



Title	A Construction Grammar analysis of the I mean sure construction
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Citation	OUCCL(Osaka University Papers in Comparative Contrastive Linguistics). 2025, 2, p. 41-51
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/103058
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A Construction Grammar analysis of the *I mean sure* construction*

Shin-ya Iwasaki

Abstract

This study discusses the first representation of the *I mean sure* construction and examines its characteristics within the Construction Grammar framework. It shows that this construction often signals the speaker's acknowledgment of a prior statement and is frequently followed by the conjunction *but*, indicating concession. Furthermore, it also functions as a marker of politeness and has become an entrenched linguistic structure. This study explores how the use of the *I mean sure* construction explains the flexibility and adaptability of language in expressing nuanced stance-taking and relational positioning.

Keywords: Construction Grammar, discourse marker, entrenchment, concession, inheritance

1. Introduction

This study provides a Construction Grammar account of the English *I mean sure*, examining it from a usage-based perspective. This construction is exemplified in (1):

- (1) a. *I mean sure*, we can keep educating ourselves, learning new techniques, making ourselves familiar with new libraries and frameworks, but at the end of the day, we'll still be developers. (COCA)
- b. What's not to like about improving technology and making EVs better, thus further incentivizing a switch away from engines that combust fossil fuels and contribute to increasingly manifesting climate change that looks poised to smash humanity's collective face in with a sledgehammer if we don't take serious action? *I mean sure*, we should have taken said action decades ago, but now is better than never. # A lighter car tends to be more efficient compared to a heavier one, especially since the battery always weighs the same, whereas a gas tank is emptied as you drive. (NOW Corpus)

In both examples, the speaker offers a clarification or an adjustment to their previous statements and then proceeds to the main point using the *but* clause, signaling a concessive acknowledgment.

This study is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses studies on the discourse marker *I mean*, and Section 3 presents the theoretical framework of this research. Section 4 identifies the characteristics of the *I mean sure* construction and shows its representation. Section 5 concludes the study.

2. Studies on *I mean*

This section reviews the literature on the discourse marker *I mean*, as the *I mean sure* construction has yet to undergo scholarly analysis.¹

* This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP22K00628. Author: Shin-ya Iwasaki, Osaka International University (s-iwasak@oiu.jp).

¹ Studies that discuss discourse markers or stance markers, including *I mean* and *sure*, include Fraser (2015) and Biber et al. (1999).

Researchers have widely examined the discourse marker *I mean*. Schiffrin (1987) suggested that *I mean* indicates a speaker's intention to modify or clarify ideas expressed in a previous utterance (Schiffrin 1987: 317–318). Brinton (2008) analyzed how *I mean* developed from a diachronic perspective and identified four pragmatic meanings of the construction: (a) appositional (repair, reformulation, explicitness, and exemplification), (b) causal, (c) expressions of speaker attitude (evaluation and sincerity), and (d) interpersonal meaning, as well as the full meaning of intention (Briton 2008: 114). Fox Tree and Schrock (2002) examined *you know* and *I mean* in terms of politeness theory, suggesting that speakers may use these expressions to temper their commitment to, or distance themselves from, a face-threatening statement. Kobayashi (2018) analyzed *I mean* from a Cognitive Grammar perspective, arguing “that *I mean* is a marker for intersubjective adjustment in the sense that the speaker uses it when noticing that the hearer is paying attention to something different from the speaker” (Kobayashi 2018: 2). Additionally, he asserted that the motivation for using *I mean* can be explained as an effort to establish joint attention between speaker and hearer—a view we agree with.

Because this study is based on the Construction Grammar framework, we will closely examine Imo's (2005) analysis of the discourse marker *I mean*.

Imo (2005) described the prosodic, semantic, syntactic, and functional properties of *I mean* within the framework of Construction Grammar and showed the representation of the *I mean* construction. He focused on two levels: textual and interpersonal. “Textual functions are defined as being concerned with the organization of sequences and repairs, [while] interpersonal functions code the attitude of the speaker to the hearer or to his/her utterance” (Imo 2005: 30).

<i>I mean</i>	
<i>Type of construction: complex, specific, free</i>	
Syntax:	autonomous phrase, can be combined with other discourse markers
Topology:	tendency to be placed in an utterance-initial position
Prosody:	variable prosodic realization (own intonation contour, integrated into the intonation contour of the utterance it precedes, integrated into the intonation contour of some previous utterance)
Semantics:	bleached semantics; only in some cases residual traces of the original semantic content of <i>to mean</i> are activated
Pragmatics:	projective power: some further utterance is expected after <i>I mean</i>
Function:	general indexical function: cut-marker specific functions are context-dependent and are mainly textual ones; interpersonal functions are only secondary

Table 1. Representation of *I mean* (Imo 2005: 30–31)

Table 1 shows that the discourse marker *I mean* pragmatically signals to the hearer that some utterance will follow. The hearer assumes that this is part of a network of other constructions and that it inherits its features from the more schematic discourse marker construction and the complement-taking verb *to mean* construction.

Discourse Markers

Type of construction: complex/atomistic, schematic, free

Syntax: autonomous phrase; can be combined with other discourse markers

Topology: tendency to be placed in utterance-initial position

Prosody: variable prosodic realization

Semantics: bleached semantics

Function: general indexical function; textual or interpersonal functions depending on type of discourse marker and context

Complement-taking verb *to mean*

Type of construction: complex, specific/schematic, free

Syntax: verb with a syntactic projection in terms of valence; complement can take a variety of forms (clause with or without complementizer, noun phrase, adjective phrase etc.)

Topology: initial position

Prosody: usually one intonation contour

Semantics: full semantics: *to refer to*

Function: making clear what one has been talking about/what one had in one's mind when talking about something; correcting other person's misunderstandings of what one has been saying/thinking

Table 2.

Representations of the Discourse Marker and Complement-Taking Verb *to mean*

(Imo 2005: 31–32)

As shown above, the discourse marker *I mean* primarily inherits its features from the discourse marker construction. Meanwhile, it inherits its semantic and pragmatic features from the complement-taking verb *to mean* construction. Its pragmatic projection is derived from the syntactic projection of the complement-taking verb *to mean* construction. Imo stated that the relation of the discourse marker *I mean* within the network of constructions can be represented as follows.

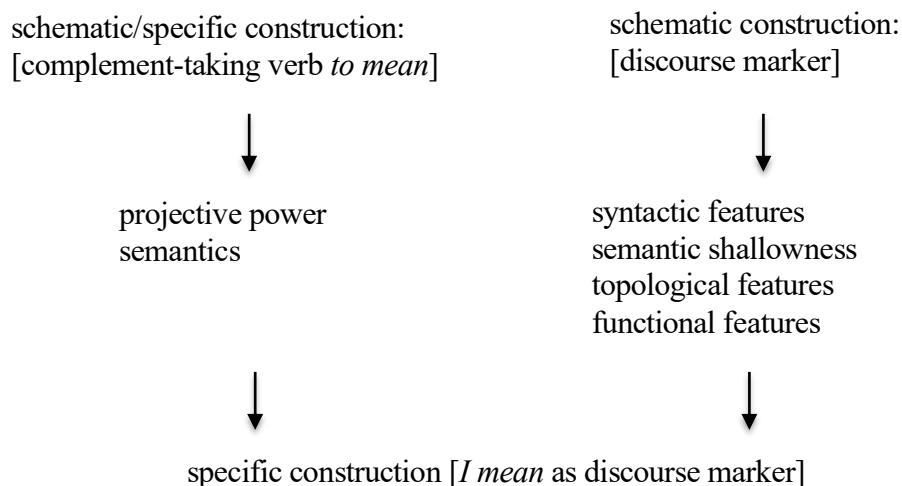


Figure 1. Network of constructions related to *I mean* (Imo 2005: 32)

We argue that Imo’s analysis is valid and reasonable, helping us construct the network of the *I mean sure* construction in this study.²

3. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the tenets of Construction Grammar, on which this study is based. In this framework, grammar consists of pairings of form and meaning and is thought to exist at various levels of abstraction and complexity (Hilpert 2014; Goldberg 1995, 2006, 2019; Hoffmann 2022). Despite some differences among researchers who have based their studies on Construction Grammar, some commonalities can be observed as well, such as the idea that the lexicon and syntax form a continuum and that constructions do not exist independently but rather form a taxonomic network.

Goldberg (1995) extensively developed the concept of “construction.” Traditionally, in major generative approaches, elements such as idioms, which do not generally follow the principle of compositionality, were relegated to the periphery of grammar, while Goldberg focused on conventional structures. Goldberg (1995) defined a construction as follows:

- (2) C is a construction iff_{def} C is a form-meaning pair $\langle F_i, S_i \rangle$ such that some aspect of F_i or some aspect of S_i is not strictly predictable from C’s component parts or from other previously established constructions. (Goldberg 1995: 4)

Based on this definition, a construction is a unit that conveys meaning and has aspects that cannot be predicted from its constituent parts. For instance, the following sentence is a Caused-Motion construction:

- (3) Sally sneezed the napkin off the table. (Goldberg 1995: 6)

² The word *sure* could be classified as an epistemic stance marker (Biber 2006).

In (3), the intransitive verb *sneeze* is not a verb that causes an action and does not take an object, but in the [S V O1 P O2] construction, the meaning of “caused motion” is associated with the construction itself and cannot be predicted solely from the verb *sneeze*.

However, Goldberg’s (1995) definition of construction has evolved. Besides unpredictability, an expression’s frequency is a major factor in determining its status as a construction. For example, when presented with other words of similar meaning, one may prefer a more frequent expression over a less frequent one, suggesting that speakers store more frequent expressions as constructions. This led Goldberg to redefine construction as follows:

- (4) Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency.

(Goldberg 2006: 5)

This definition states that an expression qualifies as a construction when it is clearly distinguishable as either predictable or unpredictable, while predictability can vary depending on context. Because compositionality is a matter of degree (Langacker 2008: 169), this definition also leaves room for doubt. In her 2019 book, Goldberg argued that “constructions are understood to be emergent clusters of lossy memory traces that are aligned within our high- (hyper!) dimensional conceptual space on the basis of shared form, function, and contextual dimensions” (2019: 7). She described a construction in psychological terms, such as “memory traces” and “conceptual space,” maintaining some distance from predictability. In line with Goldberg (2019) and Langacker (2008), this study was developed from a usage-based Construction Grammar, which demonstrates that “grammar results from language use” (Perek 2023: 226).

4. A Usage-Based Construction Grammar Account of *I mean sure*

Before discussing the characteristics of the *I mean sure* construction, we will first present the results of the corpus survey. For this construction, we found 37 tokens in the COCA Corpus (with a frequency of 76), including 28 instances that co-occur with *but*, and 301 tokens in the NOW Corpus, with 245 co-occurring with *but* (frequency of 81). A search for the *I mean sure* construction in the GloWbE Corpus generates the following results:

Country	Token
United States	43
Canada	5
Great Britain	22
Ireland	2
Australia	19
New Zealand	6
India	2
Pakistan	3
Bangladesh	1
Singapore	4
Malaysia	2
Philippines	2
Hong Kong	2
Kenya	2
Jamaica	2
Total	120

Table 3. The *I mean sure* Construction in the GloWbE Corpus

As shown in Table 3, the *I mean sure* construction is used most frequently in the United States, although the overall total is low.³

4.1. Syntactic Features of *I mean sure*

Just as the discourse marker *I mean* usually has no complementizer after it, the *I mean sure* construction is not typically followed by a *that*-clause, as seen in (5):

- (5) a. I'm a New Zealander. I love our team. I love watching them play. # I mean sure; it can get a bit boring from time to time. But that's the point. You enjoy the things you spend time and effort on more deeply. (NOW Corpus)
- b. "Are you really, really excited about the USA?" How many people are going to say yes? Most people are not really excited about any other country in totality. I mean sure, I'd love to have a Norwegian gov't, a French house, a Japanese wife, and Italian food, but I wouldn't want an Italian gov't, British food, an American wife, or a Japanese house. (COCA)

In (5a), the *I mean sure* construction occurs in the sentence-initial position and does not take the complementizer *that*. The appearance of the *I mean sure* construction signals to the hearer that the subsequent utterance will be highlighted or emphasized for a specific reason. Likewise, in (5b), the *I mean sure* construction sets up a contrast between the appealing aspects of other countries and their preferences. Interestingly, it is often followed by the conjunction *but*, as mentioned previously.

4.2. Functions of *I mean sure* Construction

As studies have observed, one function of the discourse marker *I mean* concerns the speaker's upcoming modification or repair. While the *I mean sure* construction also indicates

³ The BNC contains only two instances of the *I mean sure* construction.

an imminent modification, it conveys a concessive meaning when followed by the conjunction *but*, as shown in (6).

- (6) Emoji's are as important to the OS as all 26 letters. If someone sends you an emoji and you don't have it on your OS, it has to handle it in some way. User choice is still there; you can choose to use them or not. # *I mean sure*, if you are an app developer, you want to know if the next update breaks your app so you can write a fix for it, but rolling out a beta and blog sites reporting about all the new emojis is part of the problem with this program. It's full of vapid users trying to get access to the absolute latest Apple features before everyone else, and then failing to test or report even the most trivial of issues that are introduced with every iOS release. (Now Corpus)

In (6), the construction *I mean sure* acknowledges a potential counterpoint or concedes a valid aspect of the argument. Specifically, the speaker recognizes that it might be important for app developers to know if an update could affect their app, acknowledging that such a perspective has some validity. However, the conjunction *but* marks a shift, introducing the speaker's critical stance: focusing on beta releases and new emojis creates a problematic culture of users who prioritize the latest features over the meaningful testing and reporting of issues.

- (7) I am sure Read is not happy about selling GPUs at low prices just to keep market share or please us gamers. It will suck for gamers if high-end GPUs are given less priority, but I feel that AMD must raise prices for their GPUs. *I mean sure*, gamers love it when you can buy an HD6950 2GB for \$230 and unlock it into an HD6970, but that's not favorable for business profitability. # I have a feeling Dirk was ousted because he was strongly against the new direction the board wants to pursue, because it likely deprioritizes the enthusiast server, CPU, and GPU markets in favor of low-priced, higher volume designs for low-power devices and emerging markets. (Now Corpus)

The speaker in (7) acknowledges that gamers appreciate the ability to buy a lower-priced GPU and unlock it for better performance. By using *I mean sure*, the speaker then returns the focus to their main argument; that is, while such pricing benefits gamers, it is not sustainable or ideal for AMD's profitability. Moreover, another function of the construction is to soften the tone of the speaker's acknowledgment, making it sound less abrupt and more conversational.

4.3. Pragmatics of *I mean sure*

Scholars have often pointed out that discourse markers are related to politeness (Aijmer 2002; Brinton 2008; Kobayashi 2018). We will discuss this politeness from the perspective of Brown and Levinson (1987), who argued that speakers employ politeness strategies to minimize the risk of receiving a face-threatening act (FTA). They identified two types of face:

- (8) Negative face: the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others
Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 62)

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested five politeness strategies, including “Don’t do the FTA,” “negative politeness,” and “positive politeness.” As Kobayashi pointed out, *I mean* could be used to mitigate the threat to the hearer’s negative face in the previous utterance.

- (9) “Hi, Damian!” Tony smiled, then did a double take at the look in Damian’s knife-like eyes. “I—*I mean* Mr. Flint,” he amended hurriedly and extended a hand. “How are you, sir?” (Kobayashi 2018: 46)

Kobayashi argued that the threat to the hearer’s negative face in (9) is remedied by using *I mean*. Specifically, Tony initially calls Damian by his first name and then later changes it to Mr. Flint, which is more polite. A similar analysis could apply to the *I mean sure* construction.

- (10) I encountered the television in a faux living room environment at Samsung’s New York City showroom, the screen showing pretty demo footage with no other TV nearby. Unfortunately, I can’t really say anything substantial about the picture quality. *I mean sure*, it looked really good with punchy colors and a nice bright image, and from off-angle, it didn’t get substantially worse (as every LCD-based TV does, including QLED models). But Samsung’s demo didn’t reveal much more, and so I’ll have to wait for a real review sample in CNET’s lab to see how it stands up to the competition. (Now Corpus)

In (10), the speaker seems to hesitate in his assessment of the TV’s picture quality at first, stating, “Unfortunately, I can’t really say anything substantial about the picture quality.” This sets up a hedge, indicating that the speaker does not want to make definitive claims that could be challenged. This is then followed by the *I mean sure* construction, introducing a weak concession: the speaker admits that the TV “looked really good” but immediately tempers this with qualifying language. Simply put, the *I mean sure* construction in this context helps the speaker express a tentative opinion and soften their statement, demonstrating an instance of negative politeness.

4.4. Entrenchment of *I mean sure*

In some examples, you may observe a pause between *I mean* and *sure*, as seen in the following:

- (11) a. But despite this, I remain convinced that science is the best way to get at the truth. *I mean, sure*, in the short term, some may seek the spotlight by rushing the data analysis, overstating results, or circumventing peer review, but in the long term, that is not going to win you the Nobel Prize.
(YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czjisEGe5Cw&t=960s>)
b. Anne: Well, *I mean*, I know that I don’t want to speak for all my female editorial cartooning colleagues, but we think of ourselves as editorial cartoonists.
Michael Cavanaugh: Yes.
Anne: *I mean sure*, we do women’s issues and I think we bring obviously a very good, you know, perspective about it, but, you know, we’re editorial cartoonists—that’s what we do.
(YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPI2ITGhOP0&t=331s>)

Whereas a pause is observed between *I mean* and *sure* in (11a), none appears between them in (11b), where the *I mean sure* construction could be interpreted as a single unit. This suggests

that the latter construct is more entrenched than the former. According to Langacker (1987), entrenchment plays an important role in linguistic structure:⁴

- (12) Every use of a structure has a positive impact on its degree of entrenchment, whereas extended periods of disuse have a negative impact. With repeated use, a novel structure becomes progressively entrenched, to the point of becoming a unit; moreover, units are variably entrenched depending on the frequency of their occurrence.

(Langacker 1987: 59)

Langacker's theory posits that a novel expression could become entrenched and achieve unit status when it occurs a sufficient number of times. In other words, the more frequently a linguistic expression is used, the more entrenched it becomes in a speaker's cognitive system. In this study, we argue that the *I mean sure* construction becomes a unit due to its repeated occurrence.

Based on the discussion so far, I propose a description of the *I mean sure* construction as follows:

<i>I mean sure</i> Construction	
Syntax:	tendency to be placed in an utterance-initial position, often followed by the conjunction <i>but</i>
Prosody:	own intonation contour or integrated into the intonation contour of the following utterance
Semantics:	functions to show acknowledgment and introduce a concession
Pragmatics:	occasional use as a politeness projective power expression of nuanced stance-taking and relational positioning

Table 4. Representation of *I mean sure*

Table 4 shows that the *I mean sure* construction marks the speaker's acknowledgment of a point while transitioning into a more specific contrast or elaboration, often followed by the conjunction *but*.

Let us now examine the inheritance relations among the constructions. Goldberg (1995) suggested that "[a] subpart link is posited when one construction is a proper subpart of another construction and exists independently" (Goldberg 1995: 78–79). According to this analysis, transitive and intransitive argument–structure constructions are connected through a subpart link,

⁴ Although we use the term "entrenchment" in Langacker's sense, our approach could lead to Schmid's (2020) entrenchment, which is defined as "the continual reorganization of linguistic knowledge in the minds of speakers, which is driven by repeated usage activities in usage events and subject to the exigencies of the conventionalization processes taking place in speech communities" (Schmid 2020: 2). In contrast, "[c]onventionalization is the continual process of establishing and readapting regularities of communicative behavior among the members of a speech community, which is achieved by repeated usage activities in usage events and subject to the exigencies of the entrenchment processes taking place in the minds of speakers" (Schmid 2020: 2). This study aligns with his viewpoint and highlights the importance of considering language use in relation to both individuals and society.

where the intransitive construction functions as a proper subset within the transitive one, as shown in Figure 2:

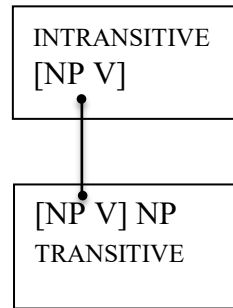


Figure 2. A subpart link between transitive and intransitive constructions (Diessel 2023: 8)

In adherence to this, I argue that the *I mean sure* construction inherits discourse marker features from *I mean* and the meaning of concession from the stance marker *sure*, as shown in Figure 3:

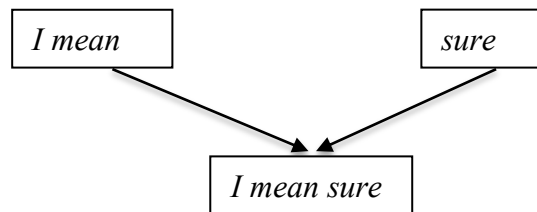


Figure 3. Network of constructions associated with the *I mean sure* construction

As depicted in Figure 3, the *I mean sure* construction consists of the discourse marker *I mean* and the stance marker *sure*, which together convey meanings such as reformulation, acknowledgment, and concession. Notably, the sense of concession can also be introduced by expressions like *to be sure* or *I'm not sure*.

5. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the distinct features of the *I mean sure* construction, demonstrating how it functions in stance-taking and subtle negotiation within communication. Its use reflects a blend of acknowledgment and concession, embodying both a commitment to and a distancing from an expressed idea. This dual function of the *I mean sure* construction allows speakers to manage interpersonal dynamics, conveying a complex stance without direct confrontation or full endorsement. Furthermore, this study has brought attention to a construction often overlooked in linguistic research. Further investigation into this construction could offer valuable insights into interpersonal relationships and intersubjectivity (Verhagen 2005).

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Corpora:

- Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (<https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>)
- Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) (<https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>)
- The British National Corpus (BNC) (<http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>)
- The NOW Corpus (https://www.corpusdata.org/now_corpus.asp)