The Pragmatic Functions of *I think* in Different Genres

Ning Yang*

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology, Zibo, Shandong, 255000, China

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased interest in targeting lexicalized sequences in second language teaching. Lexicalized sequences have been studied under many rubrics, including ‘chunk’ [16], lexical bundles, recurrent word sequences [3,4], formulaic sequence [17]. The term ‘lexical bundle’ was first used in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English [2]. Among the lexical bundles, the expression *I think* has received a fair amount of attention from different perspectives and in different linguistic frameworks. From the cross-linguistic perspective, *I think* was analyzed in the context of grammaticalization and pragmationalization [15]. In terms of *I think*, grammaticalization and pragmationalization are the two complex processes. Polysemy of *think* are metaphoric strategies and extensions because of conversational principles and implicatures. The function of *I think* was also analyzed in political discourse and it was found that deliberative *I think* is typical of political interviews, whereas tentative *I think* is rare [15]. A positive relationship between the use of formulaic sequence and language proficiency was investigated from the perspective of accuracy, fluency and variation [13,14]. Given the significance of formulaic sequence in language learning, the formulaic sequence *I think* is seldom explored in formal and informal discourse. Therefore, Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) was selected and the text types, graduate student research interview (henceforth GSRI) and objectivism group study (henceforth OSG), were chosen from the corpus. They are of relatively high interactivity in the sense that participants are constantly trying to formulate their opinions.

*Corresponding Author:
Ning Yang,
School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology, Zibo, Shandong, 255000, China;
Email: 1028852891@qq.com

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on the topic at hand and may as a result display a high frequency of I think. A comparison of its frequency and function will indicate that I think has a complex meaning and function when it occurs in different positions and with different collocations. The following two questions are discussed in the paper:

(1) Do we find a comparable frequency in GSRI and in OSG?

(2) Does I think have the same function in the two genres, and if so, what exactly is that function?

2. Literature Review

In spoken English, especially in American English speech, I think is the most frequently used epistemic marker [10]. The semantic properties of I think are the basis of the study on its pragmatic functions. The modality and evidentiality are the two considerations when scholars first analyze the semantic meanings of I think. The meaning of I think can be classified into the belief and opinion [11]. Aijmer argues I think has developed into a discourse marker or modal article and it can satisfy the communicative needs. In his study, he concluded the function of I think can be classified as deliberative and tentative. It may involve the speaker’s attitude to the hearer or to the message. When the speaker uses I think in the utterances, they want to express either the certainty or the uncertainty [11]. The use of the hedge I think is an important strategy of politeness and has the functions of avoiding sounding too blunt or assertive and expressing genuine uncertainty in the conversation [5]. Simon-Vandenbergen elaborated the functions of I think in political discourse and concluded that deliberative I think is typical of political interviews, whereas tentative I think is rare [10]. The expression I think should be considered on the levels of syntax, intonation, collocation, interactional context, etc. Karkkainen claims I think has the pragmatic function of on-line planning as well as the topic maintaining and the topic changing [11]. I think is viewed as the expression of epistemic modality within the perspective of conversation analysis. Her data come from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE). The expression I think is encoded in terms of intonation units rather than its syntactic position in clauses or sentences.

The corpus-based studies were conducted in China. Among many researches the study of I think cannot be neglected since it is frequently used in the spoken English of EFL learners. Hu studies the pragmatic functions of I think in the English conversation of Chinese college students [10]. He further analyzes the different positions of I think in the clauses based on the LSECCl (Longitudinal Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners) and discovers different pragmatic functions of I think when it occurs in IU-initial position or as a separate IU. It reveals the function of I think may be determined with their syntactic constraints. Xu makes the research on the discourse management chunk of the college students’ spoken English on the basis of COLSEC (College Learners’ Spoken English Corpus) and ICE-GB-spoken [19]. It is found that unlike native speakers of English who prefer interpersonal indirect politeness strategies, the EFL learners are lack of the chunk richness and they prefer to use the chunk including the phrase I think. Xu and He make a comparative study of I think in the two corpora from the perspective of the forms, meanings and the functions. As the British speakers, Chinese students showed a linear, incremental, dynamic and scalar use of I think [19]. They find that Chinese EFL learners tend to use the tone fillers like em, er; and erm with I think. The study makes some implications to foreign language teaching.

3. Method

The paper combines quantitative study with qualitative study based on MICASE. The selection tool Antconc3.4.4 is adopted. With the help of concordance, we can get all the contexts including I think. To warrant the research accuracy, manual work is needed to delete the phrases such as I think so, what I think and I think of. Quantitative analysis examines the relative frequency of I think in different text types. Qualitative analysis examines the specific context where I think occurs. It also involves the examination of collocation of I think in different text types.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Relative Frequency of I think in Different Text Types

I think is a feature of speech rather than writing [1,7,15]. Besides, the BNC search indicates that within speech, I think is more frequent in dialogue than in monologue: 24 instances per 10,000 words in the former as compared with only 14 in the latter [15]. Aijmer’s concluded within the London-Lund Corpus of spoken English that the frequency in informal face-to-face conversation is almost twice as many as in the non-surreptitious conversation and interview [11]. In the present study, the relative frequencies of highly interactive and highly monologic within MICASE are 36.27 and 7.86 respectively. The proportion of I think in interactive dialogue is approximately 5 times more than that in monologue.

4.2 Positions of I think in GSRI and OSG

A relative frequency of I think in GSRI and OSG is given in Table 1. The texts differ in word account (5168
vs. 22416), so the absolute frequencies have been converted into the relative frequencies indicating the number of frequencies per 10,000 words.

**Table 1.** Relative Frequency of *I think* per 10,000 words in GSRI and OSG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Event Title</th>
<th>Matches</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GSRI</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5168</td>
<td>89.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSG</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>22,416</td>
<td>56.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures show that *I think* is very frequent in GSRI and OSG. The high frequency of *I think* in both genres is related with the nature of the discourse, in which participants are primarily involved in communication. Simon-Vandenbergen’s states that *I think* is more frequent in political interview than in casual conversation (61 per 10,000 words versus 24 per 10,000 words) [15]. Specifically, within the MICASE, GSRI shows a much higher frequency than OSG (89.00 per 10,000 words versus 56.65 per 10,000 words).

With the purpose to give a detailed analysis of *I think* in GSRI and OSG, the samples have been explored from the perspectives of syntax and collocation. The perspective of syntax alone merely gives a specific position of *I think* in the utterance. It is suggested that the interpretation of *I think* cannot be separated from the linguistic context. A distinction can be made between initial, medial and final *I think*. The relative frequency of *I think* within the MICASE is displayed as follows:

**Table 2.** Relative frequency of *I think* in syntactic positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GSRI</td>
<td>73.52</td>
<td>17.41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSG</td>
<td>41.93</td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, it can be shown clearly the very high proportion of initial-*I think* in GSRI and OSG. It is in accordance with the findings illustrated by Aijmer [1] within the LLC and Karkkainen’s findings within the SBCASE [15]. Aijmer proposes that *I think* has been classified as “deliberative” if it has the nuclear tone and occurs first in the utterance [1]. However, it might be reasonable to hypothesize that the function of *I think* can be interpreted with its collocations. The present study confirms Simon-Vandenbergen’s hypothesis that the linguistic context might give additional clues as to the meaning and function of *I think* [15]. In some cases, the deliberative meaning could be enhanced by different kinds of epistemic quantifier [9]. In (1) and (2), *I think* is used to together with *of course* and *certainly* to show assertiveness and politeness as well. For example:

1) yeah *I think* you’re right of course. (OSG)
2) *I think* so um I mean I *certainly*, learned a lot (GSRI)

In other cases, the deliberative meaning could be diminished. Some expressions could convey the speaker’s uncertainty. For example:

3) but *I think* it could be termed a, an aid, a help, *I don’t know.* (OSG)

4) *I think* he is not really sure how long he has lived in the States, but I get the impression that it’s about two years. (GSRI: 42)

It is admitted that although *I think* in (3) and (4) indicate a tentative meaning, it gives the recipient an impression of softening the tone and making the speaker sound less powerful as well.

Second, *I think* displays a very low frequency in the final position, viz. 2.67 per 10,000 words in OSG. Surprisingly, finally *I think* is absent in GSRI. The finding confirms Simon-Vandenbergen’s research, which indicates that the relative frequencies of *I think* in final position in casual conversation and political interview are 7 versus 0 [13]. It could be plausible to ascribe the results to the nature of genres and different functions of *I think*. Final position gives the item an end focus, weakening the force of assertion. Meanwhile, the speaker’s doubt is highlighted. Cases of *I think* in medial and final position have been classified as tentative even if they are prosodically prominent [1]. It is reasonable that in GSRI, the interviewee expresses his opinion with great conviction, intending to persuade the interviewer to consent to his opinions and to be accepted with his great effort. Finally *I think* is totally avoided by the interviewee to reach the communicative goal. However, the conversation is co-constructed among five participants in OSG, which seems to mean they could sort of speak out their positions freely. For example:

5) it’s uh, *I mean* this doesn’t he sh- *maybe* should have qualified this *I think*.

Besides using final *I think*, the speaker here uses the hedges *I mean* and *maybe* to avoid giving the blunt assessment. Hedges are not used in situation where the speaker either cannot or does not want to say something directly [9].

In terms of medial *I think*, it could be seen that the relatively lower frequencies are displayed compared with initial position. *I think* occurs between the elements the speaker is not sure about so that the hesitation is enhanced. For example:

6) S2: um *I mean* they’re they’re i *I think* they’re supporting him [S1: right ] um so he’s just *sort of*, doing as much as he can [S1: mhm ] to get as many experiences (OSG)

Medial *I think* could also disrupt the syntactic structure and accordingly shifts the topic directly.

7) S4: he’s on the *I think* it would be really really hard to come up with the following [S1: yeah mm] especially

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with primary and fundamental (OSG)

4.3 The Collocations of I think

Another item that is worth exploring is the collocations of I think. A more detailed observation of linguistic context of I think in OSG and GSRI is displayed first. The following patterns indicate some collocations which frequently occur in the same clause or clause complex in the GSRI. The following expressions of epistemic certainty are included in research interview. For example:

8) um, I think that’s certainly, can be useful.
9) Just looking at it from that perspective, um I think is really neat um, an- and that’s and that’s I think unique.

In (9), just is used with a ‘locative’ function or maybe an emphasizing function. The credibility is enhanced when the interviewee tries to express his opinion by using I think and really, which could be considered as an expression of deliberation.

The following collocations occur more frequently in the OSG, which could reduce the assertiveness of the utterance. At the same time, I think in (12) seems to indicate that the speaker makes on-line planning especially when he needs to time to think about something.

10) I think I think I’ve resolved but I still have feeling of doubt and I don’t know why but I still have them.
11) I mean this doesn’t he she- maybe should have qualified this I think.
12) I think it was based on whatever, <PAUSE:04>, you wanna choose, a path, of thinking, that will I don’t know if we gotta get into this.

A list of I think in the immediate context, i.e. for words immediately preceding I think is shown in Table 3. For the words immediately following I think do not show any regular patterns so they will not be discussed in this section.

Table 3. Relative frequency of immediate context of I think per 100 words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OSG</th>
<th>GSRI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>so I think</td>
<td>5 (3.93)</td>
<td>4 (8.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and I think</td>
<td>6 (4.72)</td>
<td>9 (19.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because I think</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td>2 (4.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>then I think</td>
<td>1 (0.78)</td>
<td>2 (4.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but I think</td>
<td>7 (5.51)</td>
<td>2 (4.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well I think</td>
<td>4 (3.14)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I mean I think</td>
<td>1 (0.78)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstly, as revealed in the table, so, and, because, then, and but work as a link between the preceding and the following utterances. They could be interpreted as a careful deliberation rather than a hesitation. The higher proportions of so, and, because, and then in the GSRI indicate that the interviewee tries to clarify his stands in the conversation, demonstrating a kind of higher certainty and great confidence. The word but used less in the GSRI than in the OSG. It shows the interviewee will not oppose the interviewer’s argument directly, which is felt to be face-threatening.

Secondly, well I think display a higher proportion in OSG compared with the zero proportion in GSRI. The hesitation marker well I think could be regarded as typical features of OSG since it is totally avoided in the research interview. As mentioned in the preceding discussion, the interviewee focuses on commitment and assertiveness in the conversation. The fact that well frequently precedes I think may indicate the explanation of I think as a hedge.

5. Conclusions

The present study examined the formulaic sequence I think in different text types. With regard to I think, it is clear that it has different meanings and functions in GSRI and OSG. Some conclusions can be made about I think. First, the relative frequency of I think in highly interactive text type is about 5 times more than that in highly monologic text type. It is in accordance with the previous study. Second, from the perspective of syntactic position, I think has different meanings. The finding of a very high proportion of initial-I think in GSRI and OSG is in line with the findings made by Aijmer. Sometimes, the deliberative meaning might be highlighted by using I think together with of epistemic quantifier (of course, certainly, etc.). For the final position, I think has a low frequency in OSG whereas I think is absent in GSRI. As regards medi-al I think, there is lower frequency compared with initial position, which indicates that the speaker is not sure about what he is going to say. Therefore, the speaker’s doubt is enhanced and it may work as a tentative meaning. Thirdly, different collocations of I think within OSG and GSRI to be interpreted differently. In GSRI, there was a higher proportion of so, and, because and then. On the other hand, there was a higher proportion of well I think in OSG and well I think was totally avoided in GSRI. The It is because of the fact that interviewee will not argue against the interviewer’s opinion directly, which is felt to be face-threatening. The word well is placed before I think, indicating that I think is regarded as a hedge.

References


