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What are the Functions of Discourse Markers *uh* & *um*?

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Abstract

This paper examines the function of uh and um in spontaneous speaking by an English native speaker which focuses on analysis of the function of delay markers in conversation particularly in answering questions spontaneously. The data was collected from an interview with an English native speaker as the participant, a male Australian postgraduate student of an Australian university. The utterances in the transcript were analyzed applying the conversation analysis method. It is found that there are some functions of uh and um in the participant's speech such as; looking for the answer by repeating the question, searching for words, changing the structure of the sentence after pausing, keeping the floor, deciding what to say next, pausing in his long answer and pausing in his first utterance, repeating the question before answering it and ceding the floor.

Key words: *delay marker, spontaneous speaking, native speaker, conversation analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Discourse has been researched widely in a number of areas, including philosophy, sociology, and linguistics. Discourse research in linguistics field is dealing with how people interact. Conversational analysis is one of the methods for examining rhetoric through language usage which related to both social life and linguistics (Schiffrin, 1991, p.3). In fact, the conversation does not always go as expected. People frequently use markers while listening. People use speech markers in conversation, which might also cause their fluency to be disrupted (Fox Tree, 1995). Therefore, many researchers are interested in learning more about the role of the markers. In their speech, native English speakers often use pause markers or fillers such as *uh* and *um*. People are becoming more concerned that they are being disadvantaged by using these markers. As a result, it is critical to understand the role of the delay markers *uh* and *um* in conversational speech. This research would be beneficial to English teachers because they must have a thorough understanding of English in order to respond to questions from students, especially the use of the delay markers *uh* and *um*, which are common in English speaking. Meanwhile, there are a number of controversies about *uh* and *um* that sometimes emerge in English speech. They are called fillers by Fraundorf and Watson (2011) because they have little meaning, but they are considered terms by Clark and Fox Tree (2002). This raises the issue of what the *uh* and *um* pause markers do in speech. However, there has been little discussion of this subject so far.

The aim of this analysis was to determine the roles of *uh* and *um* in an interview with an English native speaker. Since *uhs* and *ums* are frequently used in English conversation, this study looked into the role of these markers in conversation, especially when participants responded to questions spontaneously. The study based on a participant text transcription of an Australian native speaker in response to questions about his hobbies. Furthermore, several

characteristics of the speaker who used the pause markers *uh* and *um* in speaking were examined, including whether he may like to look for a word to continue his speech or consider what to say next; may wish to maintain the floor and may wish to cede the floor so that the discussion can continue. During the interview, a voice recorder was used, which was later transcribed and analysed. The aim of this research was to answer following questions:

1. What are the functions of *uh* and *um* in native English speakers' spontaneously speaking?
2. How the English native speaker uses *uh* and *um* in answering spontaneous questions?

This paper is divided into seven sections: first, the introduction will discuss the theory; second, the literature review will look at hypotheses that are applicable to the study; third, methodology will explain the data collection process; and finally, the findings will be interpreted and evaluated from a theoretical viewpoint; The section that follows will go through the data analysis; the sixth section will draw a conclusion about the study; and the final section will offer suggestions about delay markers and future studies.

Various scholars have different perspectives on conversation. According to ten Have (1999), communication is associated with people conversing with one another for a specific reason or as a means of ‘sociability' (p.4). He concentrates solely on use of the verbal words in interaction. The only flaw in this interpretation is that he failed to account for nonverbal communication. Liddicoat (2011), on the other hand, defines communication as "the way people communicate, socialize, and establish or maintain their relationships with one another." People communicate using linguistic code and non-verbal expression such as eye gazes and body posture. This is a more detailed concept since he considers not just spoken but also nonverbal communication.

There seems to be a lot of research out there that demonstrates the elements of communication. (Hutchby & Woffitt, 1998; Liddicoat, 2011; Seedhouse, 2005, Tottie, 2017) believe that there are three aspects to a conversation: turn-taking, adjacency pair, and repairs. Turn taking, according to Liddicoat (2011), is "the speaker turning in speech because the previous speaker has paused or indicated he or she has finished speaking" (pp. 81-92). He states that there are two simple methods for taking turns: the main speaker can choose the next speaker, or the next speaker can choose someone else. At least two people can participate in each conversation. Furthermore, once each speaker has finished speaking, they will be given an opportunity to converse. Although "adjacency pairs are paired utterances such that on processing of the first part of the pair (e.g. question), the second part of the pair (answer)" this turn can be called an adjacency pair (Seedhouse, 2005, p. 67). Consequently, Liddicoat (2011) suggests five main characteristics of adjacency pairs, including: two turns, by different speakers, positioned next to each in perhaps the most basic form, which is in sequence and divided into pair types. He therefore explains that there are two types of adjacency pairs: first pair parts (forms of talk that trigger actions) and second pair parts (forms of talk that initiate actions) (that flows from such initiations). These adjacency pairs could appear in daily conversation or during an interview. Furthermore, often speech in discourse does not flow correctly due to a n*um*ber of is-sues such as inappropriate word usage, slips of the tongue, mishearings, misunderstandings, and so on.

Most scholars classify them as conversational fixes because of the forms of repairs that are related to cognitive issues. According to Hutchby and Woffitt, (1998), some varieties of other types of repair, according to Hutchby and Woffitt (1998), include self-initiated self repair (speaker has initiative to repair as he discovers the difficulty in his utterance), other-initiated self repair (speaker repairs his speech difficulty after being initiated by recipient), and self-

initiated other repair (speaker repairs his language trouble upon being initiated by recipient) (the speaker who has trouble in speech get the recipient to repair) and other initiated repair (both the speaker and the listener initiate repair of the speech problem) (p. 61). In conversation analysis, it seems to be vital to consider the components of conversation which would help you detect the occurrence of the delay markers *uh* and *um*.

Conversation Analysis

Early hypotheses of conversational analysis differ from used mostly in more recent research. Conversation analysis (an approach to the study of social interaction) was initiated by three pioneers in the sociology field in the 1960s, Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson when they studied with Sacks and Schegloff at Barkeley, they collaborated on an analysis of social contact with Hoffman and Garfinkel (Sidnell, 2007. p.203). In their early work, Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) focused on the structure of turn taking, while (Schegloff, 1968, as cited in Sidnell, 2007, p.203) focused on the sequencing of behaviors in conversation. Latest researchers, on the other hand, have proposed related notions in conversational study. Conversation research, according to (Grancea, 2007; Markee, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998), is the study of talk in interaction in daily interactions such as interviewing, doing business, going to school, talking on the phone, etc.

Their research focuses on daily interactions since it is through conversation that people can exchange information, tell a story, share an experience, and so on. They seem to focus a lot of time on interpreting verbal language in interactions that is only correlated with sound and speech in the transcript text. They appear to have paid no attention to the natural occurrence that can exist in speech, such as movements that are meant to be registered and transcribed in a specific manner. When non - verbal language is not transcribed and analyzed, that may lose its authenticity. Furthermore, Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) argue that the purpose of conversation analysis is to determine how participants perceive and respond to one another through the production and interpretation of speech in the interaction. However, they focus only on the talk-in interaction rather than the whole conversation.

Collecting Conversational Data

Conversation analysis begins with the collection of conversational data, which, ac-cording to Liddicoat (2011), is divided into three main phases: data collection, transcription, and analysis. Data collection is the practice of doc*um*enting a conversation using a tape re-corder or, more recently, visual technology, which may include more realistic aspects of social contact such as gaze, body expression, the relationship of talk to the physical environment, and object manipulation (pp. 14-24). However, according to Liddicoat (2011), transcription is the data that is first collected and then transcribed on paper, which may vary depending on the study's purpose. (pg. 27). To avoid misinterpretation of the conversation, meaning, clari-ty, and comprehensibility of the language, it is important for the transcriber to deter-mine elements of the interaction to include in order to help the reader understand the meaning of the text. According to Liddicoat (2011), the object of conversation analysis is to examine the facts and identify the phenomena within a specific interaction (p. 68). Since the emphasis of the conversation analysis is on the transcription's text, it's essential to note the clarity of symbols used throughout the transcription. If the text is difficult to understand, it would be difficult for

the reader to find out what the conversation is about in detail. As a result, tran-scripts should be considered one of the most critical components of conversation analysis study

Interpretation of uh and um

In conversation, the sounds *uh* and *um* can be interpreted in a n*um*ber of ways. According to Kam and Edwards (2008), *uh* and *um* are simply delay markers with one of the repair characteristics; however, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) suggest that *uh* and *um* are English words that include standard English segments such as phonology, prosody, syntax, semantics, and use. According to Clark and Fox Tree (2002), the words *uh* and *um* are words because they meet the requirements for being considered words.

Despite the fact that *uh* and *um* meet the criteria as words, they cannot be used to form a phrase. It is also the evident that they are really filled pause or delay markers. However, according to Fox Tree (2002), the use of these markers is considered a habit of speakers since the majority of native English speakers use them in their expressions (p.37). It is impossible that these markers emerge by chance when the utterance is produced by a cognitive process.

Fraundorf and Watson (2011), on the other hand, argue that *uh* and *um* are fillers that sometimes appear in natural speech and influence speech fluency. According to them, the fillers function as a filled pause in speech. A suspension in fluent speech, a hiatus of speaking, which may involve none, a stretch of silence, a filler, or other collateral acts, and a res*um*ption of fluent speaking are the three aspects of the disruptions (Clark, 1996, as cited in Clark & Fox Tree, 2002, p. 81). The phrases *uh* and *um* are most definitely just pause indicators. As a consequence, it considers *uh* and *um* both as delay markers to prevent any misunderstanding with the expression in the participant data transcript.

Implication of uh and um in speaking

Over the years, the scholars have researched at the implications of the delay markers *uh* and *um* in speech. According to some researchers, they are caused by a lack of fluency in speech. One of the phenomena of disfluencies, according to (Fox Tree, 1995; Fraundorf & Watson, 2011), is where someone uses *uh* and *um* in conversation. He also argues that in daily speech, disfluency is normal (p.709). However, according to Bortfeld et al. (2001), disfluency can be triggered by the speaker's and recipient's age, relationship, topic, role, and gender. They say that the speaker's age, relationship with the other speakers, topic role, and gender all have an impact on the speaker's fluency in the conversation. They discovered that every 100 words, the speaker produced 5.57 disfluencies on average. As a result, it is indeed critical to comprehend the implications of *uh* and *um* in order to decide whether or not the presence of these markers is associated to speech disfluency.

The reasons of using uh and um

Uh and *um* have been thoroughly studied in the areas of psychology, sociology, and linguistics. According to some scholars, *ums* and *uhs* are commonly used as upcoming delays signals. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) claim that *ums* and *uhs* are used to signal future delays, with *ums* signalling significant delays and *uhs* signaling minor delays. Furthermore, they ar-gue that there are at least three explanations for speakers to use *uh* and *um* in their voice, both of which can lead to them worrying about what to say at (filler); initiating a pause in speaking at (filler); and announcing a delay in speaking at (filler) (p.88). However, according to Kam and Edwards (2008), the major function of *uh* and *um* that have been investigated by Goodwin and Goodwin (1986) are searching memory for a word (as cited in Kam & Edwards, 2008, p.315),

Kam and Edwards (2008) are requesting assistance in completing their current utterance (p.315), and Maclay and Osgood (1959) are indicating that they want the next turn (as cited in Kam & Edwards, 2008, p.315). Each speaker specifically uses *um* and *uh* for various purposes, which are depending on the speaker's speech needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection

The data for this analysis derived from a face-to-face interview with a participant who was an English native speaker. The participant was a 25-year-old male La Trobe University student from Australia. According to Liddicoat (2011), the subject must be given adequate detail about the research and must consent to the use of his voice recording results therefore, the participant was asked to read the consent document before conducting the interview (the agreement to be recorded). Second, the interviewer explained the purpose of the interview or what would do to the data after it was gathered. And then, the researcher asked questions about his interests as well as some general questions about his hobby, experience, schooling, and activity such as; "Do you like sports?" The conversation was recorded for about ten minutes. Third, the data was transcribed using transcription symbols that would be used to analyze and understand the conversation's discourse (Herritage, 1984b; Psathas & Anderson, 1990, as cited in Liddicoat, 2011, p. 26). The interview was kept running by the interviewer asking questions without allowing the participant a chance to ask questions, in order to keep the conversation flowing naturally. Finally, the participant was asked to write a summary of the interview's content whereas the interviewer wrote his own summary of the conversation's content. It is essential that the information used in the conversation analysis be natural. As Liddicoat (2011) stated that, data for conversation analysis should be collected naturally in order to achieve the aim of conversation analysis, which is to understand how people communicate in their everyday lives (pp.14-15). As a consequence, in order to keep the conversation flowing naturally, the interviewer kept the interview going by taking turns until each participant had finished answering each question. The natural responses of the participants were necessary in order to elicit natural responses, allowing the utterances of the delay markers *uh* and *um* to occur spontaneously.

Transcription

Transcription was performed using data from a tape recorder, which enabled the transcriber to use auditory data from the participants' responses while using delay markers. The words *uh* and *um* were embedded into the script. Both samples were coded using transcription symbols (Jefferson, 2004 as cited in Paltridge, 2009, pp. 108-109). (appendix 2). Words and symbols were also used to transcribe the speech samples.

Data analysis

The function of *uh* and *um* features was used to analyze the utterances in the transcript in order to achieve the aim of this analysis, which was to determine the function of delay markers in spontaneous speech. The aim is to find certain *uh* and *um* characteristics in the participant's speech that are synonymous with looking for a word to continue communicating, determining

what to say next, leaving the floor open, or having to cede the floor so the conversation can continue.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to answer one key question about the function of *uh* and *um* in the participants' spontaneous responses. However, certain features were considered that could occur associated with the roles of *uh* and *um* in spontaneous speaking and have been elaborated in the review of literature, such as; the participant might search for a word to continue his speech, may decide what to say next; might want to keep the floor or might want to cede the floor so the conversation can continue; in his spontaneous utterances, the participant (P) frequently used the delay markers *uh* and *um*. Instead of clearly addressing the question by using it before breaks, he attempted to answer the questions with *uh* and *um*. However, I have identified some important language samples from the interview as research findings.

a) The participant seemed to be looking for an answer by repeating the question and then beginning with *uh* and *um* before answering the question. Perhaps he did not consider the question that might be asked by the interviewer. As he was trying to come up with suitable terms for his answer, he kept using *um*. This can be seen from the following excerpt:

1. I : what is the worst thing of living here.
2. P : the worst thing *uh* (.) *um* (.) is meeting people life culture and, the *um* (.) little of vividness
3. and life culture and *um* (.) ethnocentricity of *uh* (.) many of the people here really drive
4. me crazy sometimes.

b) The participant began his response with *uh*, followed by a pause, indicating that he was looking for words by using *uh* at the start, and that he was also considering what to say next by using *uh* afterwards that can be found from the excerpt below;

16. I : is it difficult?
17. P : *uh* (.) I did find it *uh* (.) little bit difficult, it is very overwhelming to start studying at
18. University at *uh* (.) the age 25 because, haven't been at school since I was 16 and I found that
19. very overwhelming but, I really enjoy learning being surrounded by intellectuals.

c) After a 5-second pause, the participant changed the form of the sentence. He may want to continue his speech with a new word to hold the board. As an example;

32. I: oh really? what kind of music do you like?
33. P: I like everything, I mean everyone said that but I do have *um* **(0.5)** I am fond of most
34. music styles. I normally don't listen to country or classical but, if it is playing live or
35. anything with good rhythm in it I like, mainly the *uh* **(.)** music genre that I listen to will
36. be rock' n roll, the blues, or hip hop as well.

d) Recalling someone's name took a total of 10 seconds, with an *um* in between the first 5 seconds and the next 5 seconds before answering the question, which can be thought of as choosing what to say next, for example;

36. I : ok, good. who is your favorite singer?
37. P: favorite singer? (.) I (0.5) *um* (0.5) I have to go with Freddie Mercury from Queen
38. would probably be the best, I like a lot of different singers though.

e) In his long answer, the participant continued to use *uh* and *um*, followed by pauses. In the first utterance, there was one *um* with a pause, followed by three *ums* in the remaining utterances as in the example below;

48. I : so *um* (.) , which part of the world have you have visited.
49. P : the first I have been to was *uh* (.) Southern Africa when I was *um* (0.5) 21 and I *um* (.)

50. went to South Africa, and Denmark and then I came back and work for couple of years and
51. I went to Russia foru*m* (.) nine months and I went to Botswana a couple of months as well,
52. and then I came back work again and recently last year try to spend six months traveling to
53. North America and South America.

f) Before responding, the participant posed the question again. As an example;

59. I : (laughs) why?
60. P : why? *uh* (.) because I did so when get there I was surprised by how multicultural differ
61. from one to another and the people as well and *um* (.) the different city. every city in *um*
62. (0.5) America is different.

g) The participant decided to give up the floor by saying *uh*, but he kept going. As an example;

65. I : ya:::a::
66. P : *uh* (.5) *well*, I have to say probably about society and development in Australia obviously
67. we are much close tight to Britain and I do find it interesting 'cause I grew up *um* (.) not in
68. the city and it's a part of and I'm traveling from the city to *um* (.) to suburb and I think…

The data analysis obtained seven important findings in this report. The participant apparently seemed to be looking for an answer by repeating the question, and then he continued with *uh* and *um* before answering the question. Perhaps he did not consider the question that would be asked by the interviewer. When he was looking for suitable words to answer the questions, he kept saying *um*. Second, the participant began his response with *uh*, followed by a pause, indicating that he was looking for words by using *uh* at the start of his response, and that he was also considering what to say next by using *uh* afterwards.

Third, after a 5-second delay, the participant changed the form of the sentence. He may want to continue his speech with a new word to hold the floor. Fourth, recalling someone's name took 10 seconds in total, with an *um* in between the first 5 seconds and the next 5 seconds before answering the question, which can be called decision-making. Fifth, in his long answer, the participant tends to use *uh* and *um*, followed by pauses. In the first utterance, there was one *um* with a pause, followed by three *ums* in the following utterances. Sixth, the researcher asked the question again before responding. Seventh, the person decided to give up the floor by saying *uh*, then 'well.' According to Kam and Edwards (2008), speakers often apply *uh* and *um* to other ways, such as well and you know (p. 314). During the interview, some work features of *uh* and *um* in speech were revealed in participant's spontaneous responses. The analysis pro-vides some information that leads to a positive conclusion.

First, the participant repeated a part of the question before responding, and in example (a) line 9; (b) line 17; and (f) line 61, he needs to find suitable terms. Second, participants were having trouble answering questions when they were struggling for vocabulary and determining what to say next (b) line 18 and (d) line 38). Third, by continuing his speech (c) line 33, the participant wanted to hold the floor. Fourth, he decided to give up the floor so that the discussion could proceed (g) line 67. Sixth, the person sought to recall a place's name (e) line 50. The participant seemed to be unprepared to respond to the random questions.

CONCLUSION

This study discovered some evidence relating to the use of *uh* and *um* in random expression while responding to questions. The participant clearly used the pause symbols *uh* and *um* to look for words to decide what to say next, as well as to hold the floor by continuing his speech and to cede the floor. The participant often repeated the questions before answering them, which is an interesting observation. It is

possible that this individual's habit of using *uh* and *um* in random speech has been permanent. It is preferable to use video to obtain a more detailed data analysis, which is particularly useful for teaching purposes. It is fair to say that even an English native speaker also used delay markers in spontaneous speaking in answering questions.

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