

Intersubjective Functions of *You Know* as a Discourse Marker in English Spoken Interaction

Aripova Mokhigul Fazliddinovna

Toshkent, Yashnobod District, school #30

aripovamohigul9@gmail.com

Abstract. *This paper examines the intersubjective functions of you know as a discourse marker in English spoken interaction. Although the expression originates from the lexical combination of the second-person pronoun you and the cognitive verb know, its use in spontaneous conversation frequently extends beyond its literal meaning. The analysis demonstrates that its pragmatic interpretation is determined by the interaction between communicative context, sequential position, speaker intention, and the assumed relationship between interlocutors.*

Keywords: *discourse marker, you know, intersubjectivity, spoken interaction, common ground, pragmatic function, shared knowledge, speaker–hearer relationship, multifunctionality*

Introduction

Spoken communication is an interactive process in which meaning is constructed not only through the propositional content of utterances but also through speakers' continuous orientation towards their interlocutors. Participants in conversation make assumptions about what others know, believe, remember or can infer from the communicative situation. They also attempt to attract attention, establish shared perspectives, signal interpersonal involvement and adjust their utterances according to the anticipated reaction of the hearer. Discourse markers play a significant role in managing these dimensions of interaction. Among them, *you know* is particularly noteworthy because its pragmatic functions are closely connected with the relationship between speaker and hearer.[1]

The expression *you know* consists formally of the pronoun *you* and the cognitive verb *know*. In its literal use, it may refer directly to the hearer's knowledge, as in *You know the answer*. However, when functioning as a discourse marker, *you know* is considerably less dependent on its literal propositional meaning. It does not necessarily constitute a genuine question about whether the hearer possesses certain information. Instead, it may function as an interactional device through which the speaker appeals to assumed shared knowledge, invites the interlocutor to adopt a particular perspective, maintains interpersonal contact, or manages the production of spontaneous speech.[2]

Methodology

One of the central functions of *you know* is its appeal to **shared knowledge or common ground**. Consider the following example:

(1) *It was one of those days, you know, when everything seems to go wrong.*

The speaker does not ask the hearer to confirm factual knowledge about a particular day. Instead, *you know* invites the interlocutor to recognize a familiar type of experience. The speaker assumes that the

hearer can construct the intended situation on the basis of general experience. Thus, the marker contributes to establishing common ground between participants.[3]

Common ground is particularly important in spoken interaction because speakers cannot make every aspect of their intended meaning explicit. They frequently rely on knowledge and experience that they assume to be accessible to their interlocutors. In such contexts, *you know* may signal that the hearer is expected to recognize or reconstruct the intended meaning:[4]

(2) *The place had that, you know, old-fashioned atmosphere.*

Here, the speaker appears to assume that the hearer can identify the type of atmosphere being described even though it is not fully specified. The marker therefore creates a bridge between what is verbally expressed and what is expected to be inferentially recovered by the interlocutor. A second important function is hearer involvement. Spoken interaction requires speakers to maintain the interlocutor's attention and participation. *You know* may serve as a means of keeping the hearer communicatively involved:[5]

(3) *You know, this could actually work.*

In this example, *you know* does not primarily refer to previously shared factual knowledge. Rather, it directs the hearer's attention towards the proposition that follows. It signals that the speaker is presenting the utterance as something relevant to both participants and invites the hearer to engage with the proposed perspective.[6]

Result and Discussion

This use demonstrates the intersubjective character of the marker. Intersubjectivity concerns the speaker's linguistic orientation towards another participant's knowledge, attention, attitudes or perspective. When speakers employ *you know*, they frequently construct their utterance with explicit reference to what they assume the interlocutor can understand or recognize. The marker therefore contributes to the coordination of perspectives between conversational participants.

Another pragmatic function of *you know* is connected with **mitigation**. Speakers may use the marker when introducing disagreement, criticism or another potentially sensitive statement:[7]

(4) *You know, I don't think that was the best decision.*

Without the marker, the statement *I don't think that was the best decision* may sound more direct. The presence of *you know* establishes a brief interpersonal connection before the negative evaluation is expressed. It can therefore reduce the abruptness of the statement and frame the disagreement as part of a shared communicative space. A similar function may be observed in advice:[8]

(5) *You know, you could try talking to her first.*

The marker contributes to presenting the suggestion less categorically. Rather than imposing a course of action directly, the speaker appears to invite the hearer to consider a possible solution. Thus, the pragmatic effect of *you know* interacts with the degree of directness of the utterance. In spontaneous conversation, *you know* may also fulfil a speech-planning function. Spoken discourse is produced in real time, and speakers occasionally need additional processing time to formulate an expression:[9]

(6) *It was a really... you know... complicated situation.*

Here, *you know* occurs at a point where the speaker appears to search for an appropriate description. The marker helps maintain the conversational floor while the utterance is being planned. However, this function should not automatically be interpreted as meaningless hesitation. Even in such cases, *you know* remains hearer-oriented: it keeps the interlocutor engaged while the speaker works towards a more adequate formulation. This becomes particularly apparent when the marker occurs alongside approximation:[10]

(7) *He looked, you know, kind of disappointed.*

The expression allows the speaker to signal that the following description is approximate rather than categorical. At the same time, it invites the hearer to participate inferentially in identifying the

intended emotional state. Speech planning and intersubjective meaning may therefore coexist in the same occurrence.

Another significant function of *you know* concerns explanation and elaboration:[11]

(8) *It wasn't exactly a formal meeting. You know, we just sat around and talked about the problem.*

The second utterance elaborates on the first and helps the hearer construct a more accurate interpretation of what the speaker means by *not exactly a formal meeting*. In this context, *you know* introduces explanatory information while maintaining the interactional connection between speaker and hearer.[12]

The examples demonstrate that *you know* is characterized by considerable pragmatic multifunctionality. Its functions may be grouped into several broad categories: an epistemic function, through which it appeals to assumed knowledge; an intersubjective function, through which it establishes common ground and coordinates perspectives;[13] an interactional function, through which it attracts attention and maintains hearer involvement; an interpersonal function, particularly in mitigating disagreement, criticism or advice; and a discourse-production function, through which it facilitates planning, hesitation, elaboration and reformulation. These functions, however, should not be treated as entirely separate.[14] A single occurrence of *you know* may activate several pragmatic functions simultaneously. Consider:

(9) *You know, I think we should probably reconsider the whole plan.*

The marker may attract the interlocutor's attention, create interpersonal involvement, prepare the hearer for a potentially divergent opinion and soften the force of the suggestion. Consequently, identifying only one function would not fully account for its pragmatic role in the interaction.[15]

This functional overlap suggests that the interpretation of *you know* should be based on several interrelated factors. These include its position within the conversational sequence, the content of preceding and following utterances, the speaker's communicative intention, the degree of shared knowledge between participants, and the interpersonal relationship established in the interaction.

It is also necessary to distinguish the literal and discourse-marker uses of the expression. In *You know where he lives*, the verb *know* maintains its lexical meaning and takes a complement. By contrast, in *It was difficult, you know*, the expression does not primarily describe the hearer's cognitive state. It comments on and manages the ongoing interaction. This distinction is essential when identifying occurrences of *you know* in spoken corpora, since formal similarity does not necessarily indicate functional identity.

The position of the marker may likewise influence its pragmatic interpretation. In utterance-initial position, as in *You know, I've been thinking about this*, it may introduce a topic or draw attention to a forthcoming viewpoint. In medial position, as in *It was, you know, rather strange*, it may contribute more strongly to speech planning, approximation or an appeal to shared understanding. In final position, as in *It wasn't easy, you know*, it may reinforce the speaker's appeal for recognition or understanding. Positional variation therefore interacts with contextual factors in shaping pragmatic function.

Conclusion

You know is a highly multifunctional discourse marker whose communicative significance is closely associated with intersubjectivity in English spoken interaction. Its functions include appealing to shared knowledge, establishing common ground, maintaining hearer involvement, attracting attention, mitigating sensitive utterances, supporting speech planning, introducing elaboration and coordinating participant perspectives. These functions are context-dependent and may overlap within a single occurrence. The analysis suggests that the marker cannot be adequately interpreted through its literal lexical meaning alone. Rather, its pragmatic value emerges through the interaction of context, sequential position, assumed shared knowledge, speaker intention and speaker-hearer relations. From this perspective, *you know* represents an important linguistic resource through which speakers orient their discourse towards the knowledge and perspective of their interlocutors, thereby

contributing to the collaborative construction of meaning in spoken communication.

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