

The prosody of initial comment clauses Evidence for main clause or discourse status

Nicole Dehé (FU Berlin) and Anne Wichmann (University of Central Lancashire)

Comment clauses (CC), aka parenthetical verbs, are pronoun-verb combinations which have been regarded as parentheticals in the literature. They include expressions such as *I think*, *I suppose*, *I believe*, *I guess*, *I mean*, *you see* and *you know*. In previous research, it has been argued that grammaticalisation accounts for the use of comment clauses as epistemic adverbials (specifically *I think*, *I suppose*, etc; Aijmer 1997, Thompson & Mulac 1991, Dehé & Wichmann 2007) or discourse markers (*I mean*, *you know*, *you see*; Murphy 1993; Aijmer 1997). Evidence comes for example from the facts that they can be omitted without altering the propositional content of the main assertion and that they can be paraphrased with an epistemic adverb (Urmson 1952), and from their intonational properties (Dehé & Wichmann 2007).

The same combinations in sentence-initial position are ambiguous between a main verb use and the use as epistemic adverbs. Thompson & Mulac (1991) argue that initial *I think* without a following complementiser should be analysed as epistemic phrases. This assumption has recently been challenged by Kearns (2007) on the basis of syntactic evidence and the diachronic development of initial vs. medial and final *I think* (referring to Brinton 1996).

The present paper approaches the question of whether or not sentence-initial *I think* etc can function as epistemic adverbs from a prosodic perspective. Dehé & Wichmann (2007) have shown that the prosodic realisations of sentence-medial and final CCs are consistent with the behaviour of discourse markers / particles in similar sentential positions. Since discourse markers also commonly occur in initial positions ('discourse marker slot', Aijmer 1996), and given that the prosodic properties of other discourse markers occurring sentence-initially are known (e.g. *now*: Hirschberg & Litman 1993; *of course*: Wichmann et al., to appear), the question presents itself whether the prosodic realisation of initial *I think* etc could suggest a discourse function in this position, too. Given the general parallels between adverbials and comment clauses described in the literature, it would be surprising if these did not extend to initial *I think* etc.

The data for this study, a working corpus of sentence-initial *I think* etc without following complementiser, are drawn from the spoken part of the British Component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB). In order to identify the prosodic patterns, all available target utterances are analysed auditorily, and utterances whose corresponding sound files are of good enough quality are analysed instrumentally. The resulting prosodic patterns will be compared to those of (i) main verbs and (ii) other discourse markers in the same surface slot. We predict to find prosodic patterns that suggest both main verb uses and discourse uses of *I think* etc in this slot. These results will go against Thompson & Mulac (1991) who suggest that all sentence-initial occurrences of *I think* without complementiser should be analysed as epistemic adverbs, but are in support of the assumption that initial CCs may indeed function as epistemic adverbs.

References

Aijmer, K. 1996. *Conversational Routines in English: Convention and Creativity*. London: Longman.

- Aijmer, K. 1997. "I think – an English modal particle." In T. Swan, and O. Jansen Westvik (eds.), *Modality in Germanic Languages – Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 1-47.
- Brinton, L.J. 1996. *Pragmatic Markers in English: Grammaticalization and Discourse Functions*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dehé, N. & A. Wichmann. 2007. "The multifunctionality of epistemic parentheticals in discourse: prosodic cues to the semantic-pragmatic boundary". Ms., FU Berlin & University of Central Lancashire.
- Hirschberg, J. & D. Litman. 1993. "Empirical studies on the disambiguation of cue phrases." *Computational Linguistics* 19(3): 501-530.
- Kearns, K. 2007. "Epistemic verbs and zero complementizer." *English Language and Linguistics* 11(3): 475-505.
- Murphy, L.M. 1993. "Discourse markers and sentential syntax." *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences* 23(1): 163-167.
- Thompson, S.A. & A. Mulac. 1991. "A quantitative perspective on the grammaticization of epistemic parentheticals in English." In E. Traugott & B. Heine (eds.) *Approaches to Grammaticalization: Vol. 2: Types of Grammatical Markers* (Typological Studies in Language, 19:2.). Amsterdam: Benjamins. 313-327.
- Urmson, J.O. 1952. "Parenthetical verbs." *Mind* 61: 480-496.
- Wichmann, A., A.-M. Simon-Vandenberg & K. Aijmer. To appear. "How prosody reflects semantic change: A synchronic case study of *of course*." In H. Cuyckens, K. Davidse & L. Vandelanotte (eds.), *Subjectification, Intersubjectification and Grammaticalization*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.