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Loose elements in colloquial English

LOOSE ELEMENTS IN COLLOQUIAL ENGLISH

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The basic unit of an utterance in linguistic analysis is the sentence (clause)[1], defined by Vachek (1980.85) as an elementary reaction by means of language to any extra-lingual reality. From the syntactic point of view the sentence represents a field of relations between the sentence constituens, i.e. the subject (= S), verb (= V), object (= O), adverbial (= A), subject complement (= C_s), and object complement (C_o). From the viewpoint of functional sentence perspective (= FSP), the sentence is a distributional field of degrees of communicative dynamism, in other words a field of relations between the following communicative units (worked out by Firbas e.g. 1979 and Svoboda 1981): theme proper (Th_p), diatheme (Th_d)[2], transition proper (Tr_p), transition (Tr), rheme (Rh) and rheme proper (Rh_p).

The above elements (sentence constituents in syntactic analysis and communicative units in functional analysis) may all be well integrated in the sentence structure. It is possible, however, for an element to become 'loosened' to a certain extent. The sentences below, taken from O'Connor and Arnold (1973), contain examples of well integrated elements, partly integrated elements and loose (isolated) elements (indicated by apostrophes). (The first number following the example gives the page, the second number the line, on which the example begins. A slash mark indicates the end of a tone group.)

98

```
3  /Well,  I  was  re'cording  a  `talk  /  this  ,morning./  For  the  'B.B.`C./
   ---  ----------------  -------     ---------------     --------------------
    .S.       V          O          A               A'
   -----  -----------  ------    ------------     -----------
   Th_p     Tr_p + Tr   Rh_p       Th_d            Rh_p'
```

$$- 282.30$$

All elements of sentence 1 are well integrated in the sentence structure. As for examples 2 and 3, each contains an extraposed element. The expression *before the red light goes on* is partly integrated in (partly loosened from) sentence 2. The element is signalled inside the sentence proper by the preparatory *it* and conveys mere background information. Putting the element in the regular position (SVOA) would cause obscurity. (For more examples and more theoretical remarks on sentence structure of this type cf. Jespersen 1933.154 (16.1.6), 330 (32.1.3) and Quirk et al. 1972.951–956.)

For the B.B.C. in example 3 is isolated outside the sentence to which it belongs semantically. The syntactic link between the sentence and the 'afterthought' is rather loose. The loose element is neither expected by the listener nor signalled by any other element inside the sentence (cf. Jespersen 1927.357).

The partly integrated element (ex. 2) and the completely isolated element (ex. 3) represent opposite poles of disintegration ('loosening') of an element from the sentence structure. It is the purpose of the present paper to show what kinds of loose elements may occur in colloquial speech. The elements will be examined at the syntactic, functional and prosodic levels. The paper is based on an analysis of the 'Dialogues for Intonation Practice' included in O'Connor and Arnold's *Intonation of Colloquial English* (1973). The analysis[3] is rather tentative; to our knowledge, elements of this type have not yet been treated as a special category. The text that is analyzed represents 784 tone groups and contains 267 loose elements. Partly integrated elements of the above type (ex. 2) are not included.

Syntactically, not all of the loose elements under examination represent sentence constituents. Some are more complex and function as (incomplete) clauses. A large number of other elements, resembling particles, are less complex and cannot perform the function of a sentence constituent by themselves. According to their syntactic function the loose elements have been subdivided into three groups:

(a) loose sentence constituents
(b) isolated (incomplete) clauses (sentences)
(c) loose particle-like expressions

Each of the loose elements in the text represents one of the following FSP-functions: Rh_p', Th_d', Tr_p'. The other FSP-functions (cf. above) have no representatives among the examined elements.

The analysis of the prosodic features is based on O'Connor and Arnold (1973). Most of the elements represent one of the following tone groups:

1	Low Drop	6	Long Jump
2	High Drop	7	High Bounce
3	Take-Off	8	Jackknife
4	Low Bounce	9	High Dive
5	Switchback	10	Terrace

Some elements represent only part of a tone group (the pre-head or tail) and do not bear a nucleus; these elements belong to the zero group ("0"). The

tone-group type will always be indicated by figures 0–10 in brackets after each example (before the page and line).

Table 1 below shows the numbers and percentages of loose elements representing groups a (subdivided into A', S', O', C'), b and c (subdivided into subgroups I, II, III, IV — to be specified and exemplified later in the section on particle-like expressions), together with their FSP-functions (Rh_p', Th_d', Tr_p') and their prosodic characteristics. In Table 1 the prosodic characterization is limited to the opposition 'elements that do not bear a nucleus' (denoted by "0") — 'nucleus bearers' (representatives of tone groups 1–10, denoted by "1–10"). A more detailed analysis of the prosodic features in regard to the different tone-groups types (0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10) is given in Table 2.
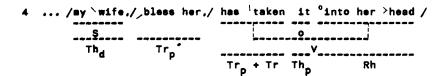
TABLE 1

	Total	Rh_p' no. (%)	Th_d' no. (%)	Tr_p' no. (%)	O no. (%)	1–10 no. (%)	A' no. (%)	S' no. (%)	O' no. (%)	C' no. (%)
a	117	79 (67.5)	38 (32.5)	0 (0.0)	5 (4.3)	112 (97.5)	60 (51.3)	21 (17.9)	23 (19.7)	13 (11.1)
b	9	4 (44.4)	0 (0.0)	5 (55.6)	0 (0.0)	9 (100.0)	I	II	III	IV
c	141	29 (20.6)	0 (0.0)	112 (79.4)	89 (63.1)	52 (36.9)	100 (70.9)	12 (8.5)	12 (8.5)	17 (12.1)
total	267	112	38	117	94	173				

(a)   Loose sentence constituents

Out of 267 loose elements 117 are sentence constituents. A total of 79 of them function as Rh_p', 38 as Th_d'; there is no representative of Tr_p'. Only 5 constituents do not bear a nucleus; a vast majority — 112 — are nucleus bearers. Altogether 60 loose sentence constituents are adverbials, 21 subjects, 23 objects and 13 complements. The verb has no representative; since the other constituents depend on it, the verb does not seem to get loosened easily. If the verb is to express an afterthought, or some other type of 'loose' information, it is usually accompanied by other constituents (cf. isolated clauses (b)). The absence of verbal loose elements is in correspondence with the absence of the transitional function.

The sentences below contain examples of loose sentence constituents (A', S', O', C') functioning either as Rh_p' or Th_d' and occurring with a nucleus and without one. (Sentence structures of this type are analyzed in Jespersen 1927.71–2, 357 and 1933.95 (9.6.5).)

4   ... /my `wife,/,bless her,/ has 'taken it °into her >head /

```
to 'do some in°terior ＼decorating./'Lounge and ＼dining ₀room./
------------------------------------       ----------------------
                O                              O˙    (A˙)
------------------------------------       ----------------------
               Rh_p                              Rh_p˙
                  \
'Both at the °same ＼time! /(2)                                        – 284.3
----------------------------
              A˙
----------------------------
            Rh_p˙
```

```
5  /But ∨most con₀ventions,/(5)⁻well, they're
   ------------------------------       ----  ------
                S˙                      ----- --*-- --∨--
   ------------------------------       ----- -----  ------
             Th_d˙          ˙          Tr_p˙ Th_p  Tr_p+Tr

  ↗just a °lot of °mumbo ＼jumbo./                                     – 279.3
  ================================
  ---------------C↓---------------
           Rh_p
```

```
6  /– ↗What    d'you ＼mean, ₀mumbo ₀jumbo? /(O)⁴                     – 279.4
   ===-- --┌ --- -===-    ------------------
   __O__   [ __S__ ]       A˙ (O˙)
   Th_d    └_____┘       Th_d˙
           --- --∨ -----
          Tr_p Th_p  Rh_p
```

```
7  /A ∨chemical ₀stripper /    is ＼just as ef₀ficient./
   ---------------------       ------ --------------------
                S              --∨-- --------C-----------
   ---------------------       ------ --------------------
            Th_d              Tr_p+Tr         Rh_p

And ↗much less ＼lethal./(6)                                          – 284.17
----------------------------
              C↓˙
----------------------------
            Rh_p˙
```

The loose character of *Lounge and dining room, Both at the same time!* (4), *most conventions* (5), *mumbo jumbo* (6) and *much less lethal* (7) seems to be conditioned by the interplay of extraposition (the element comes before or after the sentence proper), particular punctuation (the element si separated by a comma or a full stop) and particular intonation (this, as it were, renders the sentence proper complete). The following example is an adapted version of sentence 7; with the punctuation and intonation changed, *much less lethal* loses its loose character.

```
7a /A ∨ chemical ₀stripper /    is 'just as ef∨ficient /
   -----------------------       ------ --------------------
            Th_d                 Tr_p+Tr         Rh
```

```
and 'such less `lethal./
-----------------------
            Rh
              p
```

As a result of the weak integration in the sentence, the syntactic function of a loose element is sometimes ambiguous. The interpretation of *Lounge and dining room* (4) as object, for instance, is only tentative ("to decorate the lounge and dining room"); the element could also be interpreted as adverbial ("to do some interior decorating in the lounge and dining room"). Similarly, *mumbo jumbo* (6) may be an adverbial ("What do you mean by mumbo jumbo?") or an object ("What do you mean when you're saying mumbo jumbo?"). Syntactic ambiguity occurs with 22 (18.8%) of the total number of 117 loose sentence constituents. Here is another example:

```
8  /Well,`anyway, she sounds Vconfident./
       -------    ---  ------  ----------
   ----   ------    S.  --V---  ----.-----
           A.          --.-
   Tr     Th      Th   Tr +Tr    Rh
     p      d       p     p        p


   /-VConfidentl /(5)'That`s°putting it `mildly./      - 276.5
                      -----  ----------  ---  -------
      c . (s`)         S.(s) ----V---- 0  ----A--
     -----------
       Th                Th   Tr + Tr  Th   Rh
         d                 d    p        p    p
```

Besides syntactic ambiguity, the above `sentence exemplifies an 'isolated predicative' in an emotionaly coloured exclamation (cf. Jespersen 1933.126 (13.4.2)), which is represented by 14 (12.0%) of the sentence constituents examined.

(b) Isolated (incomplete) clauses

Only 9 of the loose elements in the text may be interpreted as clauses (sentences). Altogether 4 of them function as Rh_p', 5 as Tr_p', none as Th_d'. Each clause contains a nucleus:

```
9  / Which re`minds me./
      -------  --------- ---
       Th    Tr + Rh  Th
         d     p    p   p


   'Like to ^hear about the pi°ano-playing °parrot? /(7)      - 280.32
   _____
                       Rh
                         p


10 /^All °abso°lutely Vtrue./ you must a`gree./(2)      - 282.18
   ----  ----.------- -----  _____
    Th      Tr      Rh        Tr
      d       p       p         p
```

In the dialogue preceding example 9, the speaker of 9 criticizes another person's bad habit of relating long and boring stories like "the one about the parrot that plays the piano". *Like to hear about the piano-playing parrot* is loosely connected to the dialogue as a closing formula producing a comical effect. There is an ellipsis of subject and auxiliary; still, it cannot be denied the status

of a clause. The element *you must agree* in example 10, on the other hand, is formally a complete clause, but its function is limited to the expression of modality (Tr_p'). The whole clause could be replaced by, e.g., "surely". It represents a link between isolated clauses (b) and particle-like expressions (c).

(c) Particle-like expressions

Of the 141 elements of this group, 29 represent Rh_p', while the great majority — 112 — function as Tr_p'; there is no representative of Th_d'. A total of 89 expressions occur without a nucleus; 52 are nucleus bearers.

The numerous group of particle-like expressions has been subdivided into four groups:

(I) 'Fillers'

Subgroup I is in close relation to the last-mentioned type of loose clause (ex. 10). It contains 100 expressions that the speaker uses to fill a pause between sentences (when he wants to think for a while) and to make the transition to the following idea more natural, e.g.

```
11 /You see,(0)   we    'use them to °try and find 'out about ₒspeech./-281.4
        ‾‾‾‾          --- ------ ----  -------------------------------------
        Trₚ˙         Thₚ Trₚ+Tr  Thₚ                  Rhₚ

12 /They     go >on./ and >on./ and ＼on./ His ＼stories, I ₒmean./(0)- 280.22
      ‾‾‾‾ ------ ---  -------   -------   -------------   ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
      Thₚ  Trₚ+Tr Rh     Rh       Rhₚ          Th_d˙         Trₚ˙

13 /'Jackson's °down with 'flue or ₒsomething, ap₀parently./(0)      - 281.26
      --------- -------   --------------------------   ‾‾‾‾‾‾‾‾
        Th_d      Trₚ+Tr            Rhₚ                   Trₚ˙

14 /'Who's      ＼that? //- ₁Oh,(0) you re₀member ╱him./⁴,⁵          - 275.20
      ‾‾‾‾ ------ -----    ‾‾‾‾‾‾   --- ---------- ----
      Th_d Trₚ+Tr Rhₚ      Trₚ˙     Thₚ  Trₚ + Rh  Rhₚ

15 /Well,(0)   it's 'rather °difficult to ＼analyse./               - 276.25
     ‾‾‾‾       --- --------------------- -----------
     Trₚ˙       Thₚ       Trₚ + Tr           Rhₚ

16 /And e＼ventually, it'll  be a ＼ fact./
     -------------    --- ------ -------
          Th_d        Thₚ Trₚ+Tr  Rhₚ

    /- Yes,(0) but 'where does °simplified ＼spelling come ₀in? /⁴    - 278.3
       ‾‾‾‾       ------ ----  --------------------- ---------
       Trₚ˙        Th_d   Trₚ          Rhₚ             Tr
```

Altogether 30 of the above exemplified 'fillers' are expressions like *"I mean"* (ex. 12), "of course", "for instance", "that is", *"you see"* (ex. 11); some of them reflect the speaker's modal approach, e.g. *apparently* (ex. 13). The remaining 70 expressions are the particles *oh* (19 cases), *well* (36 cases), and *yes* and *no* (occurring in the pre-head — 15 cases).

All elements of this subgroup represent Tr_p'. The vast majority occur without a nucleus; only 11 are nucleus bearers. The FSP-function and the prosodic features of the expressions are in accordance with their 'filling' function.

(II) Question tags

By means of question tags the speaker expresses his (slight) uncertainty about the extra-lingual reality to which the indicative part of the "question" refers, together with a demand for confirmation:

```
17 / It's      his 'one°real `joy in ₒlife,/ that ‚car of his,/`isn't it? /
     --- ------ --------------------------   --------------   ----------
     Th_p Tr_p+Tr            Rh_p                   Th_d·           Tr_p·
```

$$(2) - 276.17$$

There are 12 question tags in the text examined. All of them function as Tr_p'; except for 2 occurring in the tail, they all bear a nucleus. Question tags are formally clauses but semantically they are more like particles; their particle character is supported by their FSP-function (Tr_p').

(III) Emotively coloured expressions

The elements of the third group are formally adverbs (10 cases) and noun phrases (2 cases), but they do not perform the function of sentence constituents; they are used more as particles expressing the speaker's emotive approach to what has been said. *Poor old George* in the following example, for instance, could be replaced by e.g. "Oh lord!", or "Horrible!":

```
18 /And 'you've been °roped in to ^help! /'Poor °old ‚George! /(1)  - 284.6
        ---- ------------------ --------   ---------------
        Th_d      Tr_p+Tr          Rh_p          Rh_p·
```

This group is in close relation to isolated clauses (group b). The element *surely* in example 19 below, for instance, is equivalent to "I am sure.".

```
19 /⌐You could have ‚spared us ₒone of ‚those,/`surely./(2)⁶      - 284.1
    ---- ------------------ --- ----------------   --------
    Th_p      Tr_p + Rh        Th_p     Rh_p          Rh_p·
```

Owing to the importance of the emotive message, all the loose elements seem to perform the function of Rh_p' and bear a nucleus. (For a discussion of 'emotiveness' and the relation between FSP-function and prosodic weight in emotively coloured utterances cf. Firbas, 1985.)

(IV) Affirmative and negative particles

Affirmative and negative particles (*Yes, No, Right*) represent an extraposed isolated indication of the (positive or negative) orientation of the answer or reaction that follows:

```
20 / `No,/(2)    I `didn't./              ⸱⸱ 275.2
     ----          --- --------
     Rh_p·         Th_p  Tr_p+Rh_p
```

```
21 /`Yes,/(2)   he `would be,/            ⸱⸱ 276.17
     ----         --- ----------
     Rh_p·        Th_p  Tr_p+Rh_p
```

This group contains 17 particles; all of them function as $Rh_p^{\cdot}$ (Svoboda — personal communication) and bear a nucleus. Nucleus-bearing affirmative and negative particles cannot be interpreted as mere 'fillers' (cf. group I); their indication of the orientation of the following sentence seems to be more important than filling a space between two sentences.

The above analysis of the prosodic features of the loose elements was limited to the opposition "absence of nucleus — presence of nucleus". A more accurate picture of the prosodic features of the elements in regard to the different tone-group types $(0-10)$ and in relation to the different FSP-functions (Rh_p', Th_d', Tr_p') is provided by the following table:

TABLE 2

	Total	0 no. (%)	1 no. (%)	2 no. (%)	3 no. (%)	4 no. (%)	5 no. (%)	6 no. (%)	7 no. (%)	8 no. (%)	9 no. (%)	10 no. (%)
Rh_p'	112	0 (0.0)	13 (11.6)	69 (61.6)	4 (3.6)	5 (4.5)	7 (6.2)	2 (1.8)	5 (4.5)	6 (5.3)	1 (0.9)	0 (0.0)
Th_d'	38	5 (13.2)	4 (19.5)	9 (23.7)	5 (13.2)	1 (2.6)	9 (23.7)	1 (2.6)	1 (2.6)	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	2 (5.3)
Tr_p'	117	89 (76.0)	3 (2.6)	16 (13.7)	9 (7.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Total	267	94	20	94	18	6	16	3	6	7	1	2

All loose elements in the text functioning as Rh_p' bear a nucleus; they represent tone groups 1–9. The most frequent tone groups are the High Drop (2) and the Low Drop (1). Loose diathemes include all tone groups except the High Dive. The most frequent tone groups are the High Drop (2) and the Switchback (5). Only a very small proportion of the loose diathemes occur without a nucleus in the pre-head or tail of a tone group. Transitions proper are most frequently without a nucleus; the few nucleus-bearing transitions proper are representatives of the High Drop (2), the Take-Off (3) and the Low Drop (1).

SUMMARY

In the process of creating an utterance the speaker often adds words to the stream of basic information on the extra-lingual reality that make the meaning clearer or the transition from one idea to another more natural. Sometimes the words only express the speaker's emotive and/or modal approach. Expressions of this type have been called loose elements in this paper.

The loose character of an element seems to be signalled by extraposition, particular punctuation and particular intonation.

Syntactically, the most frequent loose elements are particles or particle-like expressions and sentence constituents (except the verb); in a small number of cases the loose elements have the character of a clause. The syntactic function of a sentence constituent is sometimes ambiguous.

The most frequent FSP-functions of the loose elements in the text are Tr_p'

and Rh_p'; less frequent is Th_d'. Tr_p' occurs most often without a nucleus, Rh_p' with a nucleus. Th_d' covers both the absence and presence of a nucleus; nucleus-bearing Th_d's are more frequent. The most frequent tone group represented by nucleus-bearing loose elements in the text under examination is the High Drop.

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VOLNÉ ELEMENTY V HOVOROVÉ ANGLIČTINĚ

Článek je příspěvkem k analýze mluveného jazyka. Autorka zkoumá text dialogů, opatřený zápisem prozodických rysů; sleduje výskyt tzv. volných elementů, tj. jazykových jednotek, které nejsou dobře integrovány ve větě. Ve formě tabulek autorka podává jejich syntaktickou, funkční a prozodickou charakteristiku. Z hlediska syntaktického jsou nejčastějšími volnými elementy jednotky částicového charakteru a větné členy, jen výjimečně samostatné věty. Z hlediska funkční perspektivy větné plní volné elementy funkci vlastně tranzitní, vlastně rématickou a (méně často) funkci diatematickou. Nejvyšší prozodickou závažnost vykazují vlastně rématické elementy, které jsou vždy nositeli nukleárního tónu, nejnižší pak elementy vlastně tranzitní, které většinou nukleární tón nenesou.

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[1] In this connection it is not necessary to make a distinction between *sentence* and *clause*.

[2] Svoboda (1980) distinguishes theme proper and theme-proper oriented theme, diatheme and diatheme oriented theme. For the purpose of the present paper, a less detailed analysis is sufficient; themes proper and theme-proper oriented themes are here considered as one group and referred to as themes proper (Th_p); diathemes and diatheme oriented themes are referred to as diathemes (Th_d).

[3] It has been suggested to me by Aleš Svoboda, who has also kindly enabled me to consult an unpublished draft of his functional analysis of the dialogues in O'Connor and Arnold's book.

[4] The wh-words represent a special case in that they simultaneously perform a thematic, a transitional and a rhematic function (cf. Firbas 1987.19). The 'Th_d' notation is therefore to be regarded as a simplification.

[5] The element *him* in ex. 14 performs the function of Rh_p on account of 'emotive deshading' (cf. Firbas 1985.36): According to the interplay of the non-prosodic factors of FSP (i.e. linear modification, semantic structure and context), the pronoun would be ascribed a thematic function; placing the intonation centre on the pronoun *him* renders the sentence marked (in unmarked intonation *him* would occur in intonation-centre shade) and produces an emotive effect.

[6] The element *one of those* is another example of 'emotive deshading' (cf. ex. 14).