Idiosyncratic Fillers in the Speech of Bilinguals

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Abstract
This paper introduces a never before described strategy used by bilinguals to fill hesitation pauses. This strategy proved so unique that it was given the name 'idiosyncratic filler.' It describes a filler type that is produced unusually often by one individual when hesitating. It is usually a particular lexical filler that is used as often as or more often than all other lexical fillers combined. Idiosyncratic fillers are as flexible as, but more 'prestigious' than quasi-lexical fillers and they are used by bilinguals in their non-native language as an over-generalization and to avoid the incessant production of 'uhs' and 'uhms.'

1. Introduction
'Disfluencies' or 'self-repairs' are umbrella terms which cover more or less the same phenomena, but depending on the researcher and the field of study fillers are either included or excluded. In many studies on disfluencies or self-repairs, fillers do not receive much attention. In fact, conversation analysts have not investigated the role of fillers, although they do recognize that fillers are self-repair strategies. Mostly, they are recognized as repair initiators or indicators [13].

However, fillers do not necessarily need to be part of another self-repair, such as a false start. They can be clear indicators of a self-repair that lacks a hearable repairable, indicators for a word search, or another move in cognitive planning. The word(s) following a filler must be understood as the repairing segment because they constitute the found word(s) or construction. These newly found word(s) or constructions 'repair' the search. Fillers are thus always part of self-repair strategies, and as such they deserve more attention from conversation analysts who seem to consider them a special case requiring no further analysis. As a case in point, Fox, Hayashi and Jasperson [5] do recognize that fillers belong to the same category as other self-repairs, but do not analyze them. They also play no role in Fox and Jasperson's [4] typology of self-repair in which fillers are completely ignored.

Not only conversation analysts, but also psycholinguists who work in the field of self-repair, do not always recognize fillers as part of the disfluency or self-repair 'family.' Bear, Dowding, Shriberg and Price [2], who have developed a labeling system for all types of self-repair, do not in all instances label quasi-lexical (or lexical) fillers. Lexical fillers are even more often ignored by researchers in the study of self-repair. Most of the time they are not mentioned at all, let alone analyzed. Lickley [9] believes that their inclusion in the category of self-repair, which he calls disfluency, is controversial.

The inclusion of lexical fillers (and quasi- or non-lexical fillers, for that matter) is only questionable if we consider the form of self-repair[1] alone; however, when concentrating on the

function of self-repair – dealing with some kind of trouble in spontaneous speech – then fillers are clearly a part of this category. They mostly function to gain time and not lose the floor while searching for a word, structure or organizing the remainder of the turn.

Lexical fillers are special in the sense that they often fulfill more than one function at the same time. In addition to 'playing for time' they can fulfill social, interactional, discourse, and symbolic functions, such as engaging the addressee, yielding the floor, asking for feedback, stressing the content of an utterance, making it sound more friendly, and the like [7, 8, 10, 14, 16]. Therefore, lexical fillers are often analyzed under the heading of discourse markers, in which their role as fillers is sometimes not recognized or barely mentioned. As a case in point, even Schiffrin [14] devotes only a few paragraphs in a 350-page book on discourse markers to their role as fillers or 'place-holders' (p. 76).

When fillers are analyzed, either by conversation analysts, sociolinguists or psycholinguists, they are often placed under a different heading, namely 'hesitation phenomena' or 'filled pauses' (e.g., [12]). Some researchers do not acknowledge that they are part of the larger category of 'self-repair' or 'disfluency' (cf. discussion in [10]).

The present study concentrates on fillers and here in particular on a phenomenon that has never before been presented or discussed, namely idiosyncratic fillers in the L2 (non-native) speech of highly fluent bilinguals. Previous studies of hesitation strategies in L2 conversations have focused on beginning L2 learners or speakers. They found that beginners tend to leave their hesitation pauses unfilled making their speech highly disfluent [17]. Native speakers, however, use a variety of fillers to fill their hesitation pauses, such as the lengthening of sounds, quasi-lexical fillers (uh, uhm), lexical fillers (well, you know etc.), and repetitions [10]. Bilinguals also use a variety of fillers in their native as well as in their non-native language. In addition, they tend to use idiosyncratic fillers in their L2.

2. Idiosyncratic fillers
The term 'idiosyncratic filler' has been created after the transcription and a first skimming of sixteen 25-minute conversations produced by English-German bilinguals, made this necessary. The researcher noted that most subjects used one particular lexical filler unusually often in their non-dominant language conversation to fill hesitation pauses or other gaps in her or his turn. This filler was named 'idiosyncratic filler' not only because it is distinct and different for most of the participants employing it, but additionally on account of the fact that it is a noticeable device that gives their conversation a unique, individual mark or style because of its dominance among all other fillers. The

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[1] It has to be noted that some researchers believe fillers to have the same form as other self-repairs. Shriberg [13] shows that fillers have

the same surface structure as other self-repairs. The present study does agree with her point of view.

idiosyncratic filler is usually but not exclusively a particular lexical filler that is used as often as or more often than all other lexical fillers combined. For each individual, the idiosyncratic filler may be a different filler.

3. Subjects and data collection

The subject group consists of eight bilinguals, four females and four males who use English and German on a daily basis. For all participants, the dominant language is their first language. None of them had grown up as a bilingual, but had learned the L2 initially in a school setting and developed it subsequently in an immersion situation. Gordon, Henry, June, Lauren, and Sue, are native speakers of English while Isabel, Sven, and Werner are native speakers of German.

For every subject, four different conversations of twenty-five minutes each were videotaped in an experimental setting. The speakers engaged in two dyadic speech events - one in English and one in German - with a same-gender partner first and with an opposite-gender partner thereafter. The first two events were taped consecutively. A week later, the last two were recorded consecutively as well.

The data collection yielded about 210 minutes of English and 210 minutes of German conversational data. An overview of the data set is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of data set

Data set	English	German	Total
Words	31,333	31,028	62,361
All self-repairs	2,873	3,516	6,389
All fillers	1701	2402	4103
Idiosyncratic fillers	182	345	527

4. Data preparation

The recorded data were carefully transcribed and divided into units. The clause or a modified clause was chosen as the basic unit. The main coding process started once the data had been divided into units. The information needing to be coded were all elements of self-repair although for this paper only the self-repair type 'filler' more specifically 'idiosyncratic filler' is relevant.

In order to make their contributions comparable and, hence, accessible to quantitative analysis, all the participants' contributions – i.e., the number of their self-repair types and subcategories – in all four conversations were standardized by mathematical manipulation. They were all multiplied by a different factor – depending on the number of words uttered – to adjust the size of their conversational contribution to the largest conversational contribution which was made up of approximately 3,500 words. This allowed the researcher to compare each subject's self-repairs in a quantitative manner.

5. Results and analysis

The quantitative analysis revealed that for all eight subjects their use of fillers changes depending on the language they speak. It has been observed that

- bilingual speakers tend to use more quasi-lexical fillers in their non-native language than in their native language;
- bilingual speakers, in general, tend to use more fillers in their non-native language than in their native language;
- bilingual speakers tend to use a particular lexical filler, a so-called idiosyncratic filler, with unusually high frequency in their non-native language; and
- bilingual speakers tend to use more lexical fillers in their non-native language than in their native language.

Most participants – Sue, Isabel, June, Lauren, Gordon, and Sven – have developed a unique mark or conversational style in their non-native language by using a particular filler noticeably more often than others or even all other lexical fillers combined. Sven displays this behavior in his L2 as well as in his L1. Table 2 shows how many idiosyncratic fillers these six participants used in their two L1 and their two L2-conversations.

Table 2: Idiosyncratic fillers

Idiosyncratic fillers	L1	L2	χ^2
Sue	0	78	77.5*
Lauren	0	209	209.0*
June	75	377	201.9*
Isabel	0	189	188.8*
Gordon	0	66	65.5*
Sven	55	79	4.4*

Legend: Data standardized for 3,500 words per conversation. All frequencies have been rounded to the nearest integer. χ^2 for $p \le .05 \ge 3.84$ (1df). An asterisk indicates a significant chi-square value.

Table 3 presents the total number of all lexical fillers produced by these six subjects. The total number of lexical fillers includes the idiosyncratic fillers of all participants, except for June's because her idiosyncratic filler is non-lexical since it consists of the lengthening of sounds. The comparison of Tables 2 and 3 demonstrates how dominant the usage of idiosyncratic fillers is, and we comprehend that its production gives these bilinguals' conversations a unique style.

Since it has been stated that the idiosyncratic filler might be a different filler for each individual, it is essential to introduce each participant's unique hesitation strategy. For Sue this is the German filler 'also.' In her German or L2-conversations she even has two specific fillers that she employs almost exclusively. They are 'ja?' and 'also,' however, 'also' is the one that she uses most often and is thus referred to as her idiosyncratic filler. 'Also' is a filler which can be used either at the beginning (example (1)), in the middle (example (2)), or at the end (example (3)) of a clause or turn-constructional unit.

(1) Sue: <u>also</u> ich kann immer fragen […]
              (also) I always have the opportunity to ask someone […]
(2) Sue: aber reden und <u>also</u> Alltagssprache … das war viel besser […]

but speaking and (also) everyday speech … that
was a lot better

(3) Sue:　　was be- bedeutet bis jetzt? ☺ <u>also</u>
　　　　　what does until now me- mean? ☺ (also)

Table 3: Total of lexical fillers

Lexical fillers	L1	L2	χ^2
Sue	132	295	61.9*
Lauren	143	259	33.7*
June	44	17	11.8*
Isabel	162	249	18.4*
Gordon	72	127	15.5*
Sven	176	155	1.4

<u>Legend</u>: Data standardized for 3,500 words per conversation. All frequencies have been rounded to the nearest integer. $\chi2$ for $p \le .05 \ge$ 3.84 (1df). An asterisk indicates a significant chi-square value.

Like Sue, Lauren also employs the German filler 'also' almost exclusively as lexical filler in her L2-conversations. 'Also' can thus be described as her signature filler. Lauren makes use of this idiosyncratic filler most often in initial positions and she frequently uses it in the middle but only seldom in end positions. Sometimes she uses more than one 'also' in a single turn-constructional unit as illustrated in example (4) where she uses three. The first one appears at the beginning, the second one in the middle, and the last one at the very end.

(4) Lauren:　ja <u>also</u> ss- ss- die die haben auch ganz gute Leute
　　　　　bekommen <u>also</u> Mike und und Brendan <u>also</u>
　　　　　yeah (also) they they have also gotten very good
　　　　　people (also) Mike and and Brendan (also)

June is the only participant who does not produce a lexical filler as her signature filler, but the lengthening of vowels and sound combinations. In fact, these lengthenings are so dominant in her L2 conversations that they consist of more than three-quarters of all fillers combined. They can occur in lexical or quasi-lexical items in any position of a clause or turn-constructional unit. It is thus the most flexible filler. Moreover, it is noteworthy that numerous turn-constructional units contain several lengthened vowels, as illustrated in example (5).

(5) June:　　j=a e=h ihre Mu=tter kommt aus=s Irland […]
　　　　　yea=h u=h her mo=ther is from=m Ireland […]

In her English or L2-conversations, Isabel makes use of one specific filler, namely 'so,' more than twice as often than of all others combined. This is her idiosyncratic filler and she uses it either at the beginning, the end, and sometimes in the middle of a clause or turn-constructional unit. Isabel occasionally uses more than one 'so' in one utterance as can be seen in examples (6) and (7). In the first one, she uses it twice at the beginning of a turn-constructional unit and in the latter she lengthens 'so' and uses it at the beginning as well as at the end. It is not unusual for Isabel to 'sandwich' her turn-constructional unit between two utterances of 'so.'

(6) Isabel:　<u>so so</u> that's different […]
(7) Isabel:　<u>s=o</u> it's something in between <u>s=o</u>

Gordon also employs an idiosyncratic filler in his L2-conversations. It is the German filler 'da,' that he uses very frequently. He uses it most often in the middle position of a clause or turn-constructional unit, and he frequently uses it at the end but only seldom in initial positions. Sometimes Gordon uses more than one 'da' in one turn-constructional unit, as shown in example (8), where the second 'da' could be regarded as a location adverb. However, the researcher claims that it is not an adverb otherwise Gordon would have to use 'hier,' (here) because he is talking about the same university at which he is at the time the conversation took place.

(8) Gordon:　und wir wir beide eh <u>da</u> w-wir arbeiteten <u>da</u> an
　　　　　der Uni […]
　　　　　and we we both uh (da) w-we worked (da) at the
　　　　　university […]

Sven is the only participant who uses idiosyncratic fillers in his L2 and in his L1-conversations. It is this 'I mean' and 'ne?.' However, he produces more idiosyncratic fillers in his English conversations compared to his German ones. His L2 signature filler can be employed in all three positions, but he mostly uses it in initial and end position. Example (9) illustrates the latter case.

(9) Seven:　　I don't know why.. <u>I mean</u>

The German 'ne?,' on the other hand, is comparable to the English filler 'right?.' They both tend to appear at the end of turn-constructional units as can be seen in example (10)

(10) Seven:　also .. so hab ich 's zumindest gehört <u>ne?</u>
　　　　　well .. at least that's the way I heard it (<u>ne?</u>)

Henry does not make use of a particular lexical filler considerably more frequently than of other lexical fillers. However, he is the subject who uses the most 'uhs' and 'uhms' in his L2-conversations compared to his L1-conversations, namely 561 compared to 299. Hence, one could argue that quasi-lexical fillers are his signature or idiosyncratic filler.

Like Henry, Werner does not use a particular lexical filler notably more often than other lexical fillers. Moreover, he does not hesitate more frequently when he speaks his non-native language English. Werner, a native speaker of German who has lived in an English-speaking country for many decades, is clearly the most proficient of the eight subjects with a native-like command of both languages and he might therefore not display this particular behavior. Idiosyncratic fillers could be characteristic of very proficient bilinguals who have not or not yet achieved native command of their L2.

6. Discussion

Hesitation pauses and other gaps, like self-repairs in general, may occur at any given moment in a conversation. Therefore fillers appear in different utterance positions. While the two most versatile filler types, namely the quasi-lexical fillers and the lengthening of sounds can be employed in any position, to some lexical fillers not all positions are available. Fillers like the English 'yeah' and 'okay' are most often found in initial positions where in addition to playing for time they express agreement or acknowledgement or they serve as an uptake or any other link to what the previous speaker has said. A number of fillers, such as 'right?,' 'ja?,' and 'ne?' typically

occur at the end of turn-constructional units. Usually, they also fulfill several functions. They are solicitors of agreement, brief response, and/or attention, and they engage the addressee [10].

A number of fillers can be used in all positions. The German 'also,' 'na,' 'da,' and 'so' and the English 'so,' 'you know,' 'I mean,' and similar expressions, such as 'I think,' 'I guess,' 'I believe,' and their German equivalents belong to this class. In addition to fulfilling the function of a filler they may simultaneously have other functions which vary for different positions. In initial position, they play introductory roles and/or create links between what has just been said and what is about to be said. In middle positions, they can emphasize parts of the utterance or solicit understanding and sympathy. This is especially true for 'you know' and 'I mean,' which can fulfill this particular function in any of the three available positions. In end positions, these versatile lexical fillers often engage the addressee, frame, or emphasize what has just been said [10].

It is apparent that even though the particular filler that each subject 'chose' as his or her idiosyncratic filler is not the same, they all belong to the same class of lexical fillers that can occur in any position. Exceptions to this rule are Sven's German filler 'ne?' which he uses in his L1 and which might therefore be a different phenomenon than the one described here. It can be claimed that in their non-native language six out of eight participants use a particular, very flexible filler unusually often. Apparently they have found a more elegant way than simply using 'uhs' and 'uhms' to deal with a high frequency of hesitation pauses. Certainly, what idiosyncratic fillers have in common with quasi-lexical fillers is the fact that both can be used in any position of the utterance, however, the former are more 'prestigious' than the latter.

Quasi-lexical fillers are often thought of as negative [6] and undesirable flaws. Too many quasi-lexical fillers in one's speech apparently convey the image of an ill-educated, disorganized person [10]. Conversely, idiosyncratic fillers like all lexical fillers reflect favorably on the speaker since their additional social, discourse, and interactional functions make a person's speech more friendly and engaging. It is likely that bilinguals - as individuals with an excellent linguistic and metalinguistic awareness [1] - share this opinion and try to avoid the production of too many 'uhs' and 'uhms.' One way to by-pass the usage of too many quasi-lexical fillers is through the production of other fillers such as lexical fillers or sound-stretching.

While lexical fillers are more prestigious because of their additional functions, for the same reason they are also more complex and thus more difficult to acquire than quasi-lexical fillers. And since the usage of fillers is not taught in the second/foreign language classroom [11], L2 learners and users have to acquire their correct usage without formal training. In the process, they are likely to use acquisition strategies which have been observed for first and second language acquisition of grammatical forms, such as overgeneralization [3]. The unusually frequent production of one particular lexical filler certainly constitutes an overgeneralization of its semantic and pragmatic meaning. Once L2-speakers have 'found' a lexical filler which they can use in all three positions they tend to employ it almost exclusively thereby neglecting the usage of a variety of lexical fillers but also avoiding the production of yet another quasi-lexical filler.

To conclude, the researcher would like to argue that the usage of idiosyncratic fillers in the L2-speech of bilinguals is both a strategy to avoid excessive production of undesirable 'uhs' and 'uhms' as well as an overgeneralization of one particular filler, hence, obviously a characteristic of an interlanguage at the discourse level.

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