

## The Pragmatic Functions of *I think* in Different Genres

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to examine the occurrence of *I think* in different genres. A collected data of *I think* from graduate student research interview and objectivism group study within Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) is analyzed. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are included and the selection tool Antconc 3.4.4 are adopted in the study. By using concordance, all the context including *I think* are collected. Meanwhile, some phrases (such as *I think so*, *what I think*, *I think of*, etc.) are deleted from the analysis. It is found that *I think* in different positions and with different collocations fulfill different pragmatic functions respectively. The phrase *I think* is very frequent in GSRI and OSG, which is due to the nature of the discourse, where the participants are engaged in the communication. From the perspective of syntax and collocation, a lot of examples are analyzed in details. It is found that the interpretation of *I think* cannot be reached without exploring its linguistic context. In addition, a more detailed observation of linguistic context of *I think* in OSG and GSRI is explored. Some epistemic certainty (*certainly*, *really*, etc.) are included in research interview, with the function of emphasis and deliberation. The study might help to reconsider the functions of *I think* in different genres.

### 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’<sup>[16]</sup>, lexical bundles, recurrent word sequences<sup>[3,4]</sup>, formulaic sequence<sup>[17]</sup>. The term ‘lexical bundle’ was first used in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English<sup>[2]</sup>. 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 pragmaticalization<sup>[15]</sup>. In terms of *I think*, grammaticalization and pragmaticalization are the two complex process. 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<sup>[15]</sup>. A positive relationship between the use of formulaic sequence and language proficiency was investigated from the perspective of accuracy, fluency and variation<sup>[13,14]</sup>. 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 study group (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

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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<sup>[10]</sup>. 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<sup>[1]</sup>. 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<sup>[11]</sup>. 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<sup>[5]</sup>. Simon-Vandenbergel 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<sup>[15]</sup>. 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<sup>[11]</sup>. *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<sup>[10]</sup>. 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<sup>[19]</sup>. 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*<sup>[18]</sup>. 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<sup>[1,7,15]</sup>. 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<sup>[15]</sup>. 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<sup>[1]</sup>. 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

Speech Event Title	Matches	Word Count	Frequency
GSRI	46	5168	89.00
OSG	127	22,416	56.65

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-Vandenberg’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) <sup>[15]</sup>. 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

Genre	Initial	Medial	Final
GSRI	73.52	17.41	0
OSG	41.93	11.59	2.67

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 <sup>[1]</sup> within the LLC and Karkkainen’s findings within the SBCASE <sup>[11]</sup>. Aijmer proposes that *I think* has been classified as “deliberative” if it has the nuclear tone and occurs first in the utterance <sup>[1]</sup>. However, it might be reasonable to hypothesize that the function of *I think* can be interpreted with its collocations. The present study confirms Simon-Vandenberg’s hypothesis that the linguistic context might give additional clues as to the meaning and function of *I think* <sup>[15]</sup>. In some cases, the deliberative meaning could be enhanced by different kinds of epistemic quantifier <sup>[6]</sup>. 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-Vandenberg’s research, which indicates that the relative frequencies of *I think* in final position in casual conversation and political interview are 7 versus 0 <sup>[13]</sup>. 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 <sup>[1]</sup>. 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 <sup>[5]</sup>.

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

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<sup>[12]</sup>. 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

	OSG	GSRI
so I think	5 (3.93)	4 (8.69)
and I think	6 (4.72)	9 (19.56)
because I think	0 (0.00)	2 (4.34)
then I think	1 (0.78)	2 (4.34)
but I think	7 (5.51)	2 (4.34)
well I think	4 (3.14)	0 (0.00)
I mean I think	1 (0.78)	0 (0.00)

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<sup>[1]</sup>. 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 medial *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.

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