

Syntactical Peculiarities in Conversational Discourse of American Undergraduate Students: Sociolinguistic Perspective



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Social dialects, or sociolects, are known to be defined through the social status of the speaker, his/her education, and, of course, age characteristics. As the American sociolinguist J. Herndon puts it, "...individuals differ in the ways that they use their language from one period of their lives to another" (Herndon 1970:112). Native speakers are believed to possess different ranges of vocabulary and syntactical structures in different periods of their lives. Also, as time goes by, people are bound to interact in different social situations at different stages of their lives, which can ultimately result in picking up and acquiring new syntactical ways of phrasing. Still, distinction should and is actually made between *social dialect* and *the very usage* of it, since the same sociolect may be used differently in different speech situations, depending on the *register* of communication. According to sociolinguists Th.Pyles and J.Algeo, "Differences in language that depend on who we are constitute a dialect. Differences that depend on where, why, or how we are using language are matters of register. We can change our dialects during the course of our lives, but once we have reached maturity, our dialects tend to be fairly well set and to vary greatly. Each of us also uses a variety of styles, and we change them often, shifting from one to another as the situation suggests" (Pyles, Algeo 1993:228).

Also, no less importantly, the same sociolect may have certain differences in usage depending on the gender of the speaker, since both female and male speakers are believed to use language differently, which speaks to the fact "...that gender differences in language are simply a reflection of the way society works" (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, Aronoff 1997:517).

From these perspectives, it seems interesting to look at native speakers' syntactical features that might take different forms in different periods of their lives. In the present paper, which makes up a descriptive analysis, we were looking at the syntactical features in the conversational discourse of American undergraduate students aged 20 through 22, both males and females, who have the same *educational background* and, probably, *socio-economic position*. To this end, twelve students were interviewed. As far as the *register* goes, it makes up an "interview" type. So as to provide equal communicative situation, all the informants were given the same set of questions concerning educational

life, students' social life and geography related issues. Later, the records were transcribed in written form. For the current paper, we restricted our analysis to the framework of six interviews with 3 males and 3 females.

To the best of our observations, one of the most striking characteristics of informal conversational discourse of undergraduates, as our records indicate, is the frequent usage of the conjunction *and* at front- and especially mid-sentential positions. This can be best illustrated in the following segment of the interview with a 21-year-old student of the Department of Slavic languages Patrick Fansler (dots and multiple dots indicate the length of the pauses in the stretch of communication).

K. V.: Patrick, would you please tell me how you find the academic life at UT, coming from your experience?

P. F.: As far as the academic atmosphere is concerned here at the University of Texas, I would have to say that I am really satisfied, **and** I think I made a wise decision by coming to this university. I am a Russian major, **and** I study . in the department of Russian and Slavic studies, **and** .. I really enjoy the courses I have taken, **and** I have really.. been able to meet lots of interesting people. However, if I could start again, I think, in addition to Russian I would have .. picked something else, because . the University of Texas is well known for its programs . in business and engineering, and not necessarily well known for its programs in liberal arts, especially. Russian and Slavic. **And** also. , I think one of my concerns is .. , **and** this is a part of the question, I am a Russian major, I am only a Russian major, I don't know exactly what kind of work I'll be doing in future, because many students decide to combine the study of a foreign language with something else.. **And** I am only studying a foreign language, **and** I think . it might be a problem when I graduate.

As this speech segment illustrates, in a relatively short piece of communication, lasting 1.5 minutes, the coordinate conjunction *and* got used at least eight times.

This feature of the frequent usage of the conjunction *and* speaks for itself quite obviously in the narrative discourse, with a certain sequence of events in the narration, like in the following segment of the interview with a 20-year-old student of Music Department Ryan Murphy:

K. V.: So, Ryan, would you, please, tell me how and why you ended up taking music?

R. M.: Well, say?

K. V.: Why did you choose up music?

R. M.: It all started when I was 12 years old.

K. V.: **And**...

R. M.: **And** there was this party that I went to, **and** we were playing "truth and day". We were sitting around in a circle. I said "truth", **and** they said: "You said truth six times, **and** there is nothing interesting at all". **And** so I said: "Ok. Day", **and** so they said: "Go play the piano". **And** so I did, **and** I loved it. **And** I said: "I wanna do this for the rest of my life". **And** I went to study it at UT.

The same speech characteristics, with respect to the usage of the conjunction *and*, can be observed in the discourse of female students. Even more, they would seem to use

this conjunction a little more frequently. Here is a fragment of the conversation with Carry Bildingsly, a 22-year-old student of Music Department:

K.V.: So, Carry, what's your major?

C. B. : My major is music. .. I'm actually doing flute. I am playing flute in a band. That's been my major this semester, **and** I really enjoyed it. I came to UT originally, because it has a very good music program, **and** it's becoming national even now, actually, **and** it's very interesting being able to learn a lot different things, such as music theory. **And** in addition to my instrument, we play piano, study different instruments, brass instruments, trumpet, and also string instruments, orchestra instruments, **and** that's been very interesting. **And**, basically, we do a lot of playing for the most part, more than anything else. **And** we're actually members of four ensembles, each... **And** that's a very good thing, because there is only about fifteen hundred people, and from college, **and** we obviously know each other very well, and especially within respective sections, like my flute section has about fifteen people, **and** we become close friends as opposed to UT where there is fifty thousand people, **and** it's hard to get to know well. That's a very good thing... But basically, I really enjoy music as major, it's been very interesting experience for me.

Another feature that stands out in the conversational discourse of American undergraduate students is the relative frequency of *attributive clauses*. In terms of gender linguistics, it should probably be mentioned that attributive *non-restrictive continuative* clauses are more characteristic of male speakers, while attributive *non-restrictive* clauses, including *descriptive* ones, are more characteristic of female speakers. The following segments of the interviews can illustrate these features. Here is a fragment of our conversation with Dan, a 21-year-old student of mechanical engineering:

K. V. : Dan, to my knowledge your major is mechanical engineering. So, how .. and why did you end up taking this major?

D.: Well, when I was applying to colleges, I wasn't quite excited about the process, actually. I, I had a girl-friend in High School, **who wasn't graduating**. I wasn't excited to leave home. I am from Colorado, not from Texas. Schools in Colorado are ok. For what I was interested, I was strong in math and physics, **which would put me in science field**, and the programs in Colorado were not good. So, when I started looking at programs, I chose Texas because it was cheap for out of states tuition wise, because it was in a place **I thought** would be ok. I came to Texas and picked mechanical engineering, without, without much thought, to be honest. I wasn't sure what it was. I knew there would be involvement in physics, **which was good**, and I ended up sticking with it. It's been a good balance of .. science principles, .. physics, obviously, but also requires integrated thought, and it helped to solve problems. It's what I intend to pursue professionally to become a physician. But .. It's something **that I had in mind** sticking with, even though it doesn't necessarily correlate to my career plans. Because I enjoy the topics. It's.. It's good information to learn, and it helps you think more clearly in writing class when you think out problems and things like that, I think, isn't totally different from one to other, even though a person might think differently.

In the discourse of female speakers we basically find the same amount of attributive

clauses, like, for example, in the following piece from the interview with Carry :

K. V. : ... Let me ask you then .. so what is the .. why did you take this course, writing course, what is the relationship between music and writing course?

C. B. : Well, my .. the main reason actually I signed up for first place was I needed upper division writing credit, and it was the only reason starting out. But actually, it turned out to be a very interesting class, and it's really something **that I can use**, because I am writing about music and this course will be very beneficial to me, because I would be able to research and learn more about music and improve my writing, **which is great**. And it also. this course allows me to express creative thoughts, **which is the same thing we do** in composition in music, it's been very parallel, and so writing with paper, expressing myself is the same as writing music, either playing, the expression or writing music in itself, **which we do a lot**. So that's why it's interesting. But basically .. this course is intriguing me, because it was different from other courses, it was different class, we had different people, we had different papers that were very different from one another, and it wasn't as structured.. My other writing classes **I've been taking** have been more structured and more like the book.

Speaking cross-linguistically, it has to be mentioned that in the conversational discourse of Armenian students attributive clauses are rather infrequent, which would probably be typical of Armenian conversational discourse.

Another syntactical feature that stands out in the conversational discourse of American undergraduate students is the relatively high frequency of adverbial clauses of reason introduced by the conjunction *because*. It is typical of American students, if not all Americans in general, to begin a sentence with *because*, sometimes reducing to '*cause*. We have observed that American female speakers tend to use it more frequently than male speakers. For example, let us look at the following segment from my interview with Sarah, a 21-year-old student of the Department of Middle Studies:

K. V. : Ok. You are originally from Texas, aren't you?

S. : Yes. Eastern Texas.

K. V. : Eastern Texas? Ok. What's your most favorite place in Texas?

S. : Well, **because** I got to UT, I have to definitely say Austin, but if I have to live in Texas, I would choose Austin, **because**...I also enjoy Dallas, **because**.. am.. that's the biggest city that is around to round up, and so that's where we go just to ... something very special.

It should be mentioned that the question asked does not belong to "*why*" questions; yet the speaker answers the question justifying her statements by referring to extra information, thus making her answer more valid. The same characteristics may be observed in males' talk:

K. V. : Dan, to my knowledge your major is mechanical engineering. So, how .. and why did you end up taking this major? •

D. : Well, when I was applying to colleges, I wasn't quite excited about the process actually. I, I had a girl-friend in High school, who wasn't graduating. I wasn't excited to leave home. I am from Colorado, not from Texas. Schools in Colorado are ok. For what I was interested, I was strong in maths and physics and, which would put me science

field, and the programs in Colorado were not good. So, when I started looking at programs, I chose Texas **because** it was cheap for out of states tuition wise, **because** it was in a place I thought would be ok. I came to Texas and picked mechanical engineering, without much thought to be honest. I wasn't sure what it was. I knew there would be involvement in physics, which was good, and I ended up sticking with it. It's been a good balance of .. science principles, .. physics, obviously, but also requires integrated thought and it helped to solve problems. It's what I intend to pursue professionally to become a physician. But it is something that I had in mind sticking with, even though it doesn't necessarily correlate to my career plans. **Because** I enjoy the topics .It's. It's good information to learn, and it helps you think more clearly I can in writing class when you think out problems and things like that, I think, isn't totally different from one to other, even though a person might think differently.

Speaking cross-culturally, that is not the case with Armenian undergraduate students who hardly ever use the Armenian equivalent, as our records show. This could probably be attributed to the fact that young American speakers are more likely and expected to justify their statements and arguments than would young Armenian speakers.

Another feature worth mentioning is related to the usage of *parenthetical expressions*. Our records indicate that it is more typical of male speakers than female speakers to use parenthetical expressions. While male speakers tend to use parenthetical sentences rather than phrases, female speakers give preference to the use of parenthetical words and phrases, if any at all. Also, parenthetical constructions used by male speakers tend to be placed in the inter-sentential position or less frequently at the end of the sentence, as opposed to parenthetical expressions used by female speakers in the front position of the sentence. For comparison, let us consider some segments from the interviews already mentioned above.

K.V: And another question is related to it. How did you come up with your major? Why did you choose specifically Russian?

P.F: OK. Am. Well, **to begin with**, I was an exchange student when I was in High School. And I had always had interest in foreign languages. Here at the university, . I have taken courses in German, Russian, **of course**, Serbian, and .. there was even a time when I wanted to take a course in Chinese, but . I didn't. But generally, I really like foreign languages, and, **I think**, Russian ...is a very important language right now, because there aren't many people from the former Soviet Union who speak English, and **I think** many students here study French and German, but many people in France and Germany already speak English, and, **I think**, in that perspective Russian is a lot more useful, especially because there are many more countries that speak Russian, and that's very popular. I really like Russian culture.

Female speakers tend to use parenthetical expressions less frequently, like in the following piece:

K.V.: So, Carry, what's your major?

C. B: My major is music. I'm **actually** doing flute. I am playing flute in a band. That's been my major this semester, and I really enjoyed it. I came to UT originally,

because it has a very good music program, and it's becoming national even now, **actually**, and it's very interesting being able to learn a lot different things, such as music theory, and in addition to my flute playing, I've learned piano and we also learn other wind instruments, brass instruments, trumpet, and also string instruments , orchestra instruments, and that's been very interesting. And, **basically**, we do a lot of playing for the most part, obviously more than anything else. And we actually have members of four ensembles, I am a member of each orchestra, band and marching band. And that's a very good thing, because there is only about fifteen hundred people and the music college itself, and it's a close-knit group of people, so we obviously know each other very well, and especially within respective sections, like my flute section has about fifteen people and so we become close friends as opposed to UT where there is fifty thousand people, and it's hard to get to know that way. That's a very good thing...But **basically**, I really enjoy music as a major, it's been very interesting experience for me.

In the following fragment of the interview with Christine Qrake, a 19-year-old student of the Department of Public Relations, there are no parenthetical expressions:

K. V. : ... OK. And...how do you find the study.. at UT , or how do you find your life at UT?

C. Q. : Am...I would love.. UT, I .. I wasn't happy about going here in the first place, because I wanted to go to a different school, but didn't get in, and now.. I can't imagine going to anywhere else. I mean I don't even know how I can gonna leave Texas.

Am.. Everybody always told me that UT was so big that you are just a number, but I don't feel that way at all, and are for the most really eager to help you like with things like that, so it is not as big as you would think it to be the largest university in the country.

Our descriptive analysis was not aiming at giving a full picture of conversational syntax of American speakers belonging to a specific social category; for within the limits of the current paper it has not provided a full range of speech situations – registers, with all the syntactical applications to be involved and displayed. Our goal was to point out some of the key syntactical features in the talk of one of the social groups in the United States. These are the frequent usage of the conjunction *and*, attributive clauses, adverbial clauses with *because*, and parenthetical expressions. Thus, the conversational discourse of American undergraduate students can be characterized by these syntactical peculiarities that have been most frequently met in our research.

References:

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2. Pyles, Th., Algeo, J. (1993) *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. Heinle and Heinle Publishers, Fourth edition.
3. O'Grady, W., Dobrovolsky, M., Aronoff, M. (1997) *Contemporary Linguistics*. New York: Martin's Press.

**Ամերիկացի բակալավր-ուսանողների բանավոր խոսույթի
շարահյուսական առանձնահատկությունները.
հանրալեզվաբանական հեռանկար**

Ինչպես հայտնի է, հանրային բարբառները պայմանավորված են հաղորդակց-վողի հասարակական դիրքով, կրթությամբ, ինչպես նաև տարիքային առանձ-նահատկություններով: Վերջինս կարևոր դեր է կատարում լեզվական միջոց-ներ ընտրելիս, քանի որ տարբեր տարիքում հաղորդակցվողներն իրենց բա-նավոր խոսքում կիրառում են տարբեր շարահյուսական կառույցներ: Ավելին՝ շարահյուսական բնույթի տարբերություններ են նկատվում նաև իգական և ա-րական սեռի ներկայացուցիչների խոսքում:

Սույն հոդվածում վերլուծվում են քսան-քսամերկու տարեկան ամերիկացի ու-սանողների բանավոր խոսույթի շարահյուսական առանձնահատկություննե-րը: Վերլուծությունը կատարվում է հեղինակի կողմից՝ ԱՄՆ-ում ուսանողների հետ անցկացրած ծայնագրությունների հիման վրա, մասնավորապես ճշտվում են, թե ինչպիսի շարահյուսական կառույցներ, բարդ նախադասու-թյունների տիպեր են առավել հաճախ հանդիպում ամերիկացի ուսանողների խոսքում, ինչպիսին են նրանց խոսքի շարադասական առանձնահատկու-թյունները: