

# Four Pragmatic Functions Associated with Different Aspects of Disfluency in American English Dialog

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Fluent speech is not always necessary or even appropriate, neither for native speakers nor for learners. Factors affecting this include cognitive load, individual speaking styles, genres, and social contexts [1], but the possibility of functional reasons appears not to have been previously explored.

Here I build on a recent corpus-based, bottom-up study that identified dimensions of interaction style in L1 American English dialog and their prosodic realizations [2]. Each dimension has two poles, and 4 of these poles involve various types of disfluent behavior. Expanding on [2], I here report more detail on these poles: their various disfluency-related and prosodic correlates, and their typical functions.

The first function is showing disengagement, as for example when one speaker is droning on, or when both speakers are inclined to close out a topic and need to jointly do so. This often involves relatively long silences, both within-speaker and cross-speaker, and many turn-hold fillers, slightly more *ums* than *uhs*, but few turn-initial fillers. Other typical prosodic features include low pitch, narrow pitch range, low intensity, and creaky voice. In the droning-on cases, noisy inbreaths are common, and occasionally tongue clicks. In the turn-closing cases, repetition is common, as is phonetic reduction.

The second function is negative assessment. Overall, the primary interactional marker of this function seems to be non-fluent turn-taking. Specifically, this involves many long silences, again both speaker-internal and cross-speaker, much overlap, and many turn-holds, although not noticeably more *ums* and *uhs*.

The third function is taking a fatalistic stance: accepting that something is beyond one's control. This again involves pausing, but generally within-speaker. There are again many turn-hold fillers, and generally a slow speaking rate and creaky voice.

The fourth function is taking an "unfussed" or non-emphatic stance. This is common, for example, when reminiscing. Here we again see many turn-hold fillers, rather more *uhs* than *ums*, and a generally slow speaking rate, although, interestingly, the delivery is quite often at a steady pace, which is not characteristic of disfluency in general nor its use in the first three functions.

While this work is preliminary, it does suggest: 1) aspects of disfluency can be functional, 2) disfluency/fluency is not unidimensional, as different aspects of disfluency pattern differently, and 3) disfluencies are part of a larger system and may often bear meaning only in combination with prosodic features. The implications for teachers and learners of L2 dialog skills are the importance of knowing when to not be fluent, and the importance of knowing the various pragmatic functions associated with various types of disfluency. Key open questions include: the extent to which learners transfer disfluency patterns from their L1, the extent to which they nevertheless eventually pick up knowledge of the L2 patterns, and the extent to which they still suffer from incomplete mastery of these patterns in daily interactions.

[1] Foster, P. (2020). Oral fluency in a second language: A research agenda for the next ten years. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 446-461.

[2] Ward, N. G., & Avila, J. E. (2023). A dimensional model of interaction style variation in spoken dialog. *Speech Communication*, 149, 47-62.