Y’know, I’m expressing expectations about your knowledge state: left edge y’know

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The problem. The English discourse expression y’know (1), as in Y’know, Neil Young’s Canadian, is frequently used; yet, perhaps because of its wide range of use (e.g. see Ostman 1981, Schiffrin 1988), y’know still has a poorly understood semantics. We concentrate on one use of y’know common in online discourses -- left-edge parenthetical y’know -- and present new examples collected from online social media via google searches. We propose that y’know has some discourse particles properties, in expressing expectations about addressee knowledge.

The background. Y’know is typically classified as a discourse marker (e.g. Schiffrin 1988, Jucker 1993; but Schourup 1985 for the term “particle”). Whereas discourse markers contribute to the management of the Common Ground (CG) shared by speaker and addressee(s), discourse particles express a speaker attitude about the cognitive states of either the speaker or addressee to the propositional content of an utterance (Jucker 1993, Zimmermann 2011; see Krifka 2007 on CG management). Y’know, however, has also been recognized as having such a semantic contribution (e.g. Schiffrin 1988 on y’know aligning speaker and addressee knowledge states), and in the present paper we address how to model that in a formal semantic framework.

The approach. We concentrate on one common use of y’know in online discourses: left-edge parenthetical y’know (1). We propose that it contributes not at issue (non-truth conditional) content (pace Zimmermann 2009, 2011, among others) indicating the speaker’s expectations about the addressee’s knowledge state. Thus, it shares some properties of discourse particles, and is not a pure discourse management device. We blend two approaches: first, a contrastive approach (e.g. Nekula 1996, Cuenca 2008) comparing the contributions of y’know with German particles ja and doch (Zimmermann 2011). Secondly, we also adopt Zimmermann’s approach of characterizing the meaning contribution of y’know as expressive, not at issue propositions (see also e.g. Davis, Potts and Speas 2007 on evidentials; Schlenker 2007 on pejoratives).

The analysis. German ja contributes the expressive proposition the speaker believes that p is uncontroversial, where uncontroversial means “a speaker assumes [a proposition p] to be shared by the addressee, i.e. to be part of the Common Ground,” or “the speaker considers the addressee to be in the possession of sufficient evidence for judging p to be true” (Zimmermann 2011:2016). Doch, on the other hand, contributes the speaker assumes p not to be activated at the current stage of discourse (Zimmermann 2011: 2017). We propose that y’know has aspects of both German ja and doch (2). Its ja aspect is weaker than German ja, however: when expressing y’know, p, an English speaker adds the expressive proposition the speaker expects the addressee to accept p into the Common Ground. At the same time, the speaker also expresses a doch-like meaning, namely that the speaker assumes p not to be activated at the current stage of discourse.

Results of the analysis. The q contributed by y’know (2) gets away from a semantic characterization that uses know itself, instead characterizing it as an expectation, and thus accounts for why speakers can use y’know to both introduce propositions that they think the addressee knows (3), or to introduce ones they think they don’t know (4) (Schiffrin 1988). Furthermore, certain discourse contexts will create expectations that are incompatible with the semantics of y’know. For example, the contribution r in (2) predicts that y’know cannot be used in contexts where p is definitely activated in the minds of the addressee ((5), following Zimmermann 2011:2018 on doch). Additional consequences and marginal cases are discussed.
Examples

(1) a. Y’know, there are other games that come out this week. [gaming forum thread title]
   b. Y’know, Neil Young’s Canadian. [response to facebook post about N. Young concert]
   c. Y’know, I thought we wanted to [renationalise the Royal Mail]. [twitter post]

(2) y’know(p) = p & q & r
   where q = the speaker expects the addressee to accept p into the Common Ground
   r = the speaker assumes p not to be activated at the current stage of discourse
   plus: ‘even’ semantics?

(3) Y’know, the Flames WERE winning this after the first [period].
   [tweet about a 5-1 loss of Calgary Flames to Vancouver Canucks, during game, to other viewers]

(4) Y’know, I almost called you “marshmalicious” …. [twitter banter]

(5) A: Neil Young, the great Canadian rock n’ roll icon, is coming to town.
    B: Yeah/right, Neil Young’s Canadian.
    B’: # Y’know, Neil Young’s Canadian.

References


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