

I just... I think there might be a new construction
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English speakers often break off after saying *I just...*, and restart the sentence after the apparent disfluency, as in *I just... I think you should go now*, or *I just... I can't take it anymore*.

Impressionistically, the prevalence of the *I just... I* sequence appears to be growing in North America, which is supported by rough signs of age-grading in smaller corpora such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic English. To confirm and explore this possibility, this paper studies the use of *I just... I* in the speech of actors in American soap operas. While the utterances in soap operas are mostly scripted, disfluencies like *I just... I* will almost always reflect the speech patterns of the actors rather than the writers.

The analysis is based on the transcripts of almost every episode broadcast since late 2001 of every American daytime soap opera, assembled from broadcast close captioning and edited by the volunteers at tvmegasite.net. Using the tags added by the volunteers to indicate which character is speaking, utterances in a transcript were attributed to an actor if he or she was the only actor who played that character during the year of broadcast. Actors were included in the analysis if they spoke more than 25,000 attributable words in the transcripts, if their gender and place and date of birth could be determined from public websites, and if they were born in the US or Canada or immigrated as children.

The final database included 103 million words attributable to 572 actors.

The frequency of *I just... I* in the transcripts increased substantially between 2001 and 2017. More importantly, the frequency of use by actors is clearly age-graded, increasing six-fold from 53 tokens per million words for those actors born before 1940, to 330 tokens per million words for actors born between 1985 and 1995. The age-grading is also gender-graded, with men lagging about a quarter century behind women: women increasing from 88 to 396 and men from 24 to 230 tokens per million words between those two age-groups. The increase has been driven both by an early increase in *I just* tokens (with or without a following disfluency), peaking with actors born in the 1970s then decreasing, and by an accelerating growth in *I just... I* disfluencies as a share of *I just* tokens, from 5% to 15%.

The growth in frequency of *I just... I* for both genders follows the initial, accelerating phase of the S-shaped logistic curve that is common in sociolinguistic changes. The curve does not seem to have reached its inflection point yet, i.e., there is no sign the growth rate has started decelerating towards a level of saturation. Outliers among the actors suggest ample room for future growth: six actors have frequencies of *I just... I* above 1000 tokens per million words, with the most extreme having 1671 — a frequency comparable to that of *were* and *had* among the hundred most frequent words of English. For the most extreme actors, *I just... I* sequences constitute two-thirds of their *I just* tokens.

The results suggest that, while speakers may not literally *plan* their disfluencies, at the very least they foresee a considerable proportion of upcoming disfluencies and *manage* them in language-specific ways, and that these ways can undergo relatively rapid historical change, like many other sociolinguistic features. And, for some speakers, the now very-high-frequency collocation *I just... I* seems to have moved from “mere” disfluency, or even a strategic hesitation, to a conventionalized and prosodically integrated pragmatic marker (e.g., of reluctance, ‘I hate to tell you this but...’). If patterns of disfluency can evolve through time and become conventionalized into new grammatical constructions, this could challenge some of the assumptions behind analyses of other constructions, such as the double-*be* construction in *The thing is, is that...* (e.g., Coppock et al. 2006, Massam 2017).

References

Coppock, Elizabeth, Jason Brenier, Laura Staum, and Laura Michaelis. 2006. 'The thing is, is' is no mere disfluency. *Berkeley Linguistic Society* 32, 85-96.

Massam, Diane. 2017. Extra *be*: The syntax of shared shell-noun constructions in English. *Language* 93, 1, 121-152.