

The Utilization of Filler Words in Relation to Age and Gender

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Abstract

Filler words play a pivotal role in human communication. This review explores the multifaceted nature of these words through analyzing the early development of filler words as well as their correlation with age and gender. Filler words consist of two subcategories; filled pauses and discourse markers. Examples include ‘um’, ‘uh’, ‘I mean’, ‘like’, and ‘you know’. These words can have distinct and important functions in conversation, contrary to the common association of filler words with disfluency in speech or anxiety. Research suggests that the social factors of age and gender greatly influence filler word usage, as younger females tend to utilize these words and sounds more frequently than any other social group. While societal norms may predispose women to exhibit more accommodating speech patterns with the use of filler words, deeper analysis reveals more complex explanations. These explanations for younger people as well as women using these words more frequently than others include, but are not limited to, the natural maturity of speech with age, heightened awareness of semantic meanings, and a more sophisticated use of the English language. Research gaps in comparing the use of filler words across different languages and with non-native speakers as well as filler words in different conversational settings is advancing. By unpacking the complexities of age and gender in relation to language, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of language dynamics and societal norms. With the recognition of these linguistic patterns in certain societal groups, we can create more inclusive communication between people and better understand human interaction as a whole.

Keywords: filler words; sociolinguistics; speech development; gender; age; discourse markers; filled pauses; lexical hedges

Introduction

The way in which humans communicate with each other plays a considerable role in who we are as individuals. The sociolinguistic relation between speech and social factors can greatly impact people’s perceptions of others. Even seemingly pointless words and sounds can hold meaning and significance to who we are as people. In other words, words like *um*, *uh*, *like*, *I mean*, and *you know* can influence social factors like age and gender and shift one's perception of the people around them.

These sounds, words, and phrases all fall under the category of filler words. Researchers who study sociolinguistics tend to use a variety of different terms to define categories of these

words, but, for the sake of clarity and consistency, this review will include the two subcategories of filler words, filled pauses and discourse markers/lexical hedges, defined below.

Filled Pauses are words or sounds that indicate a pause in speech to collect thoughts or block a person from interrupting the speaker. This category includes the words/sounds *um* and *uh* (Laserna, 2014).

Discourse Markers are words or short phrases that do not hold any grammatical information but are purposefully used in conversation. These are generally utilized as transitions (Laserna, 2014). This category includes, but is not limited to, *I mean, you know* (Laserna, 2014; Koczogh et al., 2011), *like* (Laserna, 2014), *well, sort of* (Liu et al., 2010), *just*, and *so* (Tagliamonte, 2005).

Lexical Hedges are words or phrases that are often used to soften speech by avoiding direct tones (Rawanita, 2019). Many of the words/phrases that fall under lexical hedges overlap with the words/phrases that are considered discourse markers. The main difference between lexical hedges and discourse markers is the context of the conversation and the intention of the speaker.

In this review, as there is little difference between lexical hedges and discourse markers, I will refer to lexical hedges as discourse markers for the sake of coherency. Additionally, I will utilize the umbrella term ‘filler words’ to account for filled pauses and discourse markers/lexical hedges.

As stated above, filler words can hold a multitude of meanings that many people do not realize at first glance. Contrary to popular belief, if one tends to use filler words more frequently than the average person, it may not outright indicate that one may have disfluent speech or any type of anxiety while speaking (Laserna, 2014). Using filler words is similar to using verbs, nouns, and adjectives; all of them represent or refer to a specific and important aspect of conversation. While filler words may not be as crucial to speech as verbs, nouns, and adjectives, they are still there to serve a purpose and aid a person’s verbal expressions. Filler words such as *um, uh, you know, and like* are not typically used in formal writing, yet they are still important

tools for humans to express themselves in everyday conversations. Without filler words, much of our conversations would be dull and not as engaging to listeners.

Certain social groups tend to use these filler words more than other groups. For example, when thinking of the word *like*, many individuals may think of a “valley girl”. This stereotypical label is typically given to young adult women around the ages of 18 to 29. These women are generally associated with being “airheaded” or not as smart as other people (D’Onofrio, 2015). Emphasizing that age and gender can be linked to the words that we speak every single day could potentially open people’s minds to stereotypes we hold against the people around us. In turn, this awareness enables a more equitable society. This review will carefully examine the development of filler words in children in the hope of determining early language tendencies and patterns that may carry on and be influential later in life. Additionally, it will dive deep into existing research that analyzes age and gender as factors of the use of filler words as well as offer possible explanations for these findings.

Methods

This research entailed the use of a variety of search terms in a couple of different search engines. The search engines I used were Google Scholar and Kathryn A. Martin Library. When searching, I used terms such as ‘filler word development’, ‘filler words in childhood’, ‘age and filler words’, and ‘gender and filler words’. It is also worth noting that I used ‘filler words’ as a general search category, therefore I did use ‘filler words’, ‘filled pauses’, ‘discourse markers’ and ‘lexical hedges’ somewhat interchangeably as many of the journals and articles I found used different definitions for different words. I ensured that the sources I chose involved at least one of the filled pauses and discourse markers listed above (*um, uh, I mean, you know, like, well, sort*

of, just, and so) and I solely focused on the research regarding these words. The reason I chose these specific words/phrases to focus on is due to them being the most recurrent and prominent in the sources I found.

The literature revealed three dominant themes; the early development of filler words, age and its relation to filler words, and gender and its relation to filler words. The age and gender themes include a *possible explanations* section with the intention of finding patterns and interpretations throughout the sources. I examined filler words in young children in order to understand the development of these words and sounds and how they are used in language throughout life. The age and gender themes investigate which ages and which genders tend to use filler words most frequently. These two themes are later combined in order to ultimately conclude the main social factors that influence the use of filler words.

Furthermore, the age groups are broken up in order to compare the use of filler words at different stages in life. I inspected the developmental stages of filler words in young children around the ages of 0 to 2 years in order to understand the transformation of these words over time and the social implications that later affect the usages of these words. Then, the analysis jumps to age 10. The reason for this is due to children beginning to experience puberty which coincides with the shifting of speech tactics and certain social interaction methods. During this stage, many children develop various social skills and also take on different social roles in society (Beltz et al., 2015). I grouped the ages of 10 to 19-year-olds as this group contains the critical time of puberty as well as, in the later teens, the time people are continuing to form certain social stereotypes in the influential timeframes of high school and college. Additionally, I analyzed the use of filler words in adults ages 18 to 34 since this is the time that individuals are considered legal adults and begin to enter into more “adult roles”, such as job settings. Finally,

the last age group I analyzed is 34 to 60+-year-olds in order to compare and contrast the usages of filler words in the younger generations to older age groups.

Theme 1: The Early Development of Filler Words

In early childhood, when kids are just beginning to form words and sentences, filler words are a very prevalent feature in their speech. Acquiring language is a learning curve that takes practice, so, we can infer that children tend to use various filler words in order to collect their thoughts (Laserna, 2014) to ensure they are forming a grammatically correct sentence. Understanding this critical time of when children form language may be crucial to interpret how filler words are used in language and different social groups all throughout life. It is difficult for researchers to study filler words in children as the frequency that children produce these words vary from language to language. In other words, it is thought that some languages trigger filler words and some do not at all (Feldman & Menn, 2003). This review will inspect the usages of filler words in English, which is a language speakers tend to utilize a vast amount of filler words.

Young childrens' use of filler words tend to be a subject of debate for sociolinguists. The purpose of these filler words in children seem to teeter on the border of speech sounds and actual semantic meaning (Peters, 2001). Put differently, many experts are unsure if these words/sounds are just random sounds in children or if they actually hold significance in their speech. As language in children can vary from one child to another, it makes studying filler words difficult, especially since filler words themselves can vary from person to person as well. Some researchers in recent years have begun to tackle the obstacle of studying filler word development.

The development phases of filler words in children proposed by Ann Peters in (2001) is heavily supported by linguists studying filler words. Her proposed developmental phases paints a general picture of how and when filler words seem to emerge in children. These phases are articulated below.

Phase 1: Premorphology. This phase occurs sometime before the age of 1 year and 8 months, depending on the development of the child. In this stage, a child is able to form full syllables, a limited set of vowels, and few or no consonants. Filler words in this phase tend to completely lack meaning.

Phase 2: Protomorphology. Occurs around the age of 1 year and 8 months. The child is able to start using morphemes (i.e. affixes like ‘pre-’, ‘-ing’, and ‘-tion’). Children in this stage can usually produce combinations of words that make sense and filler words during this time usually begin to take on meaning.

Phase 3: Full Morphemes. This happens around the age of 2 years old. In this phase, children can correctly attach morphemes to words to make fully grammatical sentences (with the exception of a few errors). Filler words in this phase are used to an accurate extent. It is at this stage that Peters suggests children are able to understand and make use of filler words in speech.

Through understanding the development of these filler words early on, we can begin to comprehend and categorize certain patterns that may emerge which can lead to more advancements in the future. These advancements can include piecing together certain implications concerning the relationship between filler words and social factors like age and gender. It can highlight how the use of filler words evolve over the course of one’s life. As the idea of this developmental phase of filler words is fairly new, continuing to study this critical

time in childhood can allow researchers to determine what purposes filler words actually serve in speech and how certain social groups tend to use them throughout their entire life.

Theme 2: Age and the Use of Filler Words

As children get older they begin to utilize certain functions of speech more and more, including filler words. People of all ages use filler words on a day-to-day basis. An “um” there and a “you know” here is common speech for a ten-year-old as well as a fifty-year-old. Humans naturally have pauses in speech which can be filled with these words, whether it be for the purpose of collecting thoughts or conversational bridges. But, does one age group tend to utilize these words and phrases more often than others? Research patterns have shown that younger people tend to use filler words of all kinds more frequently than older people (Acton, 2011; Barbieri, 2008; Laserna et al., 2014; Tagliamonte, 2005). As people get older, these words/sounds become less and less frequent (Acton, 2011; Laserna, 2014).

Of the two subcategories of filler words defined above, one study found that both discourse markers and filled pauses tend to be used more frequently by young adults ages 17 to 22 compared to other age groups (Laserna, 2014). On the other hand, another study analyzed data from an electronic collection of written and spoken conversations called the British National Corpus (British National Corpus, 2007). These were recorded conversations from various sources based in Great Britain from the 1990s. From this corpus, the researcher found that the 25 to 34 age group used the filled pauses *um* and *erm* more often than 15 to 24-year-olds and the 45 to 60+ year-olds (Aldawsari, 2021). As this study used data from the 1990s, this could suggest that it is outdated and might require reevaluation for more accurate results.

Within the preteen and teenaged group, a study by Tagliamonte (2005) utilized casual interviews of 10 to 19-year-olds where the interviewer was a peer around the same age. This study was particularly beneficial because it used peer interviewers instead of strangers, lessening any possible anxiety in the young people from an interaction with an unfamiliar interviewer. This allowed for an informal and comfortable setting for the children to use their speech skills however they would like, permitting their use of filler words freely. The study focused on the use of discourse markers including words *like*, *just*, and *so* in this age group of 10 to 19-year-olds. Within this age range, the 13 to 16-year-olds typically used these words more often than the other preteens and teens. After around 16-years-old, the words continued to be used, but less often. These results suggested that the discourse markers seem to be acquired by kids in the preteen age group of 10 to 13, then are used in abundance in the mid-teen years, and become a bit less frequent in the older teen years (Tagliamonte, 2005).

Possible Explanations of Findings Regarding Age

Within the findings above, common patterns emerge and various explanations can begin to be articulated. One possible explanation for younger people using filler words more often than older people may be because as people enter into “adult roles”, such as corporate jobs, this type of speech could decrease (Laserna, 2014) as one may want to sound more professional or confident. When entering into a job setting, from the initial interview all the way to retirement, people want to sound confident and secure in what they are saying in the workplace. The use of filled pauses and discourse markers carry the idea that people sound hesitant and unsure about the topic at hand and that is not what is desired in a corporate setting. Additionally, another possible explanation for the findings could be that as a kid grows up, their speech advances and is refined naturally with age (Tagliamonte, 2005).

Theme 3: Gender and the Use of Filler Words

For the purpose of this review, I will analyze the female and male genders' use of filler words as little to no research currently exists regarding the use of filler words within the non-binary or gender nonconforming communities.

Females' use of filler words in general. Women at large utilize many types of filled pauses as well as discourse markers in everyday conversation. While men also use filler words often, researchers have found that women tend to use them most frequently of the two groups (Action, 2010; Laserna et al., 2014; Namaziandost et al., 2018; Putri et al., 2022). As previously stated, many of these words and sounds can actually hold a lot of meaning behind them and women's use of filler words can indicate certain significance in conversation. For instance, one study suggested that women have a multitude of uses for discourse markers, all with purpose and deeper meaning. The discourse marker *sort of* can soften the force of an utterance (Liu et al., 2010). The discourse marker *you know* can indicate shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener or can be used to ask if the listener is understanding what is being said. The discourse marker *I mean* can be used to express new information or to correct a previous utterance (Laserna et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2010). That said, women hedging, or softening the force of their utterances, by using these words in conversation does not necessarily indicate a less assertive trait by nature compared to men as there are evidently many functions behind these words and sounds. We must not discount a woman's use of filler words as they can actually hold purpose and meaning behind them.

Females' use of filler words compared to males. When comparing differences between females and males, research that directly compares the two genders is favorable in order to

highlight variability between the two groups. Large amounts of research supports the idea that filler words are more commonly used by young adult females than by men of the same age (Acton, 2011; Laserna et al., 2014; Namaziandost et al., 2018; Putri et al., 2022). However, one study involving both men and women on the *Larry King Live* talk show actually suggested that women use filler words about the same amount as men. The researcher in this study found that there is not a significant difference between the use of the discourse markers *you know* and *I mean* in female groups versus male (Koczogh et al., 2011). As this study was based on data from televised, and possibly scripted interviews, this raises the question if there could be differences in the use of filler words in scripted interviews and casual conversation.

Males' use of filler words compared to females. A few studies even suggest that men tend to use certain filler words more frequently than women. A study conducted by Acton (2011) utilized transcribed audio recordings from a speed dating corpus involving male and female college students. While it is not as common, this research did find that men used certain filler words more often than women, specifically, the filled pause *uh*. This same study also found that women, on the other hand, use the filled pause *um* more often than men (Acton, 2011) which points towards a possible difference in spelling between the two filled pauses but a possible similarity in meaning. In other words, *um* and *uh* could essentially have the same meaning and purposes but one may be more common in a certain gender group rather than the other. Moreover, a British study found that men of all ages use filled pauses including *um*, *erm*, and, *er* more frequently than women of all age groups (Aldawsari, 2021). As stated previously, this study was from the 1990s indicating that further reevaluation may be necessary. With both of these studies suggesting that certain filled pauses may actually be used more in the male

population than in the female population, this could highlight a need for research regarding specifically filled pauses and their relation to gender, not just filler words as a whole.

Possible Explanations of Findings Regarding Gender

The supported idea that women use filler words more often than men could be due to a number of different reasons. One feasible, and possibly the most prominent, explanation for this is that it is possible women want to appear more friendly and welcoming to others around them (Namaziandost et al., 2018). The female gender has generally been accounted for as soft, nurturing, and accommodating. The idea of being “motherly” furthers this idea as the word *motherly* actually holds the gender indicator of being female. It makes sense for researchers to link this nurturing trait to speech as these filler words can be seen as a way to hedge or soften tones in speech. Another way of looking at this is that additional research has found it plausible that conscientious people tend to use more filler words than non-conscientious people (Laserna et al., 2014). Instead of the idea presented by Namaziandost et al. (2018) that women want to appear more friendly and welcoming, Laserna et al. (2014) proposes people who are conscientious of their surroundings and of other people around them tend to use these words more often. This permits an entirely different viewpoint as this idea does not involve gender at all.

Furthermore, many studies have suggested that filler words are a way to express certain functions of speech to the listener. Filler words can have various purposes and meanings (Koczog et al., 2011; Laserna, 2014; Lui et al., 2010) and women using them more often than men could suggest a more advanced use of the English language. As articulated previously, a vast amount of research involving the use of filler words often includes the purposes or functions of these words in speech. Whether it be to transition to the next topic or an indication of shared

knowledge between the speaker and the listener, filler words can hold important meaning. Based on this, women using filler words more than men may signify a more complex and intricate use and understanding of the English language as women may be more conscientious of the deeper meaning words can have.

Conclusion

Vast amounts of research regarding the use of filler words in relation to age and gender tend to come to the same common conclusion; young adult women ages 18 to 34 are generally the group that uses filler words the most frequently compared to other social groups. While there are some outliers within the research, this conclusion is the most recurrent one. This review explored the early development of filler words in children in order to understand the origins of these words in English and how they are later used to a full extent. Additionally, it integrated existing research regarding filler words and their relation to age and gender and used this research to make inferences based off of the findings.

As this specific sociolinguistic subject has not been widely researched until recent years, further, more extensive studies would help to support or disprove certain findings. In particular, more exhaustive research regarding the development of filler words and how this relates to the usages in different social groups in later years would improve overall comprehension of filler words. Additionally, research that compares the use of filler words in certain social groups in casual conversation, as well as an interview-type setting, can help linguists better understand the functions and social factors linked to these words. Televised interviews like the *Larry King Live* show, run the risk of being scripted and practiced, thus, possibly eliminating the natural use of filler words that can be heard in casual conversation. Furthermore, a televised interview as well

as a non-televised interview setting can possibly incite nervousness or anxiety, making it so the subject uses more filler words in order to fill any awkward silences or gaps in speech.

Moreover, research regarding the correlations between filler words and anxiety would allow experts to pinpoint psychological implications behind these words (Laserna et al., 2014). An additional area for future research is comparing the use of filler words in non-native English speakers and native English speakers as well as filler words usages in American English and British English. Narrowing down research to these suggestions may open up a variety of possibilities for a better understanding of filler words in certain ages and genders. Further analyzing this everyday speech can lead us as a society to a more understanding and unified community.

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