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## **Pragmatics of fiction: Literary uses of "uh" and "um"**

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## Pragmatics of fiction: Literary uses of *uh* and *um*.

### Abstract

For some time now fictional language has been recognized as a legitimate source of data for pragmatic analyses as long as it is studied on its own terms and not as a less than perfect representation of other types of language use. The planners *uh* and *um* are particularly interesting elements because of their pervasive and nevertheless often inconspicuous nature in spoken language. In fictional language they are less frequent and more conspicuous. They may even serve as stylistic devices as is shown by a brief analysis of the use of *uh* and *um* in Douglas Adams' mock science fiction novel *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*.

Keywords: pragmatics of fiction, literary language, planners, hesitators

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Fictional language – and in particular the language of literature – may seem an unlikely candidate for pragmatic analyses. It usually comes in the form of written language and it is clearly less spontaneous than spoken interaction. It is often artificial, perhaps even contrived. It may have rhymes and a rhythmic structure, and as such it is far away from what may be seen as the ideal data for pragmatics. However, in recent years, fictional language has increasingly come to be seen as a legitimate object of pragmatic study. Fictional language – just as any other form of language – is produced with the intention to communicate with an audience and as such is susceptible to pragmatic analyses. Moreover, fictional language generally depicts characters that engage in communicative behaviour, and this embedded communicative behaviour, too, can be subjected to pragmatic analyses as long as there are no claims that the findings have validity beyond the data itself.

In this paper I argue very briefly that fictional language offers a large and very rich data source for pragmatic analyses provided it is analysed on its own terms and not as a less than perfect substitute for spontaneous spoken communication. I demonstrate this through a brief case study that focuses on an aspect that seems to be typical of spontaneous spoken language, i.e. the hesitators – or planners, as I shall call them – *uh* and *um* (*er* and *erm* in British English spelling).<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that in spontaneous

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks for valuable comments on a draft version of this paper go to xxxxxxxxxxxxxx. The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>2</sup> I shall use the American English spelling except when referring to specific tokens that appear in British English spelling in their original context.

conversation speakers are only partially aware of the *uhs* and *ums* that they and their conversational partners use (see section 3). They only become noticeable if their frequency reaches a certain level, at which point umming becomes stigmatized. In contrast to spontaneous conversation, fictional dialogue is carefully planned. It is, therefore, plausible to assume that authors use *uhs* and *ums* to achieve certain stylistic effects. I will illustrate this with a very brief case study of Douglas Adams' famous *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (first published in 1979) with its unique range of eccentric fantasy characters from around the galaxy.

## **2 Literature and communication**

Pragmatic approaches to literature are almost as old as the field of pragmatics itself. Early work discusses the status of literature within a theory of speech acts (e.g. van Dijk 1977; Pratt 1977). But for a long time pragmaticists shunned fictional language. This can be seen most clearly in the apologetic attitude of researchers who, for one reason or another, still used literature for their pragmatic analyses. Historical pragmaticists, for instance, justified their use of literary language with the excuse that "there is nothing else" (Brown and Gilman 1989: 170) or that outstanding authors like Shakespeare must have been particularly good at representing the spoken language of the day (Salmon 1965: 105). More recently approaches have become less apologetic. Sell (2000, 2014), for instance, views literature as a dialogue between writer and reader with the pragmaticist and literary critic in the role of mediator between the two, especially if they belong to different historical periods. Culpeper (1996), on the other hand, focuses on the communicative level of the characters within fictional language and analyzes the impoliteness of characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

On both levels there are obvious differences between fictional language and other forms of language. The author may have only a very vague idea of his or her audience. The audience may receive the communicated message long after its creation, perhaps even centuries later, long after the author's death. There is generally no way for the audience to reply, and there are generally very different expectations about the message's conformance with reality or "truth". On the embedded level of the depicted communication we are dealing with a representation of communication constructed by the author according to artistic considerations. Such considerations vary from one period to the next; they vary according to the literary genre and from one author to the next. But these differences do not disqualify fictional language from serving as data in pragmatics. On the contrary they call for a detailed analysis of fictional language in its own right.

## **3 The planners *uh* and *um***

In their study of Early Modern English dialogues, Culpeper and Kytö (2010: 199-200) introduce the term "pragmatic noise", which refers to a heterogeneous class of items that includes interjections, laughter and pause-fillers. These are elements that are generally not fully lexical and are morphologically simple. They lack propositional and referential meaning but they have pragmatic or discursal meanings. Culpeper and Kytö are interested in these elements because of their close connection to spontaneous spoken language, and, therefore, they set out to investigate them in their corpus of Early Modern

English dialogues. They argue that (emotive and cognitive) pragmatic noise elements have their origins in natural and non-verbal reflexes to certain cognitive states, such as surprise, contempt or pain. This is why they tend to be less arbitrary than other words and more sound symbolic. But at later stages they develop into conventional illocutionary signals and finally into conventional discoursal signals. The elements *uh* and *um* are included in their elements of pragmatic noise. They quote – among others – the following example, where they argue *um* functions like the present-day pause filler *erm* (Culpeper and Kytö 2010: 248).

- (1) *Looby.* In Company, may be?  
*Prim.* No.  
*Looby.* Um, um, that's strange indeed!  
(Drama/Miller, *The Mother-in-Law*, 1734: 67)

In an earlier paper (Author 2015), I analyzed the diachronic development of the elements *uh* and *um*. My data consisted of the 400-million-word *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), which spans two centuries of American English from the 1810s to the 2000s. In this corpus the planners *uh* and *um* are attested only sparingly and almost exclusively in fiction. They do not occur in the other three genres contained in COHA; popular magazines, newspapers and non-fiction books. Their most important functions are hesitation and planning, as for instance in extract (2), where we have indications both of the hesitation (three dots) and of the planning process (the replacement of *see* by *hear*) (Author 2015: 175).

- (2) We'll have to sort of keep it down a little bit so they can see, uh . . . hear what's going on. (COHA, 1975, FIC, Mov:Nashville)

In Present-day English these elements have received a lot of attention from psycholinguists, conversation analysts and others (e.g. Christenfeld 1995; Kjellmer 2003; Fox Tree 2007). I follow Tottie (2011) and use the term “planner” for these elements in order to avoid the negative associations of the alternatives, such as “pause-filler”, “hesitator” or “disfluency marker”. They have also been shown to fulfill such functions as “reason-for-the-interaction’s-launching” (Schegloff 2010: 130) or to “indicate the underlying structure of talk” in academic seminars (Rendle-Short 2004: 479). However, everyday perception and awareness of these elements deviate somewhat from how they are actually used in spoken interactions. Several researchers have investigated speakers’ attitudes towards *uh* and *um*. On the basis of questionnaire data, Fox Tree (2007) found that speakers generally are aware of the functions of *uh* and *um*. They are regularly described as indications of a speaker’s difficulty in speaking or his or her need to think about what to say next. Christenfeld (1995: 173) noted a difference between what he calls heavy or light “ummers” and he found that heavy ummers were rated negatively as “uncomfortable, inarticulate, uninteresting, illprepared, nervous, disfluent, unattractive, monotonous, unsophisticated, and lacking confidence”. It appears that people very often do not notice these elements, but if they do, they have a fairly clear idea of how they are used, and they rate them negatively.

There are numerous websites on the Internet which advise against using *uh* and *um*. In some cases, these elements are even seen as betraying a liar. Thorin Klosowski (2012) in a blog on spotting liars, for instance, claims that liars “often use filler words like ‘um’



100,000 words. This means that even a fraction of the spoken language frequency suffices to make these planners stand out in written fiction.

The elements *uh* and *um* have been analyzed as fulfilling a range of different functions (see e.g. Kjellmer 2003: 182-183). They are regularly described as hesitators, which tend to co-occur with several other elements that reinforce the impression of hesitation and planning, such as false starts and silent pauses. Such uses are common in the HHGG, as, for instance, in extract (3), in which Arthur Dent is talking to an old man. The use of three dots indicates a silent pause, and the switch from a negative answer to a positive answer indicates a false start. The planner may also indicate some discomfort or unease. Dent hesitates to admit feeling ill at ease and he immediately proceeds to provide an explanation for it.

- (3) “You seem ill at ease,” said the old man with polite concern.  
“Er, no ... well, yes. Actually you see, we weren’t really expecting to find anybody about in fact. I sort of gathered that you were all dead or something ...”  
(p. 57)

They are also used to indicate the uncertainty of a character as in extract (4), where the uncertainty concerns the number of years that Arthur Dent has known Ford Prefect.

- (4) “Alright,” said Ford, “I’ll try to explain. How long have we known each other?”  
“How long?” Arthur thought. “Er, about five years, maybe six,” he said. (p. 9)

Most characters that make any significant appearance in HHGG occasionally use planners. But there are two characters in particular for whom the use of planners seems to be a distinguishing feature. One is a Vogon guard with extremely limited mental capacities. He has been ordered to evict Arthur and Ford from the space ship, and he keeps shouting: “Resistance is useless”. His answers to Ford’s questions are full of planners as in (5) and (6). The many hesitations and the extremely drawn out spelling of the planner in (6) further reinforce the Vogon’s characterization as a completely mindless and foolish individual.

- (5) “Er ...” said the guard, “er ... er ... I dunno. I think I just sort of ... do it really. My aunt said that spaceship guard was a good career for a young Vogon – you know, the uniform, the low-slung stun ray holster, the mindless tedium ...” (p. 27)
- (6) “Eerrrrrrmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm ...” said the guard, “erm, well that doesn’t sound that great to me.” (p. 27)

The second is Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed and three-armed galactic president. He is depicted as both extremely shrewd and clever but at the same time also as unpredictable and reckless. Extracts (7) and (8) are taken from a conversation he leads with his great grandfather, who has returned from the dead.

- (7) “Er, yeah,” he muttered, “Er, look, I’m really sorry about the flowers, I meant to send them along, but you know, the shop was fresh out of wreaths and ...” (p. 90)
- (8) “Your great grandmother,” mused the gaunt little figure to himself.  
“Yeah,” said Zaphod, “Er, how is she? Tell you what, I’ll go and see her. But first we’ve just got to ...” (p. 90)

Zaphod Beeblebrox is clearly out of his depth when confronted with his long-deceased ancestor, who tells him off for leading the life that he lives. His confusion is conveyed by his use of conventional phrases of apologizing for having forgotten to take care of the flowers of mourning, and he insincerely asks about his great grandmother's health. The comic effect of the situation is heightened by the use of planners.

In addition, planners are used to characterize particular stretches of conversation. In extract (9) Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect have just been subjected to what is described as an extreme form of torture: a recital of Vogon poetry. But now they are trying to save their lives by impressing their captor, a Vogon poet, with laudatory interpretations of his poem.

- (9) “Oh ... and er ... interesting rhythmic devices too,” continued Arthur, “which seemed to counterpoint the ... er ... er ...” He floundered.  
Ford leaped to his rescue, hazarding “counterpoint the surrealism of the underlying metaphor of the ... er ...” He floundered too, but Arthur was ready again.  
“... humanity of the ...”  
“Vogonity,” Ford hissed at him. (p. 25)

The interpretation improvised by Arthur and Ford is clearly a wildly exaggerated parody of literary criticism. The planners and the hesitations emphasize the improvised nature of the empty phrases that they put together in order to escape what appears certain death.

## 5 Conclusion

In real-life spoken conversation, the planners *uh* and *um* are extremely frequent. Speakers use them – as the relevant research has shown – for a variety of functions, but mostly they go unnoticed. In literary fiction they are more salient. They seem to be used by authors for specific purposes; they can even serve as stylistic devices which are used to characterize characters and their communicative behavior. In the HHGG the pervasive use of *uh* and *um* heightens the impression of characters that stumble not only through an exceedingly bizarre galaxy but also through exceedingly bizarre conversations. It may be interesting to compare the use of *uh* and *um* in literary fiction to their use in other forms of fiction, as for instance film scripts or theatre plays. In fact, it might be particularly interesting to compare the text of the HHGG under analysis in this brief article to its original radio play version or its motion picture version.

This case study shows that a pragmatic analysis might possibly provide some additional layers of literary interpretation, but also – and perhaps more importantly – that fictional language provides a fertile data source for pragmaticists if it is not seen as a deviation from more basic forms of language but as a specific form of communication with its own characteristic features that warrant an analysis in and of itself.

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