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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Item</th>
<th>Face-to-face conversation</th>
<th>Telephone conversation</th>
<th>Public radio discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>You know</em></td>
<td>102 49.8</td>
<td>67 62.5</td>
<td>14 46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>You see</em></td>
<td>49 23.9</td>
<td>15 14.0</td>
<td>9 30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question tags</td>
<td>54 26.3</td>
<td>25 23.4</td>
<td>7 23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>205</strong> 100.0</td>
<td><strong>107</strong> 100.0</td>
<td><strong>30</strong> 100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*

- **Appealer**
- **Inform marker**
- **Empathizer**
- **Monitor**

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

Interactive D-items in telephone conversation

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Backchannel</th>
<th>No verbal reaction</th>
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Interactive D-items in face-to-face conversation

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Interactive D-items in public radio discussions

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

Table 6a

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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.