Another look at, well, you know . . .

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ONE OF the hitherto undefined laws of nature relates to the way an author's post-bag increases after he has written a book on English usage. (I say 'he' to reflect the regrettable fact that the vast majority of usage pundits have been, and continue to be, male.) In my case, after *Who cares about English usage?* was published by Penguin in 1984, the rise was sharp, steady, and even now – four years later – it has only slightly diminished. What is interesting is to see which topics covered in that book have attracted most comment. To date, the 'top topic' has undoubtedly been the use of *you know*, along with the other parenthetic phrases that we introduce into our conversation (*well, you see, I mean*, etc.).

These phrases are widely criticised as being markers of unclear thinking, lack of confidence, inadequate social skills, and a range of others undesirable characteristics. My aim in writing about them was to see why, if this is so, they continue to be so widely used in conversation. Why, in a word, are they so popular?

I took the line that people mainly object to them when they are *overused* – as when a Prominent Person is asked a straightforward question in a TV interview, and replies with an empty answer studded with wells, you knows, you sees, and I means. We are right to criticise, in such cases, because we have a right to receive a clear answer to a straight question, and if we do not, we feel cheated. Similarly, in everyday circumstances, if we encounter people who use *you know* to avoid the effort of having to think, in a context where we feel some degree of explicitness and precision is desirable, then again we have a right to be critical. Unless one were making a special point, it wouldn't be appropriate to end this paragraph (or its equivalent in spoken exposition) with, well, you know –

But only a tiny part of the use of *you know* is due to this sort of situation. Most of the time when such phrases are used in everyday conversation, they are not irritatingly noticeable; usually we do not even realise they are there. They are not overused; they are just used. And the fluency with which we use them conceals a subtle and complex set of rules and grammar, meaning, and pronunciation, which researchers into English have only recently begun to describe.

Here are some of the situations which permit the use of *you know:*

○ At the beginning of a sentence, it is often used to soften the force of what we are saying – a verbal equivalent to a gentle hand on the shoulder. Compare the difference between *You should be more careful*, which is fairly abrupt, and *Y'know, you should be more careful*, which is much more sympathetic. (Note also the *y'*, which shows that the *you* is spoken rapidly, with hardly any emphasis given to the vowel.)

○ In the middle of a sentence, it is often used to clarify or amplify the meaning of what one has just said. It warns the listener that the next words are particularly important. *He's just got a new BMX – you know, one of those tough little bikes . . .*

○ At the end of the sentence, it often acts as a kind of tag question – as a check that the listener is understanding what is being said: *He's bought a BMX – you know?* This use, especially following an incomplete sentence, was particularly common in hippy speech of the 1960s, and doubtless it was this association which led many non-hippies to object to it.

These are just some of the functions of *you know*. What the written examples don't show, of course, is the way we vary our intonation and rhythm in moving between these different uses – typically, the high rapidly rising pitch of the first example; the slower, low rising pitch of the second; and the slow mid rising pitch of the third. Nor do the examples make it obvious that there are

grammatical rules governing the way we use the phrase.

Note, for instance, that when the phrase is used at the beginning of a sentence, it is usual to have it followed only by a statement. To ask a question (*?You know, is the pub open?*) sounds very odd, as does giving a command (*?You know, open the door!*) or giving vent to an exclamation (*?You know, hell!*).

One way of showing that *you know* follows grammatical rules is to try to use it absolutely everywhere in our speech. We soon find that it is not possible to be so free with it. It cannot split a compound expression, for example, such as **I went to New you know York*. Nor is it usual before a coordinated pronoun, such as **John and you know I left early*. There are several other syntactic restrictions.

There are semantic restrictions too. Putting it before a noun makes you think of the noun as special in some way. We read in extra meaning. *John and his friend will be here later* is innocuous enough. *John and his, you know, friend will be here later* isn't. We see depths of meaning in the kind of friend John must be.

Or consider the normality of *My car's got four, you know, quadrophonic loudspeakers*, and the abnormality of *?My car's got four, you know, wheels*. We don't usually use *you know* before things which are totally predictable.

You know, and the other parenthetical phrases of English, are really far more complex and important than we usually allow. I tend to think of them as the oil which helps us perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and inter-action smoothly and efficiently. They give the speaker an opportunity to check back, to plan ahead, and to obtain listener reaction. They give the listener an opportunity to keep up and to react. If we all had perfect self-control, memory, attention, and logical thought processes, doubtless they would be unnecessary; but we haven't. We may admire those who approach this ideal state, and who can speak without a trace of non-fluency. But language was never intended to be restricted to an elite corps.

As with any word or phrase, they can be over-used, draw attention to themselves, and begin to irritate. But really this isn't, really, something which is really restricted to phrases like *you know*; really any word in the language, if really over-used, will really draw attention to itself and really begin to irritate. What is unfortunate is that, because of the stylistic excesses of certain groups of speakers in the past (and it wasn't just the hippies, don'tcha know), all uses of *you know* have come to be tarred with the same brush – even the useful ones.

These expressions are so complex that it would take a book to expound their use adequately. And now someone has. Britt Erman, of the University of Stockholm, has written a meticulously researched account of the way these phrases – she calls them 'pragmatic expressions' – are used in British English.* She's described the way three of the commonest expressions – *you know*, *you see*, and *I mean* – were used in a corpus of 12 face-to-face conversations between educated people. If you want to read the conversations themselves, you can – in *A corpus of English conversation* (Jan Svartvik & Randolph Quirk, Lund 1980). This will give you a sense of who the speakers are, and whether they are people who can be glibly dismissed as people of unclear mind. (They aren't.)

Erman's book is the first systematic study of these expressions in a large sample of real conversation. And as a result, we now have an alternative to the many impressionistic accounts – including my own – which did little more than draw attention to some of the general characteristics of these expressions, in a somewhat vague way – for example, talking about them all as if they were merely 'space fillers' or 'hesitation markers'.

Erman adopts a different approach. She looks in particular at the way these expressions are said, noting their intonation, and the way pauses are used around them. She examines where they appear in sentence structure, and how they function in relation to the way we express our meaning and interact with each other. What she finds is that the function of these expressions can't be summed up in a single generalisation. Each expression performs a different range of functions, and has its own typical intonation features, grammatical position, meaning, and social use.

Here are just a few of the functions that Erman finds can be identified for these expressions in the stream of speech:
○ *you know* is often used to introduce background information (such as a parenthesis), or extra clarification or exemplification;

it is also often used to finish off an argument, or to mark the boundary between one topic or manner of talking and another (*you know, I've been thinking about that . . .*).

○ *you see* tends to be used after a summarizing remark, or at the end of an explanation; it can also be used when someone is justifying a previous claim (*so that's why I left, you see*) or making some kind of evaluative or rhetorical comment.

○ *I mean* is often used to signal a change of mind or viewpoint, or to modify a claim made earlier, thus making the speaker less committed; it can also be used to clarify, or to justify something previously said (*I mean, how else could she have known . . .?*).

But pragmatic expressions do have certain things in common. They share in the task of helping speakers plan what is to be said. They help speakers to organise their message into intelligible chunks. And they facilitate the often thorny task of making communication between speakers successful. In formal speech situations, their uncontrolled use can be a hindrance. But in the rapid give-and-take of informal spontaneous speech, Erman's study makes it clear that they are a much-undervalued asset.

* Britt Erman, *Pragmatic expressions in English.* Stockholm Studies in English LXVIV. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987.