



I mean, it's kind of, you know, are we on the same wavelength?



Janet Holmes
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

MY COLLEAGUE Paul Warren's column on yeah-no provoked several responses. Most agreed that this contradictory phrase is spreading rapidly, and even admitted that although they considered it "meaningless", they were increasingly using it themselves.

Many other short phrases in English conversation seem at first hearing to be meaningless.

Consider phrases such as you know, you see, I mean, I think, sort of, kind of, and of course. These are often labelled "verbal fillers", with the implication that they provide time while the speaker decides how to say something.

While this is no doubt true, these phrases often do more. If their only function were to provide planning time, then why are there so many of them? Why don't we just use um or er; these are also hesitation signals giving us time to plan what we want to say next.

(Incidentally, another correspondent had a heartfelt grizzle on this topic, complaining he had been forced to listen to a public speaker who couldn't produce a single sentence without a multitude of accompanying ums and ers. But intriguingly, recent research at Stirling and Edinburgh universities in Scotland suggests these apparently superfluous sounds help people to remember what the speaker was saying.)

My point is that we always have a choice between these different so-called fillers. So why do people choose to say "you see" as opposed to "you know"?

Linguists who have examined these phrases have demonstrated that they are far from interchangeable. They each have different meanings in talk.

"You see" tends to be used when the speaker is providing an explanation and checking that their listener is following the gist of the message.

"So you see it was really important to leave the building really quickly." It functions as a clarification check, implicitly asking "Are you following? Do you understand what I am saying?"

People typically nod or say "mm" in response.

"I mean" tends to signal an up-coming clarification by the speaker – "Now I'm

not sure that he can do it, I mean he's not got the skills."

"You know" is more complicated, but it basically indicates that the speaker assumes that they are on the same wavelength as the listener.

The speaker assumes shared knowledge or experience, and even shared attitudes and empathy. "Well you know as usual he arrived really early. And I was still getting dressed you know, it was really embarrassing."

And another example, where a parent comments on the fact that they rescued their son from thoughtlessly incurred debt – "It was silly you know, but we just had to help out." Here the speaker appeals for the listener's understanding.

THEN there are "approximators". Phrases such as "sort of" and "kind of" signal that the speaker is not being precise but rather giving a broad indication of what is being referred to. Approximators can express vagueness in relation to specific information – "It was sort of bluey-green." "Or he looked kind of scary with those shades on."

But more often they indicate a wish to be imprecise in relation to social information. "She was sort of less than welcoming." Or "He was kind of heavy."

Of course is a rather different and ambivalent phrase. It could be regarded as the more formal, and perhaps even more educated, version of you know.

A friend recounted their experiences during the World Cup where their hotel was on the victory circuit: "Well of course we checked out next morning." The implication is: "As any reasonable person would."

Like you know, of course assumes shared knowledge, experience and attitudes. For those who are not in the know or part of the in-group, of course can be experienced as very condescending. "Well of course we booked them in at the Chateau." Of course implies that anyone who is anyone should share the attitudes and assumptions of the speaker.

This is fine if you are on the same wavelength as the speaker, but if the speaker makes assumptions which go beyond your experiences, of course can be very irritating.



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So when you produce an utterance such as, “Well of course, you know they reckon that flying is sort of unacceptable these days,” be aware that you are conveying many kinds of social meaning alongside the basic information.

Language is so complex you know, and of course amazingly interesting.

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GOT A QUERY

Send your questions to
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