

Um...let's think

Business



You hear them every day. Everyone says them, even you. Students are downgraded for it; actors show hosts, and non-live performers have them edited out; live performers get bad reviews for it; politicians are called out on it; and public speakers criticize them. They are verbal pauses, speech errors, that infamous “ um” s, “ like” s, and “ you know” s. You are always taught not to use verbal fillers, but why? What is this inherent evil possessed by the verbal crutch? What’s wrong with an “ um” or an “ and then” every now and again? The obvious answer is that they’re unprofessional.

But, once again why? What even defines “ unprofessional”? Isn’t it, like all other words, defined by the man who uses it? It seems to me that there is no truly valid reason to hate these non-words and cliché phrases, other than that people have utilized them to death. If a closer look is taken, you may find that verbal pauses aren’t all bad. Granted they are not entirely good, but they still often get more grief than they deserve. Verbal fillers often result when a speaker is nervous or unacquainted with the subject about which they are speaking. Someone who is speaking impromptu or making things up as they go, as in normal conversation, tends to pause more than one who is reciting a memorized piece or giving a prepared speech. However, when the piece is not well memorized then there can sometimes be more pauses than with the impromptu speaker.

This suggests that verbal pauses result from a humans need to process through information, our need to think. In one case, a person may be thinking too fast for their mouth, they insert an “ um” in their sentence in an attempt to allow themselves, and others, to catch up. In the other case, one is talking too fast for of their mind, and they must pause in order to think,

they also must breath and verbal fillers forces them to slow down, take a breath, and think. The development of verbal pause is rather obscure; particularly the phrases used to fill pauses as opposed to the non-words. Some phrases such as “ like,” and “ you know,” or “ I mean” likely came into popular use as a result of their frequent use aside from being pauses.

For example, the word “ and” is used as a coordinating conjunction, and thus it is difficult to have a conversation (or at least an engaging one) without using the word and many times. Since it is so commonly used in our speech, when we find ourselves struggling to finish a statement we insert an “ and”, also because and is used to combine two clauses it would make sense to put in an empty point of a conversation, since it used to bridge gaps in clauses. Now, having been initiated as a pause “ and” will become contagious, and start spreading to more and more people, who as a result do likewise. Eventually, the word becomes commonplace as a verbal pause. This holds true for other languages as well.

In Japanese the verbal pause “ ano” means there, (literally “ that over there”), and is commonly used to identify objects and clarify nouns. Since this is an often-used phrase it would make since that, it has been adopted as their verbal pause These fillers also are used to show that we are processing the information we have just received. In his book *Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean?* Michael Erard explains how a group of researchers who developed a robot that was capable of receiving voice commands, found trouble in that it took several seconds for you to realize that your command had gotten through, and as we so often do if things are talking a while, you would ask again, effectively making take longer for the <https://assignbuster.com/umlets-think/>

robot to process. Then someone suggested that they program “Flakey” to say “um” when it had received a command to prevent this stall. The use of a verbal pause shows that you as a human are processing information, whether you are rifling through your knowledge, ciphering through new information, or simply searching for something to say. In such situations an “um” seems to take the place of a much more scholarly “hmmm,” as opposed to an improper use of a non-word.

These audible pauses are in fact much more than meaningless fillers. Erard writes that “verbal blunders are rich with meaning” but we seem to have given “um” a bad rep. To begin with, and probably most important is that verbal pauses are symbolic of the very thing that makes us human, and possibly a direct symbol of our humanity. Even with today’s technology, computers cannot use verbal pauses, even though it may be programmed, it still does not carry the natural randomness that it does with a human. A computer simply can’t produce an entirely random action, and they can’t make processing mistakes.

Granted they screw up, and can give bad calculations and bad predictions, however they did everything right, it is simply impossible to take everything in this diverse world into account, and so we perceive an error. Simply put C3PO will not be saying “uhh” any time soon. Nor are animals capable of producing these errors that “plague” humanity. We are the only ones with diverse language. Now, before I have PETA on my back, I am not saying that animals don’t use sophisticated language, but animals do not have near as advanced concepts of phonics and grammar. Nor do wolves, last time I checked, speak 311 different languages in the region of the U.

<https://assignbuster.com/umlets-think/>

S. alone. We as humans have a deep and intricate way of communicating, and while some animals show similar ailments, they aren't quite the same as a verbal pause. The fact that we insert these fillers as a result of thought shows that we are indeed above the rest. Computers are still unable to think by themselves, they must be programmed at some point. And where animals do show some innate intelligence, there is nothing in the animal kingdom that even comes close to human thought.

We have the ability to rationalize, to reason, and to process. As thinkers we can overcome problems, and solve challenges. To date we still have relatively little knowledge about how the brain works. There are new wonders found every day, and the fact that things even cause us to wonder sets us apart from the rest. It has been said that the best way to figure out how something works is to watch how it breaks down. If we discover what went wrong with something then we have a better understanding about how it worked in the first place.

The same is true of speech. Linguists are using verbal pauses to understand how we formulate speech. How do we formulate thought into words? How do we construct our sentences? They have determined that there is in fact a set of "rules" that we follow in making our speech. It seems that we begin speech not with whole words, but with individual sounds and syllables. Advances in this study can be used to help develop new ways to aid those with speech impediments, and those who have trouble talking at all.

Now there are in fact times when it is best to avoid "um." While giving a prepared speech it is best to keep them to a minimum. This is not because it

conveys a sense of unprofessionalism, (firstly because who decides what professional is), but because it shows a sense of unpreparedness, or at least the lack of expertise with what you are speaking. A topic with which you are well acquainted shouldn't trouble you for thought and so if you are inserting a lot of verbal pauses you seem to not fully understand what you are talking about. Also, it may give someone the feeling that you are being impersonal, or even the exact opposite. The perception might be given that you are not taking a conversation seriously if you use numerous pauses and are seen to have a lack of proper decorum (although I think that is a ridiculous perception).

It also may be seen that you are over friendly, that you are being too familiar with a person that you should be on more colleague terms with. One should not go around profusely utilizing these verbal crutches. In that event it becomes redundant and beyond the point of natural. At that point a person is simply refusing to think, a person should know what they intend to say (even if they haven't selected the words with which to say it) before they begin speaking. That sort of thinking on the go, especially aloud is unnecessary and obnoxious.

However, some verbal fillers are to be expected. These are natural, and quite impossible to entirely eliminate. It is widely accepted among linguists that that these pauses and other verbal errors are natural and not intruding on speech. Verbal pauses account for about 40% of all errors. In a test sample of business conversations over the phone it was found that " uh" alone took up 4% of the speaking.

These pauses are present in all languages: in Japanese, it is “ ano”; in Chinese, “ nage”; “ ah,” in German; and “ oh,” in Swedish. “ Uh” is seen as the only universal pause. In Vedic, the most ancient Hindu beliefs, it was considered that the sound “ om” was the primordial sound of the universe. The likeness this sound has to “ um” is remarkable, but the later may better be described as the worlds failure to think. In sign language, pauses are symbolized by the breaking of eye contact or by wiggling ones fingers. Even in imaginary languages, verbal pauses can be found.

These slips are ever present and for people to be offended by the occasional use of one, or for the use them to be seen unprofessional, appalls me. The use of these disfluencies changes overtime. As children, we begin with a large number of pauses. As we grow older, we become more fluent and the pauses reduce. The peak is hit once a child becomes a senior of high school. From that point, it is all downhill, senior citizens, in studies, have been found to pauses as much as young children.

So if high-school students are the most fluent, then why are they given the most grief about pauses, save politicians? Errors that involve rearranging different sounds or words might suggest that our speech greatly relies on our ability to plan our sentences out before hand. Everyone recognizes such pauses. They often make us laugh and trip us up the most, and it is surprising that these are among the least common of speech errors. Though it seems that this happens all the time, (and in fact they do, just less often than other errors), this is probably because they stick in our mind and are more memorable than other errors. The perceived severity of an error is influenced by the length of the error, how badly it affects the meaning and <https://assignbuster.com/umlets-think/>

flow of the sentence, and, perhaps the biggest factor, how the speaker reacts to an error. This may even amplify the other factors, depending on how well it is handled.

Sometimes when we make an error, we don't notice it, maybe to have it pointed out later by someone else, or never to be noticed at all. Possibly one of the worst ways to react is to start restarting a word, then a portion of a sentence, and then to go on to restart the whole thing, as this makes the error rather noticeable. In a regular conversation, laughing off an amusing error can be an effective enough way to recover (though it may get the whole discussion off track), however it would be best not to make a habit of it, as laughing at a pause in a serious presentation does show unprofessionalism and takes time. If it does not prevent the point from getting across during a presentation, it is often best to simply ignore and not bring attention to an error, however try to avoid too many errors. If an error is detrimental to the meaning simply say, "I'm sorry," or "excuse me," start from the beginning of a sentence, and move on. This draws little attention to the error, does not take much time, and fixes the mistake quickly.

If you simply can't get past a phrase, and decorum is not an issue, then it is generally acceptable to make a series of intentionally unintelligible sounds and start over, (this is the technique I utilize most). The absolute worst thing you can do is say, "uh, uh, uh, oops!" The verbal pause is not a horrid speech criminal, nor an unprofessional utterance, but truly a natural part of our speech, and yes a part of our humanity. The idea that verbal pauses should be reduced is not entirely erroneous, for there are some who over use them, however they do not deserve to be eradicated, nor can they be.

<https://assignbuster.com/umlets-think/>

Teachers should cease with the downgrading because of one “ like,” and critics should stop criticizing every single “ uh.” These little non-words have their place in the art of speech, and, though they may not have as much effect as a non-verbal pause, a verbal pause does aid in speaking.

They allow one’s audience and one’s own mind to catch up. They force us to breathe, to slow down, and to think. Speech errors such as this for so long have been seen as a psychological ailment, a bad habit, but they are neither. These slips are very much a part of our physical condition, and are so ingrained in our psyche that they are not habits but characteristics of ourselves. Much can be learned about a person from how they pause. What pause do they use? Is it a typical one? What other errors do they frequently perform? How do they recover? When do their pauses occur? What sounds do they struggle with most? Do I do that as well? Those are some good questions to ask and the answers may surprise you.

I have a teacher whose pause is “ and everything,” and I can honestly say that I have never heard that one before. If you pay more careful attention to how people speak, you may discover things that fascinate you and are unrelated to speech errors. I know that when I first noticed my teacher’s pause I began to notice everyone else’s as well as my own. I will never forget that period of life, it open my eyes to the complexity of speech, grammar, and sentence structure.