



Fillers (Discourse Markers & co.) and Backchannels

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Let's sum up what we said last week...

- Spoken Language is not inferior to written language
- Meaning is more than words and much of the information transmitted in conversation is actually conveyed through prosodic and proxemic features
- It is very hard to reproduce these features and their value in a written form



Let's sum up what we said last week...

- Spoken language has structure
- Structure is needed in order to make the stream of conversation more easily processable
- Conversation is structured by several factors (politeness, negotiation, content, context, etc.)



Let's sum up what we said last week...

- Spoken language is characterized by certain structural phenomena which are related to the topic, genre and to the role of the participants in the exchange.
- We experienced what happens when we transcribe oral language (i.e. we 'polish' structure and lexicon)



Let's sum up what we said last week...

- We saw that we frequently use vague language
- We saw its major functions (list completers, quantities, placeholders, etc.)



Let's sum up what we said last week...

- We then spoke of the common use of narration in conversation
- We saw that narration has a recognizable structure
- We saw that repetition helps us
- We saw what the strategies to make narration more vivid are at the graphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse level
- We talked about the reasons to use narration in conversation (i.e. to make one's point)
- We saw how speakers collaborate to the success of the communicative event



What can you do now?

- You can recognize vague language
- You can recognize what is lost in transcription at different levels of the linguistic structure
- You can recognize the structure and the function of narration in conversation
- You can recognize formulaic expressions in spoken discourse and some of their functions (e.g. opening function, acknowledgement, speaker's collaboration, etc.)



What next...?

Today we will work on

FILLERS and in particular on
DISCOURSE MARKERS
BACKCHANNELS
VOICED PAUSES



FILLERS

Fillers are sounds or words that are spoken to fill up gaps in utterances.

Different languages have different characteristic filler sounds.

In English, the most common filler sounds are 'er' (British spelling, 'uh' in American spelling) and 'um'.



FILLERS

4 main categories of fillers have been identified:

- filled pauses (FP);
- discourse markers (DM);
- explicit editing terms (EET);
- asides/parentheticals (A/P).



FILLERS

Speakers often produce multiple contiguous fillers, that is **CHAINS OF FILLERS**.

Fillers can occupy different positions in discourse.



- **End-of-turn fillers**
 - DM ...and I went to the store /. *you know /-
 - FP ...and I went to the store /. *um /-
- **Fillers at the Start of a Turn**
 - * See Ø my company has a much stricter policy than yours it sounds like /.
 - * Um the * th * the one thing I'm thinking is /, that it might be hard to see the stage from way back here / (filler + disfluency)
- **Fillers as Complete Turns**
 - A: But it's just really bizarre /, if you ask me /.
 - B: * Um /-
 - A: The whole criminal justice system /.
 - B: * Um Ø but I don't think /, the police are the biggest system /.



Fillers as Complete Turns

With stand-alone items like these, we must be careful to distinguish fillers from **backchannels**, since some words can behave as either fillers or backchannels.



Fillers as Filled Pauses

Filled pauses are **hesitation sounds** that speakers employ to indicate **uncertainty** or to **maintain control** of a conversation while thinking of what to say next. Filled pauses **do not add any new information** to the conversation (other than to indicate the speaker's hesitation) and they do not alter the meaning of what is uttered. For instance:

- * Um I do * uh some * uh woodworking myself.

Filled pauses can occur **anywhere** in the stream of speech.



Fillers as Filled Pauses

In English, the set of filled pauses includes the following five words:

- ah
- eh
- er
- uh
- um

Other sounds or non-lexemes can occasionally be used as a filled pause, and some speakers may adopt an idiosyncratic filled pause noise that does not appear on the above list.



Fillers as Filled Pauses

Be aware that some words that can be used as Filled Pauses may have **other functions**, like question responses and backchannel cues, elsewhere in the discourse. We should identify words as **filled pauses only when they indicate a speaker's hesitation**.

Furthermore, filled pauses can sometimes function like an **editing term** as well. However, in this case they will not be considered as filled pauses but as Explicit Editing Terms.



FPs occupying a whole speaker turn

Sometimes a speaker's turn consists solely of a filled pause. You should annotate this as an incomplete SU:

- A: I love mowing the lawn /.
- B: * Um /-
- A: Being outdoors is great /.

They can also be placed at the end of the speaker turn.



Explicit Editing Terms (EETs)

EETs are fillers that occur within the context of an **edit disfluency**, comprising an overt statement from the speaker, recognizing the existence of disfluency.

Typically, they consist of a short phrase such as

"I mean", "sorry", "excuse me", "rather"



Explicit Editing Terms (EETs)

- And when he gets free again /, he will have no compunction but to complete that that same kind of lifestyle * *uh *sorry continue that same kind of lifestyle /.
- I think one of the positive things * *or rather one of the things that can come out of it is not just discipline /. I thought /, you might enjoy some meat loaf * *er tofu sandwiches * rather /.



Explicit Editing Terms (EETs)

EETs are quite **rare**. Explicit editing terms are **optional** elements for all disfluencies. They can occur **anywhere** within the disfluency, including after the corrected portion and disfluencies may contain more than one EET.

- Three hundred fifty-six residents were killed * *er injured rather /.

Please note that "er" is a filled pause that serves the EET role.



Asides and Parentheticals

Asides occur when the speaker utters a short side comment on a topic then returns to the main topic being discussed.

An aside can also occur when the speaker addresses someone who is not a part of the immediate conversation (e.g.: when someone else walks into the room during a phone call).

Asides are often accompanied by prosodic features like shift in intonation or the presence of a pause.



Asides and Parentheticals

Asides can occur anywhere in the utterance.

- He has now for about * oh gosh how long has it been ten years /, I guess /.
- And I couldn't help thinking when that last question * it was a funny question came up /.



Asides and Parentheticals

Parentheticals are similar to asides in that they are **brief remarks** that break the flow of the larger utterance, but unlike asides, the remark is on the same topic as the larger utterance.

In standard writing, parentheticals are often accompanied by dashes or parentheses. They often display similar prosodic features to asides.

- The head of the United Auto Workers Union responded by call the move * his words nuts /.



Asides and Parentheticals

Parentheticals are somewhat common in broadcast news speech, while asides occur more frequently in conversational telephone speech.

Occasionally the aside is somewhat longer than a complete SU (Sentential Unit, Syntactic Unit, Semantic Unit). The majority of these cases will involve conjunctions.

- We went on vacation to Florida about * oh I don't know exactly how long ago but six or seven years ago /.



Short comments that look like asides

Sometimes speakers will make short, aside-like comments (with accompanying prosodic features like changes in pitch, pauses, etc.) that we will NOT consider as asides.

These "non-asides" are brief, typically **one or two word phrases**. Unlike the previous examples, they are not complete clauses, so they do not involve any "nesting" of SUs. Common examples are *say* or *for example*:

- And when someone is **say** out of high school... And if he **for example** wanted to be a ballerina.... It's because of all the E S and H considerations that people are worrying about I think much more than they should...



Discourse Markers

A **Discourse Marker** (DM) is a word or phrase that functions primarily as a **structuring unit of spoken language**.

To the listener, a DM signals the speaker's intention to mark a **boundary** in discourse.

DMs are **active contributions** to the discourse and signal such activities as **change** in speaker, taking or holding **control** of the floor, relinquishing control of the floor, or the **beginning** of a new topic.



Discourse Markers

Examples:

- That gets on my nerves, too. * **Anyway** tell me about your new job.
- A: * **So** how do you make this soup /?
B: First you take a couple of carrots and chop them /. * **Okay** and then you sauté them in butter /.



Discourse Markers

It is nearly **impossible** to establish an **exhaustive list** of DMs for a given language due to their **wide range of functions** and the **difficulty of defining** them precisely; moreover, discourse markers are subject to much dialectal and individual **variation**, and **novel formations** can serve as discourse markers, which means that any list quickly becomes out of date.



Most common DMs in American English

- | | |
|-------------|------------------------|
| - actually | - now |
| - basically | - okay |
| - anyway | - see |
| - and yeah | - so |
| - yeah | - well |
| - I mean | - you know |
| - let's see | - you see |
| - like | - you know what I mean |
| - oh | |



Discourse Markers as Backchannels

Some words that function as discourse markers can also act like backchannels in other contexts.

Backchannels are words or phrases that provide feedback to the dominant speaker by indicating that the non-dominant speaker is still engaged in the conversation (though not actively participating at the moment).



Discourse Markers as Backchannels

In the example below, *okay* is functioning as a backchannel rather than a DM:

- A: I've lived in Friendship Heights for years /.
- B: Okay /@
- A: But I'm thinking of moving a little further out /.



Discourse Markers

Remember: many words and phrases that are used as discourse markers also have other *literal* meanings.

- Do **you know** how many minutes we're supposed to talk for /?
- The situation right **now** is that we're moving in three weeks /.



Discourse Markers

We consider as DMs only those instances that structure the discourse and do not carry separate meaning.

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish when a word or phrase is functioning as a discourse marker and when it is acting as a content word.



You know as a generalizer

One common discourse markers that has other functions is *you know*. *You know* is sometimes employed as an *utterance-final generalizer*, allowing the speaker to extend their specific examples to a more general observation:

- It's not like Boston NYC Philly / . Or * **you know** /-
- If the stress is really on / , she'll break down / . * **you know** /-



Like as a DM

One particularly difficult word that serves many (altogether TOO many) functions, including acting as a DM is *like*.

It can act as a *preposition*, *conjunction*, an *adverb*, an *adjective*, a *verb*, and even a *substitute* for *say*, *said*, and *that*.



Some of the non-discourse functions of *like*

Like as a *preposition* meaning "similar to":

- They're **like** bermuda shorts but a little shorter /.

Like as a *preposition* meaning "as if":

- It looks **like** she's wearing bermuda shorts /.

Like used with "to be" as a *verb* of quotation (instead of *say* or *said*):

- He was **like** / , I'm wearing bermuda shorts /.



Like as a DM

Examples in which *like* functions as a discourse marker:

- She was * *like* wearing bermuda shorts /.
- But he played the character in it that was very * *like* gross /.
- * *Like* when I was * *like* in high school and junior high school /, I used to hate it /



Like as a DM

In addition to context, prosody (especially the presence of a pause) can help to distinguish cases of DM from non-DM *like*, although some confusing cases will remain, particularly between verb of quotation *like* and discourse marker *like*.



So

So is another item with many different uses in discourse that may be difficult to distinguish from one another. The most common uses of *so* apart from its function as a discourse marker are as a(n)...

- ...**subordinating conjunction**:
 - We brought out pictures of her grandparents *so* she'll get to know them /.
- ...**adverb** meaning, roughly, therefore:
 - I grew up on a farm *so* I always had outdoor pets /.



So as a DM

As a **discourse marker** *so* often serves to indicate a **topic change**:

- I'm not sure to be honest with you / . *
So your backpacking trip through China seemed to be an exciting adventure /.

Discourse marker *so* can often stand alone as a turn, or stand at the end of an utterance when the speaker trails off:

- A: That was a lot to go through / . * So /-
- B: * Wow you must be relieved to be over that /.



So as a DM

It is often particularly difficult to distinguish uses of *so* as a conjunction vs. *so* as a discourse marker.

If the speaker **continues** in the next turn with the rest of a conjoined statement, then *so* is a **conjunction** and not a DM.



Yeah

The word *yeah* (and variations like *yup*) can play many different roles in the discourse.

As such *yeah* serves as a particularly useful illustration of **how to recognize fillers** (in this case DMs) that are included within larger SUs rather than acting as SUs of their own, and how to decide between regular DMs and DRs (Discourse Responses).



Yeah

Yeah sometimes serves as a **direct response** to a **question**, in which case, it can be seen as an independent SU (statement SU), only if the question needs a response, not merely querying feedback.

- A: You said /, you had ten cats /?
B: Yeah /. When I moved /, I gave them to my mother /.
- A: Did you say /, you're calling from Dallas /?
B: Yeah /.

On occasion, *yeah* functions as a **question itself**, displaying question intonation (question SU):

- A: I almost got hit by a bus once on my way to work /.
B: Yeah /?



Yeah

More frequently, *yeah* clearly functions as a **backchannel** and can be interpreted as roughly equivalent to "I'm listening -- keep talking."

- A: I'm sure /, everybody knows /, everybody is getting high /. You might as well just legalize it then /.
B: Yeah /@
A: It would probably bring down the price a lot /, if it was legalized /.
B: Yeah /@
A: * So the drug dealers wouldn't like it being legalized too much /.

Backchannel *yeah* typically occurs in a separate turn, or in a turn with other backchannels. As a backchannel, it cannot preface or be imbedded within a longer SU, an interruption, or any kind of new turn.



Yeah as a DM

As a rule, when *yeah* occurs at the beginning of a turn or within a larger turn, but is not acting as a direct response to a question, it can be considered as a **discourse marker**.

In such cases, discourse marker *yeah* can **provide structure** to the discourse.

- * Yeah Ø it's like /, I'm young /. And I should get started getting into shape /.



Yeah as a DM

DM *yeah* can also be invoked to provide a **(positive) reaction, affirmation, or endorsement** of something the other speaker has said, in which case it is called a **discourse response**:

- A: It's supposed to alleviate some of their pain /.
B: * Yeah Ø why not /? Legalize a hundred percent /.
A: * Yeah Ø I don't see what the big deal is /.
- A: Where with teenagers around here /, you gotta drink to be cool /.* So /-
B: * Yeah Ø you got it /. [or is this wrong now and this is a backchannel?]
A: Who knows /? Where are you from /?



Hands-on work

Several complex examples containing many instances of *yeah* will illustrate the various interpretations in context.

Identify the function of each occurrence of *yeah*.



Legend

/ . = statement SU

/ ? = question SU

/ @ = backchannel

* ... = DR

* ... = DM



B: Right now I'm in New Jersey .
 A: Yeah
 B: Yeah. In a couple of days I'm Aloha bound for -
 A: Yeah. Right on.
 B: Yeah for the whole winter. So I'm stoked.
 A: ...because there's much more kiddie stuff /.
 B: Yeah, the boardwalk?
 A: Yeah. I per- /-
 B: Board walk's great. Board walk is so great.
 A: Yeah it is. Do you surf, or something?
 B: Yeah.
 A: Yeah is that why you're heading out to Hawaii?
 B: Yeah.



B: Right now I'm in New Jersey /.
 A: Yeah /?
 B: Yeah / . In a couple of days I'm Aloha bound for /-
 A: Yeah /@ Right on /@
 B: * Yeah Ø for the whole winter / . * So I'm stoked /.
 A: ...because there's much more kiddie stuff /.
 B: * Yeah Ø the boardwalk /?
 A: Yeah / . I per- /-
 B: Board walk's great / . Board walk is so great /.
 A: * Yeah Ø it is / . Do you surf / , or something /?
 B: Yeah /.
 A: * Yeah Ø is that why you're heading out to Hawaii /?
 B: Yeah /.



DMs as Discourse Responses (DRs)

In many cases, DMs are used to express a **response** to what the other speaker is saying **in addition to structuring the discourse**. We have called these special cases **discourse responses (DRs)**.

DRs can be single words or phrases, and multiple DRs can occur in succession (in which each should be separately tagged as a DR). Speakers often use DRs to, simultaneously, **respond** to what the other person has just said, **and initiate** their own attempts to take the floor.



Discourse Responses

- A: I'm sorry
 B: I was going to say we're both in agreement
 A: * **Yes** It's so expensive too
- A: Where with teenagers around here / , you gotta drink to be cool / . * **So** /-
 B: * **Yup** You got it / .
 A: Who knows /? Where are you from /?
- A: I live in Northeast Philly / . But I used to go to Brigantine / , when I was a kid / .
 B: Not a bad spot / .
 A: * **No** * **No** * **No** It's not / . I like it / .



DRs are not to be confused with direct answers to a question. DRs are not only responsive, but also function like regular discourse markers (structuring the discourse), whereas direct responses are only answers to questions.

On the surface, DRs may look a lot like backchannel SUs, which are also responsive in nature. **Unlike backchannels, DRs are active responses**. They not only respond to what the previous speaker is saying, but they also actively structure the discourse, conveying something similar to: "I'm responding to what you're saying, and I'm going to saying something beyond that".

Backchannels, on the other hand, convey the sentiment: "I'm listening, continue talking."

In all cases, because they act as a response to what the previous speaker has said, **DRs occur initially**, or within a string of other DRs. Specifically, a DR can only be used as a response to another speaker's turn.



Backchannels

Backchannels are an open class of words that we define by their position and function within the discourse.

A backchannel, also known as an **acknowledgement** or **continuer**, is a word or phrase that provides **feedback** to the dominant speaker, indicating that the non-dominant speaker is still engaged in the conversation.

Backchannels do not signal that the non-dominant speaker is trying to take over control of the floor.



Backchannels

For example:

- A: * You know it's just been really difficult for me /.
- B: Uh-huh /@
- A: What with everything happening in the course of two weeks /.

- A: If it happens again /, I'm going to have to say something /.
- B: Yeah /@ Yeah /@
- A: Because it's getting out of hand /.



Backchannels

The number of potential backchannels is very large and it is impossible to establish an exhaustive list. The following words represent **very common backchannel words**:

hm/hmm; huh; mm-hm/mm-hmm/mhm; oh; okay/OK; good; I know; right; sure; yeah/yea/yep/yes/yup; uh-huh; really; that's; true; that's right.



Backchannels

The list is not exhaustive. For instance, in the following example, Speaker B's entire turn consists of a string of backchannel SUs, and contains several words and phrases that do not appear on the above list.

- A: And it sounds terrible to hear a little kid signing that sound "Back That Thing Up" /.
- B: Right /@ Right /@ That's true /@ Mm-hm /@
- A: I have little nieces and nephews /.



Backchannels

Backchannels may on occasion constitute **repetitions** of the dominant speaker's words.

- A: I'm from Pittsburgh /.
- B: Pittsburgh /@
- A: It's an OK place /.
- B: Mhm /@



Summing up

Now, you can...

- ...recognize a filler
- ...classify fillers
- ...distinguish among
 - Filled pauses
 - Explicit Editing Terms
 - Asides/Parenteticals
 - Discourse Markers
 - Discourse Responses
 - Backchannels



Summing up

Moreover, you have discovered some conventional **symbols** for the **annotation** of spoken data:

- / . = statement SU
- /? = question SU
- /@ = backchannel
- * ... = DR
- * ... = DM

