

1 ‘Well I mean I just sort of like you know...’

1.1 Introduction

The term ‘pragmatic marker’ has emerged in the last 20 to 25 years to describe items such as *well*, *you know*, *like* and *I mean*, expressions which may have little obvious propositional meaning but which oil the wheels of conversational social interaction. Debates with respect to terminology and definition have been heated and continuous over this period, reflecting a variety of approaches to the analysis of these very frequently occurring expressions. Despite a steady increase in the number of full-length books, chapters and articles on pragmatic markers in English and other languages, there has not as yet been a book-length publication devoted to surveying their meanings, functions and role in ordinary everyday interaction which includes both sociolinguistic and historical perspectives. This study takes an empirical corpus approach to the exploration of the ways in which pragmatic markers are used in contemporary British English and to the way that their current meanings and functions have evolved. By bringing synchronic and diachronic evidence together, it seeks to explore both the negotiation of meaning in social interaction and the impact of social interaction on meaning.

Meaning in social interaction The volume looks at six commonly occurring pragmatic markers in British English which play textual and interpersonal roles, in synchrony and diachrony. It aims primarily to describe the functions of the markers and their distributional frequency across different social groups and spoken genres in British English. In addition, it seeks to provide attitudinal information about the markers, gleaned from a range of ordinary (non-linguistically trained) speakers of British English. How sociolinguistically salient are the markers? Are they stigmatised? Are they essential elements in the communicative message or unnecessary and irritating additions?

In ordinary everyday conversation, speakers employ a number of mechanisms to create and maintain relationships with each other and to mitigate the strength of their assertions. This is something which we can study using the

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synchronic data collected in corpora of spoken language such as the spoken files from the British National Corpus (BNC), and other, more recently constituted, spoken corpora.

The impact of social interaction on meaning The study of markers in contemporary British English, however, begs the question of how these markers developed their pragmatic, textual and interpersonal roles across time. Tracing the etymology and motivation for the development of the markers can shed light on the current-day polysemy of the terms and on processes of semantic change. Following Brown and Levinson (1987: 255), one of the arguments which is pursued and illustrated through the volume is that the negotiation of face needs in ordinary everyday conversation constitutes a strong functional pressure on language structure. In the case of pragmatic markers, it is the semantic structure of the term in question which is affected, producing semantically opaque, often ambiguous, highly polysemous forms.

From a diachronic perspective, it seems that terms with different core meanings are recruited for their ability to respond to the need for (inter)subjectivity and to mediate indirectness or mitigation. The exact process of change is difficult to trace as we have few records of the spoken language before the advent of the tape-recorder, and must make the best of what Labov has called ‘bad data’ (by which he means data which is either insufficient or insufficiently representative of the spoken language). This argues the case for continuing robust collection of corpora of spoken data for future generations of scholars of language change. In the meantime, however, transcriptions of the Old Bailey trials (see Section 2.7.2) may provide us with some of the evidence we need to trace the development of these markers.

Once terms have been recruited for textual or interpersonal purposes and are semantically relatively bleached, they can be used in a wider range of contexts as they are less constrained lexically, and can even be identity markers with particular social indexicalities. The extent to which particular pragmatic markers are social shibboleths/markers of a particular in-group identity (e.g. the use of *like* currently by young people in the UK and in other English-speaking countries) may influence their dispersal through the population at large in, sometimes, apparently surprising ways.

The volume breaks new ground by highlighting the importance of socio-linguistic factors in both the usage and historical development of pragmatic markers. The conclusion will draw together the theoretical and methodological threads presented in the course of the volume and make some generalisations about the social interactional factors which have influenced the ways in which the six markers have evolved.

Chapter 1 aims to introduce the theoretical frameworks which form the backbone of the study. In Section 1.2, terminological issues and debates

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around what to call items such as *well, just, you know, sort of, like* and *I mean* are addressed, before going on to a presentation and illustration of the main functions of pragmatic markers in conversation in 1.3 and 1.4. Section 1.5 reviews the development and role of sociolinguistics in pragmatic marker studies, while historical approaches and studies are introduced in Section 1.6.

1.2 What are pragmatic markers? Terms, categories and functions

Expressions like *well, just, you know, sort of, like* and *I mean* which are the focus of this volume have been given a variety of labels in the linguistic literature depending on the theoretical stance and methodological approach of the researchers investigating them. The labels and the main authors who have adopted them are displayed in Table 1.1.

A consensus appears to be emerging with respect to the ways in which pragmatic markers might be said to be distinguishable from both discourse markers (DMs) and connectives, and to delineate their multifunctional role in social interaction.

Table 1.1. *Labels used to designate forms like well, just, you know, sort of, like and I mean*

Label	Authors/works
discourse markers	Schiffrin 1987; Lenk 1998; Schourup 1999a; Müller 2005
discourse particles	Schourup 1985; Barnes 1995; Aijmer 1996; Fischer 2006
modal particles (<i>Abtönungspartikeln</i>)	Weydt 1969, 1979, 2001, 2006
punctors	Vincent and Sankoff 1992
connectives	Fraser 1988; Bazzanella 1990; Lamiroy 1994; Unger 1996; Degand 2000
pragmatic particles	Beeching 2002
pragmatic expressions	Erman 1987
pragmatic markers	Watts 1988; Redeker 1990; Caron-Prague and Caron 1991; Brinton, 1996, 1998; Andersen 1998; Erman 2001; Denke 2009; Aijmer 2013
hedges	Holmes 1995; Hyland 1998a; Coates 2013
boosters	Holmes 1995; Hyland 1998b, 2000; Beeching 2009b
fumbles	Edmondson 1981
conversational greasers	Fillmore, cited in Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992: 196
illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs)	Verschuere, Östman and Blommaert 1995
pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs)	Nikula 1996: 43–45 and Lin 2010: 1174.

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1.3 Pragmatic markers and their functions in conversation

Pragmatic markers are most frequent in the spoken language and are a fundamental part of oral fluency. There are five main ways in which the particular characteristics of conversation are reflected in the usages made of pragmatic markers.

1. Conversation is spontaneous and takes place at speed; unlike writing, there is no opportunity for speakers to edit what they say before 'publication'; pragmatic markers allow for hesitation, back-tracking, repair and repetition.
2. Conversation is interactional; pragmatic markers occur at the junction between speakers in turn-taking, frequently in utterance-initial or utterance-final positions.
3. Conversation is social; pragmatic markers may be sociolinguistically marked (used in particular regions, by speakers of particular age-groups or particular social groups).
4. Conversation is sociable; pragmatic markers are often associated with naturalness, friendliness and warmth. In addition, they are often addressee-oriented: they allow the addressee's opinion to be enjoined or invoked.
5. Conversation is polite; pragmatic markers can hedge talk, downtoning what might be considered over-strong assertions of opinion.

Schiffrin's (1987) was arguably the first work to look seriously at linguistic items of this sort. Her book considers the functions of *well*, *now*, *so*, *but*, *oh*, *because*, *or*, *I mean*, and *y'know* and *then*.¹ She refers to these items as 'Discourse Markers' and argues that they 'bracket units of talk' and give instructions about how the next piece of talk 'fits' with the previous one. This perspective covers aspects 1 and 2 of the conversational functions of markers listed above, but does not specifically address 3–5.

Vincent (2005: 189) suggests that

From a discursive point of view, markers are distributed around two functional poles: connectors – which ensure the articulation of utterances and, therefore, function like conjunctions and adverbs of liaison – and modal elements – which introduce a point of view on the discourse and take the form of adverbial expressions.

Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2006:2) opt for the term 'pragmatic marker' rather than 'discourse marker' and make the following distinction between the two:

Discourse marker is the term which we use when we want to describe how a particular marker signals coherence relations. Pragmatic markers as we see them are not only

¹ Hansen (1998a: 24) remarks that the items studied by Schiffrin constitute 'a rather heterogeneous group, including coordinating and subordinating conjunctions such as *and* and *because*, parenthetical clauses such as *you know* and *I mean*, temporal and conjunctive adverbs such as *now* and *so*, and (not so easily categorised) particles like *oh* and *well*.'

associated with discourse and textual functions but are also signals in the communication situation guiding the addressee's interpretation. The term as we are using it can also be defined negatively: if a word or a construction in an utterance does not contribute to the propositional, truth-functional content, then we consider it a pragmatic marker.

Fraser (1996) used the term 'pragmatic marker' to englobe both discourse markers and pragmatic markers, considering 'discourse markers' as a subtype of pragmatic markers, and referring particularly to expressions which signal the relationship of the basic message to the discourse which precedes it. Fraser (1999: 931) defines discourse markers as:

signalling a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1. They have a core meaning which is procedural, not conceptual, and their more specific interpretation is 'negotiated' by the context, both linguistic and conceptual. There are two types: those that relate the explicit interpretation conveyed by S2 with some aspect associated with the segment, S1; and those that relate the topic of S2 to that of S1.

He gives, as examples of discourse markers, *so*, *and*, *furthermore*, *but* and *after all* and suggests that, according to the criteria he outlines, Schiffrin's *oh* and *y'know* do not constitute discourse markers.

Other, mainly Scandinavian, researchers, such as Erman (1986, 1987, 2001), Andersen (1998, 2000, 2001) and, as we have seen, Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2006), have been particularly interested in the sociolinguistic, interactional and extralinguistic facets of these markers, rather than their logical connective qualities, and have called them 'pragmatic markers', as does Brinton (1996) with her historical overview of 'medieval mystery words', such as *hwæt* and *I gesse*. The present volume follows this Scandinavian conceptualisation of markers, adopting the term 'pragmatic markers' rather than 'discourse markers', to highlight their interpersonal rather than textual usages, though recognising that pragmatic markers have procedural meanings, that is to say, they guide interpretation rather than have a propositional meaning in and of themselves.

Brinton (1996: 33–35) summarised some of the prototypical features of pragmatic markers at different levels of linguistic analysis, as follows:

Phonological and lexical features

- (a) they are short and phonologically reduced;
- (b) they form a separate tone group;
- (c) they are marginal forms and difficult to place in a traditional word class;

Syntactic features

- (d) they are restricted to sentence-initial position;
- (e) they occur outside the syntactic structure or are only loosely attached to it;
- (f) they are optional;

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Semantic features

(g) they have little or no propositional meaning;

Functional features

(h) they are multi-functional, operating on several linguistic levels;

Sociolinguistic and stylistic features

(i) they are a feature of oral rather than written discourse and associated with informality;

(j) they appear with high frequency;

(k) they are stylistically stigmatised; and

(l) they are gender-specific and more typical of women's speech.

Since Brinton's work appeared, some of these features have been contested. For example, though some pragmatic markers are phonologically reduced, such as *y'know* or *j'st* (for *just*), others, such as *I mean* or *like*, are not reduced. Not all markers are in sentence-initial position; in fact, of those included in the present volume, only *well* is restricted to sentence-initial position. Whether they are all more typical of women's speech has also been questioned, with some studies finding that markers are equally or more often used by male speakers. The other features are, however, generally agreed to be defining features of pragmatic markers: they are a feature of the spoken language, are frequent, do not easily fit in to an existing word class such as noun, verb or adverb, have no propositional meaning and are optional, and may be stylistically stigmatised.

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Distinguishing a pragmatic marking usage of, say, *like*, from its canonical propositional meanings is relatively straightforward on the basis of the criteria highlighted above. The verb *like* ('I like bananas') has propositional meaning, is not optional and is not stylistically stigmatised. The pragmatic marking usages of markers are, however, sometimes more difficult to disentangle from one another. Pragmatic markers are notoriously both polysemous and multifunctional. In other words, not only does each pragmatic marker fulfil a variety of functions, it can do so simultaneously. This poses problems of interpretation. Should the analyst and researcher consider all of the possible interpretations to be equally valid (*like* might be considered to be simultaneously a hesitation marker, an identity marker, an approximator and a focuser) or go for a primary interpretation (whilst allowing that others may also be possible)? The multifunctionality of markers and the fact that 'any interpretation will be subjective' (Holmes 1997: 290) renders analysts vulnerable to the criticism that they can find whatever it is that they are seeking. This is a particularly sensitive issue in gender studies, as Macaulay (2013: 224) remarks:

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The more the investigator approaches the data with preconceptions about gender differences the greater the risk of biasing the subjective interpretation in one direction or the other.

The following example, drawn from a corpus of spontaneous role-play conversations recorded with undergraduate students in 2011–2014, aims to illustrate the functions mentioned in points 1–5 above and to highlight potential problems of interpretation.

Details of the role-play the students were asked to enact are given in Section 2.2.2 and the transcription conventions adopted throughout the volume are to be found in the introductory pages.

- (1.1) A: hi.
 B: hiya
 A: I haven't seen you in ages
 B: I KNOW long time no see
 A: I know **well** listen to this right I just saw an opportunity for both of us to get jobs at this big company=
 B: =wow
 A: yeah I know I'm so excited I'm sure you'll absolutely love it=
 B: = yeah yeah =
 A: and it's with a big company and they are willing to pay us to work for the whole summer which means that **you know** between **you know** work gain experience all of this **like** what do you think? you're not very enthusiastic about it
 B: alright it's a good idea but
 A: is that all you have to say? **I mean** this is huge <B's name>**like** we could make so much money which means we could travel we can pay off some of our debts so much stuff that we could do

In the extract, three of the pragmatic markers dealt with in this volume, *well*, *you know* and *like*, are set in bold type, with a view to looking at their functions in context in some detail and pinpointing the problems of selection and interpretation which face the pragmatic marker analyst. Let us first consider line 5:

I know **well** listen to this **right** I **just** saw an opportunity for both of us to get jobs at this big company=

Three items in this utterance may qualify as pragmatic markers as they are potentially 'optional' and serve interactional rather than propositional purposes. They could be omitted without changing the main message which is being conveyed. 'Well' serves as a topic-changer, 'right' could be included as an attention-seeking or adherence-eliciting marker, and 'just' in 'I just saw' could be interpreted as a mitigating pragmatic marking usage, the implicature of which could be glossed as 'I'm going to try to persuade you of something but I don't want to put this too forcefully and get your hopes up – I saw an

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opportunity – but I'm minimising its importance by adding "just". As a pragmatic marker, 'just' here could also be interpreted as introducing a justification for the previous sentence, leading to the gloss: 'When I said "Listen to this right", I made an excited bid for your attention. The reason for this is (It's just that . . .) I've seen a job opportunity.' This would constitute a DM in Fraser's definition as it relates 'the explicit interpretation conveyed by S2 with some aspect associated with the segment, S1'.

When 'just' is used for functions such as these, as is common with pragmatic markers, it is often phonologically reduced, the vowel is shortened and pronounced with a schwa rather than 'u' vowel 'j'st'. A check of the sound-file for this transcription reveals that this 'just' is not phonologically reduced. Despite the fact that the use of the simple past with 'just' is classically associated with American rather than British English and the speakers here are British English speakers ('I have just seen' would be more characteristic of standard British English²), this occurrence of 'just' is interpreted as a time adverbial, indicating that the speaker has recently seen the opportunity, rather than as a pragmatic marker, downtoning the claim made in the utterance or used to flag a justification. The single occurrence of 'just' can therefore be excluded from our consideration of the pragmatic markers in this extract.

Well in line 5 appears to bridge the hiatus between the response to B's 'long time no see' and the next topic of conversation – it is thus a DM, easing coherence, but could also be interpreted as a hesitation marker (it could be replaced by 'er' – but signally not by *like* or *you know*) or even a politeness strategy, mitigating a change of topic. *Well* here, thus, relates to the spontaneous, interactional and polite nature of conversation.

The two occurrences of *you know* in line 11 are arguably hesitation markers and could be replaced by *er* or *like*, particularly as the second segment is disjointed. The speaker has fluently delivered the message that the two friends can get work with a big company for good money over the summer and ends up 'which means that'. At this point she stalls, having difficulty either in finding the logical conclusion to her utterance or in finding the appropriate wording. *You know* appeals to common background knowledge and suggests that the conclusions to be drawn are obvious. Speaker A fumbles and brings out 'work', 'gain experience' and 'all of this'; the two occurrences of *you know* suggest both that Speaker B can understand what she is aiming to communicate (as the advantages are obvious) and also that Speaker A considers that they are on the same wavelength, thus reducing the distance between them and intimating

² The extent to which the simple past is replacing the present perfect in British English goes beyond the scope of this volume, but merits investigation. This usage seems to reflect the influence of Americanisms heard on TV series or in films or read habitually every day (e.g. the question 'Did you forget your password?' rather than 'Have you forgotten your password?' as one attempts to get in to Microsoft Windows).

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solidarity. *You know* may also be sociolinguistically marked (certainly as being informal). Its occurrences here thus relate to the spontaneous, social and sociable nature of conversation.

The two occurrences of *like* in lines 12 and 14 could once again be hesitation markers (replaceable by ‘er’). In addition, *like* in line 12 can be interpreted as a focuser before the question ‘What do you think?’ (and thus also ensuring coherence as a DM) or as an approximator ending the sequence ‘work gain experience all of this’. In line 14, *like* can be interpreted as an introduction to an explanation, further clarification, exemplification, justification or repetition of S1 – ‘this is huge’ is linked through *like* to ‘we could make so much money’. *Like* is also sociolinguistically marked as (mainly) a young person’s usage. The occurrences of *like* in this passage can contribute to the spontaneous, social and sociable functions of everyday conversation.

Finally, there is one occurrence of *I mean* in this short extract, in line 14:

is that all you have to say? I mean this is huge (B’s name)

I mean is commonly used to introduce an explanation or clarification (relying on its propositional force – this is what ‘I mean’). It links S1 to S2 highlighting that S2 is a clarification of S1. However, the clarification is not straightforward here. A asks in somewhat challenging tones ‘Is that all you have to say?’ implying that B’s reaction to her proposal (‘alright it’s a good idea but’) is lukewarm. She goes on to say ‘I mean this is huge’. The implicature behind the use of ‘I mean’ can be glossed as ‘I’ve just accused you of having a very lukewarm reaction to my proposal, my justification for challenging you (and possibly offending you) is that . . . this is huge’. *I mean* here thus relates to the speech-act level, not to the propositional level. It has allowed the speaker to backtrack, reformulate and attempt to repair a potentially face-threatening act, explaining why she was so vehement. *I mean*, as well as being what Güllich (1970) referred to as a *Gliederungssignal* (‘linking signal’), connecting S1 to S2 in a purely textual way, and flagging an upcoming clarification, also serves politeness needs and may be sociolinguistically marked.

The pragmatic markers analysed in example (1.1) maintain coherence and cohesion at both a textual and an interpersonal level. The analysis of the pragmatic markers in this very short extract reveals:

- (a) the need to justify the selection of markers to be analysed. In my detailed analysis of this extract, *right* emerged as a pragmatic marking usage, but I have excluded detailed analysis of it from the current volume as it is relatively infrequently used (see Section 2.3); this is of course dangerous as the combinations of markers in any one idiolect can be significant;
- (b) the time-consuming and non-definitive nature of the decision-making process which distinguishes between propositional and pragmatic marking usages in spontaneous conversation, which may involve going back to the

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original sound-files for further information (the analysis of ‘I *just* saw’ exemplifies this);

- (c) the multifunctionality of the markers which may respond to some or all of the spontaneous, interactional, social, sociable and polite functions served by ordinary everyday conversation simultaneously and the difficulty of allocating each occurrence a primary function;
- (d) the subjectivity of the interpretations. The interpretation of what was meant by the marker in a particular context may differ from one hearer to another, or one researcher and another, and may also be negotiable, or even judiciously vague.

Despite the difficulties, the distributional frequency of the different markers across speakers of different age-groups, genders and social classes, and across time, can be calculated and can reveal a great deal about the ways in which innovations are propagated. These aspects are discussed more fully in Section 1.5.

Conclusions about the detailed functions which the different markers serve and how these intersect with macro sociolinguistic categories, will, of necessity, be more qualitative and tentative.

1.5 Sociolinguistic aspects of pragmatic markers

1.5.1 *Variationist sociolinguistics and discourse-pragmatic features*

Sociolinguistics has traditionally investigated the ways that language varies depending on extralinguistic factors such as the age, sex or social class of the speaker, or the situation in which speech is taking place. Given the important social role of pragmatic markers, relatively few scholarly works have been devoted to variational and sociolinguistic aspects of their usage – most have been devoted to their semantic status.

Early exceptions to this are Bernstein’s (1971: 98) and Huspek’s (1989) findings with respect to *I think*, Holmes’ (1986, 1995) studies of gender and pragmatic markers in New Zealand, Bazzanella’s (1990) work on contemporary spoken Italian, and Dines’ (1980) and Dubois’ (1992) sociolinguistic studies of general extenders such as *and stuff like that* or *and that kind of thing*. Dittmar (2000) provides a very interesting analysis of the sociolinguistics of *halt* and *eben* after the fall of the Berlin wall and, for French, my own 2002 and 2007c studies investigate gender, politeness and pragmatic markers, and the co-variation of a set of markers respectively. Fleischmann and Yaguello (2004) reports on a cross-linguistic comparison of *like* and *genre*.

As we move into the twenty-first century, an increasing number of studies have addressed the sociolinguistics of selected pragmatic markers in English, including Jucker and Smith’s (1998) investigation of *like* and *you know*,