# PHILOLOGIA

## Vol. X

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**Title: Exploring Turn-Taking and Discourse Markers through Generations**

**ABSTRACT**

While studies have explored organized turn-taking conventions (Schlegoff et. al 1974) and conversational analysis among friends (Tannen, 1984), less work has investigated how small units of discourse differ across generations (though see Schiffrin 1987 and Naya 2006). In this study, I audio-recorded conversations between female friends of two generations - Baby Boomers and  Millennials – and compared the frequency and form of minimal feedback (i.e., "mm hm", "yeah") between the two groups. The results suggest that both the overall frequency of minimal feedback has changed over time, as well as the discourse markers used in giving minimal feedback.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes turn-taking between friends and focuses on minimal feedback, the frequency of minimal feedback, and if minimal feedback has changed over time. During a conversation, one person typically speaks at a time. The person holding the floor and talking is identified as the Speaker. The other person who is listening to the speaker in the conversation is identified as the Listener. The roles identified within a conversation, the Speaker and the Listener, are not fixed; they are constantly switching between the people who are holding the conversation. If the roles switch between the people who are holding the conversation, then this is identified as a 'turn' (Schegloff et. al. 1974).

However, sometimes the Listener will speak even when it is not their turn, such as when trying to take the floor through an interruption or to indicate that they are listening. The latter contribution is called minimal feedback which consists of small units or words or phrases that indicate to the Speaker that the Listener is listening to the conversation. Units of minimal feedback are considered a featured class noted as 'discourse markers' (Schiffrin 1987): 'little words' like oh and well, and phrases like y'know and I mean. Arguably, these features are seen as 'inarticulate' and 'sloppy' in speech and described as 'meaningless' and 'fillers' (devices speakers use to 'fill out' their remarks then have nothing of substance to say). However, Schiffrin argues that the smallest details of talk are functional and potentially meaningful: if something is 'there' in people's talk, then it must be there for some purpose. While linguistics as a field views language as unstable and ever-changing. (Abbou and Baider, 2006 ), little work has investigated changes over time in discourse styles and minimal feedback (though see Schiffrin 1987 and Naya 2006).

In this paper, I attempt to fill that gap by investigating discourse markers and minimal feedback exhibited in speech patterns from the Boomer and Millennial generations. By comparing speakers of different ages to investigate changes over time, this study rests on the assumptions of the Apparent-Time Hypothesis which assumes that most features of language acquired by a person will remain relatively unchanged throughout an individual's lifetime, especially once that individual has reached a certain age. Therefore, by comparing the speech today of two generations: Boomers (born 1946 - 1964) and Millennials (born 1982 - 2004), we assume that any differences we observe reflect differences between the speech of, for example, 20 year olds in 2018 and 20 year olds in 1978.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The participants (all native speakers of U.S. English, and female) were interviewed in pairs (the participant and the friend). Four pairs of eight women were from the Baby Boomer generation, and four pairs of eight women were from the Millennial generation. I conducted all interviews and asked the pairs questions about any historical or cultural influences and their notion of politeness, and they would answer together. The interviews were all audio-recorded for no more than an hour. These questions generated co-constructed conversations, where turn-taking was observed as well as the use of minimal feedback. Table 1 shows the average age of participants and the average duration of their interviews in minutes.

**Table 1. Interview and Participant Information**

| Interview and Participant Information | Boomers | Millennials |
|---|---:|---:|
| Average Age of Participants: | 58.5 | 21.3 |
| Average Interview Time (minutes): | 32.83 | 42.39 |

## III. CODING

Each audio recording was transcribed, and all turns within a subsection (5 - 10 minutes) of each interview were identified. A 'turn' is defined in this study as any time the roles between the participants switched. For example: If the Speaker is talking and and then the Listener begins to speak over them, the Listener then becomes the Speaker and the Speaker becomes the Listener. Hence, any time the roles of the individuals change, a turn has occurred.
For example:

**1. Keep**
Is defined in a 'turn' when the Speaker is talking and is not interrupted by the listener at all, hence the Speaker's flow of speech is uninterrupted and they continue to talk. Hence, 'Keep' is defined as a way for the speaker to hold onto their turn.
> Example:
> A: I thought mine was small from high school
> L: mhm
> A: mine was two hundred and ten

**2. Switch**
Indicates that the role of the Speaker and Listener change. Hence the participant who was the 'Speaker' is now the 'Listener' and the Listener is now the Speaker. initial speaker has been interrupted and speaker two now holds the floor
> Example:
> A: that's [**right**]
> L:          [**where**] your classes are

After turns were identified and roles were established, they were then coded for:
'Who': Identify the speaker
'What': The discourse marker and minimal feedback was uttered
'Type': of minimal feedback: Content Adding [CA], New Thing [NT], Eval [E], Listening [L], Agreement [A], and Other.

I developed the 'Type' coding system specifically for this study because the amount of minimal feedback that was provided by the Listener to the Speaker was outstanding, I wanted a way to organize the immense quantity in order to better understand it so I could evaluate and then define the minimal feedback.

Content Adding (CA) feedback is when the listener builds on what has already been stated by the speaker, using an already stated phrase and building from that.

Example:

L: **i'm glad it happened**

S: **i'm glad it** did too cause I feel like there was definitely a bond there

New Thing (NT) feedback is identified as changing the topic. If the roles within the conversations change, for instance if the listener becomes the speaker by interrupting and discussing matters of a new topic, then this notion would illustrate 'NT' feedback.

Example:

S: [fingers crossed]

L: **[ mhm] so what do you have to do tonight**

S: i keep like i keep missed two of them and she doesn't let you do them again and she's          like once you miss them you miss them

L: oh

**3. Evaluative (E)** feedback is identified through the use of a small phrases typically beginning with (i.e. "that" "oh" or "well"). Dependent upon what phrase was expressed by the listener, the word should be noted and distinguished in the Evaluative column. For instance, in the example provided above, "that's so cute," the word "cute" would be labeled under the Evaluative column. Whatever the context provided after the minimal phrase would be noted under the Evaluative column.

Example:

L: to find out eh well maybe that's not the [right way]

A:                                    [**oh** that's] funny

Example II:

S: **that's** kind of fun

L: yeah so

S: it's going to be pretty fun

**4. Listening (L) feedback** indicates a particular type of marker that indicates the engagement of the person who is listening through a small utterance and a lower intonation level would indicate that 'L' feedback is being illustrated and through the forms: (i.e. : yeah, mhm, right, uh huh etc.).

Example:

L: mhm

S: **i don't know**

L: yeah

**5. Agreement (A) Feedbac**k is identified by the role of the Listener as a form of agreement through feedback. A rise in the Listener's intonation level would indicate that 'A' feedback is being illustrated and through utterances: [i.e. :yes, true, exactly, I know].

Example:

L: i'm not sure whose mourned the kids or the pa[rents]
A:                                                                                    [**exactly**] well that'

**6. 'Other'** was created if there was not a clear marker and hence could not be classified into any of the 'Types,' noted above in my Coding.

**IV. RESULTS**
**4.1 Type**
**Table 2: Proportions and Raw Numbers of Different Types of Minimal Feedback by Generation**

| Table II | A | CA | E | L | NT | Other | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Boomer** | 0.2 (70) | 0.39 (113) | 0.04 (11) | 0.12 (40) | 0.07 (20) | 0.07 (20) | 274 |
| **Millennial** | 0.24 (60) | 0.41 (100) | 0.06 (14) | 0.07 (19) | 0.09 (22) | 0.04 (11) | 226 |
| **Grand Total** | 0.24 (130) | 0.64 (213) | 0.05 (25) | 0.1 (59) | 0.09 (42) | 0.06 (31) | 500 |

Table 2 illustrates the distinct 'types' I coded for within my transcripts. Overall, Boomers produce more minimal feedback (274 vs. 226) over the selected time period. The significance of these numbers shows that the older participants provided more minimal feedback in their conversations. This suggests a possible change over time: speakers today may be providing less minimal feedback than speakers in the past did.

To see whether the feedback differed in terms of type, I calculated the proportions of each type of minimal feedback. As seen in Table 2, most Types are very similar across Baby Boomers and Millennials, except for the 'L' listening column (see Figure 1). To investigate whether this difference was significant, I conducted a Fisher's T-Test comparing the proportion of feedback that was coded as Listening across the two groups. The Fisher's exact test statistic value is 0.0708, which is not significant at $\alpha < .07$, though is close, and possibly with more data, we would find that Baby Boomers give more feedback that indicates listening relative to Millenials
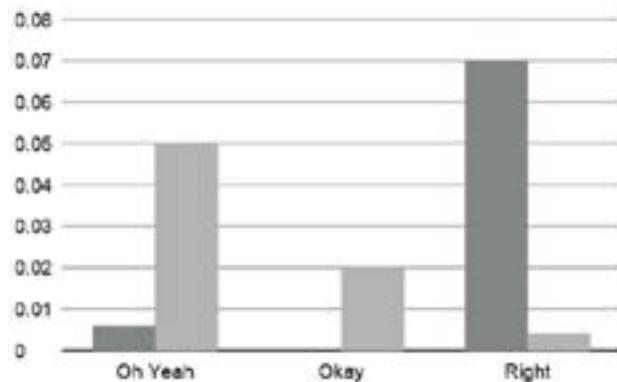
## 4.2 Discourse Markers
**Table 3: Proportions and Raw Numbers of Most Frequently used Discourse Markers by Generati**

| Table 3 | mhm | oh yeah | okay | right | yeah | Other | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Boomer** | 0.04 (12) | 0.006 (2) | 0 (0) | 0.07 (23) | 0.18 (53) | 0.67 (184) | 274 |
| **Millennial** | 0.02 (6) | 0.05 (13) | 0.02 (6) | 0.004 (1) | 0.15 (39) | 0.78 (207) | 226 |
| **Grand Total** | 0.001 (18) | 0.02 (15) | 0.01 (6) | 0.04 (24) | 0.17 (92) | 0.7 (391) | 500 |

The data exhibited in Table 3 shows the proportions and raw numbers (in brackets) of the discourse markers most frequently used from the 'Listening' type, which was extracted from the five to ten minute mark in the transcripts.

I ran Fisher's T-Test to check whether the differences in rates of usage of each of the markers was significant, focusing on the forms that appeared to have the biggest difference in Table 2. Specifically, I analyzed the data by counting each marker and found that oh yeah, okay, and right to the Grand Total column (see Figure 2). The differences in the use of right were used more frequently by the Boomer speakers. Meanwhile, the use of oh yeah and okay were used more frequently by the Millennial speakers and these differences were all statistically significant($\alpha < 0.05$).

**The Function & Definition of the Most Frequently used Discourse Markers:**

*Right*

A recent study has evaluated the function of right as a discourse marker. Right is associated with agreement and illustrates the listener agreeing with a previous statement (Naya, 158).
Example :

> D: she was very sick so Paul took me around
> N: **right**
> D: **right**
> N: that's **right** . and then . . my favorite part about Diana was i wanted to [ . ]

*Oh Yeah*

The function of oh indicates that the listener was listening to the speaker and recognized something. Oh focuses on creating fluidity between turns (Fuller, 2003). Yeah is the most frequently used discourse marker and functions as acknowledgment by the listener. (Jucker and Smith, 1998).
Example:

> S: i'd say excuse me please
> L: yeah . yeah and if they didn't . it depends if they're like just being like [obnoxio]usly large
> S:                                                                                      **[oh yeah]**

*Okay*

Classified in conversations to create coherence between speaker turns (Fuller, 2003). Further analysis has evaluated the role of okay as 'transitionally relevant' in speech exchange systems (Beach, 1991).
Example:

> C: I always call her and I'm like come over
> Q: **okay**
> C: **okay** I'll see you in studio **okay**
> Q: last year, I had a key to her house

## V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to analyze turn-taking between friends by focusing on minimal feedback, the frequency of minimal feedback, and if minimal feedback has changed over time. By looking at the speech of sixteen women, I found evidence that Millennial speakers gave less minimal feedback overall than the Boomer speakers. Even though there is not a distinct significance between the classified 'types' in conversations among the generations, the Boomer generation happened to use more discourse markers within their conversations compared to the Millennial generation. An evaluation and analysis of this time variation, The Apparent Time *Hypothesis*, could indicate that there is a difference in the way conversations are held between the generations.

There has also been a distinct change in discourse markers over the course of time when Listeners are giving minimal feedback. The Baby Boomer's use the marker right significantly more than Millennials, who appear to have replaced it with the markers okay and oh yeah.

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