

**Like, You Know, What I'm Saying:
A Study of Discourse Marker Frequency in Extemporaneous
and Impromptu Speaking**

Stephen M. Croucher, University of Oklahoma

Abstract

The following study examines the relationship between discourse markers, or vocal hiccups such as um, uh, like and you know, and speaker use of such markers in extemporaneous and impromptu speaking. One hundred and fifty speeches were transcribed and the number of markers used by each speaker was calculated. A gender comparison reveals no significant difference between speaker usage of two of the markers (um, uh). The study does however show a significant gender difference in the usage of the other two markers (like, you know). Finally, this study draws conclusions about discourse marker usage, speaker credibility and competitive success.

"Overall I liked their speech, but the delivery was a little bit shaky." "If this person is a collegiate competitor then why are they using so many um's?" "I think they have the right idea, but they don't sound very professional to me." These quotations came from public speaking students who were asked to watch and later critique five intercollegiate extemporaneous and five impromptu speeches. As with all forms of public address, the audience determines the competence of a speaker (Eastman, 1975, p. 116). Factors believed to influence this judgment of competence or credibility includes how the speaker is introduced, the speaker's perceived social status, and the organization of the speech. In addition, the strength and fluency of the speaker's delivery can have an impact on how the audience perceives the speaker. While many factors influence how the audience views speaker credibility, the degree to which these elements determine perception had not been concluded.

What is evident is how the use of effective language is important to a speaker's ethos, or credibility. In the realm of competitive forensics, ethos plays a pivotal role in competitive success and ranking. Speakers with high ethos who appear to know what they are talking about and have confidence, are generally rewarded more than those with minimal ethos. A speaker's ability to use fluid deliver and language is a critical element of ethos (Gamble & Gamble, 2002; Zarefsky, 2002). One overlooked aspect of delivery is a speaker's use of discourse markers.

Discourse markers, or vocal hiccups such as *um, uh, like* and *you know* are defined as a set of linguistic items functioning in the cognitive, social, expressive, and textual domains (Bright, 1992). This quantitative study examines the placement of discourse markers and answers the following question: how often do collegiate extemporaneous and impromptu speakers utilize discourse markers?

Forensics is an appropriate arena to study the effects of discourse markers for three reasons. First, the typical forensics judge analyzes both the speaker's language and delivery to make a written determination of communicative competence. When ranking speakers in a round, the judge is expected to provide written feedback on how the competitor can increase the perception of their competence (Cronn-Mills & Croucher, 2001). Second, forensics is an educational activity. Competitive speaking provides a setting for students to gain skills beneficial to effective public speaking and critical thinking. Lastly, the nature of the limited preparation events, such as impromptu and extemporaneous speaking, provides a context conducive to studying normal vocal and linguistic patterns. Discourse markers are more likely to occur in these events because students normally do not speak from manuscript and the speeches are typically delivered extemporaneously.

Review of Literature

Discourse Markers

Discourse analysis, the understanding and comprehension of language and its use within conversation (Bright, 1992) has focused on various aspects of linguistic theory. The studies have investigated how language links speakers and listeners, how speakers structurally organize language, and how language coordinates or dictates our daily activities. Linguistic studies serve as precursors to the study of discourse markers. To understand the development of discourse markers as an area of linguistic study, three areas must be addressed: a functional definition of discourse markers, how discourse markers assist in language acquisition, and what textual functions discourse markers serve. Initially, it is necessary to clarify the following studies on discourse markers do not address the use of these markers in forensics. No research has been conducted in forensics on discourse markers. Therefore, the following studies from linguistics and English as a second language serve as exemplars and analogs for what kinds of linguistic studies could be conducted in forensics.

The international encyclopedia of linguistics defines discourse markers as a set of linguistic items in the cognitive, social, expressive, and textual domains (Bright, 1992). Markers (e.g., *um, like, uh, you know, well, by the way*) aid communicators in linguistic or conversational consistency and coherence (Bussman, 1984). Bussman (1984) further contends the use of discourse markers helps speakers develop language skills, feel more comfortable about their conversational skills, and allows speakers to collect their thoughts before officially speaking.

The majority of the research on discourse markers is devoted to how markers assist in language acquisition. Specifically, studies have focused on how discourse markers aid children and students of English as a second language. Sprott (1992) found the use of discourse markers adds to a child's discourse complexity, or ability. Sprott further revealed how during disputes and times of heightened tension or excitement, the use of discourse markers dramatically increases. The

delivery of an extemporaneous or impromptu speech is an example of a time of heightened tension or excitement. Anyone who has done one of these events will attest to their increased adrenaline levels and stress or excitement.

Studies on the discourse organization of children (McTear, 1985; Bamberg & Marchman, 1990) illustrate how the use of markers becomes more sophisticated with age. At first, discourse markers are used at the local level, signifying upcoming talks or turns into a new subject. This level is known as the simple or one-dimensional level. Later, discourse marker usage becomes more advanced and the markers are used on a global level, covering larger units of discourse, such as returns to prior topics of discussions (Spratt, 1992).

Further research on the acquisition of English as a second language has revealed similar results. In a 1996 dissertation, Johnson (1996) discussed how "OK" and related discourse markers in ESL grammar classes serve as linguistic soothers or verbal adapters. While learning English, Johnson argues students use the markers to fill in gaps in speech and comprehension.

Another early study on discourse markers investigated the use of "OK" in service interactions between employees and their customers. By observing interactions and analyzing the conversations' content and context, Merritt (1984) concluded "OK" serves a specific linguistic purpose in interactions between personnel and customers. "OK" in fact "releases" the addressee to take the next step in the dialogue.

Schiffrin's *Discourse Markers* formalized the study of discourse markers. By observing various types of conversation, or discourse, Schiffrin (1987) identified how certain terms and/or phrases indicate understanding or coherence in conversation. Schiffrin concluded each single marker in the communal lexicon has various functions, depending upon the situation of the speaker.

Functions of discourse markers have been outlined in linguistic articles and reference materials from the *Rutledge dictionary of language and linguistics* to Perinbanayagam's (1991) *Discursive Acts*. The research points to four formal textual functions of discourse markers: (1) to indicate a turn in conversation (*you know* and *well*), (2) to identify a digression from the topic under discussion (*oh by the way*), (3) a speaker's attitude or sentiment can be shared through markers (*like*), and (4) discourse markers frame the general conversation. In forensics limited preparation events competition, a small portion of the markers used fill one of the four aforementioned formal functions. The large majority of discourse markers used in limited preparation events are deemed informal discourse markers.

Three informal functions for discourse markers have also been designated. The three informal functions are: (1) to fill pauses in conversation, (2) to act as nervous glitches in speech, and (3) the markers have become part of our collective lexicon (Davis, 1992). Unfortunately, very little academic research has been done on the three informal functions of discourse markers. Two questions in particular remain to be addressed by linguistic or communication researchers: (1) how often are the markers used? and (2) are markers a conscious or unconscious decision? Furthermore, the impact markers have on perception and credibility has not been addressed. These areas are of keen interest because discourse markers

often function informally and are considered a part of the human psyche and intellect (Schiffrin, 1987).

One specific area of communication where discourse markers play a pervasive, but under recognized role is in forensics. Specifically, the limited preparation events are more apt to include heightened use of these markers. Yet, the forensics community has not studied the linguistic side of this educational activity. The following section synthesizes forensics literature.

Forensics

Many scholars have studied non-linguistic specific elements of competitive public speaking. Aspects of both limited preparation events examined in this paper, extemporaneous and impromptu speaking, have been studied: Cronn-Mills and Croucher (2001) conducted a ballot analysis of limited preparation events. White (1997) explored gender as a predictor of competitive success in extemporaneous speaking. Aden and Kay (1988) discussed the education value of extemporaneous speaking.

However, there is no existing research on the linguistic aspects of forensics. A survey of forensics research in communication and forensics journals by Klumpp (1990), and a similar study by Worth (2000) notes studies of competitive public speaking fall into three main categories: (1) descriptive surveys, (2) prescriptive pieces about how to coach individual events and debate, and (3) forensics theory. In addition, Porter states a stronger link needs to be made between forensic research and the theoretical background of the communication discipline. Porter (1990) asserts, "the most significant problem facing the forensics community is that we have neither documented nor articulated the importance of our area of expertise to the community at large" (p. 95). I contend not only does the forensics community need to make a clearer link between forensics and the larger communication discipline, but to other disciplines as well, such as linguistics.

Indeed, if forensics aims to be an educational enterprise by improving the communicative competence of students, and providing them with skills to be effective speakers in and outside of the forensics realm connections between the use of language and the perception of speaker credibility must be made. This paper aims to expand the scope of forensics research by combining the importance of linguistics with forensics pedagogy, two areas not regularly linked.

Method

Participants

The purpose of this study is discover how often discourse markers are used in competitive rounds of collegiate impromptu and extemporaneous speaking. Therefore, the participants in this study are collegiate competitors in either of the limited preparation events. Specifically, 42 males and 28 females were observed in extemporaneous speaking, and 36 men and 44 women in impromptu speaking. All together, the sample for this study is 75 students (N=150).

Procedures

Speeches were audio-recorded at a number of tournaments throughout the Midwest. Tournament directors granted individual permission for this study before audio taping took place. The students were notified before giving their speech that they were being recorded for a linguistic study. Specific information about discourse markers was not provided before the round. The information was not provided so students would not consciously or unconsciously alter their linguistic habits and language. Moreover, the researcher did not inform the students about the specifics of the study, so the student's performance would not be hindered. Furthermore, students were told the tapes would not be listened to until after the tournament and would not affect their rank in the round. Anonymity was also very important to this study. No student names are on the cassette tapes, only tournament dates, and events.

During the speeches, the researcher kept track of the non-verbals used by speakers when they utilized a discourse marker such as *um*, *uh*, *like* and *you know*. Non-verbals tracked included the following: twitching of fingers and hands, biting of the lip, hand gesturing without an apparent purpose, and rolling of the eyes. All rounds were chosen at random and all of the speakers in those rounds were the ones recorded for this study. After the speeches were transcribed, the number of markers in each speech was counted and documented. The mean of each of the four markers pre-determined by the study, was then established. Averages for each marker were categorized into male, female and combined sexes for quantitative comparison purposes.

Results

Table 1

**Male and female means and standard deviations
for usage of *um*, *uh*, *like* and *you know***

<u>Utterance</u>	<u>Males</u>		<u>Females</u>		<u>Combined</u>	
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
UM	15.62	5.95	14.36	5.15	14.99	5.55
UH	17.20	6.21	17.63	4.82	17.42	5.52
LIKE	3.70	1.57	18.61	9.81	11.12	5.69
YOU	8.73	3.34	19.16	8.65	13.95	5.95
KNOW						

Out of the four markers designated for this study, two of the markers (*um*, *uh*) were used equally by both genders, while the remaining two markers (*like* and *you know*) were overwhelmingly used more often by females. There is no significant difference between male and female usage of *um*: $t(149) = 1.39$; $p = .17$; $M_M = 15.62$; $SD_M = 5.95$; $M_F = 14.36$; $SD_F = 5.15$. There is also no significant difference between male and female usage of *uh*: $t(149) = -.474$; $p = .64$; $M_M = 17.2$; $SD_M = 6.21$; $M_F = 17.63$; $SD_F = 4.82$.

While there is no significant difference between these two markers, there is a significant difference between male and female usage of *like* and *you know*. Females used *like* significantly more than men: $t(149) = -13.01$; $p < .01$; $M_M = 3.70$; $SD_M = 1.57$; $M_F = 18.61$; $SD_F = 9.81$. Females also used *you know* significantly more than men: $t(149) = -9.81$; $p < .01$; $M_M = 8.73$; $SD_M = 3.34$; $M_F = 19.16$; $SD_F = 8.65$.

As for non-verbals, all speakers, male and female used a non-verbal device while uttering a discourse marker in 97.8 percent of all cases. The typical non-verbals used for *urn* and *uh* included: twitching of the fingers, biting of the lips, and rolling of the eyes. The typical non-verbals used for *like* and *you know* differed by gender. When men used one of these terms the non-verbals were nearly identical to the non-verbals used for *um* and *uh*. However, men also gestured toward the audience with their hand(s) in many cases. Women on the other hand almost entirely, 99 percent of the time gestured toward the audience or randomly moved their hand/arm when saying either *like* or *you know*. Non-verbals such as gesturing appear to be more controlled and conscious, when compared to twitching fingers or rolling eyes. The subject of conscious vs. unconscious will be addressed in the following section.

One conclusion arising from this data is the correlation between frequency of discourse marker usage and gender. Specifically the results show women used two of the discourse markers significantly more often than men (*like* and *you know*). The use of terms such as *like* and *you know* do not represent natural pauses in speech, while *um* and *uh* do represent pauses (Schiffrin, 1987). These two markers are cognitively processed and used by a speaker, thus this study reveals how females more than men choose (consciously or unconsciously) to use markers, which serve no proper linguistic function. Therefore the question is why? Why do females use these markers more than men, and what purpose do the markers serve?

While no research has addressed why women use these markers more than men I contend the primary reason is cultural. The large majority of the speakers (male and female) in this study were between 19 and 24-years-old. The two markers in question (*like* and *you know*) were implanted in the American culture by a popular cultural creation in the 1980s, "Valley Girls." The "Valley Girl" phenomenon was according to Wood (1999) a product of:

a softening reaction by women to the hard-edged political activism of the baby boom generation. The new Valleyspeak - from "freak me out" to "gag me with a spoon" - was milder than the antiwar rhetoric and free-love speech of the 1960s (p. 1).

Adolescent television programs and films in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fueled the "Valley Girl" phenomenon and in turn the negative stigma placed on "Valley Girls" diminished as many "Valley Girl" terms became an accepted part of the communal lexicon (Wood, 1999). Thus, it is arguable many of the females in this study do not notice their usage of such terms, and others (particularly judges) may not even recognize them unless used exces-

sively, because the terms are part of our language now. Further research needs to address this issue. In particular research should explore where or when speakers learn to use markers in specific manners, and if speakers realize their discourse marker usage.

Limitations

This study's results are limited as a result of two particular extraneous variables, which might impact marker usage and credibility: competitor competitive history, and coaching. It would be assumed the longer a person has been competing they would use less markers or verbal fillers. In this study, the year in competitive speaking for a competitor was not included as a variable because this study simply wanted to quantify how many times a marker is used in a limited preparation speech. The addition of this variable may yield different quantitative comparisons.

A second extraneous variable is the student's coaching. Students were not asked, nor was any information gathered about their team's coaches, or coaching styles and preferences. This variable could impact the number of markers used because different coaches look for different things when coaching, a team with multiple coaches may or may not address markers, and student or graduate student run programs may or may not distinguish markers from general conversation. Coaching was specifically left out of this study because there are too many questions to be addressed and quantified in regard to this variable.

Areas for Future Research

This project alludes to two areas of future research: the link between markers and non-verbal devices and the potential relationship between marker usage and speaker credibility. The results of this study clearly indicate a correlation between marker usage and non-verbal communication. As stated earlier, the majority of the speakers used some non-verbal cue when delivering a discourse marker. Why do speakers use specific non-verbals when uttering a discourse marker? This relationship warrants future study.

The impact and importance of discourse markers on perceptions of communicative competence and credibility should also be addressed. Individuals judge others based on the manner in which they communicate. It is necessary to determine whether the use of markers hinders the perceptions of competence, or credibility. In particular, research needs to examine the potential relationship between discourse marker usage and rank in a round. With further exploration of the possible link between rank and discourse markers, communicative ability and possibly rank can be enhanced.

Ultimately, with research questioning and forcing forensics educators to re-evaluate their educational or competitive agendas, increased and broadened scholarly research must be conducted in the discipline. Forensics research needs to do more than provide how to lessons or life stories, it must address normally overlooked aspects of communication and forensics pedagogy. Not only will this kind of research increase the existing base of forensics pedagogy, it will poten-

tially show the forensics community and scholars outside the realm of forensics concrete qualitative and quantitative results. Research into the linguistic aspects of forensics may also give coaches and competitors a method to enhance the art and practice of public speaking and thus heightening the educational prowess of our students and discipline.

References

- Aden, R. C., & Kay, J. (1988). Instructional practices: Improving the educational value of extemporaneous speaking: Refocusing the question. *National Forensic Journal*, 6, 21-38.
- Bamberg, M., & Marchman, V. (1990). What holds a narrative together? The linguistic encoding of episode boundaries. *Papers in Pragmatics*, 4, 58-121.
- Bright, W. (1992). *International encyclopedia of linguistics*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Bussman, R. (1984). *The Rutledge dictionary of language and linguistics*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Cronn-Mills, D., & Croucher, S. M. (2001). Judging the judges: An analysis of ballots in impromptu and extemporaneous speaking. *Speaker Points* 8(2), from <<http://www.phirhopi.org/prp/spkrpts8.2>>.
- Croucher, S. M. (2001 March). Why do we mark our territory: A study of discourse markers. Paper presented at the Culture of Quality Symposium, Kansas City, MO.
- Davis, J. (1992, January). To er (or UM) is human. *Discover*, 19-22.
- Eastman, C. M. (1975). *Aspects of language and culture*. Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp.
- Gamble, T. K., & Gamble, M. (2002). *Communication works* (7th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Hoyle, S. M. (1994). Children's use of discourse markers in the creation of imaginary participation frameworks. *Discourse Processes*, 17, 447-464.
- Johnson, R. A. (1996). 'Okay' and related discourse markers in an ESL grammar class. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University.
- Klumpp, J. (1990). Wading into the stream of forensics research: The view from the editorial office. *National Forensic Journal*, 8, 77-86.
- McTear, M. (1985). *Children's conversation*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Merritt, M. (1984). On the use of okay in service encounters. In J. Baugh (Ed.), *Language in use* (pp. 139-147). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Pearson, J. C., & Nelson, P. E. (2000). *An introduction to human communication: Understanding and sharing* (8th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Peribanayagam, R. S. (1991). *Discursive acts*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Porter, S. (1990). Forensics research: A call for action. *National Forensic Journal*, 8, 95-103.
- Schiffirin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Spencer, D. (1981). *Man made language* (pp. 7-51). New York: Pandora Books.
- Sprott, R. A. (1992). Children's use of discourse markers in disputes: Form-function relations and discourse in child language. *Discourse Processes*, 15, 423-439.
- White, L. E. (1997). Gender as a predictor of competitive success in extemporaneous speaking. *National Forensic Journal*, 15, 21-38.
- Wood, D. B. (1999, March 16). A signal hat the mall culture is, like, end-

ing. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved January 10, 2004, from EBSCO Host database.

Worth, D. S. (2000, November). *Exploring the forensics community: The need for stronger basic research*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Annual Conference, Seattle, WA.

Zarefsky, D. (2002). *Public speaking: Strategies for success* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.