such

shift is shown. The student is initiating a new episode in turn 285 by asking the teacher if he has taken away pieces from the puzzle. This is near at hand for the student because the puzzle seems impossible to complete. However, as she is referring to something that is going on in the situation, i.e. the task the students have been given, I have chosen to categorize these shifts as SE rather than BA because of the fact that the initiations all have to do with the task, which is taking place in the immediate situation.

Example 13:

```
((From an ongoing episode))
281.      B1:    maybe this one
282.      G4:    what is it?
283.      G3:    I don't know
Silence (4s)
284.      B1:    this one?
Silence (2s)
SE**************************************************************
285.      G1:    you have taken away pieces (talking to the
                 teacher)
286.      T:     no (S2s) why would I do that?
287.      G1:    I don't know
Silence (2s)
288.      B1:    you have mixed it
289.      T:     uhuh?
290.      B1:    you have mixed it
291.      T:     mixed it
((Episode continues))
```

4.3.3 Topic motivated by shared background knowledge: AG and BA

Puzzle 1 did not use any AG or BA shifts to change the topic of the discussion. The fact that the task was an activity excludes the AG shifts simply because there was no precise agenda or instructions given with the task. Of course, it could be argued that all initiations related to the task itself are in fact agenda-based. However, since there was no pre-set agenda for the actual solving of the puzzle, I have chosen to not code task-related shifts as AG, unless the students would have specifically brought up the overall agenda of solving the puzzle as a topic, which they did not. No BA shifts were initiated during the conversation. However, the shifts I have chosen to categorize as SE could to some extent also be categorized as BA (see Example 13 above).

4.3.4 Topic unanchored: UA

No UA shifts were initiated during the Puzzle 1 conversation. Like in Justice 2, the fact that no episodes were initiated out of the blue is supportive of the fact that this type of initiation is rare and seldom occurs (Linell & Korolija 1996:803).

4.4 Comparison of groups

A comparison of the results from the three groups Puzzle 1, Justice 2 and Justice 3 will be presented below. Table 4 summarizes and adds up the total number of the different types of shifts initiated in the groups. The figures in the table will also be analyzed and discussed from a gender perspective in this section.

Table 4: **Episodes initiated in Puzzle 1, Justice 2 and Justice 3**

Type of shift or initiation	Initiated by a girl	Initiated by a boy	Total number of type	Shifts per person girls	Shifts per person boys
RC	4	4	8	0.40	0.66
AN	0	3	3	0.00	0.50
RI	8	11	19	0.80	1.83
SE	7	4	11	0.70	0.66
SO	4	6	10	0.40	1.00
AG	1	17	18	0.10	2.83
BA	1	4	5	0.10	0.66
UA	0	1	1	0.00	0.16
Total number of initiations	**25**	**50**	**75**	**2.5**	**8.3**

A total of 75 shifts of topic took place in the three groups during the 45 minutes and 44 seconds that have been recorded, transcribed, divided into episodes and coded in this study. The ten girls participating in the study shifted or initiated the topic 25 times during the discussion. The six boys shifted or initiated the topic 50 times, which is twice as many times as the girls. If the shifts would have been equally distributed between the 16 participants in this study, each speaker would have made 4.6 shifts each. The actual number for the girls is 2.5 shifts per person and for the boys 8.3 shifts per person. The fact that six boys initiated 5.8 more shifts per person than ten girls shows that the boys in this study dominated the shift and initiation of the topic completely.

The boys made a 100 percent more shifts than the girls and the boys dominated six of the eight types of shifts, AN, RI, SO, AG, BA and UA. The girls only made more initiations than the boys in one category; SE and boys and girls made an equal number of RC shifts. When comparing the group's division of the different types between girls and boys I found that the girls dominated all the categories in Puzzle 1, which is expected because the group consisted of six girls and two boys. On the other hand, three of the categories in Justice 2 were dominated by the only boy and he made as many shifts as the girls in two of the other categories. This means that the three girls in this group only dominated one category. In Justice 3 the boys dominated all categories and made 91 percent of the shifts. What is interesting to note is that even though the girls dominated all the categories in Puzzle 1, all boys in this study did more shifts per person than any of the girls.

The figures in Table 4 above show that the boys initiated more topics than the girls. This result is consistent with the results of Zimmerman and West's research on interruptions and simultaneous speech, described in chapter 2. In their study, men dominated the use of interruptions and overlaps and accounted for 46 of 48 interruptions (Zimmerman & West 1975:224). But the differences in language use between women and men can not merely be seen in the use of interruptions. Studying the shifts and initiations of topics in multi-party conversation gives additional information about gender and language as women and men shift and introduce topics differently. The present study therefore complements Zimmerman's and West's findings by demonstrating that male speakers dominate conversations not only within episodes, but also across episode boundaries.

5.   Discussion

"Women and men are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them" (Trudgill 2000:79). These differences show in language use on whole in English speaking cultures as well as in initiating and shifting of topic in multi-party conversation. In this study the boys initiated 100 percent more, or twice as many shifts as the girls, despite the fact that ten girls and only six boys participated in the study. 66 percent of the total amount of shifts was initiated by the boys. To me the result itself was not surprising; I had expected the boys to initiate more shifts than the girls, as I have seen how verbally dominant boys tend to be in

the classroom. What I had not expected was a 100 percent difference between girls and boys. From a gender perspective, the boy's dominance can be seen as support for the statement that men tend to dominate and control conversation (Pfeiffer 1998:358) and as supporting of the fact that men's use of language is based on power (Coates 1993:136). This can, for example, be seen in how two of the boys took on the role as leader in the group. The results of this study are consistent with Zimmerman's and West's (1975) research and the boy's dominance in shifting and initiating topic could be compared to the fact that men dominated the use of interruptions and overlaps in Zimmerman's and West's study, and also shows that male dominance in shifting topics also works across episodes.

The boys dominated the number of topic initiations in all three groups included in this study. One interesting finding is that the only boy in Justice 2 shifted the topic of discussion more than twice as many times as all the three girls in the group together. The fact that the boy took on the role as group leader most likely contributed to the high number of shifts, as he lead the discussion most of the time. A self selected leader was also found in Justice 3. The boy who led the discussion accounted for more shifts than any of the other members of the group. These findings are consistent with the findings of Fishman (see Pfeiffer 1998). Her study showed results similar to mine; that men are more successful than women when starting conversations on topics they initiate (Pfeiffer 1998:359). Another study by Poynton (1989:70-71) showed that women's topics are often rejected. This is not a clear tendency in my study, but the boys managed to start longer episodes that involved more members of the group than the girls.

The boy's domination of topic shift and initiation show clearly in Justice 2 and 3, but it is in fact in Puzzle 1 that the pattern of gender differences between girls and boys is most vivid. The two boys in the group accounted for more shifts per person than the six girls in the group. This finding can be compared to that of Justice 2, where the only boy made more than twice as many shifts as the three girls together. Every boy participating in this study did not shift and initiate more topics than every girl. However, the fact that this study focuses on gender differences divide girls and boys into groups, regardless of how many shifts the individual person made. The fact is that no girl completely dominated the shifts and initiations of topic in any of the groups are noteworthy because out of the three groups, two had a majority of girls.

The results of this study could have been affected by the participant's personalities, the situation in the classroom, the task at hand and an endless list of other circumstances. The groups differ in how the shifts are divided between the different types,

and, to some extent, in the task at hand; they differ in number of members in the group and in the number of boys and girls in each group. However, in all three groups the boys initiated more shifts per person than the girls. In my opinion this is no coincidence; my study shows that shifting or initiating topics in multi-party conversation reflects gender differences between girls and boys. The social norms telling us how to act and behave in certain situations permeate all parts of the society we live in and are shown in this study.

As a method of analysis TEA was on whole suitable for this study. However, more categories need to be added to the method if applied when studying task-oriented conversation. In this study the data was taken from two different lessons and TEA was more difficult to apply to the conversation recorded in Puzzle 1, where the task at hand was an activity, compared to Justice 2 and 3 where the discussions were agenda-based.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to investigate possible gender differences in how second language learners shift and initiate topic in multiparty conversations. The results of this study showed that the boys initiated topics twice as many times as the girls, which indicate a clear gender difference in terms of topic shift. There is little previous research on the exact same topic to compare the findings of this study and further studies are needed in the domain of gender and topic shift. However, on a general level, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of several others, such as the work of Fishman (1980), Coates (1993) and Zimmerman and West (1975) who all studied different aspects of gender differences in language use and communication. This study shows that differences in how the genders communicate and behave when engaged in conversation can be found in topic shift and initiation as well, just as in the use of interruptions and overlaps.

The main result of this study is a 100 percent difference in the amount of shifts made by girls and boys, resulting in the boys taking up more linguistic space than the girls, as the boys, to a large extent, dominated the topical shifts in the conversations. This finding is relevant and important, not the least to teachers and people working in school who, I believe, play an important role when it comes to changing stereotypical beliefs about gender. Further research into classroom group discussions is therefore highly relevant as there may be pedagogical implications regarding how to divide students into groups and how teacher interventions are best set up.

A suggestion for further research would be to replicate this study in a different environment. The fact that this study takes place among young adults who have been given a predefined task in a classroom setting is in itself a limitation and more research will have to be carried out to substantiate the results of this study. Future researchers in this domain could for example look at gender differences in topic shift among adults in an informal setting or add more categories to the TEA method to make it easier to apply to task oriented conversation.

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