That's what we've lived, you know? Utterance-Final Tags in Australian Aboriginal English and Standardised English

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1. Introduction

Once thought of as 'manifestations of verbal dysfluencies and inarticulateness' (Pichler, 2010: 582), discourse-pragmatic features have more recently been recognized as the *social glue* of interaction, a resource for speakers to manage their identity and social relations (Rodríguez Louro, 2019: 66). One such feature is utterance-final tags (UFTs), which are multifunctional discourse-pragmatic markers employed to delimit common ground between speakers (Denis & Tagliamonte, 2016:87). Previous studies on UFTs in different varieties of English have documented their formal and sociolinguistic import. However, their usage patterns in the Englishes spoken in the Australian continent remain virtually unexplored. To bridge this gap, this paper examines the systems of UFTs in Australian Aboriginal English (henceforth AAE) and Australian Standardised English (henceforth AusE), and documents variability within and across systems in both conversation and narrative genres.

2. Background

UFTs have been historically classified into two types: *canonical* tags and *invariant* tags. Canonical tags depend on the form of the proposition they are attached to (Pichler, 2013: 169). Invariant tags, such as *you know, right, eh*, as their name suggests, remain invariant in shape (Holmes, 1983: 43). While they may be

different in form, UFTs may function in similar ways. For example, the canonical UFT in example 1 and the invariant UFT in 2 both seek confirmation.

    (1)   Well it's like us worrying about rattlesnakes and coyotes, **isn't it** (CH/AusE/ Male/1957)[1]

    (2)   She reminds me of Wiley's girl, **unna** (VB/AAE/Female/1957)

UFTs have been extensively studied in English varieties from the UK (Algeo, 1988; 1990; Moore & Podesva, 2009; Pichler, 2013; 2020), New Zealand (Holmes, 1983; 1986; 1995; Meyerhoff, 1994), and Canada (Denis & Tagliamonte, 2016), and cross-examined in American and British English (Erman, 2001; Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006; 2009), and British, New Zealand, Indian, Hong Kong and Singapore English (Columbus, 2009a; b). However, in Australia, apart from an impressionistic description of interrogative tags in AusE by McGregor (1995), to date, there has been no other study of UFTs. This dearth of research is particularly noticeable for AAE, a contact-based variety spoken by 80% of First Nations people, in many cases as a first and only language (Rodríguez Louro & Collard, 2021a; b). Anecdotal observation by Malcolm (1994) indicates that UFTs are frequent in AAE due to its group-oriented and interactive communicative style.

The extant literature on UFTs suggests that these discourse-pragmatic features are multifunctional and that there is essentially no form-to-function correlation, as different UFT variants can perform the same function, and one single variant can be employed for different communicative purposes. To reconcile so much variability of functional labels in the literature, a bespoke framework of five broader functional categories has been created drawing on the existing scholarship. These functions are *informational*, *confirmatory*, *textual*, *metalinguistic*, and *social/interpersonal*, and have been summarized in Table 1.

Functions	Description	Labels from the extant literature
INFORMATIONAL	To exchange / request information	'epistemic modal' (Holmes, 1995) 'informational' (Algeo, 1990; Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006)
CONFIRMATORY	To seek agreement or alignment from the interlocutor.	'confirmatory' (Algeo, 1990; Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006) 'confirmatory to indicate agreement with speech act and agreement with assertion' (Wiltschko, Denis & D'Arcy, 2018)

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[1] Speaker information in parenthesis includes speaker initials (e.g., 'JC'), English variety spoken (e.g., 'AAE'), gender and year of birth.

INTERPERSONAL/ SOCIAL	To appeal to the social/interpersonal relationship between participants. To establish common ground.	'facilitative', 'softening tags' (Holmes, 1995) 'monitor for proximity, common ground and cooperation' (González, 2004) 'interpersonal and affiliative' (Meyerhoff, 1994) 'social monitors: interactive markers comprehension-securing markers', hedges' and 'approximators' (Erman, 2001) 'co-joint knowledge' (Holmes, 1986) 'direct appeal to shared knowledge, appeal to fill in the gaps, invite inferences' (Beeching, 2016) 'quotative delimiter' (Erman, 2001; González, 2004; Holmes, 1986)
TEXTUAL	To organise and encode the message.	'word search' (Beeching, 2016) 'false start' (Holmes, 1986) 'hesitation' (Erman, 2001) 'repair' (Beeching, 2016; Clayman & Raymond, 2021; Erman, 2001; Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002)
METALINGUISTIC	Concerned with the illocutionary force of the utterance as a whole.	'metalinguistic monitors', 'emphasizers'(Erman, 2001) 'punctuational', 'aggressive', 'premptory' tags (Algeo, 1990) 'challenging' tags (Holmes, 1995) 'illocutionary force markers' (González, 2004) 'self-evident facts' (Beeching, 2016)

Table 1. Summary of functional categories of all UFTs.

The distributional patterns of UFTs have long been observed in conversational data, but only recently have researchers begun to examine how UFTs function in storytelling (see González, 2004; González, 2005; Pichler, 2020). With the intention to understand 'a tag's functional spectrum in other speech events or genres' (Pichler, 2013: 173), in this study UFTs are considered in both conversation and storytelling. Narratives, as defined by (Labov, 1972), comprise events told in real life order and contain at least two narrative clauses that build onto a climax. They usually contain the components summarised in Table 2 (Labov, 2013: Chapter 2).

Abstract	Brief summary of the story.
Orientation	Information about participants, setting, and activities.
Complicating action	What happened.
Evaluation	Evaluation of what happened and comments on the significance of the story.
Resolution	Statement(s) on how the complicating action was resolved.

Coda	Return to the present time of the narration.

Table 2. A Labovian narrative (Labov, 1972: 360).

Pichler (2020), in her study of UFTs in Multicultural London English, and González (2004, 2005) in his work on Catalan and British English, observed a correlation between usage frequency and narrative segment. UFTs predominated in the orientation and the complicating action segments. This allowed the narrators to create tension and keep the listeners engaged until the climax, and to 'focus listener's attention on information that is important for their understanding of the narrative as a whole' (Pichler, 2020: 387). Storytelling in AAE is framed around the practice of *yarning*, which is a form of conversation and storytelling employed to communicate and pass on knowledge and history (Terszak, 2007: 90). While the cultural context of yarning is different from that of AusE narratives, these storytelling genres were found to be structurally comparable with respect to the Labovian narratives as outlined above.

3. Methodology

The research questions that this paper seeks to address are:
I.   What is the system of UFTs like in AAE and AusE and what functions are frequently encoded?
II.   How do UFTs used in encoding common ground pattern in AAE and AusE across conversation and storytelling?

To be able to understand the variable grammar of UFTs, all possible variants need to be isolated to consider Labov's (1972b: 72) 'principle of accountability', which Tagliamonte (2006: 13) defines as 'every case in which a variable element occurs out of the total number of environments where the variable element could have occurred, but did not.' For this purpose, the analysis of UFTs will be divided into two parts. Firstly, to provide a general overview of the UFT systems in AAE and AusE, in Section 4.1 I consider all UFTs used across all functions. In Section 4.2, I focus on a subset of UFTs within the social/interpersonal function that have been employed to mark common ground between speakers. This approach, proposed by renowned Argentinian sociolinguist Lavandera (1978), takes into consideration different ways of encoding the same function. Focusing on functional equivalence is in line with the principle of accountability and with Denis & Tagliamonte's (2016) and Pichler's (2020) decision to restrict their variationist analysis and statistical modelling to common ground UFTs.

For this study, data was drawn from two existing corpora: the UWA Corpus of English (Rodríguez Louro, 2011-2020), which consists of sociolinguistic interviews recorded by UWA Linguistic students in conversation with friends and family, and the Yarning corpus (Rodríguez Louro, 2018-2022), collected by a bi-cultural team of researchers, Dr Celeste Rodríguez Louro and Glenys Collard, through Indigenous-led yarning sessions led by Collard. The participant sample used in this study is shown in Table 3.

Age	AAE		AusE	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
< 30	5	4	5	6
30-59	6	6	4	5
>60	4	2	4	4
Total	27		28	

Table 3. Participant sample used in this study.

Tokens of UFTs and their immediate context were manually extracted and coded for the predictors summarised in Table 4. The program Language Variation Suite (Olga & Dǐaz-Campos, n.d.) was used for the distributional and statistical analysis.

Predictors	Coding options
English variety	AAE/AusE
Age	n/a
Gender	male / female
Type of tag	canonical / invariant
UFT variant	you know / right / eh …
Function	informational / textual / metalinguistic / confirmatory / social-interpersonal / common ground
Genre	storytelling / conversation
Narrative segment	abstract / orientation / complicating action / evaluation / resolution / coda

Table 4. Coding protocols.

4. Results

4.1 Distribution of UFTs across all functions

As shown in Table 5, an overall higher frequency of UFTs was observed in the AAE than in the AusE corpora. *You know* was found to be the most widely used UFT in both AAE (49%) and AusE (78%). However, while AusE speakers strongly favour *you know*, AAE speakers draw on a larger repertoire of options, which includes invariant tags such as *eh, yeah, right* and *unna*. In AAE, canonical tags are significantly less frequent than in AusE. UFT variants *you know* and *right* are the most frequent in both English varieties and across functions and genres. These findings concur with those noted by Columbus (2009b) across New Zealand, British, Singapore, Indian and Hong Kong English, and with Denis and Tagliamonte's (2016) for Canadian English.

Turning to the distribution of UFTs across functions, as shown in Table 4, it is evident that in both AAE and AusE *common ground* tokens are the most

frequent, and that *informational* UFTs have very low frequencies, which echoes Tottie and Hoffman's (2009) findings for American and British English. A noteworthy difference is that AAE speakers frequently exploit the confirmatory function, mostly through the use the variants *eh* and *unna*, a variant exclusive to AAE. This finding supports Malcolm's observation that question tags are frequently used as 'confirmation-seeking devices' (1994: 295).

	AAE		AusE	
	N	%	N	%
Common ground	225	72.6	155	81.15
Confirmatory	59	19	9	4.7
Metalinguistic	15	4.8	15	7.8
Social/interpersonal	9	2.9	6	3.1
Informational	2	0.65	5	2.6
Textual	0	0	1	0.5
Total	310	100	191	100

Table 5. Distribution of UFTs across functions in AAE and AusE.

4.2 UFTs for common ground

The focus on this section is on the sub-set of UFT tokens employed to mark common ground between speakers, so as to be able to examine UFT variability in AAE and AusE in storytelling and conversation genres.

UFTs were found across both storytelling and conversation genres in both AAE and AusE, as show in Table 6.

	AAE		AusE	
	N	%	N	%
Storytelling	64	28.4	52	33.9
Conversation	161	71.5	101	66
Total	225	100	153	100

Table 6. Usage frequency of AAE and AusE UFTs in conversation and storytelling genres.

However, interesting differences emerged when their distribution across narrative segments was considered. The overall findings concur with Pichler's (2020) findings for London English narratives in that UFTs are mostly cluster in the orientation and complicating action. However, as shown in Table 7, in AAE, UFTs are used significantly more in the orientation segment (62.5%), whereas in AusE UFTs are mostly used in the complicating action (53.9%).

	AAE		AusE	
	N	%	N	%
Abstract	1	1.5	1	1.9
Orientation	40	**62.5**	10	19.2
Complicating action	12	18.75	28	**53.9**

Evaluation	5	7.8	6	11.5
Resolution	3	4.7	7	13.5
Coda	3	4.7	0	0
Total	64	100	52	100

Table 7. Distribution of invariant UFTs in narrative segments in AAE and AusE.

5. Discussion

As evidenced in Section 4, the UFT systems of AAE and AusE present similar patterns, some of which are also shared with other mainstream English varieties, including Canadian English (Denis & Tagliamonte, 2016) and British English (Pichler, 2020). However, meaningful differences between AAE and AusE UFTs indicate that the UFT system of AAE is to some extent unique. In this section, I discuss what makes the AAE UFT system distinctive.

Confirmation in AAE

As noted in Section 4, AAE speakers were found to exploit the confirmation function of UFTs significantly more frequently than their AusE counterparts, which amounts to 19% and 4.7% of all UFT tokens respectively. This finding provides empirical evidence to support Malcolm's (1994: 295) observation that question tags are frequently used as 'confirmation-seeking devices' due to the interactional nature of AAE, where interactions are often 'participative', 'group-oriented', and often seek authorization or agreement from their interlocutors. This is exemplified in (3), where the speaker, DCC, seeks validation from her sister, SDC.

> (3) my grandmother was a very - she was very, very strong in her way too, **eh** SDC (DCC/AAE/Female/1963)

Importantly, these findings in the dataset may be prompted by the presence of Celeste Rodríguez Louro, the non-Indigenous facilitator (see further Rodríguez Louro & Collard, 2021b: 8). Among the variants employed to seek confirmation, was *unna*, a variant exclusive to AAE, exemplified in (4). This UFT, defined by Malcolm (2018: 90) as a 'marker of solidarity' (Vinson, 2008: 3), is also used to strengthen bonds.

> (4) Nanna when's that birthday party? Not this weekend, **unna**. (VB/AAE/Female/1957)

Unlike other UFT variants within the *confirmatory* function, *unna* was found across generations in the corpus, which suggests that it is an emblematic feature of AAE in the Southwest of Australia. *Unna* usage among participants in the Yarning corpus may be motivated by a need to signal affiliation and group identity (Meyerhoff, 1994: 373), which is achieved by accommodating their speech to that of the other Aboriginal participants present. Furthermore, the presence of a non-Indigenous researcher is likely to have heightened the need for group affiliation. This illustrates how AAE speakers have adapted English to express their social identities. While other UFT variants are available for them to

employ to confirm propositions, AAE speakers choose their own exclusive variant. As Burridge and Kortmann (2020) suggest, in post-colonial countries, 'distinct Englishes have become an important means of signalling […] speakers' cultural and social identity.

Tagging orientations

We now turn to examine the important difference found in the distribution of UFTs across narrative segments. As noted in Section 4, 62.5% of all UFTs employed by AAE speakers in narratives were found in the narrative orientation, as opposed to only 19.2% in AusE. This remarkable difference may be motivated by some of AAE yarns unique features. According to Malcolm (2018: 133-134), these are:

(a) 'situated,' introducing the time and place of the story;
(b) 'dramatic,' frequently featuring direct quotation;
(c) 'inclusive,' with narrators describing participants and context in detail;
(d) 'interactive,' usually co-constructed by more than one speaker.

In the previous section, I suggested that the presence of the non-Indigenous researcher may have had an impact on the use of UFTs in AAE. The high frequency of UFTs in orientation segments, I argue, may also be the result of this. Orientation segments are essential to storytellers; they allow them to build on shared knowledge with the listener. According to Labov (2013: 87), 'the placement of the orientation is one of the major tools at the disposition of narrators in their reconstruction of reality.' AAE speakers may consider their 'reality' different from that of their non-Indigenous interlocutor. In their yarns, they talk about racism, dispossession, incarceration, and spiritual beliefs that are arguably not shared with the non-Indigenous interlocutor. Therefore, they not only provide extensive orientations in the yarns, but also frequently tag them for social cohesion. This is evident in (5), where DC tells a yarn about two people who were *stolen generations*[2]. Aware that the researcher may ignore the fact that it is common for people who were stolen to call each other 'brother' and 'sister', DC tags this orientation segment to build on their common ground.

> (5) I think he was 17 and oh, and he was terrible at mum's house. I'll get my brother, because why she called him a brother he was a [unclear] man and that, been stolen from generations, they're all call each other brother and sisters, **you know**?

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[2] The term Stolen Generations refers to the mixed-race Aboriginal babies and children separated from their families between 1910 and 1970 as a result of government policy. This forceful removal of children was motivated by the assumption that Indigenous children need to be educated and socialised into Western society.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has provided an empirical account of the pragmatic and sociolinguistic import of UFTs in previously unexamined English varieties, AAE and AusE. UFTs were shown to be important resources for social cohesion in both storytelling and conversation genres. The systems of UFTs of AAE and AusE present similarities, some of which are also shared with other varieties of English. However, the AAE system is also unique. AAE speakers are using UFTs in a way that is 'recognizably aboriginal' (Malcolm, 2013; Rodríguez Louro & Collard, 2020) despite the pressing influence from the imposed majority language. This 'Aboriginal way' of using English is underpinned by a positive in-group identity among First Nations people (Dickson, 2019: 148). It remains to be assessed, however, how this identity is negotiated and indexed within and outside social networks, which is what I am investigating as part of my PhD research project. Future research in this field should focus more closely on the role of the addressee and examine the social meaning of UFTs as stylistic devices (c.f. Moore & Podesva, 2009). Opportunities for further research in AAE are vast and pressing, as this variety remains underrepresented in linguistic research. This study makes a contribution, however small, to the understanding of AAE as a marker of Aboriginal identity.

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