Uh, *um* and pragmatic particles: Overlapping functions and complementary distribution

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The status of *uh* and *um* has been debated by earlier researchers, and terminology has varied: *fillers, filled pauses*, and *hesitation markers*, etc. They have been regarded as involuntary symptoms of " speech-productive labor" (Goffman 1981) or voluntary signals from speakers that they want to start, continue or end their turns. Their status as words has also been debated – Clark & Fox Tree see them as words belonging among interjections, whereas O'Connell and Kowal argue against that view.

My purpose in this paper is to test the hypothesis that "[w]hat is operating in this instance is diachronic language change" (O'Connell & Kowal) and that *uh* and *um* are developing from being mere *symptoms* of speech-productive labor to pragmatic markers, *signals* that can be used by speakers to implicate different meanings, not just 'I'm thinking' (Fischer 2006), and that they end up as fully-fledged *words* functioning as (often ironic) stance markers (especially in writing).

I want to do this by studying overlapping functions of *uh* and *um* and bona fide pragmatic markers such as *well, you know, I mean* and *like,* and also the apparently complementary distribution of *uh* and *um* and those pragmatic particles in the speech of individuals and different speech situation, using the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC).

Although it is clear that *uh, um* and pragmatic markers can be used in similar ways in spoken discourse, little attention has been paid to this fact in the previous literature. (But see Tottie (2014). Consider (1), where a college instructor asks students how their parents were affected by the Vietnam War. The student prefaces her responses with lengthened *u=m,* where she might as well have used the pragmatic marker *well*, which is characteristically used turn-initially. In the first of the examples *well* is also added after *u=m*:

(1)   MONTOYA: … How about your parents.
        CAROLYN: **… U=m**,
                … well my dad was drafted.
        MONTOYA: … He was in Vietnam?
        CAROLYN: **… U=m**,
                … long story,
                he didn't make it to Vietnam but,

In (2) a speaker who uses very few instances of *uh* or *uhm* uses *well, you know,* and *I mean* where other speakers might have uttered *uh* or *um*:

(2)   JO: [2He i2]=s teaching,
                he's teaching something abou=t business,
                and,
                … well what he's in.
                You know.

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CAM:    [Recreation]?
JO:     [% I mean uh],
        ... not really the recreation part,
        but,
        ... how you keep books and,
        ... you know,
WESS:   Ye- --
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I am examining 25 different texts consisting of face-to-face interaction from the first and fourth parts of SBC, totaling 110,000 words and containing 957 instances of *uh* and *um.* However, only speakers who contributed over 1,000 words will be included in the study.

References

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