

Well but that's the effect of it: The use of well as a discourse particle in talk shows

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Abstract

Discourse particles have been a topic of interest in the research community for decades. Despite the vast number of scholarly outputs dedicated to this area, it appears that little has been done on the use of discourse particles by non-native speakers. This paper attempts to address this largely neglected sector by examining the use of *well* as a discourse particle by Hong Kong Chinese speakers of English in a series of a TV current affairs talk show. Results show that contrary to the prevalent view in Hong Kong educational settings that discourse particles are a sign of fluent speech, the discourse particle *well* in the data fulfils a wide range of functions which are crucial for participants to sail through different situations. This gives rise to the implications that whether the status of discourse particles in second language learning, if they have any, should be re-assessed.

Introduction

Discourse particles have been attracting much scholarly attention over the last few decades. With the development of information technology and the use of computer corpora in recent years, researchers are offered more opportunities to investigate the use of discourse particles from a computational perspective; making it possible for them to analyze a large quantity of data in a more efficient and reliable way. Aijmer's (2002) study on discourse particles using the London-Lund Corpus, for example, has proven that the methods of corpus linguistics are powerful tools in enhancing our understanding of discourse particles and hence our description of what functions they serve in discourse.

Area of study

Although the study of discourse particles has blossomed and a considerable number of research works representing different frameworks and approaches have been reported, most research outputs appear to focus on native speakers' use of English discourse particles. Studies on the use of discourse particles by non-native speakers of English, in contrast, seem to be minimal (see, for example, Müller, 2004; Romero Trillo, 2002). Given the fact that speakers of English as a second or foreign language outnumber those who speak it as a first language (Crystal, 2003) and the importance of discourse particles for achieving pragmatic competence (Müller, 2004), it is surprising that very little work has been done on this topic. The present study attempts to explore the area by investigating the use of discourse particles by Hong Kong Chinese speakers of English following a corpus-driven approach. In particular, it examines the distribution of functions of *well* as a discourse particle in a series of a TV current affairs talk show programme in Hong Kong. By doing so, it hopes to demonstrate that discourse particles serve important functions in interactions not only for native speakers but also for second language speakers. Hence, the teaching and learning of discourse particles, which is largely ignored in the English curriculum in Hong Kong, should be promoted.

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Approaches to study of well

Of all the English discourse particles, *well* has probably attracted most academic interest (Schourup, 2001). Previous studies of *well* have examined its use from different perspectives: as a preface to indirect and insufficient answers in dialogues (see, for example, Lakoff, 1973; Schiffrin, 1987), as a procedural signal for turn-taking or floor-holding on the level of interaction (Svartvik, 1980), as a frame to mark a transition of focus on the structural level (Svartvik, 1980), as a move to minimize face threat within politeness theory (Owen, 1981; Watts, 1986) and so on. The present study follows a corpus-driven approach in the sense that the analysis is not based on a particular framework but on the basis of the patterns shown in the corpus. Hence the goal of this study is to summarise how the particle *well* is used empirically in the data. In the description of the uses of *well* in the talk show, the present study makes comparisons with earlier studies of this particle and identifies patterns of use of *well* by Hong Kong Chinese from its context, collocation and positioning.

Data description

In the present study, fifteen episodes of a TV current affairs talk show programme totalling more than six hours are analysed. The data for the analysis were extracted from a section of a sub-corpus of the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English, which is a two-million word corpus of naturally occurring talk between Hong Kong Chinese and speakers of languages other than Cantonese (see Cheng, Greaves & Warren, in press, for details of the corpus)¹. The current affairs talk show, *Newsline*, is a weekly programme which often deals with hot topics and controversial issues in Hong Kong. For each episode, the talk show host, who is Hong Kong Chinese himself, invites guests, who are mostly celebrities such as politicians, government officials and educators, to the programme for discussions which arouse public interest. The episodes for the study were broadcast on a local TV English channel from December 2002 to March 2003. There were altogether twenty-nine participants. Apart from two native speakers of English and two speakers of other languages, the remaining are all Hong Kong Chinese.

Findings

In the corpus of the current affairs talk show which contained 70159 tokens, there were 315 instances of *well*, making it the thirty-sixth most frequently occurring word in the data. More than eighty percent were used as a discourse particle, of which about eighty percent were produced by Hong Kong Chinese. The computer software, *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott, 1999), was employed for the quantitative and qualitative analysis. The major observation from the data was that the syntactic positioning of *well* appears to be associated with some of its functions as a discourse particle. In addition, the collocates of *well* serve as useful cues for identifying its meaning in specific contexts. Of the occurrences of *well* which were used as discourse particles, more than eighty percent were in utterance initial position. The rest were in utterance medial position. No example was found in utterance final position. As a discourse particle, *well* was found to function in six ways in the corpus and were illustrated as follows:

¹ I am deeply indebted to Dr Winnie Cheng and Dr Martin Warren for their generous permission to let me use the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English prior to its completion and publication.

1. a responsive particle in utterance initial position

a) to questions

When *well* is used to mark the beginning of responses to answers, it is typically associated with answers which are in some respects undesirable. Firstly, the response could be “dispreferred” in Levinson’s (1983: 307) use of the term that it is structurally marked. In other words, the response is not an expected answer arising from the option(s) offered by the question. Secondly, it could be the case that although an expected answer is given, the response is somewhat insufficient (cf. Lakoff, 1973). Lastly, the answer could also be dispreferred in a psychological sense that it is an unwelcoming response to others, albeit it is direct and sufficient. In this case, *well* signals and mitigates the forthcoming message which is in some way face-threatening (cf. Owen, 1981). In the data analysed, *well* is often used to preface answers which show disagreement, insufficiency, indirectness, irrelevance, or even reluctance to respond. For instance, in example (1) below, a government official (speaker *b2*) uses *well* to introduce his lack of knowledge on the issue raised by the talk show host (speaker *b1*), and at the same time, to indicate that the part prefaced by *well* is not a complete and sufficient answer, as reflected by the *but* clause:

(1) b1: talk show host b2: Hong Kong Chinese male

- 1 b1: yes I’ve I’ve actually met some of these er people and er er I think very often they’re
2 not aware of the status of their husband in Hong Kong they think er all Hong Kong
3 men must be wealthy er and as time goes on do you think that Hong Kong men will
4 be less attractive to women on the mainland
5 b2: *well* I do not know about that but but from there’re certain anecdotal evidence in this
6 is er first of all when you get try to get married in the mainland you have to obtain a
7 certificate from the Immigration Department certifying that you are single

The observation that *well* is commonly associated with dispreferred answers in this study is in accordance with previous research on native speakers (see, for example, Jucker, 1993; Lakoff, 1973; Schiffrin, 1987). The use of *well* to signal such undesirable responses could also be reflected from the co-occurrences of *well* with words of negative connotation. In the analysis, it is found that *not* follows *well* in its adjacent context for twenty-six times, with words such as *no*, *don’t*, and *won’t* which show similar tendencies. The cluster *well I think*, being the most frequently occurring three-word cluster which appears twenty times in the data, lends further support to this view as the hedging expression *I think* is commonly associated with reducing face-threats (Aijmer, 2002). In the talk show, however, there are also a minority of instances of *well* which preface seemingly direct and non-abrasive answers. These uses are possibly associated with the “considerative aspect of *well*” (Schourup, 2001: 1051).

b) to statements

Similar to the way *well* is used in dispreferred answers to questions, *well* is present in responses which show disagreement to the preceding statement. In other instances of responses to statements, *well* is followed by a personal opinion related to the utterance or a follow-up question seeking clarification or elaboration.

In example (2) below, the talk show host (speaker *b*) is reporting on a government official's statement about the rise in crimes to the chairman (speaker *a*) of the Hong Kong Tourism Board, which is a semi-governmental body. Given the nature of their work, it is likely that the official and the chairman have business contacts on occasion. Notice how speaker *a* uses *well* to preface her objection to the view expressed in the preceding utterance, possibly to redress face-threat:

(2) a: Hong Kong Chinese female b: talk show host

- 1 b: mm er now Selina I think er Virginia Ip Secretary for Security said recently that er er
 2 with the rise in tourists from the mainland there's also been also been a rise in crimes
 3 committed by tourists
 4 a: *well* er not proportionately I I think I think that you are talking about you know over
 5 millions growth it well in fact compared to last year you are talking about over two
 6 two millions growth in numbers of visitors so you know er an increase of a couple
 7 of thousand more cases proportionately is is by far you know that i- er er not er not
 8 really that (inaudible)

2. a turn-taking/floor-holding device in utterance initial position

As suggested by Svartvik (1980: 176), *well* functions as “floor-holder, hesitator or initiator”. In the talk show analysed, it is used commonly when the speaker intends to hold the conversational floor or when the listener attempts to take over the turn from the current speaker. In the latter case, an overlapping speech often occurs as the hearer interrupts in the middle of the current speaker's talk. In example (3), a guest (speaker *b3*) has been expressing his comment for quite some time until the talk show host (speaker *b1*) uses *well* to regain the floor²:

(3) b1: talk show host b3: Hong Kong Chinese male

- 1 b3: ... I think that what happened was that there're some technical difficulties er that
 2 have shown up in the er working level contacts erm and er unfortunately these
 3 technical difficulties er really needs some high level er attention and [I think that
 4 b1: [well you know
 5 that's why we're very glad
 6 the the whole idea as I understand that the whole idea was that Hong Kong would
 7 benefit before the other members of the WTO er and if talks er drag on then er this
 8 period for Hong Kong will actually benefit before China opens up to the rest of the
 9 world is going to be shorter and shorter...

3. a signal of shift in focus

Well could operate on the textual level by indicating a change of focus of the ongoing discourse. While previous research suggested that as a boundary

² Transcription conventions used in this paper are explained as follows:

... indicates an utterance is being reported only in part

[indicates the beginning of overlapping talk

(.) indicates an unfilled pause

When the overlapping talk goes beyond the end of a line, the line immediately follows represents the continuing talk of the current speaker and the next line (unless otherwise specified) represents the continuing talk of the speaker who interrupts. Hence in example (3), line 5 is the continuing speech of *b3* and from line 6 onwards it is the continuing talk of *b1*.

5. a marker to indicate “the beginning of direct speech” (Svartvik, 1980: 174) in utterance medial position

In introducing reported direct speech, results from the mini-corpus show that *well* occurs frequently with reporting verbs such as *say* and *tell*. The findings are in agreement with previous research that *well* normally follows immediately after such verbs (James, 1983).

In example (6), the participants are having an intense debate about a government proposed legislation on national security which stirs up much public dissent. Notice how speaker *a*, who is a legislator strongly opposing the government’s decision, employs the particle *well* following the reporting verb *say* to introduce the government’s view, and at the same time, distancing herself from the government’s position:

(6) a: Hong Kong Chinese female b1: talk show host

- 1 b1: let me ask er Audrey er as a member of the Legco³ sitting er next to you are you
 2 against any form of legislation
 3 a: no I’m not I mean I I I’m a lawyer abide by the law I recognise the force of Article
 4 twenty three but I mean I perfectly understand the difference between a white bill
 5 and a blue bill and I think in this case the government er should issue a er a white
 6 bill and I don’t see why the government should say *well* because there are some
 7 people who have an ulterior motive [therefore we deny people like you [(.) who ask
 8 b1: [mhmm [yes
 9 for a white bill...

6. a signal of self-repair in utterance medial position

From the analysis of the data, it is found that *well* is employed in non-initial position to mark self-correction or rephrasing. It is also used when speakers are searching for the right word or phrase. This function of *well* has been noted in other research (see, for example, Svartvik, 1980; Schiffrin, 1987).

Example (7) shows how *well* is employed when speaker *a* is making a self-correction in the middle of her talk:

(7) a: Hong Kong Chinese female

- 1 a: ... so we have to er open to the Pearl River Delta use of it er cooperate with it in
 2 investment as a production base as a market because the Pearl River Del- Delta has a
 3 er population over er er er forty million people and er which much much larger and
 4 the res- *well* they have lot of money they have the per capita income and er saving
 5 are very high and so er I think er nowadays we have to look at the regional
 6 development rather than development of Hong Kong...

Discussions

Of the six functions found in the corpus, the responsive use of *well* appears to be the most prevalent. More than half of all the instances of *well* are associated with responses, about two-third of which being answers to either yes-no questions or WH-questions. The overwhelming number of *well* in responses confirms with previous studies which characterise *well* as a responsive marker (see, for example, Schiffrin,

³ Legco stands for the Legislative Council, the legislature in Hong Kong.

1987). This pervasive use of *well* in responses could also be attributed to the nature of the corpus being analysed. As the talk show is a TV programme in which debatable and emotion-provoking current affairs are discussed, the guests are often faced with questions that they may be unwilling to answer. In consequence, they may use *well* mainly to preface their responses, which are often perceived to be 'dispreferred' by the host, the other guests or even by the mass audience, when answering questions involving sensitive issues.

Apart from the above contextual influence, culture may possibly be a driving force for using *well* in some dispreferred responses. As Confucian values play a role in Chinese culture and face work is central to Confucianism (Lustig & Koester, 1999), participants in the talk show may, at times, be more oriented towards the maintenance of harmonious relationships than to get their opinions spelt out. Even when they show non-compliance to a previous utterance, they may be more concerned with how to minimize face damage. In both cases, *well* serves a functional purpose: either by marking the indirect and implicit responses or down-toning the disagreement to avoid confrontations.

Another interesting feature which is reflected in this study is the influence of speaker role on the use of *well*. While the guests in the programme are mainly responsible for employing *well* as a responsive particle, it is more often for the talk show host to use *well* as a marker of shift. As visitors to the show, the guests are expected to be the ones who are responding to queries raised in the programme. On the other hand, for the talk show host to ensure that the show strictly adheres to time and financial constraints, he has to carefully monitor the progress of the programme. Using *well* as a ground-shifting device enables him to manage the development of the show.

Conclusion

The present study examined the use of *well* as a discourse particle by Hong Kong speakers of English in a series of a TV talk show. Evidence from the corpus showed that the context, positioning and collocational pattern of *well* could be useful for understanding its distributions of meanings and functions. As reflected from the findings above, the particle *well* serves a rich range of functions which are crucial for second language speakers in interactions. However, owing to the common perception that discourse particles are signs of dysfluency and thus are not a commendable feature for language learners, discourse particles are often left behind in the formal language classroom (Romero Trillo, 2002). This is obviously the case in Hong Kong since discourse particles are generally neglected in teaching materials and in the English curriculum. To a certain extent, learners are denied access to a pool of valuable resources which are not only useful in discourse but also vividly embody the culture of that language community (Wierzbicka, 1991). Whether this deliberate exclusion of discourse particles in the second language classroom is appropriate is beyond the scope of this paper but it is certainly a question that requires serious consideration from educators and language policy makers.

By following a corpus-driven approach, this research demonstrated that the use of corpus and computer tools is powerful for making a systematic analysis of how discourse particles are used in naturally occurring data. From this small-scale and preliminary analysis, it appears that the use of *well* by Hong Kong Chinese speakers

of English is largely similar to its use by native speakers reported in the literature, though cultural and contextual factors also appear to be at work in the data. It is anticipated that more particle studies on second language speakers in wider contexts will follow to provide a more comprehensive description of the non-native use of discourse particles.

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