

The Uses of "Well"

By advanced Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study investigates the use of "well" by Iraqi EFL learners of English at the university level. The study explores whether the learners make use of the different functions of "well", which are listed by Muller (2004) The analysis is based upon 60 conversations produced by the students at the department of English, Shatt Al Arab University College. The study will also show which functions of well are more frequently used by Iraqis than others.

I. Introduction

Discourse markers have been an important topic in the research on language use in the last few decades, and there have been a vast number of scholarly outputs dedicated to this field. However, only little research has been conducted on the use of discourse markers by non-native speakers (Lam, 2009:1). Therefore, this study will approach this area and examine whether or not Iraqi learners of English use the discourse marker "well", and which functions of "well" they tend to use more.

Discourse markers are a linguistic device that speakers use to signal how the upcoming unit of speech or text relates to the current discourse state (Schiffrin, 1987:41). In addition to this broad definition, clause markers have been defined narrowly. Phonologically, discourse markers are said to be short and reduced form of a separate tone group and begin an intonational contour. Syntactically, they are claimed to be sentence initial, optional, not part of the syntactic structure and connected to it loosely (Brinton, 1996:16). Semantically, discourse markers have no propositional meaning and not to affect truth conditionality (Blackmore, 1996:9). As for stylistics and sociolinguistics, discourse markers are said to be prevalent in speech, used more by women than by men and stylistically stigmatized (Anderson, 1998:6).

Among the discourse markers used in conversation by native speakers of English, "well" is one of these frequent ones. For this reason, "well" has attracted most academic interest and its uses have been examined from different perspectives: as a preface to indirect and insufficient

answers in dialogues, as a procedural signal for turn taking on the level of interaction, as a frame to mark a transition of focus on the structural level, as a move to minimize face threat within politeness theory, and so on.

Since the focus of this study is on the individual functions of “well” the literature review in the following section will concentrate on which individual uses of “well” were identified by others rather than present their approaches comprehensively.

2. Literature Review

One of the earliest descriptions of “well” as a discourse marker is found in Lakoff (1973). She indicates that answers might be prefaced by “well”, but only under certain conditions: if the answer is an indirect one, i.e. if the respondent is not giving the information sought by the questioner, or if the information supplied with the utterance prefaced by “well” is only part of the answer (Lakoff ,1973:458-9). This case is also used when the speaker feels some kind of insufficiency in his answer (Ibid: 463).

Svartvik, in his article “well in conversation” in 1980, agrees with Lakoff’s (1973) analysis of “well” in answer, but he also presents evidence for a number of other functions, which he subsumes under two major uses of “well”: as a qualifier and as a frame (Svartvik, 1980:172-3). The following list of functions sums up his findings:

- As a qualifier, well indicates or marks.
- “Agreement, positive reaction or attitude”
- “Reinforcement”
- “the non-straight and incomplete answer to wh-question”
- “a non-direct or qualified answer”

Additionally, he claims that “well” also functions on the level of discourse technique as floor holder, hesitator or initiator (Ibid: 176). Seven years later, Schiffrin’s (1987) influential book “Discourse Markers” has been published (Muller, 2004:1160). Muller (Ibid) adds that Schiffrin focuses on the interactive function of “well” in the participation framework and the role of “well” regarding the coherence of discourse. Miller states:

In many of the instances she (Schiffrin) describes, the use of “well” as a marker parallels Lakoff’s and Svartvik’s analysis of “well” as marking indirect, insufficient, qualified, non-straight, and incomplete answer. (1160)

Watts (1986) and Finell (1989) look at “well” from different points of view. Watts analysis “well” within a combined politeness- relevance framework, while Finell’s squib deals with “well now and”. Both find that “well” is used

to signal and mitigate some sort of confrontation. Watts (1986:44) interprets “well” as a move minimizing face threat. Finell (1989:654) indicates that “well” is used when the speaker wants to be “on friendly terms with the interlocutor or to express a sort of concession despite” disagreement about the issue in question.

Norrick (2001:850) has concentrated on discourse marker in oral narratives and has found that “well” serves as a discourse marker signaling the beginning of a story following a digression or interruption or the return to the main story after a dialogue part.

3. Categories of well

The present study is mainly based upon Muller’s categorization of the functions of well (2004:1163). Muller (Ibid) divides the functions of well into fourteen categories with four levels. Against these, the data collected will be analyzed. The following table summarizes the functions of well:

Table (1): The categories of well

No	Level	Category	
1	Local level	R C P S R P	Rephrasing or correcting a phrase Searching for the right phrase
2	Structural level	Q U O M T S N S C C C L	Introducing a (real or fictitious) quotation Move to story Introducing the next scene Conclusive well
3	Dialogue level	I D A D I A R S Q C T A C O O E P S	Indirect/insufficient/delayed answer Direct answer to (combined y/n and wh questions) Response to a self-posed question Continuing answer Continuing own opinion Evaluating previous statement
4	Non-discourse Marker use	A D V A D D	Adverbial use "In addition"

3.1 Local Level

3.1.1. R C P: Rephrasing or correcting a phrase

Muller (2004:116) indicates that this function of “well” has been mentioned by both Svartvik (1980) and Schiffrin (1987). This use may be applied to phrases but also to single words. The following example illustrates this function:

A: The Allens are buying their possessions.

B: Well selling their possessions.

3.1.2. S R P: Searching for the right phrase

Muller (2004:1164) states that “well” is used when speakers seem to be unsure of how to express what they have in mind. Thus. It is used when speakers search for the right expression. This function is explained in the following example:

A: How did you find the book?

B: Well, it was indeed interesting.

3.2 Structural Level

3.2.1. Q U O: Quotative Well

This function is discussed by Svartvik (1980), James (1983), and Jucker (1993). It is typically preceded by a verb of saying followed by the quoted utterance (Muller, 2004:1165). For instance, a student may say:

- The teacher said "well give me your answer sheet"

3.2.2. M T S: Move to Story

"Well" can also be used to signal the beginning of the story or a return to the story after a dialogue part or interruption. For example, a speaker may use "well" to move to a new story or topic when he feels that what the group is discussing may embarrass someone:

- well, let's discuss our plans for the party tonight.

3.2.3. N S C: Introducing the Next Scene

Muller (2004:1166) explains that this function of well is found by Norrick (2001) in narratives. Thus, "well" simply marks the beginning of a new episode or scene.

3.2.4. C C L: Conclusive Well

This function implies that a speaker may use "well" to give a conclusive statement that summarizes a discussion or description.

3.3 Dialogue Level

3.3.1. I D A: Indirect/ Insufficient / Delayed answer Muller(2004:1167) shows that "well" can be used in cases of indirect or insufficient answer as found by Lakoff (1973) and Svartvik (1980). And it can also be used in cases of delayed answers as described by Schiffrin (1987). The example below explains that "well" is used to express an indirect answer:

A: How was the job interview today?

B: well, I think they are not lucky enough to have me working for them.

3.3.2 D I A: Direct Answer to (combined y/n and) wh-question

As stated by Muller (2004:1168), Schiffrin, in her studies, that “well” can be used in the answers to both Yes/No questions and also wh-questions. In her data, Schiffrin finds that “well” is sometimes used as part of the direct answer as in:

A: Do you really like it.

B: well, I think yes I do like it.

3.3.3. R S Q: Response to a Self-posed Question

Muller (2004:1168) shows that “well” can be further used in a response to a question raised by the speaker himself/ herself. For example:

A: what happened then?

B: well they started eating.

3.3.4. C T A: Continuing Answer or Opinion

Svartvik (1980) observes that “well” may re-introduce a topic which has been discussed before (Muller, 2004:1169). This function of “well” means that, for example, a speaker within a group may return to an opinion he/she has already

uttered and which has been interrupted. The return can be done using "well".

3.3.5. CO O: contributing the speaker's own opinion or answer

This function is similar to C T A. Both precede an expression of opinion. However, whereas in C T A the speaker holds the floor and is interrupted just briefly before continuing the expression of his or her opinion, in C O O the partner holds the floor (Muller, 2004:1169-1170).

3.3.6. E P S: Evaluating Previous Statement

Muller (2004:1170) reports that one of the more generally acknowledged functions of "well", besides marking indirect answer, is that of mitigating some sort of confrontation, a pragmatic force modifier, or a downgrader. Here, "well" is used to introduce utterances which evaluate a previous statement. This evaluation often refers to a statement made by the partner, but also frequently to the speaker's own previous utterances.

3.4 Non-Discourse Marker Use

3.4.1 "Well" is frequently used in its adverbial function as in "oh I didn't explain it very well", or in compounds as "That was pretty well-done".

3.4.2. A D V: In Addition

In "she has a lot of money as well", well is used to add and can be paraphrased as "in addition". Also "as well as" can be used with the same meaning.

4. The Study

4.1. Introduction

In this part of the study, 60 conversations will be analyzed. The conversations are produced by sophomores at the department of English, Shatt Al Arab University College. The analysis is conducted to show if the Iraqi learners of English use “well” when they speak English, and what functions of “well” are more prominent in their speech. Also, it will be investigated if the learners tend to use “well” as a discourse marker or as a non-discourse marker.

4.2. Hypothesis

The study is based on the hypothesis that Iraqi learners of English do not use “well” a lot in their speech. And in cases they do, they use it as an adverbial or as having the meaning ‘in addition to’.

4.3. Subjects

The subjects who have participated in the study are all students at the second stage at the department of English 2009-240. They are 60 in number, 34 females and 26 males. Their ages are between 19 and 23 years old.

4.4. Procedure

The 60 conversations which the study is based on are recorded in May 2010 during the second semester exam. The teacher of conversation course upon a request by the researchers have selected the topic of “Love & marriage”

which is of high interest for students. The conversations are recorded over six hours (three lectures). Then, the researchers have counted, classified, and analyzed how the subjects use "well".

4.5. Analysis & Discourse of Results

The following table presents the discourse markers found in the conversations of the subjects:

Table (1): Discourse markers produced by the subjects

No	Discourse markers indicating Cohesive Relations	Examples	No.of Discourse markers indicating Coherence	Examples
	862	And, Or, But, So, Because	88	Well, Now, I mean, Oh,

In the table above, it is revealed that the subjects tend to use those discourse markers such as "and, but, or, so and because" which are operative on the ideational structure. These markers can indicate three types of relations that contribute to the configuration of idea structures: cohesive relations, topic relations and functional

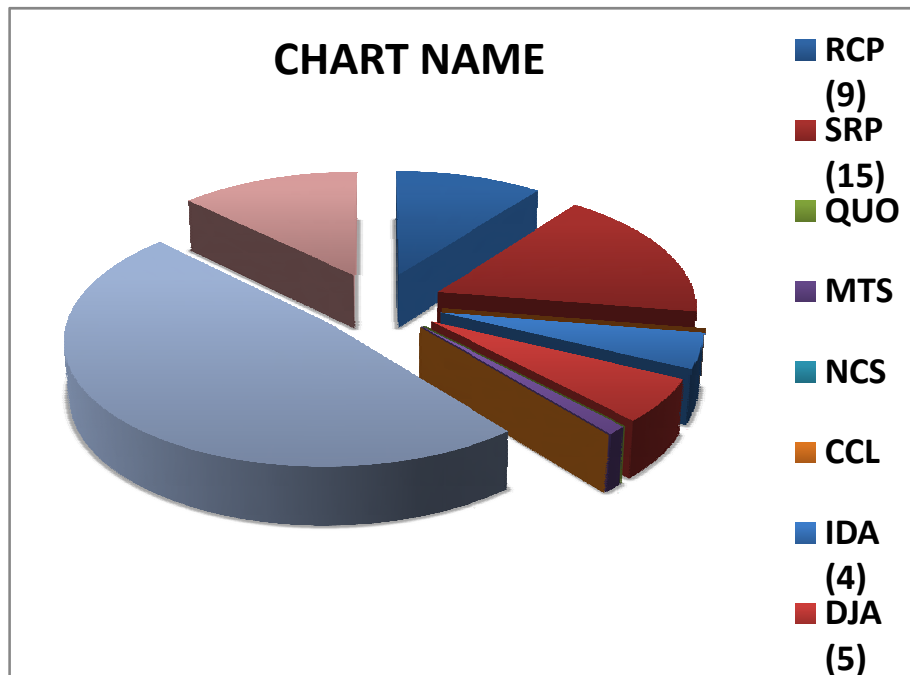
relations. On the other hand, it is seen from the table that the subjects only occasionally tend to use discourse markers as “well, now, oh, I mean, and you know which operate on the other levels: exchange, action, and participation frame work and information state. These discourse markers contribute to the coherence of discourse through relating different components of talk in the sense that the interpretation of any components is dependent on the interpretation of the other.

The researchers have found that among the 88 occurrences of discourse markers indicating coherence, 34 occurrences of “well” have been recorded, as shown in table (2).

Table (2): Discourse Markers indicating coherence in the speech of the subjects.

No	Discourse marker	No. of Occurrences
1	Well	34
2	I mean	21
3	Now	18
4	You know	9
5	Oh	6

It has been further found that “well” has been used as a non-discourse marker in the speech of the subjects. This function of “well” as an adverbial or with the meaning of “in addition” is used by the subjects more than the use of “well” as a discourse marker. The following diagram shows the functions of well as used by the subjects.



As the diagram shows, the results have revealed that the subjects use “well” as a non-discourse marker more than as a discourse, in that the subjects have used “well” 53 times as an adverbial and “in addition”. On the other hand, the total number of well as a discourse marker is 34. The highest number of well as a discourse marker is 15 when “well” functions as “S R P: searching for the right phrase”.

Also, it has been found that the subjects do not use some functions of “well”, such as Q U O, M T S, N S C, C C L, R S Q,

C O O, or E P S.

In discussing why “well” is more frequently used as a non-discourse marker than a discourse marker, the researchers believe that the subjects do not use most of the functions of well as a discourse marker because they have not been taught these functions. And they know how to use well as a non-discourse marker as their grammar textbooks discuss the uses of well as an adverbial and as having the meaning “in addition”. None of the textbooks or even the lecturers especially in conversation or composition explain that well can be used as a discourse marker with different functions.

4.6 Conclusion

Having carried out the study, the researchers have found that Iraqi learners of English at the university level have a very little knowledge about discourse markers in general and “well” in particular. Those learners have not been taught the uses of well. That is why they do not tend to use well. Additionally, it has been revealed that in cases where the subjects use well, they use it as a non-discourse marker.

Throughout the analysis of the recorded conversations, the researchers have noticed that the subjects rarely use discourse markers that contribute to the coherence of their talk. Accordingly, it is highly recommended that such discourse markers are taught for the Iraqi E F L learners at the university level.

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