

UHM in Michigan English: Variation as a Lens on the Grammar

“Uh” and “um” (referred to collectively as the variable UHM) occupy contested territory in linguistic theory, with considerable controversy over their place in the grammar of English speakers, identity as one or two discrete phenomena, and form of mental representation (Clark & Foxtree, 2002). Neither is under completely conscious control, but both are clearly perceptible by speakers and subject to extensive metalinguistic commentary (Corley & Stewart, 2008). This controversy makes them a particularly interesting locus for variationist inquiry.

Fruehwald (2016) examined UHM in the Philadelphia Neighborhood corpus and found that over the 20th century, “um” increased relative to “uh” in apparent time, with a strong gendered effect: women used “um” at a much higher rate than men. Moreover, drawing on Pak (2016), Fruehwald argued that UHM is post phonological, inserted during repair and therefore not triggering morphophonological processes. He specifically cites Pak’s observation that “a” is not produced as “an” before UHM, despite the alternation being otherwise triggered by following vowels.

The present work furthers this dual line of inquiry, examining UHM usage by Michiganders, while also examining its interactions with the English definite and indefinite articles’ prevocalic alternations to better locate its position in speakers’ grammars. I extracted 27,786 tokens of UHM from 90 women and 44 men in the MI Diaries Corpus (Sneller & Wagner, 2020-), with speakers’ years of birth ranging from the 1940s to 2010s. Tokens were coded by speaker gender, year of birth, presence of preceding pause, and following phonological context (vowel, consonant, or pause).

I find that, echoing Fruehwald (2016), UHM is undergoing woman-led apparent time change in Michigan (Figure 1). Calculating diarists’ average proportional use of “um” (of all UHM tokens), younger speakers who identify as women use “um” relative to “uh” at a higher rate than their older and/or men-identifying counterparts. Diarists’ proportion “um” increase from around 50% “um” use by those born in the 1950s to around 80% by those born in the 2010s, with women leading men by around 10-25%. This finding is further supported by mixed effect linear regression modeling of UHM production (Table 1). Of the factors examined, gender’s effect is only rivaled by the presence of a following pause, which is highly correlated with “um”, corroborating Clark and Foxtree’s (2002) observation that “um” relates to pauses differently from “uh.”

Turning to UHM’s position in speakers’ grammars, I tested if UHM triggers the definite and indefinite articles’ pre-vowel alternations: D[-def] / _V → [æn] (else [e]) and D[+def] / _V → [ði] (else [ðə]). Linear mixed effect modeling of both processes shows that UHM only triggers phonological “th[ə/i]” alternation but not morphological “a/an” alternation (Figure 2). Curiously, while Pak (2016) argues “th[ə/i]” alternation before UHM is caused by a following pause, the model shows that following UHM triggers “th[i]” at a rate more similar to other following vowels than following pauses. These two findings together suggest that UHM is invisible to morphophonology, inserted post-allomorph selection, but is still part of the utterance, capable of triggering phonological processes.

Figure 1: Average Proportion UM by Diarists' Year of Birth

Trend lines and large points show average proportion UM per decade by gender

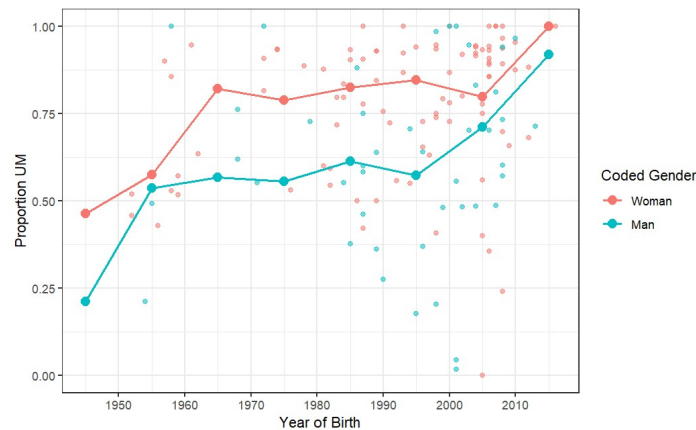


Figure 2: Predicted Variable Application of AN and THI by Following Context

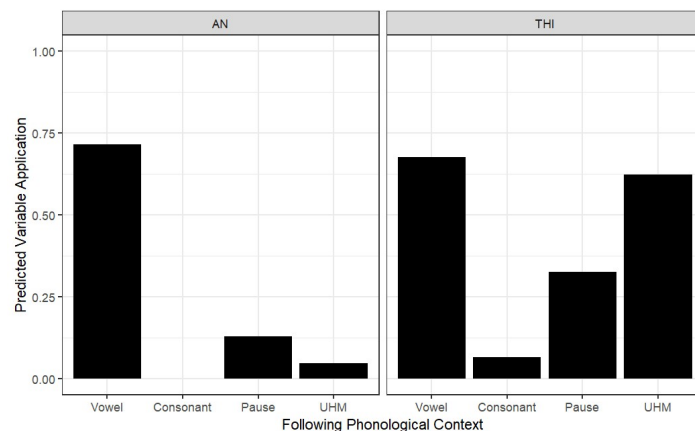


Table 1: Results of Linear Mixed Effects Model

	Estimate	Z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	0.66	4.21	<0.0001
Coded Gender: Man	-1.04	-4.15	<0.0001
Year of Birth	0.17	2.27	<0.05
Foll. Phonological Context: Pause	1.29	5.87	<0.0001
Foll. Phonological Context: Vowel	0.39	5.49	<0.0001
Pause Before: Yes	0.41	13.13	<0.0001

*Reference Levels: Coded Gender = Woman, Foll. Phon. Context = Other, Pause Before = No

References

- Clark, H. H., & Foxtree, J. E. (2002). Using uh and um in spontaneous speaking. *Cognition*, 84(1), 73–111. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-0277\(02\)00017-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0010-0277(02)00017-3)
- Corley, M., & Stewart, O. W. (2008). Hesitation Disfluencies in Spontaneous Speech: The Meaning of um. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 2(4), 589–602. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2008.00068.x>
- Fruehwald, J. (2016). *Filled Pause Choice as a Sociolinguistic Variable*. (6). <https://repository.upenn.edu/handle/20.500.14332/45126>
- Pak, M. (2016). How allomorphic is English article allomorphy? *Glossa: A Journal of General Linguistics*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.62>