

What The Heck Are We Talking About? Searching, Selecting, and Shifting Topics in Conversation

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Conversation is a ubiquitous, important, and uniquely human behavior. Almost every turn in every conversation requires the speaker to make a choice: should we stay on the current topic or switch to a different one? Descriptively, how do people navigate this decision? Prescriptively, how should they? Even when speakers' goals are perfectly aligned (e.g. to enjoy the conversation), perspective-taking biases (e.g., egocentrism), psychological constraints (e.g., limited memory and attention), and decision blindness (e.g., unawareness that they're making these decisions at all) make topic selection a difficult decision, one likely fraught with errors. Across several studies that explore synchronous (live) and asynchronous conversations in face-to-face and online settings, we investigate how people navigate topic-switching in cooperative conversation. First, we develop a framework for topic selection using an integrative bargaining framework applied to a discrete set of 12 pre-defined topics. In Study 1, using live face-to-face dyadic conversations, we find that topic selection has direct consequences for conversational enjoyment. Our findings suggest that people are overly reluctant to switch topics (i.e., they switch too infrequently), and that straightforward Pareto improvements can be achieved with more-frequent topic switching. In Studies 2-3, we introduce an asynchronous "topic interest detection" paradigm to capture conversational perspective-taking accuracy. First, individuals read a list of 12 topics, wrote responses they would give in a live conversation, and provided ground-truth ratings of interest in discussing each topic further (Study 2). We then showed their text responses to other human judges and asked the judges to predict the writer's topic preferences based on the text they had written (Study 3). We find predictable gaps in readers' ability to detect topic preferences from written text. Compared to a wide array of natural language processing algorithms, humans fall short at detecting others' interest in topics, with meaningful consequences for conversation enjoyment and learning at the individual level, for impression management and the desire to interact again at the relationship level, and for the spread of information broadly.