

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

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An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Introduction : the comment clause or parenthetical "I think"

- 1) *I think* I'm going to have to eat it with my fingers. KBW 18856
- 2) Rupert does, *I think* [pause] tend to get through a hell of a lot of milk. KBL 3213
- 3) I dunno, it was either Clive or Richard *I think*. KE6 5293

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Previous directions in research on "I think"

- Where does "I think" come from?
- What does "I think" mean?
- How do multiple meanings emerge?

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

- Where does "I think" come from?

Urmson (1957) "Parenthetical verbs"

Mulac and Thompson (1991) "A Quantitative Perspective on the Grammaticization of Epistemic Parentheticals in English"

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Introduction : the comment clause or parenthetical "I think"

- 1) *I think* I'm going to have to eat it with my fingers. KBW 18856
- 2) Rupert does, *I think* [pause] tend to get through a hell of a lot of milk. KBL 3213
- 3) I dunno, it was either Clive or Richard *I think*. KE6 5293
- 4) *I think* that you can't really make a decision until you have that literature, you can't. GY7 135

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Introduction : the comment clause or parenthetical "I think"

Mulac and Thompson's "matrix-clause hypothesis" (Brinton 2008):

- 1) Initial state: *I think that* + proposition
- 2) That deletion: *I think* \emptyset + proposition
- 3) Newly acquired mobility: proposition, *I think*

Cf. also "slifting" (Ross 1973)

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Introduction : the comment clause or parenthetical "I think"

The matrix-clause hypothesis questioned:

- Historical basis is unclear – zero complementation common even early on;
- The different positions yield arguably non synonymous utterances;
- Other much less common verbs also function as parentheticals (*acknowledge, concede, grant, maintain*)

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

- What does "I think" mean?

R. Lakoff: (1975:79) "hedging"

J. Holmes: (1990) "tentative" and "deliberative"

K. Aijmer: "Paradoxically *I think* may express either uncertainty or certainty" (1997:21) ... "modal clustering and discourse function"

A-M. Simon-Vanderbergen (2000:49) rhetorical function

G. Kaltenböck (2010) "structural or filler function"

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

What does "I think" mean?

G. Kaltenböck (2010) lists four functions for "I think":

- "shield function" – tentative use, etc.
- "approximator function" – hedge, etc.
- "structural or filler function"
- "booster function" – deliberative use, etc.

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Position of "I think" relative to its host
- Scope of "I think": what does it target?
- Prosody: detached, bound, etc.
- Situation (text type): conversational, formal, etc.
- Linguistic context: pressure from surrounding linguistic context

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Position of "I think" relative to its host

We can distinguish at least Initial, Medial and Final positions, as illustrated in 1-3.

For Aijmer, for instance, medial and final positions necessarily give rise to "tentative" meanings (1997:21)

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Scope of "I think": what does it target?

Kaltenböck (2010) has convincingly shown that "I think" can target clausal or phrasal elements. When phrasal elements are targeted, Kaltenböck considers that "I think" operates as an "approximator" or hedge.

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Prosody: detached, bound, etc.

Kaltenböck (2009a) shows that "I think" can be prosodically detached, left-bound, right-bound or both left- and right-bound. This is important in determining scope and from there, function.

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Situation (text type): conversational, formal, etc.

"I think" is far more frequent in spoken than in written text. Within spoken texts, Simon-Vandenberghe (2000) has looked at comparative frequencies and functions of "I think" in casual conversation – frequently "tentative" – compared to political interviews – frequently "deliberative".

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Previous directions in research on "I think"

How do multiple meanings emerge?

- Linguistic context: pressure from surrounding linguistic context

This has received some attention, notably from Aijmer, Kaltenböck or Simon-Vandenberghe, for example, but no systematic, quantitative research, that I know of.

Today's presentation builds on the intuitions and micro-analyses of these and other studies.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Plan and methodology of the present study

- Corpus-based investigation of collocational affinities
- Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

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Plan and methodology of the present study

- Corpus-based investigation of collocational affinities

British National Corpus accessed:

- via Phrases in English <http://phrasesinenglish.org/> and
- via BNCweb <http://bncweb.lancs.ac.uk/> essentially spoken

Formal variants are excluded "I would think, I do think", etc.
"I think that..." however is included cf. Kaltenböck 2009b

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Plan and methodology of the present study

- Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

The enunciative perspective on language pleads in favour of an integrated pragmatics, considering that many “pragmatic” phenomena can be explained as potentially part of the linguistic system itself, provided one recognises that linguistic items do not possess a fixed inventory of meanings, but mobilise abstract schematic forms which generate contextually situated shapes.

Corpus methodology, and collocations in particular, provide a means of exploring this movement from abstract potential to situated values.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Corpus explorations

- Limits, but advantages
- Frequencies (by position, by text type)
- n-grams
- Targeted collocation queries by text type and position

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Corpus explorations

- Limits, but advantages (size)
- Problems of recall in searching for just “I think” and in locating occurrences of “I think” by position in spoken corpus
- Problems with manual processing of the sheer volume of occurrences
- The BNC is getting a little old: it still contains a huge amount of tagged spoken material nonetheless and ...
- This becomes an advantage once one turns towards collocational features of “I think” as reliable collocations require large datasets

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Corpus explorations

- Frequencies (by position, by text type)

"I think": 41268 hits: 419 instances pmw

Compare with other similar items:

"I mean"	246 pmw
"I believe"	42 pmw
"you know"	431 pmw
"you see"	118 pmw

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Corpus explorations

- Frequencies (by position, by text type)

"I think": 41268 hits: 419 instances pmw

Distribution:

Spoken	2481 pmw
Written	175 pmw

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Corpus explorations

- Frequencies: by derived text type

Category	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion	Freq pmw
Other spoken m	6,175,896	16,924	670/755	2740.33
Spoken convers	4,233,962	8,910	148/153	2104.41
Fiction and vers	16,143,913	6,974	435/452	431.99
Unpublished w	4,466,673	948	98/251	212.24
Newspapers	9,412,174	1,523	248/486	161.81
Other published	17,924,109	2,554	346/710	142.49
Non-academic	24,178,674	2,593	318/744	107.24
Academic prose	15,778,028	842	196/497	53.37
total	98,313,429	41,268	2,459/4,048	419.76

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Corpus explorations

- Frequencies: by genre

Category	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion	Freq pmw
S:pub_debate	287,062	1,266	16/16	4410.2
S:brdcast:discu	761,595	3,071	53/53	4032.33
S:meeting	1,391,207	5,418	126/132	3894.46
S:sportslive	33,63	109	3/4	3241.15
S:consult	139,32	403	83/128	2892.62
S:parliament	97,289	273	6/6	2806.07
S:lect:humanitie	51,51	140	4/4	2717.92
S:lect:soc_scie	162,03	401	13/13	2474.85
S:interview	125,096	295	13/13	2358.19
S:tutorial	144,783	332	17/18	2293.09

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Corpus explorations

- Frequencies: by type of interaction

Category	No. of words	No. of hits	Dispersion	Freq pmw
Dialogue	8,847,841	23,242	636/701	2626.86
Monologue	1,562,017	2,592	182/207	1659.39
total	10,409,858	25,834	818/908	2481.69

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC

1	2	3	4	5
I	think	*	*	*
*	I	think	*	*
*	*	I	think	*
*	*	*	I	think

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

	1	2	3	4	5
107	I	think	*	*	*
35	*	I	think	*	*
2	*	*	I	think	*
2	*	*	*	I	think

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

*	*	*	I	think
that	's	what	I	think
that	's	why	I	think

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

*	*	I	think	*
I	mean	I	think	it
I	mean	I	think	that

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

	*	I	think	*	*
16	and	I	think
9	but	I	think
2	well	I	think
4	er(m)	I	think
1	so	I	think
1	because	I	think

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

The most interesting set are the 107 5-grams of the form:
“I think * * *”

Finding regularities within such a large set is more problematical, but we can observe certain patterns, using the part of speech tags of the BNC. [With corrections.]

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

	I	think	*	*	*
95	I	think	PNP	*	*
53	I	think	PNP	VB+	*
28	I	think	PNP	VM+	*
11	I	think	PNP	VH+	*

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

The point of this preliminary work on n-grams is to isolate some common configurations that will help target the searches for collocations via the BNCweb interface.

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Corpus explorations

- n-grams: a 5-gram search on the phrasesinenglish.org web interface to the BNC (min frequency: 20)

We have brought to light the following common configurations:

- I think _PNP _VB+, e.g. I think it's ...
- I think _PNP _VH+, e.g. I think I've ...
- I think _PNP _VM0, e.g. I think he'll ...
- and / but / well / er(m) I think ...
- ... what I think ...

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Corpus explorations

- Targeted collocation queries by text type and position

The aim here is to search for further collocations within the common configurations noted (and to compare these with the default case).

The searches are conducted on the spoken portion of the BNC.

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Corpus explorations

Rank	<u>_PNP + VM0</u> (default)	I think <u>_PNP + VM0</u>
1	'll	'll
2	can	should
3	could	would
4	'd	might
5	would	ought

Modals ranked by Log Likelihood after _PNP with and without "I think" at 1-R (BNC Spoken)

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Corpus explorations

Rank	<u>_PNP + VB+</u> (default)	I think <u>_PNP + VB+</u>
1	sure	important
2	afraid	right
3	sorry	fair
4	concerned	good
5	supposed	better
6	happy	true
7	glad	alright
8	aware	terrible
9	interested	disgusting
10	all	difficult

Adjectives ranked by Log Likelihood after _PNP VB+ with and without "I think" (BNC Spoken) at 1-2 R

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Corpus explorations

Rank	_ADJ I think [\\,\\.]
1	ninety
2	another
3	nineteen
4	fifty
5	important
6	four
7	eighteen
8	hundred
9	seventy
10	five

Adjectives ranked by Log Likelihood before final "I think" at 5-1L (BNC Spoken).

19 of the first 30 are numerals.

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Corpus explorations

Not, perhaps, cast-iron statistics, but very useful pointers as to the constraints the sequence "I think" places on its context.

These indications will help us in the next part of our investigation.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- "I think" as a marker of subjective positioning
- Position relative to the host clause
- Collocational configurations
- Remarks on prosody

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

Earlier on we noted at least four different “functions” of “I think”, pace Kaltenböck (2010), viz:

- “shield function” – tentative use, etc.
- “approximator function” – hedge, etc.
- “structural or filler function”
- “booster function” – deliberative use, etc.

Within an enunciative perspective, these functions are considered as no more than characteristic configurations of an abstract blueprint for meaning, or “schematic form”.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- "I think" as a marker of subjective positioning

More precisely, "I think" is not, in itself, a "shield", a "booster", etc. but rather, "I think" in all configurations marks the localisation of a target notion p relative to a subjective representation.

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- "I think" as a marker of subjective positioning

The act of assertion always involves a form of subjective representation. The assertion of p involves:

1. commitment (wishing, meaning)
2. materialisation (saying, writing)
3. a subjective representation (thinking, believing, knowing)
4. an objective representation, or "state of affairs" (Culioli 1999:96)

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- "I think" as a marker of subjective positioning

And so to assert "p" is for example

"to wish to say that one thinks that p is the case". (op. cit.)

The point with "I think" is that part of this *implicit* contract of assertion is made *explicit* in a form of meta-representation.

This explicitation, as the subject *assumes* a representation, corresponds to a number of specific modal configurations.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Position relative to the host clause

The position of "I think" relative to the host clause or more precisely its scope is also important in determining meaning.

Informally, it is one thing to announce beforehand that p is a subjective representation, as when "I think" is in initial position (*I think p*), and quite another to indicate retroactively that p is a subjective representation (*p, I think*).

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

We noted earlier that the characteristic configurations for initial “I think” include certain modals on the one hand, and the verb BE associated with evaluative adjectives, on the other.

What these configurations have in common is the notion of subjective positioning, whether this is deontic (as often with *ought*, *should*), epistemic (as often with *ll*, *would*) or evaluative.

“I think” assumes this feature explicitly.

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Initial "I think" in deontic configurations:

5) And I think we ought to get him over to one of our meetings. D97
142

6) I think you should study it very carefully and notice how you feel
at the end of it. JYM 820

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Initial "I think" in epistemic configurations:

7) I think, when I think it since, I think he must have been a remarkable man to work and slave like that. G4R 50

8) I've done some now, I think they'll be ready. KBB 4485

9) Well go, I think she's going to be shattered, I'd better wake up Jo. KPY 1079

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Initial "I think" in evaluative configurations:

10) But there are targets, and and I think targets are important in order to shape a culture. J9D 592

11) I think it's disgusting, they should do more for people. KN2 327

12) Yes I think that's fair enough. J9P 1049

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

When “I think” is placed after its scope then the configuration is one of retrospective readjustment: a first value is later explicitly located relative to a subjective representation.

Frequently this will involve some potentially objectifiable value, such as a numerical precision, a proper noun, etc.

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Final "I think" in configurations of retrospective readjustement:

13) I dunno, it was either Clive or Richard *I think*. KE6 5293

14) Nineteen squared's three hundred and ninety ninety one I think. FMM 618

15) ... there were three or two major epidemics in Oxford, of what they call plague, but it was probably a form of typhus, in 1643 and 44, and a good deal of sickness, I think, still in 1645 ... KRN 152

16) Well he's still in Manchester I think. KC9 1727

17) Two pounds, thirty I think. KBE 10011

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

These configurations appear to correspond to Kaltenböck's "shields", "boosters" and "approximators".

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Informally:

- in statements of fact, a subjective representation can be seen as indicating uncertainty or approximation (“hedging”)
- in statements of evaluative opinion, a subjective representation can be seen as extra subjective endorsement (“boosting”)
- in statements of epistemic or deontic modality, a subjective representation can swing either way, depending upon intersubjective relationships, among other factors

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

Medial "I think" can be illustrated by the following examples:

18) Rupert does, *I think* [pause] tend to get through a hell of a lot of milk. KBL 3213

19) Ergo, we have to look, I think, at the record of this company over the last few years HM6 78

20) And it's nice, I think, to include [pause] this [pause] plough, if that's what it is. HM2 453

21) As I understand, it is not I think what I voted for in number three JS9 765

An enunciative and corpus-based perspective on "I think"

Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

In medial position, “I think” appears often to correspond to Kaltenböck’s “structural or filler function”, a “pleonastic structuring device”, frequently collocating with “disfluency features such as fillers (e.g. *you know, I mean*), hesitation sounds (*uhm, uh*), word repetitions, pauses [...] and backtracking / restarts” (2010:251).

I have not been able to formulate simple searches for this type of collocation in the BNC.

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Collocational configurations

I suggest that medial occurrences of “I think” are compatible with both reinforcement and hedging and that, in addition, they contribute to the thematic organisation of the utterance, typically qualifying the immediately preceding segment as subjective representation.

Simon-Vandenberghe quotes examples of medial “I think” inserted between theme and rheme “so that the former is given extra focus” (2000:49). This would appear to be the case in the examples above.

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Modelisation within an enunciative perspective

- Remarks on prosody

Prosody can in many cases override these parameters, such that an initial "I think", with contrastive stress on "think", will be interpreted as "shielding" for example.

Kaltenböck has convincingly shown how, in medial occurrences of "I think", prosody plays an important role in indicating scope, binding the segment to its left or right-hand context.

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Conclusion

It appears unnecessary to qualify "I think" as having meanings a, b, c, d, etc.

"I think" essentially is a meta-representation that indicates that its target is a subjective representation.

The values previously adduced for "I think" in fact correspond more precisely to contextual configurations which corpus enquiries can help us to formulate more clearly.

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