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2 Conversational Topic along a Continuum of Perspectives: Conceptual Issues

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The literature regarding conversational topic is vast. Conversational topic, however, has various conceptualizations. For example, some studies examine topic changes, whereas others examine the broad subjects about which people talk. Four different perspectives (i.e., topic as a noun phrase, topic as a bounded unit, topic as a perception of language users, and topic as a subject matter of talk), focusing on different conceptions of topic for ostensibly different purposes, emerge across the literature, and, as a result, grasping the literature as a whole is difficult. This chapter highlights each perspective by pointing to the questions already answered and others remaining to be answered. In doing so, within each perspective, we review relevant research, offer critiques and suggestions for future research, and discuss conceptual issues. Spanning the four different perspectives, several general points elucidate commonalities throughout the conversational topic literature. We therefore present our own conceptualization of conversational topic following from our explication of the conceptual issues (such as topical abstrachness, globality-locality, prototypicality, and focus) that emerge in light of the four perspectives. Finally, we draw conclusions based on our explication of conversational topic for various areas within the communication discipline.

Topic is one of the most fundamental concepts in the empirical examination of human communication. Topic as a communication concept, in other words, permeates and has utility for a wide variety of areas

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