

***Uh* and *um* as sociolinguistic markers in American English**  
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The vocalizations *uh* and *um* have often been treated as (deplorable) signs of disfluency along with repetitions, false starts, slips of the tongue and stuttering. They have been labeled *filled pauses*, *fillers*, *hesitation signals* or *hesitation markers*, and have been studied more often by psycholinguists than by linguists, often as signs of aging and memory loss.

However, it has been shown that the use of *uh/um* differs from that of other disfluency phenomena – they are perceived as less disturbing, are less noticeable and do not get the adverse reactions of e. g. false starts or stuttering. They have also been shown to be sociolinguistic markers in British English.

The present study is based on part I of the Santa Barbara Corpus, which consists of 14 texts, in detailed transcription with easy access to audio files, and comprises about 62,400 words. The texts are of varying length; the average is about 4,500 words. Fig. 1 shows the frequency of occurrence of *uh/um* (w) in texts from various settings. With one exception (*Retirement*, comprising only aged speakers) the texts with high rates of *uh/um* take place in formal settings with well-educated speakers.

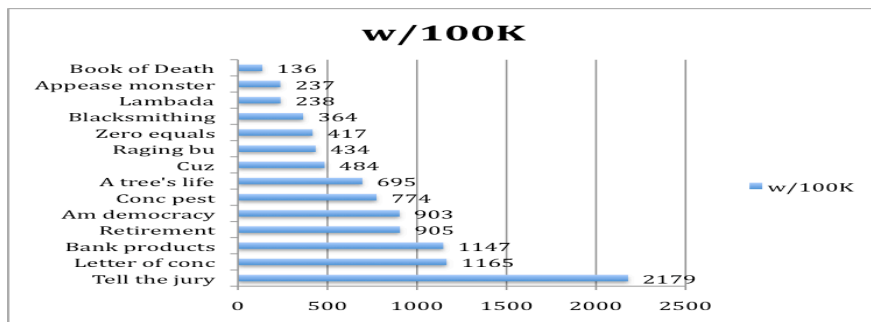


Fig. 1: Frequency of *uh/um* in texts of increasing formality, from bedroom to lawyer's office.

I will show that the vocalizations *uh/um* function as sociolinguistic markers; thus they are used more by higher socio-economic groups, more by men than by women (although women use more nasalized forms than men), and differently by different age groups. Furthermore *uh* and *um* tend to occur in complementary distribution with established pragmatic markers such as *well* and *you know*. The pragmatic functions of *uh/um* have probably been overlooked because of their lowly origins as vocalizations and their spotty recognition as words listed in dictionaries.