

## HESITATION MARKERS AMONG NON-NATIVES SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH: PRAGMATIC DEFICIT OR VARIANCE?

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### Abstract

*The occurrence of hesitation markers is usually regarded to be part of the verbal planning process. Anytime speakers engage in spontaneous conversation, there is a tendency to disruptions of the speech flow. Paradoxically while hesitation is a fundamental feature of spontaneous conversations and fulfils an important pragmatic function in a second language learning context, it is considered deficient, because it gives an impression of non-fluency, which is not good for the learners. As such, there is a lack of attention given to its study within second language learning contexts. Thus, this study draws on Hallidyan Systemic Functional Linguistics to investigate the pragmatic function of hesitation markers in non-native speakers (NNS) contexts. The paper argues that since hesitation markers are components of speech processes, either in NNS or NS, it needs to be given serious scholarly attention and de-emphasized the deficiency aspects. To obtain valid data for the NNS speech, I recorded the speeches of plenary session presenters at a conference, of which the researcher was also in attendance, and later transcribed them. After the transcription, the hesitation markers were categorized into hesitation pauses, fillers, repetitions, and drawls. The findings revealed that non-native speakers (NNS) of English tend to overuse non-lexical markers like pauses, repetitions and drawls, while underusing simpler words like 'you know, 'I mean' or 'sort of'. And because such tendency will not usually cause a breakdown in communication or some sort of misunderstanding, it could therefore be merely different from that of a native speaker (NS).*

**Keywords:** Hesitation markers, non-lexical markers, Pauses, Fillers.

### Introduction

Research on hesitation has shown that hesitation markers are predominantly used in spontaneous speech. They are a set of tools with a certain time duration used to solve oral discourse generation and reproduction problems, which can be both retrospectives (for example, correction of a produced discourse piece) and/ or perspective (e.g., planning problems of the coming discourse piece) Garmash (1999). English hesitation markers arose most when preceded by silence and followed by a lexical item, or when surrounded by silence De leeuw (2007). Hesitation situationally occurs when discourse participants are deficient in word use, and so struggle with cognitive planning. Thus, Khojastehrad (2012) sees hesitation as pauses of varying lengths, usually left unfilled. Native speakers (NS) of English are not excluded from this situation as they use fillers when they speak, including non-lexical fillers such as lengthening of sound, repeating lexical items, and pauses.

In as much as the hesitation marker is a fundamental feature of spontaneous conversations, and fulfils an important pragmatic

function, it goes mostly unnoticed in speech, especially in native speech Gilquin (2008). For instance, in reality, if one is asked to give a verbatim transcription of spontaneous speech, there is every tendency that we will concentrate on the semantic content of the sentence and will not really pay attention to what we believe to be just interference, that is, markers of hesitation present in the sentence. These markers like vocalization, false starts, fillers, pauses, repetitions and other "small words" like 'well or 'I mean, do not necessarily contribute to the message (Hasselgren, 2002, Gilquin, 2008), and as such, are disregarded, not just by the hearer, but also until quite recently by language analysts.

All thanks to spoken corpora, which have given access to a detailed transcription of the original speech and have also made it feasible to study the phenomena of hesitation with a "precision and reliability that were practically unattainable before" (Gilquin 2008: 1-2). Thus, this paper will examine the pragmatic function of hesitation markers among non-native speakers of English, with Igbo as a mother tongue (MT).

## Literature Review: The Pragmatic Function of Hesitation

Spoken languages in their most natural form are unrehearsed and spontaneous, Gilquin, (2008). Speakers build their utterances when producing language. As a result, there might be moments of hesitation in their speech when planning what next to say. These hesitations are made manifest in different ways, through repetitions draws, corrections fillers, pauses (e.g., uh, mhm) and non-lexical markers (e.g., erm, er, um). In addition, small words (e.g., 'well', 'I mean') or vague words (e.g., 'stuff' or 'things like that') also allows the speaker to 'buy time' during speech (Gilquin 2008:2). Because speech is "naturally dialogic, it becomes crucial that a speaker should indicate that he/she needs a moment of reflection, but still in control of his/her turn" (Burns & Joyce 1997:13). Hesitation markers (showing a small delay), help the speaker to keep his/her turn in a speech and as such, not be interrupted by other participants. Thus, Larcombe (1995:3) clearly states that "in order to keep the floor while we hesitate, we use dummy words in the empty spaces between our speech".

For non-native speakers or second language learners, hesitation markers enable them to gain time while trying to solve conversational problems. While hesitation markers are characteristic of spontaneous conversation and perform an important pragmatic function, it goes mostly unnoticed in utterance (especially in native speech). Even with the transcription of recorded spoken data, McCarthy (1993) nicely state that "even the best audio typist often simply misses relevant details, and can be 'deaf' to the presence of discourse markers and other little words which become important the moment one starts to analyse the work they do in the creation of interaction".

This lack of attention explains why corpora are an ideal resource for the study of hesitation markers, especially the NS, on the condition that they have been transcribed carefully and with detail. With spoken corpora, one has access to a record of authentic language, as well as various types of disfluencies. By disfluencies, we mean linguistic strategies which show speakers are under the construction of utterance (Yusop Boonsuk *et al*,

2019). Normally, disfluencies are characteristic of cognitive burden, usually in spontaneous speech, as the speaker needs to think or look for what to say that will be in line with the previous discourse, Nilcholson *et al* (2003). With Systemic Functional Grammar, on the other hand, Halliday (2006) proposed that language is based on a system of choices, thereby making meaning in context. In line with this, NNS, or second language learners/speakers should be at freedom to choose their words, and should not be accessed based on grammar alone, but the context of language use. Thus, an NNS using a kind of hesitation marker different from the natives can be seen as bringing innovation into language learning, and not because of incompetency or lack of knowledge.

## Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) featured by Michael Halliday is interested in how language is utilized in a social setting to attain a specific target. These days, the SFL approach is used globally, especially in language education, and for a number of purposes like discourse analysis. SFL is concerned with the study of language through grammar, and because of this concern of SFL with the use of language, great importance is placed on the function of language, such as what language is used for, rather than what language structure is all about and how it is composed, Halliday (2006). But SFL is not just about form and function to express meaning, it helps teachers, and their learners work with whole stretches of language in order to develop their potential to communicate in the target language.

Pedagogically, SFL is useful to help teachers make sense of how language works in different social and cultural contexts, and thus, be better equipped to help their learners understand these differences, Halliday (2006). Thus, the use of hesitation markers by non-native speakers should not be seen as a deficit or lack of knowledge, to bring down their self-esteem, but rather should be seen as their own choice of language (variance), thereby, bringing innovation into language learning and teaching. This is because different social and cultural contexts lead speakers and writers to choose differently from the repertoire of language that they have at their disposal. Therefore, the

pragmatic function of hesitation markers should be incorporated into the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum, by creating awareness activities required to make hesitation markers emerge from the state of unconsciousness, which is typical of them.

Paul Baker's Corpus Linguistic Theory (2018) is anchored on 'real world text', which means that reliable language analysis is more feasible with corpora collected in the field, in its natural context, and with minimal experimental interference. The pedagogical relevance of corpus linguistics allows us to see how language is used in different contexts, enabling us to teach language more effectively. According to him, the purpose of a corpus is to verify a hypothesis about a language. For instance, to determine how the language of a particular sound, word, or syntactic construction varies.

## Methodology

In a bid to investigate the use of pragmatic markers of hesitation by English as a second language learners/speakers, and to obtain valid data for the NNS speech, I recorded the speeches of plenary session presenters at a conference, held at the University of Benin in the southern part of the country, in January 2021, of which the researcher was also in attendance, and later transcribed. Each of the presenters was given one hour for their presentations. These recordings captured all pauses and even incoherent sounds the presenters produced. The recordings were checked several times in order not to skip even a short silent pause. All three speakers were one man, and two women professors of English, with Igbo as their mother tongue. The recordings of the three speakers were on two different days. The choice of these participants was because they are high profile personalities and professors of English, it is expected that even though they are second language speakers (by reason of not being natives), their high levels of education must have made them be highly proficient in language users, thereby, using the language in a way very close to the natives. The participants were not aware of the recordings, simply because, it is a public function, and the presenters were also being recorded by the organizers of the program and later sent to the

associations' platform. After the transcription, the hesitation markers were categorized into hesitation pauses, fillers, repetitions, and drawls.

## Analysis and Findings

For analysis purposes, the functions were divided into three main categories, namely: Hesitation Markers: Pauses and Fillers, Repetitions, and Drawls.

**1 Hesitation Markers: Pauses and Fillers.** Silent pauses are gaps in utterances and are likely the most basic means of handling the problems of word formulation (Gilquin, 2008). A speaker keeps silent when he/she does not know what to say. Silent pauses are flexible in the sense that they both have a rhetorical function and serve as disfluency markers.

**Speaker A:** 'erm, anything can be data....', 'erm, you can't give it to me now 'I will go straight to erm..., erm... one analysis.

**Speaker B:** 'erm, I did just a particular aspect', 'it studies the transcription of erm... meaning'

**Speaker C:** 'it is also enriched erm erm uh with medical control', 'you know erm, you can't give it to me now, 'yeah, I went to see erm another one'.

Here, non-native speakers of English use more non-lexical markers like: 'erm', 'er', 'uh'. By using them, it indicates that the other person should continue listening, instead of speaking. Used sparingly, there is nothing wrong with pauses and fillers. But when used excessively, they can detract from your confidence and credibility.

## 2 Repetitions:

**Speaker A:** 'so, I'm looking for ....', 'so, these people are under the law', 'now, now, you can lose knowledge in the course construction'

**Speaker B:** 'so, I didn't get worse', 'and so, that was the beginning'

**Speaker C:** 'so, so, this is a form of imprisonment, 'and so, so, the big farmer crushed other medical practitioners?', 'so, this eh study'

These excerpts from speakers A, B, and C, show the repetition of transition words (meta discourse) 'so', for emphasis and to draw attention.

### 3 Drawls:

**Speaker A:** 'n..o.ow, any fanatic effect...'

**Speaker B:** 'th.i.ss the essence of cognitive processing'

**Speaker C:** 's..o.o, God-given medicine is a form of medical chemical control'. From the above example, the use of drawl is uttered in a slow lengthened tone, with the vowels greatly prolonged. With drawls, the speakers spoke slowly, and sometimes, not clearly, with long vowel sounds. This could either be to plan their word or take time to think.

Generally, the findings revealed that non-native speakers (NNS) of English tend to overuse non-lexical markers like pauses, repetitions, and drawls, while underusing simpler words like 'you know', 'I mean' or 'sort of'. And because such tendency will not usually cause a breakdown in communication or some sort of misunderstanding, it could therefore be seen as merely different from that of a native speaker (NS).

### Conclusion

Hesitation marker occurrence is natural in spontaneous speech, both native and non-native. Thus, it is not the presence or absence of such features that differentiate NNS and NS speech production, but the variance. The results have shown that non-native speakers of English overuse pauses and other non-lexical hesitation markers, while underusing small words like, 'I mean' or 'you know'. This is regrettable since non-lexical hesitation markers are precisely those that give an impression of non-fluency, while small words "keep our speech flowing" (Hasselgen, 2002: 150). Because of this, Learners' use of the hesitation marker function has been reported as being "deficient" rather than just "different", and with a suggestion that the function should be given a position in the English teaching (ELT) curriculum. The aim is not to stop hesitation, which is natural in unplanned speech, but to provide learners with strategies of hesitation that are less disruptive to the interaction. Nevertheless, some other areas need to be examined. For instance, if there is any influence of mother tongue (MT) in learners' use of the hesitation markers, it would also be valuable to study hesitation markers in other languages to

investigate whether there are similarities and differences between NS and other NNS. Moreover, it would be interesting to look at eye movement during hesitation in spoken languages. It will be worth exploring whether eye change also occurs systematically in spoken languages to mark hesitation.

### Recommendations

1. This paper recommends the necessity to incorporate the function of hesitation into the ELT curriculum by creating awareness activities. Simple exposure is not enough to raise Students' consciousness. Hesitation markers need to fully surface and be brought to students' attention by means of appropriate activities. This could be done by addressing issues like the non-universality of fillers, the variety of hesitation markers, the multi-functionality of small words or the role of hesitation as a politeness strategy.
2. Learners should be taught to rely less on pauses and other non-lexical devices, and more on small words which are less disruptive to speech production

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