

A pragmatic function study of the discourse marker "I mean" in *Friends*

Xinyue YI

Applied Linguistics, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an 710128, China

Abstract: This paper examines the discourse marker "I mean" in the first season of *Friends*, exploring its pragmatic functions within dialogues. Analysis reveals that "I mean" facilitates politeness, moderates tone, and enhances identification, while also serving functions such as clarification, correction, emphasis, and supplementation. These functions support coherence and interaction, underscoring the marker's role in promoting dialogue fluency. The findings highlight how "I mean" contributes to character interactions and provide insights for learners on the pragmatic use of discourse markers in communication.

Key words: *Friends*; discourse markers; "I mean"

1 Introduction

Discourse markers can not only organize the dialogue and make it more coherent, but also convey the speaker's attitude, emotion or position, so that the listener can quickly understand the speaker's underlying meanings. As a classic American sitcom, *Friends* is popular for its realistic and natural dialogues, and has attracted countless scholars to study its language usage. In the show, the characters not only organize their conversations with authentic and coherent sentences or idioms, but also frequently use a variety of discourse markers to facilitate communication, among which "I mean" is one of the most common markers. In this paper, we will analyze the use of "I mean" in the first season of "*Friends*" to explore its pragmatic function and its role in different contexts. By analyzing specific examples, the paper will reveal how "I mean" helps the characters to make self-corrections, take positions or maintain interactions in the dialogues.

2 Discourse markers

In daily communication and usage, people often define discourse markers as words or phrases that play a connecting and regulating role between or within sentences. They are not attached to any syntactic and semantic structure, but play an important role in discourse coherence, attitude expression and interpersonal interaction, and help to form a coherent and organized discourse [3]. Since the 1970s, people began to devote themselves to the pragmatic study of discourse markers (e.g. van Dijk 1979), and since then, discourse markers have gradually become one of the hot issues studied by domestic and foreign academics. Levinson, a pragmatist, once said that "English, and undoubtedly most languages, have a lot of words and phrases that mark a certain relationship between a certain discourse and the previous one, such as but, therefore, in conclusion, however, anyway, well, actually, fortunately, so, you know, I mean, that is to say, in other words, you see and so on [1]." Domestic scholar Ran Yongping reviewed the pragmatics of discourse markers in 2000, outlining the

research status and trends at that time, contributing to the subsequent development and transformation of discourse markers.

3 Pragmatic functions of the discourse marker "I mean" in *Friends*

As a discourse marker, "I mean" has the main functions of clarifying, correcting, emphasizing, supplementing, organizing and expressing emotions [2]. In the following, the basic pragmatic functions of "I mean" are analyzed in detail with the specific example of *Friends* (Season 1).

3.1 Clarification

As a discourse marker, "I mean" is often used to clarify or explain the speaker's point of view or position to help the listener better understand what has been said before.

Example 1:

Phoebe: No, I don't think this was your shot.

Phoebe: I mean, I don't even think you just get one shot.

In Episode 6, when Joey feels he missed a valuable audition chance, Phoebe reassures him by saying "I mean, I don't even think you get just one shot." Using "I mean", she clarifies her optimism, emphasizing that Joey will have more opportunities ahead. This reflects a positive outlook on career growth, underscoring the need to stay receptive to future possibilities in competitive environments.

Example 2:

Ross: Rach, do you uh, are you gonna separate those?

Rachel: Oh God. Oh, am I being like a total laundry spaz? I mean, am I supposed to use like one machine for shirts and another machine for pants?

In Episode 5, Rachel jokes about being a "laundry spaz" due to her inexperience. She uses "I mean" as a discourse marker to clarify this, followed by questions that further explain her confusion about basic laundry principles. This usage refines her statement, making her self-description more coherent and plausible.

3.2 Correction

"I mean" is used to correct previous statements, allowing the speaker to rephrase their message for accuracy.

Example 3:

Phoebe: Um, Monica, you're scaring me.

Phoebe: I mean, you're like, you're like all chaotic and twirly.

In Episode 2, after seeing Monica's anxious reaction to her parents' arrival, Phoebe initially says "you're scaring me". Realizing this is too direct, she corrects it with "I mean" to "you're like all chaotic and twirly". This euphemistic expression provides a more accurate depiction of Monica's behavior, shifting from emotion to description.

Example 4:

Ross: Helen Geller? I don't think so.

Carol: It's not gonna be Helen Geller.

Ross: Thank you!

Carol: No, I mean it's not Geller.

In Episode 2, Ross accompanies his ex-wife Carol to a maternity checkup, where they discuss the baby's names. When Carol says the child won't be named "Helen Geller", Ross mistakenly thinks he has won the argument. Carol clarifies with "No, I mean it's not Geller", correcting his misinterpretation about the last name. This exchange highlights a semantic correction and reveals a deeper issue of naming rights, illustrating a father's loss of naming authority after divorce.

3.3 Emphasis

"I mean" can also be used to emphasize a certain point or feeling, to make the speaker's attitude clearer, and to highlight the speaker's opinion.

Example 5:

Chandler: Thank God you didn't try to fan out the magazines.

Chandler: I mean, she'll scratch your eyes right out.

In Episode 6, Rachel moves a green soft chair without Monica's permission, raising concerns about Monica's reaction. When Chandler sees that Rachel hasn't moved the magazines, he warns her, saying "I mean, she'll scratch your eyes right out." This use of "I mean" directs Rachel's attention and emphasizes the hyperbolic seriousness of the warning. Fortunately, the situation doesn't escalate. This discourse marker not only underscores the potential consequences but also enhances the emotional intensity of the scene, making the dialogue more vivid and effective.

Example 6:

Rachel: Mrs. Bing, I have to tell you, I've read everything you've ever written. No, I mean it! I mean, when I read *Euphoria* at midnight, all I wanted to do was become a writer.

In Episode 11, Rachel expresses her love of Mrs. Bing's books, making it clear that she has read all of Mrs. Bing's works. In this exchange, Rachel emphasizes her sincerity and determination by using the phrase "I mean it". Subsequently, Rachel uses "I mean" again to further elaborate her feelings, especially in reference to her experience of reading *Euphoria* late at night. This expression not only deepens the credibility of the aforementioned praise, but also clearly demonstrates the profound influence of the work on Rachel's personal pursuits.

3.4 Supplementary

"I mean" is sometimes used to add additional information or ideas to help the speaker provide more details or background on the original topic, making the conversation richer and the message more complete.

Example 7:

Monica: If you had to do it all over again, I mean, if she was here right now. Would you tell her?

Monica's mother: Tell her what?

Monica: How she drove you crazy, picking on every little detail, like you hair... for example.

In Episode 8, Monica's mother reminisces about some of the behaviors that her grandmother did when she was alive that drove her crazy, and Monica uses this as an opportunity to ask a hypothetical question: if she could relive the past and her grandmother was still alive, would her mother be honest with her grandmother about how she really felt? In effect, through this hypothesis, Monica attempts to engage in an open and honest dialogue with her mother in order to express that she is currently experiencing some similar distress. In this dialogue, "I mean" serves as an additional illustrative discourse marker, leading to the hypothetical condition "if she was here right now", which further refines the previous expression "all over again". This not only provides richer contextual information about Monica's intentions and conveys her feelings and thoughts more effectively, but also enhances the logical coherence and semantic integrity of the sentence.

Example 8:

Ross: It was the most elaborate filth you have ever heard.

Ross: I mean, there were characters, plot lines, themes, a motif.

In Episode 15, when Joey inquires about the progress of Ross's relationship with Celia, Ross states that it is going surprisingly well. He further explains that the reason it is going so well is because he is good at telling "dirty stories" and believes that his stories are very clever and complex. The subsequent use of "I mean" to elaborate and supplement "the

most elaborate filth" by listing the elements of character, plot, theme, and motif in detail allows the listener to more clearly understand what he means by "elaborate".

3.5 Organizing discourse

In real communication, discourse is often not organized in advance. As the context changes or the message is different, the speaker may not be able to organize what comes next, which may lead to hesitation or interruption. In this case, the discourse marker "I mean" can be used as an organizing tool to help the speaker to introduce the next topic, so as to express the intention more smoothly and avoid long pauses that affect normal communication.

Example 9:

Monica: There's something that you should know.

Monica: I mean, there's really no easy way to say this.

In Episode 3, Monica is having trouble telling her friends about her decision to break up with Alan. After saying "There's something that you should know" and realizing that she needs to find an appropriate way to convey the news of the breakup to her friends. Monica uses "I mean" as a discourse organization device to play its discourse articulation role, reflecting her internal hesitation and struggle, and at the same time obtaining a temporary pause for further thinking and organization of the next words, thus making the speech more coherent.

Example 10:

Ross: OK, where am I talking to, here?

Ross: I mean, uh, well, there is one way that seems to offer a certain acoustical advantage, but

In Episode 9, Ross tries to have a conversation with his unborn child, but being new to fatherhood, he doesn't know how to communicate with the fetus through his ex-wife's abdomen, so he asks "OK, where am I talking to, here?" Subsequently, Ross uses "I mean" to guide his further explanation of the previous query. However, Ross makes frequent use of discourse markers such as "I mean", "uh" and "well" in this explanatory discourse, which provides him with extra time to think, adjust his thoughts, and organize his language, avoiding sudden interruptions and maintaining the coherence and logic of the dialogue.

3.6 Emotional expression

As a phrase expressed from the first-person perspective, "I mean" has a distinctly personal flavor, so it can convey or enhance the speaker's emotional color in different communicative contexts, and thus facilitate the expression of emotion.

Example 11:

Monica: Look at that face.

Monica: I mean, even sleeping, he looks smart.

In Episode 11, Monica and Phoebe are visiting a strange man who has been injured in a car accident. Monica looks at that face and says "Look at that face. I mean, even sleeping, he looks smart". In this context, "I mean" serves as a tool for emotional expression, which not only effectively deepens Monica's praise for the man's appearance, but also deeply conveys her positive feelings towards him, reflecting Monica's sincerity and honesty, and increasing the credibility and infectiousness of the dialog.

Example 12:

Rachel: Chandler, I gotta tell you, I love your mom's books! I love her books! I can't get on a plane without one. I mean, this is so cool.

In Episode 11, Rachel emphasizes her love of Chandler's mom's books by repeating "I love her books". The hyperbole of "I can't get on a plane without one" effectively conveys Rachel's recognition and appreciation of the books, and then she

further deepens her emotional attitude towards Chandler's mother's books by saying "I mean, this is so cool". This expression not only complements the previous praise, but also strengthens the expression of emotion, making her love for the books more real and significant.

4 The social function of the discourse marker "I mean" in *Friends*

The discourse marker "I mean" also has important social functions, especially in maintaining politeness, moderating the tone and guiding identification. It provides a tactful way for speakers to avoid direct criticism when discussing sensitive topics, maintains a friendly atmosphere, and reduces the other party's defenses. In addition, the use of "I mean" can lead the listener to agree with the point of view and enhance his/her acceptance, helping to establish more harmonious communication and understanding.

4.1 Maintaining politeness

"I mean" helps speakers in social interactions to maintain politeness and ensures that the conversation flows smoothly to achieve the desired social effect.

Example 13:

Phoebe: I don't know what you just said, so let's get started.

Paolo: Uh, I am, uh, being naked?

Phoebe: Um, that's really your decision, I mean, some people prefer, you know, to take off...oh whoops! You're being naked!

In Episode 12, when confronted by Paolo with the question of whether or not a massage requires full nudity, Phoebe initially replies that the decision is up to Paolo's personal choice. However, she then realizes that her answer may be too direct and reorganizes the expression using "I mean" to make the subsequent explanation seem more polite and smooth, showing respect for personal preference, avoiding direct offense, mitigating potential awkwardness in the exchange, and enhancing the politeness of the conversation.

4.2 Moderating the tone

When expressing a personal opinion or making a criticism, a direct statement may seem too blunt or forceful. The use of "I mean" allows for a more tactful tone, which reduces the likelihood of offending or starting an argument.

Example 14:

Ross: Yeah, who wants fair?

Ross: I mean, I just want things back. Y' know, the way they were.

In Episode 3, when Monica tells her friends that she's decided to break up with Alan and they all show great disapproval. Monica jokes that she can keep pretending to go out with Alan in order to maintain everyone's relationship. The friends agree, but Monica feels that it wouldn't be fair to everyone, and Ross emotionally interjects, "Who wants fair?" Realizing that his tone was too intense, Ross softens it with "I mean" and explains that he just wants things to go back to the way they used to be and everyone to get along like they used to.

4.3 Guiding identification

"I mean" can also guide the listener's attention, increase the listener's identification with a particular point of view, and lead to the establishment of a mutual understanding.

Example 15:

Joey: Well, if she's my friend, hopefully she'll understand. I mean, wouldn't you guys?

In Episode 17, when Joey plans to celebrate Ursula's birthday with her, Ross poses a question: if Joey chooses to celebrate with Ursula, what should be done about Phoebe's birthday? Because both birthdays happen to fall on the same

night. In the end, Joey decides to stay with Ursula to avoid disappointing her, and says that if Phoebe is really his good friend, she will understand his choice. Joey then attempts to get Ross and Candler to agree and empathize with his point of view by saying "I mean".

5 Conclusion

This paper analyzes the discourse function of the discourse marker "I mean" in the American comedy *Friends*, and emphasizes the important role of "I mean" in clarifying, correcting, emphasizing, supplementing information and organizing discourse. In addition, the marker has a clear potential for politeness, moderating the tone, and guiding identification in social interactions. Together, these functions contribute to the harmony and effectiveness of conversations, enabling participants to achieve better communication in complex social environments. Through an in-depth discussion of discourse markers, this paper provides concrete practical guidance for learners to understand and utilize discourse markers, highlighting their importance in language learning and communication.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Levinson S. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 85-94.
- [2] Ran Y-P. 2003. A pragmatic account of the discourse marker well. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 3: 58-64.
- [3] Fraser B. 2009. An account of discourse markers. *International Review of Pragmatics*, 1(2):1-28.