

I JUST... I THINK THERE MIGHT BE A NEW CONSTRUCTION*

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One very frequent pattern in the speech of North American English speakers is for a sentence to begin with *I just*, then break off in an apparent disfluency, then resume with a repetition of *I*. A few examples:

I just... I had to be with you.

I just... I want to make sure we're doing the right thing.

I just... I hate being in the dark.

I just... I beg you to believe that I don't use language like that.

This pattern seems to be becoming more frequent. This impression can be weakly confirmed in some smaller corpora of natural speech, such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic English, but without enough data to allow us to be very confident of the results. In this paper, we'll look at a very large corpus of transcribed speech, though one where most of the speech (but plausibly not *I just...I*) has been scripted.

Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) showed that there was much to be learned about the use of intensifiers from the scripted speech of characters in the sitcom *Friends*. Following this lead, in this paper we'll look at the use of *I just...I* in one of the richest available sources of speech by actors across a wide range of ages — over a hundred million words in transcripts of American daytime soap operas. We'll associate as many of these transcribed words as possible with the actors who spoke them, see how the usage of *I just...I* differs between men and women, and track how its frequency has grown across generations.

One potential objection to using speech during a scripted drama to infer an actor's typical speech patterns is that it's impossible to tell whether tokens of *I just...I* were really inserted by the actors themselves, or whether the actors were simply reading what was written for them in the script. In fact, we can be confident that the large majority (*at the very least 85%*) of the tokens of *I just...I* in our transcript corpus will result from the speech

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processes of the actors, and not the decisions of the writers.¹

1. The corpus of soap-opera transcripts

The website *tvmeasite.net* has transcripts of almost all episodes of all English-language American daytime soap operas since late 2001, edited by the site manager Suzanne Lanoue and several volunteers. The transcripts are based on captures of the close captioning included in the broadcast of each episode,² but the volunteers have edited almost all episodes to merge caption lines belonging to the same speech and make sure each speech is tagged with the name of the character who spoke it. A fragment of a typical transcript is shown in Figure 1.

Mia: Gabi, wait.
 Gabi: What's with you. Are you stalking me or something?
 Mia: Look, I just--I want to work things out between us, you know? I really want us to be friends.
 Gabi: Are you kidding me? After the way you've treated me? Mia, you are the last person on this earth I want to be friends with.

Figure 1: A fragment of a typical transcript. (*Days of Our Lives*, June 16, 2010)

For this project, I downloaded the transcript of each episode between 2001 and April

¹While there are no soap opera shooting scripts available online that would let us check whether or not *I just...I* tokens were scripted by the screenwriters, there *are* a large number of shooting scripts and late-stage network scripts available for feature films and other TV shows (mostly for pilot episodes of weekly primetime series). Many of these scripts overlap with another corpus of manually verified transcripts of the resulting episodes/films. There are 90 tokens of *I just...I* in the manually verified transcripts where the line in question can be found in the available script — only 13 of those tokens were actually written in the script.

So, if the production constraints of soap operas were the same as those for films and weekly TV series, we could conclude that about 85% of *I just...I* tokens in our soap opera transcripts would represent the speech of the actor, not the decisions of the writers. In fact, the production differences make this a highly conservative estimate. The manually verified film and primetime TV transcripts have *substantially* lower frequencies of *I just...I* than the soap opera transcripts do — and not unexpectedly. Feature films and weekly TV series (especially their pilot episodes) have weeks or months of time for rehearsal, shooting, and editing, and their actors and directors generally care more about sticking exactly to the script. Soap opera productions, in contrast, are essentially cranking out a feature-length film every two days; there's little time for actors to memorize their lines, less to rehearse, and there's almost never a second take for any scene. Soap opera writers probably include *I just...I* tokens in their scripts at the same very low rate that writers in other genres do, but soap opera actors end up speaking far more tokens of *I just...I* that are never reshot or edited out.

²The fact that the transcripts are based on close captions means that occurrences of *I just...I* will be somewhat undercounted. Along with *actually*, hedges like *basically*, and discourse particles like *well* and *now*, apparent disfluencies are a favourite target of captioners looking to delete words in order to meet the technical limits on how many characters per second can be transmitted in the close captioning signal. Despite this, there's an extremely close correspondence between the transcript and the audio in the dozen or so soap transcripts that I have checked against the broadcast, with far fewer of the deletions that are common in close captioning of other TV genres.

2018 from *tvmegasite.net*, then stripped out non-transcript material (e.g., ads, page navigation), and saved the remainder in a raw text file with each speech as a separate line. Some episodes were discarded because they had no character tagging or because they contained excessive amounts of gibberish created by glitchy caption capturing. Manual editing removed some of the more obvious material from commercials and news breaks that had remained in some of the earlier transcripts. The final database includes transcripts of just under 28,000 episodes of *All My Children*, *As the World Turns*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Days of Our Lives*, *General Hospital*, *Guiding Light*, *One Life to Live*, *Passions*, *Port Charles*, and *The Young and the Restless*.

Tying each speech to the actor who spoke it was trickier, since soap opera producers routinely replace the actors who play the characters, and the same actor will often play different characters in other soaps (and even in the same soap). I limited my attempts to identify the actors to those characters who spoke at least 10,000 words in the transcript corpus. I identified the actors who played each of those characters, and the range of dates they played it, using the Internet Movie Database (*imdb.com*), Wikipedia, and news sites and fan wikis (such as *soaps.sheknows.com*). These ranges were used to attribute speeches to actors; for example, a speech tagged with the character Gabi in the June 16, 2010, transcript of *Days of Our Lives* (excerpted in Figure 1) was attributed to the actor who was playing Gabi on that date (Gabriela Rodriguez). In all analyses, I included only actors whose date and place of birth could be identified from public sources — usually fetched automatically from their IMDB page, sometimes from Wikipedia or one of the soap fan sites.³ I also included an actor only if they were born in the US or Canada, immigrated to the US or Canada as a child, or if their biography included some other evidence of their first language being North American English (e.g., belonging to an American military family posted overseas). Finally, I included only speeches attributed to actors who were at least 13 years old on the airdate of the episode and only actors who were born before 2000 and had at least 20,000 words in the corpus attributed to them — except in the brief discussion below of *I just...I* use among children and adolescents.

2. *I just...I* use depends on age and gender

The final analyses are based on 606 actors, who between them spoke 104.2 million words, including 21,314 tokens of *I just...I*. Simple division tells us that the overall frequency of *I just...I* in the corpus is 205 tokens per million words — about the frequency of words like *quite*, *yours*, *also*, and *dinner*.

But this average obscures considerable and systematic differences in *I just...I* use across ages and between women and men, as shown in figure 2.

³Some skeptics accustomed to the pre-internet world might doubt the veracity of actors' public birthdates. In favour of their accuracy is the fact that, in 2016, after years of lobbying by actors who felt that being identified as middle-aged was costing them roles, the California state legislature passed a law requiring IMDB to delete an actor's date of birth upon request. This law (recently ruled unconstitutional) would scarcely have been necessary if falsifying a birthdate on IMDB had been an easy thing to do.

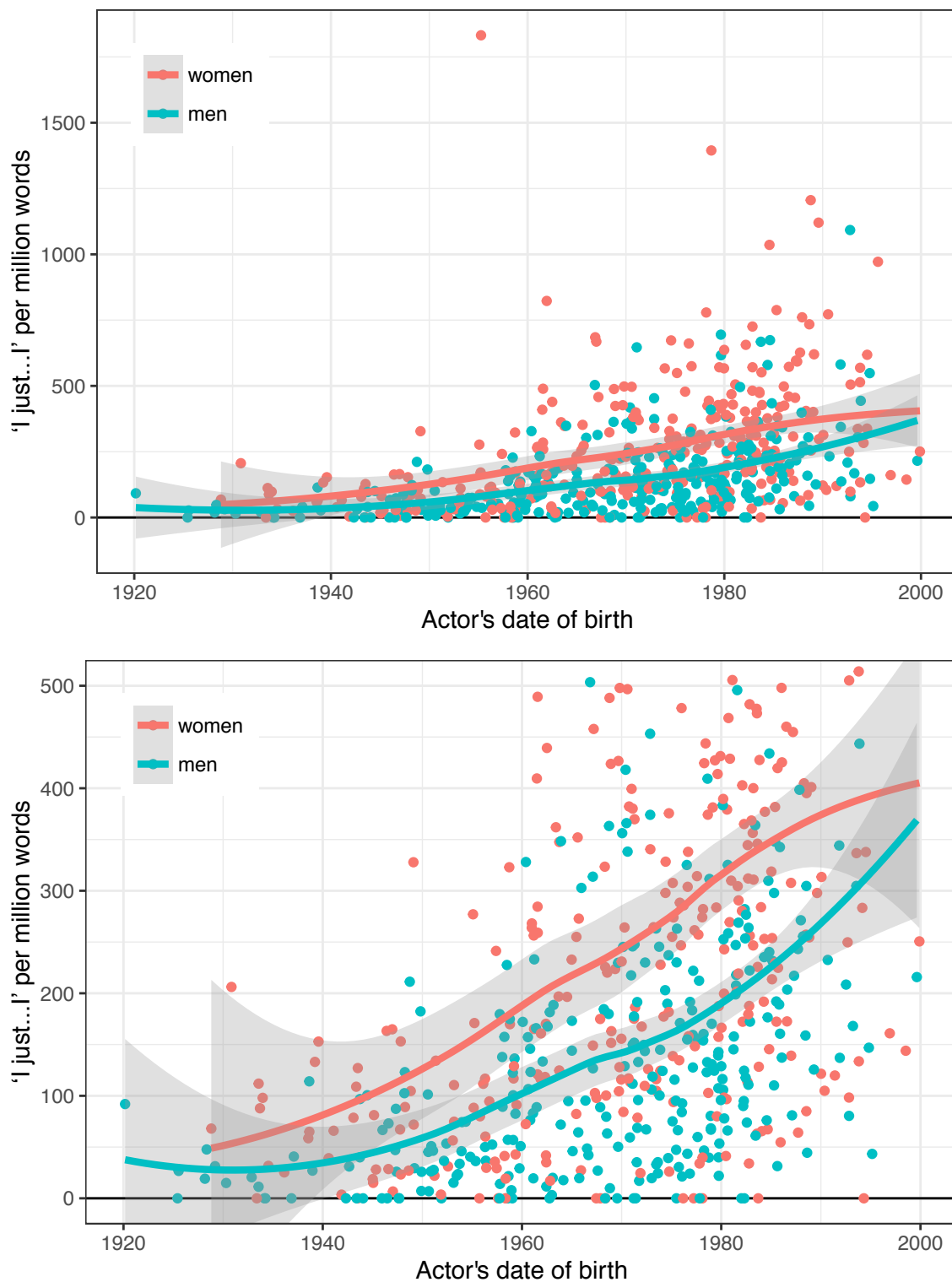


Figure 2: Frequency of *I just...I* use (in tokens per million words) for each actor included in the corpus. Top: all data. Bottom: zoomed in to the range from 0 to 500 tokens per million words.

I just...I use increased from 87 tokens per million words among women born before 1940, to 330 among women born in 1990 or later. Among men, *I just...I* use increased over ten-fold, from 30 per million words for actors born before 1940, to 325 for actors born in 1990 or later. Use among men lags about two decades behind use among women.

This data isn't easily subject to a logistic regression analysis, since it isn't clear exactly what should count as a "failure" to use an *I just...I* construction, but the pattern in Figure 2 looks much like the beginning of the S-shaped logistic curve often found in sociolinguistic changes, with no sign that the curve has already hit its inflection point or what the inflection point may be. (The apparent slight flattening of the curve for women born after 1990 is caused by a very small handful of actors who were still young teenagers when they spoke their lines; use of *I just...I* among children and adolescents will be discussed briefly below.) The outliers suggest that the future frequency of *I just...I* could easily end up at over a thousand tokens per million words, where six (or 1%) of our actors already are. The most extreme actor in the corpus, Alexandra Neil born in 1955, used 1832 tokens per million words — approximately the frequency of words like *man*, *where*, and *them* — which, if *I just...I* were a single word, would make it about the 90th most frequent word in her lexicon.

The growth in the use of *I just...I* isn't caused by a general increase in disfluency among younger actors. For example, the combined frequency of the parallel sequences *I, uh... I* and *I, um... I* has remained essentially flat across ages at around a hundred tokens per million words — or about double the frequency that *I just...I* started with for those born before 1940 and a third of the frequency it has ended up at for those born after 1990.

Instead of representing an overall increase in disfluency, the growth of *I just...I* seems to result from a combination of two factors, each also showing a typical pattern for sociolinguistic change. First, as shown in Figure 3, the frequency of the sequence *I just* (with or without resumption) has been increasing steadily, from 941 tokens per million words for actors born before 1940, to 2125 tokens per million words for actors born in 1990 or later, with women clearly leading men. Second, as shown in Figure 4, the frequency of *I just...I* as a share of all *I just* tokens has also been increasing, growing from 5.8% to 15.4% between those two age groups, again with women leading men, and with the most extreme speaker saying *I just...I* on over two-thirds of the occasions when she said *I just*.

Another feature that *I just...I* may share with many sociolinguistic changes is the fact that pre-adolescent speakers don't seem to use it. There are eight actors who spoke at least 10,000 words each in the corpus before the age of 12 — these child actors didn't utter a single token of *I just...I*.⁴ In contrast, as we've seen, actors aged 13 and older with comparable birthdates since 1990 (and thus who *could* have been a pre-teen when the corpus began) have rates ranging between 0 and 1206, averaging 328 tokens per million words. This would suggest that using *I just...I* is something that emerges during adolescence, though another reasonable interpretation is that child actors are simply weird and even

⁴Given this, the 95% confidence interval for the rate of *I just...I* use in these child actors is between 0 and just under 20 tokens per million words.

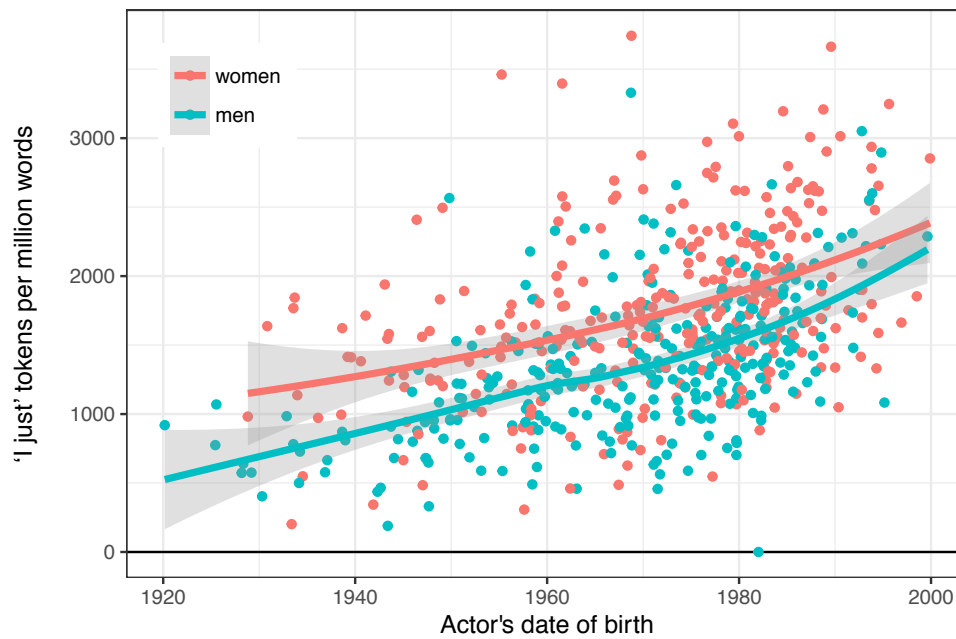


Figure 3: Frequency of the sequence *I just* (in tokens per million words) for each actor in the corpus.

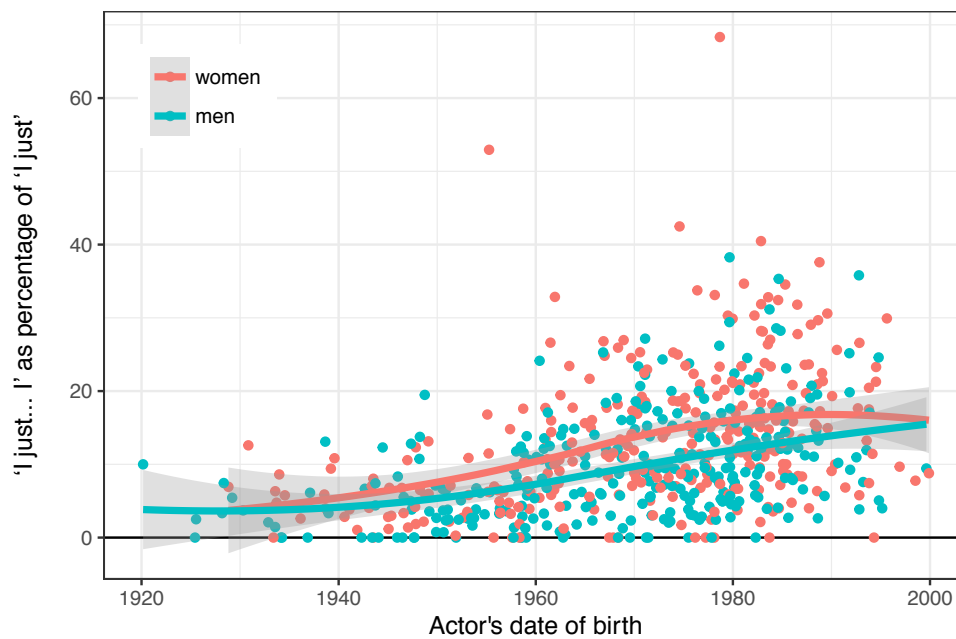


Figure 4: Percentage of *I just... I* as a proportion of all *I just* tokens for each actor in the corpus.

	<i>I</i>	<i>I just</i>	<i>I just...I</i>
number of unique verbs	149	130	102
entropy (unpredictability)	3.73	3.46	3.21
negated	16%	15%	37%

Table 1: Some properties of a sample of 1000 clauses containing *I*, 1000 clauses containing *I just* (but not *I just...I*), and 1000 clauses containing *I just...I*.

less representative of the general population of children than adult actors are of the general population of adults.

3. What *I just...I* gets used for

3.1 More limited in use than *I* or *I just*

Figure 5 shows the most common verb lexemes⁵ in (a) clauses with *I* as the subject, (b) clauses with the sequence *I just*, but without resumption, and (c) clauses with *I just...I* (but excluding *I just... I just*). The overwhelming majority of clauses with *I just...I* express either modalities of possibility and necessity (e.g., *can*, *can't*, *need to*, *have to*) or mental and emotional states of the speaker (*want*, *think*, *know*, *feel*, *love*, *hate*, *wish*, *am sorry*, *am happy*). Even those clauses that use a more general verb like *have*, *get*, *keep* usually express mental and emotional states (e.g., *get angry*, *have an idea*, *keep worrying*). The same categories also apply to a numerical majority of clauses with simply *I* — since these are, after all, the things that human beings want to talk about — but the skewing is stronger for clauses with *I just*, and much, much stronger for clauses with *I just...I*.

The figures in Table 1 support the conclusion that *I just...I* is used in more limited ways than even *I just* is. A thousand clauses with *I just...I* contain only two-thirds the number of distinct verb lexemes as a thousand clauses with *I* do. Similarly, the entropy measures on the distribution of verb lexemes show that *I just...I* clauses are more predictable than *I* and *I just* clauses are. Table 1 also shows a fact I have no explanation for: clauses with *I just...I* are negated more than twice as often as clauses with *I* or *I just*.

3.2 A negative politeness strategy

The imbalances illustrated in Figure 5 and Table 1 are what you'd expect if *I just...I* had become, or were in the process of becoming, a full-fledged grammatical construction used for a specific purpose in specific contexts. In this section, I'll speculate on what that specific

⁵A slightly idiosyncratic definition of “lexeme” was used in this analysis. For most clauses, the lexeme was considered to be the bare form of the main verb of clause, ignoring any auxiliaries for tense and aspect, for example, *eat* in the clauses *I ate it*, *I'll have eaten it*, and *I'm going to eat it*. But, since they were so common, other modal verbs such as *can*, *can't*, *could*, *must* and modal expressions such as *need to*, *have to* were counted as the “lexeme” of their clause.

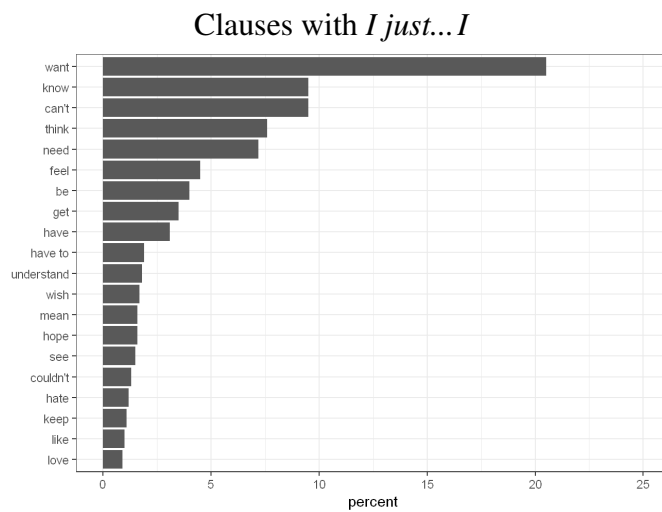
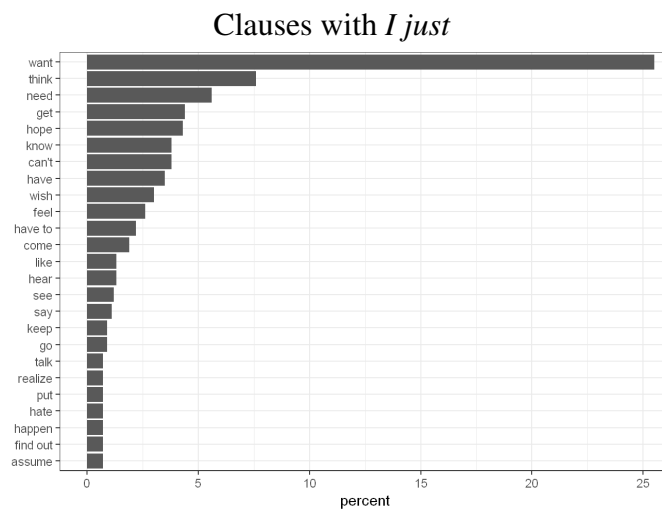
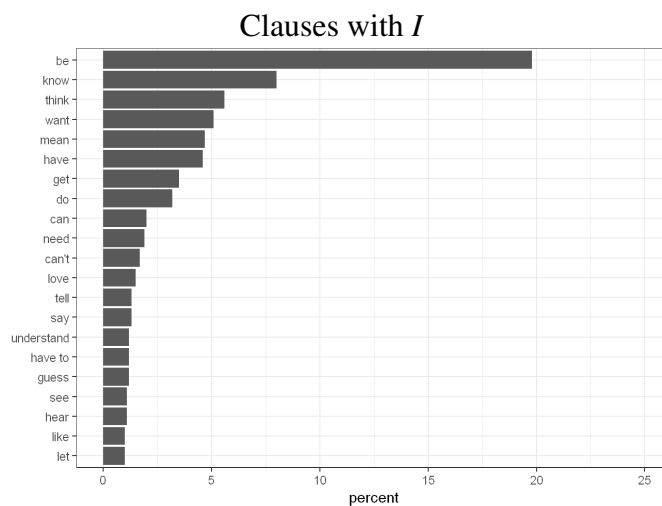


Figure 5: The proportions of the most common verb lexemes used in clauses containing *I* (top), *I just* without resumption (middle), and *I just...I* (bottom).

purpose might be, what younger generations might be using it for increasingly (and women more so than men), and what pre-adolescents may perhaps not have twigged onto yet.

First, we need to acknowledge that a certain number of *I just...I* tokens have always been, and continue to be, the results of simple disfluencies. For men born before 1940, it's plausible that nearly all of their 30 tokens per million words reflected disfluencies. For women and for men born later, it's plausible that the same 30 tokens per million words, or more, continue to reflect simple disfluencies.

In order to explain what the growing number of not-real-disfluencies are doing, the best proposal I have relies on the theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Brown and Levinson argue that there are two basic sets of wants (or "faces") that a person would like to have satisfied in their social interactions:

- Negative face: "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction — i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition".
- Positive face: "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants".

Some communicative acts that can threaten the listener's negative face include: giving orders, making requests, offering suggestions or advice, giving compliments, expressing admiration or envy, and expressing strong emotions towards the listener. Some acts that can threaten the listener's positive face include: expressing disagreement, disapproval, criticism, contempt, ridicule, accusations, insults; expressing violent (out-of-control) emotions; and raising dangerously emotional or divisive topics.⁶

If a speaker wants to perform a negative face-threatening act (FTA), they have a number of strategies for going about it. If the social distance between the speaker and hearer is too great, or the relative power of the hearer over the speaker is too great, or the imposition on the hearer is too great, the speaker might choose to do the FTA indirectly, "off the record", dropping hints, inviting the hearer to draw a conversational implicature ("I'm awfully thirsty"), leaving the hearer the freedom to pretend, for example, either that the speaker never made a request or that the resulting offer was their own idea. If the social distance is closer, the power difference less, or the imposition smaller, the speaker might perform the FTA directly, but along with linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies to express their respect for the hearer's negative face. Some of the common negative politeness strategies cross-linguistically include:

⁶Notice that expressing strong emotion — a not infrequent part of soap opera plots — is listed as both a positive and a negative face-threatening act. Brown and Levinson consider expressing strong emotions specifically about the hearer as a negative face-threatening act to the extent that it could cause the hearer to fear for their safety, while expressing (any) strong emotion can be a positive face-threatening act to the extent that it shows the speaker doesn't care about the potential embarrassment to the hearer of being involved in a public scene. While not discussed by Brown and Levinson, we can also consider expressing strong emotions to be a negative face-threatening act in North American culture, to the extent that it severely limits the choices the hearer has for responding in an appropriate manner, depriving them of much of the freedom they would have had in their part of the interaction if the speaker hadn't expressed strong emotion.

- be conventionally indirect. (E.g., “Would it be possible to get something to drink?”)
- minimize the imposition. (E.g., “Just water would be fine.”)
- prosodic or kinesic hedges. As Brown and Levinson put it: “prosodic or kinesic means of indicating tentativeness or emphasis. The raised eyebrow, the earnest frown, the *umms* and *ahhs* and hesitations that indicate the speakers attitude toward what he is saying, are often the most salient clue to the presence of an FTA, even cross-linguistically.”
- apologize. One of the sub-strategies for this is to show one’s reluctance to perform the FTA.

The way that speakers most often use *I just...I* in the soap opera transcripts simultaneously carries out several of these negative politeness strategies. *Just* is a word that’s practically custom-made to minimize the perceived size of an imposition, as discussed at length by Brown and Levinson. An apparently involuntary interruption, often with a brief pause, followed by a resumption of the sentence is perfect for conveying the speaker’s tentativeness and reluctance to say what they’re about to say. Finally, though it’s not a logically necessary side-effect of using *I just...I*, we’ve seen that *I just...I* sentences almost always involve expressions of necessity, possibility, or mental and emotional states. This suggests that speakers who use *I just...I* for politeness have also decided to recast their face-threatening act into something that lies somewhere on the spectrum between conversational and conventional indirectness, making what they say into a statement about their own needs, wants, and feelings rather than about what they expect the hearer to do. So “Tell me who did it” becomes “I just... I need to know who did it.” “Stop arguing with me” becomes “I just... I want us to get along.”

In short, the way it’s often used, *I just...I* bundles together several of the most powerful strategies that are used cross-linguistically for mitigating a negative face-threatening act, at the small cost of two reduced syllables of the speaker’s effort.

4. Disfluencies and constructions aren’t mutually exclusive

Several researchers have considered the English double-*be* construction represented in sentences like “The fact is, is that I’m broke” (e.g., Coppock et al., 2006; Massam, 2017). I’m convinced by the *conclusion* of this line research that this is a genuine grammatical construction and not simply a speech error or disfluency, but unfortunately the arguments have *started* from the tacit assumption that something must be either one or the other, that it’s impossible for a recurring pattern in speech to be both a grammatical construction and a disfluency.

The growing use of *I just...I* as a strategy for negative politeness is evidence that this tacit assumption is faulty. *I just...I* is both, and not just in the trivial sense that some tokens result from disfluency while other tokens are deliberate uses of a construction. In a very real sense, one and the same token of *I just...I* can be both a disfluency and a construction. Indeed, *I just...I* can do its work in mitigating a negative face-threatening act precisely

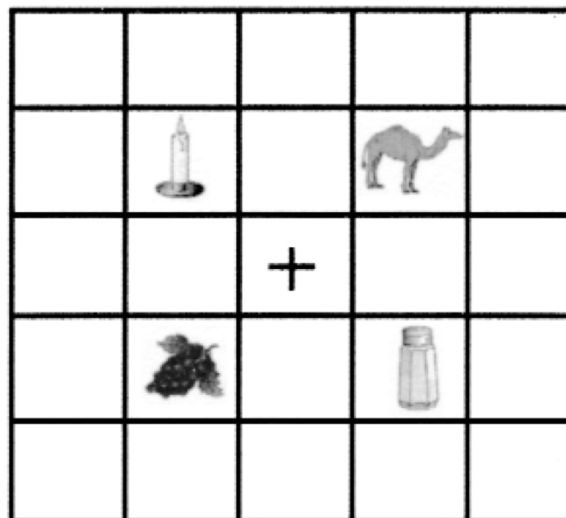


Figure 6: The layout of a typical screen during Arnold et al.’s experiment on the effect of a speaker’s disfluencies on the listener’s conclusions about reference.

because it can be both planned by the speaker as a deliberate use of a construction and interpreted by the listener as a disfluency suggesting tentativeness and reluctance.

I believe that much the same superposition of construction and disfluency was at play in the early days of the growth of sentence-internal *like* as a focus marker (cf. Underhill, 1988; D’Arcy, 2017).

Psycholinguistic research has shown that a disfluency can influence a listener to conclude that the speaker is about to signal new information. For example, in the eye-tracking experiment of Arnold et al. (2003), listeners would look at a computer display like the one in Figure 6 and hear an instruction like “Put the grapes below the candle,” which they were supposed to carry out by clicking and dragging with their mouse. Which picture a listener is looking at while in the middle of hearing a word is an excellent indicator of what they believe is the likeliest referent the speaker is in the middle of referring to. In the crucial trials of this experiment, immediately after obeying an instruction like “Put the grapes below the candle,” a listener would hear an instruction like either “Now put the ca...” or “Now put theee, uh, ca...”. Partway through hearing the word that could be either *candle* or *camel*, those listeners who heard the disfluent instruction were significantly more likely to look at the picture of the camel, that is, they were biased towards concluding that the speaker must be referring to the new rather than the old referent. Children as young as 2 have learned to use this association between hesitation and focus marking (e.g., Kidd et al., 2011).

Speakers frequently hesitate before expressing the harder-to-plan new information of a sentence. In an earlier stage of English, speakers would have frequently filled this hesitant pause with *like* — a function that sentence-internal *like* clearly still performs a small minority of the time. Listeners would have easily learned the statistical association between a pause filled with *like* and the new information of a sentence, and begun to use this associa-

tion while interpreting the speaker's intentions. Earlier stages of English could easily mark the *end* of the focussed constituent with nuclear pitch accent, but had no straightforward way of marking the *beginning* of the focussed constituent. The ability to use disfluencies to disambiguate where the focussed constituent began would have been useful for listeners, and it's unsurprising that it would eventually come to be used deliberately by speakers who wanted to encourage this disambiguation. After several decades, this early use of a combined disfluency/construction came to lose its reliance on the association between disfluency and new information and became a pure focus marker within the grammar of more and more speakers.

I just...I is still in the beginning stages of this potential trajectory. Most English speakers probably now use it deliberately at least some of the time. Perhaps a handful of the most innovative speakers now use *I just...I* as a pure marker of negative politeness, independent of disfluency, but for nearly all speakers *I just...I* probably still crucially relies on its association with hesitation and tentativeness to do its work of mitigating a threat to the hearer's negative face. But it's distinctly possible that *I just...I* will end up as a pure, and extremely frequent, marker of negative politeness for future generations of English speakers.

5. Conclusion

In a sense, it's misleading to say that *I just...I*, or even a specific token of it, "is a disfluency". Disfluencies are failures of the speech-planning process. Even a pause-filler like *um* isn't itself a failure of the planning process — it's one of the available strategies for *managing* an upcoming failure of the planning process that an English speaker foresees in time to do something about it. These management strategies are language- and culture-specific. (For example, one of things I had to learn as a child was that *um* is an appropriate pause filler in my community, but a syllabic velar nasal isn't.)

Disfluency-management strategies can change in popularity through time, and can do so as rapidly as any other kind of linguistic change. In this paper, we've seen that it's possible for some of these strategies to become associated with particular (textual and social) contexts. Once this association exists, they can then become, not just strategies for dealing with accidental failures of speech planning, but deliberate strategies for dealing with those textual and social contexts.

One consequence is that there may be no rigid distinction between a social and cognitive strategy for managing disfluency and a grammatical construction for expressing a discourse function.

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