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## **Social dimensions of syntactic variation: the case of *when* clauses**

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### **Introduction**

Peter Trudgill and Jack Chambers hoped that their 1991 volume on grammatical variation in English dialects would stimulate further research into the grammar of nonstandard dialects and the nature of grammatical variation in language (1991:295-6). Since the publication of that volume there has been a good deal more research on these topics, from theoretical linguists as well as sociolinguists, and even from a collaboration between the two (for example, Henry and Wilson 1998). Mainly, however, researchers have focused on language internal constraints on variation, and the social dimension of grammatical variation has remained less studied. It has been argued, in fact, that syntactic variation is conditioned less by social factors than by internal, cognitive and situational constraints (see, for example, Rydén 1991, Scherre and Naro 1992), and that syntactic variation may rarely, if ever, serve the function of distinguishing social groups in the way that 'classic' phonological and morphological variants do (Winford 1996: 188, Hudson 1996:45). One reason for this would be the infrequency of syntactic forms relative to phonological or morphological variants: since syntactic variants are less frequently heard, they are presumably less likely to become associated with a specific social group and to function as sociolinguistic indicators or markers. But until we have clear evidence of the social patterning of syntactic variants in different communities, or the lack of such patterning, we cannot draw any firm conclusions about the relationship between syntactic variation and the social world.

Discovering the social dimension of syntactic variation is, of course, less straightforward than for phonological and morphological variation. There are several methodological and conceptual problems, some of which are mentioned by Trudgill and Chambers, as we will see. In this paper I focus on some of these problems, suggesting the kinds of methodological procedures that might help resolve them. I will use as illustrative material an analysis of one type of clause found in conversations between 12-16 year old working class adolescents in Reading, Berkshire, recorded in adventure playgrounds during a nine-month period of participant observation<sup>1</sup>. This analysis will show that syntactic variation can be intricately involved in the construction of social meaning, but that the involvement is of a different kind from that of phonological and morphosyntactic variation.

### **Lone *when* clauses**

An initial difficulty in the analysis of syntactic variation lies in deciding what to analyse, as grammatical variants often evade the conscious awareness of speakers and listeners. Chambers and Trudgill point out that they are less easily disassociated from the discourse than phonological variants and are not readily subject to paralinguistic comments or observations. Furthermore,

contextual cues, felicity conditions and implicatures disguise (or perhaps compensate for) unusual syntactic structures in a conversation, whether those structures are the result of performance factors (false starts, ellipses, blends) or dialect differences (op.cit.: 292).

The clause type that I will discuss in this paper seems a clear example of an unusual syntactic structure that may be overlooked. I did not notice it until I had decided to focus specifically on an analysis of the clause structures used by the adolescent speakers. For this it was necessary to work closely with the transcripts of the playground conversations, identifying every instance of a non-canonical clause, including any that could be attributed to performance factors. One such non-canonical clause is an adverbial clause introduced by *when*, with no accompanying main clause. I will refer to these clauses as lone *when* clauses. Extract 1 provides one illustration: other examples are given later in the paper.

Extract 1 (the boys are talking about one of their teachers, who was married to someone I knew)

Nobby:        yeah Miss Threadgold she ain't bad  
Rob:            yeah she she went camping with us  
Jenny:        yes he told me she'd been camping  
→Nobby:     when we went camping  
Rob:           she's a good laugh  
Jenny:        is she?  
Nobby:        yeah

There are 28 lone *when* clauses in this data set, in a corpus of 50,000 words - not many, but enough for them not to be attributable to performance factors. Interestingly, this figure represents a far higher proportion of unaccompanied *when* clauses than the literature would lead us to expect. Lone *when* clauses account for 25 per cent of all *when* clauses in the playground conversations: there are 105 *when* clauses in total, 77 of which have an accompanying main clause. By comparison, in Ford's corpus of adverbial clauses in American English (see Ford 1993) only 3 per cent of the total number of temporal adverbial clauses had no main clause (there were only 2, in 63 temporal clauses). Furthermore, in Ford's data temporal clauses were the least likely to occur with no main clause: conditional clauses were the most frequent, although even so there were only 8 of these (15 per cent), from the total of 52 conditional clauses. Similarly, Mondorf's analysis (2000) of adverbial clauses in the London-Lund corpus found only 6 per cent of adverbial clauses with no main clause (259, out of 4462 clauses); again, these were mainly

conditional clauses. The temporal clauses in Ford's study were introduced with a range of time adverbs, of which *when* just one (Mondorf did not analyse temporal clauses). The frequency of lone *when* clauses in the Reading data set, then, marks them as an unusual phenomenon that is worth further analysis.

### Explicatory lone *when* clauses

The next step in the analysis was to identify the discourse functions of the lone *when* clauses. Four of them were used to explain something that had been mentioned in the previous discourse. In extract 1, for example, the discussion is about the excursions that the playground leader, Sue, organises. Mandy has trouble finding the word she wants to describe the destination of the next excursion, and after unsuccessful attempts by others as well as by herself she finally explains what she is referring to with her *when* clause.

#### Extract 1

Terry: Sue's given lots of outings...first one was Chessington Zoo  
Jenny: was it good?  
Terry: yeah  
Mandy: next one is the ludo thing ain't it  
Paul: not a ludo  
Mandy: judo  
Jenny: judo?  
→Mandy: not a judo! when you're on a water shoot and you go right in the ...er  
water.. you goes right down into the water  
Jenny: like a water shoot thing?  
Mandy: yes

Similarly, in extract 2 Rob explains how Britt (another playground leader) tries to control her mind, providing a time frame for a specific situation that illustrates what she does:

#### Extract 2

Rob: and Britt she's queer = = she's trying to learn to control her mind  
Nobby: = yeah =  
Rob: whatever that means  
Jenny: is she?  
Rob: [yeah  
Nobby: [yeah  
Jenny: oh how is she going to what is she doing to con  
Nobby: I don't know  
→Rob: when you  
look at smoke and that you know fire =  
Jenny: = yeah

Nobby: she looks at a flame she's. you can look at . she's trying to look at a flame  
until it burns right out  
Jenny: and then w. how does that control your mind?  
Rob: I don't know

This interactional function of the lone *when* clauses corresponds in some respects to a function that has been previously noted for initial adverbial temporal clauses. Ford (1993:29, 32), for example, notes that initial *when* clauses can explicate a semantically broad term such as *thing* or *then*. In her data, however, the explication occurs within an extended speaker turn; she argues, in fact, that the use of the semantically broad terms contributes to the projection of extended turns. In the Reading data, the four lone *when* clauses are explicatory but they do not project an extended turn. Instead, they clarify a term that the emerging discourse shows to be ambiguous, or too vague for present purposes, or otherwise problematic. They occur in response to a question from another speaker, and the turn in which they occur is typically short, as are the subsequent turns.

It is not only the lone *when* clauses that are used in this way: initial *when* clauses sometimes serve this purpose too, as in Ford's corpus. Initial *when* clauses with this function, though, bear a superficial resemblance to lone *when* clauses, since they are separated from their main clause by intervening speaker turns. For example, in extract 3, the *when* clause explicates the ambiguity of Sharon's pronominal referent *she*.

#### Extract 3

Julie: oh don't kick her Tina!  
Sharon: did she hurt?  
Jenny: who? that little one?  
→Sharon: no her ...when she kicked you  
Jenny: oh her..not very hard  
Julie: that's what she's always doing...kicking everyone

Julie had told her younger sister Tina (too late!) not to kick me. I had not heard her say this and as I had previously needed to safeguard the tape recorder from a small child who tripped as she was running past and fell on me, I thought Sharon's question *did she hurt* might refer to that event. Sharon's *when she kicked you* then makes it clear that her question was about Tracy's kick rather than the other event. Thus the sequence can be seen as *did she hurt when she kicked you*, with the *when* clause separated from the main clause by my intervening turn, in which I show that I had not understood who Sharon's *she* referred to. The function of the *when* clause is to explicate the ambiguity: Sharon clarifies the referent with her *no her* and then provides further clarification by indicating the specific time frame with the *when* clause.

Extract 4 provides a further example. Here Nick corrects my assumption that the shop he had previously mentioned was in Reading, adding *when I went down town* to what can be analysed as the main clause *it was* in his previous turn. The *when* clause gives precision, then, to the vague *quite a long way*.

#### Extract 4

Jenny: which shop was that?  
Nick: oh it was quite a long way  
Jenny: in Reading was it or...  
Nick: no when I went downtown

#### **Pivotal lone *when* clauses**

The remaining 22 lone *when* clauses have a different function: and unlike the explicatory lone *when* clauses they initiate an extended turn, usually a narrative of personal experience. There is an example of this in extract 5, from a conversation between two girls, Valerie and Christine, and one boy, Tommy:

#### Extract 5

Jenny: you have to do horrible jobs if you're a nurse.. all the bed pans  
All: <LAUGHTER>  
Jenny: have you ever been in hospital?  
Valerie: [I have  
Christine: [oh yeah I have  
Valerie: I got run over by a car  
Christine: I fell off a gate backwards <LAUGHS> and I was unconscious  
→Tommy: oi when I.. when I went in hospital just for a little while...  
Valerie: sshhh  
Tommy: cos my sister and my cousin they bent my arm ..they twisted it right round

Here a discussion about nursing as a possible career prompted me to ask whether they had ever been in hospital. Valerie and Christine each take brief turns to mention one occasion when they were taken to hospital. Tommy also mentions an occasion when he went to hospital, but he prefaces this with a lone *when* clause (also with an attention-getting *oi!*). This is interpreted by the other speakers as an indication that he intends to take an extended turn, as we see from the fact that Valerie compliantly tells her younger sister to be quiet; and Tommy goes on to tell the story of his stay in hospital.

Lone *when* clauses were also used to initiate and mark a sequence of 'joint remembering' (see Edwards and Middleton 1986), where two or more friends go over scenes from a favourite TV show or film that they have all seen. Here they sometimes project an extended turn in which a single speaker talks about a specific part of the film; often, however, they initiate a stretch of co-constructed talk where the speakers together relive their enjoyment of the event. Extract 6 illustrates this: it is part of a long sequence where four friends are discussing 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame', a film that had been shown on television recently (this is discussed in more detail in Cheshire 1999). The short

extract contains three lone *when* clauses, all of which nominate a specific section of the film that the speaker has enjoyed. The first nomination, from Johnny, is successful, as the following turns in the conversation show. Darren's bid is not at first successful: he stumbles momentarily, and the floor is immediately taken by Patsy, who proposes a different topic. Her topic is not taken up by the other speakers, however – Nicky, in fact, shows that he does not think much of this episode – and Darren seizes the opportunity to continue recounting his favourite scene, adding detail to increase speaker and hearer involvement and to justify the telling.

#### Extract 6

Patsy: I thought he was gonna fall when he was treading on the em er edge  
 →Johnny: when he was on them bloody bells swinging about = = and he  
 Patsy: = yeah =  
 knocked..and he knocked his master down didn't he from the  
 galleries...woo crash!  
 →Darren: when he was gonna em  
 →Patsy when he told that girl he was deaf .. he got deaf by  
 the ...that bell = = I know  
 Nicky: = but he was still there =  
 Jenny: was that on the telly?  
 All: yeah  
 Darren: I saw it in colour..you could really see the blood  
 Patsy: [Darren...don't put me off  
 Nicky: [I was gonna see it again  
 Darren: and I see this blood went slu-u-urp <DRAWLS> all come out .. I see it all  
 come out of his mouth  
 Nicky: it was horrible

Again, the function of these lone *when* clauses corresponds to an interactional function noted by Ford for adverbial clauses in initial position: they form pivotal points in the development of talk, project an extended turn and present explicit background for material that follows (1993:62). Initial *when* clauses can also have this function in the Reading conversations, as will be seen in extract 8, later. Thus, as with the explicatory lone *when* clauses, the function of what I will term pivotal lone *when* clauses is shared by conventional adverbial *when* clauses.

It is interesting that the lone *when* clauses in the Reading conversations correspond in their functions to what other researchers have noted for initial temporal clauses, but the fact that there are so many unaccompanied *when* clauses in the Reading conversations is puzzling. There is, in fact, an important difference between the lone *when* clauses in the Reading conversations and the unaccompanied adverbial attested elsewhere: in other studies it is often possible to infer a main clause for unaccompanied adverbial clauses, from the context in which they occur, but it is rarely possible to unambiguously do so for the pivotal lone *when* clauses (what, for example, could be inferred as the main clause for the *when* clauses in extracts 5 and 6?).

## Social variation

A simple breakdown in terms of the gender of the speakers who use lone *when* clauses points to a further unexpected phenomenon: as Table 1 shows, pivotal lone *when* clauses are used far more frequently by male speakers than female speakers. The numbers of tokens of explicatory lone *when* clauses are too low for conclusions to be drawn about their social distribution; and nothing further will be said about this.

@@INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The next stage in the analysis was to listen to all the lone *when* clauses in the audio recordings. This revealed that pivotal lone *when* clauses are distinguished from explicatory lone *when* clauses and, indeed, from all other *when* clauses, by a characteristic intonation contour. They are distinct in having level tones on every syllable except the last: this has a falling tone, and is slightly drawled.

Pivotal lone *when* clauses, then, differ in form from the other *when* clauses in the data set, both in their lack of a main clause and in their characteristic intonation; yet their interactional function appears to be no different from that of conventional initial *when* clauses (and of initial temporal clauses introduced by other temporal conjunctions). They seem, then, to be candidates for a variationist analysis. We could set up a sociolinguistic variable for which one variant would be the pivotal lone *when* clauses, and another would be initial *when* clauses with an accompanying main clause and the same interactional function. Pivotal lone *when* clauses could then be seen as sociolinguistic indicators, used in these groups of friends almost exclusively by male speakers. If we assume that the variants with a main clause are 'standard' forms and the pivotal lone *when* clauses are nonstandard (because they lack a main clause), we could then interpret the variation as a manifestation of the well-attested sociolinguistic gender pattern, where female speakers use more 'standard' forms. This would be consistent with research on American English that has found female speech to be less redundant than male speech and more syntactically elaborated though as Philips and Reynolds (1987: 92) point out, these findings need to be very carefully analysed and interpreted. Syntactic variation, we might then say, does distinguish social groups in the same way as classic phonological and morphological variables.

This approach, however, ignores two major problems associated with the analysis of syntactic variation. First, it does not address the question of what is 'standard' in spoken English apart from what is prescriptively defined in this way (Milroy and Gordon 2002: 185). Prescriptivists have nothing to say about adverbial clauses without a main clause, perhaps because they are so infrequent that they are not noticed, or because they occur only in specific settings or with specific groups of speakers. Second, seeing lone *when* clauses as an alternant to conventional *when* clauses is not necessarily the most appropriate way to conceptualise the variation in which they are involved. In the analysis so far I have been considering lone *when* clauses as adverbial clauses, in line with both

Ford and Mondorf. But this relies on conventional frameworks of grammatical analysis, which are heavily influenced by the form of written language and may not, therefore, provide the most appropriate categories for forms that are typical of spoken language. The functions of the lone *when* clauses overlap with some that have been reported for initial adverbial clauses, as we have seen; but adverbial clauses are, by definition, part of a main clause (Biber et al 1999: 194, Quirk et al 1985:1047). We can consider lone *when* clauses as part of a main clause only if we assume that a main clause is ellipped, but it would require a large stretch of the imagination to see pivotal lone *when* clauses in this way.

There are no other grammatical frameworks that can suggest alternative ways of conceptualising the variation. A way forward, however, is to look not merely at the form and the interactional function of the lone *when* clause but also at the content of the clause, to see what kind of events are nominated as topics. We have already seen that sometimes the event is part of a film or TV show that the speakers have all seen and enjoyed: in the extended turn that follows the speakers, through their talk, relive their enjoyment. Examining the content of the narratives of personal experience introduced by lone *when* clauses showed that here too the narratives are often about events that are familiar to the other speakers, either because the story is one that they have heard before, or because they also took part in the events. This is clear from extract 7, where Jeff's *you know* indicates that this is a familiar story (as does Alec's response); the story opener is a pivotal lone *when* clause uttered with the characteristic intonation (with a falling tone on *Wight*).

#### Extract 7

Jeff: when we went to the Isle of Wight though [you know  
Alec: [fucking hell he fell in loads of  
stinging nettles = = and the way he cried mate "oh God oh God oh God"  
Jeff: = yes =

Narratives of this kind, therefore, are also a form of joint reminiscing. The question that needs to be answered now, then, is why male adolescents should use lone *when* clauses in this way while female speakers do not. In other words, does the lone *when* clause function simply as a sociolinguistic indicator, indexing the fact that the speaker is male, or does it indicate that male speakers in the adventure playgrounds propose familiar topics for their narratives or initiate sequences of joint remembering more frequently than female speakers do? If so, what do the male speakers accomplish through this aspect of their talk? Further, is this something that the female speakers do not accomplish, or something that they accomplish using different linguistic means? These questions take us a long way from the analysis of syntactic variation, for it now becomes necessary to explore the narrative sequences that occur in the conversations. It is necessary, however, to follow this trail in order to discover why the gender difference might exist.

## Narrative analysis

The narrative analysis that I carried out is reported in Cheshire (2000). I will mention here only the points that are relevant to an understanding of the variation in which the lone *when* clauses are involved. Analysing all the narratives in the corpus would have taken more time than was available, so it was necessary to be selective. Several of the lone *when* clauses used to introduce a narrative or reminiscence came from conversations where there were several boys talking to each other, so I chose for detailed analysis the three all-male conversations with the highest number of narratives and, similarly, the three all-female conversations where the most narratives were told. I isolated all the narrative sections in these conversations, using Labov's definition of a minimal narrative as consisting of at least two temporally ordered clauses following the order in which the real world events could be inferred to have taken place (Labov 1972: 360-61). Very few of the narratives in the conversations were as short as just two clauses, however. This gave a total of 124 narratives – 58 from female speakers and 64 from male speakers.

A consistent characteristic of the narratives told in the male friendship groups was a concern to create a sense of group identity through the telling of a story. This was shown especially by central members of the friendship groups. In their monologues they explicitly marked their stories as familiar to the other speakers by addressing them by name in tags (for example, Nobby says *I was pushing my granny and I bit my tongue in half didn't I Ben*), and they encouraged their friends to tell stories of their own about events that were known to them all. A high proportion of the boys' narratives was co-constructed, though often the nature of the co-narration prevented a coherent tale from being told. This was because many of the contributions from individual speakers were insults, contradictions, interruptions and other attempts to seize the floor. The pace of speech was fast, and all the speakers seemed to be enjoying themselves: it seemed to be less important for speakers to secure the floor and recount their story than to participate in group talk and the camaraderie it produces. The point of the contradictions was to show familiarity with the events being recounted rather than to challenge the speaker, as could be seen from the speakers' responses.

Table 2 shows that 10 of the story openers used in the male conversations marked the story as a shared event about which they could jointly reminisce. Lone *when* clauses accounted for 5 of these story openers. In terms of their interactional function, then, these clauses can now be seen as one of a group of forms that propose a topic for a sequence of group talk. This group of story openers is used almost exclusively by the male speakers; there is just one token in the female narratives<sup>2</sup>. We gain a better understanding of why speakers use lone *when* clauses in their talk if we see the variation in this way than if we think merely in terms of the form of adverbial clauses. They are one linguistic reflex of the construction of friendship through talk in the male groups. As other researchers have observed, retelling familiar stories is a way of reinforcing group membership, allowing

participants to relive common experiences and confirming a shared long-term bond (see, for example, Norrick 1997: 211).

@@ INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Friendship was constructed more as a relationship between individuals in the female conversations, and as a result the style of telling was very different. Monologues predominated, and other speakers were rarely (only once, in fact) drawn into the telling with a tag explicitly addressed to them. When narratives were co-constructed they consisted of a series of contributions from individual speakers, with one girl's contribution building on the previous speaker's, and sometimes expanding on it. Contradictions and interruptions were rare, and when another speaker added to the narrative it was usually to contribute points of details that the main speaker had explicitly asked for. In all the female narratives, the speaking rights of the current speaker were respected and a coherent tale was told. Again, this was reflected in their choice of story openers: as Table 2 shows, 23 of these were temporal adverbial clauses, forms that were used almost exclusively by the female speakers. The *when* clauses used as story openers were conventional adverbial clauses dependent on a main clause: like the other temporal adverbial clauses used, their interactional function was to secure the floor by projecting an extended turn, whilst situating the event reported in the main clause within a specific time frame. Extract 8 provides an illustration. Here Julie answers my question about frightening events by beginning a story about a specific time when she and Valerie had been playing near the motorway (the M4) and had been frightened by a man who was following them. She begins her story with a conventional *when* clause, dependent on the main clause *there was a man following us*; her *weren't he* asks for confirmation, which her friend tries to provide, and together they establish the background information to the story. Once this has been done Julie takes the floor and continues with her story.

Extract 8

- Julie: if ever anybody says to me your mum told me to c.c. bring you home in my car and if I didn't know this person I would say I would run.. or else I would knock at the nearest house
- Jenny: yes...good idea... has that ever happened to you?
- Julie: [no
- Valerie: [no not really
- Julie: when we was down the M4 there was a man weren't he...following us... I think it..no wasn't he ..was following his wife ..weren't he?
- Valerie: I don't know....the M4....
- Julie: down the em..when we crossed that bridge before...Tina we was with...he had his shoes off and I ...I walked along the ground [and I and I
- Valerie: oh yes!..oh yes we was on the bridge...do you know the bridge?
- Jenny: yes
- Valerie: do you know there's another one half way along?

Jenny: I know  
 Valerie: we was on that one  
 Julie: and there was this fellow got out of his car and he was following us all the way (narrative continues)

Narratives with no story opener occurred more frequently in the boys' conversations, reflecting the fast pace of speech typical of these stretches of talk in the all-male conversations, which does not always allow for a story to be explicitly framed as such. The figures are given as 'zero forms' in Table 2.

The remaining story openers listed in Table 2 reflect a range of strategies about which it is difficult to generalise. Some openers, notably existential constructions and clauses with left dislocation, seem to reflect production processes, allowing speakers to place a new topic in the discourse before constructing a complete clause; others, including clause final *right*, *you know X* (as in *you know Annie*) and *you see*, are presumably strategies that secure the involvement of the addressee (Chafe 1982).

To summarize, the main point to emerge from this analysis was the narratives told in the single-sex conversations were ways of constructing friendship, but the relationship between the individual speaker and his or her friends was accomplished differently by the male and the female friends. The style of telling adopted by the boys allowed them to situate themselves as a member of a group, whereas the style used by the girls expressed a more individual identity. The implications for our understanding of the construction of adolescent friendship through language are discussed in more detail in Cheshire 2000. The implication for our understanding of syntactic variation is that it now becomes clear that pivotal lone *when* clauses and initial adverbial *when* clauses cannot be analysed as a linguistic variable, since in terms of their interactional function they are not ways of doing the same thing.

## Conclusions

We can now return to the question of whether syntactic variation distinguishes social groups in the way that phonological and morphological variants do.

Trudgill (1999) draws an important distinction between two types of linguistic sex differences. One type concerns the variables typically analysed in sociolinguistic surveys: phonetic, phonological and morphological features. These, he concludes, concern differences in dialect and accent. The other type are what he terms language use differences: these include "particular hesitation phenomena, particular syntactic devices (such as ellipsis and tag questions), and particular communicative and conversational strategies" (164). Trudgill considers Brown's (1980) point that points out that one reason for the existence of linguistic sex differences may be that women and men are trying to achieve different things through language; if this is so, "it will be the *language use* level that will be a reflection of these differences, since *dialect and accent* variants must be

held to be socially different (but linguistically equivalent) ways of doing the *same* thing (165). He does not go so far as to suggest that syntactic variation will always concern language use rather than dialect and accent differences; indeed, he has argued elsewhere for more research into the grammar of nonstandard dialects, as we saw at the beginning of this paper. What is important is distinguishing, as Trudgill does, the two types of social differences. His discussion concerns sex differences, but the distinction is necessary for other types of social difference – for example, social class differences in accent and dialect, on the one hand, and in language use, on the other hand.

I hope to have shown here some methodological procedures that can help us distinguish the two types of social difference. For example, syntactic forms are integral to the meanings that are constructed through talk, and so the message conveyed by syntactic forms must be taken into full account when analysing syntactic variation (see also Chambers and Trudgill 1991:292). In addition, it is important to remember that spoken syntax has its own structure about which we should keep an open mind when deciding on the framework of analysis.

It is worth stressing that the lone *when* clauses here have served simply as an illustration of these fundamental aspects of syntactic variation. In this case the gender difference in their use was evident from the outset – though trying to find an explanation for the difference took us a long way from a simple analysis of the alternation of syntactic forms. However the social patterning of grammatical features may not be obvious unless the features are analysed in their full pragmatic and interactional context. For example, Cheshire and Williams' analysis of, initially, existential *there* constructions, led us to discover unexpected gender differences in the use of terms referring to new information in the discourse, that indicate a greater concern for the expression of propositional meaning on the part of male adolescents (Cheshire and Williams 2002). This analysis of language use led us from our initial focus on existential *there* constructions to an investigation of a range of clause structures as well as a number of lexical forms, prosodic forms, and performance features.

Syntactic variants may distinguish social groups, then, but they do not do this in the same way as phonological or morphological variants do. They do not simply index membership in these groups; instead they may indicate deep-seated differences in the way in which different social groups create their social worlds. These differences can be discovered, however, only by analysing syntactic variation within its full interactional context.

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## Notes

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2. Mondorf found that unaccompanied main clauses (of all kinds) were used more frequently by female speakers in the London-Lund corpus, and we should not, of course, suppose that pivotal lone *when* clauses would necessarily be used more frequently by male speakers in other communities. Internal constraints on syntactic variation may well be the same across different communities of speakers, but the social meaning of syntactic variants develops as a result of their use in different pragmatic and cultural contexts, which may not be the same for different groups of speakers.

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Table 1. Lone *when* clauses used by male and female speakers in the playground conversations

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	male speakers		female speakers		total number of tokens
	percentage	tokens	percentage	tokens	
pivotal lone <i>when</i> clauses	91.7	22	8.3	2	24
explicatory lone <i>when</i> clauses	*	3	*	1	4
total	*	25	*	3	2

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\* Numbers of tokens are too low for a percentage to be viable

**Table 2 Story openers in the corpus of narratives**

	All-female conversations	All-male conversations	Total
<b>Markers of a shared reminiscence</b>			
<i>Remember when</i> clause	0	1	1
<i>What about that time when</i>	0	2	2
<i>You know when</i> clause	0	1	1
<i>What about X</i>	1	0	1
Pivotal lone <i>when</i> -clause	0	5	5
<i>I can't forget that time when</i>	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
<u>Temporal subordinate clauses introduced by:</u>			
<i>once</i>	6	0	6
<i>when</i>	5	2	7
<i>the other day</i>	5	0	5
<i>one time</i>	2	0	2
<i>one day</i>	3	0	3
<i>last time</i>	1	0	1
<i>yesterday</i>	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>
<u>Zero opener</u>	9	34	43
<u>Miscellaneous</u>			
clause <i>right</i>	1	7	8
left dislocation	9	3	12
<i>there was X</i>	6	3	9
<i>you know X</i>	2	2	4
<i>you see</i>	3	0	3
<i>see</i>	2	0	1
<i>you should have seen X mate</i>	0	1	1
<i>fuck me</i>	0	1	1
<i>he's a bastard mate</i>	0	1	1
<i>oh it's horrible</i>	1	0	1
<i>it wasn't half fun</i>	1	0	1
<b>Total all story openers</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>123</b>

