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I mean… Like, Uptalk, You Know?

Uptalk, high rising terminals, or high rising intonation is "the upward inflection that makes it seem like you're asking a question" (Eckert 395). "The standard view of English intonation is that declarative statements are pronounced with falling contours" (Shokeir 16). This means that the pitch of the sentence starts on a high note and then falls at the end. This is why the use of rising terminals indicates some other function to declarative sentences than merely, like, declaring something? Shokeir affirms that both female and male speakers use it, as well as older speakers as much as younger ones (16)[1]. However, as Eckert argues, though it is used across age and gender, it is still "folded into a female style and related to what is commonly thought of as trivial female activity" (394). High rising intonation is also usually paired with the use of *um*, *like*, *you know*, *I mean*, and other filler words that are also attributed to females, particularly adolescent females. These filler words are speech irregularities that have no grammatical content used in spoken conversation that are usually regarded as unnecessary and superfluous language that careless speakers use (Laserna 2). They are discourse markers, which means that they serve the purpose of breaking down discourse into segments. In this paper I will use Grice's conversational maxims and model of communication as a cooperative venture to analyze the violations of the maxims that high rising terminals and

[1] See also Eckert (394), Tomlinson (2) and Ritchart (9).

filler words commit. After evaluating the violations on both the side of the speaker and the hearer, I will consider how uptalk and filler words could also be speech acts with illocutionary force, and further than that, how they could be conversational implicatures with respect to the intonation instead of the content.

How does a high rising intonation and the use of filler words affect a conversation? Applying a rising contour over declaratives gives what Shokeir calls a "question contour" (17), and adding filler words only worsens its effect. The most common assumptions about high rising intonation and filler words are the following. For Laserna, the rising contour is a sign of disfluency (2), it means that the speaker does not want to fully commit to what they say and is hedging (3). For Tomlinson and Fox Tree it reflects how the speaker is unsure of the truth of the propositional content of the utterance (1). Shokeir affirms that they indicate uncertainty and deference (17). Lastly, Eckert gives an extensive list that includes the following: unwillingness to say things, that the speaker is "terribly unsure of him or herself" (394), that they don't know what they are talking about, hedging, unconcerned with lack of precision, unwillingness to take responsibility for their statements (394). The combination of both the filler words and the rising tone is fatal because it communicates uncertainty, lightness, and lack of depth. Gorman affirms that it sounds cool, ironic, uncommitted, as well as tentative, testing, oversensitive and unnecessary. Gorman gives some examples in which a high rising intonation and filler words would *not* be helpful, like in the case of police officers ("you're, like, under arrest? Let me read you, like, your rights?"), airplane pilots ("we're headed to Denver? At an altitude of, like, 30,000 feet?"), or even novel openings. Imagine *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Many years later, as

he, like, faced the firing squad? Colonel Aureliano Buendia, was to, like, remember, you know? That distant afternoon when, um, his father took him to, like, discover ice, or whatever?"

To consider high rising terminals as part of, or a violation of, Gricean maxims, one must maintain the cooperative principle which states that communication is inherently a cooperative venture (Grice 45). For Grice, conversations have a common purpose, or a "mutually accepted direction" (45) that may be definite or indefinite. Conversations are not made up of random, disconnected remarks, but rather they are made up of the cooperative effort of both speaker and hearer. For Grice, the exchange of information in observing the cooperative principle and the maxims is to be maximally efficient. As English speakers, the standard conception of declarative sentences is that they state something, and this is usually done through a falling intonation at the end of the sentence. The rising intonation at the end of a declarative sentence makes it sound like a question, which, as opposed to declaring something, is a request for information. A response from a hearer to a question differs from the response to a declarative sentence, so what happens when declarative sentences are asked with an interrogative tone? If anything, it hinders communication more than it helps it, because declarative sentences are not a request that need a reply. It could be argued that it is even counterproductive if we hold the maxims as Grice does in a "quasi-contractual manner" (48). From the side of the speaker, it is a violation of the cooperation principle in general because it interferes with making oneself understood. In particular, it is a violation of the quality maxim and the honesty clause because high rising intonations indicate that the speaker is not sure of what she is saying, and if she isn't sure, she could be saying something false. It would also be a violation of the manner maxim which relates to how what is said is to be said. The speaker would be violating the supermaxim

of "[being] perspicuous" (Grice 46), because the idea the speaker is trying to get across is no longer clearly expressed nor easily understood. The speaker gets in her own way of making communication maximally efficient. From the side of the hearer, the hearer is potentially violating the principle of charity in the form of pedantry. The hearer may interpret the speaker's declaration as a question instead, so the hearer may proceed to respond to what they think is a question. Uptalk and filler words are completely unnecessary and hinder all communication, they only get in the speaker's way of making herself understood. According to the Gricean maxims, we should abandon both of them entirely. I mean, being uncertain never helped, like, anybody?

Grice does not explicitly state whether the failure to fulfill the maxim must be intentional or not. The idea of "if you don't know how and when to break the rules properly, you really don't know the rules" does fit with the maxims really well, but does it really fit the idea of a high rising terminal and filler words? The violation of the question contour is not always intended by the speaker. Grice admits that there are too many types of conversation, like quarreling and letter writing in which the maxims fail to fit comfortably (48). The maxims remain a model of communication we should adhere to if possible, but they are not an imperative. There are more factors to this model of communication. Maybe Grice's type of reciprocal cooperation is not operating when high rising intonations and filler words enter a conversation.

As we start to consider speaker intention or speaker meaning, declarative sentences with filler words and high rising intonation become more like speech acts that violations of Gricean maxims. Austin introduced the concept of *illocutionary force* that added the dimension

of how an utterance is used (*Words* 98). Asking a question, giving information, pronouncing a prison sentence, and announcing what's for lunch all have different *forces* and a certain way they ought to be taken (Austin *Words* 99). Searle describes Austin's illocutionary force with the example that the same utterance can have different illocutionary forces ("Austin" 406). For example, "I'm going to do it" could be a promise, a prediction, or a threat based on intonation. Both Searle and Austin are referring to the same act, the difference is that for Searle they are speech acts and for Austin they are illocutionary acts. Searle attaches a great importance to meaning in a speech act in the two following ways: the utterance the speaker utters *has meaning* and the speaker is said to *mean* something with the utterance ("Speech" 6). Searle brings in Grice's "Meaning" to help clarify this distinction. "To say that A meant something by x is to say that 'A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention'" (Searle "Speech" 7). For example, when I make an assertion, what I want to communicate to the hearer is my attempt to convince her of the truth of a certain proposition. (Um, all of this will be, like, relevant, I *promise*?)

What if what is produced in the hearer with the utterance was not the desired effect of the speaker in a declaration, but the hearer recognizes the intention of the speaker as a question? Let's take Searle's example of "I'm going to do it" and apply to it a high rising intonation as well as filler words. It would result in something like "Um, I'm going to, like, do it?" Taking out the filler words, which according to Laserna, contain no grammatical information (2), the content of both declarative sentences is the same. Yet what varies is the illocutionary force of it, because the force is not a feature (or a bug) of the content of the utterance, but how what is said is meant. The notion of illocutionary force is pitted against high rising terminals and

uptalk because it affirms that they both undermine the strength and force a declaration should have. This is where Searle's distinction of meaning aided by Grice plays a part. The speaker may have *meant* to declare that she was going to do something, but the *meaning the utterance has* is more like a question than a declaration. A sentence that is a declaration in content is taking the illocutionary force of a question, creating both a tension and a mismatch in how what is said is to be taken. As we have seen above, this tension is of a negative kind because we are not supposed to declare something as a question. Taylor Mali fervently defends this position in his slam poem "Totally Like Whatever, You Know?": "What has happened to our conviction? / Where are the limbs out on which we once walked? / Have they been, like, chopped down / with the rest of the rain forest? / Or do we have, like, nothing to say?" He ends the poem with a declaration, or even an imperative, of "I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you, / I challenge you: To speak with conviction. / To say what you believe in a manner that bespeaks / the determination with which you believe it." However, an important factor in the interpretation and meaning of a speaker's utterance is the listener's gender. Male hearers are more likely to interpret falling contours as an indicator of certainty and rising contours as indicators of uncertainty and continuation, unlike women (Shokeir 15). It is not surprising that Taylor Mali stands so strongly against rising intonations because he is likely to interpret them as markers of uncertainty and lack of conviction from the speaker. Since these contours have so readily been folded into the female style, women are not as likely to read lack of precision, hedging, and inarticulateness into them, like Melissa Lozada-Oliva's response to Taylor Mali's poem[2].

[2] "And it's like maybe I'm always speaking in questions because I'm so used to being cut off. / Like maybe, this is a defense mechanism. Maybe everything girls do is evolution of defense mechanism. / Like this is protection, like our 'likes' are our knee pads. / Our 'ums' are the knives we tuck into our boots at night. / Our 'you knows' are best friends we call on when walking down a dark alley."

Even in this light of speech acts, illocutionary force, and meaning, the interrogative tone combined with filler words is something we should, like, abandon? But instead of, like, completely discarding all of the philosophy of language theories by Searle, Austin, and Grice, who are all white men, you know? They could be reconciled with uptalk and filler words under a new light? Instead of, um, reading a traditional male interpretation into rising contours and filler words, we could, like, change it up a bit? Tomlinson and Fox Tree affirm that "the interpretation of uptalk does not equal the sum of its parts" (10) and draws a similarity between reconstructing the meaning of a metaphor based on its parts and reconstructing the meaning of an intonational contour based on pitch accent: it is complex and can be misleading because there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence between form and function[3]. Similarly, Shokeir affirms that rising intonation can indicate more complex information that just distinguishing declarative statements from questions (16). For example, Laserna offers a different interpretation of the filler words as follows. When a speaker uses "I mean," they intend to modify what they said and "you know" is to ask the listener to make inferences about the conversation and confirm understanding (3). Uptalk can be used to verify the listener's active participation and probing and testing what they know. Pauses, instead of associated with hesitation, are associated with complex thoughts (Laserna 2), so maybe, like, what we're doing with our words and intonation, is breaking down our complex thoughts for you, you know?

To add another dimension to the different interpretation of uptalk and filler words, Gricean conversational implicatures can be used to reflect why this change is happening and

[3] Tomlinson and Fox Tree consider how the timing of an utterance as well as presuppositions and inference play a role in how uptalk is interpreted.

what it means. For an utterance *p* that has uptalk and filler words to be considered as a conversational implicature that implies *q*, it would have to meet the three following conditions (Grice 49):

1. That both the speaker and the hearer are observing the conversational maxims, or at least the cooperative principle,
2. That the speaker thinks that *q* is required to make her point,
3. That the speaker thinks that it is within the hearer's competence to work out and grasp intuitively that the supposition in 2 is required.

If I was using the traditional interpretation of uptalk and filler words as a listener of *p*, the implicature *q* that I would read into it is "because of my tone, I'm not sure of what I'm saying." Yet this implicature is not related to the content, as Grice intended to, but the illocutionary force of the utterance. This interpretation of an intonational implicature does not stay true to Grice's original conception of implicature, but it does serve a purpose to reveal what else is being said with the tone. For conversational implicatures to work, according to 1, the maxims, or at least the cooperative principle, must be observed. What a high rising terminal and filler words, like, reveal is that a conversation is no longer, like, a cooperative venture? Ending declarative sentences like questions shows how communication is no longer cooperative, and the intonational implicature within is asking for that cooperation to be reestablished. The implicature would say something like "please try to understand what I'm saying, let's cooperate" to start leveling the playing field between speaker and hearer. It is not only a way to test what the hearer knows and that the hearer is actually participating, but a request to meet in the middle. Say I want to talk about Spinoza? Like one substance, attributes, and modes? This

is my way of verifying if you know something, and also asking you to meet me halfway in trying to understand and cooperate in the conversation. This also reflects that the "burden" of uptalk and filler words is not only attributed to the speaker, but also to the hearer as well. The listener reads insecurity, hedging, and all other negative interpretations to the intonation and filler words because they are not trained to read these other implicatures to it. According to 3, it is not in the hearer's competence yet to distinguish these implicatures.

The ubiquity of the risings and filler words counters the generalization and convention that the rising contours indicate interrogatives, uncertainty, or continuation (Shokeir 15). Since everyone is, like, using them now? They may indicate a linguistic shift that shows the need to advance, like, older theories of language. The way we're, like, speaking now, you know, questions the conventional assumption that, like, declarations should have, like, a falling contour? Holding high rising terminals and filler words against theories that could not have predicted this linguistic shift is enlightening in some ways and counterproductive in others. Searle's speech acts, Austin's illocutionary force, and Grice's maxims and implicatures all have useful ways of conceptualizing where these phenomena fit within our language, but they fall short in other respects. Declarations and questions can no longer be told apart by their intonation only, and both the intonation, "ums," "likes," and "you knows" can have other functions besides the ones that are commonly attributed to them. This paper explored a few options to the traditional conceptions of uptalk and filler words and how they are not something that should be eliminated, but embraced. In a way, they are similar to Rorty's metaphor of unfamiliar noises in that our current theories are not apt to read the information that these unfamiliar noises are conveying. Maybe instead of *understanding* these intonations

and filler words through our existing theories, we need to find new ways to *cope with* or *make use* of them, and according to Rorty we do so by revising our theories to fit around these new phenomena. And, like, what's wrong with, like, expressing ourselves?

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