

Some interactive discourse items as response elicitors in spoken English

A contrastive analysis of complexity in different genres of spoken English

Complexity in spoken language

- The spoken language is, in fact, no less structured and highly organized than the written.
- Spoken English has, in fact, its own kind of complexity, arising out of the nature of medium.
- Spoken language is every bit as highly organized as the written, and is capable of just as great a degree of complexity. Only it is complex in a different way.
- Written language represents phenomena as products. Spoken language represents phenomena as processes.
- The complexity of the written language is static and dense. That of the spoken language is dynamic and intricate. Grammatical intricacy takes the place of lexical density.

Three different genres of spoken English under investigation

- Face-to-face conversation
- Telephone conversation
- Public radio discussions

Spoken interaction

- co-operation between two or more partners in a communicative situation;
- governed by two main principles:
 1. speakers co-operate;
 2. speakers take turns, i.e. at any particular moment one of them is the current speaker and the others are the current hearers;

Interactive discourse items (interactive D-items)

- appear in spoken discourse
- help the smooth flow of interaction

The texts analysed are taken from the London-Lund Corpus

- three private face-to-face conversations (S.1.1, S.1.6, and S.1.8)
- three telephone conversations (S.8.1, S.8.2, and S.9.2)
- three public radio discussions (S.5.1, S.5.2, and S.5.7)

Face-to-face versus telephone conversation

Face-to-face conversation

- face-to-face contact
- visible feedback
- lack of planning
- topics unpredictable
- surreptitious recording
- interactive features
- monitoring features
- inexplicitness
- frequent pauses

Telephone conversation

- lack of face-to-face contact/visible feedback
- partly planned
- topics partly predictable
- surreptitious recording
- interactive features
- monitoring features
- explicitness
- short pauses

Private face-to-face conversation versus public radio discussions

Face-to-face conversation

- private
- face-to-face contact
- visible feedback
- lack of planning
- topics unpredictable
- surreptitious recording
- shorter turns
- interactive features
- monitoring features
- inexplicitness
- frequent pauses

Public radio discussions

- public (passive recipient)
- face-to-face contact
- visible feedback
- planning in advance
- topics predictable
- nonsurreptitious recording
- longer turns
- one main speaker
- monitoring features
- explicitness
- pauses

Three ways the current speaker can appeal to the current hearer to produce some kind of reaction:

- declarative questions
- question tags
- comment clauses

Three interactive discourse items under investigation

- *you know*
- *you see*
- question tags (e.g. *isn't it, aren't they*)

Backchannels

- must be distinguished from proper turns
- do not involve any shift of current speaker
- are just the hearer's signals that they are still listening and ready to go on listening
- indicate to the current speaker to go on speaking
- important for the smooth flow of communication

Interactive D-items are studied with regard to what they prompt from the current hearer:

- a verbal response, which implies a shift of speaker
- a back-channel signal, which does not imply any shift of speaker
- no verbal reaction at all (non-verbal reactions, such as head-nods and facial gestures included)

Question tags

- sometimes labelled tag questions (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Leech and Svartvik 1994)
- two types:
 - tags with a rising tone which invite verification, expecting the hearer to decide the truth of the proposition in the statement;
 - tags with a falling tone which invite confirmation of the statement and have the force of an exclamation rather than a genuine question;

Clausal forms *you know* and *you see*

- considered to be comment clauses by some authors (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985: 1112-1118)
- many other labels used, e.g. pragmatic particles, pragmatic expressions, fillers, fumbles, softeners, hesitation markers, discourse markers, etc.
- represent a borderline category within type (1) comment clauses (owing to a different function from e.g. *I suppose, I think, I'm sure, I'm afraid*)
- used to claim the hearer's attention or agreement, express the speaker's informality and warmth towards the hearer

Interactive discourse items

(Leech & Svartvik 1994: 10-19)

- purely interactive (e.g. *aha, mhm, yes, yeah*)
- mainly interactive (e.g. *you know, you see, I mean, well, OK, right*)
- also interactive (e.g. *anyway, perhaps, of course*)

Table 1

Interactive discourse items in three genres of spoken English

Text types	Face-to-face conversation		Telephone conversation		Public radio discussions	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Discourse item						
<i>You know</i>	102	49.8	67	62.5	14	46.7
<i>You see</i>	49	23.9	15	14.0	9	30.0
Question tags	54	26.3	25	23.4	7	23.3
Total	205	100.0	107	100.0	30	100.0

Hypothesis

- The clausal forms *you know* and *you see* can have different elicitive force in spoken English depending on their particular function in a given communicative situation.
- Moreover, the presence or absence of face-to-face contact may have some influence on their use.

Main criteria for distinguishing discourse functions of comment clauses:

- Syntactic type
- Orientation
- Turn position
- Prosodic features
- Entire situational context

Four different discourse functions of *you know* and *you see*

- Appearer
- Inform marker
- Empathizer
- Monitor

Comparison between different types of reactions to interactive D-items (all three genres)

Table 2a
Reactions to interactive D-items in face-to-face conversation

Reaction	Response		Backchannel		No verbal reaction		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>You know</i>	27	26.5	30	29.5	45	44.0	102
<i>You see</i>	8	16.3	8	16.3	33	67.4	49
Question tags	38	70.4	10	18.5	6	11.1	54
Total	73	35.6	48	23.4	84	41.0	205

Table 2b
Reactions to interactive D-items in telephone conversation

Reaction	Response		Backchannel		No verbal reaction		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>You know</i>	23	34.3	12	17.9	32	47.8	67
<i>You see</i>	4	26.7	4	26.7	7	46.6	15
Question tags	22	88.0	1	4.0	2	8.0	25
Total	49	45.8	17	15.9	41	38.3	107

Table 2c
Reactions to interactive D-items in public radio discussions

Reaction	Response		Backchannel		No verbal reaction		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>You know</i>	2	14.3	0	0	12	85.7	14
<i>You see</i>	1	11.1	1	11.1	7	77.8	9
Question tags	3	50.0	2	33.3	1	16.7	6
Total	6	20.0	3	10.0	21	70.0	30

Interactive D-items in face-to-face conversation

Table 3a
Reactions to *you know*

Reaction	Response 27			Backchannel 30			No verbal reaction 45		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	6 (1)	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	0 (2)	3	2	11 (3)	2	3	28 (2)	5 (1)	2
Empathizer	2	3	0	3	5	0	5	4	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total (No. 102)	17	7	3	20	7	3	53	6	3

Table 3b
Reactions to *you see*

Reaction	Response 8			Backchannel 8			No verbal reaction 33		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	1	2	0	2	2	0	18	8	0
Empathizer	1	1	0	4	0	0	2	4	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total (No. 49)	5	3	0	6	2	0	21	12	0

Table 3c
Reactions to question tags

Reaction	Response 38		Backchannel 10		No verbal reaction 6	
	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause
Total (No. 54)	23	15	7	3	1	5
Question tags	23	15	7	3	1	5

Interactive D-items in telephone conversation

Table 3b
Reactions to *you know*

Reaction	Response 23			Backchannel 12			No verbal reaction 32		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	7 (1)	2 (1)	2	1 (1)	2	1 (1)	2	10 (3)	3
Empathizer	3	2	0	3	2	0	2	10	4
Monitor	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Total (No. 67)	17	4	2	8	2	2	22	7	3

Table 3c
Reactions to *you see*

Reaction	Response 4			Backchannel 4			No verbal reaction 7		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	1	0	0	1	0	0	6	0	0
Empathizer	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total (No. 15)	4	0	0	4	0	0	6	1	0

Table 3d
Reactions to question tags

Reaction	Response 22		Backchannel 1		No verbal reaction 2	
	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause
Total (No. 25)	16	6	1	0	0	2
Question tags	16	6	1	0	0	2

Interactive D-items in public radio discussions

Table 3b
Reactions to *you know*

Reaction	Response 2			Backchannel 0			No verbal reaction 12		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	1	0	0	0	0	0	8	2	0
Empathizer	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total (No. 14)	2	0	0	0	0	0	10	2	0

Table 3c
Reactions to *you see*

Reaction	Response 1			Backchannel 1			No verbal reaction 7		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
Appearer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Empathizer	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total (No. 9)	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0

Table 3d
Reactions to question tags

Reaction	Response 3		Backchannel 2		No verbal reaction 2	
	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause
Total (No. 7)	2	1	2	0	1	1
Question tags	2	1	2	0	1	1

Comparison between different types of reactions to interactive D-items (details from all three genres)

Table 6a
Reactions to interactive discourse items in face-to-face conversation

Reaction	Response 73			Backchannel 48			No verbal reaction 84		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
<i>You know</i>	17	2	1	30	7	1	33	9	1
<i>You see</i>	5	3	0	6	2	0	21	12	0
Q-tags	23	15	0	7	3	0	31	5	0
Total	45	20	1	43	12	1	85	26	1

Table 6b
Reactions to interactive discourse items in telephone conversation

Reaction	Response 49			Backchannel 17			No verbal reaction 41		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
<i>You know</i>	17	4	2	8	2	2	22	7	3
<i>You see</i>	4	0	0	4	0	0	6	1	0
Q-tags	28	16	0	13	2	2	48	10	0
Total	49	20	2	25	4	4	76	18	3

Table 6c
Reactions to interactive discourse items in public radio discussions

Reaction	Response 6			Backchannel 3			No verbal reaction 21		
	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed you
<i>You know</i>	2	0	0	0	0	0	10	2	0
<i>You see</i>	0	1	0	1	0	0	5	2	0
Q-tags	4	1	0	0	0	0	6	0	0
Total	6	1	0	1	0	0	16	4	0

Conclusions

- Speakers frequently use some interactive discourse items (*you know, you see*, question tags) to enhance the smooth flow of interaction.
- Non-verbal reactions can often represent sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking especially when face-to-face contact is available.
- When it is not available, then the current speaker tends to produce some feedback either in the form of a verbal response, which is more typical of telephone conversation, or a back-channel signal, which is sufficient in face-to-face conversation.