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## PRAGMATIC MARKER USE IN POLICE INTERVIEWS: THE CASE OF *I MEAN* AND *YOU KNOW* (PART 1)

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### Abstract

Drawing on interactional approaches to comment clauses (Stenström 1994; Povolná 2010), the paper reveals the discourse functions of *I mean* (Part 1) and *you know* (Part 2) in the context of police interviews. More specifically, taking into account the socio-pragmatic setting of police-suspect interaction, it highlights the context-dependence and the multifunctionality of these markers based on data from two police interview transcripts. Thus, following the spirit of the study by Fox Tree and Schrock (2002), Part 1 of the analysis demonstrates that while the primary role of *I mean* is that of “forewarning upcoming adjustments” (Schiffrin 1987), the marker performs interpersonal, turn management, repairing, monitoring and organizing functions. This being the case, the study examines the potential of *I mean* to modify the ongoing interaction and stresses its contribution to the coherence of the interviewees’ narratives. Attention is also drawn to the syntactic environment in which *I mean* occurs as well as to listener responses to *I mean* and *I mean*-introduced ideas. Finally, the discussion touches upon the issue of power relations and shows the role which *I mean* plays in the linguistic manifestation of power in an institutional setting.

### 1. Introduction

Much of the scholarly exchange dealing with discourse or pragmatic markers has focused on private talk as well as academic and media genres. Yet, the strategic use of pragmatic markers in police discourse, including interpreter-mediated police interviews, also warrants an in-depth analysis, especially given the fact that it

can translate into better interviewing and interpreting practices. Complementing conversation-analytic studies of police interview discourse (e.g. Haworth 2009; Carter 2011), a discourse-functional account of selected discourse markers can therefore contribute to our knowledge of police-suspect interaction patterns as well as shed light on the multiple meanings of D-items, depending on context and discourse participant roles. Therefore, in this paper I look at two frequently used clausal markers, i.e. *I mean* and *you know* and discuss, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the role they perform in police interview discourse. First, I start with a brief description of the most frequent functions of the two markers reported in the literature and then I examine their use in two police interviews.

## 2. Pragmatic functions of *I mean* and *you know*

Discussed under a variety of labels – including comment clauses, D-items or inserts – pragmatic markers have cohesive and interactive potential and as such, they are used for turntaking, turnkeeping and turnyielding, i.e. for floor management (e.g. Stenström 1995, Povolná 2010). Such is also the case with *I mean*, a high frequency clausal marker in present-day English (Brinton 2008: 112), which performs various discourse-organising functions and contributes to the interactional actions performed by interlocutors. As observed by Brinton (2008: 112), drawing on Schiffrin (1987: 304), the clause is either metalinguistic (i.e. “message-oriented”) or metacommunicative (i.e. focused on the communicative act itself). In her diachronic study, the scholar (Brinton 2008: 132) notes “the decategorialization of *I mean* and concomitant change to functional, or operator status rather than to lexical or major class status” as well as points to the fact that the clause has acquired subjective and intersubjective meanings. Accordingly, Brinton (2008: 114) proposes five pragmatic meanings of *I mean*, namely: oppositional meanings (repair, reformulation, explicitness and exemplification), causal meaning, expressions of speaker attitude and, finally, interpersonal meaning.

An illuminating discussion of both *I mean* and *you know* can, in turn, be found in Fox Tree and Schrock (2002), who stress the historical affinity of the two markers. The scholars (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002: 727) posit that the surface similarities of *I mean* and *you know* stem from their basic meanings of “forewarning upcoming adjustments” (Schiffrin 1987) and “inviting addressee inferences” (Jucker and Smith 1998), respectively. Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) propose five categories of functions associated with the analysed markers: interpersonal, turn management, repairing, monitoring and organising. In their analysis, the researchers also review proposals to the effect that *I mean* and *you know* are either randomly sprinkled into speech or used at a particular moment for a particular function (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002: 728). Arguing against the random sprinkling approach, Fox Tree and Schrock (2002: 731) favour the view that *I mean* and *you know* are used exactly when they are needed. In particular, they link the moment of use with negative politeness and monitoring functions. Last but not least, as reported by the scholars (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002: 736),

*I mean* and *you know* share “forward-looking functions”, i.e. although they may occur sentence-finally, the markers usually point to the subsequent discourse and contribute to the further development of the communication (cf. Povolná 2010: 98).

In her influential study of discourse markers, Schiffrin (1987: 310), on the other hand, observes that both *I mean* and *you know* encourage listeners to consider the overall sense of what has just been said. She (Schiffrin 1987: 272) notes, conversely, that the monitoring uses of the two markers differ, since *you know* elicits addressee feedback, while the speaker-oriented *I mean* is used to focus the listener’s attention (Schiffrin 1987: 309). What is more, as maintained by Schiffrin (1987: 268), *y’know* operates either as a marker of metaknowledge about what the discourse participants share (demonstrating mutual background knowledge) or as a marker of metaknowledge about what is generally known. *I mean*, on the other hand, signals the upcoming modification of the ideas and intentions expressed in the prior utterance (Schiffrin 1987: 296).

That being said, despite the often mutually exclusive views on the multifunctionality of *I mean* and *you know*, there seems to be consensus that some of their functions overlap and that the two clauses contribute to discourse coherence. Accordingly, the view followed in this study is in agreement with Fox Tree and Schrock (2002: 736) approaching *I mean* and *you know* as two related markers and maintaining that the two clauses can adopt new meanings every time they are used. As this article appears in two instalments, in Part 1, I will focus on the patterns of use of *I mean*, while in Part 2, I will turn my attention to the strategic deployment of *you know*.

### 3. Data and method

The data I used for the study come from two transcribed police interviews: a 123-page interview conducted by the FBI (case no. R 08-74777) and a 233-page interview conducted by the Calgary Police Service (CPS file no. 10137061). The first of them illustrates police-witness interaction in a child murder case, while the latter involves participation of a detainee arrested for an aggravated assault and a sexual assault, among other charges.

At this point it should be remembered that police interviews reflect the specific communicative context of an unequal encounter marked by hierarchical power relations and status asymmetry. The exceptional nature of the interview follows from the fact that, as duly noted by Haworth (2009: 77), interaction “between the detainee and police representatives is heavily circumscribed and to a large extent predetermined, with a set of information that must be imparted, and significant limits to what can be said.” At the same time, Haworth (2009: 77) observes that while the detainee may talk freely, he “will not receive a reply or any engagement in interaction” but the institutional response, that is a formal written record of what was said. Notwithstanding the above, however, as suggested by Gibbons (2005: 86), in the case of police interviews we may expect the blending of casual language and formulaic copspeak.

As regards the structure of the police interview genre, it may be described, in brief outline, as involving three stages: primary reality framing, secondary reality core and primary reality framing. Whereas “primary reality framing” refers to information provided at the beginning and at the end of the interview, such as the time of the interview, particulars of the participants, cautions or recording issues, “secondary reality core”, which is of greatest interest to this study, entails the subject of the interview and the questioning phase, the latter making use of available evidence and inviting further evidence (Gibbons 2005: 142). Equally important for the structuring of the interaction itself are the respective roles of interview participants. Among them we find: interviewers (investigating officers or detectives), interviewees (suspects or witnesses), audience members (legal counsels, fellow police officers, interpreters, judges) as well as the “silent participant”, that is the tape (Carter 2011).

Further, concerning the very presence of discourse markers in transcribed police interviews, it needs to be observed that police interview transcripts illustrate discourse which originated as speech and which was subsequently converted to writing. Therefore, it should never be regarded as “neutral”, as it is often the case that discourse markers and hesitation phenomena are deleted from the written record (Blackwell 2000: 6). Yet, since the present data contain a significant number of the two clauses selected for analysis, it may be justifiably assumed that the clauses *I mean* and *you know* have been recorded mostly in an unchanged form.

To examine the usage of the two clauses referred to above I relied on the discourse-analytic method consisting in a detailed, systematic reading of the transcript data. The first stage of the transcript analysis involved identification of the recurrent patterns of use of the two clauses. During the second stage, on the other hand, the predominant discourse-pragmatic functions of *I mean* and *you know* were identified on a case-by-case basis.

While the primary purpose of the current study is to account for the discourse-pragmatic role of *I mean* and *you know* in an institutional setting, in the ensuing analysis I also touch upon the issue of power relations and their linguistic manifestation. To achieve these goals, I address the following questions: 1. Which of the most frequent pragmatic functions of *I mean* and *you know* reported in the literature are evidenced by the police interview data analysed? 2. What are the most common syntactic variations of *I mean* and *you know* in the data? 3. What are the most frequent types of response to *I mean* and *you know* in the police interviews analysed? and 4. What is the correlation between the patterns of use of *I mean* and *you know* and interview participant status?

Last but not least, in the analysis I combine insights from Fox Tree and Schrock (2002), mentioned earlier, who propose five categories of functions associated with *I mean* and *you know*, with Povolná's (2010) approach to the study of interactive discourse markers. It should also be acknowledged that while prosodic contours are certainly meaningful, they could not be analysed as the transcribed data lacked relevant annotation.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. *I mean* in police interview data

In total, the analysis has revealed 143 PM-uses of *I mean*, whose various syntactic realisations have been summarised in Table 1. As can be seen, sentence-initial *I mean* followed by a subject was clearly preferred (38.46%). Ranking as the second most frequent type of *I mean*-introduced phrases, various forms of *(do) you know what I mean?* were, in turn, attested by 31 tokens (21.67%). Nearly equally common, sentence-medial *I mean*, inserted parenthetically, was represented by 28 occurrences (19.58%). Other, decidedly less frequent syntactic realisations included: *I mean...* (9.79%), *right/well/so/yeah*-prefaced *I mean* (7.69%), *I mean* followed by an adverb and, finally, the *what-I-mean-is* phrase attested by only one token.

As expected, correlations were identified between the individual forms and their predominant functions. Predictably, sentence-initial *I mean* was typically linked to the monitoring function, while sentence-medial *I mean* often played the role of a self-repair device. On the other hand, *I mean...* operated as a mitigator and off-record politeness marker, preventing potential face-threats (with the speaker withholding awkward or embarrassing details), whereas the frequently repeated *(do) you know what I mean?* question appeared to betray the speaker's discomfort and uncertainty related to the interview situation.

Interesting correlations were also found, in line with other studies (e.g. Furkó 2013), between the preferred patterns of use and interview participant status (Table 2), which, more generally, can be linked to the linguistic manifestation of power. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, *(do) you know what I mean?* (which might as well be paraphrased as *do you understand?*) appeared to signal uncertainty and the interviewee's apparent need to find affirmation of his account of events. Notably, the phrase was used only by the second interviewee, who was arrested, among other charges, for an aggravated assault. It might be justifiably speculated that the 20-year old detainee (that is the powerless party) felt unsure and uneasy having to answer awkward questions asked by the detective controlling discourse (that is the powerful party).

Furthermore, Table 2 clearly shows that as compared with the interviewees' talk, the incidence of *I mean* phrases in the interviewers' discourse was marginal, which, however, should not be surprising since the detectives were mainly asking questions, while the greater share of the interviews was made up of the interviewees' narratives. Yet, on closer examination, it became evident *why* the interviewees relied on the *I mean* phrases. Firstly, I observed that sentence-initial monitor *I mean*, preferred by the interviewees and representing nearly 40% of all tokens, was used principally for two specific purposes, namely: clarification and elaboration. Example 1 illustrates one such let-me-explain usage, where the interviewee – wary of the fact that whatever he says may be used against him during the subsequent stage of the proceedings – starts his clarification with *I mean* to make sure that his account

CATEGORY	REALISATION	NO. OF OCCURRENCES		
		Inter- view 1	Inter- view 2	Total
I mean (+ S) (sentence-initial)	<i>I mean I know stuff...</i>			
	<i>I mean you could see...</i>	46 (32.16%)	9 (6.29%)	55 (38.46%)
	<i>I mean she tried...</i> <i>I mean it was...</i>			
((Do/if) you) {see, know, understand} what I mean(?)	<i>You know what I mean?</i>		31 (21.67%)	31 (21.67%)
	<i>Do you know what I mean?</i>	0		
... I mean ... (sentence-medial)	<i>That same day I mean right after...</i>	25 (17.48%)	3 (2.09%)	28 (19.58%)
	<i>She's emotional I mean she's crying...</i>			
	<i>Absolutely. I mean...</i>	7 (4.89%)	7 (4.89%)	14 (9.79%)
I mean ...	<i>You know, I mean...</i>			
	<i>Well, I mean that's...</i>	8 (5.59%)	3 (2.09%)	11 (7.69%)
Right/Well/So/Yeah, I mean	<i>Right. So, I mean that's...</i>			
	<i>I mean sure you could...</i>	1 (0.69%)	2 (1.39%)	3 (2.09%)
I mean + Adv.	<i>I mean by that is...</i>	1 (0.69%)	0	1 (0.69%)
What I mean is/ What I mean/meant by X is				
TOTAL:		88 (61.53%)	55 (38.46%)	143 (100%)

Table 1. Syntactic realisations of *I mean* in the data (adapted from Brinton 2008: 118)

is specific and accurate enough and, further, that the hearer arrives at a coherent interpretation of what is being said (cf. Povolná 2010: 98).<sup>1</sup>

#### Example 1

GA: We opened that door for her. She never jumped in and then the birth of the child came along. **I mean** she tried to even conceal that from us for a month or two and stuff until you could see something...

FBI OFFICER: (Inaudible)... (laugh).. yeah. (Int.1\_p.15)

<sup>1</sup> This finding is consistent with the observation made by Fox Tree and Schrock (2002: 741), who claim that *I mean* is likely to be used whenever speakers are careful about expressing precisely what they want to express.

SYNTACTIC REALISATION	NO. OF OCCURRENCES PER PARTICIPANT	
	Interviewer	Interviewee
I mean (+ S) (sentence-initial)	2 (1.39%)	53 (37.06%)
... I mean ... (sentence-medial)	4 (2.79%)	24 (16.78%)
((Do/if) you) {see, know, understand} what I mean(?)	0	31 (21.67%)
I mean ...	1 (0.69%)	13 (9.09%)
Right/Well/So/Yeah, I mean	1 (0.69%)	10 (6.99%)
I mean + Adv.	0	3 (2.09%)
What I mean is / What I mean / meant by X is	0	1 (0.69%)
TOTAL:	8 (5.59%)	135 (94.40%)

Table 2. Syntactic realisations of *I mean* vs. interview participant role

Quite unsurprisingly, sentence-medial *I mean*, associated with unplanned speech and linked to self-repair and mistake editing (cf. Povolná 2010: 98; Furkó 2013: 15), was used chiefly by the interviewees (16.78%) too. As evidenced by Example 2, the interviewee resorts to *I mean* to correct himself and replace the mistakenly used word with the correct one. As such instances were not infrequent in the data, a regular pattern which seems to be emerging here is that of the less powerful party, i.e. the interviewee, using an increased number of pragmatic markers such as *I mean* to prevent ambiguity and to ensure coherence of the ongoing communication, on the one hand, and to make low-level adjustments resulting from speech production problems, on the other (cf. Fox Tree and Schrock 2002: 744). The detectives or investigating officers, conversely, are less likely to use similar markers with the same frequency, since they are the ones who follow a pre-determined format of the interview and thus manage the turntaking and control discourse.

### Example 2

GA: And I'm thankful for that. And he's shared a lot of different things with us, I'm like, why you say... well dad you know it's something between Casey and I. You know just father... **I mean** brother..

FBI OFFICER: Brother... (Int.1\_p.11)

Less frequent, though also deserving a mention, were two interpersonal uses of *I mean*: one related to hedging and mitigation (*I mean I'm not a stupid guy...*) and one related to conceding (*I mean sure... but...*). Accordingly, Example 3 shows how *I mean*, alongside laughter,<sup>2</sup> operates as a mitigating device intended to save the speaker's face. In the following interaction, the interviewee admits to having been cheated on, which could have been avoided, if he had acted more judiciously. Therefore, not to lose face in front of the FBI officer, the interviewee, somewhat jokingly, states that despite falling for the scam, he is not "a stupid guy".

### Example 3

GA: All (Inaudible)... I should've known better it was stupid, but every phone number that was ever given to me and every address. I always followed up with it and everything sounded legitimate and needless to say I got scammed and ah...

FBI OFFICER: Okay.

GA: I had taken money out of our ah...

FBI OFFICER: You're by no means the first person that's done that.

GA: I know that. (laugh)

FBI OFFICER: (laugh)

GA: I should know better. **I mean I'm not a stupid guy**, but...

FBI OFFICER: (Inaudible)... (Int.1\_p.28)

As regards the "agreement to disagree" expressed by *I mean (sure)*, Example 4 clearly shows that this marker can also perform the role of an agreement token, since in the following exchange it might simply be replaced by *yes*. Importantly, however, the concessive meaning of *I mean* (whose interpretation is facilitated by the epistemically modifying elements such as *if* and *could probably*) is justified only after the contrastive *but* is used in the following stretch of talk.<sup>3</sup> Thus, anticipating the detective's argument, the detainee initially acknowledges that the music he played was loud, but later on he produces a counterargument claiming that it was not obtrusive at all.

### Example 4

DP: (...) I turned the music on.

DETECTIVE: Yeah.

DP: And not uh, five minutes into it ... and it wasn't uh, obtrusive or anything. It, **I mean sure if** you're laying [sic!] there quietly in a paper thin uh, apartment and uh, it's Saturday morning and you're trying to sleep, **I mean sure you could probably** hear the base, right. **I mean** it carries, right.

DETECTIVE: Okay.

DP: **But** nothing obtrusive or anything. (Int.2\_p.101)

<sup>2</sup> The strategic use of laughter is an interesting subject of study in its own right. See, for instance, Carter's (2011) insightful research into the structure and uses of laughter in the police interview.

<sup>3</sup> The concessive aspect of *I mean* seems to have been overlooked by researchers focusing on the multifunctionality of this clause.



Finally, I would like to discuss the role of *I mean* as a response elicitor. However, given that the analysed markers frequently co-occurred, identification of a clear correlation between the type of response and the *I mean*-introduced idea proved difficult, as the link was not always obvious. Therefore, rather than distort my data, I chose to analyse only these listener responses which followed *I mean* or *I mean*-introduced ideas occurring in the last syntactic unit of the prior utterance. The analysis has shown that out of 143 instances of PM-uses of *I mean*, 59 tokens were used in such positions.<sup>4</sup> It turned out that verbal responses were noted in 21 instances, backchannels were recognised in 24 cases, while only 14 instances were classified as having no verbal response related directly to the *I mean*-introduced idea (Table 3).<sup>5</sup> Thus, it became evident that more often than not, *I mean* was followed by some kind of response.<sup>6</sup>

Verbal response		Backchannel		No verbal response	
After <i>I mean</i> ending the last syntactic unit	After <i>I mean</i> -introduced idea	After <i>I mean</i> ending the last syntactic unit	After <i>I mean</i> -introduced idea	After <i>I mean</i> ending the last syntactic unit	After <i>I mean</i> -introduced idea
13 (22.03%)	8 (13.55%)	7 (11.86%)	17 (28.81%)	11 (18.64%)	3 (5.09%)

Table 3. Types of response to *I mean*

What may be surprising is the fact that, contrary to what might be expected, backchannels followed *I mean*-introduced ideas (28.81%) decidedly more frequently than *I mean* occurring at the end of a syntactic unit (11.86%). By way of illustration, Example 5 shows a backchannel following an *I mean*-introduced idea, whereas Example 6 – a backchannel following directly sentence-final *I mean*.

#### Example 5

GA: And um, soon as I got up to where we were at by the front office area (Inaudible)...  
I told my wife I said, man this car stinks. I had the windows down that's much...  
it was starting to rain outside. **I mean** it was just... very, very strong odor.

SB: **Yeah.** (Int.1\_p.72)

<sup>4</sup> It should be added that such uses of *I mean* included both sentence-initial, -medial and -final occurrences.

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of clarity, I wish to explain, after Povolná (2010: 109) that the label “verbal response” indicates a response involving a change of the current speaker, whereas “backchannel” refers to a signal which does not involve a change of the current speaker, but which simply indicates feedback and confirms understanding.

<sup>6</sup> Since the current analysis is based on transcribed data, it was not possible to account for silent feedback, such as, e.g. nodding, shaking one's head, facial expressions or other gestures. However, in the transcripts there was evidence of some non-verbal reactions, e.g. clearing one's throat or laughter.

**Example 6**

DP: This guy had ... he was bleeding from orifices. He was oozing from orifices.

DETECTIVE: Okay.

DP: Absolutely. **I mean...**

DETECTIVE: **Okay.** (Int.2\_p.96)

Yet, despite the above observations, the figures (which are of an indicative nature only) should be approached with caution, since the responses could have been cued by co-occurring phenomena, rather than by *I mean* itself.<sup>7</sup> Besides, to provide more reliable, quantifiable figures resulting in the identification of the preferred types of response to *I mean* in police interviews, more data would have to be analysed.

To conclude, I hope to have provided enough evidence in support of the claim that the functions performed by *I mean* in police interview discourse can be mapped onto the five categories proposed by Fox Tree and Schrock (2002), that is: 1) interpersonal (marking politeness, hedging, conceding), 2) turn management (managing the flow of the interaction and turntaking, response eliciting, indicating adjustments), 3) repairing (mistake editing, signalling a change of mind), 4) monitoring (checking comprehension, seeking acknowledgment of understanding) and 5) organising (introducing comments, adding new information), acknowledging, at the same time, that the predominant role of *I mean* is that of “forewarning upcoming adjustments”, regardless of the nature of the adjustments themselves. And it is this ability to modify the ongoing interaction that, as it seems, makes *I mean* such a useful device for police interviewees wishing to add coherence to their narratives as well as to make their accounts of events convincing and more powerful.

Of equal, if not greater, relevance to the shaping of the ongoing communication and the creation of intersubjective meanings is the related marker *you know*, whose primary role, as noted by Fox Tree and Schrock (2002), consists in appealing to addressee inferences and inviting addressee feedback. However, I will leave a discussion of the various discourse-pragmatic functions of *you know* for Part 2, with a view to providing more insight into the strategic deployment of this marker in the data analysed.

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<sup>7</sup> As Fox Tree and Schrock (2002: 735) rightly point out, it may be the case that other co-occurring factors (i.e. rising or falling intonation) and not the pragmatic markers themselves are the actual response elicitors. The scholars (Fox Tree and Schrock 2002: 731) also report Erman's (1987) finding that in the case of self-repairs, listener responses are more likely to occur when no marker is used at all.

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