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To er is human but 'and stuff' has real meaning



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

RECENT research at the universities of Stirling and Edinburgh suggests that hesitation noises like "er" and "um" are not just annoying distracters, as many believe, but rather help us to understand what the speaker is saying. I find myself sceptical since too many "ums" and "ers" certainly irritate me, but I need to look more carefully at the research reports.

My own research suggests that effective speakers tend to use a range of more interesting alternatives to "er" and "um" when they need some planning time. Moreover, their choices usually convey meanings beyond hesitation and uncertainty. The choice between "you know", "I think", "I mean", "sort of" and "like" is meaningful, as I will discuss in a future column. Today I focus on phrases known as end-tags or "general extenders".

Phrases like "and stuff", "and so on", "and that sort of thing", "and things like that", "and everything", "or something" seem at first glance to be meaningless fluff, just phrases filling up space and time. But sociolinguistic research indicates their use is patterned and socially meaningful in ways that are not immediately apparent.

One of the first studies of end-tags in

English was undertaken almost 30 years ago by an Australian, Elizabeth Dines. She found they were more frequent in working-class speech than in middle-class speech and she suggested that they were used to signal in-group membership. After all, if you use a phrase like "and stuff" at the end of a sentence, such as "Oh I read *New Idea*, the *Listener* and stuff" or "I did a lot of backpacking and stuff", you are implying that the person you are speaking to is on the same wavelength and can supply this missing information or extra examples.

More recently, Jenny Cheshire has studied end-tags in the speech of adolescents interviewed in three English towns. She found no evidence of the overall social class pattern noted in the Australian data, which suggests they have spread to become standard usage. However, she reports that the teenagers had different preferences among end-tags. The middle-class British teenagers preferred "and stuff" and "and things", while the working-class teenagers preferred "and that" – eg, "I don't like ties, they choke me and that." Since working-class speech is often the source of language change, this may indicate that we will all be happily saying "and that" rather than "and stuff" in a couple of generations' time.

THESE phrases have many meanings. They often indicate that we believe we have said enough for the speaker to get the general gist, and to fill in the blanks. They can also signal intentional vagueness and imprecision – eg, "How often do you see him?" "Oh, every three or four months, or something like that."

Markers of vagueness and imprecision often express politeness too. They hedge

propositions and make them less demanding – more like suggestions open to discussion or negotiation – eg, "Could you get me some bread or something, anything edible will do." Because they serve as politeness markers in this way, it was suggested in earlier research that end-tags were used more often by women than by men. Current language and gender researchers express this differently.

They note that politeness is associated with femininity in many cultures. Hence features such as end-tags tend to be used in conveying a more feminine or less aggressive approach to a topic; they may soften a disagreement, for instance.

Tom: "Young people's stereotypes are responsible for appalling noise pollution in this suburb."

Chris: "It's not just the young people – it's the pubs and the clubs and stuff like that."

Finally, these phrases are by no means simple in terms of English grammar. Consider the fact that "or so", which looks like a typical end-tag, can be used only with units of measurement – eg, ten kilos or so, but not a book or so. Similarly, "or anything" has strict constraints; it can be used only in negative, non-assertive utterances: eg, there was no tearoom or anything, while "or something" occurs only in positive and assertive utterances: eg, and in the evening there was a film or something.

So you can't treat them as interchangeable and substitute "or something" for "or anything". There is always something new to learn about grammar.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz