CONJUNCTIONS IN FINAL POSITION IN EVERYDAY TALK

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1. INTRODUCTION

The final position in a turn at talk can assume a special status. It offers the speaker a final chance to modify the current utterance, and it can help determine the next speaker and the type of response. In English conversation, many items can appear in turn-final position such as tag questions and pragmatic markers such as though and y’know. English has a notoriously complex system of inflected tags for commenting on discourse functions and modality in turn-final position. Less well described is the whole array of invariant tags such as right and okay for modifying utterance meaning and modality in final position. Conjunctions such as but and so belong to this group of turn-final units as well, and they represent the focus of this paper.

In as much as conjunctions such as but and so are supposed to conjoin units, we might not expect them to occur in final position at all. Of course, they do not end sentences in written texts, but conjunctions do routinely close turns in everyday talk. Turns ending in conjunctions often occur with typically final intonation contours, and they receive the same sorts of responses as turns ending in other ways. That is to say, other participants do not orient to them as incomplete: they do not respond with proposed completions or questions such as but what? Instead, turns ending with conjunctions can elicit typical markers of understanding or agreement, indicating that the final conjunctions have recognizable points or functions. In the following, I will investigate the distribution and functions of conjunctions in turn-final position in American English conversation. The focus will be on but, which is by far the commonest final conjunction. I will include observations on the combination yeah but for the light they shed on the function
of final *but* more generally. I will not be considering items like *though* or *however* with regular occurrence throughout turns, including final position.

2. **Corpus**

As long as electronically searchable corpora of transcribed conversation were relatively small, it was understandably difficult to find convincing examples of turn-final conjunctions, although we, probably all, occasionally noted them in everyday conversations around us. Today, one can find ample data in very large corpora such as the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus (LSWEC-AC), with nearly 2.5 million words of transcribed American English conversation, on which this investigation is based. Further examples come from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE): see Data Sources at the end of this paper.

3. **Final but, so & and**

An initial example with final *but* shows that the conjunction can occur in final position without inviting completion by another participant.

Larry:  um like if they want to look in uh in your locker,  
if you have a locker,  
then they say  
that that’s kind of into your personal area, y’know *but*.

Brian: yeah, I read about this lady,  
this lady wrote an article  
worked for United Airlines for awhile  
and she was saying how you can’t …

LSWEC-AC (131101)

Final *but* introduces a note of doubt or insecurity on the part of the speaker, but does not leave the utterance incomplete, because it suggests that what is left unsaid is shared knowledge. The other participant responds with *yeah*, an obvious marker of agreement, before moving on to a related story. The occurrence with *y’know* is unsurprising, since *y’know* also often signals information shared by the speaker and the listener, according to Schiffrin (1987).

Again in the following excerpt, the conjunction *so* appears in turn-final position, where it, too, elicits a *yeah* response.