

*All quotes in this report are from interviews with Tyneside speakers aged 70+.*

***“I mean, he could've come to Newcastle.”***

## INTRODUCTION

Look at that title. What is ‘I mean’ doing there? Why is it at the start of the sentence, rather than the end? Have you ever used ‘I mean’ in this way? Look at the title again; on the face of it, ‘I mean’ is unnecessary to the meaning of the sentence, but at the same time, it adds something subtle to it. It’s part of a category called **discourse markers**; broadly speaking, these are words and phrases that help to guide the flow of our language.

It’s been studied before, but never specifically in older Tyneside speakers, so it’s a rich avenue for exploration. In this study, I looked at how it differed (or didn’t) in where it was used in a sentence, as well as how social isolation in older adults changed how often it was used.

***“And of course, I mean, even the football and stuff like that. I love the football.”***

## WHO DID WE ASK ABOUT THIS, AND HOW?

Broadly speaking, we asked people like you: **retired individuals over the age of 70 who had lived in Tyneside for a long time**. It’s difficult to get reliable information about people’s language by asking them directly, so they were interviewed in a conversational style for an hour each. They were also given demographic questionnaires, including one designed to determine their level of social isolation, which I’ll get to later.

There were **16 participants**, 8 non-isolated and 8 isolated. While this might seem like a small number, every study of this type must find a balance between size, time, and funding, and sixteen is reasonable given these constraints. In the end, it gave us nearly **115,000 words of speech** to analyse. Once this was transcribed, relatively simple software allowed us to count how many times ‘I mean’ was used—the phrase was used **36 times per 10,000 individual words** overall—and what surrounded it.

***“Well, I'd say, if you're in the centre of Newcastle, I mean, there's more pubs than you can shake a stick at.”***

## WHERE IS ‘I MEAN’ USED (IN A SENTENCE)?

In the examples I’ve given so far, you might have noticed that ‘I mean’ doesn’t always appear in the same place. It can appear at the start, middle, or end of the sentence, but it’s more common in some places than others. Generally, research across many forms of English agrees

that you're far more likely to use it at the start of the sentence, sometimes in the middle, and very rarely at the end.

If you have an especially keen eye, you might also have noticed that the second example starts with more discourse markers than just 'I mean': 'and' and 'of course', which are also used to make our sentences flow better, although in different ways from 'I mean'. I considered any 'I mean' in a sequence of these discourse markers that happened at the start of a sentence to be the start of a sentence itself.

The older Tyneside speakers in our study aren't the odd ones out, using 'I mean' in about the same way as other English speakers around the world. Roughly **80%** of usages were at the **beginning** of sentences, with around **19%** used **in the middle** of sentences, and only **0.24%** were used at **the end**—a single occurrence in the entire 115,000 words!

***“You know, I mean, I get involved in discussions with people, and I accuse people of being typical Libra.”***

### **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND 'I MEAN'**

By now, I think most of us are familiar with a level of social isolation and the effects it can have on us, and it affects our language as well. As I said earlier, the older adults in our study took a questionnaire designed to assess their level of social isolation numerically, and were categorised either as socially isolated or non-isolated.

You might not expect there to be a difference in how often people use 'I mean' based on their social isolation—when I began this research, I didn't. But it turns out that there were: socially isolated individuals used it **29 times in 10,000 words**, while non-isolated ones used it **42 times in 10,000 words**.

It's hard to say exactly what this means, even if it suggests a link between social isolation and language use. Further research is needed to shed more light on this topic, which would help in illuminating the wider effects of social isolation on those affected by it.

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