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Syntactic Accidents in the Spontaneous Speech of English and Armenian Speakers

Karen Velyan

Abstract

Fragmented syntax or a break of the flow of surface syntax is well known to be an indispensable part of spontaneous spoken language. Interruptions in the flow of speech may be triggered by pragmatic reasons, changes in syntactic planning and performance errors, which results in syntactic fragments. Syntactic accidents may take different forms in the actual flow of speech. This study presents a cross-linguistic comparative analysis of the cases of syntax in the speech of low socioeconomic status speakers of English and Armenian. Based on data from informal interviews with native speakers, the analysis presents a variety of syntactic accidents, such as *maxi-accidents*, *mini-accidents* and *micro-accidents* that come up in spontaneous speech. The article outlines the patterns of syntactic accidents, the frequency of their occurrence, distributional properties, as well as pragmatic reasons behind them. The cross-linguistic analysis summarizes divergences and convergences of the functional features of syntactic accidents in English and Armenian.

Key words: comparative syntax, sociolinguistics, syntactic accidents, social class and speech patterns, Armenian, English

Introduction

Among the key characteristics of spontaneous spoken language, it is fragmented and unintegrated syntax that stand out. These two features, though not identical in nature, are related. Unintegrated syntax, in particular, can in a majority of cases be treated not only as a result of performance errors and time constraints, but also, and rather, as a feature of face-to-face communication, in which case "... a lot of information is shared or present in the situation of utterance and does not need to be articulated" (Miller, Weinert 2009:23).

Fragmented syntax, in turn, can be viewed as a part of unintegrated syntax, i.e. as a specific phenomenon of a more global one. In general terms, it can be defined as a degraded realization of a proper, well-formed sentence. This being the case, it can also be defined as "untidy" syntax with disconnected phrases mostly resulting from performance errors in spontaneous talk, when the break of the flow of surface syntax happens. Coming from these properties, we can consider fragmented syntax to be part of spoken language behavior, rather than part of the language system.

In linguistic literature, the phenomenon of fragmented syntax as an indispensable element of spoken language has been given some attention over the past few decades. Chafe (1982) addresses the phenomenon of fragmented syntax. He

contrasts the syntax of spoken language to the syntax of written language, highlighting fragmented syntax as a property of spoken language.

In Russian, the phenomenon of fragmented syntax was investigated by Zemskaya (1973) in her work “Russian spoken language”. One of the main points of emphasis in her analysis is *syntactic blocks* that do not fit into the structure of sentences produced by native speakers in various professions, such as lawyers, doctors and representatives of academics, involved as informants for her analysis.

Miller and Weinert (2009) discuss fragmented syntax, as opposed to well-constructed syntax with easily established syntagmatic relations. The authors provide analyses of fragmented syntax in English, Russian and Italian. They point out cases of fragmented syntax, with the focus on the interruptions and the possible reasons behind them, such as changes in planning or performance errors. They also discuss the relationship between the incomplete syntax and the information left for the listener to infer based on the background information. In this respect fragmented syntax is not always identical to incomplete syntax since in the latter we can sometimes observe an incomplete sentence with proper syntagmatic relations.

Performance errors frequently have less to do with grammatical competence, than with certain non-linguistic limitations – “limitations on performance imposed by organization of memory and bounds on memory...” (Chomsky 1970: 10). Fragmented syntax in this context will be defined as *interruptions* in the flow of speech within the limits of one sentence, whether simple or composite – compound or complex. By interruptions in this context we mean the interrupting of the syntactic performance on the part of the speaker, not on the part of the interlocutor. Interruptions – «syntactic accidents» - result in syntactic fragments, or syntactic blocks, which may have the structure of individual complete syntagms or may lack syntagmatic completeness. In either case, they will be treated as syntactic blocks, or chunks of syntax, in other words.

The study of the nature of fragmentation of surface structures – syntactic accidents – seems to acquire more significance when spontaneous spoken discourse in different languages is compared. This may be relevant to two languages with different grammatical structures – English and Armenian. Given the fact that both languages, one analytical, the other synthetic, have differences in syntactic structures, we can predict that syntactic accidents in spontaneous speech in either language will display both similar and distinctive features in terms of formal and distributional properties. Moreover, the significance of the contrastive study is even more emphasized when a cross-linguistic study is implemented on *socio-linguistic platform*. The establishment of cross-linguistic convergences and divergences is highly essential not only for contrastive typology, but also for cross-cultural study.

We hypothesize speakers with different socio-economic background display variation in syntactic features in spontaneous discourse, syntactic accidents being among them. In the present paper, syntactic accidents in spontaneous talk of English and Armenian speakers of low socioeconomic status have been analyzed.

The data for our contrastive analysis are based on the informal interviews with native speakers of English from England (mostly from Newcastle, Northumbria), the

USA (Ohio), and Armenia (Yerevan, the capital city). The selection of the informants was made with consideration of a number of social criteria. The interviewees are native speakers aged from 35 to 60, with high school or community college education, involved in low-paid jobs: bus drivers, cleaners, janitors, store assistants, street traders, hairdressers. In terms of gender, the informants were equally selected in number: 6 interviewees per gender (12 speakers for each language). All the informants were asked the same questions, namely: 1. Do you think that for the last 15 to 20 years there has been a transformation or at least a change of gender roles in your home city?; 2. How do you find social life in your home city?. From pragmatic perspective, these two questions are different in character: the first one presupposes more analytical response and involves more *reflection*; the second involves more descriptive and open response, with a wider scope for narration. The interviewees did not know they were being interviewed for linguistic purposes – in order that we get authentic speech production. The recordings were then transcribed.

In our analysis we faced some difficulties in identifying the boundaries between sentences in the speech flow. The problem with handling the boundaries of spoken sentences primarily lies in the fact that the sentence as a *language unit* does not always share the *structural features* of the sentence in actual use (utterance) by the very virtue of the looser nature of syntagmatic ties and semantic links in spoken language – as opposed to the tighter organization of written language.

Alongside formal aspect, there are a number of other factors that cause some difficulty in identifying individual sentence limits in spontaneous language. First, in spoken language, sentence-utterances are not marked by the initial capital letter or the period, or any kind of punctuation at all. Second, long pauses do not always precisely mark sentence boundaries, long as they are. Third, the lack of whatever pauses – short, medium, long – between adjacent clauses with subject-predicate units does not necessarily mean that the given stretch of discourse presents one uninterrupted composite sentence. Last, intonation contours do not always outline the sentence boundaries, since, as our recording data indicate, even the declarative sentences often end up with a rising intonation – both in English and Armenian.

These sort of difficulties explain the fact that many linguists (Halliday 1989, Crystal 1987, Quirk et al. 1985, Crookes 1990, Miller and Weinert, 2009) refrain from treating sentences as analytical units for the syntax of spontaneous spoken language. Instead, they suggest *clauses* for analysis, not sentences. Unlike these scholars, Chafe and Danielewicz (1987: 94-96) do single out both *clauses* and *sentences* in their analysis of spoken language. In singling out a sentence, they emphasize the intonation factor, i.e. a single coherent intonation contour, possibly followed by a pause. More specifically, according to them, speakers produce sentence final intonation when they are aware they have come to the end of some coherent content sequence.

One would assume, though, that recognition of the boundaries of *sentences* – not clauses – may sometimes be based on the intuition of the researcher himself. This, in turn, would reduce the degree of validness of the data analysis. As Chomsky mentions, “...the major goal grammatical theory is to replace this obscure reliance on

intuition by some rigorous and objective approach” (Chomsky 1971: 94). So, one is highly expected to come up with a set of criteria that would reduce the degree of intuition and establish more or less solid ground for identifying the boundaries of the sentences.

The appropriateness or inappropriateness of the sentence as a unit of analysis in relation to spontaneous spoken language deserves is beyond the scope of this study. For our current analysis purposes, however, we *do* single out both clauses and sentences, based on the following three criteria taken in one unity: intonation, pauses and the degree of semantic links between subject-predicate units.

Objectives of the analysis

The overall goal of the analysis was to carry out a *cross-sociolinguistic study* of fragmented syntax in two Indo-European languages with different grammatical systems – English and Armenian, with the target group being speakers with low socio-economic background. This goal has a number of objectives. First, we examine both *similar* and *different typological features* of fragmented syntax in spontaneous spoken language of the target social group. Second, we examined the *frequency* of occurrence of syntactic accidents in the spontaneous spoken language of the target group, with gender-related specifics in view. Third, we examined the *types* of syntactic accidents most frequently met in spontaneous spoken language. Finally, we describe the *reasons* for interruptions in the syntactic performance in both languages.

Methods of analysis

We collected data by interviewing native speakers of English and Armenian. The interviews, with the average duration of 5-6 minutes, were transcribed. The intonation properties such as pauses (short, middle, long) were indicated by graphic means, specifically dots and periods. We recorded the frequency of syntactic accidents which are reported in Appendix A. We also applied a *structural* analysis.

In the course of analysis, we singled out a wide range of syntactic accidents. We sorted them into different categories, based on formal properties. Moreover, some categories have subcategories, as long as they share the nature of the same syntactic accident type but differ in terms of distributional properties or lexical elements. However, we limit the analysis to the most frequently met cases of syntactic accidents. We present the outcomes in the sequence based on the *varying frequency* of occurrence of syntactic accidents – from most frequent to least frequent. We also highlight the formal feature(s) of the syntactic accident and then comment on semantic and pragmatic properties.

We singled out two levels of classification for syntactic accidents. On the first level of classification, we make the distinction between *single* and *multiple* accidents. A single syntactic accident is one interruption within the boundaries of one sentence – simple or composite (compound or complex). Multiple accidents are more than one (usually two, sometimes three) interruptions resulting in two or more syntactic fragments within the boundaries of one sentence.

On the second level of classification, we identify three categories of syntactic accidents – based on their formal properties: 1. maxi-accidents; 2 mini-accidents; 3 micro-accidents. *Maxi-accidents* are defined as fragmentations of syntax in the middle of a sentence, with a new sentence following. *Mini-accidents* are characterized as a break of the sentence at a *word or phrase level*, with the same word or phrase repeated in the sequential segment of the sentence. *Micro-accidents* are restricted to a break in the speech flow in the middle of a word.

Analysis

In terms of frequency of occurrence, in spontaneous spoken English it is *multiple accidents* within the boundaries of one sentence that stand out. The reasons for multiple syntactic accidents in the same sentence may vary. The overall number of multiple syntactic accidents were **12**. These are illustrated in the following passage from the interview with a 59-year-old bus driver from Newcastle, Northumbria. (The spots of the accidents are indicated by double dots (..) immediately after the interrupted element. If the double dots, just like single and triple dots, are placed at some interval from the word, it will then be an indication of a pause, not interruption. The length of pauses may vary from short, middle, and long, which is respectively indicated by single, double, and triple dots).

P. People cannot afford to go out anymore just for meals or drinks and things like that.

K.V. Because of financial conditions?

P. Financial, job situation. *It's.. there's still work, but it's not.. they are just paying the minimum wage, and . it's not covering the expenses.* So we have more hours now. People are less holic. They are not even taking holidays, some of them working for all the days...

In the passage, the sentence in italics has two instances of syntactic accidents, namely: (1) *It's.. there's still work, but it's not..* (2) *They are just paying the minimum wage.* The first interruption takes place after the speech segment *It's...*, and the second one – after the speech segment *but it's not..* . In either case, the interruption takes place on the copula (*be*) level.

As for the possible *reasons* for the syntactic accidents here, in the first case the interruption takes place because of the change in planning of ideas, since the speaker was going to insert some background information – *there's still work*, which has concessive meaning and is followed by the segment which was supposed to have been uttered in the beginning – *but it's not..* However, the latter is in its turn interrupted so as to insert an explanatory idea – *they are just paying the minimum wage*, which has the meaning of reason and is followed by the piece of information the speaker, most likely, had in mind from the very beginning – *it's not covering the expenses.*

We did not find any essential differences in the gender-linguistic distribution of syntactic accidents in English. Out of the overall number of multiple syntactic

accidents (12), those found in the discourse of females turned out to be 7. This is illustrated in an interview with a 60-year-old female from Newcastle:

K.V. Janeen, do you think that for the last fifteen-twenty years here in Newcastle there has been a change of gender roles? Put otherwise, in other words, do you think that females nowadays have more rights, have acquired more opportunities for job, for socialization, so have more opportunities for business as opposed to what it used to be twenty years ago? Just coming from your impressions, strictly from your impressions?

J.T. Yes, very much. .. change. *It's changed a lot the last.. from going back to when.. when I was younger and working.* I mean the sort of wages when . there was.. there was a big movement in towards that, and I mean I don't think a lot men liked it...

In the sentence with multiple accidents *It's changed a lot the last.. from going back to when.. when I was younger and working*, the first interruption is after the segment *it's changed a lot the last..* which is followed by the prepositional phrase *from going back to when*, with no linear syntagmatic relations between the two segments. The second interruption is after the phrase *from going back to when..*, which is abandoned and then immediately followed by the clause *when I was younger and working*. Based on the formal features of the two interruptions, we can state they have different causes. The first interruption took place because of the change in planning the ideas, specifically: the speaker was probably going to say *It's changed a lot the last 15 to 20 years*, but then she realized it was longer than that period and made a shift to *from going back to when.. when I was younger and working*. Within the latter, there is another interruption - after the conjunction *when*. The likely reason for the interruption is a performance error since the discourse runs on with the same conjunction. The latter kind of syntactic accident we treat as *mini-accident*.

In both English and Armenian the spontaneous spoken language of low socioeconomic status speakers the number of multiple accidents was 12. However, unlike English, where multiple accidents are most frequently met, in Armenian this is not the case. This is illustrated in the following passage from an interview with a 40-year-old male street trader. (The passages are first supplied in Armenian, with English translations provided. The first translation is a word-for-word translation, and the second one is accurate for meaning).

... *Գոնե՛ մի տաս տասնհինգ գործարան քայտին՝ մարդիք աշխատեին, հետ.. հետ զար էր էլի էս էղածը., քայտ դե.. երևույթը հետ զար, քայտ ... անհնար բան ա էլի, էտի արդեն անցավ գնաց, դրա դեմը արդեն առնել չի լինի,...*

...*That ten to fifteen factories (they) would open – (so that) people would work., back.. back would come what used to be., but.. the situation back would come, but ... impossible (that) thing is, that's already gone, that against already you can do nothing,...*

(... That they (authorities) would open ten to fifteen factories (I wish they would open ten to fifteen factories) (so that) people could work., (so that) what used to be could come back., but.. (so that) the previous (social) situation could

come back, but ... that's impossible, that's already gone, there is no way to bring it back)

This passage is one composite sentence, more specifically, it is a compound-complex sentence with six clauses. Such extended sentences are very typical of not only spoken, but also written Armenian. The speaker first abandons the sentence after the postposition հետ (back), which is a part of the phrasal verb հետ գալ (get back) - ...հետ.. հետ գալ էր էլի էս էրա՞ծը,....((so that) what used to be might come back).

The second interruption takes place after the adversative conjunction բայց (but) (with the interjection դե corresponding to English *well*) of the second coordinate clause - բայց դե.. երևույթը հետ գալ, բայց... (but.. (so that) the previous (social) situation could come back, but...). Still, there are different reasons for the two interruptions. The first interruption is the result of a performance error, since after the interruption the discourse runs on with the same postposition. The second interruption is caused by the speaker's intention to insert information which is semantically similar to the information expressed in the segment after the first interruption. This similarity of information expressed in two different segments indicates that the information was still on top of the speaker's mind when he was making a transition to another thought.

The number of syntactic accidents in cross-gender distribution of multiple syntactic accidents was slightly larger in the speech of females – 7 – as opposed to 5 in the speech of males. This is the same proportion we found in the English data.

Next is a sentence with multiple accidents from an interview with a 54-year-old female janitor.

...Ընդունվեց համալսարան, *քանի*.. ինքը խելացի երեխա յա, *բայց քանի որ* . *գումար չկար վճար էինք*.. պետական համալսարան ընդունվեց, էտենց, բանը, դուրս մնաց էրեխեն:...

...(my son) was admitted to the university, as.. he is a smart boy, but as money there wasn't for us to pay.. state university was admitted to, so, well, dropped the boy. ...

(my son) was admitted to the university, as.. he is a smart boy, but as we no money to pay.. he was admitted to the state university.. so, well, the boy quit the university)

As in the previous case, this is a compound-complex sentence with 6 clauses. The first interruption of the speaker's syntactic performance is after the subordinate conjunction *քանի* (as) – Ընդունվեց համալսարան, *քանի*.. ((my son) was admitted to the university, as..). Then, the speaker abandons the reduced headless attributive clause - բայց *քանի որ* . *գումար չկար վճար էինք*.. պետական համալսարան ընդունվեց,.. (but as there was no money to pay.. he was admitted to the state university...). We believe that in either case the fragmentation of the surface structure has the same reason – to insert extra material important to the speaker:

(my son) was admitted to the university, as.. *he is a smart boy*, but as there was no money to pay.. *he was admitted to the state university*.. so, well, the boy dropped the university)

Still, the information expressed in the second inserted segment – *he was admitted to the state university* – has some pragmatic value as well, since it has an extra implication, namely: they could not pay for the tuition because he was admitted to the *state* university, with the rhematic focus being on *state*. This inference is based on our knowledge of the educational system in Armenia, where the tuition in the state university is normally higher than in the non-state ones. In this case, the inserted segment may function as an explanation of this idea.

In terms of the *formal* features of these two interruptions of identical nature, they manifest some differences. Specifically, the first break of the speech flow takes place after the conjunction *as*, and after the inserted information the interrupted idea continues with the same conjunction – *as .. he is a smart boy, but as there was no money to pay..*, which means that the interrupted idea was still on top of the speaker's mind when it was interrupted. In the second interruption, the fragmented thought runs on without any repetition of any lexical item from the previous interrupted segment.

We found a wide range of cases with different formal features in *single* syntactic accidents. Our data indicate that in spontaneous spoken English the highest degree of syntactic accident frequency is found at *word* level where both the interruption and the continuation of the flow of speech happen with *the same word*. The interruptions at word level we classify as *mini accidents*. There were 26 of this kind of interruption. Within this category of syntactic accidents we found two subcategories: 1. when the interruption takes place *at the very beginning* of the sentence and 2. When the interruption takes place *in the middle* of the sentence. The latter makes up 14 out of 26 instances. Here is an example from an interview with a 38-year-old female hairdresser from Southern Ohio:

...Other than that, *I think just the working.. working* for women, I think, has changed over the last twenty years....

In this example the word *working* is repeated after the interruption. Another example is from an interview with a 39-year-old male street-trader from Newcastle in which the interruption takes place at the preposition level.:

I am all for.. for equality, you know.

Sometimes whole phrases are repeated after the interruption as in the following example from an interview with the female from Southern Ohio:

...And, you know, there's more stores, *there's more.. there's more* small town feel than there used to be,...

In the example the phrase *there's more* which is repeated in the continuation of the discourse.

Within the subcategory of interruptions in the middle of the sentence we also include those within the limits of composite sentences, mostly complex sentences, as in the following examples from interviews with a female from Southern Ohio and a male from Newcastle:

1. I think it's.. it's more or less now.
2. Where I live it's.. it's just going downhill.

These interruptions take place at the beginning of the subordinate clauses, specifically, the subordinate object clause in the first case – I think *it's.. it's more or less now*, and at the beginning of the principle clause in the second case – Where I live *it's.. it's just going downhill*, preceded by the adverbial clause of place. However, since we recognize *the sentence* as an analytical unit (including the composite sentence), not just *the clause*, we consider the place of the interruption within the limits of the whole composite sentence. There were only 3 such cases in our samples.

There were 12 interruptions at word level *at the very beginning* of sentences. Two examples below are from interviews with a 46-year-old male street trader and 60-year-old female from Newcastle:

1. Yes, *I.. I* think the female, yes, have a lot more opportunities than it used to
2. *People.. people* are friendly.

The reasons for syntactic accidents of this kind could be attributed to the speakers having some thought in their minds – some abstract syntactic structure they aim at – but seem to be unable to give expression to immediately on the surface. This results in a syntactic accident.

Under the category of syntactic accidents at the beginning of a sentence we also included cases with the interrupted segment being the contracted form of the link verb *be* with a pronoun, such as *it's* or *that's*. In spite of the fact that they represent a combination of *two* individual lexical items which *syntactically* function as the subject (*it, that*) and the link verb of the compound nominal predicate (*is*), strictly *syntagmatically*, at speech level they function as one unit and are pronounced as one syllable. Two examples below illustrate this:

1. Yeah, *that's.. That's* all I can say about that really.
2. *It's.. it's* really good social life in Newcastle,...

Although the forms *that's* and *it's* are contracted variants of the complete forms *that is* and *it is*, native speakers are very unlikely to use the complete forms in spontaneous spoken language and thus the continuation of the interrupted segment has the same form.

Our data indicate that in Armenian, unlike English, the interruption and continuation with the same word is not very typical. We found 26 instances in English, but only 4 instances (3 at the beginning and 1 in the middle of the sentence) in Armenian. This makes us believe that this kind of syntactic accidents is not typical of Armenian. Here are some examples:

1. *Բւ.. Իմ* կարծիքով շատ շատ ա բարձրացել էս .. կանանց դերը,...
- My.. my* opinion a lot a lot has risen that .. females' role
(In my opinion, the females' role has risen a lot)
2. Չգիտեմ ինչի, *ամեն.. ամեն* բնագավառում, առևտուրը՝ առավել ևս, որ անգամ կասայում իրանք միշտ կանանց են ուզում
- Don't know why (in) *every.. every* sector, trade especially (that) even (at the) cash desk they always females need
(Don't know why in every.. every sector, trade especially, even at the cash desk they always need females)

After single word interruptions the next most frequent comes is interruptions in the middle of the sentence, and, after a pause, the speech continues with a new sentence expressing a new thought. This last type of syntactic accidents we classify as *maxi-accidents* because the whole sentence is changed. This implies a change in meaning which triggers a change in the sentence order. There were 10 maxi-accidents in English. As in the case of mini-accidents, we identifies two subcategories: 1. maxi-accidents with *a complete lexical change* and 2. Maxi- accidents with *a partial lexical change*.

The overall number of maxi-accidents with a complete lexical change turned out to be **6**, the vast majority of them met in the speech of male speakers (5) as opposed to a single occurrence in the speech of a female. Let us have a look at a couple of examples from the interviews with a male (example 1) and female (example 2) from Newcastle:

1. *This country is..* To me, it's going down hill.
2. *They still..* It's, maybe, the thing that's been born and bred into people.

The reason the speakers abandon the sentences and thus interrupt their syntactic performance lies, mostly, in the *change of planning of ideas* in the speaker's mind. On the surface syntactic level, this is manifested in different wording in the interrupted segments (*this country is..; they still..*) and the sequential segments of the discourse (*to me, it's going down hill; it's, maybe, the thing that's been born and bred into people*).

The change of planning of ideas itself may be triggered by a number of secondary reasons. In the first example the sequential sentence starts with the prepositional phrase *to me* which indicates that the speaker, probably, wanted to make the statement he was going to utter less categorical and more subjective. Another possible reason may be the speaker's intention to give a *different phrasing* to his thought. This may be justified in that the phrase *this country* has the deictic item *it* in the sequential sentence. The same issue is seen in the second example. The symptom of the planning problem is the pause after the abandoned sentence *They still..* . With the change of planning of ideas still being the primary reason for the interruption, the speaker also wanted to give a different phrasing to her thought. Like the previous example, there are two co-referents in two adjacent sentences – *they* and *people*. Also, the speaker is likely to wish to give some *explanatory* value to her idea.

Within this subcategory of maxi-accidents, the following illustrates the syntactic relationships between non-adjacent sentences. The discourse is from an interview with a 46-year-old street trader from Newcastle.

- They still ...* society where all views still have it. *But it..* Which is slowly, which is very good, you know.

Here there are two instances of interruption in non-adjacent sentences. The second interruption is after the phrase *But it..*, followed by individual attributive non-restrictive continuative clauses *Which is slowly, which is very good, you know*. The latter is related not to the interrupted sentence *But it...*, but rather to the preceding

sentence *society where all views still have it*, for which the original version of the whole sentence would have been as follows:

They still ... society where all views still have it, which is slowly, which is very good, you know.

The reason for the interruption in the original version lies in the fact that the sequential clauses *Which is slowly, which is very good, you know* “jumped up” to the top of the speaker’s mind later, on the second thought, so to say. Considering this piece of information important, the speaker inserted it in his discourse, which entailed the interruption of the sentence *But it..*

In Armenian, we see a different picture in terms of the frequency of maxi-accidents with a complete lexical change. As opposed to **6** instances in English, we have **19** instances in Armenian. From the gender-linguistic perspective, out of 8 speakers in whose discourse we found this kind of syntactic accidents 5 are males and 3 are females. In terms of the cross-gender distribution, we seem to see almost the same picture as in English: the vast majority of syntactic accidents of this kind are met in the discourse of males – 14 – as opposed to only 4 in the discourse of females. By way of illustration, we will bring the following examples from the interviews with a 54-year-old male book-trader (1) and a 35-year-old female store-assistant (2)

1. *Ուղղակի ուզում եմ ասել, կանայք ..* Հա, էրևում ա, որ ուզում են պայքարեն սղամարդկանց հետ հավասար:

Just (I) want (to) say (that) women.. Yes, obvious is that (women) want (to) strive men with equally.

(I just want to say women.. Yes, it’s obvious that women want to strive equally with men)

2. *Նույն էլ..* Պարզ չ’ի, որ ինքը չի նստելու սպասի իրա ամուսինը իրա երեխում փող կուղարկի թե չի ուղարկի, բնականաբար,...

The same is.. Clear isn’t that she isn’t going (to) wait (whether) her husband her kid money will send or not send, naturally...

(The same (is).. Isn’t it clear that she isn’t going to wait and see whether her husband will send her kid money or not, naturally...)

In either example, the sentences are abandoned at the subject level, although in the first example the syntactic performance is interrupted after the subject in the subordinate clause (*Ուղղակի ուզում եմ ասել, կանայք ..* (Just want to say (that) women..), whereas in the second example - after the subject in the starting sentence (*Նույն էլ..* (The same is..)) the Armenian particle *էլ* can be rendered by the link verb *be* in English. In each case there is the same reason for the syntactic accident: *the change in planning of ideas*, as a result of which the first sentences remain hanging in the flow of speech. While still semantically connected to the interrupted idea, a new idea comes to the speaker’s mind, the speaker feels it is more important than the previous interrupted one and the preceding sentence is left incomplete.

Another variety of maxi-accidents in spontaneous spoken language is found in situations when the interruption is still in the middle of the sentence but with a *partial lexical change* in the sequential segment. A partial lexical change is the *insertion* of a new lexical item or *substitution* of one lexical item for another. The

lexical change is usually caused by the speaker's intention *to add an idea* which is missing from his previous speech segment and which is meaningful to the speaker. Usually, the interrupted segments have a subject-predicate unit, but, being interrupted and pronounced with a rising intonation, do not express a complete idea.

This type of syntactic accident is infrequent – 4. We found that in terms of gender-linguistic properties this kind of syntactic accident is equally distributed: 2 instances per males and females. The following examples are from interviews with a 39-year-old street-trader from Newcastle (1) and the 38-year-old hair-dresser from Southern Ohio (2):

1. ...*And that's the way..* that's probably the way it should be,...
2. ...*That I think um. as women..* I think, there's a lot of women are working more.

In each case (*And that's the way..* , ...*That I think um. as women..*) there is an insertion of lexical items after the interrupted segment: *that's probably the way it should be,...* *I think, there's a lot of women are working more.* The inserted elements do not shift the underlying meaning. However, they appear to add some modality to the whole proposition. These minor inserted lexical elements seem important to the speakers in terms of the exactness of information they are giving at that point in time, so they go back to the beginning of their message and “repair” their original message.

The definition of “lexical insertions” is rather conventional in this context, since the insertions – “repairs” – can be as extended as *parenthetical clauses*, like in the following sentence from the interview with the same male:

I think.. Like I said before, I think women can just keep doing any job a man can do very much.

Here again the original message is interrupted (*I think..*) because the speaker suddenly remembered that he had already made a similar statement in his previous discourse and, to justify his repetition, restarts his message with the parenthetical clause *Like I said before.*

In Armenian, the number of syntactic accidents with a partial lexical change turned out to be slightly higher - 5 - than the 4 in English. The similarity is that 2 instances out of 6 are found in females' talk. This is illustrated in the following examples from interviews with a 58-year-old street store female owner (1) and a 57-year-old assistant-sawyer (2):

1. Շատ.. Սոցիալական վիճակը շատ ծանր ա ժողովրդի:
Very.. (the) Social condition very tough is (of the) people.
(*Very.. The social condition of people is very tough*)
2. Էն ժամանակ.. մարդիք աշխատում էին, կարում էին գնաին ընտանիքով, էթային *իրանց*.. մի տարի աշխատելով հանգստանում էին իրանց համար մի ամիս, դուրս էին գալիս մի տեղ:
(*At*) that time.. people (would) work, could afford to go (with the) family, *to go them..* one year having worked (would) have a rest them for (for) a month, (would) go somewhere

(Previously, people would work, could afford to leave with their family, to go.. having worked for a year they would have a rest for a month, would travel somewhere)

In the first case the sentence starts and then stops with the adverb of degree (շատ)(very). The speaker seems to have realized that she has missed the subject (սոցիալական վիճակը) (the social condition) and “repairs” the sentence starting it all over again with the subject group.

The same can be said about the syntactic accident in the second example. The sentence is abandoned in the middle of the would-be prepositional phrase (իրանց) (them) which is restored (իրանց համար) (for them) after the inserted participial phrase (մի տարի աշխատելով) (having worked for a year) and the verb predicate (հանգստանում էին) (would have a rest). The speaker has interrupted his narration in the middle of the prepositional phrase possibly to emphasize that in the previous times, having worked for a year it was quite possible for people to save money and people could afford to travel. That may be why he leaves a part of the phrase hanging and inserts a new piece of information.

Among the basic types of syntactic accidents we also identified *micro-accidents*. The peculiarity of these lies in the fact the interruption takes place in the *middle of the word*. The occurrence of this kind of accidents is infrequent. It was very rarely found in English samples (3 instances: 1 - in the talk of a male and 2 - in the talk of females). Below are two examples from interviews with a female bingo caller (1) and the male street-trader from Newcastle (2)

1. Yeah, yeah, it's definitely changed on the better for the.. for the women and in.. in Newcastle definitely more opportunities, employmentwise, there is a lot more choice and women are given more or less now chance as men *now.. nowadays*, and a lot more socializing, more than it used to be.
2. People have alcohol problems, drug problems, there is a lot more, lot more *beg.. it's just begging*, it's.. it can be a little bit intimidating for.. for you, for elderly people, because it can be intimidating, you know.

In these examples the interruptions take place in the middle of the words (*now.. nowadays, beg.. begging*), but on the boundaries of the *morphemes* that make up the words. However, the «repairs» are different in nature: in the first example (... *as men now.. nowadays, and a lot more socializing, more than it used to be*), the «repaired» word comes immediately after the interrupted word, whereas in the second example (...*lot more beg.. it's just begging...*) it is in non-adjacent position. This “repair” is accompanied with the partial lexical change which we discussed above. In this respect, in the second case there seems to be a *pragmatic* reason for the interruption in the middle of the word: the speaker probably wants to emphasize the *social* aspect of begging and interrupts the word so as to use it in a new clause (*it's just begging*), with the particle *just* having a specifying function.

In Armenian we found the number of the mid-word interruptions to be twice as frequent as in English. Also, in the mid-word interruptions, we found one cross-linguistic distinctive feature, a kind of the mid-word interruption which is missing in the English data, specifically: the interrupted word is not repeated in the segment

that follows. In terms of gender-linguistic specifics, five interruptions were found in the females' discourse as opposed to one in the male's.

The example below illustrates mid-word interruptions with immediate repetition as in this example from an interview with a 60-year-old female baker:

Ուննորը ավելի շատ կշփվի, ասենք, քաղաքական հարցերի հետ,
քաղաքական

էտ լայն. լայնատարած էտ միջավայրում, քանց թե, ասենք, ցածր խավը,
չուննորը, աղքատը.

(A) well-off (man) more will deal, say, political issues with, political that *wide.. wide-spread* that setting than, say, the low class, a poor man.

(A) well-off man will more deal (will be more exposed to) with, say, political issues in that wide-spread setting than, say, the low class, a poor man).

Similar to English, this kind of mid-word interruption can be attributed to *performance error*.

We found two instances with a mid-word interruption without repetition, as in the following sentence from an interview with a 38-year-old male assistant in internet services:

Կանայք, ասենք, *անհատա..* , ասենք, կանանց որոշ դեպքերում տալիս են
դեկավար պաշտոններ...

Women, say, individu..., say, women's some (in) cases (they) give leading positions...

(Women, say, individu..., say, in some cases women are appointed to leading positions)

The interrupted word (*անհատա..*) (*individu..*) is not repeated in the sequential part, but is substituted by the word-combination *որոշ դեպքերում* (*in some cases*). The possible reason for the word-interruption lies in the *performance error*, which can be justified when the would-be word *անհատականոթն* (individually) is semantically linked with the word combination *որոշ դեպքերում* (*in some cases*). The interpretation of the interruption as being a performance error is also justified by the change of the syntactic structure in the post-interrupted part: the would-be active voice construction used in the pre-interrupted segment comes to be substituted by the passive construction, which is morphologically marked by the corresponding noun case form (dative) and is syntactically marked by the word order.

We found three instances related to the *distant* repetition of the interrupted word, that is, when the interrupted word is not *immediately* repeated. All three instances are found in the interviews with females as in this example from an interview with a 60-year-old female store owner:

Ես ոչ մի.. *Ան..* Ես միշտ *անհատ* ձեռներեց եմ եղել...

I no.. *Ind..* I always (an) individual owner have been...

(I no.. *Ind..* I have always been an individual owner...)

The would-be adjective *Անհատական* (*individual*) is discontinued in the beginning, with its full form used in the sequential sentence. The speaker may leave the word incomplete because she wants to emphasize the fact that she has *always* been an

individual owner. So, the interruption of the word is triggered by the speaker's desire to *insert some piece of information* she views as important.

Another example is from an interview with a 57-year-old female janitor:

Շատ սխալ ա, չ. մարդիք *տանջ*. աշխատում են, *տանջվում են*:

(It) very wrong is, .. people *suff.* work, suffer.

(It's very wrong, people *suff.* work, suffer)

As with the previous example, the speaker does not complete the word *տանջվում* (*suffer*) possibly because she chooses to insert another lexical item *աշխատում են* (*work*), which is more relevant in her message. Although mid-word interruptions are the least frequent in either language, in the whole paradigm of syntactic accidents it displays the largest number (3) of variations.

Analysis

In our cross-linguistic analysis we found both similarities and differences as regards the structural and functional features of syntactic accidents in spontaneous spoken English and Armenian. Both in English and Armenian, we find all three types of syntactic accidents in spontaneous language: maxi-, mini-, and macro-accidents, all of them displaying the same variations (with one exception) in either language. The highest degree of similarity we find in multiple accidents. Not only has the overall number of multiple accidents turned out to be the same in either language (12), but there is also an equal cross-gender distribution: in either language we find 5 instances in males' talk as opposed to 7 in females'. Moreover, in either language the overall number of syntactic accidents prevails in males' talk: 27 as opposed to 24 in English, and 29 as opposed to 18 in Armenian.

We identified more divergent than convergent cross-linguistic features. The total number of the syntactic accidents was higher in English, though the difference is insignificant: 51 in English as opposed to 47 in Armenian. The highest degree of difference is observed in mini-accidents with the two subcategories. In English there were 26, whereas in Armenian only 4. Yet, as far as the cross-gender distribution is concerned, we see similarities: in either language, we find the larger number of mini-accidents at the *beginning* of the sentence in the talk of *males* and the bigger number of mini accidents in the *middle* of the sentence in the talk of *females*.

Second, a lower but still high degree of divergence is explicit in relation to macro-accidents with the two subcategories. Here we are find the opposite statistics: macro-accidents in the middle of the sentence in Armenian (25) outnumber those in English (10). The prevalence in number is observed in macro-accidents both with a partial lexical change and a complete lexical change. Alongside this substantial difference in number, we still see a small similarity as regards the cross-gender distribution: in either language, the frequency of macro-accidents with a complete lexical change is lot higher in males' talk. Last, cross-linguistic differences have been found in micro-accidents: the number of the latter in Armenian has turned out to be twice as frequent as in English: 6 versus 3. The frequency and nature of syntactic accidents in English and Armenian are summarized in Appendix A.

Conclusion

Syntactic accidents, with a variety of forms they can take, are an inseparable property of spontaneous spoken language (Chafe, 1982). The non-planned nature of spontaneous speech in different linguistic communities is in close conjunction with unexpected communicative shifts in speakers' minds and is bound to be reflected in linguistic performance on the surface level, which is in line with Chomskian (1970) theory of memory and limitations in linguistic performance. Alongside with unexpected turns, however, there can be pragmatic reasons for syntactic interruptions.

The frequency of syntactic accidents is correlated to social class (Zemskaya, 1973). The English and Armenian speakers of low socioeconomic status displayed a high degree of syntactic accidents in spontaneous spoken performance. Still, the quantitative distribution of syntactic accidents across different social classes will demand further similar analyses.

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Appendix A

Frequency of syntactic accidents in spontaneous spoken language of low-class speakers in English and Armenian

Type of syntactic accidents	English		Armenian	
Multiple accidents	12		12	
	males	females	males	females
	5	7	5	7
Single accidents				

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Mini-accidents (at word level)	26		4	
<i>at the beginning of the sentence</i>	12		3	
	9	3	3	-
<i>in the middle of the sentence</i>	14		1	
	5	9	-	1
Macro-accidents (in the middle of the sentence)	10		25	
<i>with a complete lexical change</i>	6		19	
	5	1	15	4
<i>with a partial lexical change</i>	4		6	
	2	2	4	2
Micro-accidents (in the middle of the word)	3		6	
<i>with immediate repetition</i>	2		1	
	-	2	-	1
<i>with distant repetition</i>	1		3	
	1	-	-	3
<i>without repetition</i>	0		2	
			2	-
Total	51		47	
	27	24	29	18

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