

**THE MANAGEMENT OF CONVERSATIONAL TOPIC BY A TEN YEAR OLD
CHILD WITH PRAGMATIC DIFFICULTIES**

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Abstract

A case study is presented of a ten year old child described as having 'pragmatic difficulties', for the initiation and management of conversational topic. Video-recorded naturally-occurring conversations between the child and his peers at school are subjected to a detailed sequential analysis, drawing on some of the insights gained into the collaborative management of topic by researchers working in the tradition of conversation analysis (Button and Casey 1984, 1985). We find that our subject uses some helpful devices to generate and manage conversational topics but has difficulty collaborating with his conversational partners.

We consider some of the different ways in which social-cognitive abilities are implicated in alternative courses of action available for the initiation and management of topic, and find that our subject's behaviours support the suggestion of Bishop (1997) that a difficulty in the development of social cognition underlies the interactional problems experienced by children with pragmatic language impairment. Consideration is given to ways in which the child's conversational behaviours are subject to influence from the styles of talk he is exposed to in interactions with adults in the language unit setting in which he spends much of his time.

Keywords: topic, interaction, language disorder, child, conversation analysis

INTRODUCTION

Studies of the language behaviour of children with pragmatic difficulties (*pragmatic language impairment*, Bishop, Chan, Adams, Hartley and Weir, in press; *semantic-pragmatic disorder*, Bishop and Rosenbloom 1987) have frequently reported that these children show atypicalities in the initiation and management of conversational topics (e.g. Rapin and Allen 1983, Bishop and Rosenbloom 1987, Adams and Bishop 1989, Bishop and Adams 1989, Letts and Reid 1994). Different kinds of atypicality have been described. There may be a complete absence of initiation at a stage of formal language development where such initiations would be expected (Conti-Ramsden and Gunn 1986). More frequent in the literature, however, are reports of these children initiating much more than their normally developing peers (Bishop and Rosenbloom 1987, Adams and Bishop 1989, Bishop, Hartley and Weir 1994). 'Verbosity' is often taken to be a hallmark of the conversational behaviour of these children (e.g. Rapin and Allen 1987, Bishop et al., in press), and a contributory factor to this can be a tendency to initiate topics frequently. These initiations may be unconventional in nature, often taking the form of questions which are deemed to be inappropriate in some way, for example by appearing to solicit information already at the child's disposal (Bishop and Adams 1989, Willcox and Mogford-Bevan 1995a, b). These children are often described as having difficulty sustaining or developing topics introduced by their conversational partners. They may 'drift' off the topic at hand (Bishop and Adams 1989, Letts and Reid 1994) or, through unconventionally placed initiations, bring about unmarked and rather abrupt shifts in topic (Bishop and Adams 1989, Letts and Reid 1994). These shifts can have the effect of turning a conversation to the child's favoured topics (Bishop et al., in press). Resources for developing an ongoing topic may be limited to the partial or wholesale repetition of a conversational partner's previous utterance (Willcox and Mogford-Bevan 1995b).

Despite the apparently rich body of evidence drawn from these various case studies, however, our understanding of the management of conversational topic by these children remains limited for a number of reasons. In what follows, and before presenting our own case study of a ten year old child with pragmatic difficulties, we shall briefly outline some of the problems as we see them with the way in which the matter of conversational topic is typically handled in the existing literature on pragmatic development and impairment.

First, in the literature on both developmental and clinical pragmatics the notion of 'topic' is understood in different ways. For some researchers, topic is understood in a broad sense as simply comprising the subject matter of conversation, or 'what is being talked about' (Smith and Leinonen 1992). This conception of topic is much less useful than that of others such as Brinton and Fujiki (1989), for example, for whom topic is a set of procedures by which participants in talk manage what they talk about. Second, the definition of 'initiation' is equally problematic. The studies by Adams and Bishop (1989) and Bishop et al. (1994), which make use of coding schemes in order to investigate the high rate of initiations in children with pragmatic language impairment, adopt a definition from Coulthard (1985) in which initiations are items 'which begin anew and set up an expectation of a response' (Bishop et al. 1994: 178). The following sequences are presented in these two studies as examples of utterances coded as initiations.

(1) (from Adams and Bishop 1989: 219)

Adult: have you ever been ill like that?/

Child: yeah, sick/

-> Adult: what happened to you then?/

Child: oh I was sick lots of times I was-/
had to kept me off school/

(2) (from Bishop et al. 1994: 179)

Adult: What's going on 'there?

Child: they're having a 'party.

Adult: mmh.

-> why do you think they're having a 'party?

Child: it's someone's 'birthday.

Adult: that's 'right.

-> do 'you have birthday parties?

are you too 'old for proper parties now or not?

Child: (.5) well, I 'dunno.

-> my friend 'Janice is having a party next 'week.

she'll be 'ten.

Each of the arrowed turns in these examples (in addition to some other turns) is categorised as an initiation, despite the fact that it is not at all clear that these turns 'begin anew', and each could equally plausibly (from the transcript, at least) be considered as a turn addressed to the development of the topic at hand. The categorisation of initiations is clearly not a straightforward matter and therefore leads to problems with quantification.

A further complication is that not all instances of utterances categorised as initiations are

equivalent in the extent to which they implicate a response in the following turn. Therefore quantitative analyses which find these children to be 'ignoring' or 'failing to respond to' initiations made by their conversational partners can be challenged for taking initiations as a blanket category. Willcox and Mogford-Bevan (1995b), for example, present the following sequence as an example of a child ignoring an adult's initiation and initiating a new topic himself. The child is playing with a Play People camper, with his nursery nurse. (The dashes in this transcription represent pauses.)

- (3) 1 Adult: has he got a passenger? (C puts men in the back
of A's camper)
- 2 -> Child: __ you have to get them all in yours
- 3 Adult: all of them?
- 4 it'll be a bit crowded
- 5 _ won't it?
- 6 haven't you got anybody to put in your car?
- 7 Child: __ put it there
- 8 Adult: have you got a passenger that could sit on the front
9 seat?
- 10 __ that's it (A points to front seat, C puts man in).

(Willcox and Mogford-Bevan 1995b: 242)

In this extract, it is not clear to what extent A's turn in line 1, 'has he got a passenger', can usefully be considered an initiation. To be sure, it takes the form of a question - but there is no evidence that what it solicits is an answer from C. A does not treat C's non-answer in line

2 as accountable: indeed she responds directly to it in the lines which follow. It is true that A returns to versions of her original question in lines 6 and 8, but this line of pursuit seems to be satisfied by a non-verbal action by C, that of putting a toy figure into a toy car. A's questions seem to be versions of an invitation or suggestion to C to take a particular action in the ongoing play in which they are engaged. What it solicits is not talk and not a topic. The action it invites can be swiftly accomplished without talk, so it does not render other lines of unrelated talk occurring in its vicinity misplaced. Clearly, the interrogative turns produced by the adult in this sequence of play are different in kind from turns which initiate a topic for conversational participants to talk to, because they have very different implications for what may or may not legitimately follow them in an interactional sequence. Further attention to this kind of sequential detail is needed to account for how an individual manages conversational topic.

A further problem for work in this area is one that is faced by work in clinical pragmatics more generally. It is that the behaviour of children with pragmatic difficulties, in the area of topic just as in many other areas, is often distinguished by reference to the notion of 'inappropriacy'. Attempts to overcome the inherent subjectivity of such a description have typically relied on demonstrations of high inter-rater reliability in coding judgements (e.g. Bishop and Adams 1989, Letts and Reid 1994) - but such measures can be problematic. Willcox and Mogford-Bevan (1995b: 237) make a useful observation here. They note:

It is also evident that highlighting specific contributions within a conversation and describing them as 'odd' or 'inappropriate' will be equally unhelpful in assessing why the child's communication is disturbed. ... If the utterance was acceptable in the context, and to the participants involved in the conversation,

it is difficult to see how it can afterwards be judged as inappropriate.

However, in their analysis these authors, too, make judgements that their subject's utterances 'sounded unusual in the circumstances' (1995b: 243), and make comparisons between what he says and hypothetical utterances which 'would be more usual' (1995b: 247). An alternative method, and the one adopted here, is to try to understand just how these children's conversational behaviours accomplish particular kinds of interactional work in the contexts in which they appear, the effect that they have over subsequent turns at talk, and how they are interpreted by other participants in conversational exchanges.

An approach to the study of conversational topic

In an attempt to address the challenges outlined above, the work presented here draws heavily on the tradition of ethnomethodological conversation analysis. Within this tradition, research into topic has begun to uncover the procedures by which participants in talk negotiate the matter of what gets talked about (Sacks 1992 Jefferson 1984, Button and Casey 1984,1985). Emphasis is laid on the collaborative nature of topic generation, and a sequential approach to analysis of the phenomenon is made possible. This approach, while it has thus far to our knowledge not been extended to developmental patterns in children's topic management, offers an appropriate set of procedures for analysis of the data at hand, which involves conversations between a ten year old boy and his peers.

The conversation analyst Harvey Sacks made a distinction between two types of movement from one topic to the next (Sacks 1992, Jefferson 1984:191). Firstly, the closure of one topic and the subsequent opening of another is jointly achieved in a process over turns known as

boundaried movement. Alternatively a topic shift can be achieved by the *stepwise* flowing over several turns where there is a branching of the topical content (Jefferson 1984). This stepwise topical movement is described by Sacks as the most usual in conversation (1992: Winter 1971:301). In the case of boundaried topical movement, further talk proceeds from the use of an initiating device rather than out of prior talk. Button and Casey (1984,1985) have identified three such types of initiating device, and have explored some of their sequential relevancies in adult interactions. The analysis which follows borrows heavily from the picture presented by Button and Casey in these two papers. It is pertinent here, therefore, to sketch an outline of the three types of topic opener which they distinguish.

A first option to open topic for talk is called a *topic initial elicitor* (Button and Casey 1984). This is characterised by an open enquiry directed at the possible activities of the conversational participant. Examples include 'what's new?' or 'anything else to report?'. The noteworthy feature of this initiator is that it carries no topical material itself, but serves to invite the speaker in the subsequent turn to provide a report of events which are newsworthy.

(4) [F:TC:I:13]

-> S: what's new,

G: we:ll? ·t °lemme see° las' ni:ght, I had the girls

ove[r

S: [yea:h?=
 (continues on topic))

(Button and Casey 1984:182)

The speaker in the first turn is displaying availability for talk, to which the second speaker responds by offering a possible initial topic. It is for the first speaker in the third turn to topicalise the event report in order to orient to its newsworthiness. This is in keeping with the nature of the initial news enquiry, as it demonstrates availability to talk to the topic proposed by the second speaker. In this third turn position, a failure to topicalise material generated by the use of a topic initial elicitor inevitably has implications for the curtailment of the potential topic.

Two further methods of topic initiation have been described in the conversation analysis literature, and they have different implications for subsequent turns (Button and Casey 1985). These openers differ from a topic initial elicitor in that the speaker is electing to nominate topical material. The first is an *itemised news enquiry* which is a query aimed at a particular item of news. Examples are 'how's your foot?' or 'how's it going at the restaurant?' The production of this opener invites its recipient to do more than simply fill a gap in the speaker's knowledge. In the turn that follows, the speaker has the responsibility to provide a related news report.

(5) (NB:I:6:13)

-> C: How's yer foot?

A: Oh it's healing beautif'lly!

C: Goo [::d.

A: [The other one may haftuh come off...

(Button and Casey 1985:18)

Again, it falls to the first speaker in third turn to topicalise the report thus generated in order to invite the producer of the news to continue. Once again, then, a three part sequence is necessary for a mutual and collaborative accomplishment of topic generation.

Alternatively, a speaker may initiate with topical material by making a *news announcement* (Button and Casey 1985). Examples of this type of opener are 'I got hurt' or (from the current data) 'I went to Tanzania in the holidays'. These statements function as a sort of headline news, projecting more to be told in further turns.

(6) (Heritage:III:1:5:3)

-> E: Now look (.) im-uh Ilene has just pushed a note in

-> front'v my fa₂ce,

J: Ye₂s?

(0.3)

E: Ten pou₂nds,

(Button and Casey 1985:23, 24)

In this case, it falls to the second speaker to topicalise the news in next turn by providing the sequential opportunity for its elaboration. Prototypical examples are 'yes?' or 'did you?' which invite elaboration of the news by the first speaker, and so implicate extended talk on

the topical material in third turn. A second turn response which fails to do this may lead to topic curtailment, as it may be construed as displaying unwillingness, on the part of the second speaker, to continue on topic.

Aims of the study

A conversation analytic approach to the investigation of topic, offers us a way around some of the pitfalls associated with investigations of pragmatic difficulty, described earlier. It invites us to consider as topic, not just what gets talked about, but how participants collaboratively negotiate and manage what gets talked about. It avoids reliance on the quantification of coded categories of phenomena, and allows for a detailed examination of utterances in their sequential context. By paying attention to this sequential context, it is possible to gain some understanding of the interactional work accomplished by particular conversational behaviours. This approach enables us to move away from a reliance on our own subjective judgements of 'inappropriacy', and to consider instead the orientations of the conversational participants themselves, as displayed in the ongoing talk. The principal aim of our paper, then, is to begin to illustrate how some insights into conversational management which have been gained by conversation analysts might have much to offer the field of clinical pragmatics.

In applying this kind of analysis to a case of pragmatic language impairment, it is worth considering that the different designs of opener make different demands on the speaker in terms of social cognition, with regard to the speaker's awareness of information that is shared and sharable. This is of interest since impairment in the development of social cognition is taken to be characteristic of these kinds of disorders (Bishop 1997). Those openers which carry topical material presume knowledge on the part of the news enquirer or news

announcer as to what is a potential newsworthy topic. Thus the use of an itemised news enquiry or news announcement makes assumptions with regard both to the degree to which a news item is already known about by the recipient, and to that recipient's willingness to talk to that item. Problems relating to this type of awareness predict potential difficulties in establishing a topic to be talked to by both participants and thus a likelihood of topic curtailment. We will give some consideration to the topic-initiating strategies used by our subject in the light of the demands that each makes on his social-cognitive skills.

The paper also aims to consider some practical implications of the findings it presents, in terms of the institutional management of children with these kinds of difficulties. By considering the relationship between our subject's conversational behaviours and the particular interactional styles to which he is regularly exposed in the language unit setting in which he spends much of his time, we shall give some thought to the role of environmental influence on this child's behaviour.

SUBJECT

David, the subject of this case study, was aged 10;6 to 10;10 at the time the data were collected. In summarising his difficulties, his Statement of Special Educational Needs describes him as a child with social problems:

David has specific difficulties with receptive language, communication and associated learning difficulties. He shows some difficulties in making and maintaining contact with other people, both children and adults. His social skills are immature.

This profile may be contrasted with adequate cognitive functioning as measured by age appropriate performance in mechanical reading tasks and mathematical computation, and mature syntactic and phonological systems as revealed by inspection of the current data.

David has been educated in a special provision for pupils with specific language impairment (referred to here as the language unit) since age 5;2, but at the time of the study integrated into his local primary school two days a week, with some additional support.

PROCEDURE

Video recordings were made of David with five familiar male peers both in his language unit and the primary school into which he integrated. These pupils, aged 9;10 to 11;10, frequently sat next to David at school. The language unit pupils also had specific language difficulties but in the mainstream school the conversational partners had no history of language or learning difficulties. The children were not engaged in any task and there were no particular materials to talk to, except that the children were having a drink in the unit setting. The only instruction given was that they should carry on as they normally did. Eight sessions of between six and 13 minutes were video-taped across settings. Most recordings involved David and one peer, but on two occasions a third boy was present.

For purposes of comparison, 29 minutes of conversation were video-taped between two boys, aged 10;10 and 11;0, who attend a mainstream school and who have no history of speech and language therapy or learning difficulties. They were having a drink in a home setting and were given the same instruction as the other subjects. This is referred to as the normative data.

Videotape was also collected of four sessions of morning 'news' between two teachers and small groups of children aged 8 to 11 years, and two episodes of informal chat between a speech and language therapist and two pupils.

The conversations were subjected to detailed sequential analysis according to the framework for topic described earlier. Particular attention was given to the types of initiator used, and the design features of turns relating to the accomplishment of topicalisation and the pursuit of topic. Consideration was given to patterns of behaviour which contributed to topic curtailment.

ANALYSIS

General picture

David displayed consistent language behaviour with all interactional partners regardless of whether he was in the language unit or mainstream school setting. The overall picture was of bounded topical movement, marked by pause of more than one second (extract (7)), or by initiators which contained no obvious topical material related to the previous utterances (extract (8)).

(7)

Thomas: yes and manchester united did the doubles didn't

 they

David: yeah

(0.8)

David: yeah

-> (3.8)
 -> David: so is there any hymn practice

(8)

David: and what's your mum's name
 Adam: that'd be telling
 -> David: and (.) what did you do at the week-end

The production of several opening devices in a period of a few minutes was typical. This may be contrasted with the normative sample where the subjects talked to two general topics about football or holidays for 29 minutes. The introduction of new material was achieved by use of tangential news announcements, for example adding further topical material about the holiday (extract (9)). As can be seen here, pause in the normative data did not necessarily result in a shift of topic

(9)

Richard: greg fell in and his head went right under
 Oliver: oh no hehhehheh
 -> (11.0)
 -> Richard: I wonder if I'll be going on any water sports
 Oliver: I am

Other sequences in the normative data, where minimal topical content was apparent, were rarely treated as opportunities to close the topic. In extract 10 movement into a tangential topic about teachers was achieved by using material from the previous three utterances to

gradually step into it. This type of topical movement is described by Sacks (1992: Winter 1971:301) as the 'most routine thing' in adult conversations and typifies extended topical talk as opposed to David's bounded style.

(10) ((...talk about isle of wight trip))

Oliver: and you have to do this isle of wight diary

Richard: yeah I know

(1.0)

Oliver: it's going to be so boring

-> Richard: bit like games (.) I hate miss ***** doing games

Oliver: I know it's boring

-> Richard: she used to be good (.) now she's gone all ->

educational

((continues on tangential topic about teachers...))

In terms of initiations, David's favoured device was a version of a topic initial elicitor. This was typically an enquiry relating to activity concerning the conversational partner, such as 'what did you do at the week-end'. Also evident in the data were itemised news enquiries which typically nominated material relating to the other person. These were most frequently

introduced by a WH-question, examples being 'what did you do last week in maths' or 'where does dina live'. It is perhaps significant that there were no news announcements produced by David and only one example of a news announcement addressed to him.

The analysis which follows will deal in turn with sequences initiated by David with topic initial elicitors and itemised news enquiries, and with the resources available to David for topicalisation of the material which his openers elicit.

Topic initial elicitors

Evidence of the extensive use by David of this means of topic initiation was that at least one example was recorded with each peer regardless of whether he was in the language unit or the mainstream school. Extracts 11 to 17 provide examples of openers with all five peers on different occasions. The design of the opener was characterised by variations on the interrogative 'what did you do'.

(11)

(to Adam): and (.) what did you do over the weekend

(12)

(to Sheel): what did you do sheel

(13)

(to Thomas): right thomas what did you do

This design varies from a topical initial elicitor in that it is not a strictly open enquiry as would a design like ‘what have you been up to?’. Rather, its use predicts a report of an activity, and as such imposes limits on the range of possible next turns available to David's conversational partners. His peers are further constrained by invitations to restrict their report to a time frame of the weekend. In some instances the day is specified and in others a more precise time period.

(14)

(to Sheel): so (.) what did you do sunday

(15)

(to James): er saturday morning what did you do

(16)

(to James): what did you do on saturday evening

(17)

David: gregory (.) greg (.) what did you do over the
weekend

Sheel: on saturday I [went

Gregory: [I played computer

-> David: what day (.) you have to say what day

This imposition of constraints on the material elicited from the next speaker contradicts the

collaborative principle of topic generation. The use of a content free opener such as a topic initial elicitor displays apparent availability for talk, thus inviting the next speaker freely to select an item of newsworthiness. It also displays apparent willingness to talk to that material. However, the restrictive design of David's topic initial elicitors operates against this kind of free volunteering of news by his conversational partners.

Nonetheless, these design constraints notwithstanding, it can be seen that topic initial elicitors, the openers used most commonly by David, afford him some success in generating topical sequences of talk, since they very often do elicit a newsworthy event report in next turn.

(18)

David: and what did you do over the week-end

-> Adam: er went to our presentation evening...

((continues))

(19)

David: right thomas what did you do

-> Thomas: I went to robert's house and... (continues)

It may be that the high prevalence of this form of opener over alternative means which David might choose for initiating topic is related to the level of social-cognitive demands required for its use. Whilst topic initial elicitors display apparent orientation to the conversational participant by enquiring about an event relating to them, their use does not presuppose particular knowledge relating to that person. This is because they are essentially free of topical content, and as such the suitability of topic for mutual generation is not an issue. It is noteworthy that, while topic initial elicitors represent the majority of topic openers used by

David, they do not occur in the normative data, and neither are they used by David's peers in conversation with him.

Itemised News Enquiries

A second kind of opener available to David for initiating topic, although less frequent in the data, is the itemised news enquiry. This involves the explicit introduction of topical material by David to different interactional partners. In terms of content, a variety of topics are evident, ranging from school subjects, family, holidays to activities with friends. Extracts (20) to (22) provide examples of a typical interrogative syntactic design.

(20)

David: what did you do last week in maths

(21)

David: where does dina live

(22)

David: and do you have any brothers or sisters

According to Button and Casey (1985:11), itemised news enquiries 'occasion the relevancy of doing more than just filling in some gap in the speaker's knowledge'. Rather, they 'are oriented to receiving "things to tell" about a particular newsworthy item, the details of which are proposed by the itemised news enquiry itself, as being unknown to the enquirer' (1985:17). Regardless of a closed question design, therefore, an itemised news enquiry projects in second turn, some kind of report of news on the specified item. (See, for example,

'oh it's healing beautifully' in extract (5) above.) David's enquiries, however, can be seen to be limited in respect of their 'news generational' qualities. Examples (23) to (25) show how they are treated as enquiries that necessitate merely a filling in of a gap in knowledge. Minimal responses are generated here, thus Adam and Thomas fail to provide further 'things to tell'.

(23)

David: what did you do last week in maths
 -> Adam: area

(24)

David: who was your first teacher here
 -> Thomas: mrs healey

A further problem for topic generation arises when David's openers of this kind are met with a second turn response which amounts to a 'no-news report' (Button and Casey 1985:26).

(25)

1 David: and em and and do you have any brothers or
 2 sisters
 3-> Adam: no
 4 David: no
 5-> Adam: no
 6 David: and what's your mum's name

- 7-> Adam: that'd be telling
 8 David: and what did you do over the week-end

Here, David's 'no' in line 4, in response to Adam's 'no' response in line 3, provides an opportunity for an alternative candidate for further talk. When none is offered, closure of the topic is acknowledged by production of a further itemised news enquiry (line 6). David orients to the apparent unwillingness displayed in Adam's 'no-report' response ('that'd be telling') by using a topic initial elicitor (line 8). This short extract thus carries four attempts by David to initiate topic.

These no-news reports suggest a reluctance, on the part of David's conversational partner, to engage with the topical material nominated by David's openers, and in themselves suggest that one problem that David has is with the selection of topical material from which news may be generated. In the following extract, this kind of reluctance is explicitly displayed.

(26)

- David: er thomas where does john (t***) live
 -> (3.0)
 David: what about kieren
 -> Thomas: I don't know (.) what's all this about where
 -> people live

Here, reluctance to pursue the nominated topic is displayed in three ways: firstly, by a no-response (silence of three seconds); secondly by an account for a non-answer (a form of no-news report) ('I don't know'); and thirdly, in the same turn, by an explicit challenge to David's

topical agenda ('what's all this about where people live').

A similar challenge is made in the following extract:

(27)

David: who was your first teacher here

Thomas: mrs healey

David: mrs healey in reception

Thomas: yeah

David: and then who

-> Thomas: we've just gone through all the teachers david

-> Adam: yes david

David: I just want to go through it again

The challenge here is formulated (and corroborated by a third participant) in terms of the repetitive nature of David's topical agenda. This suggests that whereas range of topics is not an issue for him, persistent use of similar enquiries is in conflict with production of topical material to be shared.

It is worth noting, however, that in themselves these no-news reports by David's interactional partners are only potentially topic-curtailling. Button and Casey (1985:41) outline ways in which, following such a potentially curtailling move, a first speaker may use a form of news announcement to 'pursue' the topic nominated in an initial itemised news enquiry. For example:

(28) (Frankel:QC:1:2)

L: How you feelin 'Mahrge=

-> M: =Oh fi:ne

-> L: Cuz - I think Joanne mentioned that yih weren't so well? ->
a few weeks ago:?

(Button and Casey 1985:41)

M's response here does not constitute a newsworthy progress report, but the topic is nonetheless kept alive by L's version of a news announcement in third turn, as it introduces new topical material. However, such means for topic pursuit are not available to David since there are no examples of news announcements in the data. What David typically does in these sequential environments is to produce further itemised news enquiries or topic initial elicitors (extracts (25), (29) – (31)).

(29)

David: er thomas where does john (t***) live

(3.0)

-> David: what about kieren

(30)

David: who was your first teacher here

- Thomas: mrs healey
- David: mrs healey in reception
- Thomas: yeah
- > David: and then who
- (31)
- David: you went on british airways from paris then to
tanzania (.) so what time was this flight
- Sheel: what
- David: what time was this flight to paris
- Sheel: I don't know
- > David: er what gate was it going from
- Sheel: I don't know
- > David: an do you know what terminal it went from
- Sheel: no
- David: did it go from terminal one terminal two
terminal three or terminal four

These sequences of news enquiries allow minimal opportunity for David's conversational partner to negotiate the topical agenda, and cumulate in his boundaried style of topic movement.

It can be seen, then, that David's use of itemised news enquiries leads to some problems of topic negotiation, which may stem from a particular difficulty in the area of knowledge of suitable conversational topics to be shared. This difficulty arises with attempts to use this

kind of opener, which requires the nomination of topical material, and is avoided with the use of topic initial elicitors, which don't. It seems, then, that the latter afford David greater success in establishing conversational topic with his peers.

Topicalisation

Both kinds of topic opener considered above, topic initial elicitors and itemised news enquiries, implicate a newsworthy report from next speaker in second turn. This report, according to Button and Casey (1985:14), is typically incomplete, insofar as it projects more to tell on the topical material selected. It therefore falls to the first speaker to *topicalise* the second speaker's contribution - to demonstrate their own availability to talk to that particular item which was implied in the opening turn - and to provide the sequential opportunity for further talk on that topic. In this way, topic generation is seen to be a truly interactional matter which is locally managed, typically over a series of three turns.

In light of the previous discussion of David's use of topic opening devices, it is interesting to note that the principal means by which he invites topic continuation in this way is by repeating part of the prior speaker's turn (either exactly (extract (32)) or with appropriate deictic rearrangement (extract (33))).

(32)

David:	so (.) what did you do sunday
Sheel:	on sunday morning
David:	yeah
Sheel:	we went to the club (.) but there was no pool table

-> David: no pool table
 Sheel: yeah so we er...
 ((continues))

(33)

David: er saturday morning what did you do
 (1.0)
 James: saturday morning we went to the caravan
 -> David: you went to the caravan
 James: and I built I had lunch at the caravan..
 ((continues))

This use of partial repetition in third turn succeeds in establishing topic, as evidenced by the production of further news in the next turn. As these repetition turns carry no new material, the next speaker has the freedom to select further items to talk to, in keeping with the collaborative principle of topic generation.

Similarly, in the following extract, David's use of repetition at a later point in the topical sequence serves to keep the topic alive, and his conversational partner goes on to tell more of the news:

(34)

David: what airline
 Sheel: air france
 David: is that to tanza=no it goes to paris

- Sheel: it stops at paris
- > David: it stops at paris
- Sheel: yeah then went to tanzania

The prevalence of this design of topicalising turn from David merits consideration (as did the success of his topic initial elicitors in an earlier section) in the context of the social-cognitive demands which it makes on him. The use of partial repetition in third turn as a topicalising move requires no assessment of the state of mind of the other person, in terms of either their knowledge or their interests. It may be for this reason that these turns serve David well in establishing topic for talk over several turns with his conversational partners.

DISCUSSION

The approach adopted here, in the tradition of conversation analysis, provides fresh insights into the strategies available to one ten year old child for topic management. A pattern of strengths emerges in terms of devices that successfully generate talk for him; topic initial elicitors and repetition for topic pursuit. On the other hand, the design of his initiating turns serves to impose a constraint on the conversational partner in terms of the quantity and type of material that can be reported. When a newsworthy report is elicited, David's options seem to be:- to repeat part of the utterance; to pursue the topical agenda with a similarly constraining design; or to accept topic closure and produce a fresh opener. The cumulative effect is a pattern of bounded topical movement that operates against the collaborative principle of topic generation, where availability for talk is displayed by allowing a volunteering of topical material. While documented information about the typical development of such abilities is scarce, the normative data collected for this study suggests that a typical adult style of tangential topic flow using related news announcements, was

available to age-matched peers.

Our analysis of David's talk at a behavioural level reveals little evidence of collaborative activity. To address the question of why this occurs, it is necessary to consider factors at a cognitive level, in particular the role of social cognition. Bishop (1997) discusses at some length the ways in which a deficit in social cognition might be implicated in specific language impairment, and, more particularly, in semantic-pragmatic disorder. She considers three competing theoretical models of specific language impairment - the first in which a limited processing capacity underlies difficulties in language learning and in non-verbal communication, which in turn results in poor performances in tests of social communication skills; a second in which defective language skills result in social rejection by peers, which in turn leads to the child having reduced opportunities for the kinds of social interaction necessary for full development of social cognition; and a third in which a deficit in the development of social cognition is what underlies both social rejection by peers and poor communication skills (both of which factors will then continue to have a detrimental influence on each other). Clearly, it is no easy matter to tease out the direction of causality among these various impairments. However, Bishop suggests that the third model, in which a deficit in social cognition underlies interactional difficulties, might best account for the behaviours observed in a subset of children with SLI - those with semantic-pragmatic disorder.

Such an account is consistent both with David's profile and with our observations of his strategies for topic management. His reading and mathematical computation are age appropriate, suggesting adequate cognitive functioning. His phonological and syntactic skills are unproblematic. In the case of topic management, it is suggested that an important factor

involved in David's difficulties may be the social-cognitive demands inherent in the use of particular devices to generate topic. His apparently successful strategies are content free and include the use of topic initial elicitors as openers and repetition, to invite the co-participant to continue. Topical material is not introduced, therefore he is not required to assess the state of mind of the other person. Use of itemised news enquiries, by introducing potential material, require knowledge that the item is newsworthy and that the co-participant is willing to talk to it. This strategy by David has been shown to lead to topic curtailment, not only as a result of its design, but also owing to the persistent nature of its production, typically without topicalisation of the material it generates. A candidate account, then, for the particular difficulties which David demonstrates in his management of conversational topic can be framed in terms of the ways in which this activity makes demands upon his social-cognitive skills.

A further factor, however, which should not be ignored is the nature of the interactional experiences to which David has been exposed in the language unit setting, and the possible influence that this might have had on his behaviour. In inspecting some data collected in the language unit, where teachers and speech and language therapists were interacting with children with communication difficulties, we were struck by some similarities between what we could see teachers and therapists doing, and what we had seen David doing in interactions with his peers. A weekly experience in the language unit which David has attended for five years is the 'news circle'. Extract (35) is from such an activity in his unit:

(35)

teacher: ryan what did you do at the week-end

pupil: stay in

teacher: mm what did you do
 pupil: (****) tv ((signed))
 teacher: what did you watch on tv
 pupil: batman
 teacher: batman (.) what was it what was the story this
 time

There are several points of similarity to features of David's conversational style in evidence here. The teacher uses a topic initial elicitor with a syntactic and semantic design similar to that used by David, including reference to a week-end time frame. Topicalisation strategies are use of repetition ('batman') and two itemised news enquiries.

Other experiences for David in the language unit are likely to have included individual time with a speech and language therapist. Here is a fragment of therapy chat from the same setting, where, again, similarities to David's conversational style are readily apparent:

(36)

therapist: ok what else did you do at the week-end
 pupil: well on saturday (.) I think (.) we had (.) on
 saturday (.) oh yes it was er saturday
 therapist: mm
 pupil: saturday I went (.) to happy eater
 therapist: you went to happy eater mm

pupil: no it wasn't it was sunday

therapist: on sunday

On the basis of such examples it may be suggested that what David is doing in his conversations with peers is to adopt the role of the teacher in the news circle or the role of the therapist in the individual session. In effect, he uses a questioning sequence of initiation, response and feedback or evaluation (IRF) that is typically found in classrooms around the world (Mercer 1995). Whilst this design may be well suited to instructional agenda of the classroom, in terms of providing a model of talk for conversational purposes, it is problematic for him. Willcox and Mogford-Bevan (1995a, b) make a similar observation in relation their two (six and seven year old) subjects who presented with similar profiles to David and who, like him, were placed in a language unit. They suggest that certain behaviours observed in their subjects, such as the frequent asking of questions to which the answer was clearly known, and the frequent repetition of a co-participant's utterances, are also to be observed in adults interacting with children with conversational difficulties. They advise of 'a strong possibility that children with conversational difficulties adopt conversational behaviours that adults use with them' (1995b:251). An interesting line of future enquiry is suggested by these observations, since it is possible that the kinds of processing difficulties experienced by children with pragmatic difficulties render them particularly susceptible to these kinds of influences from their interactional environments - or lead them to rely strategically on 'borrowing' interactional behaviours in unorthodox ways. Such a line of enquiry might raise important practical considerations concerning the kinds of interactional environments and experiences that would most benefit these children's communicative development.

The analytic techniques employed in this paper have highlighted some particular difficulties faced by one ten year old child in his management of conversational topic and have, it is hoped, begun to demonstrate how future work in the field of clinical pragmatics might usefully draw on some of the insights gained into conversational management by researchers working in the tradition of conversation analysis. A detailed consideration of the specific actions involved in the collaborative management of topic initiation, as outlined by Button and Casey (1984, 1985), has allowed us to consider the different ways in which social-cognitive abilities are implicated in alternative courses of action, and hence how a deficit in social cognition might provide an explanation for David's difficulties in the handling of conversational topic. In addition, the findings of the study have raised a practical implication, in that the apparent 'borrowing' of conversational styles from adults in institutional settings is suggested as a possible influence on the behaviour of children with pragmatic difficulties. This merits further enquiry, and may turn out to have significant implications for the kind of interactional and instructional opportunities provided by teachers and speech and language therapists in mainstream and language unit settings.

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**THE MANAGEMENT OF CONVERSATIONAL TOPIC BY A TEN YEAR OLD
CHILD WITH PRAGMATIC DIFFICULTIES**

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