

“Caught in the Act of Greatness: Jane Austen’s Characterization of Elizabeth and Darcy by Sentence Structure in *Pride and Prejudice*”

[Written by an undergraduate student, Amy Baker, this technical analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* appeared in the scholarly journal *The Explicator*. Baker notes that most critics have given “more attention” to the content of Austen’s novels than to her writing techniques. Here she identifies sentence structure and syntax patterns in Elizabeth and Darcy’s dialogue to demonstrate how Austen creates each character’s unique voice.]

Jane Austen is one of the most widely read and most praised authors of English literature. She published only six full-length novels in her lifetime, but she is acclaimed for the unmatched wit, realism, irony, and social commentary that they contain. Few other authors have mastered this art of recreating a society with words on paper. Literary critic and Stanford English professor Ian Watt writes, “[Austen] is first and foremost a critical observer of humanity who uses irony as a means of moral and social judgment, who enlarges the reader’s understanding of experience through making him realize how limited is that of her fictional characters” (2). With Austen’s critical eye and realistic writing, each of her novels becomes a microcosm of society as a whole. Therefore, that her novels are brilliantly written is undisputed, but specifying exactly how is another issue. Twentieth-century author Virginia Woolf writes, “Anybody who has had the temerity to write about Jane Austen is aware ... that of all the great authors, she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness” (15). Austen’s greatness is most easily detected in its overall effect or its wholeness, but dissecting the technicalities of her style is no simple task. Because of this, reviewers tend to give more attention to *what* she writes, rather than *how* she writes. Barbara Hardy, senior fellow professor at the University of London, observes, “Jane Austen took a very long time to attract technical analysis, though she has always been praised, in somewhat general terms, for her artistry” (12). But at last, technical analysis of Austen’s writing is beginning to make an appearance, especially with regard to her unique voice. A lively combination of wit, satire, playfulness, and charm, her most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, exemplifies this writing. In *Jane Austen and Her Art*, Mary Lascelles writes, “Never again will she be so brilliantly idiosyncratic, so unmistakably herself, as in *Pride and Prejudice*” (91). Within these pages, readers experience Austen at her

most authentic. Her characteristic voice is easily detected in this early novel, particularly in the dialogue between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Lascelles (96) calls Austen's most notable technical feature this "mastery of dialogue," perfected with a "fine and true ear." Others, including Archbishop Richard Whately in 1821, compare her aptitude for character shaping in dialogue to William Shakespeare's (qtd. by Watt 5). Austen is one of a few skillful authors who can create whole people out of literary characters by their words. She gives each a unique voice, structure pattern, and manner of speaking unlike any other character in each novel. This is clearly seen in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Austen distinguishes the voices of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy by their unique sentence structures in dialogue.

Consistent sentence structure seems to be Austen's literary tool of choice to shape her characters' voices. She is intentional with her syntax, never overembellishing structures when the situation does not call for it (Lascelles 88). If ever Austen writes dialogue that is structurally simple and to the point, it is for a specific reason; likewise, if she writes dialogue that is long-winded and structurally complicated, it is also for a reason. The voice she chooses for each character is intentional and communicative about his or her nature (Lascelles 101). For example, readers attribute rambling to silly characters, complex structures to intelligent characters, and bluntness to rude characters. Less obvious, however, is the way Austen uses structure to mark social class. Lascelles writes, "[Austen] tends to suggest social variants in speech by syntax and phrasing rather than by vocabulary" (95). Whereas high-class characters speak with precision and perfect grammar, low-class characters often falter with subject/verb agreement. When written consistently this way, individual voices both become real to life and illuminating of class and nature. As Lascelles notes, "The virtue of this style which Jane Austen has made to be the means of communication of her characters lies in its equitable settlement of conflicting claims; not only does it allow her people to be constant without becoming static, but it gives them a language in which they may speak to us as they would" (102). With voices of their own, Austen's characters develop a fullness, consistency, and individuality that complete their personhood by the end of a novel.

A clear example exists between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Although the two major characters share a similar personality, quick wit, and precision of speech, they do not share a single voice. Austen develops their characters differently throughout the novel and attributes distinct structures in their dialogue. Diagramming dialogue at various emotional states, levels of comfort, and settings reveals consistent and distinct patterns

that distinguish Darcy's voice from Elizabeth's (refer to Appendix, Tables A1 through A9). Tables A1 through A9 total the number of independent clauses, nominal clauses, relative (adjectival) clauses, subordinate (adverbial) clauses, prepositional phrases, and infinitives used in each section of dialogue per speaker. These tables also show the ratio of each category in relation to the number of independent clauses. Table A9, then, totals each pattern from the four sections and reveals an average ratio per independent clause.

Elizabeth's voice is marked by several patterns. First of all, she shows a greater variety of clauses than Darcy across the board. In three of the four sections of dialogue, she tops his percentage of relative clauses while keeping pace with his nominal and subordinate clause usage. In fact, she favors a different kind of clause in each of the passages (favoring relative clauses twice). In addition, Elizabeth consistently uses more prepositional phrases and infinitives than any other category, though she decidedly favors prepositional phrases to infinitives in each section. Also, Elizabeth simply speaks more than Darcy. Not only do her sentences outnumber his 31 to 20, she is more likely to compound independent clauses than he is. In addition, she averages more words per independent clause than her counterpart. These patterns are fairly consistent across the four passages of dialogue, but setting, emotional state, and context seem to affect her voice. Passages #1 through #4 involve the respective emotional states of disgust, distress, anger, and love. In all three of the negative emotional states (frustration, distress, and anger), Elizabeth's voice is very consistent. However, her speech patterns become a great deal simpler when in love. While "in love" throughout the fourth passage, she uses more nominal clauses and fewer prepositional phrases per independent clause than in any other section. For example, in the first passage she says, "We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the *éclat* of a proverb" (Austen 63). In contrast, in the fourth passage she states simply, "I must ask whether you are surprised" (249). In addition, this is the only state in which Elizabeth uses no relative or subordinate clauses whatsoever. Love seems to simplify her voice, but it does not ruin her consistency altogether. Because of this, Elizabeth's random speech solidifies into a rather uniform voice, much different from Mr. Darcy's.

Darcy's voice is also characterized by uniformity of speech pattern. Whereas Elizabeth implements more variety of clauses, Darcy strongly favors nominal clauses to relative and subordinate clauses in each of the four passages. In fact, in two sections, this is the *only* kind of clause used. Relative clauses are utilized in only one of the

four passages, but they match the average amount of subordinate clauses overall. Like Elizabeth, Darcy has a tendency to use prepositional phrases more than any other category, averaging 0.77 prepositional phrases per independent clause. He uses them consistently in each section but more sparingly than Elizabeth. She averages 1.11 per independent clause. Infinitives are also regularly woven into Mr. Darcy's speech. In each section, infinitives keep pace with the number of nominal clauses, receiving similar averages under prepositional phrases. Whereas Elizabeth's category averages fluctuate from passage to passage, Darcy's follow a greater consistency. That is not to say, however, that emotional state does not affect his voice. Passages #1, #2, and #3 depict his disgust, distress, and anger, respectively. These tables, Tables A1 through A6, show similar patterns, such as strong use of nominal clauses and nearly no use of relative or subordinate. In addition, infinitives appear in few of the independent clauses. But when Darcy speaks in the fourth passage, he is in the emotional state of happiness and love. Like Elizabeth's, his voice becomes altered when in love. But while hers becomes simpler, his becomes more complex. For example, this is the only section where he uses relative clauses while also implementing nominal and subordinate clauses. Also, in nearly every pattern category, his averages are substantially higher here than any other emotional state. For example, Darcy mentions, "On the evening before my going to London, I made a confession to him, which I believe I ought to have made long ago," using both a nominal and relative clause, in addition to four prepositional phrases and an infinitive (Austen 250). His use of infinitives per independent clause (0.75 in passage #4) more than doubles the second-highest use (0.33 in passage #3). While Austen is consistent in altering both characters' voices with the emotional state or mood of the setting, she is careful to alter them differently, as to keep them distinct.

From these structural differences, readers can make conjectures about the voices of *Pride and Prejudice*. For example, Elizabeth's complex structures reveal that she's reaching above her own social class. Since Austen typically improves the grammar of her characters in tandem with their social classes, she is enlightening her readers in two ways. First, Austen shows that Elizabeth is insecure of the social gap between herself and Darcy. She senses her inferiority and attempts to cover it with intellect, wit, and confidence. These complex structures make her dialogue seem more intelligent and appropriate for high class. Her rejection of Darcy's first proposal (passage #3) makes an excellent example. She says, "From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your

manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike” (Austen 131). On the other hand, when she is in love with Darcy (passage #4) and comfortable in his presence, Elizabeth’s speech simplifies to a more basic structure. In addition, by writing Elizabeth’s voice this way, Austen is also preparing readers for the novel’s ending. In the final chapter, Elizabeth marries Mr. Darcy and jumps from her social class to his. It is important for readers to feel that she not only deserves this honor but can handle the social responsibility of becoming Mrs. Darcy. But because Elizabeth’s structurally complex voice already leans the way of the elite, readers have no fear that she will banter, debate, and converse well among Darcy’s circle.

Readers can also sense a difference between dialogue spoken in frustration, tension, and anger, as opposed to the dialogue spoken in love, comfort, and happiness. Perhaps it could be implied that passage #4 diagrams and tables (analyzing the lighter-hearted moods) represent more innate and authentic voices than the other three sections. With nothing to prove, yell about, or cry over, Elizabeth and Darcy speak naturally through beaming hearts and smiles. In each of the other passages, there is some emotional distraction to the conversation. The mood of passage #1 is awkwardly tense as they discuss, over a dance, Darcy’s injustice to Mr. Wickham; passage #2 has a mood of panic and concern over Elizabeth’s runaway sister; and passage #3 is spoken in wounded anger, as Elizabeth rejects Darcy’s proposal with insults and he cuts off the conversation. All three of these situations include an emotional barrier that separates the speakers and alters their voices. But in passage #4, marked with joy and easiness, no such distress complicates her natural voice or silences his. Here, her speech becomes more basic and reveals her rural social class, while his becomes more complex and wordy, revealing his social superiority.

Yet another conjecture one may make is that Austen, speaking through both Elizabeth and Darcy, uses a great deal of variety in her sentence patterns. In these four passages, it is uncommon to find many sentences with identical numbers in each category. The most common structure Austen utilizes is the simplest: zero dependent clauses, zero prepositional phrases, and zero infinitives per independent clause. This syntax is commonly used to communicate basic information, make direct answers, and ask simple questions. For example, “But we may be silent now” (Austen 62); “Good God, what is the matter?” (184); and “He had never had the slightest suspicion”

(249) all demonstrate this very basic structure. But despite this pattern's versatility, Austen applies it to only twenty-four percent of her sentences. No structure is repeated more often than this, leaving ample room for originality. In the fifty-one sentences throughout all four passages, Austen applies twenty-seven different structures. That means that more than half of her sentences receive their own, unique patterns, making the dialogue between Elizabeth and Darcy fresh, interesting, and flexible.

She may be difficult to catch in the art of greatness, but Austen leaves trails in her mastery of dialogue. Few other authors have been able to develop such realistic and deeply consistent characters through syntax, and Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy serve as great examples. In *Pride and Prejudice*, her second novel, these two characters are shaped not just by the words they say but by the manner in which they say them. Austen gives them both unique voices, unlike any other, to create a realistic individuality. Whereas Elizabeth's voice is structurally complicated, heavy on prepositions, and more varied, Darcy's tends to favor nominal clauses, simplicity, and infinitives. In these differences of structure, Austen suggests differences in their characters. Elizabeth appears to be reaching beyond her social class to compete with the socially elite Mr. Darcy, and both characters undergo voice modification when affected by love. Austen is a master of subtlety, hinting at these ideas, allowing her readers to surmise but refusing to put them in print herself. Perhaps this is yet another layer of Austen's elusive greatness; she allows readers to stumble upon truth where they did not think they would find it. By weaving characters' dispositions into their words—into the sentence diagrams themselves—she is paradoxically able to reveal the natures of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, while also adding to their mystique.

(2014)

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Appendix

Table A1.
PASSAGE #1 SUMMARY, ELIZABETH AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
1	A	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	1
2	B	Elizabeth	2	—	—	—	6	1
3	C	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	1	—
4	D	Elizabeth	1	1	—	—	—	—
5	E	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
6	G	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
7	H	Elizabeth	2	—	—	1	4	2
8	J	Elizabeth	2	—	1	1	5	2
9	N	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	1	—
Totals			12	1	1	2	17	6
% of Independent Clauses				8%	8%	17%	142%	50%

Table A2.
PASSAGE #1 SUMMARY, DARCY AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
10	F	Darcy	1	—	—	1	1	—
11	I	Darcy	2	1	—	—	1	—
12	K	Darcy	1	—	—	—	1	—
13	L	Darcy	1	1	—	—	1	1
14	M	Darcy	1	1	—	—	—	—
Totals			6	3	0	1	4	1
% of Independent Clauses				50%	0%	17%	67%	17%

Passage #1

ELIZABETH: “It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.”

“Very well. That reply will do for the present. Perhaps by and bye I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones. But now we may be silent.”

DARCY: “Do you talk by rule then, while you are dancing?”

ELIZABETH: “Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together, and yet for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.”

DARCY: “Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?”

ELIZABETH: “Both, for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the éclat of a proverb.”

DARCY: “This is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure. How near it may be to mine, I cannot pretend to say. You think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly.”

ELIZABETH: “I must not decide on my own performance.” (Austen 62–63)

Table A3.
PASSAGE #2 SUMMARY, ELIZABETH AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
15	A	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
16	B	Elizabeth	2	—	—	—	—	—
17	C	Elizabeth	2	—	1	—	1	1
18	I	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
19	J	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	1	—
20	K	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
21	L	Elizabeth	1	—	1	—	2	—
22	M	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	2	—
23	N	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	1	—
24	O	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	2	—
25	P	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	1	—
26	Q	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	1
27	R	Elizabeth	2	—	1	—	—	1
28	S	Elizabeth	1	1	—	2	3	—
29	T	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
Totals			18	1	3	2	13	3
% of Independent Clauses				6%	17%	11%	72%	17%

Table A4.
PASSAGE #2 SUMMARY, DARCY AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
30	D	Darcy	1	—	—	—	—	—
31	E	Darcy	2	—	—	—	1	—
32	F	Darcy	2	—	—	—	—	—
33	G	Darcy	1	—	—	—	—	—
34	H	Darcy	3	1	—	—	1	1
Totals			9	1	0	0	2	1
% of Independent Clauses				11%	0%	0%	22%	11%

Passage #2

ELIZABETH: “Oh! Where is my uncle? I beg your pardon, but I must leave you. I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment, on business that cannot be delayed; I have not an instant to lose.”

DARCY: “Good God, what is the matter? I will not detain you a minute, but let me, or let the servant go after Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. You are not well enough; you cannot go. Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take, to give you present relief? A glass of wine; shall I get you one? You are very ill.”

ELIZABETH: “No, I thank you. There is nothing the matter with me. I am quite well. I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have just received from Longbourn. I have just had a letter from Jane, with such dreadful news. It cannot be concealed from anyone. My youngest sister has left all of her friends, has eloped, has thrown herself into the power of Mr. Wickham. They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to—she is lost forever.

“Had I but explained some part of it only—some part of what I learned, to my own family! Had his character been known, this could not have happened. But now it is all too late.” (Austen 184–85)

Table A5.
PASSAGE #3 SUMMARY, ELIZABETH AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
47	A	Elizabeth	1	—	1	—	10	1
48	B	Elizabeth	1	1	1	1	1	1
Totals			2	1	2	1	11	2
% of Independent Clauses				50%	100%	50%	550%	100%

Table A6.
PASSAGE #3 SUMMARY, DARCY AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
49	C	Darcy	1	—	—	—	—	—
50	D	Darcy	1	1	—	—	1	1
51	E	Darcy	1	—	—	—	2	—
Totals			3	1	0	0	3	1
% of Independent Clauses				33%	0%	0%	100%	33%

Passage #3

ELIZABETH: “From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that the groundwork of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike. And I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.”

DARCY: “You have said quite enough, madam. I perfectly comprehend your feelings, and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been. Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.” (Austen 131–32)

Table A7.
PASSAGE #4 SUMMARY, ELIZABETH AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
35	A	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	2	—
36	B	Elizabeth	2	2	—	—	—	1
37	E	Elizabeth	1	1	—	—	—	—
38	G	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	1
39	H	Elizabeth	1	—	—	—	—	—
Totals			6	3	0	0	2	2
% of Independent Clauses				50%	0%	0%	33%	33%

Table A8.
PASSAGE #4 SUMMARY, DARCY AS SPEAKER

#	SENTENCE	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
40	C	Darcy	2	2	—	—	3	4
41	D	Darcy	1	3	—	—	1	—
42	F	Darcy	1	1	—	1	1	—
43	I	Darcy	1	1	1	—	4	1
44	J	Darcy	1	—	1	—	2	1
45	K	Darcy	1	—	—	—	—	—
46	L	Darcy	1	—	—	—	—	—
Totals			8	7	3	1	11	6
% of Independent Clauses				88%	38%	13%	138%	75%

Passage #4

ELIZABETH: “Your surprise could not be greater than mine in being noticed by you. My conscience told me that I deserved no extraordinary politeness, and I confess that I did not expect to receive more than my due.”

DARCY: “My object then was to show you, by every civility in my power, that I was not so mean as to resent the past; and I hoped to obtain your forgiveness to lessen your ill opinion, by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended to. How soon any other wishes introduced themselves I can hardly tell, but I believe in about half an hour after I had seen you.”

ELIZABETH: “I must ask whether you were surprised?”

DARCY: “Not at all. When I went away, I felt that it would soon happen.”

ELIZABETH: “That is to say, you had given your permission. I guessed as much.”

DARCY: “On the evening before my going to London, I made a confession to him, which I believe I ought to have made long ago. I told him of all that had occurred to make my former interference in his affairs, absurd and impertinent. His surprise was great. He had never had the slightest suspicion.” (Austen 249–50)

Table A9.
SUMMARY OF ALL PASSAGES

# AND TOTALS	SPEAKER	INDEPENDENT CLAUSES	NOMINAL CLAUSES	RELATIVE CLAUSES	SUBORDINATE CLAUSES	PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES	INFINITIVES
31	Elizabeth	38	6	6	5	42	13
% of Independent Clauses	Elizabeth		16%	16%	13%	111%	34%
20	Darcy	26	12	2	2	20	9
% of Independent Clauses	Darcy		46%	8%	8%	77%	35%