

# The *just me* construction

Is it just me, or does it work like a discourse marker?

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years a wide variety of studies have featured discourse markers with different approaches and accounting for different phenomena (Schiffrin 1987; Traugott 1995; Brinton 1996, Brinton 2008; Krug 1998; Fischer 2006; Fraser 2009; Lewis 2011; to name just a few). There is little consensus on the terminological name used for discourse markers, let alone on the definition or the categorization of them. This paper adopts the term “discourse marker”, as it highlights the functional properties of the linguistic items in question and avoids unnecessary formal limitations (Fischer 2006: 4-7). But it is not the focus of this paper to dwell on the onomasiological question. Instead, the interest of this paper is to explore the formal and pragmatic behaviors that characterize and define discourse markers. From this perspective, this paper presents the case study of the *just me* construction and discusses its syntactical and functional status in discourse. In doing so, this paper aims to help develop a better understanding of this field in its breadth and contributes to the growing body of studies combining Construction Grammar and pragmatics in understanding discourse behaviors and discourse markers.

The *just me* construction refers to the use of *Is it just me or...* and its variant forms in raising a (rhetorical) question, as unexhaustively listed below from (1) to (5).

- (1) *Is it just me or is he looking a little older?*  
(SPOK, CNN\_Crossfire, 2004)
- (2) *Is it cold in here or is it just me?*  
(FIC, Mov:BatmanRobin, 1997)  
(SPOK, Fox\_Beck, 2009)

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- (3) *Is it me, or is this the most disgusting thing you've ever seen?*  
(FIC, Ploughshares, 1998)
- (4) *You look like you have a toothache or is it me?*  
(FIC, Mov:PickleThe, 1993)
- (5) *Is it just us, or are movies on airplanes getting worse and worse?*  
(MAG, PCWorld, 2003)

Bai (2014) has given a detailed discussion of the compositional, semantic and pragmatic properties of the *just me* construction in support of a constructional account. The *just me* construction features not only a highly constrained compositional pattern that is cognitively motivated, but also unique semantic intricacy. It has been shown that the *just me* construction evokes mental representations of both the alternative question construction and the truncated *it*-cleft construction formally and conceptually, but the constructional meaning as a whole does not equal either of them. Thus, the *just me* construction has been recognized as a conventionalized form-meaning pairing, whose semantic and pragmatic functions cannot be perceived through a literal reading of the individual words that constitute the sentence or through a structural analogy to the input constructions.

Heine (2013: 1209-1213) summarized a list of properties that prototypically define and characterize discourse markers, as shown from (a) to (e) below. These criteria demonstrate a neutral starting point of approaching discourse markers, which maintains a good balance between formal and functional emphases imposed by different approaches of research and therefore could cover a broad range of linguistic items that would otherwise add on more heterogeneity to this field than it already has.

- (a) They are syntactically independent from their environment.
- (b) They are typically set off prosodically from the rest of the utterance.
- (c) Their meaning is non-restrictive.
- (d) Their meaning is procedural rather than conceptual-propositional.
- (e) They are non-compositional [...].<sup>1</sup>

Based on these generally accepted criteria, I suggest a division between two types of properties in characterizing and defining discourse markers: those that are associated with how discourse markers (usually) appear and those that concern what discourse markers mean. Therefore, (a), (b) and (e) are considered formal properties, as they describe the extrinsic behavior and appearance of

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<sup>1</sup> In the original text “as a rule short” is also part of this criterion. But it is not quoted here as the notion of “short” is always relative and usually it does not apply to multi-word discourse markers.

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discourse markers; while (c) and (d) are functional properties which concern the intrinsic semantic content and functional behavior of discourse markers. In other words, discourse markers tend to be formally fixed and feature loose syntactic and/or prosodic linkage to the other parts of the utterance; their meaning is semantically reduced and serves procedural and meta-linguistic functions instead of contributing to the propositional content of the utterance.

These criteria of describing and defining discourse markers have been supported by numerous studies. For instance, Günthner (1996: 324-337) and Gohl and Günthner (1999) discussed the phenomenon that the German subordinating conjunction *weil* sometimes does not follow its categorical behavior in conjoining two syntagmatic units. Instead, it is rather loosely connected to the syntactic structure of the utterance and serves various discourse-organizational functions.

- (6) Rita: *s'macht mir echt NICHTS AUS.*  
[actually it doesn't bother me at all.]  
Ute: *WAS WÄR denn deiner Meinung nach ↑NICHT OKAY. (0.5)*  
*((zunehmend leiser)) ↓weil=du= hast=ja= vorhin=gesagt=*  
*er=NERVT=dich=ganz=schön. >*  
[what in your opinion wouldn't be okay (0.5)  
((decreasing volume)) ↓because=you=just=said=that=  
he=really=gets= on=your=nerves. >]  
(Günthner 1996: 327)

Similarly, Ferrara (1997) showed that *anyway* as a discourse marker is fixed in one syntactic position and features further semantic reduction than as an adverb. Unlike the adverbial subtypes of *anyway*, it does not constitute the propositional content of the utterance. Rather, it serves as self-digression management and signals a resumption of the trend of thought of the speaker.

- (7) Annie: And she was like, "Oh, I'm not sleeping in this room. I'm sleeping in Annie's room. Locking the door. I'm not sleeping in HERE. Cause she was all scared. (.5) *Anyway*, and then (.5) urn so then I was laughing, "Ah ha ha ha ha. It was just a joke. This is fake blood, da da da" and ah and urn and this that was sort of the end of the joke ((laugh)).  
Except my friend Teri. She was going, "Annie, you're just making that- you're just saying that to make us FEEL better, AREN'T you? There really was something up there,  
((laugh))  
Peach: ((laugh))

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Annie: ((laugh)) *Anyway* and so then we ended up sleeping under there *anyway* and I only scared two people.  
(Ferrara 1997: 353)

Also Prevost (2011), in her study of the emergence of the French discourse marker *a propos*, showed that it features prosodic and syntactic separation and procedural semantic content with the main function of reinforcing or even creating discourse coherence.

- (8) *Elsa est à la toilette. Elle se fait une beauté, me dit Dominique. A propos, elle attend toujours son article.*  
[Elsa is freshening up. She's putting her make-up on, Dominique told me. By the way, she's still waiting for your paper.]  
(J. Kessel, *La Passante du Sans-Souci*, 1936)  
(Prevost 2011: 392)

The following parts of the paper focus on the *just me* construction. Section 2 briefly introduces the data and methods applied in this study. Section 3 analyses the formal properties of the *just me* construction, which are characteristic for discourse markers, i.e. the semi-fixed compositional pattern (Section 3.1) and loose syntactic and prosodic linkage (Section 3.2). In Section 4 it will be shown that the *just me* construction also exhibits functional properties of discourse markers, i.e. non-participation in propositional meaning (Section 4.2) and reduced semantic content (Section 4.3). In the concluding Section 5, I will summarize the findings in the previous sections and propose that the *just me* construction is best understood as a discourse marker as opposed to other alternative interpretations.

## 2. Data and method

The data used in this paper come from two corpora: the Corpus of Contemporary American English - the COCA corpus and the Corpus of Historical American English - the COHA corpus. Tokens of the *just me* construction were extracted from the corpora by manually filtered search to cover derivational forms, which constructed my data set of 93 tokens. They were then annotated with variables that are relevant for this study, such as syntactic / prosodic separation, speech type, response type, semantic content, etc.

The COHA corpus helps to show that the *just me* construction is a fairly new linguistic item. As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, until the 1980s the use of the *just me* construction has been extremely rare. It underwent a significant

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frequency increase during the 1990s which continued during the 2000s. Such a trend is equally observable with the data retrieved from the COCA corpus.

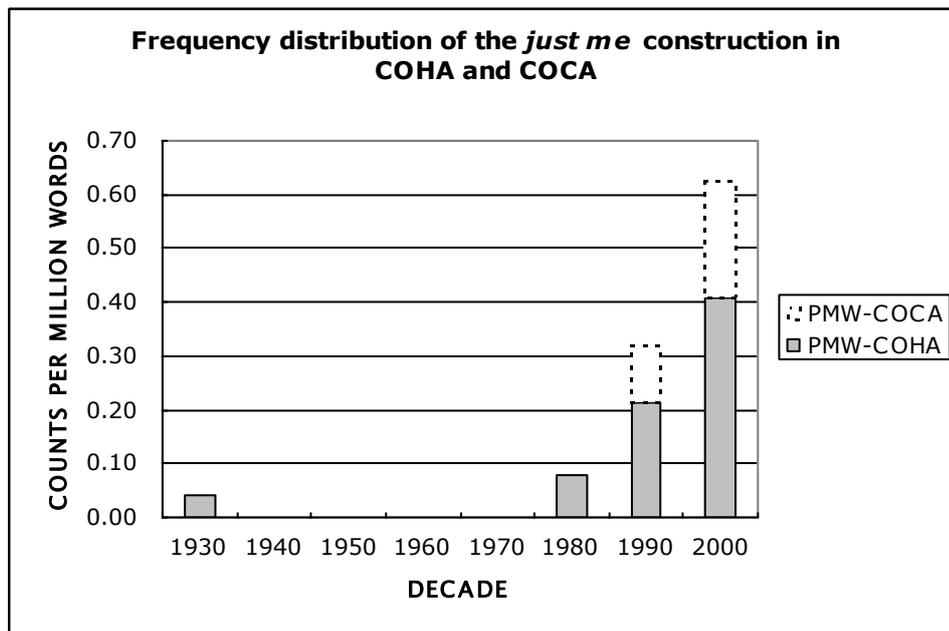


Figure 1 Frequency distribution of the *just me* construction in the COHA and COCA corpora

As the absolute number of counts of the *just me* construction is rather low in the COHA corpus, tokens found in the COCA corpus compensate for this under-representation and support a better understanding of the contemporary use of the *just me* construction. The sum of tokens from both corpora will serve for the further analyses in the rest of the paper.

### 3. Formal properties

#### 3.1. Non-compositional structure

As discussed in detail in Bai (2014: 130-136), the structure of the *just me* construction is highly constrained. It appears to be centered on a particular exemplar, from which only minimal deviations are allowed. To start with, the constituent *it* is a substantive element that is both lexically and phonologically fixed in the structure. And the variation in the rest of the constituents is to a great extent subject to different cognitively motivated constraints.

For instance, as the *just me* construction suggests the speaker's perspective, it requires a subjective proposition, either provided in the conjoined clause, in the discourse context, or at least in the extra-linguistic context. In this way, the *just me* construction adds the speaker's perspective and attitudes to an otherwise possibly objective proposition.

Other variations can be seen at various slots such as tense (past/present), presence of *just* (present/absent), syntactic position (clause-initial/final), personal pronoun (*me/us/you*<sup>2</sup>) and syntactic linkage (intimate/loose)<sup>3</sup> (see Table 1).

Table 1 The *just me* construction in various forms

| Variant form         | Token  |
|----------------------|--|
| Is it just me or...? | <i>Is it just me or is soccer incredibly boring?</i><br>(SPOK, NBC Dateline, 2006)                   |
| ...or is it just me? | <i>Is it cold in here or is it just me?</i><br>(FIC, Mov:BatmanRobin, 1997)                          |
| Is it me or...?      | <i>Is it me, or is this the most disgusting thing you've ever seen?</i><br>(FIC, Ploughshares, 1998) |
| ...or is it me?      | <i>You look like you have a toothache or is it me?</i><br>(FIC, Mov:PickleThe, 1993)                 |

<sup>2</sup> The highly unusual use of the personal pronoun *you* is found in one token in the COCA corpus, as listed in Table 1. It is a rhetorical question that assumes the standpoint of the reader/s and reports what they might ask - "Have you ever wondered if it is just you or the airline food seems to have declined?"

<sup>3</sup> Punctuation signaling prosodic separation is not considered a compositional variable here, which means, for instance, "Is it just me or..." and "Is it just me, or..." will be counted under the same form.

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|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Is it just me?        | <i>A look at Saturn through a quality telescope gives you an exhilarating feeling that is all its own and distinct from the feeling you get when observing, say, a globular cluster. <u>Is it just me?</u></i><br>(MAG, SkyTelescope, 1996) |
| Is it me?             | <i>Rasputin slams the cabinet shut, then turns to see Bartok in front of a mirror. He wears a smart BLACK BERET which is much too large on him. # BARTOK # What do you think? <u>Is it me?</u></i><br>(FIC, Mov:Anastasia, 1997)            |
| Was it just me or...? | <i><u>Was it just me, or</u> had things just taken a hairpin turn for the hostile?</i><br>(NEWS, NYTimes, 2005)   |
| ...or was it just me? | <i>Was it kind of tense down there <u>or was it just me?</u></i><br>(FIC, Bk:ThisKiss, 2012)  |
| Was it just me?       | <i>Well, so <u>was it just me</u> then? I mean, did I just, you know, make this whole thing up in my mind?</i><br>(SPOK, NPR, FreshAir, 2002)   |
| Was it me?            | <i># <u>Was it me?</u> Did he sense something wrong? # She broke off the familiar thought and walked more quickly, lifting her skirts above the dew-soaked lawn.</i><br>(FIC, LordLegends, 2009)  |
| Is it just us or...?  | <i><u>Is it just us or</u> is he suddenly looking a little Latino?</i><br>(MAG, Cosmopolitan, 2003)   |
| ...or is it just us?  | <i>Is it cold in here <u>or is it just us?</u></i><br>(MAG, Cosmopolitan, 2009)   |
| Is it just you or...? | <i><u>Is it just you, or</u> does the quality of airline food seem to have declined?</i><br>(MAG, Newsweek, 1999)   |

An overview of the frequency distribution of the variant forms is shown below in Figure 2. Among all the tokens, 41% of the occurrences of the *just me* construction contain the “*is it just me*” clause in initial position, which is significantly more frequent than any other variant form existing in my data.

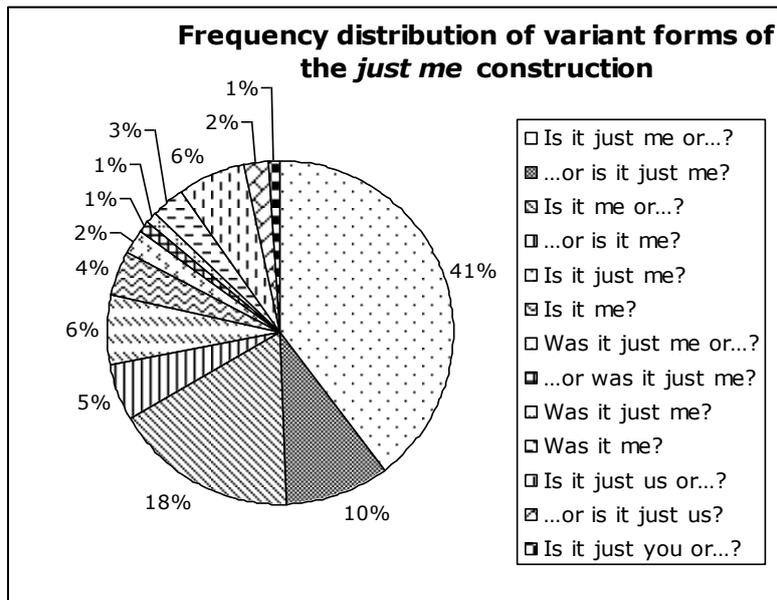


Figure 2 Frequency distribution of variant forms of the *just me* construction

The leading relative frequency of one variant form of the *just me* construction shows a strong preference for a fixed compositional pattern, which is a common feature for discourse markers.

### 3.2. Syntactic (and prosodic) independence

One limitation when using text-based corpora to study discourse markers is the absence of prosodic features. It is generally accepted though, that punctuation separation accounts for prosodic pause and separation. Therefore, a statistical calculation is made in this paper between fully embedded, separated by punctuation, and more syntactically independent cases, as exemplified in (9) - (11) respectively.

- (9) *Is it just me or is he looking a little older?*  
(SPOK, CNN\_Crossfire, 2004)
- (10) *Is it just me, or is he kind of cute?*  
(MAG, RollingStone, 2008)

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- (11) *The night I visited, Marsh's vision of the American dream seemed to have a lonely and sterile feel. Or was it me?*  
(NEWS, Chicago, 1992)

Among all the tokens of the *just me* construction, as shown in Figure 3, only one third are used syntactically embedded in the utterance; more than half are separated from the rest of the utterance by punctuation, signaling prosodic separation; on top of that, 15% even appear independently from the propositional clause.

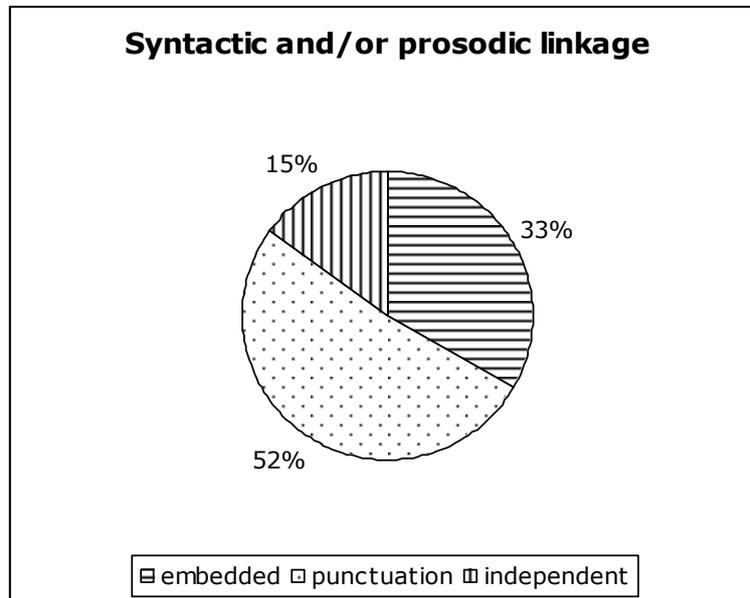


Figure 3 Frequency distribution of linguistic linkage types of the *just me* construction

As a result, up to 67% of the occurrences of the *just me* construction are produced in a syntactically or prosodically independent manner, which is a common feature for discourse markers. This high frequency of loose linkage also suggests a distinction between the *just me* clause and the coordinate clause in terms of propositional content. The contribution of the *just me* construction to the speech is rather procedural than conceptual.

#### 4. Functional properties of discourse markers

##### 4.1. *Non-participation in propositional meaning*

Instead of contributing to the propositional meaning of the utterance, which is carried in the coordinate clause, the *just me* construction features a hedging function and has a parenthetical quality (Bai 2014: 139-140). The insertion of the *just me* construction to a question or a statement and the accompanying interrogative structure per se both express the speaker's tentativeness about their utterance with regard to the truth value and politeness, as shown in (12) and (13).

- (12) *Timmy peered into the microscope. "Has it changed or is it just me?" "Oh, yes," Meggie said, "it has definitely changed."*  
(FIC, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 2001)
- (13) *Is it just me, or ... Are you starting to -- I'm trying to phrase this the right way -- change your focus, shift your focus from one of just being labeled, although significant, from one of being exclusively labeled as environmentalist to one who has taken a more "free market" approach?*  
(SPOK, PBS\_Tavis, 2004)

In (12) the coordinate clause contains the subjective opinion of the speaker and the *just me* clause expresses the accompanying uncertainty and tentativeness towards the truthfulness of the utterance. In (13), as the speaker fears that his upcoming remark might be impolite or intrusive, he starts his utterance with the *just me* construction to mitigate the potential impact. An extra interjection with explicitly saying "*I'm trying to phrase this the right way*" also supports the interpretation of this function. In both cases, the *just me* construction does not contribute to the propositional content of the utterance as a whole, but rather adds on the speaker's perspective towards the proposition.

##### 4.2. *Reduced semantic content*

Despite the interrogative form of the *just me* construction, it is mainly used as a rhetorical question, either to bring something new into the conversation or to make a subjective comment on a certain situation, as exemplified in (14) and (15).

- (14) *Congresswoman Jones, you are up there in the middle of it all, so give us a -- is it me or do things seem extraordinarily loud right now?*  
(SPOK, PBS\_NewsHour, 2009)

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- (15) *Is it just me, or did somebody clean out all the pollution while I was out? God, it's like stagelights.*  
(FIC, BkSF:ChildrenNight, 1990)
- (16) *"Was it kind of tense down there or was it just me?" Carefully sewing the hole shut on Andi's dress, Rebecca pulled a pin out from between her lips and slid it into the strawberry-shaped cushion. "Sean didn't know that Stu and I split up," she explained to her clearly confused friend. "He came here expecting there to be a wedding tomorrow."*  
(FIC, With This Kiss, 2012)

The interrogative function of the *just me* construction can still be observed in my data, as in (16), but it is very infrequent. As shown in Figure 4 below, 85% of the occurrences of the *just me* construction in my data function as rhetorical questions, among which 58% are subjective comments and 27% are topic introducers; only 4% function as real questions. The low frequency of the interrogative use of the *just me* construction hints at an ongoing process of semantic reduction, where its conceptual content as a question is giving way to discursive and meta-linguistic functions.

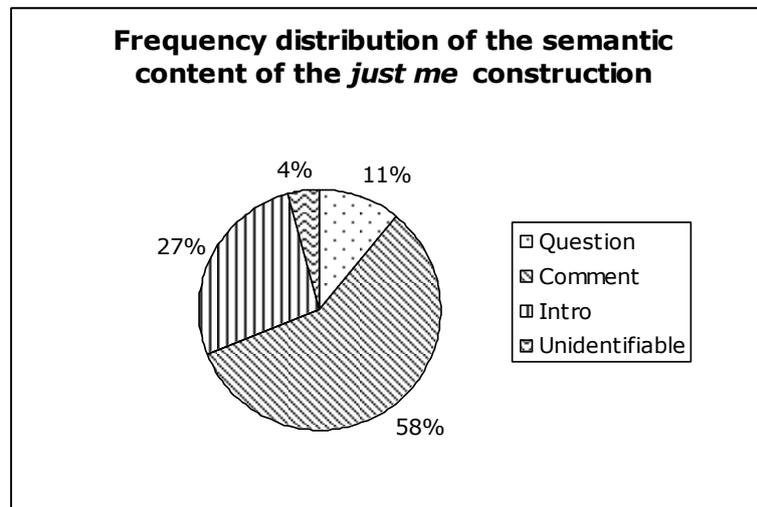
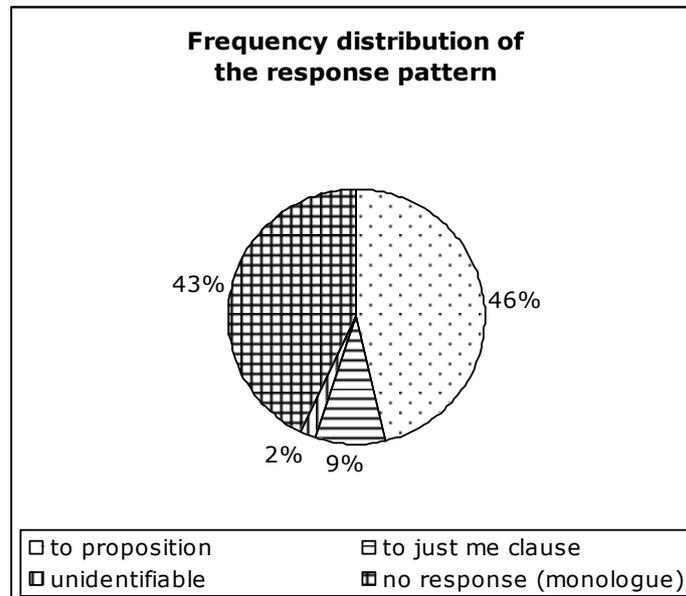


Figure 4 Frequency distribution of the semantic content of the *just me* construction

Another piece of evidence of semantic reduction comes from the hearers' response pattern, as shown in Figure 5 below. In my data, I distinguish between two types of utterance - monologal and dialogal speeches. The distinction is made based on the presence or absence of interlocutor/s other than the speaker invoked by the utterance. No token has been found in my data where a monologal speech is nonetheless responded to or interrupted, although it's logically possible. Among the tokens containing dialogal speeches, where responses do take place, a distinction is found between responses that address the proposition in the coordinate clause and those that address the *just me* clause.



*Figure 5 Frequency distribution of the response pattern*

It is observed that the majority of the responses address the proposition in the coordinate clause, as exemplified in (17). There are only a few tokens in which the hearer responds to the *just me* clause, as in (18).

- (17) *Judd sniffed. "Is it me, or is there an odor in here?" Vicki blushed. "I hid in a garbage bin."*  
(FIC, BkSF:Busted!, 2000)

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- (18) # BIANCA # (to Miss Perky) *We'll be getting back to you.* #  
MISS PERKY # *What, no hug?* HALLWAY - DAY And Bianca  
leave Miss Perky's office # BIANCA # *Is that woman a complete  
fruit-loop or is it just me?* # KAT # *It's just you.*  
(FIC, Ten Things I Hate About You, 1999)

This discrepancy provides further evidence that the *just me* construction is losing its semantic content. It is more frequently accepted as a symbolic unit whose function is more procedural than conceptual.

### 5. Conclusion

The case study in this paper concerns a piece of linguistic expression which was first described by Bai (2014) and recognized as a construction: the *just me* construction. Although the *just me* construction evokes mental representations of both the alternative question construction and the truncated *it*-cleft construction formally and conceptually, the constructional meaning as a whole does not equal either of them. A functional interpretation as either alternative would turn out to be problematic.

First, with similar canonical syntactic structures in terms of the presence of *or* joining two yes-no questions together, the *just me* construction and the alternative question construction share the same semantic content of providing opposing options. However, the options provided by the *just me* construction are not the explicit propositional constituents as in an alternative question (see [19]) and they need to be construed at the constructional level, i.e. agreement or disagreement with the speaker and to the subjective proposition (see [20]).

- (19) *He also said that, you know, 'What is it with this Yeltsin? Why can't he get along with anybody? He couldn't get along with Gorbachev. He couldn't get along with this group. He can't get along with me. Is it me or is it Yeltsin?'*  
(SPOK, CNN\_Sonya, 1993)
- (20) *Judd sniffed. "Is it me, or is there an odor in here?" Vicki blushed. "I hid in a garbage bin."*  
(FIC, Busted!, 2000)

(Bai 2014: 137)

Second, although the *just me* clause in the *just me* construction formally resembles the structure of the truncated *it*-cleft construction - a term proposed by Hedberg (2000: 898-899) - "*it* + copula + NP", the constructional meaning does

not obtain if it were interpreted as such. For a truncated *it*-cleft sentence, the content of the absent cleft clause is given in the context and is therefore immediately recoverable, for instance from (21) to (21'). The *just me* clause, on the other hand, is not necessarily accompanied by content that could suffice the restoration of a semantically correct cleft clause, as in (22) and (22'). It features a specific function-meaning pairing.

- (21) *Is anybody else sick of it, or is it just me!*  
(NEWS, SanFranChron, 1996)
- (21') *Is anybody else sick of it, or is it just me that is sick of it!*
- (22) *Is it just me, or does the whole world suck?*  
(MAG, Bazaar, 1999)
- (22') *\*Is it just me that sucks, or does the whole world suck?*  
(Bai 2014: 139)

Therefore, in order to better understand the functional status of the *just me* construction in discourse, this paper re-examines the semi-fixed compositional structure and the unconventional semantic structure and pragmatic use and proposes that these properties characterize and define it as a discourse marker.

It has been shown in the previous sections that the *just me* construction features a semi-fixed form. Although multiple ways of variation are possible and are supported by cognitive motivations, there is a strong tendency towards a fixed compositional pattern: *Is it just me or...?* It therefore shows that the *just me* construction is getting conventionalized as a unique form-meaning pairing.

Moreover, the majority of the tokens feature a linguistic structure in which the *just me* clause is loosely linked to the coordinate clause than embedded in the syntactic structure. This feature has been recognized by many scholars as a prominent feature of discourse markers (Gohl and Günthner 1999: 59-63; Prevost 2011: 394-395).

Furthermore, the *just me* construction is going through semantic reduction, traces of which can be found through the frequent disregard of the *just me* clause in the hearers' response pattern, and through the more frequent function as a hedge conveying subjective comments and introducing topics than as a real question. The *just me* construction is perceived as more procedural than conceptual in its function, which means that it does not constitute a part of the propositional meaning of the utterance but instead concerns the speaker's perspective and contributes to the coherence of the speech act.

To sum up, I propose that the *just me* construction has a primary function as a discourse marker. With the formal and functional properties discussed in this paper, this study contributes to the growing body of studies combining Construction Grammar and pragmatics in understanding discourse behaviors and

discourse markers, and thus helps to develop a better understanding of this field in its breadth.

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