

# Comment clauses in English face-to-face conversation

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The present paper concentrates on **comment clauses** (CCs) as used in English face-to-face conversation. There are many clausal forms such as *you know*, *you see*, *I mean*, used frequently in everyday conversation between people. They do not contribute much to the informational content of a particular conversation, but their presence is important because they perform several different discourse functions and help the smooth flow of conversation.

Although the term comment clauses is used by many authors including Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Quirk et al. (1985), Leech and Svartvik (1994), Crystal (1995), Stenström (1995), Biber et al. (1999), many different labels have been used in literature, too. Erman (1986:131), who himself gives preference to the term pragmatic expressions, provides a summary of the terms used to label CCs, such as verbal fillers, void pragmatic connectives, softeners, pause-fillers, hesitation markers, discourse markers, pragmatic particles. He argues that most of the terms used are either too specific, for example, hesitation markers, or too general, for example, verbal fillers. Moreover, some of the terms mentioned comprise other categories than just what can be labelled comment clauses. Therefore the **term comment clauses seems most appropriate for the present research**.

In the contribution several different factors influencing possible functions of CCs in spoken discourse are considered. The inquiry is based on the analysis of three conversational texts taken from *A Corpus of English Conversation* edited by Svartvik and Quirk (1980). All the three texts analysed represent authentic face-to-face private conversation and each of them comprises 5,000 words, which means that the total extent of text under examination is 15,000 words.

The most comprehensive classification of CCs is provided by Quirk et al. in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985:1112-1118), where CCs are defined as **parenthetical disjuncts** functioning either as **content or style disjuncts**. The former 'express the speakers' comments on the content of the matrix clause' and are realized by finite clauses, while the latter 'convey the speakers' views on the way they are speaking' and appear in the form of non-finite clauses. Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish **six syntactic types** of CCs:

- (1) like the matrix clause of a main clause, e.g. *I hope*;
- (2) like an adverbial finite clause (introduced by *as*), e.g. *as I say*;
- (3) like a nominal relative clause, e.g. *what is more important*;
- (4) *to*-infinitive clause as style disjunct, e.g. *to be honest, to be fair*;
- (5) *-ing* clause as style disjunct, e.g. *speaking openly*;
- (6) *-ed* clause as style disjunct, e.g. *stated bluntly*.

The above-mentioned classification of CCs has also been applied to the present analysis as one of the possible factors influencing their discourse functions.

Table 1  
Syntactic types of comment clauses

Syntactic type of CCs	Texts			Total	
	S.1.3	S.1.5	S.1.8	No.	%
(1) like the matrix of a MC	101	69	97	267	96.04
(2) like an adverbial finite clause ( <i>as</i> )	4	3	2	9	3.24
(3) like a nominal relative clause	0	0	0	0	0
(4) <i>to</i> -infinitive	1	0	1	2	0.72
(5) <i>-ing</i>	0	0	0	0	0
(6) <i>-ed</i>	0	0	0	0	0
Total (No.)	106	72	100	278	100.0

The results in Table 1 indicate that in accordance with, for example, Broughton **finite CCs functioning as content disjuncts are the most common**, amounting to more than 99 per cent of all CCs in the data under investigation, whereas non-finite CCs functioning as style disjuncts are ‘a little more formal’ (Broughton 1990:73). This result is also in agreement with *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, in which the authors say that CCs ‘comment on a thought rather than the delivery of a wording’ (Biber et al. 1999:197). Owing to the very low frequency of style disjuncts expressed by non-finite CCs in authentic face-to-face conversation (only two occurrences in the material analysed), they have been excluded from further analysis. Of the three syntactic types comprising finite verbs, it becomes clear that type (1) CCs are the most frequent. They are illustrated by two instances in Example 1. The transcription of all the examples in the paper is based on the prosodic system in Crystal (1969):

#### Example 1:

A *I ^only \_paint \_what's \_th\ere# you ^kn\ow# if it's ^p\ink# I ^paint it p\ink# and ^if it's gr\een# I ^paint it gr\een - - ^and of !course I 'have !n\o [e]# com" ^m^\and# I mean I ^don't know 'how to paint a "!m\outh or 'anything#*  
(S.1.8.841-849)

The high frequency of type (1) CCs is probably one of the reasons why Quirk et al. (1985:1113) consider them as the most important and say that many of them are stereotyped, for example, *I believe, you know*, and may have **various semantic functions**:

- (a) they hedge, i.e. they express the **speaker's tentativeness** over the truth value of the matrix clause, e.g. *I guess, I suppose*;
- (b) they express the **speaker's certainty**, e.g. *I know, I must say, I don't doubt*;
- (c) they express the **speaker's emotional attitude** towards the content of the matrix clause, e.g. *I hope, I'm afraid*;

Commonly, the subject in types (a), (b) and (c) is *I* and the verb is in the simple present, in type (a) the subject may be an indefinite *one* or *they* or *it* and the verb may have a modal auxiliary, e.g. *I can see*, or be in the present perfective, e.g. *I have heard*;

(d) As for the last semantic function mentioned by Quirk et al., CCs are used to claim the **hearer's attention**. Some also call for the **hearer's agreement**. At the same time, they



having about 73 per cent of *you*-oriented CCs. On the contrary, text S.1.5 has the highest percentage of speaker-oriented, i.e. *I*-oriented CCs (about 57 per cent). It becomes clear that such differences are connected with participants in individual conversational texts, their relative social status, their attitudes towards each other, the history of their acquaintance, the amount of shared knowledge, and above all the topics they discuss in a given speech situation. As to co-text, I fully agree with Brown and Yule that ‘any sentence other than the first in a fragment of discourse, will have the whole of its interpretation forcibly constrained by the preceding text’ (Brown and Yule 1993:46).

Let me now briefly describe the individual texts under investigation. In **text S.1.3** one of the speakers dominates the whole flow of conversation, the topic of which is her taking part in an interview and her staying for a short time at a certain university college. Thus it comprises many interesting insights into the atmosphere of the college, for instance, common room life and ironic comments on some members of the college, i.e. topics that frequently require the use of *you know*, which can ask for the hearer’s attention and understanding and which is the most typical CC in this text. The CC *you know* is used mainly in the function of inform marker, i.e. asking for the hearer’s attention, or as an empathizer, i.e. asking for the hearer’s understanding. When discussing text S.1.3 it is important to mention the CCs *you know* and *you see* in what can be labelled the function of applier (nine cases), i.e. asking for some kind of feedback from the listener. This function is illustrated by the first occurrence of *you know* in Example 3:

### Example 3:

**b** . ^I !have [em] - - aspirations to make :marvellous g/arments#  
you ^kn/ow# \*<<sylls>>\*

**A** \*well\* it's ^so ch\eap#. you \*\*^kn/ow#\*\* ^this is the th/ing#

**b** \*\*^yes#\*\*

>**A** par^ticularly <<I think>> ^you probably like the :sort of clothes  
 I like :\anyway# which \*is fairly ^s\imple# -\*. (S.1.3.71-79)

**Text S.1.5**, being a chat between three secretaries and one female academic, concerns mostly administrative matters, such as replacement of secretaries, their working conditions and experience from previous jobs, interviews for new academic posts, lectures and seminars, but also personal relationships between some members of the academic staff. Since one of the speakers (speaker A) is a new member of staff, she and the other speakers do not have much past experience in common. So it can be claimed that the high proportion of *I*-oriented CCs in this text is closely related to the status and mutual relationship of the speakers. They mostly express their beliefs and certainty or lack of it using CCs such as *I think*, *I suppose* and *I don't know*, in the function of opine markers or markers of certainty (altogether 22 cases), or they feel the need to clarify what they have said by using *I mean* as a monitor due to the lack of shared knowledge (20 cases).

**Text S.1.8** is a private chat between three female academics mainly about several pictures that are displayed in the room in which their conversation takes place. It concerns some painters and their paintings, including some remarks on one of the speakers’ former painting career. Since it is a talk between women, it also includes such topics as the speakers’ housekeepers and shopping. The high proportion of *you*-oriented CCs, especially *you know* and *you see*, in this text can be accounted for by their main function, to ask for the hearer’s attention and understanding, i.e. what can be labelled inform markers and empathizers, respectively, the former having 30 and the latter 40 occurrences in the text.

Table 3  
Discourse functions of comment clauses

Discourse function	Texts			Total	
	S.1.3	S.1.5	S.1.8	No.	%
Appealer	9	2	0	11	3.98
Inform marker	22	13	30	64	23.55
Empathizer	44	15	40	99	35.86
Monitor	18	20	14	53	18.84
Opine marker	7	13	10	32	10.87
Marker of certainty	5	9	4	18	6.52
Marker of emotion	0	0	1	1	0.36
<b>Total (No.)</b>	105	72	99	276	100.0

As for the turn position of CCs, in accordance with, for example, Stenström (1995) and Erman (1986), I distinguish **three positions in the turn**: at the very beginning of a turn, within the turn, and at the very end of a turn. By the turn I understand everything a particular speaker says before the next speaker takes over. Moreover, I argue that the **turn position greatly influences the discourse function**; thus it is not possible to consider it separately from the other factors. As can be seen from Table 4, the great majority of CCs in my material tend to occur in medial position within the turn (88 per cent of all CCs), the only more noticeable exception being the CCs *you know* (9 cases) and *you see* (2 cases) when used as appealers, the former illustrated by Example 3 above. The preference to be placed in medial position within the turn has also been proved by Erman (1986), who in his article, however, deals only with *you know*, *you see* and *I mean*. Both his and my results indicate that apart from the medial position, *I mean* tends to be placed in initial position, whereas *you know* and *you see* tend to occur in final position. For more details concerning the turn position of CCs, see Tables 4, 5 and 6 below.

Table 4  
Discourse functions and turn position of comment clauses

All texts together	Turn position			Total
	I	M	F	No.
Appealer	0	0	11	11
Inform marker	1	63	1	65
Empathizer	0	92	7	99
Monitor	5	47	0	52
Opine marker	0	27	3	30
Marker of certainty	2	14	2	18
Marker of emotion	0	0	1	1
<b>Total (No.)</b>	8	243	25	276
<b>Total (%)</b>	2.89	88.04	9.06	100.0

In connection with the turn position, it must be stressed that I agree with Stenström that ‘turntaking presupposes a shift of speakers. An utterance produced while the other party goes on speaking can consequently not be regarded as a turn’ (Stenström 1994:34ff). This is illustrated by Example 4, in which *[m]* does not represent a turn, but is merely a backchannel

item. Therefore *you know* appears in Table 4 as a CC used in medial, not in initial, position within the turn. A similar approach has been adopted by Erman, who maintains that he does not regard ‘so-called back-channel-items as turns, if they occur in the middle of the ongoing speaker’s TU without interrupting it’ (Erman 1986:132).

#### Example 4:

- >A [em] . ^|all of the three - Exton gr/aduates# were ^girls who were  
- al!{r\eady} in:v\olved in their re\_search# - ^already involved in \*their\*  
bph\arm#. ^which meant that - they  
c \*[m]\*  
>A - ^you kn/ow# they ^must have been at :least in their :second research  
- y\ear#. I ^know \one of \_them# <<'d>> been ^doing research for  
seven !y\ears# - - [em] (S.1.3.279-287)

When recognizing the function a particular CC plays in a given speech situation, I have taken into consideration not only the above-mentioned factors, i.e. syntactic type, orientation and turn position, but also the prosody and above all the entire situational context.

As for the prosody, I agree with Stenström that ‘there appears to be a clear difference between *I*-oriented and *you*-oriented CCs with regard to tonicity’ (Stenström 1995:292). In my material, there is only one instance of *I mean* with a tone marker, shown in Example 5; all the other 46 occurrences have no tone at all and do not occur in a separate tone unit (TU), as, for instance, *I mean* in Example 1 above.

#### Example 5:

- B it's ^really was B\eryl <<that>> 'did it I th/ink# <<^Beryl M\artin#>> -  
C but ^s\urely I m/ean# they \*<<^can't 4 to 5 sylls>> \* (S.1.5.401-404)

The other *I*-oriented CCs (48 occurrences), represented above all by *I think* (14 cases) and *I don't know* (nine cases) mostly have a tone marker (21 cases), but do not usually occur in a separate TU. One typical instance of *I think* expressing the speaker’s opinion has been shown in Example 5.

Unlike *I*-oriented CCs, which hardly ever occur in a separate TU (only 10 cases of all 95 *I*-oriented CCs), *you*-oriented CCs, which amount to 180 occurrences in the data, tend to have a tone marker (126 cases) and occur in a separate TU (87 cases). A typical example of *you know* (with a tone in a separate TU) can be seen in Example 1 above and a typical token of *you see* (without any tone) in Example 6:

#### Example 6:

- A ^this is !v\ery {^tr\icky}#. I should have ^thought there were .  
B ^y\es# well ^qu\ite# they ^do 'that sort of :th\ing you see# and then  
they ^see what they've prod\uced# (S.1.5.528-533)

I agree with Stenström that the differences between *I*-oriented and *you*-oriented CCs with regard to their tonicity not only reflect ‘a tendency on the part of the speaker to minimise attention to the self in favour of the listener, but is also the direct result of the diverse discourse roles of these CCs’ (Stenström 1995:292). This diversity has been stressed also by Quirk et al. (1985:1481) when talking about speaker/hearer contact in speech.

Table 5  
Comment clauses with regard to tone markers and separate tone units

Discourse function	Formal realization	No tone	Tone marker			Tone and separate TU			Total No.
			I	M	F	I	M	F	
<b>Appealer</b>	you know	0	0	0	1	0	0	8	9
	you see	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
<b>Inform marker</b>	you know	16	1	5	0	0	28	0	50
	you see	9	0	4	0	0	0	0	13
	as you know	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Empathizer</b>	you know	21	0	18	4	0	47	1	91
	you see	5	0	1	0	0	0	1	7
	if you see what I mean	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
<b>Monitor</b>	I mean	46	0	1	0	0	0	0	47
	you know	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	5
	you see	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Opine marker</b>	I think	8	0	6	0	0	0	0	14
	I thought	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	4
	I suppose	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	4
	I don't suppose	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	I found	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	I imagine	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	I say	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	I should say so	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	as far as I can say	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	as far as I can see	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	as far as you could gather	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Marker of certainty</b>	I must say	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
	I know	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	I don't know	1	0	7	0	0	1	0	9
	I'm sure	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
	as I say	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
<b>Marker of emotion</b>	I'm afraid	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
<b>Total (No.)</b>		117	1	54	7	2	82	13	276

As to my classification of possible discourse functions of CCs, I have adopted and slightly modified some of the conversational strategies mentioned in Stenström's study *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction* (1994). Her study does not concentrate on CCs, but, since she deals with different conversational strategies, she must take into account the CCs most typical owing to their important discourse functions. My classification has been partly supplemented by semantic functions Quirk et al. (1985:1112-1118) mention in connection with type (1) CCs. As already mentioned, when recognizing the individual functions of CCs,

I have considered their syntactic type, orientation, turn position, prosody, and above all the entire situational context. I fully agree with Stenström that ‘the speaker does not always mean what s/he literally says, and the listener cannot always identify the speaker’s intention by the form of the utterance. **Function** is not simply a matter of surface structure but a matter of **when and where something is uttered, by whom and for what purpose**’ (Stenström 1994:43).

Table 6  
Survey of all comment clauses in all texts analysed

Discourse function	Syntactic type	Formal realization	Turn position			Orientation			
			I	M	F	I	you	imp.	
<b>Appealer</b>	1	you know	0	0	9	0	9	0	
		you see	0	0	2	0	2	0	
<b>Inform marker</b>	1	you know	1	49	0	0	50	0	
		you see	0	12	0	0	1	0	
	2	as you know	0	2	0	0	2	0	
<b>Empathizer</b>	1	you know	0	85	6	0	91	0	
		you see	0	6	1	0	7	0	
	2	if you see what I mean	0	1	0	0	1	0	
<b>Monitor</b>	1	I mean	5	42	0	47	0	0	
		you know	0	5	0	0	5	0	
		you see	0	0	0	0	0	0	
<b>Opine marker</b>	1	I think	0	12	2	14	0	0	
		I thought	0	4	0	4	0	0	
		I suppose	0	4	0	4	0	0	
		I don’t suppose	0	1	0	1	0	0	
		I found	0	0	1	1	0	0	
		I imagine	0	1	0	1	0	0	
		I say	0	1	0	1	0	0	
		I should say so	0	1	0	1	0	0	
		2	as far as I can say	0	1	0	1	0	0
			as far as I can see	0	1	0	1	0	0
	as far as you could gather	0	1	0	0	0	1		
<b>Marker of certainty</b>	1	I must say	2	0	1	3	0	0	
		I know	0	1	0	1	0	0	
		I don’t know	0	8	1	9	0	0	
		I’m sure	0	2	0	2	0	0	
	2	as I say	0	3	0	3	0	0	
<b>Marker of emotion</b>	1	I’m afraid	0	0	1	1	0	0	
<b>Total (No.)</b>			8	243	25	95	180	1	



**Example 8:**

- B**            *and ^he's the 'sort of !n\ext one#. ^you kn/ow# ^next 'senior 'one  
'after H\art#*
- A**            *^[m]# - ^H\arold#*
- B**            *^[m]# - -*
- A**            *and ^d'y/ou . teach# -*
- B**            *^n\o# ^I d/on't# because ^I'm not \English at 'all# (S.1.5.451-460)*

Unlike *you know*, the CC *you see* has only seven occurrences in the function of empathizer in the data under examination and only in one case is this function performed by the CC *if you see what I mean*.

Within **I-oriented** CCs, indicated by shading in Table 6, it is possible to recognize the functions of monitor, opine marker, marker of certainty, and marker of emotional attitude. The function of **monitor** is the only one identified both with *you-oriented* and *I-oriented* CCs. The most typical representative is definitely *I mean*, illustrated by Examples 1, 5, and 7 above. Nevertheless, some instances of other CCs have been found, too, mostly collocating with *I mean*. As to collocations, I agree with Östman that *I mean* is close in function to *you know* because, on the one hand, it is 'speaker-oriented in the sense that, by using it the speaker self-corrects, or clarifies his own views. On the other hand, he does this clarification for the benefit of the addressee' (Östman 1981:35). Therefore, it can easily co-occur with *you know*, as shown below:

**Example 9:**

- A**            *"^I haven't heard a w\ord# - I mean ^I [θ]^you kn/ow# <<I say>>  
^I think they :made up their minds before they !s\started#  
(S.1.3.989-991)*

The CC *you see* is included in Tables 5 and 6 above because Stenström (1994:132) lists it among her examples of monitors. In my data, however, it has not been found in this function at all. CCs are used as monitors when the speaker needs to make a new start or rephrase what s/he was going to say in the middle of a turn, either because s/he has some problems with finding most appropriate words or often because the listener shows that s/he cannot follow what the current speaker says. The former reason is close to what Quirk et al. (1985:1313) label 'mistake editing'.

The greatest variety of forms has been found among CCs functioning as **opine markers**. Since some of the forms have only one occurrence in my material, only those having at least two occurrences are exemplified. The most typical representative of this group is the CC *I think*, shown already in Examples 3 and 5 above. Relatively frequent are the CCs *I thought* and *I suppose*, each having five occurrences, the former shown in the following example:

**Example 10:**

- B**            *and ""^sh\e pro'duced a s\entence# which ^{I'thought} didn't !m\ean# .  
^what she . th/ought it \*'meant#\**
- A**            *\*^[m]#\**
- >B**           *^or . and was com^pletely ungram:m\atical# ( - - laughs) - - -*
- A**            *^I m\ust say# it ^<<syll>> 'obviously : \is a m\atter# of ^seeing  
'whether . one :gets - - one's suf^ficiently : \interested in a 'thing#*

*and one* ^d\oesn't 'get 'bogged d/own# ^in [e:] - - ^\oh the \_sort of - - -  
 ^roul\ine <<of the '1 syll>># (S.1.5.566-576)

It is evident from Example 10 that CCs as opine markers indicate that what is being uttered is just the speaker's opinion, his/her feelings and attitudes. It is close to what Quirk et al. (1985:1114) recognize as the speaker's tentativeness over the truth value of the matrix clause. As for tonicity, *I*-oriented CCs as opine markers hardly ever have both a tone and a separate TU. For the only five cases of opine markers occurring in a separate TU, see Table 5 above, where they are indicated by shading. This result corresponds to their different discourse functions from *you*-oriented CCs, as already mentioned.

Example 10 also includes the CC *I must say*, which represents **markers of certainty** or lack of certainty in the material analysed. Apart from *I must say*, typical CCs expressing certainty are *I'm sure*, *as I say*, and the lack of certainty *I don't know*. As for tonicity, 16 cases from all 18 CCs in this function have a tone marker and in 4 cases even a separate TU. It is clear from Example 10 as well as Example 11, which exemplifies the CC *I don't know*, that CCs in this function indicate the speaker's certainty or lack of certainty over what is being uttered. When *I don't know* functions as a CC expressing uncertainty, it is according to Östman (1981:27) paraphrasable as 'I don't really know what to think about that' or 'I don't really have anything more to say about this' or some similar implicit qualification. In connection with 'complex' discourse markers, into which most CCs can be included, Aijmer in her book '*Conversational routines in English*' (1996) stresses that 'the literal meaning is not completely obliterated but can be scrutinized by the hearer; for someone who did not know the phrase it would still be possible to figure out what it means on the basis of its constituents' (Aijmer 1996:204). And this is exactly the case with the CC *I don't know*.

**Example 11:**

>A *or one* ^w\onders# [i] ^whether it's !th\at \_way \_round# or ^whether  
 it's the !\other \_way \_round#  
 c *yes*  
 A ^whether they don't ever get the !ch\oice# so ^this is an in!st\ead of#  
 b [m]  
 A - - but . ""*I don't kn/ow# I mean I* ^haven't b\een in# - - the ^academic  
 world - :!ong e \_nough# - or ^w\idely e \_nough# (S.1.3.1174-1185)

The last discourse function of CCs that has been recognized in the present inquiry is that of **marker of emotional attitude**, i.e. a function similar to what Quirk et al. (1985:1114) label 'the speaker's emotional attitude towards the content of the matrix clause'. However, only one token of such a CC has been found in the data, namely *I'm afraid* in the following example:

**Example 12:**

A ^<<just>> put my gl\asses 'on# I ^can't see a !th\ing <<with 'out  
 them>># - - - <<well ^after all>> they're \_too 'dark to be  
 in!sp\iriting# ^\aren't they#  
 B ^I don't w\ant one# ^*I'm afr/aid*# (S.1.8.53-58)

In conclusion let me just state that CCs are typically used in authentic face-to-face interaction, where they have functions which they do not have in written discourse. These often diverse functions are influenced by many factors such as their syntactic type, orientation, turn position, tonicity, and last, but not least, the entire situational context. For further research, it seems interesting to consider the role of CCs from the point of view of functional sentence perspective and thus contribute to a deeper understanding of their functions in spoken discourse.

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