Some Discourse Items as Response Elicitors in English Face-to-Face and Telephone Conversation

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Based on the comparison of six texts taken from the LLC, the author endeavours to contribute to the study of interactive discourse items as response elicitors. They are studied with regard to what they prompt from the current hearer: 1/ a verbal response; 2/ a backchannel signal; or 3/ no verbal reaction at all. It seems that the use of non-verbal reactions on their own on the part of the current hearer can represent sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking, owing above all to the face-to-face contact between all participants. However, when such contact is not available, the current hearer tends to produce much more frequently some kind of feedback in the form of a verbal response rather than a backchannel signal.

1   Introduction

When communicating with other people we often try not only to convey some new information but also to exchange some ideas, attitudes and opinions, i.e. to create some space for interaction. Under spoken interaction the co-operation between two or more partners in a communicative situation is understood. According to Stenström (1994: 1) it is governed by two main principles: 1. speakers co-operate and 2. they take turns, i.e. at any particular moment one of them is the current speaker and the others are the current hearers. In my paper some items that enable spoken interaction, especially the shift of the speaker, are under examination. They are labelled as interactive discourse items because they appear in spoken discourse and help the smooth flow of interaction.

However, not all utterances produced by speakers can be considered proper turns. These must be distinguished from backchannels, which do not involve a shift of speaker and are just hearers' signals that they are still listening. Nevertheless, they are very important for

the smooth flow of communication because they indicate to the current speaker to go on speaking.

In connection with the cultural specificity of the English language Urbanová (2002: 17) states that when talking to their partners in a typical dialogue English speakers are all the time seeking confirmation of what they are saying. In her opinion, there are three ways the current speaker can appeal to the current hearer to produce some kind of reaction: (1) declarative questions, (2) question tags, and (3) comment clauses.

For this paper two of the above-mentioned ways to prompt some reaction from the current hearer have been chosen, namely question tags and the clausal forms *you know* and *you see*, both often considered comment clauses (CCs) by some authors (see e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, Quirk et al. 1985, Leech and Svartvik 1994).

According to Biber et al. (1999: 1091) backchannels are very frequent and their role is to signal "feedback to the speaker that the message is being understood and accepted. Given the interactive nature of conversation, backchannels are important in indicating that speaker and hearer are keeping in touch with one another, and that the communication is still in progress".

The distinction between a proper turn and a backchannel signal is also important for my study because all the three interactive discourse items (D-items), namely question tags, and the clausal forms *you know* and *you see*, are studied with regard to what they prompt from the current hearer. They can prompt:
(1) a verbal response, which implies a shift of speaker;
(2) a backchannel signal, which does not imply any shift of speaker; or
(3) no verbal reaction at all.

Unfortunately, it has been impossible to conclude from the transcribed texts how often they prompt some silent feedback in the form of head-nods and facial gestures for example. That is the reason why the current hearer's non-verbal reactions are treated together with no verbal reaction at all.

2   Material

The material for my investigation consists of six texts taken from the London-Lund Corpus, namely three private face-to-face conversations (S.1.1, S.1.6 and S.1.8) and three telephone conversations (S.8.1, S.8.3 and S.9.2). The two genres of spoken English have been chosen because they have both similar and different characteristics. On the one hand, both of them represent spoken interaction and have the form of a dialogue (or multilogue if more than two speakers are involved). On the other hand, they differ in the lack versus presence of face-to-face contact between participants. The speakers in the texts analysed are all native speakers of British English, mostly educated to university level, and their conversations were mostly recorded surreptitiously, i.e. without the prior knowledge of the speakers that their conversation was being recorded.

3   Classification

As for questions tags, sometimes labelled "tag questions" (see e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Leech and Svartvik 1994), there are basically two types, both included in my study: (1) tags with a rising tone which invite "verification, expecting the hearer to decide the truth of the proposition in the statement", and (2) tags with a falling tone which invite "confirmation of the statement" and have "the force of an exclamation rather than a genuine question". (For

more information, see Quirk et al. 1985: 810-813.) Urbanová (2001: 53) considers question tags as "a semi-direct way of asking, combining a declarative sentence structure with a tag". According to Biber et al. (1999: 1080-1089), who include them among response elicitors, question tags have the interactive function of eliciting the hearer's agreement or confirmation, which is the main reason why they have been included in my analysis.

As for the clausal forms *you know* and *you see*, they are mostly listed as type (1) CCs used to claim the hearer's attention or agreement, expressing at the same time the speaker's informality and warmth towards the hearer. However, owing to their different functions from the other type (1) CCs, which are mostly used to express the speaker's tentativeness (e.g. *I think*), certainty (e.g. *I'm sure*), or emotional attitude (e.g. *I'm afraid*), it can now be stated that both *you know* and *you see* represent a borderline category within type (1) CCs. Moreover, they are used when the speaker wants to establish some kind of contact with the hearer, i.e. to create some space for interaction, which is the main reason why these two clausal forms in particular, and not any others, have been included in my study.

The label "interactive discourse items" is also used by Leech and Svartvik (1994: 10-19) when discussing the grammar in spoken and written English. They list several words and expressions typical of spoken discourse like *mhm, yeah, I see, I mean, you know*, *you see*, *well, anyway, of course* and put these discourse items, also called fillers, under three headings, indicating a scale from "purely interactive" to "also interactive" functions. The clausal forms *you know* and *you see* are somewhere in the middle of the scale and are considered to be "mainly interactive" discourse items, which emphasizes their importance in spoken interaction. (For the FSP-function of "fillers" and questions tags, see Chamonikolasová 1987.)

4   Analysis

As can be seen from Table 1, the number of interactive discourse items is higher in private face-to-face conversation, amounting to as many as 205 cases in comparison with their number in telephone conversation, which amounts to 107 cases. These results must be viewed with regard to the fact that the length of the texts under investigation taken from the two genres is identical (15,000 words of each text type).

Table 1 Interactive discourse items in face-to-face and telephone conversation

Text types	Private face-to-face conversation		Telephone conversation	
Discourse items	No.	%	No.	%
You know	102	49.8	67	62.5
You see	49	23.9	15	14.0
Question tags	54	26.3	25	23.4
Total (No.)	**205**	**100.0**	**107**	**100.0**

Based on my results as presented in Table 1, it can now be stated that speakers in face-to-face conversation tend to use some kind of interactive D-items (for the term D-items, see Stenström 1984) much more frequently than participants in telephone conversation. However, it is questionable how frequently such D-items elicit some kind of verbal reaction from the

current hearer and whether there are any differences between the three D-items under examination.

Tables 2a and 2b below offer my overall results from the two genres of spoken English. It becomes clear that in telephone conversation the number of all interactive D-items, even when taken separately (question tags, *you know* and *you see*), is lower with any kind of reaction (a verbal response, a backchannel signal, no verbal reaction at all). Nevertheless, the number of the cases in which a particular D-item elicits a verbal response is relatively high in this language variety. My results indicate that in telephone conversation a verbal response rather than a backchannel signal tends to be a more common kind of reaction to the use of any of the three D-items analysed (46 per cent of all reactions). The reason for this can be the absence of face-to-face contact between the speakers, which does not enable a backchannel signal, thus representing only 16 per cent of all reactions, to become sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking (see Table 2a). On the contrary, speakers in face-to-face conversation can watch one another all the time and that is the reason why backchannel signals are much more frequent, representing 23.5 per cent of all reactions in this language variety (see Table 2b).

Table 2a Reactions to interactive D-items in telephone conversation

Reaction	Response		Backchannel		No verbal reaction		Total
D-items	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
You know	23	34.3	12	17.9	32	47.8	67
You see	4	26.7	4	26.7	7	46.6	15
Question tags	22	88.0	1	4.0	2	8.0	25
Total	49	45.8	17	15.9	41	38.3	107

Table 2b Reactions to interactive D-items in face-to-face conversation

Reaction	Response		Backchannel		No verbal reaction		Total
D-items	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
You know	27	26.5	30	29.5	45	44.0	102
You see	8	16.3	8	16.3	33	67.4	49
Question tags	38	70.4	10	18.5	6	11.1	54
Total	73	35.6	48	23.4	84	41.0	205

It can now be stated that in both genres of spoken English the overwhelming majority of interactive D-items prompt some kind of verbal reaction (66 cases in telephone and 121 in face-to-face conversation); this is more frequent in the form of a verbal response than in the form of a backchannel signal, which is evident above all in telephone conversation, which has 49 occurrences of a verbal response and 17 of a backchannel signal. Nevertheless, the number of the cases in which no verbal reaction at all occurs is also relatively high, amounting to 41 cases (38 per cent) in telephone and 84 cases (41 per cent) in face-to-face conversation. However, it is important to state that it has been impossible to take into consideration the cases in which D-items prompt some silent feedback (in the form of head-nods and facial gestures for example, which can represent sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking, especially in face-to-face conversation).

Since the use of interactive D-items in private face-to-face conversation has already been discussed in great detail in Povolná 2005, there is no point showing here any results apart from those that are shown in Table 2b above. Moreover, these results are shown here only for a comparison with those drawn from telephone conversation, which is the main concern of my present paper.

For my study of interactive D-items and their role as response elicitors, my classification of possible discourse functions of *you know* and *you see* has been applied. (For more details, see Povolná 2004a.) The reason for this is my hypothesis that the clausal forms *you know* and *you see* can have different elicitative force in spoken English depending on their particular function in a given communicative situation, and, moreover, the presence or absence of face-to-face contact may have some influence on their use. My classification is based on some of the conversational strategies presented in Stenström (1994). After the application of several different criteria, including the entire situational context, it is possible to distinguish four discourse functions: appealer, inform marker, empathizer, and monitor. (For exemplification of these, see Povolná 2004ab.) Accordingly, these four functions of *you know* and *you see* are related to their roles as response elicitors in my analysis. (See Tables 3a and 4a below.)

My results in Tables 3a and 4a show the current hearer's reactions to the clausal forms *you know* and *you see* respectively. They provide evidence that in the majority of cases there is some kind of verbal reaction to the occurrence of *you know*. There are altogether 35 tokens of *you know* in telephone conversation and 57 cases in face-to-face conversation (compare with Table 2b above) in which some kind of verbal reaction occurs. However, the distribution between a verbal response and a backchannel signal is different in the two genres of spoken English. Whereas a verbal response with a shift of current speaker (23 cases) clearly prevails over a backchannel signal (12 cases) in telephone conversation, the results drawn from private face-to-face conversation show that a backchannel signal, i.e. without any shift of speaker (30 cases), is a slightly more frequent kind of reaction than a verbal response (27 cases).

Table 3a Reactions to *you know* in telephone conversations

Reaction	**Response**		23	**Backchannel**		12	**No verbal reaction**		32
Discourse Function	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*
Appealer	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	7 (1)	2 (1)	2	1 (1)	(1)	2	10 (3)	1	3
Empathizer	8	2	0	5	2	0	10	6	0
Monitor	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Total (No. 67)	17	4	2	8	2	2	22	7	3

Note: The numbers listed in brackets in columns 'Without any pause' or 'After a pause' concern the cases in which D-items occur after the stressed pronoun *you*. In order to avoid their double occurrence in the tables, they are counted in the column 'After stressed *you*' but also listed in brackets to show whether such cases occur without or after a pause.

The above-mentioned results can be accounted for by the absence of face-to-face contact between the speakers in telephone conversation, which calls for a more frequent need of some kind of verbal response. Otherwise the current speaker cannot feel sure that the

current hearer is still listening. No verbal reaction at all appears in 32 and 45 cases in telephone and face-to-face conversation respectively. However, it must be emphasized again that it has been impossible to take into consideration any forms of silent feedback, which can represent sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking in face-to-face conversation. Summing up, it can be stated that cases with some kind of verbal reaction to the use of *you know* are more common than cases without any reaction at all in both text types.

As for pauses, it seems that the presence or absence of a pause after *you know* does not have any influence on the kind of reaction it prompts. In fact, it can now be maintained that cases without any pause after all D-items (question tags, *you know* and *you see*) are more common within all types of reaction under investigation (see Tables 3a, 4a and 5a) in both genres of spoken English. (For details concerning face-to-face conversation, see Povolná 2005.)

Before commenting on the use of *you see*, let me make a short remark on the term "prompter". In my study it is used in agreement with Urbanová (2001: 53), who mentions the prompters *you know* and *you see* when talking about indirectness as a characteristic feature of conversational language and who considers their use after a declarative sentence structure to be a more acceptable way of asking than an interrogative sentence structure. And this is evidenced also in my material.

Table 4a Reactions to *you see* in telephone conversation

Reaction	**Response**		4	**Backchannel**		4	**No verbal reaction**		7
Discourse Function	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*	Without any pause	After a pause	After stressed *you*
Appealer	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Inform marker	1	0	0	1	0	0	6	0	0
Empathizer	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
Monitor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total (No. 15)	4	0	0	4	0	0	6	1	0

My results concerning the use of *you see* as a response prompter are slightly different from those concerning *you know*. The clausal form *you see* tends to occur less frequently in both genres of spoken English. Also the distribution between some kind of verbal reaction and no verbal reaction is different. In face-to-face conversation (see Table 2b above) there is no verbal reaction at all in the majority of 33 cases, and the remaining 16 occurrences are evenly distributed between a verbal response and a backchannel signal. By contrast, in telephone conversation cases with no verbal reaction at all (seven cases) are almost as frequent as those with some kind of verbal reaction (eight cases), which are evenly distributed between a verbal response with a shift of current speaker and a backchannel signal without any shift.

As for question tags, with 25 and 54 occurrences in telephone and face-to-face conversation respectively, my results in Table 5a below and Table 2b above make it evident that they represent a typical response prompter. The overwhelming majority of question tags prompt some kind of verbal reaction, mostly in the form of a verbal response (22 and 38 cases in telephone and face-to-face conversation respectively), which implies a shift of current speaker, as in Example 4 below, and less frequently in the form of a backchannel signal (one case in telephone and 10 cases in face-to-face conversation). Only in eight cases altogether in both genres is there no verbal reaction at all. However, as stated above, it has been impossible

to distinguish cases in which D-items prompt some silent feedback from the current hearer from those in which there is no reaction at all.

Table 5a Reactions to question tags in telephone conversation

Reaction	Response 22		Backchannel 1		No verbal reaction 2	
Total (No. 25)	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause	Without any pause	After a pause
Question tags	16	6	1	0	0	2

Since there are some marked differences not only between the frequency of occurrence of the individual discourse functions of *you know* and *you see,* but also between the type of reaction they elicit (see Tables 3a and 4a above), I now wish to comment briefly on the results connected with the individual discourse functions of *you know* and *you see.*

As mentioned above, it is possible to distinguish four different functions: appealer, inform marker, empathizer, and monitor. When functioning as appealers, the clausal forms *you know* (3 cases) and *you see* (2 cases) are explicit signals to the hearer that some kind of feedback would be appropriate. Such cases mostly occur in turn-final position with a rising tone, as in Example 1, in which the second token of *you know* is a successful means of getting some feedback from the current hearer, namely in the form of a verbal response, which implies a shift of current speaker. According to Östman (1981) *you know* in turn-final position, especially if accompanied by an interrogative contour, has a questioning effect from which can be inferred "are you attending", "do you agree", or "do you see what I mean".

Example 1
A   *^is he in'cluding 'other :c\/ountries as 'well . {^in this tr/ip#}#*
B   *[em] . ^well he's !basically 'going to New :G\uinea# but [e:m] . you ^know I !think he is 'trying to stop 'off on the way 'there and the way :b\ack# you ^kn/ow#*
A   *because . of ^course he's !{m\et} 'Doctor :K\/olnig# ^Doctor Re!n\/e 'Kolnig#*
B   *^y\es#*   **(S.9.2.477-483)**
Note: The transcription of all the examples in the present paper is based on the prosodic system in Crystal (1969).

As for their use as inform markers, according to Stenström (1984: 90) *you know* (28 occurrences) and *you see* (eight occurrences) serve in this function differently. "*You see* is typically used when A assumes that the information is new to B", as with the second token of *you see* in Example 2 below, whereas *you know* can be used in the same way but is "more often used when B is either assumed to be somewhat familiar with the subject matter already or when A wants to create the impression that A and B share a common ground", as with the first token of *you know* in Example 1 above. This explains why there is no verbal reaction at all in more than half of the cases (14 with *you know* and six with *you see*). Moreover, it seems more natural to acknowledge the receipt of new information rather than old information, even if this is just pretended. If there is some verbal reaction, then it tends to be a verbal response (11 cases with *you know* and two cases with *you see*) rather than a backchannel signal, as mentioned above (three cases with *you know* and one with *you see*). The second token of *you see* in Example 2 illustrates *you see* as a verbal response prompter:

Example 2

B *and ^and they . they ^do a 'half-way th/ing# be^tween the i'dea of a :flat and a h\ouse# *^we'd !very much pre!f\er a 'house you s/ee# but**

C *((several sylls)) I ^mean _they're they're* ^f\/our-'roomed m\aisonnettes# you ^s/ee# ^so you can _have **!two b/edrooms#***

B **^y\es# . ^y\es# . ^[\mhm]#** ^that's r\ight# and you've *^got* it on two fl\oors#* **(S.8.1.1270-1281)**

Note: It is important to state here that single or double asterisks used in the examples presented in the paper indicate simultaneous speech.

In agreement with Stenström (1984: 90) I maintain that *you know* as an inform marker is often used to hint at some underlying message, which is usually indicated by a somewhat unexpected intonation contour; *you* carries the tone and not *know,* as in Example 3. As can be seen from Tables 3a and 4a above, instances with the stressed *you* occur only when *you know* functions as an inform marker. Moreover, not a single occurrence of a stressed *you* has been found with *you see* in my data.

Example 3

B *I've ^had to 'tell my l\andlord# that ^I !hope I'll be !l\eaving# . [e:m] and ^he's . ^y\/ou know# ^wanting to _know _when I shall _b=e# ^moving _out of the _flat I'm :/\in# . so I've ^r\eally got to kn/\ow# . ^when com:pletion :date is :l\/ikely# ^otherwise I 'might 'find myself 'on the :str\eet# .*

A *^y\eah# . [e:m] - - it ^is 'really a m\/atter of #how [e:] _quickly we can _get the sur_veyor to !m\ove# *((you ^s\ee#))*

B **^y\/es# ^y\es#***

A *[e:m]* . now ^I 'spoke 'to the es:t\/ate 'agent((s)) {of ^[dhi:] !v\/endors#}#*

B *^[/mhm]#* **(S.8.1.91-106)**

The clausal form *you see* in Example 3 produced by the speaker A immediately prompts a backchannel signal in the form of *yes, yes* from the hearer B. It is yet another instance of an appealer, this time as a successful backchannel prompter, which does not imply any shift of current speaker. Compare with Example 1 above, in which *you know* prompts a verbal response, which implies a shift of current speaker.

As for *you know* and *you see* used as empathizers, these represent the most common function of all in telephone conversation, amounting to 33 occurrences of *you know* and five of *you see*. Their tone is mostly rising and it can be stated that they are close to what Quirk et al. (1985) mark as asking for the hearer's understanding, as illustrated by the first token of *you see* in Example 2 above. Östman (1981: 17) describes this function as "the striving on the part of the speaker to get the addressee to co-operate, or accept the propositional content of his utterance". The fact that empathizers usually prompt some feedback from the hearer (altogether 21 cases) clearly reflects their important function in spoken interaction. By using them, the current speaker invites the current hearer to take an active part in the communication. Empathizers prompt some feedback either in the form of backchannelling (nine cases) or some stronger verbal reaction implying a shift of current speaker (12 cases), as in:

Example 4

B *^he !will be 'there on ![m\an] ^just *((the)) M\onday#**

A **^I !s\ee#* ((^you kn/ow#)) I ^know he's :not there :p\/ermanently#*

B	*^y\/es#*
A	*^goodness m/\e# ^y\es#*
B	*^on !M\onday#*
A	*^y\/es# ^well we'll !have to 'push . [e:m] . ^that's 'Lossiemonth :\Avenue /<u>isn't it</u>#*
B	*^y\es# . ^but . !if he 'goes to '[dhi:] - hel^l\/o#* **(S.9.2.133-144)**

In spite of the fact that *you know* and *you see* when used as empathizers sometimes do not prompt any immediate verbal reaction (17 cases), they have an important social function. It seems that the insertion of an empathizer on its own tends to be sufficient from the speaker's point of view. So the current speaker does not wait for any kind of verbal reaction from the current hearer and goes on talking, as is the case of two tokens of *you know* in the following example:

Example 5

C	*I ^feel !very [e:] a:sh/amed# ^not to _have it _off [t] "!pat . <u>you ^kn/ow</u># "^p/at# on the ^tip of my !t\ongue# but the ^fact /is# I ^haven't ^not . been as it [e] _what's 'called ":c\/onference 'secretary# - [e:] ^and [em e] ^so <u>you ^kn/ow</u># I ^haven't . ((haven't)) in a !sense "!m\emorized (^these th\ings#)# .* **(S.8.3.316-323)**

As for the last discourse function, namely that of monitor, it has been impossible to draw any results in my present study because only three tokens of *you know* in this function have been found in my data. The reason for this is the fact that the function of monitor is not typical of *you*-oriented CCs, among which both *you know* and *you see* can be included. (For more information on the differences between *you*-oriented and *I*-oriented CCs such as *I mean*, see Povolná 2004a.)

5   Conclusions

In summary, it can now be stated that speakers frequently use some interactive discourse items to enhance the smooth flow of spoken interaction, to create some space for the exchange of ideas, attitudes, opinions, etc. with the other participants in a given communicative situation, in spite of some differences between the individual D-items. The use of non-verbal reactions on their own, such as head-nods and facial gestures, on the part of the current hearer can often represent sufficient support for the current speaker to go on speaking, owing above all to the face-to-face contact between all participants. However, when such face-to-face contact is not available, as for example in telephone conversation, the current hearer tends to produce much more frequently some kind of feedback in the form of a verbal response rather than a backchannel signal.

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