

# Basic meanings of *you know* and *I mean*

Jean E. Fox Tree\*, Josef C. Schrock

*Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA*

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## Abstract

Although *you know* and *I mean* are frequent in spontaneous talk, researchers have not agreed on what purpose they serve. They have been thought by some to be used similarly and by others to be used differently. Similarities of uses at a surface level encouraged historical discussions of these two markers in the same breath. The current synthesis details how both the apparent multifunctionality of *you know* and *I mean* and their surface similarities can arise out of each discourse marker's basic meaning, with *you know*'s basic meaning being to invite addressee inferences (Jucker, A.H., & Smith, S.W. (1998). *And people just you know like 'wow': Discourse markers as negotiating strategies*. In A. H. Jucker & Y. Ziv (Eds.), *Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory* (pp. 171–201). Philadelphia: John Benjamins), and *I mean*'s basic meaning being to forewarn upcoming adjustments (Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse Markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

“I mean I don't know how I got any food down me at all, I mean I'm not used to drinking anyway, and having had this glass of sherry, I was a bit woozy, and everything I put in my mouth felt like rocks, you know, including the soup!” (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.3.665).

Although *you know* and *I mean* are frequent in spontaneous talk, researchers have not agreed on what purpose they serve. In fact, the indeterminacy of function can be seen as a hallmark of their overarching category, *discourse markers*. Virtually every

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\* Corresponding author.

*E-mail address:* foxtree@cats.ucsc.edu (J.E. Fox Tree).

discourse marker has been described as serving a wide range of functions, such as aiding in language production or comprehension, aiding in turn management, and aiding in creating a congenial interpersonal atmosphere. Nonetheless, some markers have struck researchers as more related than others. *You know* and *I mean* are two markers that share a historical affinity because of their apparent similarities in function. In the current paper, we explain how the apparent multifunctionality of *you know* and *I mean* and their surface similarities can arise out of each discourse marker's basic meaning, with *you know*'s basic meaning being to invite addressee inferences (Jucker and Smith, 1998), and *I mean*'s basic meaning being to forewarn upcoming adjustments (Schiffrin, 1987).

By *basic meaning*, we mean something akin to Heritage's (1984, 1998) *generic* meaning, Jucker's (1993) *core* meaning, Östman's (1995) *abstract* meaning, or Fox Tree and Schrock's (1999) *underlying* meaning. The basic meaning forms only a starting point, a conventional meaning, for interpreting the talk the expression occurs in. Heritage (1984) discusses how *oh*'s generic meaning is *particularized* by the goals of the talk it occurs in (such as informing or repairing) and at what point it is used, with *oh*'s various "senses" (Heritage, 1998: 327) arising from *conversational inference*. For example, *oh*'s basic meaning of indicating a change of state is "most commonly used to accept prior talk as informative" (Heritage, 1984: 335), but it can be used for "noticing; having one's attention drawn to something; remembering; being reminded, informed, or corrected; [and] arriving at discoveries and realizations of various kinds" (Heritage, 1984: 337). Fox Tree and Schrock (1999) build on this by demonstrating that *oh* is used systematically by listeners. Jucker (1993) discusses how *well*'s basic meaning of indicating that "[w]hat seems to be the most relevant context is not appropriate" can tie together what otherwise seems to be separate uses (p. 438).

We believe that *you know* and *I mean* have basic meanings, like other stereotypical words. One reason that *you know* and *I mean* have been treated differently may be because they operate on the metacommunicative level rather than the propositional level; that is, they contribute to successful communication rather than to the "official business" of the communication (Clark, 1996: 241). But otherwise, they are similar to other words, and give rise to similar theoretical problems. For example, like other words, there is currently no clear picture of how, precisely, basic meanings give rise to apparent meanings.

Our synthesis ties together a wide array of disparate claims made by many researchers using different corpora. We believe that this approach offers a lot by way of analogy for investigations of other discourse markers. In this paper we will review the claims made for *you know* and *I mean*, present proposals for basic meanings, and then show how the apparent uses can arise from the basic meanings. Claims can be divided into those that consider them to be randomly sprinkled into speech and those that consider them to be used at the moment that they are needed for a particular function. The proposed functions can also be divided into five categories: interpersonal, turn management, repairing, monitoring, and organizing. Random sprinkling has been proposed only for the interpersonal category, but moment-of-use has been proposed for all categories. We will discuss random

sprinkling proposals first, moment-of-use proposals that equate *you know* and *I mean* second, and moment-of-use proposals that differentiate *you know* and *I mean* third. We will then show how all proposals can be recast in terms of basic meanings.

## 2. Random sprinkling

The traditional English teacher's approach to *you know* and *I mean* is that they are "verbal garbage" [discussed in Schourup (1985: 94), see also discussion in Schiffrin (1987), and Stubbe and Holmes (1995)] sprinkled into speech with no distinction between saying one or the other (Fromkin, 1973: 42; O'Donnell and Todd, 1991: 69). The observation that people are not good at detecting how often they say *you know* or *I mean* (Broen and Siegel, 1972) adds more fuel to the fire. Some proposed functions highlight this sprinkling quality, claiming that they "add liveliness to the conversation" (Stenström, 1990a: 152) or that they create a "*you-know* mood" (Östman, 1981: 41). Speakers are seen as using *you know* and *I mean* to keep from being bores, and as such could utter these words at any point. In fact, *you know*'s and *I mean*'s apparent lack of being tied to a particular position has been used to argue that they are in a separate class from other discourse markers (Fraser, 1990: 392).

Looked at more systematically, sprinkling *you knows* and *I means* into speech has been thought to provide three types of interpersonal information: (1) information about the speaker, (2) information about the situation, such as its formality or intimacy, or (3) information about the level of politeness. Each proposal has been challenged.

Proposals that *you know* and *I mean* indicate something about speakers include that using them implies speakers are anxious, uncertain, or lacking in self-confidence (Lalljee and Cook, 1975; Ragan, 1983; see Holmes, 1986, for review) and that using them marks a speaker as belonging to a certain social class, age group, or gender (see Östman, 1981, and Stubbe and Holmes, 1995 for reviews). But it has also been claimed that *you know* is used when speakers are certain, not uncertain, with *sort of*, *I guess*, and other devices marking uncertainty (Erman, 1987: 32), and that *you know* and *I mean* are not tied to speaker characteristics (Erman, 1987; Holmes, 1986, 1990; Lalljee and Cook, 1975; Östman, 1981; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995).

Proposals that *you know* and *I mean* indicate something about speaking situations include that using them implies informality, amusement, and a quick pace (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 91; Holmes, 1986: 12, 1990: 192; Lalljee and Cook, 1975: 305). And indeed, *you know* and *I mean* are, on average, twice as common in conversations than in formal interviews (Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 77, 80). Speakers themselves may not be aware of their uses; one study found that speakers thought they had fewer *I means* and *you knows*, among other markers and disfluencies, in their conversations as compared to their monologues, even though they in fact had more (Broen and Siegel, 1972: 225). But here too there are some contradictions: *you know* and *I mean* are more common in "considered talk" than in spontaneous talk (Freed

and Greenwood, 1993, cited in Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 82), although spontaneous talk should be more conversational, casual, and fast. Likewise, they are more common in narrative sections of a conversation than in sections with frequent turns (Holmes, 1986: 15; Östman, 1981: 16), though at the same time, they are more common in opinionated talk than in narratives (Huspek, 1989: 667), although opinionated talk seems more likely to have more turns. Conversations among family members at a dinner table have fewer *you knows* than conversations with guests (Östman, 1981: 19), but conversations with friends have more *you knows* than conversations with strangers (Jucker and Smith, 1998: 193; Redeker, 1990: 375).

The third approach to the functions of *you know* and *I mean* on the interpersonal level is to relate them not to a type of person or situation, but to the type of face-saving necessary for a particular type of person or situation. One type of face-saving is to express shared understanding (Holmes, 1986: 17; Stenström, 1990a: 141; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 65, 70), sometimes called *positive politeness* (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Another type is to show speaker imprecision, allowing addressees more room to express their opinions (Holmes, 1986: 7, 1990: 199; Ragan, 1983: 167; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 64, 70), sometimes called *negative politeness* (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Because negative politeness functions are best seen within the moment-of-use framework instead of random sprinkling, they will be discussed in the next section.

Proposals that *you know* and *I mean* indicate something about positive politeness include that using them makes speech more casual and decreases social distance (Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 66, 80), such as by marking the desire for or presence of shared experience (Östman, 1981: 19; Schourup, 1985: 109, *you know* only in both cases) or even increasing the status of addressees (Östman, 1981: 19, *you know* only). This could explain the observation that it is inappropriate for a supervisor to use *you know* when talking to a subordinate, presumably because the supervisor wants to maintain distance (Jefferson, 1973: 74). But in contrast to these proposals, at least *you know* need not be polite. Turn-final *you know* with declarative intonation can be used to close off a point, as in “I won’t say anything more” (Östman, 1981: 27).

In addition to politeness, another interpersonal function *you know* and *I mean* might serve is self-presentation. *You know*, in particular, may be used between disjoint utterances to give a veneer of continuity or to counteract the negative effects of a pause (Schourup, 1985: 110, 124). Problematically, however, *you know* has also been thought to be a liability in self-presentation. Speakers reduce their use of *you knows* and *I means* as well as other markers and hesitations when they believe self-presentation is important, although it’s not clear what the individual effect on the numbers of *you knows* and *I means* is in this research because of the grouped design (Broen and Siegal, 1972).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence against random sprinkling proposals is that it matters where the *you know* or *I mean* falls in an utterance. Compare the following originals and alternatives that shift location of the original *you know* or *I mean* (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.3.496, 1.4.848; periods and dashes in this and other examples indicate short and long pauses):

- (1) Original: me and the Edinburgh girl got together after dinner late in the evening and decided they'd really got us along to make it look right, *you know* they had after all had candidates from other universities
- Alternative: me and the Edinburgh girl got together after dinner *you know* late in the evening and decided they'd really got us along to make it look right, they had after all had candidates from other universities
- (2) Original: but I don't think it's feasible . *I mean* I know this is the first time I've done it, and I'm not in a main line paper, but I'm sure it'll take me all my time to do it in three weeks
- Alternative: but I don't think it's feasible . I know *I mean* this is the first time I've done it, and I'm not in a main line paper, but I'm sure it'll take me all my time to do it in three weeks

In (1) Original, *you know* comments on what is means to “look right,” in (1) Alternative it comments on what “after dinner” means. In (2) Original, *I mean* comments on why the speaker says “I don't think it's feasible,” without overwriting the statement, but in (2) Alternative, *I mean* comments on “I know,” retrospectively treating it as a false start. If it matters where these markers fall, then their locations cannot be random.

### 3. Using either one, but when needed

*You know* and *I mean* are used when they are needed. But what are they needed for? Proposals that equate *you know* and *I mean*, but do not consider them to be randomly sprinkled, fall into two categories: repair and turn management.

*You know* and *I mean* can contribute to repairs in at least three ways. One is by substituting for a pause, repairing or avoiding the break in fluency caused by the pause (Fromkin, 1973: 42; Holmes, 1986: 6). A second is by stalling for time as speakers complete various stages of the speech production process, including planning what to say, selecting words, or restarting a false-started utterance (Erman, 1987: 58, 173; Holmes, 1986: 6, 10). A third is to explicitly forewarn upcoming adjustments to what has just been said, even what kind of adjustment to expect (Erman, 1987: 58; Levelt, 1989: 482). Listeners are less likely to complete a speakers' repair after *you know* and *I mean* than when no marker is used (Erman, 1987: 173), consistent with both the stalling for time and forewarning proposals, if forewarning is taken to also imply that speakers should be allowed to complete the repair themselves. Nonetheless, there is a difference between stalling for time and forewarning and it's not clear how addressees know which applies in a particular case.

*You know* and *I mean* can contribute to turn management in three ways as well. Aggregating across researchers' positions, *you know* and *I mean* have been thought to aid in turn-taking (Schourup, 1985; Erman and Kotsinas, 1993; Holmes, 1986,

1990; Redeker, 1991; Schegloff, 1987), turn-holding, or turn-relinquishing (Duncan, 1972; Erman, 1987; Erman and Kotsinas, 1993; Stenström, 1990a). The turn-holding function may seem most likely given the high rate of turn-medial *you knows* and *I means*. In one analysis of spontaneous conversations, around 86% of *you knows* and *I means* were turn-medial (Erman, 1986: 132; 1987: 50). Additionally for *you know*, turn-medial position can be viewed as a natural result of a proposed function of eliciting backchannels from addressees while maintaining the floor (Schourup, 1985: 132, 135). Different pronunciations may help identify which turn management role the *you know* or *I mean* is playing; this would be particularly useful in identifying whether a non-initial *you know* or *I mean* was turn-holding or turn-relinquishing (Schiffrin, 1987: 292).

One problem with turn management proposals is that there is little independent evidence that position in a turn is related to turn management, even if the *you know* or *I mean* is pronounced differently at different points in the turn. *You know* or *I mean* may fall at the beginning, middle, or end of a turn for reasons unrelated to turn management. Even within turn management explanations, it is difficult to say which turn management strategy applies. For example, a *you know* that appears to be turn-medial, and therefore turn-holding, may have been a failed attempt at turn-relinquishing. In fact, it's been suggested that *you know* can be used to politely offer a turn without forcing addressees to take it (Holmes, 1986: 6; Jefferson, 1973: 74); when the addressees do not, this intended turn-final *you know* appears turn-medial.

Another problem is that the frequencies of markers' positions are themselves up for debate. *You knows* have been argued to be both frequent (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 88; Stenström, 1990b: 225) and infrequent turn-finally (Erman, 1987: 53). Turn-final *I means* do appear to be infrequent, accounting for only 4 exemplars out of a 60,000 word corpus, all of which the analyst defined as interruptions and not planned turn-endings (Erman, 1987, p. 199). However, at least one of these examples was analyzed by the current authors as a planned turn-ending (Example 8 below).

And there is yet a third problem, which is a difficulty for both the using-either-one-when-needed repair proposals and the turn taking proposals: *you know* and *I mean* are not interchangeable. Compare the following originals and alternatives that interchange turn-medial *you knows* and *I means* (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.2.889, 1.3.305):

- (3) Original: and I was the only person there that was sort of remotely .  
                   *you know* competent to speak  
 Alternative: and I was the only person there that was sort of remotely .  
                   *I mean* competent to speak
- (4) Original: the interview was - it was all right *I mean* I handled it like  
                   a competent undergraduate - I didn't handle it like a graduate  
                   who knew . where she was going . cos I didn't  
 Alternative: the interview was - it was all right *you know* I handled it  
                   like a competent undergraduate - I didn't handle it like a  
                   graduate who knew . where she was going . cos I didn't.

In (3) Original, *you know* comments on what the speaker was remotely able to do, but in (3) Alternative, *I mean* in *you know*'s place suggests a correction, such as removing “sort of remotely” to yield “and I was the only person there that was competent to speak.” In (4) Original, *I mean* presages an upcoming adjustment, suggesting in this case that perhaps it wasn't as “all right” as the speaker initially claimed. But in (4) Alternative, *you know* in *I mean*'s place presages an example, without a similar qualification on how “all right” it was. If they cannot be substituted for one another, then they must have distinct functions.

#### 4. Using the right one at the right time

Proposals that differentiate *you know* and *I mean*, albeit that their functions may be related, fall into four categories: (1) interpersonal functions tied to moment of use (negative politeness), (2) repair functions that distinguish between *you know* and *I mean*, (3) monitoring, and (4) organizing.

Unlike the random sprinkling approaches to other interpersonal functions, negative politeness functions are tied to their moment of use. Speakers might use *I mean* or *you know* to reduce their commitment to or distance themselves from a face-threatening utterance. *I mean* may presage a less-face-threatening rephrasing (Erman, 1987: 207; Ragan, 1983: 169–170; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 70) as a kind of interpersonal repair. *You know* may blunt the blow of face-threatening talk that precedes or follows it (Erman & Kotsinas, 1993: 84; Kotthoff, 1993: 199; Östman, 1981: 21). The following demonstrates both functions (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.11040):

- (5) how do you get on with this fellow Hart? *I mean* he's a nice fellow normally, but he's a hell of a - he's a big head in some ways *you know* Reynard

If “How do you get on with this fellow Hart?” is taken to imply that the speaker has trouble getting along with Hart, then *I mean* may be presaging the less-threatening rephrasing “he's a nice fellow normally.” Likewise, if “he's a big head in some ways” is taken as threatening, then the subsequent *you know* may be softening the blow.

A problem with these proposals is that they don't always work. Consider the following (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 214.987):

- (6) she appears to be perfectly happy - . *I mean* she can't be a hundred per cent happy, nobody is, but she appears to be happy

In contrast to the negative politeness proposal, the phrase preceding the *I mean* seems less threatening than the one following it. Of course, the *I mean* could be serving a different function here, such as repair. But if this were the case, proposals should detail when the function is repair and when it is negative politeness, but they do not. Another possibility is that it is not the *you know* or *I mean* that determines

politeness at all, but something about the words in the surrounding utterance (Schourup, 1999: 250). “He’s a nice fellow normally” would be a less threatening rephrasing of “how do you get on with this fellow Hart?” with or without the *I mean*.

Repair proposals that differentiate between *you know* and *I mean* include that *you know* indicates a relatively predictable leap from repair to reparandum but that *I mean* indicates a less predictable leap (Schourup, 1985: 125). That is, *you know* implies addressees can figure out corrections on their own (Schourup, 1985: 125), as demonstrated in the following example (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.5.967):

- (7) A: you can hold the top - -administrative job in college, and if you haven’t got a degree, - . you just can’t set foot beyond a certain . *you know*  
 B: but if you’ve got a degree, this is magic

*I mean*, on the other hand, implies unexpected changes (Schourup, 1985: 125), such as with word replacements (Erman, 1987: 58; Levelt, 1989: 482) like “but your customers I mean your clients” (Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.2.655). *You know* is frequently used to hedge a single word (Östman, 1981: 17) or in word searches (Erman, 1987: 179), but according to this proposal the hedge or word sought should be predictable.

Oddly for this continuum hypothesis, however, *I mean* can be used to deliberately leave the repair up to the addressee, implying predictability (Schourup, 1985: 148), as in the following example (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.1.932):

- (8) A: if the response is enthusiastic, well then *I mean* - -  
 B: yes then you’d get you might get somebody else to  
 A: exactly

Neither *you know* nor *I mean* require repairs. This contrasts with other repair markers. Compare the following original and hypothetical examples with *oh* (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.1.330):

- (9) Original: that would be Dell plus somebody wouldn’t it . *oh* . no  
 there are two external advisers  
 Hypothetical: that would be Dell plus somebody wouldn’t it . *oh*  
 [end of utterance]

*Oh* cannot be used in reparandum-repair sequences without supplying overt repairs.

Unlike interpersonal and repair proposals, all monitoring proposals apply to the moment of use and distinguish between *you know* and *I mean*. Both markers encourage addressees to think about the comprehensibility of what has just been said (Schiffrin, 1987: 310), with comprehensibility defined in many ways, including word choice, syntax, or the relevance of what’s said to the topic (Schourup, 1985:

124–125, 127–128). But speakers' uses of them in monitoring differ. *You know* is thought to be used to elicit addressee feedback about their comprehension, either visually, such as with nods, or auditorily, such as with backchannels like *uh huh* (Schourup, 1985: 135; Schiffrin, 1987: 272). *I mean* is thought to be used to focus addressees' attention (Schiffrin, 1987: 309), but without explicitly requesting addressee feedback, although speakers may monitor understanding in addressee replies. But not much is known about *I mean* and monitoring, and support for the *you know* proposal is equivocal.

If *you know* elicits responses, backchannels should be frequent after *you know*, but they aren't. Backchannels and other addressee responses follow only 12% of *you knows* that end syntactic or semantic units (Erman, 1987: 195). Of course, this could be seen as frequent, considering that no responses follow *I means* in analogous positions (Erman, 1987: 194). Other evidence for *you know*'s and *I mean*'s use in monitoring is that 66% of *you know*-introduced phrases and 77% of *I mean*-introduced phrases have listener responses at the end of the idea introduced by the marker (Erman, 1987: 198). This contrasts with other markers, like *you see*, which has responses only 38% of the time (Erman, 1987: 198). At the same time, the eliciting or deferring of responses could be caused by other factors co-occurring with *you know* or *I mean*, such as rising or falling intonation.

Notably for *you know*, monitoring answers to the literal question "Do you know this to be true?" is not occurring, as some laypeople might think. People say *you know* when addressees could not possibly know, as in "Yesterday I was in my bedroom you know?" (adapted from Schourup, 1985: 126). Some have argued that it is precisely when the addressee does not know that *you know* is used, noting that the first time a story is told, there are many *you knows*, but upon retelling, the number of *you knows* drops (unpublished manuscript by Newsome, 1980, cited in Östman, 1981, p. 18). Of course, this drop could be caused by something else, such as a reduced likelihood of speaker repair and consequently reduced need for *you know* in retellings.

Like monitoring, organizational proposals also apply to the moment of use and distinguish between *you know* and *I mean*. *You know* and *I mean* are thought to aid in organization by introducing topic shifts, although each marker is thought to be used for different kinds of shifts. Some argue that the changes *you know* foreshadows are on a more local level than those of *I mean*. That is, *you know* is used to provide background information, close off one kind of discourse, or to foreshadow a cause, effect, or clarification of the preceding utterance (Erman, 1986: 135; Erman, 1987: 31, 52; Holmes, 1986: 11), and operates with a "narrow scope often confined to the clause, phrase and word levels" (Erman, 1987: 176). In contrast, *I mean* is used to introduce commentary, justification, and phrasal level modifications (Erman, 1986: 137, 140; Erman, 1987: 176, 207; Schiffrin, 1987: 302; Stenström, 1990b: 225). At the same time, some argue the reverse, pointing out that the connection between *I mean* and the surrounding context is more precise than *you know*, with *I mean* being used to adjust a phonological, syntactic, or content error on what's just been said (reviewed in Schourup, 1985: 147) and with *you know* being used to introduce justifications (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 87). The proposal that

*you know* helps focus attention on the thrust of a narrative (Schiffrin, 1987: 281–282) also contradicts this local-global distinction.

There are also a number of other organizational uses that have been identified for *you know* and *I mean*, including that *you know* is used to introduce given information but *I mean* is used for new information (Erman, 1987: 201), that *you know* is used to instruct an addressee to seek a referent in common ground (Aijmer, 1984: 122), that *you know* is used to introduce quoted speech (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 87; Redeker, 1990: 374), and that *you know* is used to highlight information (Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 83; Holmes, 1986: 8).

It seems like *you know* and *I mean* can take on new meanings every time they are used. But there is at least one commonality most researchers agree on, and that is that *you know* and *I mean* have forward-looking functions. This is unexpected for *you know* from the layperson's view that *you know* is a backward-looking tag added to the ends of phrases, as in "because I never seem to throw anything away you know" (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.2.90). In fact, analyses reveal that *you know* usually points forwards (Erman, 1987: 115, 205; Erman and Kotsinas, 1993: 86), although some argue that when *you know* and *I mean* co-occur, *I mean* takes the forward looking role of introducing the new segment, and *you know* is used to close off the prior discourse (Erman, 1987: 94). But even with the agreement that they are both forward-looking, the multifunctionality of each marker is still worrisome. If *you know* and *I mean* can do so much, how do we know what they are doing at all?

## 5. Basic meanings

The wide range of possible functions for *you know* and *I mean* compromises any theory of *you know*'s or *I mean*'s usefulness. An addressee could hear a marker, but not know whether to take it as a sign that there will be, for example, a repair, a continued turn, or a decrease in social distance. Some researchers argue that the function of a marker depends on where in the sentence the marker falls or how it is pronounced (Erman, 1987: 182–185; Östman, 1981: 21–23; Schiffrin, 1987: 291–294; Stenström, 1990a: 145), and others argue that discourse markers are always multifunctional (Erman, 1987: 141; Holmes, 1986: 5; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 85). We believe that the disparate functions can be reanalyzed in terms of basic meanings. Because the basic meanings are different for *you know* and *I mean*, we will discuss each marker separately.

## 6. You know

There have been two proposals for the basic meaning of *you know*. One is that *you know* is used to check on or to demonstrate shared views (Schourup, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987), or as Östman wrote, to show that "The speaker strives towards getting the addressee to cooperate and/or to accept the propositional content of his utterance as

mutual background knowledge” (1981, p. 17). This may seem to be a vacuously broad claim, because everything a person says should eventually become mutual background knowledge. But the idea is that *you know* highlights particular utterances requiring extra consideration. The other proposal is that the basic meaning is to signal to addressees that they fill out unspoken intention; Jucker and Smith argue that “*You know* thus invites the addressee to complete the argument by drawing the appropriate inferences” (1998, p. 196), or, said another way, “invites the addressee to recognize both the relevance and the implications of the utterances” (1998: 194).

There is some relationship between these two proposals: in order to fill out speaker’s meaning, addressees need to adopt shared views. However, Jucker and Smith’s (1998) proposal is more specific because it proposes that speakers strive towards acceptance of a particular unspoken intention, rather than acceptance of whatever was said as background knowledge. It’s not that speakers say *you know* to appeal to shared views as much as to get addressees to make the right inference. This refinement covers more data (Jucker and Smith, 1998: 195).

### 6.1. Interpersonal

People from a certain community might use *you know* more often not to show that they are members of that community, but because they are more willing to appeal to addressee inferences. *You know* may be more common in talking to friends than strangers because friends share more mutual knowledge; that is, speakers may be more likely to invite addressee inferences when they believe inferences drawn will approximate their thinking. At the same time, *you know* may be more common with guests than family if the family has developed a style of not inviting inferences, say to avoid misunderstanding. *You know* may be common in opinionated talk because speakers may desire addressees’ filling out ideas along the lines of speakers’ opinions. At the same time, they may be common in casual talk because speakers may not feel that they have to fill out all their ideas, or because speakers may be more willing to accommodate addressees’ interpretations.

*You know*’s basic meaning can consolidate conflicting information about its role in marking uncertainty. Instead of viewing *you know* as marking uncertainty or confidence depending on whether it referred to the words in the utterance or how information was accepted by addressees (Holmes, 1986), *you know* could be viewed only as inviting addressee inferences, which could be either at the word level or the interpersonal level, with differing effects at each. Because word level invitations might frequently be followed by speakers choosing different words, *you know* might appear to signal uncertainty. Because interpersonal level invitations might frequently be followed by listeners agreeing with speakers, *you know* might appear to signal confidence. That is, the apparent uncertainty or confidence may be a product of the subsequent discourse rather than the *you know*.

*You know*’s basic meaning can also explain its role in conveying politeness. By saying *you know* and leaving ideas less filled out, speakers can distance themselves from potentially face-threatening remarks and invite addressees’ interpretations,

achieving negative politeness. Inviting inferences may also result in more shared views, which can accomplish both negative and positive politeness. Shared views may achieve negative politeness by reducing the potential face threat of introducing or changing a topic (Schourup, 1985: 110). Shared views may also achieve positive politeness by increasing people's feelings of familiarity. But *you know* need not imply politeness. As mentioned earlier, *you know* can be used at the end of arguments to express "I won't say anything more" (Östman, 1981: 27). But in these uses, *you know* does turn the floor over to addressees (Östman, 1981), which can be seen as a way of inviting addressee inferences, especially because the speaker is unwilling to continue. As with uncertainty, politeness may be a product of the situation, not the presence or absence of a marker.

### 6.2. Turn management

*You know* may occur turn-initially, turn-medially, or turn-finally not because *you know* is being used to accomplish the turn coordination, but because at any point in the turn speakers may want to invite addressee inferences. Inviting inferences need not imply that the speaker stops talking; addressees can think about what inferences to draw while the speaker is talking, as would be the case with a turn-initial *you know*.

### 6.3. Repair

Instead of being used to forewarn an upcoming adjustment, or to hedge a word, *you know* may occur at these moments in conversation because it is precisely these times when speakers want to heighten addressees' inference processes. That is, *you knows*, speaking trouble, and hesitations co-occur (Erman, 1987: 187; Fox Tree and Clark, 1997: 162), but this does not mean *you know* signals the other problems. One telling piece of evidence is that the more complex the repair, the more likely it is to be marked (Erman, 1987: 172–173). This suggests that *you know* is used when speakers are having extra trouble expressing themselves, to encourage addressees to infer the intentions. The proposal that *you know* is used to buy time while speakers repair problematical speech can also be reanalyzed as *you know*'s co-occurring with problematical stretches of speech for addressee-inference reasons rather than for buying time. Furthermore, *you know* may occur in predictable repairs, as discussed above, because its use presumes that addressees could draw the desired inferences. This presumption of addressee-inferability is not present for *I mean*.

One piece of data mentioned earlier seemingly belies the basic meaning proposal. That is that addressees are less likely to complete a speaker's repair after *you know* (and *I mean*) than when no marker is used (Erman, 1987: 172–173). However, while *you know* may be used for addressee's filling out of intention, it is not necessarily used to request addressees' adoption of the speaker's syntactic and semantic structure in an explicit completion. When addressees do complete speakers' utterances after *you know*, the completion may have been prompted by other speech signals, such as marked pronunciations (Fox Tree and Clark, 1997), as in the following

(adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.71095; *thiy* is used to represent the marked pronunciation of *the* that rhymes with *see*):

- (10) A: well this brew I made, I . I picked a bottle up,  
just after you'd gone actually, . there was a filthy mess  
of yeast, - where it had pushed the cap off . and it was a filthy .  
you know, not not nasty but, quite a k thick creamy sort of  
scum of yeast, on *thiy* um it was dried, *you know*, .  
B: on the floor .  
A: on th- on thiy well on thiy s- you know on thiy hatchway there  
B: oh yeah

The completion could be to produce either “It was dried on the floor,” prompted by *you know*, or “Quite a thick creamy sort of scum of yeast on the floor,” prompted by *thiy*. As another example, the following completion was begun before the *you know* was finished (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.7.136; asterisks indicate overlap):

- (11) A: but . I really couldn't face the film festival thing, with with all the .  
\**you know*\*  
B: \*slips\*  
A: filling up - . thanks -

In another example, no completion follows *you know* (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 3.1.251; A and B are interviewing C):

- (12) A: um . your essay . if I may just cut across for one moment .  
um - - uh we'd like you to uh re-read this little passage beginning .  
thiy last paragraph as an example that's the one over the page you see .  
to the end of (untranscribable)  
B: where you talk about \*connections in that paragraph - \*  
C: \*terrible yeah - - \* I'm sorry, I'm terribly unused to writing essays,  
I haven't written them . for so long now, . this . came as . *you know*  
A: try to read it, as if you're not . yourself

But this is to be expected if *you know* is not requesting completion, but rather inference-drawing. Furthermore, *you know* only invites addressee inferences, it does not require them.

#### 6.4. Monitoring

Rather than being a way to monitor understanding, *you know* may merely coincide with times of insecurity about what's understood. Inconsistent backchannelling is expected if *you know* is inviting addressees' inferences rather than addressees' confirmation of understanding. The addressee backchannels

that do occur may be a result of rising intonation rather than the *you know* (Holmes, 1986: 10). Indeed, the more questioning the intonation, the more likely a backchannel (Östman, 1981: 23). Nevertheless, some backchannels after *you know* might be expected, because in inviting inferences that “recognize both the relevance and the implications of the utterances” (Jucker and Smith, 1998, 194), addressees may choose at times to verbally display the status of the inferences they drew, as in the following (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.61036):

- (13) A: Faulkner’s uh relaxed, but not too relaxed, *you know*  
 B: m

But even this example requires careful analysis, as the immediately prior turn exchange makes clear (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.61033):

- (14) A: Faulkner in this department’s, a good lecturer  
 B: m

There is no *you know*, but still an *m*, leading to the question of whether the *m* in the later exchange is a response to the *you know* or something else. It may be appropriate to have backchannels after *you know*, but it is not necessary.

### 6.5. Organization

*You know*’s proposed organizational uses can be broken down into three categories: (1) topic shifts, such as closing off prior discourse, foreshadowing a cause, effect, or clarification, introducing background information or justification, and presaging reported speech as enquoting devices, (2) emphasis, such as highlighting a particular point or the thrust of a narrative, and (3) reference, such as to introduce given information or request a referent to be searched for in the common ground. In each case, *you know* may be indicating speakers’ desires for addressees to infer something, rather than presaging particular organizational events.

Consider this passage (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.1.272):

- (15) I don’t really know why Cambridge turned it down, - - I mean it’s got to be done by, a university press, because it’s not going to be a remunerative - - thing .  
*you know*

A number of organization-enhancing utterances could follow, such as: (1) “One day I do hope to write a book that appeals to the public at large,” a closing off of prior discourse; (2) “They must not like my style of writing,” a cause; (3) “Now I don’t know where to turn with this manuscript,” an effect; (4) “‘We’re awfully sorry, take it elsewhere,’ but where?,” a quote; (5) “Can’t I ever get a break?,” highlighting the thrust of a narrative; (6) “They also turned down my other one,” searching for a referent. In this case, it happened to be (adapted from Svartvik and

Quirk, 1980: 2.1.277) “it, well it’s not a best-seller,” a clarification. According to the basic meaning proposal, *you know* informs addressees that an inference is requested, but does not provide information about what kind of inference. That is, rather than forewarning a clarification, the *you know* invites addressees to infer something about what was just said.

## 7. I mean

*I mean*’s basic meaning may be to indicate upcoming adjustments, from the word level on up to the negotiation of meaning (Schiffrin, 1987: 304).

### 7.1. Interpersonal

*I mean* may be used more by some speakers, and in some kinds of talk, because these speakers, or these speakers in these situations, are more willing or able to make adjustments on the fly.

*I mean* may be more common in thoughtful and opinionated talk, as discussed above, if speakers are being more careful about expressing exactly what they mean to express, and so using *I mean* to adjust their speech. This may also be true of narratives. On the other hand, *I mean* may be more common in conversations than in interviews, if speakers are talking more spontaneously in conversations. If talk is planned in advance, or considered carefully before articulating, as it might be in interviews, there is less need for on-the-spot adjustments. Likewise, *I mean* may be linked with positive politeness because using it reminds conversational participants of more casual talk. At the same time, it may be linked to negative politeness by decreasing face threat; saying *I mean* may be like saying “I’m not committed to what I just said and will adjust if you are offended.”

### 7.2. Turn management

*I mean* may occur turn-initially, turn-medially, or turn-finally not because *I mean* is being used to accomplish the turn coordination, but because at any point in the turn speakers may want to forewarn adjustments. For example, turn-initial *I mean* may indicate that the speaker will contribute an adjustment to the speaker’s prior turn, skipping over the other speaker’s turn in-between, as in the following two examples (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 2.3.819, 1.1.909; in the first one below, the discussion is about how “peacetime talents” differ from “wartime talents”):

- (16) A: they tend not to be so dramatic, do they,  
 B: - I I think it is true that, . a sort of  
 A: *I mean* you’re not going to get a sort of medal for uh, . drafting a beautiful new bill or something like that

- (17) A: and uh I'm I'm determined, to get that sort of stuff, into the comprehension questions, . rather than all this high-faluting literature stuff, where they can set . imagery, and all that kind of thing, because the \*scientists don't want that sort of stuff,\*  
 B: \*m, . fa far further from\* . from the students' experience, and so on, - - yes, .  
 A: *I mean* they . they talk about uh uh thuh . by all means encourage the scientist to read this sort of stuff, . but that's very different matter from compelling them, . to deal with that sort of material, at what is an important examination

Similarly, turn-medial *I mean* may indicate that the speaker will adjust what the speaker just said, and turn-final *I mean* may indicate that the speaker means something else, but will leave the adjustment off record.

### 7.3. Repair

*I mean's* use in repair conforms with its basic meaning to forewarn upcoming adjustments. With a broad view of repair that extends beyond local phonological or syntactic adjustments, this basic meaning can accommodate many of the other observations, such as that *I mean* forewarns parenthetical remarks or a change of mind (Erman, 1987: 175). The forewarning adjustments function treats the predictability or the local-globalness of repairs as irrelevant, so the conflicting findings presented earlier pose no threat.

### 7.4. Monitoring

The forewarning adjustments function also sits well with speakers' increased monitoring of addressee comprehension after an *I mean*. If speakers have just forewarned an adjustment, they might seek an acknowledgement of understanding from the addressee after the adjustment has been made.

### 7.5. Organizational

Forewarning adjustments can also account for *I mean's* uses in topic shifts, such as introducing commentary, justification, phrasal level modification, and new information.

## 8. Discussion

Most researchers describe *you know* and *I mean* in multifunctional terms. We believe that the markers are not doing as much as has been claimed, and what they are doing can be reanalyzed in terms of basic meanings. Our analysis further explains the apparent similarities that led to *you know's* and *I mean's* historical twindom in the research literature.

In particular situations, *you know*'s and *I mean*'s uses can appear similar. For example, both can occur turn-finally, as in the following examples repeated here (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.5.967, 2.1.932):

- (18) you can't step foot beyond a certain . *you know*  
 (19) if the response is enthusiastic, well then *I mean*

But instead of being used interchangeably to mark the end of a turn, we believe that in the first example, *you know* is suggesting that addressees infer what "you can't step beyond," whereas in the second example, *I mean* is suggesting that addressees recognize that the speaker would adjust what was just said but wants to leave the adjustment off record. The distinction might be missed were all examples of *you know* and *I mean* of this sort. But they aren't. In many situations, the uses are markedly different, as in the following examples repeated here (adapted from Svartvik and Quirk, 1980: 1.2.889, 1.3.305):

- (20) and I was the only person there that was sort of remotely . *you know*  
 competent to speak  
 (21) the interview was - it was alright *I mean* I handled it like a competent  
 undergraduate

In the first example, the speaker uses *you know* to invite addressees to follow along the same wave length. An *I mean* cannot work in its place because there is no upcoming adjustment. In the second example, in contrast, the speaker uses *I mean* to forewarn an adjustment to what is meant by "alright." A *you know* in its place would mean something else: that the addressee could already infer that to be "alright" meant to be "like a competent undergraduate."

One counterargument to the basic meaning proposals for *you know* and *I mean* is that they seem so general, they could account for any use. Whatever function is proposed, the basic meaning can be made to wear it. But our approach does make testable predictions not only about when a *you know* or *I mean* might occur, but also about when they are less likely to occur.

If *you know* is an invitation to infer the speaker's intentions, then there should be situations where this is not a desired strategy, and where, correspondingly, *you know* should be infrequent. One such situation is airline flight crew communication. In this situation, incorrect inferences can lead to serious negative consequences. Increasing precision and avoiding inferences would predict a decrease in *you knows*. Although *you know* by itself was not examined, the use of agreement-requesting discourse markers did decrease in problem flight conditions (Linde, 1988). Another situation in which *you know* might be infrequent is in the speech of high-status conversational participants. Higher status addressees may not desire to invite addressees' inferences or to distance themselves from what they are imposing on lower-status addressees. Although *you know* by itself was not examined, higher status speakers were more direct in making face-threatening requests of lower status addressees (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Becker et al., 1989; Holtgraves, 1986). A third situation in which *you know*

should be infrequent is when the addressees form a large group; in these cases, addressees are less likely to all draw similar inferences and speakers may be aware of that. Although this has not been tested, a consistent piece of evidence is that *you know* did not occur in any of the 16 recorded inaugural addresses, from F.D.R.'s first address to Clinton's 1993 address, although plenty of other conversational elements did, such as other discourse markers, hesitations, and the use of short sentences (Kowal et al., 1997).

If *I mean* is forewarning upcoming adjustments, then there should be times when this is not a desired strategy, such as when speakers are trying to present themselves as having thought through an issue in advance. In accordance with this hypothesis, *I mean* also did not occur in any inaugural addresses (Kowal et al., 1997).

Another prediction about the use of *you know* and *I mean* is that they should be differentially avoidable in speech. Because *you know* is used to invite addressee inferences, it should be avoidable when addressee inferences are not desired, and evidence suggests this is the case. But *I mean* might only be avoidable when it is forewarning higher-level adjustments, such as rephrasings of an idea; a speaker may choose to let the first phrasing stand instead of risking an *I mean* and the consequent addressee revision. *I mean* may not be avoidable when it is used to forewarn low-level adjustments stemming from speech production problems, such as alternative word choices or syntax, because these speech production problems themselves are unavoidable, even with prepared speeches, as the data on inaugural addresses show (Kowal et al., 1997). Evidence consistent with this hypothesis is that there were more *you knows* in dialogues than in monologues, but not more *I means* (Fox Tree, 1999b), showing that people were able to reduce their numbers of *you know* but not of *I mean*. Of course, there are alternative accounts for this discrepancy, such as that *you know* is increased by dialogue, while *I mean* isn't. Future research will help clarify this issue.

*You know* may be increased in dialogue because its basic meaning focusses on addressees, by inviting addressee inferences, whereas *I mean*'s basic meaning focusses on speakers, by forewarning speaker adjustments. Another way of viewing this is that *you know* encourages listeners to focus more on their own thoughts, and that *I mean* encourages listeners to focus more on speakers' thoughts. This view touches base with the proposal that *you know* is addressee oriented, but that *I mean* is speaker oriented (Schiffrin, 1987: 309; Stubbe and Holmes, 1995: 70). The distinction helps explain an observation made by laypeople and researchers alike regarding the quantity of *you knows* and *I means* used by some speakers. The claim is that *you know* and *I mean* may serve nondetrimental and even beneficial functions when they occur in small doses, but when they are frequent, they become detrimental to comprehension. Frequent use alters the words' functions from beneficial discourse markers to annoying "speech habit"s, with some researchers even creating a special functional category for overuse (Östman, 1981: 27). But there may be no need for a special category. Magnifying the underlying uses as they relate to speaker or addressee orientation can accommodate the overuse observations. Saying *you know* frequently may cause addressees to do more work than they like, and may cause addressees to feel resentful of speakers' lack of filling out ideas. Saying *I mean* fre-

quently may cause addressees to focus more frequently on speakers than they like, and may also make the speakers appear self-focused and impolite (see Schiffrin, 1987: 311 for similar arguments).

*You know* and *I mean* occur frequently in conversation because their functions are tied to the naturalistic, unplanned, unrehearsed, collaborative nature of spontaneous talk (see discussion in Fox Tree, 1999a). It is in talking on the fly that speakers are motivated to invite addressees to fill out their inferences by saying *you know* or to forewarn upcoming adjustments by saying *I mean*. A prepared speech allows speakers to plan the best way to express their ideas in advance. There is less need for *you know* because the speaker has planned most inferences ahead of time, and there is less need for *I mean* because the speaker has worked out most kinks and adjustments already.

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**Jean E. Fox Tree** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California Santa Cruz (A.B. Linguistics, Harvard; M.Sc. Cognitive Science, Edinburgh; Ph.D. Psychology, Stanford). She studies spontaneous speech production and comprehension, with a particular focus on discourse markers, *um* and *uh*, and prosody.

**Josef Chad Schrock** is a researcher at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Ph.D. Psychology, University of California Santa Cruz). His interests include spontaneous speech comprehension (specifically the role of discourse markers in structuring spontaneous language, and the interpersonal and politeness functions of discourse markers). Currently he is developing studies exploring the working memory demands for understanding and producing spontaneous conversation.