

# CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION IN CENTRAL THAI

*John Hinds*

Conversation is an activity which is engaged in by speakers of every known language. While conversational strategies may differ from culture to culture, there are basic organizing principles which are immutable. One of these principles, I will claim, concerns felicitous topic shift. In this paper, I first present an overview of conversational interaction involving principles of speaker turn-taking. Then, I focus on one aspect of conversational activity, the change of topic, and present data from Central Thai conversational interaction which, on the surface, appear to violate the standard canons of topic shift conventions. On deeper analysis, however, it will be seen that the data do not violate these standard conventions, given access to socio-cultural information relevant to Thai society in particular. The results may be extrapolated without distortion to other cultures as well, although the details, of course, will differ.

## I. CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION

In some respects, conversational interaction may be likened to traffic patterns, and this is the analogy I shall pursue in this paper. In fact, researchers such as Duncan 1974 and Sacks et al 1974, among others, have focused attention on an interesting aspect of conversational interaction. They have focused on

[ 1 ]

### AMERICAN ENGLISH

- ( 1 ) use of rising or falling pitch at the end of a clause
- ( 2 ) lengthening of final syllable in a clause
- ( 3 ) end of a hand gesture
- ( 4 ) use of a stereotyped expression such as *but uh*
- ( 5 ) sharp drop in pitch
- ( 6 ) completion of a clause with subject and predicate

[ from Duncan 1974 ]

how it is that conversations can flow smoothly, one person at a time, with so few collisions ; that is, how it is that there are so few instances of simultaneous speaking. They are not talking about certain well-known American Indian conversational interaction, such as that reported by Philips 1976, in which there is an obligatory pause after the speech of one person and before the beginning of the speech of the next. Rather, they are talking about normal American English conversational interaction. What Sacks et al claim is that, " Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time," and " Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief." The question for us today is, how is it that interactants know who is permitted to talk at any given point in a conversation ?

What these researchers have found is that there are specific " traffic signals " which either give the other person permission to speak or which tell the other person not to speak. These signals operate much the way traffic lights or traffic signs do in regulating against potential collisions.

As a point of reference, I will summarize some of the major signals in both English and Japanese conversational interaction for giving permission to the other person to speak. These are presented in [ 1 ].

### JAPANESE

- ( 1 ) drop in intonation at clause boundaries, accompanied by
- ( 2 ) gaze toward hearer or head nod

[ from Hinds 1978 ]

Preliminary investigation into vocal turn signals in Thai conversational interaction carried out by myself and two graduate students in linguistics at Thammasat University, Supaporn Chutikanon and Khannita Ratanabhayone, has shown, as might be expected, that change in pitch plays no role in turn taking signals since tone in Thai carries meaning. Rather, if the speaker pauses at the completion of a potentially complete grammatical unit, this licenses the addressee to become the speaker. Lengthening of a syllable, or the immediate start of another utterance at such

grammatically complete units, function as turn suppression signals.

What is of interest about Thai conversational interaction, however, is the degree to which simultaneous talking occurs. The following segment of conversation transcribed and translated by the same two students mentioned above is typical of conversational interactions among friends, and it shows a considerable amount of simultaneous speaking, represented as overlapped lines.

[1]

- 1 A : phî ?ét lúcak ?àtsənii ka wásǎn lú pà  
Add, do you know Asnee and Wasan?
- 2 B : lúu lúu lú pà phî tūy lú pà  
Yes, yes. Do you know them Tuy?
- 3 C : dǎyyin tề chêu tề mây khôy lú khon nǎy ?a  
I've heard their names, but I don't know who they are.
- 4 lú tề wǎ ?ây bók tɔŋ tɔŋ [laugh]  
I know about "book tong toong"
- 5 lế man kó yók mư ?alay kô mây lú  
and they raise their hands.
- 6 A : ?aray ?ây bók tɔŋ tɔŋ  
What about "book tong toong?"
- 7 C : man lóŋ peen bók tɔŋ tɔŋ lǎ ?alay kô mây lú [laugh]  
They sing the song "Book tong toong" or something else I don't know
- 8 lếw man kó yók mư nà  
and they raise their hands.
- 9 B : thī wannán nà kadīi dǎy nǎam nà  
It's that day, it's "kadi day nam."
- 10 C : ?əə lú tề wǎ mii khon welaa chia lếw man yók mư yế yế thī wǎ  
Uh, I know that there's someone to cheer them and raise their hands
- 11 lók dontii nà  
in the "look dontrii" concert.
- 12 tề wǎ may may mây dǎy tít taam pen pəcam yǎŋ nǎn nà  
But I don't follow their songs all the time, there's something like that.
- 13 A : lếə  
Is that right?
- 14 C : ?əə thā thīap kà phưak bết bết ?alay la kó ?àtsənii dǎyyin tề chêu  
Uh, if I compare them to Bird, I only know their names
- 15 B : mư kòn mư kòn yù wɔŋ ?itsǎn  
In the past they played in the "Isn't" band.

- 16 A : lǎə  
Is that right?
- 17 C : thī wánán thī pay lǎ ?ét chōp duu mǎak  
It's that day that I went, and Add liked watching them.
- 18 B : ?ee thī lóng peŋ nùng m'it ch'it klây nay thǎŋ ?aw ma lóng dǎay  
Um, they sing a song "Neung mit chit klay" that we can sing.
- 19 A : lǎ phī nǎŋ lúcàk pà ... hǎn nǎp  
And Nong, do you know them? You're not saying anything.
- 20 D : rúu ...hà ...cīŋcīŋ lǎew nī ?àtsənii nī dǎŋ kwàa nǎ tǎ wǎ  
Yes I do. In fact, Asnee is rather famous, but I prefer Wasan
- 21 phī chōp wasǎn mǎk kwàa pǎ sǎŋ khǎw ...  
because of his voice, a lovely voice,
- 22 khǎ nǎlǎk nǎ kēem yúy lǎ sǎŋ khǎw lóng peŋ nùng m'it ch'it klây  
he has fat cheeks, and when he sings "Neung mit chit klay"
- 23 man ...man man plǎ dī nǎ  
it .. it's it's melodious.
- 24 C : khǎw mây lóng dǎay kan lǎə  
Don't they sing together?
- 25 D : mǎay ..khǎw...?əə...khǎw cà lǎn dontlii dǎay kan lǎ sǎn yǎy ?àtsənii cà lóng  
No .. they .. they will play together, mostly Asnee sings.
- 26 B :  
pen tǎn sǎŋ  
The beginner
- 27 C :  
cà lóng ..?ǎə ..  
He will sing .. oh ..
- 28 D : lǎ sǎŋ man cà nǎk nǎk kwà wasǎn  
And his voice is stronger than Wasan.
- 29 C : lǎ wasǎn tham ?əlay là ..d'it ?əlay pay lǎə ..?ǎə ..  
And what does Wasan do? Play the guitar? Oh I see ..
- 30 D : lǎ wasǎn cà lóng peŋ .. nīm nīm ?əə nīm nīm kēem yúy yúy  
And Wasan will sing .. a very soft song, and his cheeks inflate.
- 31 B : ?àat cà pen..  
It may be ..
- 32 D :  
khǎ mò ka kha lǎk tǎ khǎw  
It fits him perfectly.
- 33 A : tǎ khǎw kǎ lǎn dontrii thǎŋ sǎŋ khon mây chǎy lǎə  
But they play together, don't they?
- 34 D :  
lǎn .. ?əə ..  
They do .. um ..
- 35 C : tǎ khon thī lóng mǎk thīsùt khǎ ?àtsənii  
But Asnee always sing.
- 36 D :  
tǎ khon dǎŋ khǎ ?àtsənii  
But the famous one is Asnee.

- 37 B : wasǎn cà pen sǎŋ ʔay [nân nà .. khǎw lǎk ..] sǎŋ ʔəlay ná  
Wasan will be a .. they call .. it's called the
- 38 thî man mii chêu .. ʔəə sǎŋ kholas ʔəə sǎŋ kholas  
It's called .. um .. the group .. um .. group.
- 39 C : sǎəm  
Supplement?
- 40 D : sǎŋ kloə na lǎə  
To be moist?
- 41 A : lǎə  
Is that right?
- 42 B : suǎn yǎy man tham sǎŋ kholas  
He always sings in a group.
- 43 D : lǎə man dǎŋ khənǎat thî wǎ ʔaw pay pen ʔəə ..  
And he's so famous that Coke wants him to be ..
- 44 ʔəlay ná .. naay bǎep  
uh what .. the model for
- 45 khóok nà chây má pen khótsəna khóok chây má kó ʔaw pay khon diaw  
Coke, isn't that it? It's the Coke ad, isn't it? He's the one.
- 46 hǎn ma sədɛŋ wǎ ʔàtsənii dǎŋ kwǎa  
That means that Asnee's more famous.
- 47 C : ʔaw tǎ ʔàtsənii pay  
They only wanted Asnee?
- 48 A : lǎə phî chǎp ʔəlay pɛŋ ʔəlay khǎŋ man là  
And what, what is his song that you like?
- 49 C : ʔəə [phî ..  
Uh, I ..
- 50 D : phî chǎp nǎŋ mǐt chǐt klây  
I like "Neung mit chit klay."
- 51 C : lǎŋ ɲay wǎ mǐt chǐt klây thî bǎan ʔét thî wannǎn pǎet duu chây máy  
How do you sing it? That day, in Add's house, she watched on TV, right?
- 52 B : [sings] chǎun chii wan ..  
"Chuun chii wan .."
- 53 D : [sings] lǎəm tǎ wan .. ʔəə chǎun [chǐ wan chây chây khǎn chǐt khǎn phǐt ..  
"Leen tae wan .." uh "chuun chii wan" yeah, I can't sing it right.
- 54 B : ʔəə ʔəə  
Yeah yeah.
- 55 A : lǎə  
Is that right?
- 56 C : máy lú chǎ pɛŋ lòk tǎ nǐ kó chǎp  
I don't know the song, but I like the contents.
- 57 A : tham máy thǎŋ chǎp pɛŋ nǐ là  
Why do you like it?

- 58 mii khwaam lǎŋ fǎŋ cay kàp man lǎ wā ..  
It reminds you of something, or ..
- 59 D : man man plǎu dii ?à  
It, it's melodious.
- 60 phî wā man mò ka khon kè kè na sùan yà  
I think it's most suitable for older people.
- 61 C : tham nong dii nǎ  
That's a good melody.
- 62 A : sǎdɛŋ wā phî kè lǎ lǎ  
That means you're old, doesn't it?
- 63 D : kǎ lǎ  
I am.
- 64 C : tham nong kǎ dii sù tham nong man yen yen dii  
It's a good melody, Su, it's a cool melody.
- 65 A : lǎ  
Is that right?
- 66 D : man plǎk dii  
It's rather strange.
- 67 A : yàŋŋǎ sǎdɛŋ wā phî chǎp pɛŋ sǎtaay bɛp yen yen  
That means you like a cool style song.
- 68 D : ʔaa ..  
Ah ..
- 69 C : mây tǎn yen mǎak  
It doesn't have to be.

There are four specific reasons which explain why simultaneous talking may occur in Thai conversational interaction. Discussion of these features shed insight into Thai conversational behavior.

First, similar to English, are occurrences of brief overlapped conversation in which one party stops to allow the other to continue. This may be seen in section [ 1 : 49 - 50 ] and [ 1 : 68 - 69 ].

Second, again similar to English, is simultaneous speaking to show solidarity. The addressee echoes the basic content of the speaker to show that she is following the conversation. This is similar to a phenomenon discussed by Tannen 1983 who showed that there is a type of speaker of English she calls a "completer" who will help the conversational partner complete a sentence. This is illustrated in section [ 1 : 25 - 27 ] and [ 1 : 38 - 40 ].

Third, there are incorrectly given signals such as that illustrated in [ 1 : 30 - 32 ] in which the speaker ignores her own signal to turn over the floor. This

may be thought of in terms of "interruptions," the fourth type of documented simultaneous speaking.

This fourth type of simultaneous speaking is by far the most common, and involves what I have just termed "interruptions." There are three types of interruptions in this data set, and their functions are (a) to ask questions, (b) to give information, and (c) to give opinions. In order to understand why such types of interruption are so common in Thai conversational interaction, we can return to a consideration of Thai public behavior, and pursue the analogy of traffic patterns alluded to earlier.

Let us then consider behavior in traffic. There are behaviors in traffic in Bangkok which would be considered both impolite and illegal in many other countries. At traffic lights, for instance, instead of lining up to wait for the red light to turn green, drivers maneuver whenever possible to get closer to the light, passing those stopped vehicles which have arrived before them. This behavior is typically carried

out by motorcyclists who are able to weave between cars, trucks, and buses, but it is frequently carried out by tuk - tuk drivers, taxi drivers, and even bus drivers as well. Other drivers do not appear to get angry, as they would in most in other countries that I have lived in. Many cultures prefer orderliness for the good of the majority. In these other places, it is not desirable for a motorcycle, for instance, to weave to the front of a queue, since ultimately others down the line will be inconvenienced. In Thailand, the attitude seems to be that if it is possible to better one's own position in traffic, then one does so, regardless of the consequences to those who are not able to do so.

Similar behavior may be seen in post offices and banks. It is usually only the short time foreign resident who patiently queues in a bank or a post office. Thais, in general, have no compunctions about going ahead of someone else if they can. I am still astonished that I can be waiting in line at a xerox machine on campus and find a student who has arrived later than me attempting to hand materials in ahead of me.

I am sure that most of my Thai colleagues would like to dismiss these behaviors as aberrations, as impolite behaviors which are not condoned by the majority of polite people. Yet if we examine the reaction of the employees of banks, post offices, and xerox machines to these "line jumpers," we see that this behavior is at least accepted. This is because, with rare exceptions, employees will wait on the line jumpers even though they know that the person has cut in line, and even though they may have to handle two or more transactions at once.

This behavior is one which we must accept as part of Thai culture. Understanding it is not difficult if we consider a position taken in a paper written by Cooper and Ross 1975. They propose that a universal of behavior is the "ME - first" principle. This principle says that, all other things being equal, "I" comes first. This is seen in both language and other types of human activity throughout the world. The difference appears to be how many canons of politeness are imposed on individuals in order to suppress this tendency. Standard English, for instance, insists on sentences such as "He and I went to the store" whereas most nonstandard forms of English, being less concerned with conventions of politeness, prefer sentences like "Me and him went to the

store."

With respect to Thai traffic behavior, and with respect to Thai conversational interruptions, then, we have an extreme example of the "ME - first" principle operating. To the extent that people feel that their needs, either social or conversational, outweigh anyone else's, then interruptions will take place. Not surprisingly, interruptions of the type presented here occur more frequently by the socially superordinate person, but they are by no means limited to superordinates.<sup>1</sup>

With these preliminary observations out of the way, I will turn to the matter of topic shift in conversation. I will show, I trust, that those instances of infelicitous topic shift which warrant attention and which seem to run counter to universal topic shift conventions, are not counterexamples at all. Rather they may be explained by recourse to the "ME - first" principle discussed just now.

## II. STANDARD RULES OF TOPIC SHIFT

Despite the fact that the notion of "conversational topic" has been widely studied [see, among others, Li and Thompson 1976, Givon 1982, Hinds 1976, Hinds et al 1987], there are no universally accepted definitions of this term. The problem has been, and will continue to be, that the term itself is "intuitively" understood to mean "what the conversation is about at a given point." But, as Wardhaugh 1985 : 139 points out :

A topic is something talked about, but it is very unusual in conversation ever to talk on a well defined topic in a highly systematic way ... The comments the participants make will cluster, and the focus of that cluster is a topic, whether it be the weather, movies in general, a particular movie, a current news story, a round of joke - telling, and so on.

I believe that Wardhaugh is overly pessimistic in his view that a topic cannot be identified. He 1985 : 140 states, "you will hardly ever be able to say that a certain group of people is now going to talk precisely about topic X within such and such parameters for this or that purpose." This pessimistic position differs from, for instance, Keenan and Schiefelin 1976 : 338 who state that the "discourse topic ... refers to the PROPOSITION (or set of propositions) about which the speaker is either providing or

requesting new information."

For the purposes of the present discussion, we will consider that a "discourse topic," or more accurately, a "conversation topic," is the framework in which other information is passed back and forth. There is no requirement that comments be directed toward it as developments occur within it. For instance, a

common conversational activity in Thai, though not necessarily in English or in other languages, is to discuss prices. The information which is provided relates to specific items, but the overall conversation topic is none of these specific items: instead it is "discussing prices of items." This may be illustrated in the conversation segment presented in [2].

[2]

- 1 A : [laugh] kěy lǎŋ rú? plàaw  
[laugh] Will you pay or not.
- 2 pay kĭn than thĭi lǎey  
I will go right now.
- 3 B : mây mĭi ɲən rúu plàaw  
I don't have any money. You know?
- 4 pay duu nǎŋ wannĭi  
I went to see a movie today
- 5 lǎŋ phĕan  
and paid for my friend.
- 6 A : pay lǎŋ thammay  
Why did you pay?
- 7 B : mây rók  
No.
- 8 kôo man ?ók khăa kĭn nă?  
He paid for the food.
- 9 A : duu thăwrày  
How much [was the seat]?
- 10 yĭisĭp  
Twenty baht?
- 11 B : bàt bàt lá? yĭisĭp  
The ticket. Twenty baht a ticket.
- 12 kôo sĭisĭp chăy plàaw  
So forty baht, right?
- 13 man sŭu [NOT CLEAR] khăawphôot sǎŋ thŭŋ năam sǎŋ kĕew  
He bought .. two bags of popcorn, two glasses of water,
- 14 plaamăk tăwthoŋ thŭŋ lá? sĭpsǎŋ bàat  
squid, twelve baht a bag
- 15 khăawphôot thŭŋ lá? thăwrày  
How much did the popcorn cost?
- 16 hòk bàat  
Six baht.
- 17 sĭpsǎŋ pen yĭipsĭi yĭipsǎŋ  
Twelve is twenty - four, twenty - two.
- 18 năam ?ĭik kĕew lá? thăwrày  
How much did a glass of water cost?

- 19 cèt  
Seven.
- 20 .. pen thâwrày pen sìpsìi  
.. how much, fourteen.
- 21 thâwrày kôo mây phoo ròok  
It wasn't enough.
- 22 tềe kễ ?òok khâa kaafềe yen khâanlâan ?lìk sìp bàat  
But I paid for the ice tea downstairs, ten baht.
- 23 pen hâasìp  
It was fifty.

What happens in this segment of conversation is in fact the way that all conversations progress. Each utterance which is made sets the stage for the next by providing more or fewer restrictions on what can be said next. For instance, [ 2 : 3 ] occurs as a *justification* for why B will not pay for A. [ 2 : 4 - 5 ] is an *explanation* for why B does not have any money. [ 2 : 6 ] *questions* [ 2 : 4 - 5 ]. The purpose of [ 2 : 7 - 8 ] is to *minimize* the force of the "why question," since "why questions" are frequently used in conversation to voice disapproval. By indicating that "HE" paid for the food in [ 2 : 8 ], B opens up the possibility for the next set of utterances to discuss various items which might be paid for when going to the movies. This continues through [ 2 : 23 ].

The simple test that is used to determine "conversation topic" in this framework, then, is to ask, "What are the participants talking about now?" We

recognize that the answer to this question may be very specific or very general, and that it may be answered with varying degrees of exactitude. The most general response that an informed and trained observer can provide is the overall conversation topic, while successively specific answers constitute sub-topics.<sup>2</sup>

In Hinds 1978 and elsewhere, I have claimed that conversations progress in one of two basic ways. First, they may progress in a *paratactic* manner. That is, topic change occurs by shifting from a topic (or sub-topic) to another topic at the same level of specificity. The second way that topic change may occur is in a *hypotactic* manner. The same topic is discussed in subsequently more detail.

The sequence [ 3 : 24 ] through [ 3 : 33 ], a continuation of the first conversational segment, illustrates both types of topic progression.

- [ 3 ]
- 24 hỏo khít lểew mây nâa duu lểay  
I think I should not have seen it.
- 25 thâa mây chuan man nâ raw kôo sabaay lểew  
If I had not invited him that would have been better.
- 26 phoo chuan pay duu nẳ phoo man maa lểew kôo hây kláp pay sỉ?  
When I invited him to the movie, when he came, then I told him to go back.
- 27 [laugh] kôo thamngay dâay  
What should I do?
- 28 sèak chuan man lểew kôo tởn pay duu  
I had invited him, so I had to go see it.
- 29 rúnnon  
He's younger.



- 30 dèk fayfāa  
An electricity student.
- 31 nỏ๓ .. nỏ๓chaay ph๑an k๑y  
The brother .. brother of my friend.
- 32 man n๑s๑y dii  
He is nice.
- 33 A : yàak pay duu r๑an meennekhin  
I want to see "Mannequin."

Utterance [ 3 : 24 ] establishes the ( sub ) topic of conversation as " THE MOVIE B SHOULD NOT HAVE SEEN. " In [ 3 : 25 ], a further subtopic is introduced. This is the " HE " that speaker B has invited. In [ 3 : 29 ] through [ 3 : 32 ], B opts to provide more details about " HE " effectively developing the conversation in a *hypotactic* manner. That is, B begins with the topic of a movie, and then introduces a character " HE " into the conversation. The subsequent development concerns " HE, " a development which provides more details about the topic. In [ 3 : 33 ], A opts to change the original topic of " THE MOVIE B SHOULD NOT HAVE SEEN " to

another movie, " MANNEQUIN. " This is a parallel, or paratactic, topic shift.

### III. " VIOLATIONS " FROM THAI

We are now prepared to examine a few selected instances of topic shifts which do not seem to follow the types of progression which have been discussed so far. The types of violations which occur are not uncommon, although it must be emphasized that most topic changes in Thai conversation are orderly in the sense that I have been using the term. These non-felicitous topic shifts then are exceptional cases rather than normal cases.

- [ 4 ]
- 36 B : l๑๑w maa th๑am bii  
And she asked me.
- 37 bii bỏ๓k  
I said
- 38 "๑aacaan kỏ๓ ๑ann๑i khỏ๓ n๑u" [ laugh ]  
" Teacher, this is mine. " [ laugh ]
- 39 kh๑w duu m๑y r๑u  
She saw it but didn't know.
- 40 ๑aacaan khon n๑i dii caydii  
This teacher is good, kind.
- 41 A : ๑ỏ๓y pen w๑t l๑๑w  
Oh, I've got a cold.

While B has been talking about her teacher, A, in [ 4 : 41 ] suddenly speaks about having a cold.

- [ 5 ]
- 65 A : tham ๑aray sỏ๓ khon  
What do you do, both of you?
- 66 B : h๑y khray doon d๑a nay hỏ๓rian kỏ๓ kh๑an  
Write the names of students who are scolded.

- 67 A : ๓๓๐  
Oh I see.
- 68 B : คอต  
Take notes.
- 69 A : หอย หอย  
Oh, oh.
- 70 เมาkhuen noon tan tii nen  
I went to bed at 1 : 00 am last night.
- 71 B : thammay  
Why?

In this continuation of the same conversation, A makes another abrupt topic shift in [ 5 : 69 ] and [ 5 : 70 ]. Notice that this topic shift is also a comment about A's internal state. Note further that B in [ 5 : 71 ] sanctions this topic shift by questioning her. This should call to mind the instances discussed above in which employees typically do not try to punish queue jumpers, but accede to them.

#### IV. ACCOUNT OF " VIOLATIONS "

If we invoke the " ME - first principle " again, we find that it accounts for these types of topic shifts. The speaker feels it is acceptable to say something which is immediately important to him or her, and so does. It is necessary to point out here that the observations I have been making are not intended to say that Thais are rude in their speaking behavior. The observations I have made, however, do begin to give an account of why Thais may *seem* to be rude to non - Thais.

Conventions in conversation may differ from culture to culture. Members of a specific culture rarely find the need to question the behavior of others if that behavior follows the expected standards, whether those standards are formerly articulated or not. In fact, the only time we usually question such behavior is when we have had experience in a culture other than our own in which the conventions are different. .

To give a concrete example that many of you will recognize, many non - Americans form the impression that Americans are insincere. They often form this impression from a conventionalized behavior which is unconsciously known to all members of American

society, but which is frequently misinterpreted by outsiders. This involves what Americans say when they part company from someone. Typical closing utterances are " See you later, " " I'll call you sometime, " " Let's have lunch when you're free. "

These utterances are often misunderstood by non - Americans as being PROMISES to meet again. They are not this at all. Instead, they are expressions of a DESIRE to meet again at some unspecified time in the future. Since the words which are used appear to make a promise, it is necessary for me to explain to you how Americans know that these utterances are not promises. The key to this puzzle is how definite a time is stated. " I'll call you sometime " is an expression of DESIRE to meet, but " I'll call you tonight about 7 : 30 " is a PROMISE to call. Not calling in the first case is not considered insincere by Americans, but not calling in the second case is.

In Japan as well, there are conventional expressions which tend to be misinterpreted by outsiders to the society. If a Japanese says the Japanese equivalent of " I'll think about it " in response to a request, most outsiders will assume that there is still a chance that the request will be fulfilled. But those who know the conventions know that the case has been closed. There is no chance that the request will be filled.

If we shift now into Thai society, I think that it is fair to say that most non - Thais learn to live with questions like " How much do you pay for rent each month ? " " What is your salary ? " " How much did this necklace that you just gave me cost ? " We non - Thais learn very quickly that these questions are condoned by Thais, although we may find them difficult to handle.

On a different level, but operating under the same principle, we must accept abrupt changes of topic as well. We non-Thais may never become used to a student walking into the office and beginning to speak to us even though we are engaged in a conversation with another teacher. This violates the canons of politeness in many other cultures. But we must understand that abrupt topic shifts, interruptions in conversation, and line cutting behavior in public are condoned by Thai society, despite the protestations of our colleagues who have been exposed to non-Thai ways of thinking.

## V. SUMMARY

In this paper I have attempted to document specific conversational behaviors which center around simultaneous speaking and topic shift. Although this report is a preliminary statement, I think it is safe to conclude that there are different cultural expectations operating in Thai conversational interaction than in conversational interactions in other cultures. Specifically, the "ME - first principle" invoked in the first part of this paper operates at a higher level in Thai society than in other societies under consideration.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is not only interruptions which are sensitive to the roles of conversational superordinate and subordinate. Conversational subordinates are also required to respond to questions and comments of superordinates before continuing with their own comments. For example, in segment 8 through 13, B begins to talk about the price of food. In 9 and 10, A asks about the price of a seat. In 11 and 12, B responds to that before continuing with her original topic of prices of food.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to distinguish "topic" in sense from "theme." A "topic" is what the participants are talking about, while a "theme" is what the participants are doing. For example, "complaining," "joking," etc are themes. It may not always be possible to differentiate the two, but the attempt must be made.

## REFERENCES

- Cooper, William and John R. Ross. 1975. Word order. Papers from the Parasession on Functionalism. Chicago. Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Duncan, Jr., Starkey. 1974. On the structure of speaker - auditor interaction during speaking turns. *Language in Society* 2 : 161 - 180.
- Givón, Talmy (Ed). 1982. *Topic Continuity in Discourse*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia : John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Hinds, John. 1976. *Aspects of Japanese Discourse Structure*. Tokyo : Kaitakusha.
- Hinds, John. 1978. Conversational structure : An investigation based on Japanese interview discourse. in J. Hinds and I. Howard (Eds), *Problems in Japanese Syntax and Semantics*. Tokyo : Kaitakusha ; 79 - 121.
- Hinds, John, Senko K. Maynard, and Shoichi Iwasaki (Eds). 1987. *Perspectives on topicalization : The case of Japanese 'wa'*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Keenan, Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin. 1976. Topic as a discourse notion : A study of topic in the conversation of children and adults. *Subject and Topic*, edited by Charles, Li. New York : Academic Press, 335 - 384.
- Li, Charles and Sandra Thompson. 1976. Subject and topic : A new typology. In Charles Li. 1976. (Ed) *Subject and Topic*. New York : Academic Press, 457 - 489.
- Philips, Susan. 1976. Some sources of cultural variability in the regulation of talk. *Language in Society* 5 : 81 - 96.
- Sacks, H., E. Schegloff, and G. Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn - taking for conversation. *Language* 50 : 696 - 735.
- Tannen, Deborah. 1983. When is an overlap not an interruption? One component of conversational style. *The First Delaware Symposium on Language Studies*, edited by R. J. DiPietro, W. Frawley, and A. Wedel. Newark : University of Delaware Press.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1985. *How Conversation Works*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd.