

# Who Cares What You Think?

By

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“Who cares what you think?” is usually taken as a dismissive and insulting remark, but, in our age of mass communication and information overload, *I think* it’s one that’s become crucial to regularly ask of others and of ourselves.

In recent years, I’ve noticed an increase in how frequently English speakers use the phrase “I think” in casual conversation. I do it myself—a habit I’m trying to remain more conscious of so I can reduce its overuse and misuse in my own speech. Why?

That question is the whole point of today’s message. If we preface almost everything we say with “I think” but don’t include *why* we think it, then what we think is unsubstantiated and, therefore insignificant. Sometimes there are implicit reasons to believe what specific individuals think without requiring them to state them. Perhaps they are experts in their fields—like physicians, scientists, and professors, so we already have a good reason to believe they know what they are talking about, although it seldom hurts to have a second opinion.

But when it comes to casual conversation we ought to be attentive to this phrase “I think,” and listen for the reasons one thinks what one does. Otherwise, who cares what they think? There are billions of people in the world with billions of ideas, and every day we are exposed to more of them than we can possibly process. So, we should be critical of the ideas we do entertain by always asking *why*?

For example, I just said that I’ve noticed an increase in the use of “I think” in casual conversation? Does this mean my observation is true? Is there really an increase? Or do I just notice it more because I’m listening for it? Because of confirmation bias? If my observation is true, I have further reasoned that its increased use might have something to do with our era of mass communication, information overload, and social media? That could be true, or it could be a case of correlation but not a cause? It would be irresponsible and arrogant for me to proceed without proving my case and it would be foolish of you to accept my claim without hearing any evidence of it.

But this seems like a tall order. Who, on earth, besides myself has given as much thought to the phrase *I think* as I have? And how would I find them even if they have? And if they have, what makes their thinking about thinking any better than mine? To paraphrase Clint Eastwood, *opinions are like nostrils; everyone’s got at least one*. So, I don’t simply need to find others who share my opinion, which might only add to my confirmation bias; I need to

find experts who have obsessed over *I think* as much as I have. What are the chances of that?

Actually, if you do the math, the chances are good. As I said, there are over eight billion people in the world, which is a difficult number to imagine. It takes 248 years for eight billion seconds to tick by. Eight billion minutes is 248,000 years! Eight billion stacked dollars would be 544 miles high, more than twice as high as the International Space Station. Surely, out of eight billion people, the chances are good that there are others who take the phrase *I think* as seriously as I do, including a few experts.

Indeed, after a little research, I discovered a 2019 research paper by linguist professor Henrik Kaatari and Tove Larsson entitled, *Using the BNC and the Spoken BNC2014 to Study the Syntactic Development of I Think and I'm Sure*.<sup>1</sup> BNC stands for British National Corpus, a large, publicly available collection of samples of how English is currently being used in ordinary life.

According to their research, "I think" increased from 1,598 occurrences per million words in the earlier corpus to 2,390 occurrences per million words in the later one, a jump of nearly 50 percent in the twenty years between 1994 and 2014.<sup>2</sup> That's a remarkable rate of growth for a phrase that was already extremely common.

So, my powers of observation have been validated by professional scholars who have researched the topic and published a peer-reviewed paper about it. But what about my inference that this has something to do with the corresponding changes in our use of the internet and social media?

I can't find any peer reviewed articles linking the specific phrase "I think" to these tools. What I have learned, however, is that *I think* is classified as a hedging device, referring to words and phrases that soften our statements by making them less direct, less certain, or less absolute. *I believe, it appears, it seems, in my opinion, I feel, it would seem to me* are common hedge phrases that allow us to assert something we simultaneously imply could be false. Like "hedging our bets," we hedge what we assert just in case we are proven wrong.

So, there are sound reasons to accept my assertion that there's been an increase in the use of the phrase, *I think*. This increase has occurred at the same time as the rise of the internet and social media, which is a good reason to think there is a correlation, but without further study we can't be sure. So, the second part of my argument is weak. There's simply not enough evidence to support it.

If you're still awake, none of what I've just said has been for the purpose of proving my point. It's been my attempt, rather, to exemplify the kind of ideas the phrase *I think* ought to imply—ideas that have been well reasoned and that are well substantiated with evidence and facts. When we say, "I think," we ought to also say *why* we think it. And when somebody tells us what they think, we ought to listen or ask for their reasons why.

You'll notice I frequently use the word *ought* rather than *should* or *need to*. *Ought* is a derivative of the Old English word for *owe*. In philosophy, *ought* refers to something we have an ethical duty to do. So, when I say we ought to ask why we think what we think and why others think what they think, I'm saying that we have an ethical responsibility to do so. Reason without reasons isn't reasonable, nor is it ethical. As a minister and public speaker, for instance, it would be unethical for me to speak each Sunday without having substantive reasons for what I'm saying. Although I think ... wait a minute. That's wrong. I *suspect* there are lots of ministers who get up each Sunday and speak who have little regard for reason and facts.

Notice, in the process of explaining this, I have just given you the reasons for my own reasoning. Now you know *why* I use the word *ought*. But our casual use of *I think* doesn't necessarily imply we have any reasons at all for thinking what we think. Yet the term implies something is going on in our heads. Doesn't it?

Let's consider Artificial Intelligence. We give it a verbal or written prompt and within seconds it generates an intelligent response. This seems astonishing, and it is. But it's not really that different than what we do. Humans reply to one another in conversation just as fast as AI does. And we do so, like AI, without giving much thought to what we're about to say. We don't usually structure and rehearse what we're going to say before we say, we just say it. Like AI, we often process and respond to speech without thinking about it. What we hear during conversation prompts us to saying something, so quickly that sometimes we interrupt or jump in out of turn.

What makes AI different is the enormous amount of information it processes in seconds compared to our relatively limited amount of knowledge as human beings. But how we process information so quickly, what's really going on when we say, "I think," is as much a black box mystery as is the thinking of Artificial Intelligence.

And this is why we ought to ask why. *Why* brings a layer of thought and reasoning to our conversations that makes them useful and productive. As I've said, anyone can share their opinions about things, but without understanding their reasons, who cares? There's no point accepting what they say or to believe what we claim to believe without sound reasoning. This may not have to occur in every casual conversation—it's too much effort—

but when it comes to holding the beliefs, ideas, and worldviews that function as the operating system for our lives, we owe it to ourselves to truly think about their reasons. And we owe it to ourselves, as in the illustration I've given, to be honest by admitting the weaknesses and lack of evidence for what we think is so. Good thinking should humble us, not give us a false sense of certainty.

Let's get back to the phrase, "I think." It's natural to conclude this phrase refers to the process of thinking. But, as mentioned, linguists tell us the term is often used as a hedge device, meaning it does not imply that what we think has been well thought out, but suggests the exact opposite, that we are admitting we might be wrong, that we're simply expressing an idea that has popped into our heads in the moment.

On the other hand, "I think" can also be used as a heuristic, that is, as a shortcut for something that has been previously well substantiated and reasoned. Experienced doctors may not have to give much thought to a diagnosis after years of training and experience, which, to use the metaphor again, has become part of the operating system that allows them to respond to patients very quickly. We don't have to ask them for a thorough explanation because their expertise is itself a sound reason for trusting they know what they're talking about. This isn't to suggest we shouldn't question doctors or any other experts, but that their expertise is itself a sound reason to trust they know what they are talking about; that there is something substantive in the background of what they think.

The point here is that *I think* can be an admission that one isn't sure of what they are saying, and it can be good reason to believe someone really does know what they are talking about. Sometimes people use *I think* in reference to what they are feeling. Some use it when they are only repeating something someone else thinks. Some use it when they are only imagining, or remembering, or desiring, or assuming. Sometimes "I think" refers to an impression, a suspicion, or a hope. The point, again, is the meaning of *I think* is incredibly ambiguous, telling us little to nothing about the thought processes it is supposed to be referring to. In light of all I've said, it the term may be a greater indicator that little thinking has transpired at all.

So, practically speaking, what does all of this mean for us? How do we apply it to our lives?

Firstly, I don't wish to suggest you should stop engaging conversationally in conversations. That is to say, you should continue engaging without giving much forethought to what you're going to say next. That's human. That's how we commune with one another. Somehow, at lighting speed, we are able to engage meaningfully with each other, listening and responding to what's being said, as impressively as we're able to carry a full glass across a room without spilling it or thinking about it. In fact, thinking about it

increases our chances of spilling it. Human communication is magic, so, despite all that I have previously said, don't overthink it.

Secondly, when it comes to the big ideas, the important ideas, those we believe are true and that shape the way we see truth, reality, and the world, we *ought* to give them lots of prior scrutiny so that we can rationally and honestly defend them when necessary. You never know when, in casual conversation, when you're saying what you think, some smartass might interrupt and ask, "Why do think it?" More importantly, you should ask yourself why you believe what you believe so that you are living integrity with yourself. Real conversation—the kind that builds understanding between people—requires that we mean what we say and know why we mean it.

One sign of such integrity is that your big ideas, your most important beliefs, your worldview change over time, as they must if you have a mind that is continually learning, seeking, and questioning. Uncertainty is a sign of wisdom and intelligence. Certainty is the false feeling of fools.

Thirdly—and this is the one I'm only beginning to work on—is give your operating system an upgrade by programming yourself, through practice, to use more precise language. Instead of saying, "I think," train yourself to say, "I feel," when you are expressing an emotion. Or, "I wish," when you want something that may or may not be true. Or "I wonder" if that's really all you're doing. Instead of "I think," even if that's what you're really doing, how about "I infer?" Nothing indicates you have sound reasons for your ideas than "I infer." *I imagine, I suspect, I remember, I hope* are among the many phrases that better pull back the curtain to reveal what's truly going on inside our heads.

Finally, and, most importantly, don't forget to ask—or at least listen for—why others think what they claim to think. If there are no good reasons, then who cares what they think? Even more importantly, never stop asking yourself why you think what you think. Without good reasons, who cares what you think? The answer to that question is that nobody should care more about what you think than yourself. At least, that's what I think.

<sup>1</sup> Kaatari, H., & Larsson, T. (2019). "Using the BNC and the Spoken BNC2014 to study the syntactic development of *I think* and *I'm sure*." *English Studies*, 100(6), 710–727. [Full article: [Using the BNC and the Spoken BNC2014 to Study the Syntactic Development of I Think and I'm Sure](#)]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 8.