Variation in the use of discourse markers by Chinese teaching assistants in the US

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Abstract

The use of discourse markers (DMs) is common in everyday native speech. If an L2 speaker wants to sound more like a native speaker, one way is to adopt the “conventional expressions” (e.g. DMs) used by native speakers in the local community. Recently a number of studies have examined DM use by native speakers of a variety of languages; however, relatively few studies have explored the use of DMs by L2 speakers and even fewer have examined L2 speakers in the study-abroad context.

This study investigates the use of English DMs by six male and female Chinese L1 graduate students in a study-abroad context. The DMs examined are yeah, oh, you know, like, well, I mean, ok, right, and actually, for a total of 1422 tokens. Combining insights from variationist sociolinguistics and SLA, this study uses quantitative methods to investigate the use of DMs in two settings, TA-led discussions and sociolinguistic interviews, and examines the variable production of L2 speakers. In addition, this study also employs qualitative analysis to examine the relationship between L2 speakers’ multifaceted social identities, language attitude, and participation in the local community with their individual repertoires and frequency of DM use.

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1. Introduction

A great deal of research on discourse markers has been carried out during the past two decades (e.g. Aijmer, 2002; Fraser, 1990; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1985). Although other terms such as “discourse particles,” “connectives,” “pragmatic expressions” or “pragmatic markers” are preferred by some researchers, the term “discourse markers” (DMs) is more commonly employed by researchers who work on English discourse, and I will therefore use the term “discourse markers” in this article.

Despite the various perspectives on the choice of a particular term, it is generally agreed that DMs play a crucial role in the organization of native speaker discourse. Discourse markers, defined by Schiffrin (1987) as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” (p. 31), can facilitate listener comprehension and help smooth
spontaneous interaction between speakers. For example, you know may be employed to make the information more salient, oh may be employed to mark a speaker’s receipt of new information, and ok may serve as a device to initiate movement toward closure. Since the use of DMs is common in the everyday spoken discourse of native speakers, we may assume that DMs also require special attention in a language classroom. Nevertheless, DMs are seldom part of the curriculum in the classroom in spite of the important role they play in spoken discourse. As de Klerk (2005) observes, the reason might be because of “their [DMs’] lack of clear semantic denotation and syntactic role, which makes formal or explicit commentary on their use fairly difficult” (p. 275). Besides, as the quotation at the beginning of the paper illustrates, if an L2 speaker does not employ any DMs, it is impossible that native speakers can pinpoint any grammatical errors, nor is it likely that they can pinpoint what sounds unfriendly or awkward in the utterance. As DMs are not explicitly taught in class and L2 speakers can speak grammatically without the use of DMs, DMs are usually invisible for L2 speakers who learn the language in a formal classroom setting.

Since there is a lack of instruction on the use of DMs in formal language classrooms and the use of DMs is nevertheless important in native discourse, previous studies have suggested that if an L2 speaker is more acculturated to the L2 culture or wants to sound more like a native speaker, he or she may pick up how “things are said” and adopt those “conventional expressions” (i.e. DMs) by the native speakers in the community (de Klerk, 2005; Hellermann and Vergun, 2007). Sankoff et al. (1997) also state that the use of DMs is an ideal indicator of the extent to which an L2 speaker desires to be integrated into the local community because DMs are often not part of the traditional classroom curriculum and L2 speakers generally acquire these expressions through contact with local native speakers. In other words, it is assumed that if an L2 speaker has more contact with the local people or desires to be assimilated in the local community, he or she will employ more use of DMs compared with those who do not.

The current study investigates the use of DMs by six L2 speakers – 3 female and 3 male international graduate students – living in a study-abroad context. Combining insights from variationist sociolinguistics and SLA research, this study uses quantitative methods to investigate the use of DMs in two different settings, TA-led discussions and sociolinguistic interviews, and examines the variable production of L2 speakers. In addition, this study also employs qualitative analysis to examine the relationship between L2 speakers’ multifaceted social identities, language attitude, and participation in the local community with their individual repertoires and frequency of DM use.

2. Previous literature on DMs and NNSs

A large number of studies on DMs used by NSs of English have been conducted in past decades. The use of DMs by non-native speakers (NNSs) is also beginning to become popular since researchers and educators have come to recognize the importance of the acquisition of communicative competence (see Canale and Swain, 1980 for a discussion of communicative competence). For example, Remero Trillo (2002) used a corpus-driven approach to examine the use of DMs in English by native and non-native children and adults. He concluded that native and non-native children show a similar pattern in their use of DMs, whereas non-native adults fossilize in their L2 pragmatic development due to the lack of DM instruction. Also using corpus-driven analysis, Müller (2005) compared the corpus of American NSs of English with German NNSs of English in which participants retell and discuss a silent movie in a university setting. Besides using quantitative analysis in frequency counts, she also distinguished individual functions for each DM and discussed both linguistic and non-linguistic factors that might influence the frequency of DMs. Her findings showed that NSs and NNSs prefer different DMs and there are differences in the usage of the individual functions. More recently, Fung and Carter (2007) compared the production of DMs by NSs from a corpus of spoken British English with NNSs from a corpus of classroom discourse in Hong Kong. They found a considerable discrepancy in the use of DMs between NSs and learners. NNSs used DMs at a very restricted level and with limited functions. The above three studies provide a preliminary description of differences between NSs and NNSs in the use of DMs; however, the NNSs in the above studies are in English as a foreign language contexts, the results might be different if NNSs have access to the constant interactions with NS in an English-speaking context.

On the other hand, Sankoff et al. (1997) investigated the use of DMs in English and French by English learners of French as a second language in Montreal. They found that generally learners tended to use DMs less frequently in their L2 (i.e. French) than in their native language (i.e. English) and that those who were more integrated into the local francophone community had more native-like use of DMs, especially those who had been exposed to French since their childhood. Regarding the use of DMs in an ESL context, Fuller (2003a) compared the use of DMs by NSs and
NNSs in different contexts—interviews and conversations. Her findings supported all the previous studies on the use of DMs by NNSs that overall NNSs use fewer DMs. Even though her results indicated that there was a higher rate of the use of you know by NNSs than the rate by NSs, she suggested that non-native speaker discourse is characterized by formulaic use of DMs that are easy to acquire. Besides, NNSs in her study did not show differences across different contexts as NSs would do when their speaker roles changed. In contrast to Fuller’s study which investigated highly proficient NNSs, Hellermann and Vergun (2007) focused on adult immigrants as beginning learners of English, a population with chances to develop their English in their daily working lives. They suggested that more highly proficient students demonstrated more use of DMs and they also appeared to be more acculturated to the English-speaking cultures.

To sum up, previous research indicated that NNSs do not use DMs to the degree that NSs use them. Moreover, when NNSs do use DMs, it is likely to be in a formulaic manner and therefore there will not be cross-context difference in NNSs’ use of DMs. Finally, the more contact NNSs have with the target language culture, the more likely they will use DMs in their spoken discourse.

3. Previous literature on sociolinguistics and SLA

With the growing interest in research on L2 speakers’ acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, findings from previous studies have also provided insights for the research on L2 DMs both quantitatively and qualitatively.

From quantitative perspectives, sociolinguists who study SLA have focused on the linguistic and extralinguistic factors that may affect how learners acquire native-speaker patterns of variation (see, for example, Adamson and Regan (1991) on the acquisition of the English variable “ing” by Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants; Young (1991) on variation in interlanguage morphology; Bayley (1996) on –t/d deletion in the interlanguage of Chinese learners of English). More recently, Mougeon et al. (2004) in their study of sociolinguistic variation by Canadian French immersion students suggest that more proficient learners will display patterns of variation that are more similar to NS patterns. In other words, these learners, like native speakers of the target language, alternate between variants depending on factors such as gender, social status, register, style, and so on. Also comparing NS patterns and NNS patterns, Major (2004) focused specifically on gender and stylistic differences in the choice among phonological variants. Studies in NS stylistic variation have indicated that speakers shift styles according to the addressees, the formality of the situation, social class, or the persona they want to present to others (for details, see Eckert and Rickford, 2001). However, Major’s results indicated NNSs showed much more salient difference in gender than in style. He suggests that this may due to the fact that gender differences are more prominent for learners to notice and therefore learners could clearly acquire the differences.

Howard et al. (2006) examined /l/ deletion by advanced L2 speakers of French in both an instructed and a study-abroad context. They found that opportunities to interact with NSs in the native speech community allowed L2 speakers to acquire the native informal variants. On the contrary, the formally instructed L2 speakers only displayed minimal use of the informal features. Overall, these studies have demonstrated that L2 speakers also display systematic variation much as native speakers do, and to sound like native speakers, L2 speakers also need to acquire NS patterns of variation.

From qualitative perspectives, recent SLA theorists have come to recognize that “language learners do not live in idealized, homogeneous communities” (Peirce, 1995:12); rather, they live in this complex social world and each learner varies individually in what they perceive and how they respond to the world. Therefore, instead of treating L2 learners as a homogeneous group, researchers have suggested that we recognize the complex social history and multiple desires different learners have when discussing their language learning. For instance, Siegal (1995) in her study of women learning Japanese in Japan points out that how learners view themselves and their target language and culture determines to what extent they desire to adopt the native speaker norms. McKay and Wong’s (1996) study of adolescent Chinese immigrants shows that learners’ social identities and their different personal values and stories can influence how much they are willing to invest in their English learning. Similarly, Norton (2000) in her study of immigrant women suggests that how much language learners are willing to “invest” in learning is closely tied to the multifaceted social identities they construct across different sites over time. Drawing on Norton’s work, Kasper (2001) also suggests that, in terms of learning L2 pragmatics, learner subjectivity (i.e. learners’ social identities, their sense of themselves and their understanding of their relation to the world) may affect the amount of effort an L2 learner makes to understand L2 pragmatic features and the extent the learner converges to native speaker use. In a nutshell, these

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researchers suggest that learners’ voices need to be recognized in order to have a better understanding of each individual’s language learning pathway.

In addition to the above sociolinguistically orientated studies of SLA, research on language and gender also provides directions for the role of gender in SLA. Recent sociolinguists have rejected the idea that gender is something we intrinsically possess; instead, it is something that emerges from practice, from what we perform (for details, see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Therefore, men and women do not simply use linguistic forms that are appropriate to their biological sex; rather, “they learn a much broader set of gendered meanings that attach in rather complex ways to different ways of speaking, and they produce their own behaviour in the light of those meanings” (Cameron, 1997:60). Postmodern researchers have begun to examine ways in which the resources of linguistic variation are used to perform gender and construct identities. For example, fraternity men in Kiesling’s (1998) study constructed their casual and confrontational masculine identities through the use of the (ING) variable. Young women in Okamoto’s (1997) study rejected strongly feminine particles wa and kashira because they sound formal and prudish, but would use moderately masculine particles da and dayo to express intimacy with their interlocutors. Nerd girls in Bucholtz’s study (2001) were able to move from one identity to another by using different linguistic forms to achieve different discursive effects at the specific moment where they were standing (e.g. whether it be the use of formal register or the use of slang). These studies all suggest that the gendered identities that individuals construct are dynamic rather than categorical or fixed and that people perform gender differently in different social contexts. Moreover, individuals may deploy variation to affiliate themselves with or be distinguished from different groups from time to time.

4. The current study

Most of the studies on the use of DMs by NNSs use quantitative methods, discussing the patterns of usage of the DMs between NNSs, rather than considering the social contexts in which the L2 speakers are situated. Even though some studies did look into variables that might affect NNS’ use of DMs such as level of proficiency, length of stay in the English-speaking country, native speaker contact, and so forth, they tended to quantify the results without treating each learner as an individual social being. As Siegal (1996) points out, “second language learners do not merely model native speakers with a desire to emulate, but rather actively create both a new interlanguage and an accompanying identity in the learning process” (p. 36). Therefore, when discussing the use of DMs by NNSs, we should not only aim to find a general pattern, but also seek to realize the voice behind each individual’s choice of using DMs. The current study, combining insights from quantitative and qualitative research of L2 sociolinguistics and also research on language and gender, aims to have a better understanding of overall and individual learner’s use of DMs in a study-abroad context and factors that might affect their use of DMs. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. How do L2 speakers’ patterns of DM use compare with NSs?
2. What are the roles of gender and style in L2 speakers’ use of DMs?
3. How does individual subjectivity influence L2 speakers’ use of DMs?

4.1. Participants

This study was conducted at a research university in California. Six international teaching assistants (ITAs) with similar backgrounds, including 3 female and 3 male ITAs, were recruited through the Taiwanese/Chinese Graduate Student Association. All ITAs were native Mandarin speakers from Taiwan or Mainland China who had studied English formally for more than 8 years. They had been in the U.S. for between 2 and 4 years. Additionally, by the time of the study, they had all been TAs for at least two quarters. During the interviews, all participants described similar formal English learning experiences in Taiwan or China: first, teachers primarily employed the grammar-translation method accompanied by a lot of drill with little attention to communication, and second, they did not have many opportunities to speak English in class since it was usually a huge class with 50 students, nor did they interact with native-speakers of English outside the classroom. In addition, all the participants mentioned that the goal in the classroom was not to communicate well in English but to memorize vocabulary and be able to read and write to pass the college entrance exam. Therefore, it can be assumed that the focal participants did not acquire the use of DMs when they received formal English education in their home countries and it was not until they came to an English-speaking

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country that they started to “pick up” the local ways of speaking (e.g. the use of DMs). Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of the six participants.

### 4.2. Data collection

Each ITA was audio-recorded in two different settings. In the first setting, the participants were leading a discussion section of a large lecture class where they usually review the lecture notes, practice exercises and go over the previous homework assignment. The recorded discussions were approximately 40–50 min. To minimize any effect of the researcher’s presence and elicit the most authentic speech, I chose not to sit in the classroom but simply left the digital recorder on the table. In the second setting, I interviewed the participants with whom I share the same L1. It should be noted that even though the interviews might not be as candid as truly casual conversation because they were not conducted in our native language, the interviews could still display the participants’ natural use of DMs. Young (1991) in his study of the English morphology of Chinese learners also demonstrated that there was no interviewer effect whether the speakers were interviewed by a Chinese or a native English speaker. Actually, as L2 speakers generally express their nervousness and unease when they talk to NSs, they may not reveal their real language ability when talking to NSs. On the other hand, when talking to me, the participants could feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts since we share the same L1 and sometimes they could even ask me about some unfamiliar expressions, and thus they could truly reveal their acquisition of the target linguistic features. Besides, the participants were informed that the interview was more like a casual conversation without knowing the fact that their use of DMs was the research target. These interviews lasted 40 min and included topics such as the participants’ adjustments in the U.S., English learning experiences, participation in school and community, daily activities, and any other personal experiences they were willing to share. Therefore, the interviews can be considered to be relatively informal. I expected the focal TAs to use more formal speech in their TA discussion than in the interviews because of different roles they play in the two contexts (TAs versus interviewees), different topics they cover (class discussion versus small talk), and different settings where they were recorded (classrooms versus coffee shops).

### 4.3. Data analysis

The discussions and interviews were transcribed for analysis and 9 specific DMs were counted, yielding a total of 1422 tokens. The specific DMs counted are like, yeah, oh, you know, well, I mean, right, ok, and actually. Yeah, oh, you know, well, I mean, and like, they were selected because they appear more frequently in Fuller’s (2003a) native corpus. Ok and right were selected because of their frequent use in academic discourse especially in lectures and seminars (Schleef, 2004). The final selected DM was actually, which I have observed to be used frequently among Mandarin NNSs. In order to decide whether the selected particles have the status of DMs in the utterances where they occur, I adopted Fuller’s (2003a) two criteria for DMs. First, the semantic relationship between the elements that DMs connect in the utterance will remain the same if the DM is removed. In other words, DMs do not change the truth conditions of the propositions in the utterance. For example, as illustrated in (1b) and (2b) both utterances still carry the same stances and attitudes the speakers want to express with the omission of the DM actually and like. Second, the utterance will still be grammatically intact without the DM. For instance, speakers’ utterances in (1a) and (2a) would still remain grammatical without the use of the DMs. Some people may even suggest (2b) to be more grammatical than (2a).

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Iris</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Qinping</th>
<th>Joseph</th>
<th>Chi-wei</th>
<th>Zhong</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Ph.D. in economics</td>
<td>Ph.D. in agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* All the names are pseudonyms.
5. Findings and discussion

5.1. How do L2 speakers’ patterns of DM use compare with NSs?

In order to address whether the variable production of DMs by L2 speakers shows similarities or differences from NS patterns or whether the focal L2 speakers have acquired NS patterns of DM variation, I counted the number of tokens of total DMs in both discussions and interviews and normalized marker use to the number of tokens per 1000 words. Then I compared their use of DMs with use of DMs by NSs found in previous studies. However, I am aware that the current NNS data is not parallel to NS data in other studies, nor is it conclusive about all Mandarin L2 speakers of English. Therefore, findings compared to different NS data sets are aimed to get a suggestive picture of how these L2 speakers perform compared to NSs. Figs. 1 and 2 show the rate of each DM by all the individual speakers.

Schleef’s (2004) study of DMs in academic discourse by native instructors and students indicated that the use of ok and right is more frequent than the use of like and you know, especially when ok and right function as progression checks and transition markers. The results of NNS data also support Schleef’s NS data that ok and right are preferred in discussions because of the unique structure of academic speech. However, more discrepancy is found in the current NNS data from NS usage of DMs. In Fuller’s (2003a) study of DM use by native speakers between 20 and 35 years of age, she found that the most prevalent DMs in the data are you know, like, oh, well, yeah, and I mean. Similarly, Remero Trillo (2002) found that you know, I mean, and well, the “involvement markers” that enhance the involvement of the listener in the thinking process, are more frequent in native speech. As can be seen in Figs. 1 and 2, the results seem to show some difference from previous studies of native speakers and there appears to be a good deal of variation in the focal ITAs’ use of DMs.

Although well is one of the most prevalent DMs in native discourse from Fuller’s (2003a) study, among the 6 ITAs, only Chi-wei seems to comfortably use well as a DM, yielding 3.67 tokens per 1000 words while other ITAs either used

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1 In Fuller’s (2003) study, NSs used well at the rates of 3.6 tokens per 1000 words in interviews and 5.5 tokens in conversation; they used I mean at the rates of 2.5 tokens in interviews and 2.4 tokens in conversations.
well relatively infrequently or not at all. Moreover, Chi-wei’s interview data suggested that he has internalized some use of well in the manner of native speakers in their spoken discourse. According to Schiffrin (1987), one of the uses of well is the response to the prior question. It can function as a delay device when the speaker is searching for his/her response as in (3) or a response marker when an upcoming response does not resonate with the prior utterance as in (4).

(3) Researcher: How do you like the life in California?
Chi-wei: The life, here, well, it is difficult to describe, but, I think it’s very, um I should say I am pretty stressed because a lot of pressure from my study and research something like that.

(4) Researcher: You don’t hang out with your classmates? Or making friends with them?
Chi-wei: Well, I think classmates is just classmates, um I should say of course I will talk to them from time to time and we will discuss our homework or papers together, but that’s not relationship friends I think

Further analysis suggests that Chi-wei seemed to only fully acquire the delay device function preceding an answer that native speakers employ. Tokens of well were all used with answers to the prior questions, and none of the occurrences functioned as requests or self-responses which NSs also frequently employ (Schiffrin, 1987). Besides, Chi-wei’s expression about his conscious awareness of his frequent use of well and his tendency of lengthening and lowering the vowel to [wæː l] seems to suggest that his use of well may be part of a fixed formulaic utterance in certain situations.

Similar to the results for well, only Joseph seemed to use I mean as a DM, yielding 3.5 tokens per 1000 words, whereas other ITAs showed no use or few occurrence of I mean. When discussing I mean as a DM, Schiffrin (1987) suggests that one common function of I mean is as a marker of a speaker’s modification, expansion or clarification of the prior utterance. The following excerpts demonstrated that Joseph has acquired the function of I mean and could use it comfortably. In (5), I mean functions as modification; in (6) as expansion; in (7) as clarification.

(5) Joseph: But sometimes they ask me questions, I ask them reply and reply I mean repeat and repeat again, something like that.
(6) Joseph: So yeah we didn’t do something like analysis, I mean, analysis like statistic analysis, so we only do analysis by our own data and compare with others.
(7) Joseph: I think they are all the same year, I mean we came here at the same year, so we become very good friends.

Unlike the rest of the target DMs that the focal ITAs have all acquired to a different degree or displayed at a rate comparable to that of NSs, the overall infrequent use of well and I mean may suggest that these ITAs have not yet acquired the use of well and I mean as DMs. One possible explanation may be that there is no counterpart in Mandarin, these ITAs’ native language. In Mandarin, the equivalent marker to well as a delay device would be “um;” the frequent occurrence of “um” in the data confirms my assumption that almost all the focal ITAs did not replace the use of “um” with the use of

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2 The average use of “um” by the six participants is 11.2 tokens per 1000 words.
well, a response marker that NSs tend to use frequently in their spoken data. As for I mean, the counterpart in Mandarin is “wo de yisi shi” (my meaning is) which contains 5 Chinese characters with 5 syllables, and thus is never regarded as a DM in Mandarin. Since Mandarin L2 speakers of English need to pay more attention to the use of well and I mean as DMs by NSs because there are no equivalents in Mandarin, it is not surprising that well and I mean did not occur in some of ITAs’ spoken discourse. Similarly, this reason can also explain why almost all the focal ITAs employed actually as a DM at a higher rate than well and I mean. The use of actually as a DM may be influenced by their frequent use of “qishi” (actually) as a Mandarin DM.

One interesting finding is the high rate of yeah as a DM by these NNSs in interviews. The average of yeah use in interviews was 21.02 tokens, higher than Fuller’s (2003a) study on NSs in which the average rate of yeah in interviews was 14.2 tokens. Additionally, the specific function of yeah as self-repair was found in ITA discourse in addition to its uses to mark transitions, comment on the preceding utterance or indicate agreement, the functions which occur frequently in NS data. This supports Wong’s (2000) findings in which she observed the function of same-turn repair by her non-native participants whose native language is Mandarin. This usage of yeah has been found to be extremely rare in NS discourse, and NNSs use this yeah to resolve what was problematic or troublesome about the utterance. According to Wong, the use of yeah as same-turn repair by NNSs can be followed by an effective repair, no repair when the speaker is just rechecking the previous utterance, or ineffective repair. Examples (8)–(10) illustrate that a disfluency occurred first, and then the speaker paused, then self-repair came after the token yeah.

(8) Iris: Two ninety-eight is very impor- yeah, important for your data.
(9) Emily: Although there are some bad– yeah there are some bad parts, you know, some parts I don’t like, but at least I can have more opportunity like more jobs, maybe different kind of jobs, and know more people, yeah, and enjoy more sunshine.
(10) Researcher: Maybe you should study linguistics, huh
Qinping: Oh my god, yeah, maybe, but it’s totally different, I know. I do this just for fun, not for, you know, yeah, I don’t wanna analyze.

The results suggest that the use of each DM may be acquired by the focal ITAs to a different degree, which confirms earlier research on variation in the use of DMs (cf. Sankoff et al., 1997) that NNSs display extreme variation in their use of DMs. While the ITAs did use many of the same DMs as NSs, they either did not fully adopt the functions of DMs used by NSs (e.g. well and I mean) or employed different functions of DMs from NSs (e.g. yeah). Besides, influence of L1 transfer may explain why certain DMs are employed at a higher or lower rate by the focal ITAs, but further research is needed to claim the possible effect of L1 transfer.

5.2. What are the roles of gender and style in L2 speakers’ use of DMs?

Research on NS variation of DM use shows that speakers make linguistic choices based on their gendered identities and shifts of style. For example, Houghton (1995, cited in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003) found that her young women participants tended to use more tokens of you know to connect themselves to others. Dailey-O’Cain (2000) found the use of like to be typical in the casual speech of young American speakers, especially in young Californian women’s discourse. Siegel (2002) found that like as a hedging modifier is in particular more preferred by Philadelphian adolescent girls than boys. Teenage female Canadians in Tagliamonte’s (2005) study also tend to use like more frequently than their male counterparts. While also noticing that females tend to use more like than males do in academic discourse, Schleef (2004) found more use of you know in male speech than in female speech. However, the gender differences are not statistically significant and he further suggested that the styles of different disciplines and social roles in academic discourse play a more important role in the use of DMs. For example, Schleef found the use of like and you know is perceived to be more inappropriate in academic discourse by instructors and some instructors might have never acquired like due to its stylistic stigmatization. Similarly, Fuller (2003a) also suggested the role of the speakers in the contexts influence the use and the distribution of certain DMs; NSs in her study tend to use more oh and well in conversations than in interviews due to different types of interactions and speech contexts.

In order to see whether NNSs make different linguistic choices based on gender and stylistic practice in their use of DMs, I counted the number of tokens of each DM by gender (females versus males) and style (classroom discussions...
versus interviews) and then combined and tabulated the results for each speaker. A series of ANOVA analyses were performed on the data, yielding significant results for both the gender variable \((p < .05)\) and the style variable \((p < .01)\). Fig. 3 illustrates that female ITAs tended to use more DMs than male ITAs.

While the results show that females used more DMs than males, it is inconclusive to claim that this study supports previous studies in NS discourse that females tend to use more DMs. As can be seen in Fig. 4, Iris apparently employed far fewer DMs than other ITAs, especially in interviews. As Schleef (2004) suggests, gender variation in the use of DMs seems to be heavily dependent on context, speaker role, etc. since human beings are members of multifaceted social categories, not just male or female. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how contexts and speaker roles influence the use of DMs in addition to the gender factor.

Fig. 4 shows that all the ITAs tended to use DMs at a higher rate in interviews than in discussions, which contrasts with Fuller’s (2003a) study that NNSs reveal no difference in the use of DMs in different contexts or between different speaker roles. Three possible reasons can be proposed to explain this: first, the different types of discourse between discussions and interviews, second, the different roles these participants played in two contexts, and third, different functions of particular DMs. First, the content of discussions is usually prepared beforehand and DMs are usually not part of the planned discourse, whereas interviews are unlikely to be planned ahead and therefore ITAs use more DMs to facilitate their messages. Iris’s lecture notes confirm this assumption. When I told her that I could not transcribe some of the background noise, she sent me her lecture notes that she usually prepared before leading the discussion. Example (11) is a fragment of her lecture note. Even though Iris did not merely read her notes, the fact that she had planned the discussion beforehand may have resulted in her infrequent use of DMs in her discussion data as shown in Fig. 4.

(11) This week we will learn how to do both one-sample and independent samples t-tests in SAS using the data for your paper. After the completion of this exercise, you will have the necessary information to answer items 2 & 3 of your paper assignment.

Although other ITAs did not prepare detailed lecture notes as Iris did for their discussions, they all had planned lessons beforehand. Emily and Qinping chose to write detailed weekly lesson plans; Joseph used...
Powerpoint to facilitate his discussion, and Chi-wei and Zhong preferred to write what will be covered on the board in advance.

(12) Zhong: The strategy I use is to put down everything first, I put on the board, then students can catch what I am gonna say, that takes me a lot of time, but I prepare the lecture beforehand, I put down everything I can come up with, you know, on the board, so students can catch me.

Secondly, the participants’ roles as teaching assistants in discussions and as interviewees might influence the formality of their speech. As TAs in the classroom, the participants were aware of their roles as authorities, and thus they might tend to avoid using certain DMs in their speech due to the stylistic connotations of these DMs as very informal and colloquial (e.g. like and you know). Not surprisingly, the only DMs used more frequently in discussions were ok and right because these two markers function as devices for instructors or TAs to check students’ comprehension, ask for confirmation, and mark transitions to the next utterance. (13)–(15) illustrate the ITAs’ uses of ok and right in classroom discussions.

(13) Iris: Ok, let’s go to today’s topic. Ok, um today we will learn both how to do one sample and independent sample t-test for our paper, and actually we will answer two questions for our final project

(14) Emily: Ok. That is the formula we got right? Standard error. Ok, so since we have this one, then we want to find the end, then the next step would be this one here.

(15) Zhong: Ok basically that’s caution. So secondly we are gonna talk about is the **** principle, we used that principle during last week’s principle, right?

Finally, as just mentioned, it is not surprising the two frequent DMs in academic discourse are ok and right because of their functions to facilitate discussions. The reason that you know, like, and yeah were used more frequently in interviews than in discussions can be explained with the functions of these particular DMs. Schiffrin (1987) suggests that you know is used frequently in narratives because it allows the speaker to solicit hearer affirmation, helps the hearer to filter through the story and then creates a joint focus on speaker-provided information. Since the topics included in interviews were related to the participants’ daily lives, opinions and past experiences, in which the speakers would require hearer reception, they used you know more often than in discussions where they presented information about a subject. (16) and (17) show how you know is used in the speaker–hearer interaction.

(16) Joseph: this quarter is fine, because you know I spent more than 2 years here, and also during the past year, um you know, I interact with my students and my professors and I pass the oral exam, so, it makes me create more confidence to stay on the stage or to talk with students in English.

(17) Zhong: You know I worked for a while, and feel like, um I like to get more in-depth survey, you know before I got the job, I started for my master degree, at that time I already made up my mind, I am gonna get a Ph.D. oversea.

Another DM usage that was found more frequently in interviews is like. The functions of like are categorized as focuser like, functioning as a marker of new and focused information; approximator like, replacing the adverb about; and quotative like, serving to report speech. The quotative like was not included for analysis because it lacks DM status. As DM like is suggested to focus on the status of information just presented in an interaction, it is not surprising that like occurred more frequently in dyadic interactions where these participants tried to make information or opinions salient, present information they were uncertain of, or introduce examples (Fuller, 2003b). (18) and (19) illustrate the uses of like in the data.

(18) Iris: When I took the [GRE] class, the headquarter was in Beijing, and not too many cities have that class, but nowadays it’s like all over the country.

(19) Qinping: I don’t think I melt into American life. I don’t know, like my department, there are couples of American guys, but they are very very, I think they are very very nice people, yeah, but like if you don’t talk with them, they just ignore you.
As mentioned in the previous section and also shown in Fig. 5, yeah was predominantly employed more frequently by the focal NNSs in interviews. Two reasons can be postulated to explain this. First, yeah usually occurs in the dyadic interaction when one participant in the conversation displays attention, understanding, agreement, or response to a previous turn by the other speaker. Unlike in discussions where the TA usually dominates most of the talk, the two interlocutors in the interview context usually take turns in their interaction. There are more turn-taking situations, and as a result, much more tokens of yeah occur in interviews.

Second, as Wong (2000) proposed in her study of yeah in NNS English conversation, yeah may serve as a “self-presentation display” (p. 60). L2 speakers generally are more attentive of their language when they speak; they may want to present to their interlocutors that they can competently manage their language. Thus, they would use yeah as a way to repair or recheck any possible trouble sources. Although Wong’s study only focused on yeah in the environment of repair, I have observed that my focal participants also used yeah more frequently than NSs do to mark transitions (e.g. when topics shift) or to elaborate or comment on their preceding utterances. As can be seen in (20), Emily closed her response with yeah to signal her closing the topic and also confirm to what she had responded, and in (21), Qinping further elaborated more why she thought Beijing is better than Davis besides having more tall buildings. These functions of yeah as well as the repair function suggest the use of yeah may be part of L2 speakers’ unique stylistic repertoire. Zhong and Chi-wei’s much higher frequency of different functions of yeah as shown in Fig. 5 and the following excerpts (22) and (23) seems to further suggest L2 speakers tend to be constantly aware of their language in interaction. When engaging in the dyadic interaction, L2 speakers generally use more devices to maintain the flow of the conversation and make their language more understandable.

(20) Researcher: So you mentioned that before you came to [D City], you’ve been in the States for two years, what were you doing here?

Emily: Um... for my master’s degree in statistics. Yeah.

(21) Qinping: I think right now Beijing is much better, like you have a lot of tall buildings, you know, much better than [D City], yeah, that’s like entertainment whatever you want if you have money.

(22) Zhong: We play outside, yeah, we play badminton outside, cuz it’s pretty outdoor activity. We just play for fun without net yeah. Not for competition yeah just kind of practice, practice skill yeah. And yeah we also play billiards downstairs.

(23) Chi-wei: Um I think this is the second quarter- yeah of my TAship. Better right now, maybe but I am not pretty sure about that, yeah, I think I am still trying to improve my teaching, something like that yeah.

While the results above show that there was gender and stylistic difference, we should be aware that gender and style should not be treated as the only factors in the use of DMs since other factors such as identities, access to the linguistic resources, and attitudes also interact in the complex L2 learning even within a homogeneous group. Therefore, in the next section I will discuss how other social factors might play a role in individuals’ different level of acquisition and different frequency of DM use.

Fig. 5. Frequency of yeah between speech styles.

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3 This is a pseudonym.

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5.3. How does individual subjectivity influence L2 speakers’ use of DMs?

The six ITAs speak the same native language (i.e., Mandarin), have similar educational backgrounds, learned English in a formal EFL setting in their home countries, and have lived in the U.S. for 2–4 years. However, as can be seen Figs. 1 and 2, they displayed considerable differences in their use of DMs. Qinping’s high rate of DM use compared with those who came to U.S. before her further demonstrates that learner background and length of time in an L2-speaking country are not the primary explanation of L2 speakers’ acquisition of DM use. As Müller (2005) states, “[b]eing a native or non-native speaker, however, is not the only factor which might influence the frequency of discourse markers. There are also non-linguistic factors said to be relevant” (p. 40). Therefore, I will discuss four participants in detail due to space limit, examining how their multifaceted social identities relative to their language attitudes and participation in the local community might contribute to their individual repertoires and frequency of DM use.

5.3.1. Identity as a site of struggle

In social constructionist theory, identity is produced in multifaceted sites where a person may take up different subject positions. Furthermore, “while a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position, or even set up a counter-discourse which positions the person in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position” (Norton, 2000:127). Qinping’s identity as an international student and as a TA illustrates this point.

Being an international student, Qinping found it difficult to adjust to the life in D City in the beginning. Living with a Taiwanese roommate and rarely interacting with Americans because there were too many Mandarin speakers in her program, Qinping honestly expressed that she could not melt into the American life and did not have any American friends. In (24) Qinping described her first quarter in D City.

(24) I wasn’t used to this kind of boring life, at the beginning, you know I had a lot of friends, like in Beijing, we just went out, and we like went to Kareoke, we had fun, you know, every once in a while. But here I realize, I can not live a decent life here, I suffered a lot whether I should transfer, you know I had a lot of thought.

Qinping was somewhat upset that her American classmates never reached out to speak a single word to her, even though they had been sitting in the same classroom for 2 years. “If you don’t talk with them, they just ignore you” said Qinping. Moreover, she expressed how terrible her TA experience in the first quarter was. Students wrote in teaching evaluations that “her English is very difficult to understand” or “I can not understand, improve your English.” She felt very depressed after reading the evaluations. This frustration, however, turned out to be the force for her to improve her teaching skills. She tried very hard and put much effort into improving her English and teaching techniques so that students could understand her better. Even though she didn’t interact much with native speakers except for her TA discussions, she would instead watch TV and consciously imitate the characters, picking up their colloquial expressions. This may explain her highest rates of you know and like, the two DMs typically associated with colloquial interactions. Qinping responded to her struggle in TA experiences by setting up a counter-discourse, resisting to being positioned as an incompetent ITA. As a result, her resistance had motivated her to improve her speaking skills, consequently she also improved her overall use of DMs. Her use of DMs in the interview data was at the highest rate among the six participants. Two years after her first quarter, now Qinping has abandoned the thought of transferring to another school and has found her voice to challenge her subject position as an incompetent L2 speaker. Qinping said:

(25) You know, I know my English is probably hard to understand, but it also depends on, like how much efforts I put and how much they put to understand me. So it’s like two-side story.

5.3.2. Identity as changing over time

For poststructuralist theory, identity is never static or unified, but rather, it is the individual’s understanding of their relation to the world and is open to change (Weedon, 1997). Identity is so fluid that it may change over time as the subject changes their conception of themselves in relation to the social world. Joseph’s experiences in the English-speaking community illustrate the concept of identity as a site of potential change.

Prior to coming to the U.S., Joseph was constantly warned that he should avoid hanging out with Taiwanese friends if he wanted to improve his English. Bearing this in mind, Joseph put a lot of effort into trying to be integrated to the
local community: he went to an American church, he lived with an American roommate, he took the initiative to talk to American classmates, and so on. However, the more he tried to be acculturated in the local community, the more he realized that there was always a cultural barrier between his American friends and him. No matter how hard he tried to build up this relationship, he could never talk in depth with those Americans. Besides, his eagerness to join the local group also isolated him from his Taiwanese peers. They viewed him as somebody who was whitewashed or “chung yang mei wai” (to worship foreign things and fawn on foreign powers). Not able to express what he thought with his American friends or be understood by his Taiwanese peers on top of his already pressured study, Joseph was lost in why he came here and doubted why he made his life more difficult. After a year of unhappy and lonely life, Joseph said he “surrendered” and decided to go back to the Taiwanese circle where he could freely express his thoughts in his native language and share things with people who “connect to his heart.” Joseph still valued the importance of knowing American culture and mastering English skills, but his decision to go back to Taiwan to contribute his knowledge after he earns the degree has changed his attitude toward improving his English. What really matters is whether he had enough English ability in his professional field, not whether he could have small talk with Americans. Instead of trying hard to be assimilated to the local culture and imitate the native speakers, Joseph realized that he should stick to who he was and keep his happier self.

(26) I think Taiwanese accent is still in my body. You know what? If you ask me this question before, I would say yes, I think you need to know English very well, which means pronunciation is correct, grammar is correct, like an American, speak in American way, American pronunciation, but at this time, I would say I am Taiwanese, and I talk to you in English right? Then I show more Taiwanese way.

This excerpt shows how Joseph has changed his view; now he would like to speak like a Taiwanese because that is the identity he could not deny. Joseph’s efforts to interact with Americans in his first year provided him with opportunities to acquire the native expressions; however, his later choice of not actively socializing with Americans and his awareness of his Taiwanese identity prevented him from fully acquiring and mastering the use of DMs, and this resulted in his low rate of DM use even though he did employ almost all DMs in his speech.

5.3.3. Identity as presentation of self

As Siegal (1996) suggests, L2 speakers’ conception of themselves, their position in society and their views of the L2 and its culture influence their sociolinguistic competence. Two focal participants—Iris and Zhong, both married prior coming to the U.S., illustrate how individual differences influence the acquisition of DMs.

Unlike many other international students who usually socialize more often with people from their countries and use their native language after or even in class, Iris had more opportunities to use English since she was one of the two international students in her department. However, she employed far fewer DMs than the other two female ITAs. One possible reason might be her professional identity as a teacher which may result in her reluctance to use informal DMs in her discourse. While acknowledging that she noticed native speakers use DMs such as you know, like and well a lot, she expressed no intention to follow those “kouyu” (colloquial words). Iris was very concerned to construct a professional persona in English, which also parallels her Chinese teacher persona. As a high school teacher in China for several years before coming to the U.S., she had constructed her identity as the authority in class and had been accustomed to the formal “teacher talk” since then. Even when we switched to chat in Mandarin, she still maintained her “teacher talk” style and seldom employed young-speaker discourse style. One example that illustrates her teacher identity might have a stronger influence than her current graduate student identity on her language choice is when Iris was asked if she had experienced any difficulty in her TA discussion. She replied “before I came here, I was a teacher for five years, you know, teachers are like God there “and “because I am more experienced”, emphasizing her confidence in teaching. Another factor that might have influenced her use of DMs is her identity as a married woman. Living with her Chinese husband and mother-in-law, she did not try to actively socialize with American classmates. Being a wife and a daughter-in-law, Iris had to devote her whole time to her family after school or during the weekend. Even though she could have more access to acquire the use of DMs by participating more in her department, her identity as a wife and daughter-in-law has limited her opportunities for language socialization. Iris did not actively participate or try to acculturate to the local community; additionally, she was clearly aware of how she presented herself and how her language choice and style should reflect her professional persona in the local community. As a result, her data display the overall low rate of DM use.
On the other hand, Zhong, also a married graduate student, actually devoted more time to his schoolwork. Therefore, Zhong had more time to participate in the local community and interact with native speakers. In addition, as a member of Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that was banned in China and whose practitioners were persecuted or suppressed, Zhong cannot go back to his home country after he receives his doctoral degree. His role as a Falun Gong member acted as a strong force in terms of his desire to become a professor in an American institute or other English dominant countries such as Singapore or Canada. Therefore, he put greater effort into being integrated into the local community and tried hard to improve his teaching skills so that he could have more chances once he goes on the job market. In addition to taking ESL classes that trained ITAs in discourse strategies and oral proficiency, he took an ESL academic writing course and signed up for an American conversation partner through the Partners in Acquiring Language Program so that he could have a weekly one-on-one talk with a native speaker. He also spent one summer doing his internship in Cincinnati where he sought every opportunity to speak with his native colleagues and mimic their expressions. Zhong expressed that his English improved most through constant interaction with native speakers. While acknowledging that he desired to interact with native speakers, Zhong did not want to get rid of his accent. Zhong said:

(27) I don’t want to get rid of my accent completely, but I just want to improve my English and make it easier for native speakers to understand me yeah. Even though they can detect at the first sentence I speak, ok this guy is not native speaker, that’s ok, cuz that’s also a feature of, yeah myself, yeah I am from mainland, I do not want to delete my accent, but I want to lower the barrier, yeah, make the communication smooth.

For Zhong, his Chinese accent tells people his origin and he did not want to deny it; he imitated the native expressions but not their accent. His purpose of picking up the native ways of speaking was to reduce the communication barrier between native speakers and him, not to sound like a native speaker. Zhong was clear about how his language choice should match his identity. His consciousness of his goals of language use and his active investment in improving his English have resulted in his higher rate of DM use in his interview than other two male ITAs.

6. Conclusion

Previous sociolinguistic studies of SLA have generally used either quantitative approaches or qualitative analysis to explain L2 speakers’ acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. The use of both approaches has enabled the present study to gain a fuller picture of L2 speakers because it not only dealt with the group-Chinese ITAs but also accounted for individual subjectivity. The study has addressed the research questions in detail. First, although NNSs have all acquired native use of DMs to some extent, they either obtained partial acquisition or revealed some discrepancy from NSs in the usage of the individual function of DM. Moreover, unlike other variationist studies of L2 speech that show more systematic patterns of variation on the target variable (ex. –t/d deletion, -ing, plural forms, etc.), there is extreme variation in the frequency of the focal participants’ DM use. The results also support Fung and Carter’s (2007) work on DM use by Hong Kong L2 speakers in which their ESL learners show restricted range of DM use and some unnatural use of DMs.

Second, while the study shows gender and stylistic differences in the use of DMs by NNSs, style seems to be a more important factor than gender. The finding that there is a greater stylistic difference than gender difference suggests that ITAs of both genders moved in the same direction to perform different identities by deploying different linguistic resources in different contexts. In the classroom discussion, they had to portray themselves as professional TAs, and therefore they had to avoid using colloquial words to perform their professional personas. In addition, the different types of discourse between discussions and interviews and different functions of particular DMs also explain why particular DMs are preferred in particular interactions. This result disagrees with Fuller’s (2003a) finding that “the differences in DM use for different speech styles are subtle and difficult to acquire” (p. 206).

Third, this study suggests that we should be cautious in making generalizations about L2 speakers even within relatively homogenous groups, but instead, treat each learner as an individual social being with multiple complex identities in their process of second language acquisition. As illustrated in the study, the focal participants have shown different voices and lived experiences and these differences have resulted in their different access to second language resources, different attitudes to second language socialization, and different investments in second language learning.

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This study emphasizes the need to explore L2 speakers' inner voices regarding how their individual subjectivity in relation to their attitudes and participation might affect their use of DMs in addition to using quantitative methods to explain the patterns in the use of DMs.

This study has provided a more holistic approach to examine L2 speakers’ use of DMs. However, the data were collected in each setting at one time; further research which employs longitudinal accounts of L2 learners’ development is needed to interpret their changes and acquisition over time.

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