

## Teaching unit 4: Dafne and Nandita – food stories

### Background

In this extract two 8-year-old girls are talking to the interviewer about food. They are both keen to talk and in their enthusiasm they overlap, but overall they support each other and from line 58 they each take a turn to tell a specific story about food. Although they are only 8 years old, the girls use several features here that are typical of young people's spoken English, such as general extenders and the discourse markers *like* and *yeah*.

Audio, transcript and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at: <http://www.englishlanguageresources.org/TU04>

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### Discussion points

#### Discourse markers

**like** (lines 25, 37, 53, 61, 62, 92, 97 and 112). This discourse marker is typical of young people's speech. It does not occur just anywhere in speech: in this extract it occurs (i) before noun phrases, often highlighting things or people that are new to the discourse (lines 1, 25, 37, 61, 62, 92, 97); (ii) before expressions of quantity (line 112, perhaps also line 25); and (iii) at the start of a clause (line 62), where it may reflect planning (like *er* and *erm*). It could be interesting to decide when discourse marker *like* has the meaning 'sort of' or 'approximately' (it seems to be used this way in lines 37, 61 and 97) and when it has no meaning other than to mark discourse structure. Note that the discourse marker *like* is not the same as the verb *like*! The verb occurs here, in lines 17, 19, 21, 26).

**oh** *Oh* is almost always at the beginning of a clause in this extract (lines 20, 34, 39, 44 and 87), and it also marks the beginning of a turn in lines 20, 34 and 87. It is a **backchannel** (or 'minimal response'), with *no*, in line 79 and the only word in a quote in line 86. In every case the speaker shows that they have understood what the previous speaker has just said, sometimes suggesting that they are slightly surprised and offering an evaluation (lines 34, 39, 87).

**yeah** *Yeah* is very frequent here and has a range of discourse functions. In the interviewer's speech it is often a **backchannel**, showing understanding and encouraging the girls to speak (lines 13, 15, 23, 26, 50, 63, 80, 89, 91). At the beginning of a turn it shows agreement in answer to a question from the previous speaker and also shows that the speaker accepts the turn, as they then say more (lines 3, 9, 31, 36, 40, 46, 84; note that there is a simple agreement as a reply in line 45). In the girls' stories *yeah* also occurs at the end of a clause, to punctuate the discourse (like a full stop or a comma in speech) and check that the listeners are following (lines 53, 60, 68, 69, 75, 101). The interviewer uses *yeah* at the end of a clause in line 44, to show that he understands the new information ('pakoras').

#### General extenders

*or something* (line 30) is purposely vague, suggesting that there are alternatives to the word that has just been uttered. It extends the meaning, then, of *chicken*, showing that this is meant to be just

one example of the kinds of meat that could be added to pilau rice. The discourse marker *like* helps to convey the same meaning.

*and stuff* (line 97 perhaps allows Dafne to suggest that her listeners know the kinds of things she has in mind here, so she doesn't need to specify them. Note that again the discourse marker *like* helps to convey this intended vagueness.

*and stuff like that* (line 101 rounds off Dafne's list and shows that the list is not complete.

In each case the general extenders extend the meaning of the word or words before it, and helps create a feeling of shared understandings between the speaker and the listeners.

### Non-fluency features

#### *er* and *erm*

Both girls use *er* and *erm* frequently (lines 5, 6, 11, 19, 22, 36, 41, 43, 49, 58, 61, 62, 66, 88, 90, 93, 10 and 107). There are two main positions for *er* and *erm* in this extract.

One is before a **content** word – an adjective (*brown* or *orange* in line 6) or a noun phrase (*egg fried rice* in line 19, *pilau* in line 22, *miss (teacher)* in line 63, *stuff* in line 93 and *my dad* in line 107). Using *er* and *erm* allows the girls to show that they are searching for the word that they want to use. Lines 66-68 confirm this, when Nandita explains that she can't remember the name of *this spicy thing*.

The other position is at the start of a clause (as in lines 5, 11, 41 or 43), usually before a **function** word (*we* in lines 5, and 41, *some* in line 11, and *I* in line 41). Here the girls are planning the structure of the clause that they are about to utter. Notice that sometimes there is also repetition or a false start (for example, in line 5 Dafne repeats *we* and seems to start to say *we sometimes* before interrupting herself to say *we eat jollof rice*. Using *er* and *erm* shows that the speaker is busy planning but is intending to say more.

Although the girls say both *er* and *erm*, their most frequent form is *erm*. Their usage fits with the results of recent research into gender differences in the use of *er* and *erm*. Although one extract from two speakers can hardly be conclusive, it could be interesting to compare this extract with one from a male speaker to see whether he also uses *erm* more often than *er*.

#### Repetition

Repetition occurs in several places, sometimes together with *er* or *erm* or a false start (e.g. lines 5, 41 (*we*), 53 (*he*), 68 (*I can't*) 88 (*when*) and 90 (*do*)). Note that when there is too much repetition and hesitation speakers may end up losing the floor and not being able to utter what they are planning: this happens to Dafne in line 48

In lines 14 and 16 the repetition of a **content** word expands what has just been said (*they're nice...very nice*); this also happens in line 81 (*my mum goes "why don't you give just give..."*).

### Nonstandard grammar

**Past tense verb forms** Nandita's past tense forms for BRING vary between *brang* (line 36) and *brung* (lines 43 and 67). This could reflect normal child language acquisition (perhaps she has not yet acquired the different past tense forms for all verbs) or they could be nonstandard past tense forms

used more widely in the local area. Note that Nandita uses standard English past tense forms for the strong verbs EAT (*ate* in line 53) and TAKE (*took* in line 97).

Dafne uses *cook* (lines 10, 12, 13 and 14) as the past tense of COOK. Again, this could reflect her stage of language acquisition. It may also be a feature of the Nigerian English that she hears at home.

### Quotative expressions

In this extract Nandita uses GO to introduce direct speech in lines 71, 73, 83 and 84. Note that speakers never use GO to introduce indirect reported speech: in line 88 Dafne uses SAY for this purpose.

### Rhetorical strategies

Dafne repeats the same clause structure three times in lines 94-96, using a different verb in each of the three clauses. She uses the same strategy in lines 98-101, this time with a different noun in each of the four clauses. Notice that here Dafne rounds off her list with *and stuff like that*.

### Other features

The zero-plural marking in line 12 (*two type*) may be typical of Nigerian English, which sometimes avoids plural –s when there is a number that expresses the plural. Dafne speaks Nigerian English at home with her family.