

From pause to word: *uh*, *um* and *er* in written American English¹

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This article describes and discusses the appearance and increasing frequency of *uh*, *um* and *er* in American English journalistic prose from the 1960s to the early 2000s as part of the colloquialization of the language. The three variants *uh*, *um* and *er* are shown to have different uses in writing than in speech; in writing they can be shown to qualify as words, while their status in speech appears to be on a cline of wordhood. In writing, they belong to the class of stance adverbs, serving metalinguistic purposes. Two types are distinguished, depending on sentence placement: in initial position, *uh*, *um* and *er* are attitude adverbs and in medial position, they are style adverbs. Although *er* is dispreferred in initial position and preferred for correction of previously used words, every variant can be used for all discourse-pragmatic functions, which supports classifying them as one lexeme.

Keywords: filled pauses, hesitations, discourse, pragmatics, word-formation

No dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some fading away...

Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is threefold:

- to investigate the use of *uh* and *um* in written English (journalistic prose);
- to add to the study of the ongoing colloquialization of written English;
- and in doing so, to contribute to the discussion of the status of *uh* and *um* as words, and the process of word-formation.

Uh and *um* are the usual transliterations of the vocalizations [ə(:)] and [ə(:)m] in American English; *er* and *erm* have been standard in non-rhotic British English but *uh* and *um* are now common also in that variety. Surprisingly, *er* also appears in rhotic American English, presumably an adoption from British English.

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Colloquialization of written language, defined as ‘the shift to a more speech-like style’ by Leech *et al.* (2009: 239), has usually been defined in terms of grammatical variables, such as the increased use of semi-modals like *have to* and the decline of *must*, greater use of progressive forms, the substitution of *that-* for *wh-*relatives, the use of contracted negatives and verb forms and the use of *not-*negation rather than *no-*negation, to list some of the most frequently treated phenomena. The study of colloquialization has occasionally been extended to the use of discourse and pragmatic markers in writing, as in Tottie & Hoffmann’s (2009) study of the use of tag questions in British written material, and Rühlemann & Hilpert’s (to appear) study of inserts, especially *well*, based on the *TIME Magazine Corpus* from 1923 to 2006 (Davies 2007–). Rühlemann & Hilpert show an increased use of typical spoken inserts as discourse markers in writing especially since the 1990s, and, interestingly, a clear difference in the functions of *well* between spoken and written language. The authors also present some quantitative data on other discourse markers, including *uh*, *um* and *you know*.

The present article has a related purpose, focusing on the use and functions of *uh* and *um* in written language, consisting of American journalistic prose. But there are major differences between my approach and that of Rühlemann & Hilpert as regards subject matter, goal and methodology. First of all, unlike *well* and other discourse markers like *you know* or *I mean*, *uh* and *um* are not pragmaticalized uses of previously existing lexical items with well-defined meanings. *Uh* and *um* are transliterations of vocalizations, and their status as words is a matter of discussion. My aim is to clarify this status by comparing their use in spoken and written English.

Secondly, Rühlemann & Hilpert look at the total frequencies of the markers they study, expressed as occurrences per million words. They do not distinguish between the parts of text that are clearly written by journalists and parts that are – or are purported to be – quotations from speech, usually enclosed between quotation marks or preceded by colons. The status of quoted speech is problematic, as we cannot know if it is quoted verbatim and thus equivalent to actual spoken language, or whether it represents a writer’s conception of spoken language, possibly based on literary examples. And when it is obvious that texts do include verbatim quotations, this is not what is usually meant by colloquialization. For this reason, the present study is based exclusively on actual journalistic prose, and tokens of *uh* and *um* occurring between quotes, after colons, or otherwise indicated to be from quoted speech, have been excluded from searches. Comparisons with speech will be based on empirical studies of spontaneous conversation from the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*, henceforth SBC. Quoted speech deserves separate treatment in future work, based on greater knowledge of both genuine spoken language and actual writing.

This article is organized as follows: [section 2](#) discusses the classification of *uh* and *um* according to functions and wordhood, and [section 3](#) presents the corpus material and methodology used for this article. [Section 4](#) compares Rühlemann & Hilpert’s findings from the *TIME Corpus* with results from the same corpus based on only actual journalistic prose, and [section 5](#) presents the results of a study of the use of *er*, *uh*

and *um* in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, COCA (Davies 2008–). Section 6 treats register differences as a preparation for an account of distributions of the three variants in section 7 and discourse-pragmatic functions in section 8. Section 9 discusses differences between the use of *uh* and *um* in speech and writing. Section 10 discusses the status of *uh* and *um* as words in speech and writing, and section 11 contains a summary and concluding remarks.

2 Classifying *uh* and *um*: are they words?

Uh and *um* have been variously classified as dys- or disfluencies, hesitations, hesitation markers, fillers, filled pauses, etc., depending on the theoretical orientation of writers – phoneticians, psycholinguists, grammarians and others. Typically, dictionaries do not list meanings for *uh* and *um* but say that they are ‘[u]sed to express hesitation or uncertainty’ or ‘used to express doubt or uncertainty or to fill a pause when hesitating in speaking’ (*American Heritage Dictionary*, italics added.)² Grammars have also taken different approaches: some altogether ignore *uh* and *um*, like Huddleston & Pullum (2002). Carter & McCarthy (2006) treat them (in the guise of *er* and *erm*) together with other ‘filled pauses... such as *like, well, you know*’. Biber *et al.* (1999: 52f.) include *er* and *erm*, classified as hesitators, in the ‘relatively newly recognized category’ of *inserts*, without necessarily acknowledging their status as words.

The pragmatic functions of *uh* and *um* in conversation have been analyzed in various ways; the function as floor-holders was emphasized by the early psycholinguists Maclay & Osgood (1959) and conversation analysts (e.g. Sacks *et al.* 1974), followed by writers on pragmatics (Mey 2001; Levinson 1983) and grammarians (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999: 1054),³ a view that has been questioned by Tottie (2015a). They have been characterized as pragmatic particles (Fischer 2006) or pragmatic markers (Edmondson 1981), and Tottie (2016) compares them to *bona fide* pragmatic markers such as *well, you know, I mean* and *like*. *Uh* and *um* are thus slippery customers; there is no consensus on either their description or function.

So are they words? As pointed out by Biber *et al.* (1999: 51) ‘the definition of “word” is far from straightforward’. Whole volumes have been written on the lexicon without discussing or giving a definition – see e.g. Aitchison (2012), and dictionaries rarely define the concept. Psycholinguists disagree about the status of *uh* and *um*: Corley & Stewart (2008) argue that *uh* and *um* cannot be words because they are not intentionally produced, but Shillcock *et al.* (2001) found that *uh* and *um* form part of the mental lexicon, based on the correlation of semantic and phonological distance found in experiments. Clark & Fox Tree (2002) argue that *uh* and *um* are not mere symptoms of hesitation but conventional words, and that they function as interjections that signal upcoming delays (i.e. silent pauses), or themselves constitute delays.

² See Tottie (2011) for a discussion of dictionary practices.

³ Biber *et al.* are inconsistent, including them among ‘repair strategies’ (1999: 1067): ‘One is to hesitate to give yourself more time to plan.’

Clark & Fox Tree base their classification of *uh* and *um* as interjections on a definition from Wilkins (1992: 124) that this author himself defines as ‘unorthodox’:

A conventional lexical form which (commonly and) conventionally constitutes an utterance on its own, (typically) does not enter into construction with other word classes, is (usually) monomorphemic, and (generally) does not host inflectional or derivational morphemes.

The usual expressive or emotional function is missing from Wilkins’ definition – see *OED* s.v. *interjection* 2a. Furthermore, *uh* and *um* do not normally constitute an utterance on their own. If cliticization is counted, it also enters into constructions with other word classes, *and*, *but* and other short words.⁴

The claim that *uh* and *um* are interjections has been refuted by O’Connell & Kowal (2005) and Tottie (2015b). Analyzing television interviews and material from SBC, respectively, these authors found that a large proportion of instances of *uh* and *um* are not followed by delays, that most silent pauses are not announced by *uh* or *um*, and that therefore the function as announcements of upcoming delays cannot be used as support for the status of *uh* and *um* as words with this particular function in spoken language.

Returning to the fundamental question of a general definition of wordhood, Biber *et al.* (1999: 51) offer a description rather than a definition, pointing out that words ‘resist insertions’, and that their independence

is shown phonologically by the fact that they may be preceded and followed by pauses; orthographically by their separation by means of spaces or punctuation marks; syntactically by the fact that they may be used alone as a single utterance; and semantically by the possibility of assigning to them one or more dictionary meanings.

Interestingly, however, the definition given by the latest edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *OED* online, cuts the Gordian knot of defining ‘word’ (s.v. III.12) by appealing to speaker intuition. The entry has been updated from that of earlier editions and is quoted below, with the novel part italicized:

An element or unit of speech, language, etc. ... 12. Any of the sequences of one or more sounds or morphemes (*intuitively recognized by native speakers as*) constituting the basic units of meaningful speech used in forming a sentence or utterance in a language (and in most writing systems normally separated by spaces); a lexical unit other than a phrase or affix; an item of vocabulary, a vocable.

If we follow the *OED* and take the intuition of native speakers as the arbiter of wordhood of *uh* and *um*, it is clear, even in the absence of a formal vote, that most speakers (but not all linguists) do not consider *uh* and *um* to be *bona fide* words with meanings and codified uses, but as undesirable noise unintentionally produced by speakers (see Erard 2007). Intentionality thus appears to play an important part for

⁴ Norrick (2015) includes *uh* and *um* as interjections, but also points out, following Ameka (1992), that this may denote either a word class, or a function of whole phrases as well as words.

the definition of *uh* and *um* as words, and the medium of use – speech or writing – therefore becomes an important criterion, as written language is normally voluntarily produced.

Clark & Fox Tree (2002) point out in a footnote that *uh* and *um* are used deliberately in chatrooms and emails, and that this supports their classification as words. Rose (2011) examined their use in the hybrid genre of blogs, pointing out the intentionality of their use in this medium. As demonstrated e.g. in Tottie (2015b), there is even stronger support for regarding *uh* and *um* as words when they appear in print, where they must also have been inserted by writers for specific purposes. Examples (1)–(6) below are taken from headlines and articles culled from newspapers⁵ and impressionistic reading. (Boldface is added throughout for highlighting, and ellipses are used when examples have been abbreviated. Original ellipses in quoted examples are flagged as such. In quoted speech from SBC ellipses denote silent pauses.)

- (1) Obama is more, **um, seasoned**. Barack Obama's ... closely shorn hair appears to be increasingly gray. (*Washington Post* 2008)
- (2) An ode to opera's, **uh, operation**. As ... Baroque-era composers become increasingly popular, more people wonder about the castrati – the emasculated singers ... (*L. A. Times* 2005)
- (3) [The actor Ben Affleck goes to sleep during a performance of Shakespeare.] The Oscar-winning screenwriter and actor seemed to be, **um** – how can we put this delicately? – **meditating** during most of the first act. (*Boston Globe* 1999)
- (4) Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama ... claimed that 'the market will view these firms as ... implicitly backed by the government.' **Um, senator**, the market already views those firms as having implicit government backing, because they do ... (Paul Krugman, op-ed column, *New York Times* 2010)

In (1)–(3) the function of *uh* and *um* is that of ironic euphemism, 'putting it delicately', and in (4), *um* is used for disagreement in a vocative sentence. Polite avoidance of unpleasant realities like graying hair, castration, sleeping at the theatre and disagreement is a common factor in all of these examples. This is not an exclusively American phenomenon; British magazines and newspapers also provide examples of *er* and *erm* in similar uses, as shown by (5) from sports pages and (6) from a film review. Again, we have ironic euphemism here: the Liverpool soccer players mentioned in *The Independent* have clearly not gone on to finals or semi-finals, and the *Guardian* headline is beating around the bush on a sensitive topic.

- (5) The Liverpool players, **er, have the evening off**. (*The Independent* 2010)
- (6) Attila: hot babes, baths and, **erm, birth control**. This 2001 made-for-TV movie does get very silly at times, but it does make a surprisingly good fist of the history of the infamous Hun king ... (*The Guardian* 2010)

Uh and *um* are definitely not (filled) pauses in (1)–(6). They fulfil the criteria for wordhood in writing of being separated from other items by spaces and/or punctuation marks, and they appear to have meaning, or at least communicative functions. (See

⁵ Accessed through newspaper corpora available at the department of English, the University of Zurich.

Biber *et al.* 1099: 51.) They must also have been intentionally produced. We may thus regard them as words in these examples, but this raises several questions. How frequent are *uh* and *um* overall in writing? Can they also have functions other than those proposed for (1)–(6)? What word class should they be assigned to? Classifying *um* as an interjection might work for (4), but hardly for the other tokens, although the answer hinges on the definition of interjections.

Finally, are *uh* and *um* two separate words, or are they variants of a single lexeme? Clark & Fox treat them as separate words based on their distribution in the *London–Lund Corpus of British English*, where *uh* was found to flag short pauses and *um* flagged longer pauses. However, Tottie (2015b: 48) found no such distinction in American English from SBC and therefore found it justified to regard *uh* and *um* as variants of a single lexeme dubbed UHM. The single-lexeme view appears even more appropriate for written language, where the lengthening criterion is absent. Henceforth, I will use the abbreviation EHM to subsume *er*, *uh* and *um* in written language, regarding it as one variable with three variants. I will use *er*, *uh* and *um* when discussing the individual variants. When referring to the vocalizations in spoken language as one variable, I will use UHM.

3 Material and method

Some information on the use of *uh* and *um* in twentieth-century writing already exists. Jucker (2015a) reports on results from an investigation of the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA, Davies 2010–) but is based largely on examples of represented speech from fiction. Rühlemann & Hilpert’s (to appear) study of colloquialization is based on the *TIME Magazine Corpus* (Davies 2007–), consisting of 100,000,000 words published 1923–2006. The main focus of that study is the use of *well* in writing, but the authors also include data on *er*, *uh* and *um*, beginning in the 1920s, showing a great increase in frequency from the middle of the century and culminating in the 1990s. However, Rühlemann & Hilpert searched for all tokens of *er*, *uh* and *um* surrounded by commas, including those that were surrounded by quotes and were thus (at least supposedly) quoted from direct speech. As I wished to restrict my study to language originally written to be read, i.e. journalistic prose, I therefore examined the *TIME* corpus anew, eliminating, by means of mostly manual sorting, all tokens that occurred within quotation marks or were otherwise marked as spoken, e.g. immediately following a colon.⁶

This was also the time-consuming method used for further work on the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, COCA (Davies 2008–), which is the main source of the present work. COCA now comprises over 530,000,000 words from 1990 to 2015, from five different genres (Spoken, Fiction, Magazines, Newspapers and Academic), but I restricted myself to the two ‘agile’ genres (as defined by Hundt & Mair 1999),

⁶ Because of the often considerable distance between quotation marks and quoted material, and the difficulty of assigning them correctly to quotations, I refrained from trying to solve this problem by programming.

viz. Magazines and Newspapers. The research for this article was completed before the release of data from mid 2012 to 2015, and as 2012 was incomplete, my corpus was COCA 1990–2011.⁷ The combined Magazine and Newspaper subcorpus amounted to over 182 million words.

In my search I included *uh* and *um* but not instances of *uh* that were part of *uh'uh* ('yes') *'uhuh* ('no') or the 'mild alarm cry' (*uh-oh.*) The item *er* – an anomaly in usually rhotic American English – was also included as it turned up with surprising frequency, but *erm* did not appear.⁸

A diachronic approach to EHM development is taken in sections 4 and 5, but sections 7 and 8 will give a synchronic survey of placement and uses of EHM because of the limitation of the material.

4 Journalistic prose in the *TIME* corpus

Rühlemann & Hilpert (to appear) found a small number of tokens of EHM in the early decades of the *TIME* corpus, as shown in figure 1, quoted from their article. They show a substantial increase from the 1940s to the 1950s, and then again to the 1960s, and a steady rise after that.⁹ Many of their examples must have occurred in quotations from speech, however, and were not excluded by their computerized search. The fact that Rühlemann & Hilpert's search was based on searching only for tokens that were surrounded by commas, including those occurring in quoted speech, led to the inclusion of examples like (7), where six instances of *Um* make up a song title. All the *um* tokens from the 1960s came from (7), but the method of collection missed the first and the last one because they were not preceded or followed by commas as required by the algorithm.

(7) The sledgehammer refrains of Wayne Fontana and the Mind Benders' **Um, Um, Um, Um, Um, Um** can be heard parting the walls of a Yokohama teahouse.

All seven *uh* tokens from the 1970s were from quoted speech, as in (8) and (9):

(8) Erlichmann added: 'Before I get too far out on that, **uh**, I want to talk to an attorney.'

(9) 'Oh, **uh**, that's all right,' smiled Kennedy, 'I, **uh**, I've heard the question before too.'

In my manual search for examples, which was not restricted to those surrounded by commas, I did not find any non-quoted instances until the 1960s. In the entire decade I found only three tokens, shown in (10), with both *er* and *uh*, and (11), with one token of *uh*. Note that in (10) *er* and *uh* are juxtaposed with *well*:

⁷ The updated COCA corpus was not published until early 2016.

⁸ How Americans imagine the pronunciation of *er* is not clear to me. I have never heard anyone go around saying *er* to rhyme with *her*.

⁹ Jucker (2015a) reports a similar steady rise in *uh* and *um* frequency (but not including *er*) in COHA during the time period 1950–2000. The frequencies of *uh* and *um* are higher than that reported by Rühlemann & Hilpert by about a factor of 3 or 4 – possibly because Jucker's search was not restricted to examples surrounded by commas but also included examples surrounded by dashes or no punctuation at all – but the proportions are almost identical.

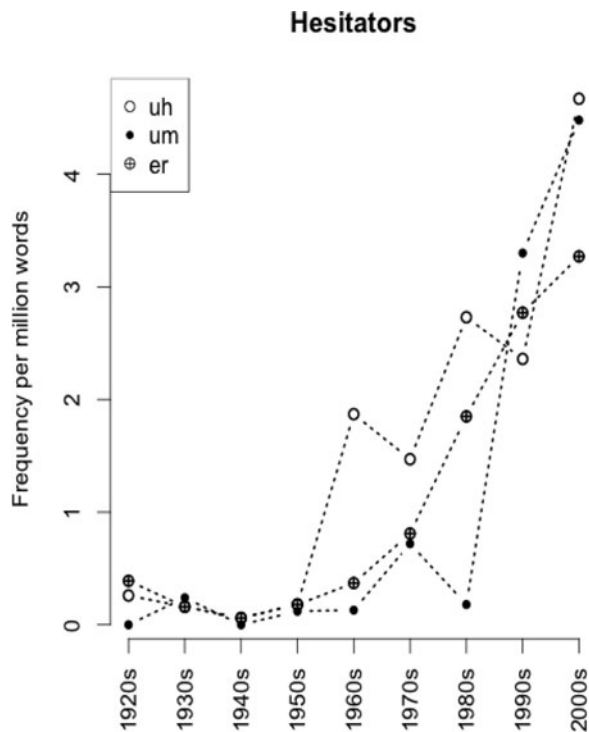


Figure 1. The frequency per million words of *er*, *uh* and *um* in the *TIME* corpus according to Rühlemann & Hilpert (to appear)

- (10) [Buddhist] monks had decided to ‘fast ... to protest ...’ ... Beside the fasters were handy slices of fruit and glasses of pale, cold tea, prompting a young monk to explain that liquid was ‘allowed.’ As for the fruit – **well**, **er**, **uh**, no comment. (*TIME* 1965)
- (11) Armenti[è]res is a [French town with a single claim to fame]: its mademoiselle, heroine of ... World War I ditties, most of them dirty ... Armenti[è]res last week began a fund-raising campaign for a statue in mademoiselle’s, **uh**, honor. (*TIME* 1965)

The total number of instances of EHM occurring in journalistic prose in *TIME* from the 1960s to the middle of the 2000s was 166, as shown in [table 1](#).¹⁰

[Figure 2](#) shows the frequency per million words (pmw) of EHM for the five decades when it occurred in journalistic prose. The frequency was 0.2 pmw in the 1960s and 0.8 in the 1970s, rising to 2.1 pmw in the 1980s and then steeply to 8.4 pmw in the 1990s, but the frequency then goes down somewhat in the 2000s to 7.5 pmw. The differences between the first three decades are significant (1960s–70s $p < .04$, 1970s–80s $p < .014$, 1980s–90s $p < .0001$) but not that between the 1990s and 2000s; the development thus approaches an S-curve. The rise closely follows that shown in

¹⁰ The *TIME* data for the 2000s ends in March of 2006; hence the low number of words for the 2000s.

Table 1. *Tokens of EHM, number of words per decade and frequencies pmw in non-quoted text in the TIME corpus*

	Number of EHM	Number of words	Freq. pmw
1960s	3	15,653,909	0.2
1970s	10	12,518,793	0.8
1980s	23	11,053,333	2.1
1990s	79	9,425,993	8.4
2000s	51	6,754,797	7.5
Totals	166		

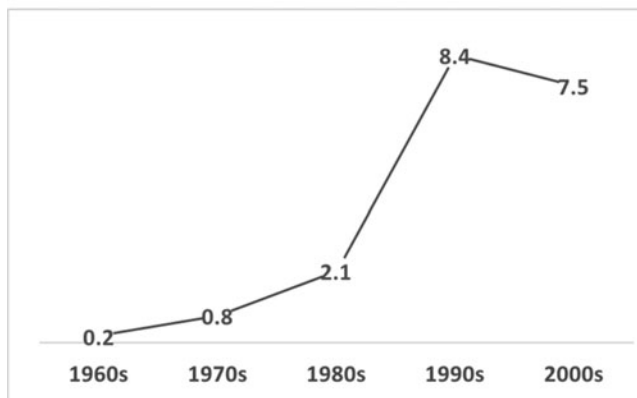


Figure 2. The frequency of EHM pmw in the *TIME* corpus from the 1960s to the 2000s

Rühlemann & Hilpert (to appear), if all variants in figure 1 are added up. However, their totals for e.g. the 2000s amount to over 12 tokens pmw and are thus about 1.6 times higher than that for only journalistic prose, 7.5 pmw, most likely due to the difference between our methodologies and their inclusion of quoted speech.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the variants *er*, *uh* and *um* over time. Interestingly, the British-type *er* is especially frequent in the 1980s and 1990s before losing ground in the 2000s, but the typically American variants *uh* + *um* show a steady rise and jointly outrank *er* in the 2000s.

5 The distribution of *er*, *uh* and *um* in COCA

The search of newspapers and magazines in COCA 1990–2011 yielded a total of 630 tokens of EHM. In order to follow the development more closely, I divided the material into four blocks of five years each (1990–4, 1995–9, 2000–4, 2005–9) plus one ‘rump’ period consisting of the two years 2010–11. Figure 4 shows the frequencies pmw in the five time blocks.

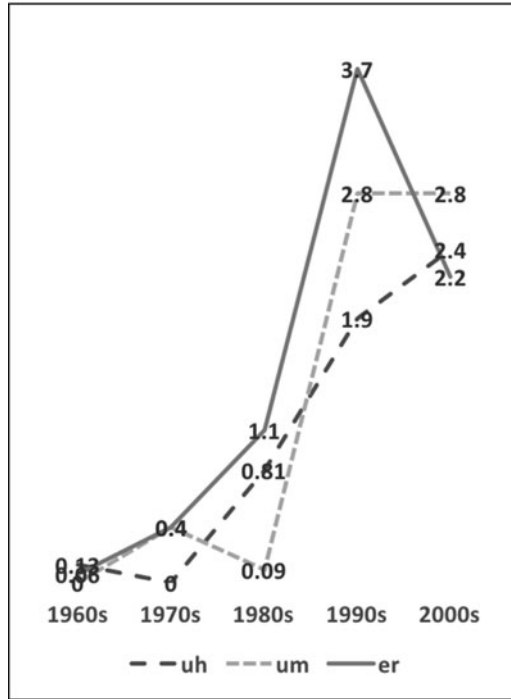


Figure 3. The frequency of *er*, *uh* and *um* pmw per decade in non-quoted text in the *TIME* corpus

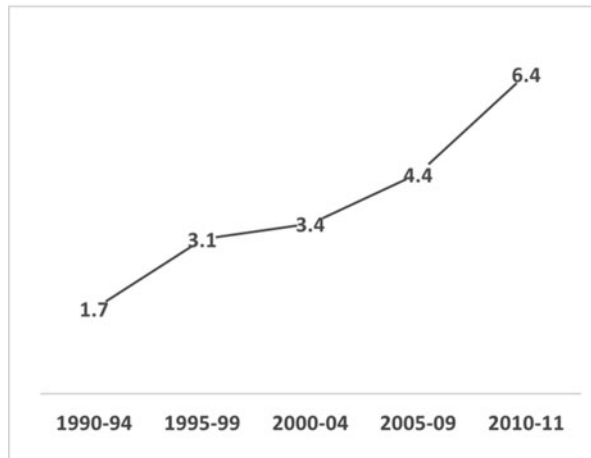


Figure 4. Frequencies of EHM pmw in COCA newspapers and magazines 1990–2011

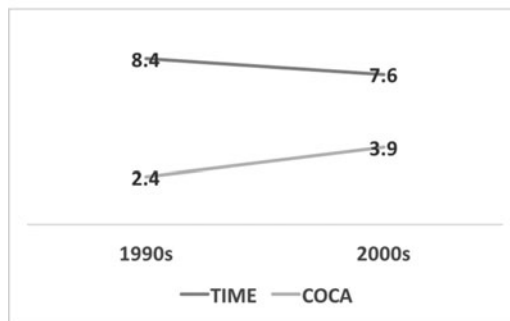


Figure 5. Comparing frequencies pmw of EHM in *TIME* and COCA in the 1990s and 2000s

After a modest start in the early 1990s with 1.7 pmw in 1990–4, the frequency of EHM rose to 3.1 in the second time band and to 3.4 pmw in the 2000–4 time band. By the last period, 2010–11, the frequency is 6.4 pmw, or 3.76 times as high as in the first period, but still not as high as the 8.4 pmw high in *TIME*, recorded in the 1990s. Overall, the frequencies are much lower than those for *TIME* magazine for the same time periods. Adding up the five-year periods to decades in COCA, the differences between *TIME* and COCA in overlapping time periods are shown in figure 5.

The difference between the frequency of EHM in *TIME* magazine and COCA is striking, with 8.4 pmw in *TIME* in the 1990s vs 2.4 in COCA, and 7.6 pmw in *TIME* vs 3.9 in COCA in the 2000s. *TIME* is known for its particular style, which may account for its much higher EHM frequency, but there are also differences between newspapers and magazines in COCA. The reasons for these discrepancies need to be discussed.

6 EHM in newspapers and magazines – a question of register?

The frequencies of EHM turned out to differ between the two subcorpora in COCA. In the total sample, 60 percent of the 630 tokens appeared in the Magazine subcorpus, and 40 percent in the News corpus. Over time the proportions changed from almost a fifty–fifty distribution in the first period to about a quarter from News and three-quarters in Magazines in the last period, as shown in figure 6.

It is necessary to take these proportions with a grain of salt, however, because of the changing composition of the two subcorpora. The COCA sample of newspapers remained constant in the sense that for most of the sampling period, it comprises the same ten sources: in addition to Associated Press, the newspapers were *The Christian Science Monitor*, *New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today* from 1990, with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* added in 1991, the *Chicago-Sun-Times* and the *Houston Chronicle* in 1992 and *The Denver Post* in 1994.

The selection of magazines has undergone greater changes over time, and neither the domains nor the publications remain the same. In the 1990 sample there are nine domains, viz. African American, Children, Entertainment, Financial,

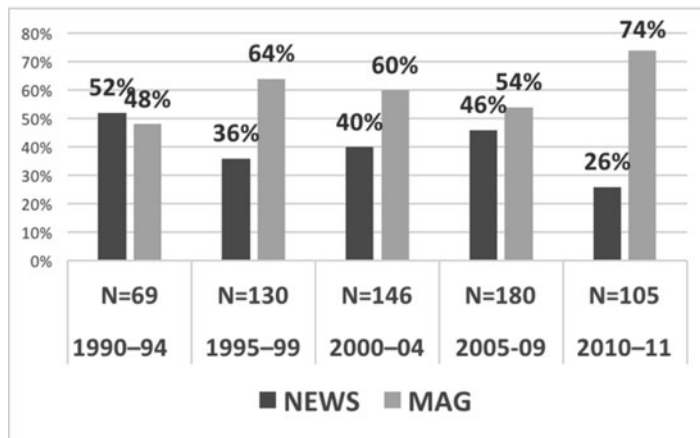


Figure 6. Percentages of EHM in newspapers and magazines in COCA 1990–2011

Home/Food/Health/Garden, News and Opinion, Science/Tech, Social Sciences/Fine Arts, and Sports/Outdoors. In 2011 there are ten: Financial is now absent, but two new domains, Religion and Women/Men/Fashion, have been added. In the 1990 sample, there are 35 different publications, and in 2011, there are 51. Twelve are identical to the 1990 sample, but they make up just over a quarter of the 2011 sample.

The addition of the domain Women/Men/Fashion is especially important for the study of EHM. In this domain we find *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Ms.*, *Redbook*, *Parenting* and *Today's Parent*; the presence of the lightweight publications *Cosmopolitan* and *Redbook* is noteworthy because of their profiles and the large number of tokens they supply. *Cosmopolitan* advertises itself on the internet as 'The Women's Magazine for Fashion, Sex Advice, Dating Tips' and *Redbook* promises its readers articles on 'Anti Aging, Beauty, Fashion Under \$100, Sex ...' Furthermore, the publications in the domain Sports/Outdoors have changed character: in the first periods, the serious-minded environmentalist magazines *Conservationist*, *National Parks*, *Sierra* and *Wilderness* dominated. *National Parks* remains in 2011 but the additions are more oriented towards outdoor sports and equipment than to nature preservation: *Backpacker*, *Bicycling*, *Motor Boating* and *Skiing* are good examples. *Men's Health* and *Shape*, both focusing on looks and lifestyle, are among the additions to the Home/Food/Health/Garden domain.¹¹ These and other changes in COCA would certainly be good material for a study of cultural changes in the years around the turn

¹¹ Some basic figures: the average number of tokens of EHM per magazine is about 7.5, not counting those that had no instances at all. *Cosmopolitan* yielded 56 tokens and *Redbook* 18, *Entertainment* 27, *Rolling Stone* 19 and *Bicycling* 21. *Men's Health* yielded 18 tokens, but *Shape* – with a mostly female readership – only 3. But much more work needs to be done on register differences and readership of the publications in COCA, both qualitative and quantitative, and from a sociological as well as a linguistic perspective, before an accurate account can be given.

Table 2. *The position of EHM in COCA*

	1990–4	1995–9	2000–4	2005–9	2010–11
Medial	57 (84%)	109 (84%)	106 (73%)	110 (61%)	71 (69%)
Initial	11	21	40	70	32
	68	130	146	180	103

of the millennium in the vein of Leech & Fallon (1992), but that is beyond the scope of the present work.

Although there are certainly differences between the two types of publications, News and Magazines, it is probably register that is the most important factor in the use of EHM. In newspapers, tokens of EHM are not used in news reporting or editorials but tend to appear in reviews, comment columns and sports pages; in magazines, those which comprise similar registers dominate. A detailed study of register and colloquialization including other types as well is necessary before generalizations can be made. For the current purpose, it will suffice to treat newspapers and magazines jointly.

7 The use of EHM in COCA

COCA does not supply information about occurrences in headlines or photo captions, but the manual inspection showed that the vast majority are from running text. A total of 88 percent of all tokens of EHM occur in statements, and the remaining 12 percent in either imperatives or questions. The use of EHM tokens can be correlated to their appearance in either sentence-medial or sentence-initial position.

7.1 *EHM position and following focused element*

The placement of EHM is most often sentence-medial; thus 453/630 (72 percent) of the tokens occur in this position and 174/630 (28 percent) in initial position. (Three tokens appeared in sentence-final position and will be disregarded here.) The proportion of medial EHM is higher in the earliest periods – over 80 percent – and goes down in the later ones, but medial position always prevails and is never lower than 61 percent, as shown in [table 2](#).

If only full decades are counted, as shown in [figure 7](#), the proportional increase of EHM in initial position is significant ($p < 0001$, chi-square 18.39, 1 df.)

7.2 *Sentence-medial EHM*

Typical examples of medial EHM are given in (12)–(14). In order to illustrate the versatility of the variants, they will all be included for most example types, in the order *er*, *uh*, *um*.

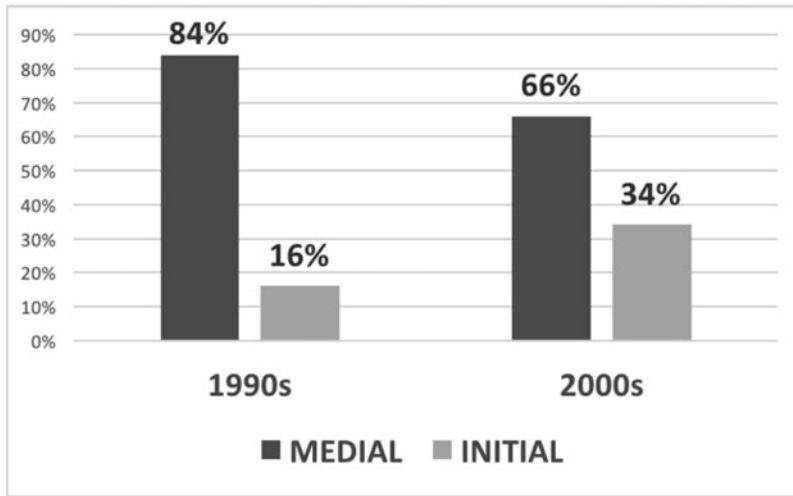


Figure 7. The proportional increase of EHM in initial position in COCA from the 1990s to the 2000s

- (12) ... contributors ... tend to be on the, **er, um, old-ish** side. (*New York Times* 2010)
 (13) You just ... lived the life. Which was, **uh, strenuous**. (*Rolling Stone* 1992)
 (14) ... you have what it takes to enter ... **um, the winner's circle?** (*Men's Health* 2000)

The element following EHM is focused. A large majority of tokens of medial EHM (65 percent) precede noun phrases, as in (12) and (14) above, but the classification is based on the individual lexical item that is focused. Thus examples like (12), where an initial adjective carries the focus, are classified as having pre-adjectival EHM. Some 14 percent precede adjectives, either stand-alone as in (13), or as parts of NPs, as in (12).¹²

A total of 11 percent precede a verb or verb phrase, as in (15), and the remaining 10 percent precede clauses, as in (16), pragmatic markers or response signals.

- (15) I mumble that I'm, **uh**, just shopping. (*Southern Living* 1995)
 (16) ... among the things yet to be discovered by researchers is [,] **um** [,] how sleep works, exactly. (*Men's Health* 2006)

¹²In the present material NPs rarely occurred in initial (subject) position, unlike regular practice. When they did, it was usually in (abbreviated) clauses, classified as such as in (i) and (ii):

- (i) **Um** ... reality check time. (*Outdoor Life* 1994; [orig. ellipses; quoted as (41)])
 (ii) ... (**uh**, murder not included). (*Cosmopolitan* 2011)

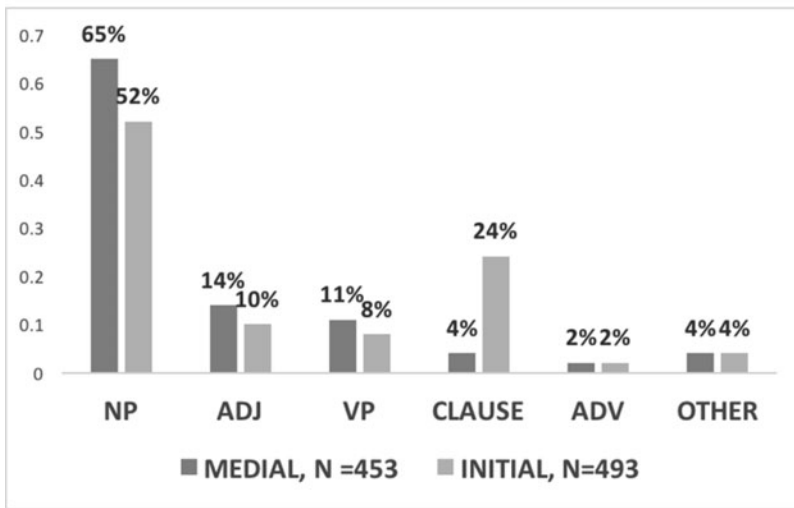


Figure 8. Elements following medial and initial EHM

7.3 Sentence-initial EHM

Initial EHM precedes a clause in the great majority of tokens (79 percent), as in (17)–(19), and it is a proposition that is focused:

(17) ... three strikes always mean you are out. **Er**, make that fuori. Here in Italy ... (*Christian Science Monitor* 2004)

(18) **Uh**, that's hogwash. (*Sporting News* 1997)

(19) **Um**, what does your wife think about that? (*Redbook* 2010)

Other types include response signals (9 percent) and noun phrases (6 percent), as in (20) and (21), and an assortment of adverbs, pragmatic markers, etc.

(20) Drop pounds simply by drinking two 8-ounce glasses of water before each meal. **Uh**, sure. (*Cosmopolitan* 2011)

(21) I could have ... **uh**, rotten excuse. I just wish I didn't suck. (*Rolling Stone* 1996; orig. ellipses)

The difference in following elements between sentence-medial and sentence-initial EHM emerges clearly from [figure 8](#) – medial EHM significantly precedes NPs ($p < .0001$, chi-square 15.31, 1 df), and initial EHM significantly precedes clauses ($p < .0001$, chi-square 71.19, 1df). The other differences were not significant.

8 The discourse-pragmatic functions of EHM

The pragmatic or discourse function of EHM was usually possible to determine thanks to the availability of larger co-texts in COCA. Almost without exception it is the

writer's attitude to the message, either previous or following, which is signaled to the readers by metalinguistic means.¹³

There turned out to be almost total correlation between placement and function. In sentence-medial position, EHM usually expresses writers' attitude to the content of their own subsequent text, as previously shown in (10) and (11) above. EHM in initial position expresses the writer's attitude to a previous message or assumption, usually something said or written by a different person, as in (17)–(20) above. A more fine-grained analysis is given below.

8.1 Sentence-medial EHM

Virtually all the instances of medial EHM can be classified as having some kind of 'tongue-in-cheek' function, as in (22)–(24), i.e. implying that something should not be taken seriously.¹⁴ Euphemism is frequent, and it also sometimes signals irony, as in (24):

- (22) ... happy hour at your neighbor's makes your speech, **er, unrecognizable** ... (*Chicago S-T* 2001)
- (23) I failed to mention recently the, **uh, unusual** ensemble that Tim Hudson wore ... (*Atlanta J-C* 2008)
- (24) ... former boxing champ ... Holyfield agreed to show his dancing, **um, skills**. (*USA Today* 2000)

Functional subcategories often shade into each other, and it is therefore impossible to make completely water-tight exclusive classifications. I have tried to organize them in order of frequency, but overlaps are unavoidable. Intentional self-correction, where first one word is used, and then another is substituted, is a large subtype of the tongue-in-cheek category, accounting for 106 tokens in the corpus, or almost a quarter of the total number of medial instances. Examples are given in (25)–(27), but notice that puns, another subcategory which is further exemplified in (33)–(35) below, also occur here, as in (26) and (27). Whereas the overall distribution of EHM variants is fairly even in medial position with about a third of each, the typical variant used for self-correction is *er*. *Er* accounts for 88 percent of these examples, often with some type of word-play, as in (26) and (27).

- (25) Both dental chairs have eastern views of the lake with some interesting signage to distract the **victim, er, patient**. (*Chicago S-T* 1994)
- (26) [A] stack of sheetrock [fell] on his foot ... And a **scar, er, star** was born. (*Atlanta J-C* 2011)
- (27) The mayor's **hair** was down at the **hair (er, air)** show. (*SanFranChron* 2006)

¹³ I was the sole coder of functional categories, but all examples were checked and sometimes recoded again after a lapse of more than a month, which should guarantee some reliability of the procedure.

¹⁴ (i) is a unique example that mimics spoken language:

(i) Judah Maccabee, a member of the tribe who ... ah ... **um** ... what was it he did and what the hell did it have to do with Hanukkah? (*Esquire* 2009; orig. ellipses)

Self-correction with *uh* is rare; it occurs only eleven times, whereas self-correction with *um* is virtually non-existent, with only two instances. Examples are given in (28) and (29).

(28) But no one in the traveling party saw any sign of the **thugs, uh, Klan members**, (*Atlanta J-C* 1994)

(29) Black would have had good cause to be **terse or, um, ticked**. (*Sporting News* 2008)

Another tongue-in-cheek subcategory (9 percent of sentence-medial tokens) is that where the writer is ‘putting things delicately’. This type is common when body parts, sex or body functions are referred to and the writer does not wish to be specific, as in (30)–(32):

(30) Amneris is no Snow White ... with costumes to make her physical allure, **er, jump out** at you. (*Atlanta J-C* 1998)

(31) Last bit of advice: Get your dress cleaned to destroy any other evidence that might have, **uh, leaked out**. (*Cosmopolitan* 1998)

(32) [A] sudden bear made a huge crash in the forest. One guy, **um, taking care of business**, came running back into camp ... (*TIME* 1997)

Puns are also sometimes (in 5 percent of all cases) signaled by EHM, as in (33)–(35):

(33) Sties are red swellings on the margin of the eyelid that can be not only painful but a real, **er, eyesore**. (*Men's Health* 1994)

(34) The monks used to bake bread to earn a living, until they realized they weren't making any, **uh, dough**. (*Men's Health* 1998)

(35) [T]hey don't show ... just a basic black dress – an omission that's, **um, redressed** in Amy Holman Edelman's [book] *The Little Black Dress* ... (*Newsweek* 1997)

The subtype consisting of repetition for rhetorical effect accounts for a small proportion of cases (2 percent), as shown in (36) and (37), with punning on literal and metaphorical meaning in (37):

(36) ... from a white T-shirt to a cashmere sweater ... **Black** denim is, **uh, black**. (*Men's Health* 2000)

(37) Literally **walking in other people's shoes** may give kids valuable experience in, **um, walking in other people's shoes**. (*Parenting* 2010)

In a few cases variants, *eh*, *uh* or *um* appear together, as in (38), where *well* is thrown in for good measure:

(38) Despite the neat glass roof, the vehicle is, **um, er, well** ... a little ugly.¹⁵ (*Boys' Life* 2002; orig. ellipses)

8.2 Sentence-initial EHM

Tokens of sentence-initial EHM account for 174/630 tokens (27 percent). *Er* is unusual in initial position with only 11 percent of the total, whereas *uh* and *um* make up 45 and 44 percent, respectively. But *er* can be used in all the pragmatic functions identified

¹⁵ See the discussion of ‘predicative well’ in Rühlemann & Hilpert (to appear).

below, as is clear from (39), (42) and (45). In all of these functions, EHM conveys the writers' negative or contradictory attitude to a previous message or assumption, either their own or that of another speaker or writer.

In (39)–(41) EHM is used in statements to refute a prior assertion:

- (39) [Basketball player tries to explain an injury.] **Er, wrong**. Normally, you can't walk after tearing up your knee like that. (*USA Today* 1992)
- (40) This year's unit was supposed to be the school's most talented since the Razorbacks entered the SEC in 1992. **Uh, that's hogwash**. (*Sporting News* 1997)
- (41) And if you're building a kit cabin ... it's tempting to believe it will be easy. **Um ... reality check time**. (*Outdoor Life* 1994; orig. ellipses)

Statements often occur in (usually negative) answers to rhetorical questions, as in (42)–(44):

- (42) Sounds harmless, right? **Er, not** really. (*Cosmopolitan* 2011)
- (43) Anything good about getting older? **Uh ... no**. (*Rolling Stone* 2008; orig. ellipses)
- (44) Did anyone else hook up on the set? **Um, not** to my knowledge. (*People* 2008)

Initial EHM is also used in questions to make fun of previous assumptions – expressed by authors or others, as in (45)–(47):

- (45) [T]he narrative arc is elaborated with the addition of nuanced emotional subtext that ... **er**, what am I talking about? (*NY Times* 2007; orig. ellipses)
- (46) [The] novel ... comes equipped with a ... dust jacket promising 'This Book Will Chill You,' and offering your money back if it doesn't. **Uh**, what was that address again? (*SanFranChron* 1994)
- (47) 'One [competition] down and six to go,' [swimmer Phelps] said by the pool. **Um**, did he fail math in high school? He means seven to go, right? (*Chicago S-T* 2004)

Summing up, all three variants can thus be used in both initial and medial position and all of the functions identified in sections 7 and 8.¹⁶ This supports regarding EHM as a single variable with three variants, even though *er* is dispreferred in initial position and strongly preferred for medial self-correction. It seems likely that self-correction is the context where *er* was first used in American English as a calque of British English usage, and that this construction persisted, but historical evidence from both British and American English is required for this to be confirmed.

9 Differences between UHM in speech and EHM in writing

Although the use of EHM contributes to the colloquialization of written English, making it 'more speech-like', there are differences between the functions served by EHM in writing and by UHM in speech. The main reason for this fundamental difference is the conditions of production: UHM is normally an unintentional phenomenon in online spoken language but highly intentional in written language,

¹⁶Note that Rose (2011) also observes that '[w]riters [of blogs] show little distinction between *uh* and *um*'.

where writers use EHM to achieve a stylistic effect, and to convey an attitude. The main function of EHM in writing is metalinguistic: EHM is used to highlight a preceding or following proposition or lexical element, and to produce a humorous, ironic and/or polite effect. The use of EHM thus entails that a marker of authorial stance is introduced, and that increasing subjectivity is allowed in the written medium, ‘expression of self and the representation of ... a locutionary agent’s perspective or point of view in discourse’, in the words of Finegan (1995: 1).

As mentioned in section 2, there has been much debate concerning the functions of UHM in spoken language, and especially floor-holding or signaling upcoming pauses have been suggested. The position here is that the basic use of hesitators – not just UHM but also often routinized uses of *you know, like*, etc. – is to help speakers plan their upcoming speech. This view is taken by the early psycholinguists Howell & Vetter (1969), who state that *uh* and *um* are used for ‘monitoring and verbal planning’, and more explicitly by Carter & McCarthy (2006: 903), who note that a ‘filler [e.g. *uh* or *um*] ... can indicate the speaker’s online process of thinking and planning’ and that fillers are items ‘whereby speakers fill their silences while planning their speech in real time or while hesitating’ (ibid.: 12). Fischer (2006: 432) argues that ‘[h]esitation markers, such as *uh* and *um* ... indicate a current process: “I am thinking”’, and Götz (2013: 110) asserts that ‘[f]illed pauses (FPs) are probably the most frequently used planning strategy in both native and nonnative speech’. Based on empirical research of SBC, Tottie (2014, 2015a, 2015b, forthcoming) subscribes to this view, and has argued for the term *planner*, also adopted by Jucker (2015a, 2015b).

An illustrative example of a speaker hesitating in order to plan is given in (48), where a woman has a rather long turn telling the story of her move between apartments in New York in a dinner-table conversation; long turns characteristically have a high incidence of UHM. (Lines mark intonation units, commas continuing intonation and periods final intonation. The symbol = denotes lengthening of a preceding vowel; X denotes unclear words; two dots denote a pause shorter than 0.3 seconds; three dots denote longer pauses. Brief simultaneous speech has been removed here for clarity. Names of source texts from SBC are given in italics.)

- (48) FRAN: For one thing,
 I had **uh**,
 such a tiny apartment.
 ... **u=m**,
 ... when we ... went back to New York,
 .. **u=m**,
 .. I had ... <X kept X> a studio there.
 ... And .. of course,
 that was small and,
 ... and then,
 we found another studio,
 ... in **uh**,
 in .. our neighborhood, (*New Yorkers Anonymous*)

(49) and (50) offer a clue to what could be the origin of the written uses of EHM in sentence-medial position: word-search. In (49) Wess is looking for a word, and in (50) Roy is giving examples of animals threatened by extinction:

- (49) WESS: then you pour that fudge mixture out on a= **uh**= .. sheet, (*You Baked*)
 (50) ROY: You know,
 saving the whale,
 or saving **uh** ... the . polar bea=r, (*Conceptual Pesticides*)

Word-search is not a very frequent function of UHM in spoken language (Tottie forthcoming). However, it is a salient one, and it does offer a parallel and a possible source for the medial use in writing. This is also suggested for *well* as a discourse marker in written English by Rühlemann & Hilpert: ‘it seems possible to argue that the word-search function is the model after which the word-choice function is crafted. That is, *well* is used as if the writer were searching for the appropriate wording.’ *As if* is important here: in writing, the word-search is make-believe. The writer pretends to be searching for a word and pretends to hesitate before making an ironic, funny, somewhat derogatory or naughty choice. But note that in the context of writing, hesitate does not mean ‘pause because of uncertainty’. It has a strong connotation of reluctance or unwillingness, reluctance to be tactless, to hurt or insult someone.¹⁷ This use was not found in the c. 175,000 words of conversational speech from forty SBC texts examined by Tottie (2014, 2015b, forthcoming), but it is certainly possible to imagine such instances. Jucker (2015b: 66) provides a discussion and gives an example from fiction; genuine spoken examples can also be found on the web, as shown by (51)–(53):¹⁸

- (51) What was your boss like? Heather: Well she wasn’t er wasn’t very easy ..., she was a **bit er difficult very difficult** to get on with ...
 (The London Bubble Theatre, www.londonbubble.org.uk/page/stories/)
 (52) We were in the middle of this, **um, difficult** situation between Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador ... (US Institute of Peace interview)
 (53) Um we realise this is a very **um difficult** area and it’s one that we did inherit, the skills crisis from the Howard government, we’re focussed on that ...
 (Transcript of interview with Justine Elliot, Minister for Ageing, www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2009/s2586025.htm)

This type is dependent on situation or register. Clearly, when word choice is a delicate matter, UHM is a useful hedging device; notice the collocation with *difficult* in (51)–(53).

There are also similarities between the uses of sentence-initial EHM in writing and spoken English uses. A frequent use of turn-initial UHM in speech is in answers to questions – for instance, they account for 26/68, or over a third of turn-initial instances in the first quarter of SBC (see Tottie 2015a). A good example is (54), recorded in a college class where the instructor asks students how their parents were affected by the

¹⁷ Among a large number of dictionaries I have checked, only *Roget’s Thesaurus* includes the connotation of unwillingness or reluctance.

¹⁸ I thank Philip Shaw for providing the examples in (51)–(53).

Vietnam War. Notice the co-occurrence with *well* in a couple of cases – something that is also found in writing, as e.g. in (10) and (38) above. (Square brackets indicate simultaneous speech.)

- (54) MONTOYA: ... Which –
 .. Which way.
 .. [Which direction].
 GILBERT: [Um=],
 ... total apathy.
 MONTOYA: ... Total apa[thy].
 GILBERT: [Yeah].
 MONTOYA: .. Why.
 GILBERT: .. **Um**,
 .. **well** my mom.
 .. Total apathy.
-
- MONTOYA: ... How about your parents.
 CAROLYN: ... **U=m**,
 ... **well** my dad was drafted.
 MONTOYA: .. He was in Vietnam?
 CAROLYN: ... **U=m**,
 ... long story,
 he didn't make it to Vietnam but, (*American Democracy is Dying*)

This type of use is a probable source of sentence-initial EHM in writing. However, whereas speakers hesitate to produce answers to questions because they are uncertain of what to say or how to say it, writers merely pretend to hesitate, out of reluctance to say something tactless or hurtful. Again, it is the metalinguistic, jocular or critical attitude that fundamentally distinguishes the function of sentence-initial EHM in writing from that of UHM in typical speech, just as is the case with medial EHM.

10 UHM and EHM as words

The preceding data provide ample evidence that EHM – in any of its incarnations as *er*, *uh* or *um* – is a word in written language, and that its use has increased over recent decades in magazines and newspapers. But if EHM is a word in written language, how did it go from being a mere filler or filled pause in speech to being a full-fledged word in writing?

I would suggest that in speech, UHM is on a cline of lexicalization, with one end being represented by *anduh* and *butuh* and similar examples of monosyllabic words whose last consonant is lengthened with vocalizations, like *when uh*, *then uh*, *had uh*, etc.; speakers are probably not likely to perceive cliticized *uh* or *um* as an independent word. The other end of the cline is that where UHM occurs not only between words, but between (silent) pauses, thus fulfilling the phonological criterion for wordhood (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999: 51). The vocalizations *uh* and *um*, most likely in their lengthened forms, are then perceived as words in the mental lexicon, especially when they are used for word-search and in answers. UHM becomes a conscious word choice and

can be co-opted for use in writing. Lexicalization thus takes place in speech, and probably also pragmaticalization, i.e. the use for metalinguistic purposes, irony etc. As Dr Johnson says in the preface to his *Dictionary*, used as an epigraph to this work, ‘some words are budding’, and UHM is such a nascent word. The term *emergent word*, suggested by Grieve *et al.* (2016) – but not applied by them to UHM/EHM – also appears appropriate.

This would then be one of the rare cases of word-formation called coinage or root creation, i.e. lexicalization occurring without any kind of prior traditional word-formation process taking place (see Brinton & Traugott 2005:43).¹⁹ It would also qualify as a case of ‘motivated’ root creation (McArthur 1992: 876f.), similar to that of echoic words such as *splash*, *vroom*, *zap* etc.²⁰ Speakers become aware of the particular specialized uses of UHM in cases of word-search and in answers, and as writers, they use them for related purposes.

If UHM/EHM is thus a word, it should be possible to assign it to a word class, or rather, to separate word classes depending on the different functions it has in typical speech and in writing. The word-class assignment in speech was discussed above, and the classification as an interjection was criticized. The wider *insert* category proposed by Biber *et al.* (1999: 1082) is accommodating though somewhat diffuse. It is defined as ‘stand-alone words which are characterized in general by their inability to enter into syntactic relations with other structures’. It does include interjections as one of its subclasses, but there are two others: response forms and hesitators, the latter being where *uh* and *um* fit in. Interestingly, the authors acknowledge that ‘it may be questioned whether some inserts are words at all ... this applies to ... hesitators (such as *mm*, *uh*)’. The fuzziness of this class is thus especially suitable for nascent words like spoken UHM.

An appropriate categorization for EHM in writing must be based on different criteria. The function of expressing attitude is typically a frequent one of adverbs, and EHM is therefore best characterized as a stance adverb (see Biber *et al.* 1999: 557f.). Biber *et al.* further subdivide the stance adverbs into subcategories: epistemic, attitude and style adverbs. Attitude adverbs express a speaker’s or writer’s attitude towards a proposition, like e.g. *(un)fortunately*, and style adverbs ‘comment on the manner of speaking’ and are exemplified by *frankly*, *honestly*, etc. EHM shares characteristics of both of these classes. (55) is a particularly interesting example, as medial *uh* collocates here with the multi-word style adverbial *shall we say*; see the example from Quirk *et al.* (1985) with *so to say* in (56), where the single quotes suggest an ironical stance:

¹⁹Note that *um* is used as a verb meaning ‘to say *um*’, and then for derivation in *ummer*, meaning a ‘person who says *um*’ (Christenfeld 1995). *Wiktionary* lists *umming* as the present participle of the verb *um*. Derivation from interjectional bases are unusual, but note *wowed* from *wow*.

²⁰Like *vroom* and *zap*, the forms *er*, *uh* and *um* are used frequently in comic strips, which could have contributed to their acceptance as words.

- (55) They don't think twice about an outfit's, **uh ... shall we say**, improbability. (*Harpers Bazaar* 2008; orig ellipses)
 (56) They have not, **so to say**, 'combined' their efforts (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 618)

As pointed out by Quirk *et al.* (1985) adverbials 'lend themselves very conveniently to incorporating metalinguistic comment into a sentence whose purpose is not itself merely metalinguistic' – and style disjuncts – their preferred term for style adverbs – do this 'peculiarly well'.

Compare also (57), from Quirk *et al.* (1985: 616), with (4), repeated here for convenience, and (58), both with initial *um*. In this use, *um* functions as an attitude adverbial.

- (57) **If I may say so / With respect**, none of you are competent to make the legal judgment required. (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 616)
 (4) Senator Richard Shelby ... claimed that ... '[t]he market will view these firms as ... implicitly backed by the government.' **Um, senator**, the market already views those firms as having implicit government backing, because they do... (Paul Krugman, op-ed column, *New York Times* 2010)
 (58) is less respectful, but also an expression of a negative attitude:
 (58) Raid[er]s coach Tom Cable says he wants interim tag dropped from title. **Um**, Tom, everyone but Al's hairdresser is interim. (*Denver* 2008)

Summing up, I thus propose that EHM is a stance adverb, with the special function of style adverb/disjunct when it is used in medial position with a metalinguistic function.

11 Summary and conclusion

Based on the *TIME* corpus and the COCA, *uh*, *um* and *er* were shown to be increasingly frequent in written American English consisting of journalistic prose, with the first few tokens appearing in the mid 1960s and then a rising frequency culminating in the 1990s and early 2000s, and at higher rates in magazines than in newspapers. Their appearance in writing definitely qualifies them as words, whereas their status in spoken language is better described as a continuum with low-to-high degrees of wordhood.

The variants *er*, *uh* and *um* could be shown to be interchangeable in all the different pragmatic functions in writing, and it is therefore justified to regard them as variants of one lexeme, EHM for convenience. Placement was either sentence-initial or sentence-medial, 28 vs 72 percent, respectively, with some variation over time. In the sentence-initial slot, EHM preceded a clause in 80 percent of the tokens, and in medial position, EHM preceded mostly noun phrases (65 percent) and adjectives (14 percent).

The overall pragmatic function of EHM in writing is to express the writer's stance. With EHM in initial position, writers usually voice disagreement with or disapproval of the (implicit or explicit) preceding proposition, as in *Uh, that's hogwash* – initial EHM can be classified as an attitude adverb. Medial EHM can be classified as a style adverb and is most often used with a metalinguistic 'tongue-in-cheek' function,

conveying writers' attitude to an upcoming item in their own text, as in [*He showed his*] *dancing, um, skills*. Although all three variants *er*, *uh*, and *um* appeared in all pragmatic functions distinguished, and were in fact fairly equally distributed in most of them, *er* was dominant in (medial) instances of self-correction, as in *a scar, er, star was born*, but dispreferred in initial position.

Although EHM gives a colloquial flavor to the written message, there is more at stake than merely using a spoken expression for the same function as it has in typical speech. EHM serves very different functions in the two media. Spoken UHM is unintentionally used (along with pauses) for online planning of upcoming speech, as demonstrated by means of examples from the *Santa Barbara Corpus*, but written EHM is used intentionally by writers to highlight their attitude either to a preceding or following proposition or expression.

These differences have consequences for determining the status of UHM/EHM as a word. Considering what is now known about their use, it appears that UHM is a nascent or 'budding' word in speech, and that some uses (word-search and answering) are picked up by speakers for use in writing for related functions. Word-class categorization must be different for spoken and written uses – thus the somewhat fuzzy category of *inserts* appears to be the most suitable for spoken UHM, but for written EHM, the category of stance adverb is indicated, with the subcategories attitude adverb appropriate for initial uses and style adverb for medial uses.

More work needs to be done, on both written and spoken uses of *uh* and *um*, in American English as well as other varieties, from many different perspectives and in different disciplines. Researching quoted language in journalistic prose and fictional dialogue as well as comic strips would certainly give interesting insights into popular as well as scholarly views of their function. The puzzling use of the transliteration *er* in American English deserves historical work. But for now, this has to be, um, the last word.

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