Filler particles (FPs), such as *uh* and *um* in English, occur in many languages and often consist of a similar form. A vowel (*uh*) or nasal type (*hm*) or a combination of the two (*um*). Differences across languages in the use of FPs seem to be mainly the preferred type of FP – vocalic, nasal or vocalic-nasal – and the different vowel quality that is produced in the FP [1]. Previous research suggests that the preferred type of FP may be connected with the most frequent syllable type [2]. For example, closed syllables are more common than open syllables in English and the preferred FP in English is the vocalic-nasal FP (i.e., a closed syllable) [3]. Spanish, however, prefers open syllables which may be the reason for the preference of the vocalic FP *uh*, i.e., an open syllable [4].

The vowel quality of FPs takes the form of a central vowel in many languages, e.g., in German, English, Arabic, Dutch, Hungarian and possibly many others [2, 5-8]. Spanish FPs, on the other hand, employ an unrounded mid-close front vowel similar to their lexical vowel /e/. A speculative reason for this may be the lack of a central vowel in the Spanish vowel inventory and the frequency of the phoneme /e/.

In this talk, I will present data on Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish, a variety of Spanish spoken by a small group of speakers in Bulgaria. This pilot study investigates the frequency and vowel quality of FPs produced by four female Bulgarian and Judeo-Spanish bilinguals focussing on the research question whether the FPs in Judeo-Spanish resemble the ones in Spanish or Bulgarian more closely. The FP vowel quality of the bilinguals is compared to Bulgarian monolinguals as well as Spanish monolinguals, suggesting that the bilingual FP resemble the Bulgarian FPs more closely. This may be due to the fact that the speakers are more dominant in Bulgarian and furthermore, due to the adaptation of the central vowel into their Judeo-Spanish vowel inventory through Bulgarian loan words [9].

References: