

Sociolinguistic Variation of *okay, right, like, and you know* in English Academic Discourse

Erik Schleeef

University of Michigan

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Author's name: Erik Schleeef, University of Michigan
Telephone: (0041) 21 601 51 57
e-mail: eschleeef@umich.edu

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This presentation will explore the role of *okay, right, like, and you know* as hearer guiding structures in academic lectures and seminars. Guiding a hearer through academic discourse is of extreme importance since it makes the understanding of discourse more transparent. There are several discourse markers that can serve this task, however they are all to a larger or lesser degree markers that are socially evaluated and negatively sanctioned – in particular in contexts where there is large pressure to speak “good English.” This is a contradiction university students have to deal with and university lecturers have had to find their own solution for. In this paper, I will show that in the context of the lecture different disciplines seem to have found different solutions to this problem, since hearer guiding structures vary by discipline in this context. However, this discipline specificity must be acquired by undergraduate students whose hearer guiding structures do not vary by discipline yet but by gender.

The data for this project will be drawn from the MICASE corpus compiled at the University of Michigan. This corpus consists of recordings and transcriptions in a large number of academic contexts, of which this project will investigate 6 hours of lectures and 6 hours of seminars. However, the analysis presented here will not employ corpus methodologies, but consist of a qualitative conversation analytic methodology coupled with a sociolinguistic quantitative analysis of the data. In my analysis of *okay* and *right*, I will restrict my self to two variants: *okay* and *right* as transitional devices (“...don’t be worried it almost never falls. i’ve been told that. okay hormonal

signals, how does a hormone work?” LEL175SU098), and *okay* and *right* as pseudo-turn offers (“this is probably the most important one in distinguishing liver atrophy and muscle atrophy. okay?” LEL175SU098). In my analysis of *like* and *you know*, I will argue that *you know* can fulfill essentially the same function as what has been traditionally called the “focuser” *like*. Among other things evidence for their similarity is that they can sometimes occur together: “well, she seems to, it gives her power to be a, to you know like a preacher who, like a televangelist who’s trying to get money” (SEM300MU100), and can virtually be replaced by each other without changing the meaning of the sentence: “it’s kinda kinda like Serna – Serena Joy that was, the stay-at-ho like the advocate of, you know staying at home and being a mother...” (SEM300MU100). In this investigation, I will restrict myself to this focuser function of *like* and *you know*.

Concerning the sociolinguistic distribution of *okay*, *right*, *like*, and *you know*, preliminary analysis shows that the choice of structures in the lecture context is sensitive to discipline but not gender. Whereas lecturers in natural sciences and engineering use transitional markers (such as *okay*), question markers (such as *okay?*) and direct questions more often to structure their discourse; lecturers in the Humanities use a more “colloquial” style much closer to how their students speak, i.e. they use the discourse markers *like* and *you know* relatively frequently and prefer rhetorical questions to structure their discourse.

This is also true for the seminar context. However, here the students’ use of hearer guiding structures shows a differing use between undergraduate and graduate students of the markers *like* and *you know*. Whereas *like* is clearly a marker used by female undergraduates, it is almost entirely absent among female graduate students. Concerning *you know*, female and male undergraduates use it in about the same amount. However male graduate students use it considerably more often than female graduates. This is particularly interesting since *you know* – as opposed to *like* - is also used relatively frequently by humanities lecturers. Whereas male graduate students pick up this feature and use it in their academic speech, female graduate students cleanse their academic speech of all such focusing devices, which is in line with a large amount of sociolinguistic research that has found female middle class women to be the most likely to conform to a perceived standard variety. What is interesting in this respect is that differing behavior between men and women can be observed even in the academic context which one would assume puts an equally strong pressure on male and female students to use “good English”. Thus I will conclude that among lecturers only traditions in a particular discipline influence their speech behavior, however that among students differences in education level and gender could be detected.

These findings do not only contribute to theoretical sociolinguistic research but also to a better understanding of the role and meaning of discourse markers in academic discourse.
