

Teaching unit 10: Stan – life in the army

Background

Stan is 77 years old and lives in Havering, Essex. In this extract he reminisces about his army days. It could be interesting to consider which features of Stan's speech mark him out as a member of an older generation: for example, would a young person use the colloquial words and expressions *chap* (lines 6, 75), *a good half hour* (line 25), *a blind bit of notice* (line 31), *blimey* (line 44) or *a great big fat corporal* (line 18)? Stan's hedges, discourse markers and quotative expressions are also more typical of an older speaker.

Much of the impact of the story comes from what Stan said to his superior officers and what they said to him, so there is a lot of reported direct speech and reported thought in his story. His use of *er* and *erm* is in line with research findings on gender differences in the use of these forms.

Audio, transcript and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at: <http://www.englishlanguageresources.org/TU10>

Discussion points

Clause combining

And is the most frequent conjunction that Stan uses to combine his clauses, occurring in lines 4,5, 11, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 33, 35, 37, 40, 41, 45, 47, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 77, 82, 84, 86, 87, 90, 92, 93, 98 and 99. Stan also uses *so* (lines 8, 12, 54, 73, 75 and 91) and *but* (line 9).

Conversational historical present

Stan uses this tense in line 86 to report something that he said in the past. The tense is the present progressive (not the simple present as in *I say*); which symbolically prolongs the moment and adds to the dramatic effect.

Discourse markers

oh is frequent. It often marks the structure of the discourse: for example it is usually at the beginning of a clause (lines 12, 27, 44, 48, 69, 73), sometimes with another discourse marker (*well* in line 13) or an interjection (*blimey* in line 48).

It also marks the discourse structure when it is at the beginning of the quote in reported direct speech (lines 12, 27, 53, 69, 72). In line 44 it marks an interruption to the main story, when Stan finds that he can't remember a character's name. Similarly, in line 48 *oh* after *one day* marks the beginning of a long digression from the main story, which Stan doesn't get back to until line 52, when he repeats *one day*.

At the same time *oh* sometimes indicates that what will follow is an evaluation of what Stan has just been talking about (his own evaluation in line 12; his superior officer's surprise in line 27). It sometimes signals that the information just given has been understood (lines 69 and 72).

well Stan uses *well* at the start of a clause, like *oh* (lines 16, 24, 80, 88), as well as at the beginning of a quote in reported direct speech (12, 25, 63, 70, 95) or reported thought (line 25), and to signal the beginning of a new episode in the story (lines 16, 80, 88). Other functions are to soften a following negative comment (line 25), and to signal that what Stan intends to say may not be what the listener (here, the other character in the story) is expecting (lines 63, 95).

course and **of course** Stan also uses this discourse marker to mark the start of a clause (lines 3, 11, 13, 16, 24, 84). The literal meaning of *of course*, expressing certainty, sometimes lingers on so that Stan perhaps emphasises what he is about to say (for example, lines 13, 16, 24). In some of these cases *of course* may also signal that Stan is about to give the listener some new information (lines 11 – note that here the interviewer signals that he has understood by saying *right* – 13, 16, 24, 84). Sometimes *of course* suggest that the information that is about to follow is something that we all know about (line 16). *Of course* also occurs at the end of a clause (line 8), perhaps, with the clause initial *so*, adding a note of irony (since the infantry is not where Stan had wanted to be).

you know The position of this discourse marker is flexible: Stan uses it at the beginning of a clause (line 30) and also mid-clause (lines 12, 67). *You know* involves the listener by appealing to shared understanding: in line 12 *you know* implies ‘you may have thought the same’ and in line 30 it implies that the listener may have seen people trying to show off their badges as they walk (note that the listener laughs).

you see in line 87 has a similar function, implying that the listener may have experience of people making little jokes when they lecture.

Note that like most older speakers, Stan does not use *like* as a discourse marker. The only way that he uses *like* is in its older uses as a conjunction (line 21) and a preposition (lines 30 and 83), not as a discourse marker.

Hedges

sort of (lines 21, before the verb *scratched away* and 30, before the verb *walk about*) involves the listener by signalling imprecision – ‘scratched away’ may not be the best way to describe the sound of an old gramophone, and the impression Stan gives of the way he walked about (line 30) may not be exactly right.

about (line 75) signals that 30 is an approximate number.

Note that although young people use *sort of* and *about* too, in these contexts they may be more likely to use *like*.

Indefinite *this*

(lines 19, 20, 40, 65, 75 and 90) introduces new information. Note that *this* in lines 22, 30, 83, 86 and 93 has its more literal **deictic** meaning (‘pointing’ to things present at the time of speaking or that have just been mentioned): in line 22 it refers to the noises that Stan was hearing, in line 30 the way that he was pretending to walk, in line 83 to the country where Stan was at the time, in line 86 to the box that he had just been talking about and in line 93 to the way that Stan had just been talking (*this line of patter*)

Non-fluency features

er and erm (filled pauses)

These nearly always occur at the beginning of a clause, indicating that Stan wants to keep the floor while planning the grammatical structure of what he is about to say (lines 2, 10, 11, 18, 25, 29, 77). Sometimes there is a **silent pause** too (lines 11, 25, 29).

Stan mainly says *er* (*erm* occurs only once), in line with attested gender differences in the use of *er* and *erm*.

Repetition

On line 78 there is repetition of the first word of the clause and a silent pause, again indicating planning.

Quotative expressions

Zero quotatives (lines 43, 44 and perhaps also 74, though note that here that *he said* straggles 2 quotes). Although the quote is not introduced explicitly it is clear which character in the story is speaking, sometimes from a change in the voice that Stan uses for his characters. The zero form has the effect of highlighting what was said, which is a dramatic part of the story.

THINK introduces reported thought (lines 12, 25, 46, 57)

SAY The only other quotative expression that Stan uses is SAY (lines 6, 7, 22, 27, 40, 43, 53, 55, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 86, 93, 94, 95, 96, 98). Note that he uses the quotative to break up a long stretch of reported speech from the same character e.g. lines 58 and 59, 63 and 64, 70 and 71, 93 and 94, 95 and 96. He sometimes puts the quotative in the middle of the quote, which also helps to break it up (e.g. lines 72, 74). At other times the quotative frames the reported speech (e.g. it is clear when listening to the extract that on lines 58 and 59 *he said* comes both before and after the quote, framing it).

Note that although younger people may use a wider range of quotative expressions (mainly by using BE LIKE as well as SAY, GO and the zero form), they do not normally use BE LIKE to frame or break up long stretches of reported speech as Stan does with SAY.

Rhetorical strategies

In lines 15 and 50 Stan criticises army decisions. He does this by 'fronting': putting a dependent question clause in front of the main clause (compare *I don't know* [main clause] *how they thought we were gonna get out there quickly to do it* [dependent clause] with the fronted *how they thought we were gonna get out there quickly to do it I don't know*; and *I've never understood* [main clause] *why they wanted British troops there* [dependent clause] with *why they wanted British troops there I've never understood with*). By fronting the dependent question Stan gives more emphasis to the decisions that he thinks were foolish.