
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pragmatic Functions of “uh” and “uhm” and the Reasons for their Use in English Spoken Discourse among Ilocano Speakers: A Conversation Analysis

FLORENS GENOVES-BAGAT¹✉ and DR. JUANITO P. TANDOC JR.²

¹Graduate Student, Doctor of Philosophy in English Language Studies, Department of Languages and Literature, College of Arts and Sciences and College of Advanced Studies, Isabela State University, Philippines; Senior High School Teacher, Department of Education, Schools Division of Santiago City, Patul National High School, Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines

²Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Isabela State University-Echague Campus, Isabela, Philippines

Corresponding Author: Florens G. Bagat **E-mail:** florensbagat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the pragmatic functions and reasons for Ilocano speakers' use of “uh” and “uhm” in spoken English discourse. Using a qualitative research method, specifically conversation analysis, 15 participants were purposively selected following the set inclusion criteria: (a) they must be native speakers of Ilocano; (b) have basic to intermediate English proficiency as assessed through Rosero's (2019) speaking rubric; (c) willing to participate in recorded interviews; (d) Grade 12 learners who are already using “uh” and “uhm”. The conducted interview was recorded (audio and video) from which transcribed verbatim was themed based on Junker (1993) and Ran's (2003) five main pragmatic functions of the discourse marker. Findings reveal that when “uh” and “uhm” are used as *delaying marker*, they function for *organizing thoughts and turn holding*; as *repairing marker*, for *correcting grammar, revising message and sustaining flow*; as *framing marker*, for *driving explanations and shifting topics*; as *initiating marker*, for a *response cue*; and as *mitigating marker*, they function for *giving opinions, releasing pressure, signaling attention and simplifying explanations*. Further, results show that Ilocano speakers use “uh” and “uhm” as *delaying marker* in order to *avoid dead airs, because of habitual usage, to manage anxiety and process ideas*; as *repairing marker*, to *ensure clarity*; as *framing marker*, to *organize flow*; as *initiating marker*, to *delay initiation, to initiate strategically, and reflect habitual and situational use*; as *mitigating marker*, they are used to *verify ideas*.

KEYWORDS

Pragmatics, Discourse Markers, Fillers, Functions

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1. Introduction

One of the most powerful tools available to humans is language, which allows people to communicate their ideas, feelings, intentions, and ambitions. It serves as the cornerstone of social contact and enables people to create bonds, exchange stories, and take part in communal activities. Language is essential to human identity and social behavior, connecting people to larger cultural and communication practices (Crystal, 2000). Therefore, language's significance goes beyond basic communication; it shapes identity, affects behavior, and facilitates the generational transfer of culture and information.

According to Pardeshi and Vyawahare (2025), pragmatics is essential to understanding both what is said and what is intended in this wider function of language. Pragmatics studies how listeners understand meaning, how speakers employ language in context, and how social and cultural norms influence communication (Yule, 1996). Indirect emotions, courteous approaches, gestures, and tone are all common in daily conversations. Effective communication in families, workplaces, classrooms, and digital settings is supported by pragmatics, which aids in interpreting these hidden layers of meaning.

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In order to implement effective communication, especially in verbal interaction, speakers often use a variety of signals. Additionally, second language (L2) speakers frequently adopt communication methods to make up for the insufficiency of their L2 resources (Zuñiga-Tonio, 2021).

There are numerous distinctions between prepared or read speech and spontaneous discourse. It has several disfluencies, such as repetitions, repairs, and fillers, due to its unplanned nature. The English words *uh* and *uhm* (as well as their variations) constitute one kind of filler. Various terms, such as hesitation, disfluency, error or filled pause, and discourse particle, have been used in the literature to reflect researchers' approaches to fillers as either signals in discourse (Clark and FoxTree 2002; Kjellmer, 2003; Shriberg, 2001) or symptoms (Corley and Stewart, 2008; Levelt, 1983), or emphasizing their resemblance to silent pauses (MacLay and Osgood, 1959; Rochester, 1973). They are more than just hesitations, according to more recent studies (Crible, Degand, and Gilquin, 2017; Knudsen, Creemers, and Meyer, 2020). FPs are semantically empty, syntactically unrestricted, and lexically underspecified (Belz, 2021).

For the previous 20 years, *uh* and *uhm* as spoken language elements have invited scholars to explore (Clark and Fox Tree 2002; Tottie 2011, 2014; Jucker 2015a, 2015b). They have been referred to as hesitators, fillers, filled pauses, or planners, depending on the researcher's point of view. They are frequently examined as indicating minor issues in the speech production process. Without doubt, they are evident in spoken language and researchers have explored on their specific roles in producing speech as well as their sociodemographic distribution, usage by non-native speakers, and distribution in other genres.

Filler particles, such as *um* and *uhm*, are commonly used in speech and are characteristic of impromptu, unplanned conversation (Crible, Degand, and Gilquin, 2017). They have been referred to as (dis)fluency indicators (Schmid and Fagersten, 2010; Gilquin, 2008). On the other hand, they contribute a connection between structured discourse and turn-holding (FoxTree, 2002; Fischer, 2000) and perform discourse-pragmatic roles beyond hesitations (Heine, Kaltenbock, Kuteva, and Long, 2021; Swerts, 1998). In authentic discourse, these disfluencies may make up as much as 10% of the words (Shriberg, 2001).

In light of Tarone's (1983) communicative competence theory, the use of *uh* and *uhm* cannot be treated directly as dysfluency because that is the speakers' adaptive and socially context dependent response to real time communication. Moreover, Sauvignon's theory (1976) supports that speakers' use of such is not a linguistic weakness but an evidence of their strategic competence in an authentic communication.

Previous studies have examined the use of filled pauses and other discourse features in spoken discourse; however, several gaps remain. Research by Tubben and Landert (2023) and Nama (2021) discussed the functions of planners and filled pauses in speech, while studies such as Aldawsari (2021) and Afriyanti and Andini (2020) mainly focused on sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and nervousness influencing the use of fillers. Similarly, research by Alkhelaiwi (2023) and Gadanidis (2025) largely centered on native English speakers and the frequency patterns of filled pauses. In the Philippine context, the study of Zuñiga-Tonio (2021) examined the discourse marker *well*, but limited studies have specifically investigated the pragmatic functions of filled pauses, for instance the occurrence of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" in speech. Moreover, existing research rarely focuses on the particular Philippine ethnolinguistic groups or explores the speakers' own reasons for using these fillers. Hence, this study examined the pragmatic functions and reasons for using "*uh*" and "*uhm*" in English spoken discourse among Ilocano speakers.

2. Literature Review

Philosophers and linguists including Morris, Searle, Austin, and Grice established the groundwork for contemporary pragmatic theory by focusing on inferred meaning and speech acts (Cutting, 2002). It investigates how speakers employ language in context to express emotions and social cues in addition to facts. The study of pragmatics examines how language users employ language to achieve a range of goals and outcomes as well as how they decipher and deduce meaning from contextual factors including tone, gesture, and social norms. Additionally, because it promotes communicative competence and an awareness of the nuances of language usage in many contexts, pragmatics is crucial to language learning and instruction.

Redeker (1991) expresses that DMs function to connect the utterance and discourse context, in particular, these assist in linking the segments of discourse. Clark and Fox Tree (2002) states that the English words "*uh*" and "*uhm*" having satisfied the criteria to be classified as words, possess phonology, prosody, syntax, semantics and use. Kam and Edwards (2008) contend that these are only markers of delay that contain the feature of repairing communication, but cannot form a sentence, nor qualified to be called words. Additionally, it is clear that they are actually filled with delay or pause marks. However, as most native English speakers employ these markers in their utterances, Fox Tree (2002) claims that their use is regarded as a habit of speakers. The fillers serve

as a filled pause in speech, according to Fraundorf and Watson (2011). According to Clark (1996, as referenced in Clark & Fox Tree, 2002), the three parts of the interruptions are a pause in fluent speech, a pause in speaking that may involve nothing, a period of quiet, a filler, or other collateral acts, and a return of fluent speaking. Without a doubt, the words "uh" and "um" are just pause indications.

Pragmatic Functions of Uh and Uhm and Reason of Use in Spoken Discourse

Nama (2021) conducted an interview to the Australian postgraduate students who are English native speakers to investigate the roles of uh and uhm in spontaneous speech. The conversation analysis showed that uh and uhm function in various purposes which include finding answers, looking for words, restructuring sentences, identifying the message, pausing when necessary and keeping the floor of conversation.

Focusing on native speakers, Ranti, Azizah, and Mufidah (2023) investigated the kinds and purposes of fillers in English as a foreign language presentations in addition to studies of native and podcast speech. Students' oral presentations were analyzed in this study using a qualitative method. Ten English majors from Universitas Negeri Malang in Indonesia participated in this study. The interview and audio recording were used to get the data. Participants' audio recordings were found during presentations, and the information was then transcribed. In order to gather more detailed information to address study topics, the participants were interviewed. The transcriptions were analyzed using both Stanstrom's (1994) and Rose's (1998) theory of the functions of filler. The findings reveal that the speakers practice uh, hmm, uhh as non-lexical filler, followed by lexical so, well, I mean. Additionally, the results show that in order to have time, to hesitate, to empathize, to mitigate and edit terms, they used filler.

While Alkhelaiwi (2023) examined FPs used in podcast of an American speaker and investigated the difference between genders among non-native English speakers. Results show that FPs exist with the utilization of these connectors: and, but, so, well, and you know. The native speaker's FPs were somewhat longer on average. The samples from the beginning of the podcast episodes contained more FPs than those from the middle and occasionally the conclusion. Regardless of whether they were native or non-native speakers, men speakers produced more FPs than female speakers.

Experimental Studies on the Pragmatic Use of Uh and Uhm

The usage of "uh" and "um" in spontaneous speech was studied by Kosmala and Morgenstern in 2018. They suggest that fillers don't always indicate speech disruption and difficulties. As a result, they carried out an experiment wherein participants were asked conversational questions regarding a movie. The results show that when questions are not difficult, speakers do not tend to use fillers. In addition, fillers are utilized for planning which coincides Tottie's (2011) conclusion that these are used for buying time and planning for discussion.

Similar to this, Staley and Jucker (2021) concentrated on a specific communicative scenario—service interactions in particular, socially stratified Los Angeles restaurants—but within a more socially structured communicative setting. One speaker role—that of the server—was used in the study. In a somewhat more controlled setting, theories on gender disparities and socioeconomic stratification were tested. The findings reveal that uh and uhm also function as face-mitigating and emphasizing points during communication.

Tübben and Landert (2023) extended the analysis to other discourse genres by examining the prevalence and purposes of uh and huh in three other genres: improvised theater, scripted dialogue in television shows, and spontaneous conversation. The results imply that the planners' roles are affected by a text's degree of composition as well as its fictional nature. This only demonstrates that pragmatic markers, particularly planners play a significant role in textual and interpersonal purposes.

Botthcher and Zellers (2024) examined discourse and filler particles whether they play a role in structure. Using the RUEG corpus, the findings showed many elements such that filler particles, discourse markers, tongue clicks, and connectors occur in informal narratives. However, filler particles become more evident in formal narrations.

From an interactional perspective, Hutin, Hu, and Degand (2024) examined if filled pauses in five conversations consisting of twelve asymmetrical sub-conversations co-exist with oh, um and mh. The results revealed that speakers do not tend to agree with interlocutors, despite the distinct pattern found in filled pauses. This only implies that these are more on the side of speakers instead of listeners. Thus, they do not converge, at least in form, like other common words in the lexicon.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design, and its methodological approach was Conversation Analysis. Conversation analysis (CA) is a method for studying language and social interaction, according to Rossi (2021). CA has a strict system built around two pillars. Using audio and video records of naturally occurring interaction is the first. Audio and video recordings continue to be the primary data that must be consulted frequently, even though transcripts and other types of annotation are typically used to complement the analysis. A dedication to closely examining social interaction in its sequential, forward-feeding development provides the second pillar of CA's methodology. A series of initiating and responding acts make up interaction. Therefore, it was thought to be crucial to use CA in this study in order to comprehend the speakers' motivations for employing *uh* and *uhm* as well as to methodically investigate their pragmatic roles.

3.2 Locale of the Study

One among the researchers is currently a teacher at Patul National High School, Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines, which serves as the study's location. The school was selected because it is easily accessible to the researchers, allowing for effective data collection, coordination, and participant communication. Additionally, the school caters to students who are mostly Ilocano speakers, which makes it a suitable place to study the pragmatic roles of *uh* and *uhm* in spoken English.

3.3 Respondents of the Study

The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method that is frequently used in qualitative research (Adeoye, 2023), especially when researchers want to look into particular participant characteristics and gain a thorough grasp of a phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). At least 15 participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) they must be native speakers of Ilocano; (b) have basic to intermediate English proficiency as assessed through Rosero's (2019) speaking rubric; (c) willing to participate in recorded interviews; (d) Grade 12 learners who are already using *uh* and *uhm*.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure

This study used recorded interviews as a means of data collecting. Audio recordings of the participants' discussions from Patul National High School comprised the primary data. The primary source for determining the pragmatic purposes of *uh* and *uhm* as well as the speakers' reasons for employing these filled pauses was these recordings. The researcher conducted and recorded the interviews after receiving informed consent. After that, the recorded material was verbatim transcribed into written documents. The transcripts were then closely scrutinized to find themes.

The five main pragmatic functions of the discourse marker in conversation (delaying, repairing, framing, initiating, and mitigating) identified by Junker (1993) and Ran (2003) were used to code and analyze the transcripts. For example, (1) as a Delaying Marker, in which the speaker is not always ready to respond to another utterance, is hesitant to tell the truth, or requires more time to organize his or her speech; (2) as a Repairing Marker, in which a speaker may make mistakes and thus needs to repair, correct, or edit his or her own utterance while speaking; however, the speaker cannot do so abruptly; (3) as a Framing Marker, which allows the speaker to switch from one topic to another for a variety of reasons. He or she may use some signals to suggest that the current topic will be changed, and these signals can aid in the integration of the two independent themes into a more coherent one, preventing a sudden topic changeover; (4) DM can be used as an Initiating Marker to show the speaker's acceptance or receipt of the addressee's speech and to emphasize the speaker's responsibility to speak; (5) as a Mitigating Marker to signal refusals, objections, and denials (Zuñiga-Tonio, 2021).

3.5 Data Analysis

Speech transcripts based on the audio recording made up the data, which were examined to find themes on the pragmatic uses of *uh* and *uhm* as well as the speakers' reasons. Following completion, the transcripts were categorized, themed, and analyzed using Junker (1993) and Ran (2003), which provided the analytical framework of the study.

4. Discussion

The results show that *uh* and *uhm* perform various pragmatic functions in English spoken discourse among Ilocano learners. As **delaying markers**, they function for *organizing thoughts and turn-holding*, as speakers depend on them to organize thoughts while demonstrating a control of the conversation. These are practiced as they silently plan to structure ideas before articulation, and holding the conversational floor is a shared opportunity to complete their message. This finding supports the study of Tuben and Landert (2022), which identified "*uh*" and "*uhm*" as planners that provide speakers time to organize upcoming utterances, as well as Kjellmer (2003), who explained that filled pauses function in turn-taking and turn-holding.

When they are used as **repairing markers**, they function as real-time editing devices, highlighting *correcting grammar, revising message and sustaining flow*. They provide signals where speakers detect the need to adjust in grammar, meaning-making or means of delivery. Further, these repairing markers provide the continuous natural flow of speech as they bridge ideas free from disruption, and refine them as friendly as possible. This aligns with Levelt’s (1989) speech production model cited in Clark and Tree (2002), which explained that speakers conceptualize, formulate, and articulate utterances in stages, as well as Kjellmer (2003), who described fillers as indicators of repair, and Tottie (2014), who emphasized their contribution to speech fluency.

As **framing markers**, “uh” and “uhm” facilitate the discourse structure through *driving explanations and shifting topics*, as they provide a mark for the speaker when to expand, explain or transition ideas for an organized and easier flow of conversation. These function as cues enhancing clarity and coherence in actual discourse. This finding is supported by Clark and Fox Tree (2002), who noted that fillers frequently introduce new topics, and by Kjellmer (2003) and Schegloff (2010), who explained that fillers function similarly to discourse markers at discourse boundaries.

As **initiating maker**, these uh and uhm are *response cues* for initiating conversations in most tensed or pressured moments. When answers are not readily prepared, they act as brief buffers as entry signals for the speaker’s intention to answer while giving them time to gather their thoughts before answering. This confirms Tonio’s (2021) finding that Filipino English speakers use discourse markers as initiation markers, while Kroll and Gollan (2014) emphasized that bilingual speech monitoring increases cognitive demands that may result in greater filler use.

Mitigating marker functions as a social and emotional strategy through *giving opinions, releasing pressure, signaling attention, and simplifying explanations*. These help speakers to soften opinions, manage social tension, and demonstrate attentiveness. Using “uh” and “uhm” allow speakers to demonstrate politeness, reduce pressure, adjust to unfamiliar or sensitive contexts, and simplify the delivery of ideas. These findings support Fischer et al. (2017), who associated filler use with politeness, Sadjail (2021), who linked fillers to nervousness and anxiety, Fox Tree (2001), who explained that fillers heighten listener attention, and Tottie (2014), who emphasized that fillers give listeners time to process messages effectively.

Further, the findings reveal that the reasons for *uh* and *uhm* in English spoken discourse vary according to their pragmatic functions. Avoiding *dead airs, habitual usage, managing anxiety and processing ideas* are the reasons in the use of uh and uhm as **delaying marker**. Speakers utilized them to avoid uncomfortable silence, demonstrating their sensitivity of how listeners may interpret pauses. However, its use is often ingrained in speech patterns due to practice and continuous exposure. Fillers are a natural reaction to anxiety or performance stress; therefore, anxiety also plays a big part. Most significantly, they have a useful function in the processing of ideas, enabling speakers to retrieve data, compose phrases, and keep their thoughts coherent. As supported by Sadjail (2021), fillers help avoid dead air and signal that the speaker is thinking rather than unprepared. Their use also becomes habitual due to repeated exposure and ingrained speech patterns, which aligns with Clark and Fox Tree (2002), who argue that fillers can be both automatic and strategically used, while Tottie (2019) emphasizes their role in speech planning. Anxiety is also a contributing factor, as filled pauses may reflect stress levels influenced by cognitive load and performance pressure (Vasilescu & Adda-Decker, 2006). Most significantly, they serve as cognitive tools for processing ideas by allowing speakers to retrieve information, construct sentences, and maintain coherence, consistent with Tottie’s (2011) notion of fillers as “planners,” and Kosmala and Morgenstern (2018), who explain that fillers provide time for structuring upcoming speech.

The speaker’s goal to *ensure clarity* is the primary reason for using “uh” and “uhm” in **repair**. Instead of making possibly inaccurate or ambiguous assertions right away, speakers take a moment to clarify their points. This shows a deliberate attempt to keep things understandable and prevent misunderstandings by prioritizing meaning ahead of speed. As Sadjail (2021) notes, speakers often use fillers when searching for the next word or idea, particularly when they are attentive to how they sound, indicating a focus on clarity and communicative accuracy.

Discourse management and social influence are the reasons behind the use of “uh” and “uhm” as **framing markers**. They are commonly employed by speakers to control the flow and structure of their speech, making sure that concepts are introduced and seamlessly connected. In addition, their use is influenced by *peer adaptation*, whereby people unintentionally incorporate filler patterns from those in close proximity within their conversational style. Additionally, “uh” and “uhm” aid in *flow organization* by enabling speakers to pause briefly while searching for the appropriate words and preserving coherence as they transition into explanations or new concepts. Clark and Tree (2002) explain that fillers help listeners anticipate upcoming speech, while Götz (2013) suggests that such markers contribute to more native-like fluency in second-language speech. In addition, fillers assist in organizing flow by giving speakers time to retrieve appropriate expressions and maintain coherence across topic transitions, consistent with Tottie’s (2014) view that fillers function as planning devices that structure discourse.

A complex and situational use of *uh* and *uhm* is revealed by the reasons for **initiating markers**: delayed initiation (used in following sentences); strategic initiation (used at the beginning for flow); and habitual and situational use. Even though many speakers avoid using them at the beginning, especially when they are prepared, they usually show up in later sentences when ideas become more difficult to maintain or uncertainty rises, indicating delayed initiation. These markers are purposefully employed at the start of discourse to facilitate responses and preserve a fluid flow. For others, the usage of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" is shaped by ingrained speaking habits or situational signals like anxiety. This aligns with Özsoy and Blum (2023), who found higher occurrence of fillers in utterance-initial positions, and Clark and Fox Tree (2002), who describe these as signals of macro-planning pauses. Some speakers also use fillers strategically at the start of speech to facilitate smoother initiation and maintain flow, which corresponds to Tottie's (2014) explanation that "*uhm*" signals the introduction of new discourse elements. Additionally, usage may be habitual or triggered by situational factors such as nervousness or formality, as supported by Özsoy and Blum (2023), who found higher frequency of fillers in more formal speech contexts.

The speaker's intention to verify ideas before expressing them is the main reason for using "*uh*" and "*uhm*" as **mitigating marker**. This illustrates a cautious approach to communication in which speakers take a moment to consider their ideas and make sure they are correct, appropriate, and socially acceptable. As Kroll and Gollan (2014), de Jong (2018), and Betz et al. (2023) explain, increased cognitive load in bilingual speech often leads to hesitation phenomena such as filled pauses, which serve as tools for monitoring and verifying speech before delivery.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that *uh* and *uhm* serve multiple pragmatic functions in English spoken discourse among Ilocano learners and are driven by varied communicative and cognitive reasons depending on their specific discourse roles. When *uh* and *uhm* are used as delaying marker, they function for *organizing thoughts and turn holding*; as repairing marker, they function for *correcting grammar, revising message and sustaining flow*; as framing marker, they function for *driving explanations and shifting topics*; as initiating marker, they function for a *response cue*; as mitigating marker, they function for *giving opinions, releasing pressure, signaling attention and simplifying explanations*. Further, *uh* and *uhm* are used as delaying marker to *avoid dead airs, because of habitual usage, to manage anxiety and process ideas*; as repairing marker, they are used to *ensure clarity*; as framing marker because they *adapt them from peers and to organize flow*; as initiating marker, they are used to *delay initiation, to initiate strategically, and reflect habitual and situational use*; as mitigating marker, they are used to *verify ideas*.

The following are the implications and recommendations of the study: (a) Integrate awareness and controlled use of fillers in speaking instruction. Teachers should explicitly teach the pragmatic functions of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" (e.g., organizing thoughts, sustaining flow, softening statements) so that learners understand that these are not merely errors but functional discourse tools. Guided speaking activities (e.g., role plays, interviews, impromptu speeches) can help students practice using fillers appropriately while also learning when to minimize overuse for clarity and fluency; (b) Incorporate fluency-building and anxiety-reduction strategies in oral communication tasks. Since the use of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" is linked to managing anxiety, avoiding dead air, and processing ideas, teachers should design low-pressure speaking environments. Techniques such as pre-speaking planning time, think-pair-share, and scaffolded responses can help learners organize thoughts more confidently, reducing excessive reliance on fillers while maintaining natural speech flow; and (c) It might also be better to look into the relationship between speaking anxiety and the use of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" among senior high school learners. It is also interesting to investigate the gender and ethnicity differences in the use of "*uh*" and "*uhm*" among non-native English speakers.

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