

VERBAL FILLERS AS TYPICAL FEATURES OF CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Verbal fillers are words, phrases and sometimes just noises like "er" which do not contribute much, if anything, to the new information content of an utterance but perform several valuable functions in speech. While a speaker is speaking he is simultaneously planning what he is going to say next, and also monitoring what he is saying making sure that he is pronouncing in an adequately clear manner and that he is not making any phonetic errors (Brown G., 1984).

As it is known spontaneous speech is typically full of false starts and hesitations. Usually a new speaker in a conversation begins his speech by uttering some sort of hesitation noises like "mm", "um", "er", "erm", then he utters a word or phrase which is outside the syntactic structure he is about to embark on and then launches into the expression of his thought which will very often largely consist of a repetition or restatement of what previous speaker has said, but with some extra comment of his own. But, however, fillers like "er", "um" can be found in the middle of one's speech as well. In this case they indicate the speaker's hesitation of uttering something, he or she may change his mind while speaking, and he can't begin his speech from the beginning, as here we deal with live spontaneous speech. E.g.

Michael grinned. "I suppose they will all be nob's, or sn - er- why the deuce did they ask us?" (J. Galseworthy, "The Silver Spoon". p.126)

Here we can see that the use of verbal filler "er" is preceded by unfinished word beginning with the letters "sn". Probably the speaker intended to say something offensive but halfway refrains from doing so, and somehow to get through this situation he makes use of a verbal filler. The use of colloquial exclamation like "the deuce of" also speaks about the spontaneous colloquial style of speech.

It is reasonable enough, of course, that there should be a certain amount of repetition or paraphrase, since the participants in a conversation must make it clear that they are talking about the same topic. It seems that the hesitation noises, the conversational words and phrases which occur outside the main syntactic structures, must be interpreted as performing the same function to fill the silence and maintain the speaker's right to speak while he organizes what he wants to say. Since their function is to fill the silence G. Brown calls all these phenomena "fillers". We all use them. Perhaps some do more frequently than others. There are many people who can't stop like saying "like?" or "um..." or "uh" or perhaps even a mini-phrase, like "you know?" (Brown G., 1984).

There may be different types of verbal fillers. G. Brown distinguishes the following two types:

1. Repetitious fillers
2. Introductory fillers

It is a noticeable feature of a text when one agrees with the other he doesn't just say "yes" or "no". E.g.

"That dog!" said Soames, impaling a morsel of fish he had set aside as uneatable.

"No, no, Dad! He just wants to know you've seen him!"

(J. Galsworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 28)

Or let's take another example:

"I beg your pardon, sir. Didn't know. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No, no; pleasure to see you. If I run across Marjorie, I'll see - I'll see."

(J. Galsworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 50)

If in the first example we have a conversation of rather an informal character, in the second one we witness a dialogue of more formal character. However, in both of them we find the repetition of the same filler "no". Moreover, it should be mentioned that in the second example besides "no" there can also be found another verbal filler, such as the repetition of "I'll see". By the way, it would be also noted that in case of the formal speech we find more elements of conversational style than in the example of more informal speech, such as elliptical sentences ("Didn't know.", "Sorry to have bothered you.", "No, no; pleasure to see you."), contracted forms ("I'll") and of course the use of verbal fillers in the form of repetitions ("No, no.", "I'll see - I'll see.").

Speakers all use repetition with a powerful and presumably intentional effect. This sort of repetition is characteristic of more formal situations. This particular type of repetition involves the creation by the speaker of a frame-work which can be used as the basis for several consecutive phrases. The speaker selects a rather general phrase and uses it again and again, simply filling the noun slot with a different item each time. E.g.

"I see," he said, "I see. Very cunning, Forsyte. You want me to get some one whose name will act like a red rag. It mustn't be a novelist, or they will say he is jealous - which he probably is: the book is selling like hot cakes - I believe that's the expression. Ah! I think - I rather think, Forsyte, that I have the woman."

"Woman!" said Soames. "They won't pay any attention to that."

(J. Galsworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 117)

In this example the phrases "I see", "I believe", "I think" do not differ much in their function and meaning. All the three are rather general and each of them could fit in any statement expressing one's opinion or showing that one is listening to his interlocutor.

A rather different sort of repetition is characteristic of informal conversation, and that is the repetition of non-lexical words and phrases which have very little semantic content, like "sort of". E.g.

"Well," said Francis Wilmot, "we're sort of thinly populated, compared with you."

"That's it," said Michael.

(J. Galseworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 31)

It should be noted that here the filler "sort of" is accompanied by another verbal filler, namely "well", which is typical both of formal and informal speech.

Thus, there may be distinguished two main types of repetition and suggested that one is characteristic of more formal speech and the other of more informal speech.

As to introductory fillers it should be noted that the most common introductory fillers are very closely followed by non-verbal noises of an institutionalized sort like "er" and "um". In all cases the introductory filler is followed by a pause, which is quite natural, as the introductory phrase or word used by the speaker is somehow both semantically and structurally separated from the main content of the utterance. However, these introductory fillers indicate that the speaker is about to produce a reply and indeed is even now working on it. If a speaker makes a direct statement as an opinion, all that the other participants can do is to accept this as true or enter into an overt disagreement with him or express his disbelief and surprise, in this case expecting some reaffirmation. E.g.

"*He is dead. I read it in the paper yesterday.*"

"*No. Not really.*"

(E. Hemingway "Fiesta", p. 115)

Here by saying "no", the second speaker doesn't express his critical negative reaction. He rather expresses his surprise and disbelief, and the following phrase "not really" comes to prove it.

It is very well known that foreign learners have maximal difficulty in understanding conversational speech. One reason why this is so, is because spontaneous speech tends to be pronounced much less clearly than the sort of speech that foreign students are exposed to in courses of Spoken English. Another reason for this difficulty is that they have not been exposed to the stops and starts, repetitions and hesitations of conversation. And in particular it has not been made clear to them that you don't have to hear every word in a conversation in order to understand what the conversation is about. A great deal of spontaneous speech consists of fillers which give the speaker time to plan what he is going to say on the one hand and, on the other, to ease the progression of the conversation. The foreign student must be exposed to speech containing these fillers and taught to disregard them and to listen for the meat of

the utterance. It is at the beginnings of the utterances that we find repetition of affirmatives and negatives, and fillers like "er" and "well" and markers which act as social fillers like "I think" and "clearly". By the end of the utterance the speaker has usually worked out what he is going to say and the message is relatively coherent at this point (G. Brown, 1984).

Among the main difficulties in understanding a foreign speech it should be also mentioned that very frequently our mother tongue itself becomes an obstacle. Each language has its own verbal fillers. Moreover verbal fillers of one language can have quite a different function and meaning in the other language.

For instance in Armenian we frequently use a filler, which sounds like "ə", this sound, however, stands for the English indefinite pronoun "a". Thus, Armenian students who study English as a foreign language should be aware of not using the sound "ə", so commonly practiced in Armenian colloquial language. Otherwise there would arise problems of misunderstanding and non-fluency of speech.

Both repetitions and introductory fillers are mainly typical of conversational style. As it is unprepared speech here we find a lot of fillers. This kind of English is also a means for everyday communication, heard in natural conversational interaction between speakers.

So, verbal fillers are frequently used in informal situations, conditioned by the characteristics of the latter. In such situations speakers are more relaxed, not so much careful about the effect they produce on the listeners. While in formal situations they monitor their linguistic behaviour and this very fact itself "hinders" the abundant use of verbal fillers. But in everyday communication a more natural and spontaneous language is used. Conversations are one of the most complex forms of human behaviour. Clearly, a conversational style consists of more than verbal language. As compared with the other styles, we very often use verbal fillers in a conversation, because we do not just listen to words, we derive the meaning consciously or unconsciously from a number of other communicative systems and it could be that a lift of an eyebrow, a twitch at the side of the mouth, or a silence will tell us more than a dozen sentences, i.e. here more than in any other style both linguistic and extra-linguistic reality should be taken into consideration.

Spontaneous, colloquial, informal conversations display certain common linguistic characteristics:

1. Firstly, talks of this kind are characterized by the inexplicitness of the language as the speakers rely very much upon the extra-linguistic factor-context, as communication itself greatly depends upon the context. The interlocutors "operate" in a definite context, and they all are well aware of it. This manifests itself in "incompleteness" of many utterances as the context makes it clear what

was meant by the speaker, thus making redundant its vocal expression. Hence the abundant use of verbal fillers. E.g.

"Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

"I'm not afraid, but ..." (J. Galseworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 59)

Or

The other two were silent till Bergfeld said:

"If I had my saving...." (J. Galseworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 82)

Very often the speech can be interrupted suddenly by fillers, because they fill the silence, and fall into silence but the listeners understand them, catch the meaning, because the participants have a common personal background and the explicitness is tolerated or even taken for granted and is diagnostic of conversation.

2. Secondly, conversations can't exist without these verbal fillers, because oral speeches are characterized by the lack of planning and the randomness of subject matter and a high degree of unpredictability. By the way, even the change of the subject is realized not without the help of these meaningless verbal elements.

3. The third general feature of the conversational style talks is "non-fluency". This is another reason why we often meet verbal fillers in this style. Because of poor vocabulary and knowledge of a language speaker has to use these fillers during conversation. Informal spontaneous conversation is characterized by a high proportion of "errors" involving hesitation phenomena, slips of the tongue and sorts of overlapping and simultaneous speech (G. Brown, p. 109).

In conversational style it may happen so that one of the participants is an active speaker the other is an active listener. This happens in case they tell long or amusing stories. During such conversations the listener's speech is confined either to making gestures, mimics or uttering words which stimulate the first speaker to go on with his story, like "What then?", "So what?", "And?" "Well?"

According to D. Cristal the most important detail in our everyday communication is our vocabulary. The informal text gives us the opportunity to use special words and expressions. For example: *Yeah. Sure. Good heavens! Thanks! You know! Jolly good! Really? Come off it! Oh, no! Hey! Well!* (Cristal D., 1979).

E.g.

"Oh! well," she said, "I suppose you'd better."

"Thank God!" (J. Galseworthy, "The Silver Spoon", p. 159)

Or another example:

"You were the only friend I had, and I loved Brett so."

"Well," I said, "so long." (E. Hemingway "Fiesta", p. 182)

A very specific register of conversational style is telephone conversation. The telephone situation is quite unique being the only case of a conversation in which the participants are not visible to each other, so there is some uncertainty in maintaining the give-and-take between the participants. It means the speakers can't depend on the information they could obtain through non-verbal communication. And here they can be aware only of each other's verbal language. Therefore, the speakers avoid long utterances without introducing pauses. Pauses can't be long, because anything approaching a silence may be interpreted by the listener either as a breakdown of communication or as an opportunity for interruptions which may not be desirable. As a consequence, hesitation noises, repetitions of words, interjections, exclamations are rather handy and helpful. Here is the example:

"*Madame Bovary takes a course in Television Appreciation. God, if you knew how*".

"*All right, all right. You realize this isn't getting us anyplace*", the gray-haired man said.

"*Oh, God, that kills me. She describes every man she sees as 'terribly attractive'. It can be the oldest, crummiest*".

"*All right, Arthur.*" the gray-haired man said sharply.

"*Oh, Chris! I know that... I don't know. What the hell. Yeah. I am not crazy about the idea naturally, and I won't go if I can possibly avoid it. At least, it's oblivion. Oh, Arthur, this is getting us exactly nowhere*".

(Salinger J. "Pretty Mouth and Green my Eyes", p. 115)

Thus, to sum up we should note that without verbal fillers verbal communication between two or more people is nearly impossible. They make it easy to speak. They give people time to think what they are going to speak about, and it is not rarely that people use verbal fillers unwillingly, nearly automatically especially in oral informal speech. While in literary language the deliberate usage of these units aims at conveying the traditions of colloquial language and at making conversations sound more lively and true to life.

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