



# The role of *I mean* in conference presentations by ELF speakers



Francisco Javier Fernández-Polo\*

Departamento de Filología Inglesa e Alemana, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, Avenida de Castela s/n, 15762 Santiago de Compostela, Spain

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 1 November 2013

### Keywords:

Conference presentations  
Discourse markers  
English as a lingua franca (ELF)  
Self-repair  
Self-presentation  
English for academic purposes

## ABSTRACT

*I mean* typically marks the introduction of modifications or adjustments in discourse, including self-repair, which seems to be especially prevalent in ELF. The role of *I mean* in academic ELF speech has been recently investigated by Kaur (2011). Kaur focuses on academic dialogue and self-repair roles. However, *I mean* has been found to be a rather speaker-centred, monologic particle, playing a variety of different roles in discourse. This article sets out to provide a comprehensive description of the functions of *I mean* in the monologic context of conference presentations by ELF speakers. The data consists of the presentations module of the ELFA corpus. Results indicate that self-repair, for corrective or 'proactive' purposes, is indeed a major function of *I mean* in the present materials too. However, presenters also use this discourse marker for other purposes inherently related to scientific argumentation, such as introducing background knowledge, justifying claims, interacting with audiences, marking salience or reinforcing commitment. It is argued that, for all their contribution to the effectiveness of presentations, some of the uses ELF speakers make of *I mean* structures may also compromise their personal image as speakers and as researchers.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) designates the kind of English used in interactions between non-native speakers with different linguo-cultural backgrounds to carry out practical everyday activities, like doing business, developing new technologies or performing different academic tasks. The very concept of ELF and its status as an area worth studying independently from both English native varieties and learner language (ESL/EFL) are increasingly recognized (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004). At the forefront of the research agenda is the description of the special language features and communicative strategies typically employed by ELF speakers.

The present research studies the role of *I mean* in one major context of ELF interaction, conference presentations (CP). English holds an undisputed dominant position as the international conference language (Ammon, 2001); the overwhelming majority of conference presentations are in English, by non-native speakers and mostly for non-native audiences. In this context, it is surprising that specialists in conference language should have mostly focused their attention on native English speech patterns, sometimes even explicitly discarding non-native production from their data (Dubois, 1987; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005).

*I mean* figures in most catalogues of English discourse markers (DM) (Aijmer, 2002; Redeker, 1991; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1999). Its primary role is textual, indicating an upcoming adjustment (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002) in the meaning of prior talk, an expansion of an idea or an explanation of the speaker's intentions (Schiffrin, 1987). *I mean* seems to occur frequently in contexts like informal conversation where the natural constraints of speech-production and competition for

\* Tel.: +34 881811858, 650066514; fax: +34 981574646.

E-mail address: [xabier.fernandez@usc.es](mailto:xabier.fernandez@usc.es)

the floor lead to frequent hesitation and repair, but also in opinionated and thoughtful talk, where precision is an issue (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002). Previous research has also shown (Lalljee & Cook, 1975; Ragan, 1983, cited in Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002) the existence of a certain correlation between the use of *I mean* and certain speaker-related features, such as anxiety or lack of confidence.

Erman (1986) observes that, semantically, the two segments related by *I mean* hold a very close relationship, with the second taking back, explaining or providing support to the preceding claim. He also notes that, informationally, the second clause often functions as a simple paraphrase, but sometimes may also add significant precision to the previous statement.

Interactionally, *I mean* often signals speakers' intention to make a point of their own, instead of jointly establishing a shared perspective (Schiffrin, 1987), functioning as a sort of *booster*, which encourages addressees to focus on the speaker's words and thoughts. As such, it may constitute a potential threat to the negative face of the audience (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002). Finally, by indirectly creating a stationary focus on a given topic (Schiffrin, 1987), sometimes *I mean* may also be used by speakers to indicate discourse salience.

Our current knowledge about discourse marker use in ELF is scarce (Mauranen, 2006a). This seems to be an especially difficult area for non-native English speakers (Aijmer, 2002). Fung and Carter (2007), for instance, showed the existence of a highly routinized use of DMs in their learner data, resulting in a certain tendency towards fossilization. Learners in this study also tended to focus their production on textual DMs, while other pragmatic, interpersonal markers were clearly underused. Research suggests, in general, that NNSs use less DMs than NSs, a tendency that has been attributed to different factors, including the influence of the mother tongue (Liao, 2009) or the degree of socialization and acculturation (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007) in the L2.

Although there exists a significant tradition of studies (see above) on the role of *I mean* in L1, there is little research on its use by NNSs in educational or real-life settings. Besides, existing literature (Fung & Carter, 2007; Liao, 2009; Liu, 2013) focusing on quantitative differences between both groups of speakers, has provided contradictory results and remains inconclusive.

DMs seem to be an interesting area for ELF research (Baumgarten & House, 2010; House, 2009), but have received little attention so far. The role of *I mean* in spoken academic ELF has been recently explored by Kaur (2011), but her research is restricted to self-repair roles in student conversations. In general, current literature on *I mean* (and other DMs) is clearly skewed towards dialogic exchanges, but its role in monologues is far less well understood. The present research intends to contribute to fill these observed gaps by analyzing the variety of roles played by *I mean* in a monologic corpus of conference presentations by ELF speakers. Based on our current knowledge of ELF and of the role of the particle in English, the research intends to show the actual contribution of *I mean* structures to the fulfilment of the basic rhetorical goals of conference presentations: clarity and persuasiveness. The research also intends to show how *I mean* is employed by ELF speakers to respond to the special challenges of ELF communication in this specific context.

Compared to unplanned conversation, carefully planned communicative events (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002) like CPs seem to disfavour the use of adjusting strategies, such as the use of *I mean*. On the other hand, other features of CPs and of ELF communication are likely to favour the use of this specific discourse marker. Firstly, *I mean* seems to be popular in thoughtful talk (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002), like the CP, where speakers strive to express meaning as precisely as possible, using *I mean* to adjust their message. Secondly, *I mean* might be used by conference speakers for politeness purposes (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002), to infuse a conversational tone into their presentations and create rapport with audiences (Hood & Forey, 2005). Thirdly, ELF speakers are arguably more prone than L1 speakers to making adjustments on the fly, one of the conversational roles of *I mean*. Finally, ELF speakers have been found to favour 'pro-active' communicative strategies (Mauranen, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2004) like repetition and self-rephrasing to pre-empt comprehension problems. Contributing to discourse explicitation by expanding ideas or explaining intentions (Schiffrin, 1987) is the main role of *I mean* structures, which accounts for their apparently frequent use in ELF discourse (Fernández Polo, in press; Kaur, 2011).

## 2. Data and methods

The materials consist of the whole CP component of the ELFA corpus<sup>1</sup> (Mauranen, 2006b; Mauranen, Hynninen, & Ranta, 2010). They comprise 34 conference presentations, totalling over 97,000 words of transcribed text. The presentations were recorded at several international conferences in Finland over the period 2002–2006. Speakers have different cultural and language backgrounds, although Finnish speakers and native speakers of other European languages are especially well represented. The majority of the presenters are between 31 and 50 years old and hold senior and, to a lesser extent, junior staff positions in their universities. A slight majority are male. The academic domains of the social sciences, the humanities and technology are more or less equally represented in the materials. The number of participants in the presentations range between 15 and 45 (see Appendix A). All the events constitute authentic, naturally occurring instances of ELF communication, where native speakers may be present but only in non-dominant roles, as part of the audience.

AntConc 3.2.1w was used to track the presence in the corpus of the DM. All the retrieved items were analyzed manually. Those instances where *I mean* was not a discourse marker but a clausal structure were discarded for analysis. Focusing as we

<sup>1</sup> ELFA (2008). The corpus of English as a lingua franca in academic settings. Director: Anna Mauranen. <http://www.helsinki.fi/elfa/elfacorporus> (accessed on 15 June 2013).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/355428>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/355428>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)