The discourse marker well:  
A relevance-theoretical account

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In Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, the discourse marker well can be seen as a signpost which constrains the interpretation process and the concomitant background selection. It signifies that the most immediately accessible context is not the most relevant one for the interpretation of the impending utterance. This analysis covers four more or less distinct uses of well: (1) as a marker of insufficiency; (2) as a face-threat mitigator; (3) as a frame; and (4) as a delay device. Relevance theory, which is a general theory of human communication based on cognitive principles, offers a unified explanation across a broad range of examples.

1. Introduction

Discourse markers have attracted a lot of research recently, both in papers and in book-length studies. Some studies deal with a whole range of discourse markers (Schourup 1982, Schiffrin 1987, and Watts 1989 on English; Bazzanella 1990 on Italian; and Hölker 1991 on French), while others concentrate on individual ones (Lakoff 1973, Svartvik 1980, Owen 1981, James 1983, Carlson 1984, Schiffrin 1985, Watts 1986, and Blakemore 1988b). Or they are treated within larger discourse analytical frameworks (Labov and Fanshel 1977, Owen 1983). Sometimes the term ‘discourse particle’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘discourse marker’. Schourup (1982), for instance, uses the former term to refer to the same linguistic elements for which Schiffrin (1987) uses the latter. Sometimes the two terms are used to refer to different phenomena. ‘Discourse marker’ is used to refer to elements like well,
oh, so, I mean, y’know in conversations in English, while the term ‘discourse particle’ is used to refer to elements like ja, doch, halt, eben in German; dan, toch, maar, wel, eens, even in Dutch; and vel, visst, nok, da in Norwegian (see the collection of articles in Abraham 1991a and 1991b). These elements in German, Dutch and Norwegian appear to serve functions that are clearly distinct from those in English. I will therefore follow the convention of calling the former ‘particles’ and the latter ‘markers’.

There is no generally accepted list of discourse markers in English. While there seems to be general agreement for some elements, such as the ones listed above, other elements are of more doubtful status (because, and, then are included by Schiffrin (1987) but not by Schourup (1982), while hey and aha are included by Schourup but not by Schiffrin). Blakemore (1987: ch. 4) uses the term ‘discourse connectives’ for a set of elements that share some characteristics with discourse markers. Her set comprises elements such as therefore, so, after all, and moreover. These expressions “constrain the interpretation of the utterances that contain them by virtue of the inferential connections they express” (Blakemore 1987: 105).

Hölker (1991: 78–79) lists four basic features that characterise discourse markers (or pragmatic markers, as he calls them). (1) they do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; (2) they do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; (3) they are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; and (4) they have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function. Extract (1) shows that well in the way it is used here is such a discourse marker.

(1) A: but who has to buy it (0.8)
   B: well the – the state has to buy it but … (Dick Hatch, phone-in)

The presence or absence of well in B’s utterance does not change the truth-conditions and it does not add anything to the propositional content of B’s utterance. The utterance would be a true (or false) representation of B’s opinion in exactly the same circumstances if B had omitted well. It does not add any information to the proposition that ‘the state has to buy it’. It probably indicates that the answer should have been clear to A, and thus it relates to the speech situation rather than to the situation talked about. Moreover, it does not have any referential function in this utterance, but it reflects the speaker’s attitude towards the question.

The discourse marker well has several homonyms, for instance a manner adverb (She draws well), a degree word (You know that perfectly well), a noun (Everyone digs their own well), and a verb (Tears well in my eyes) (cf. Svartvik 1980: 168; Schiffrin 1987: 102; Cobuild: 1655). In these cases well does affect the truth conditions, it adds to the propositional content; it relates to the
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speech situation talked about (i.e. to the manner in which she draws, to the degree of perfect knowledge, to the kind of object dug up by everyone, and to the activity of the tears); and it has a referential function. I shall not consider the use of *well* in these contexts. Here I am only concerned with those uses of *well* that fall within the characterisation for discourse markers given by Hölker.

Watts (1989: 224) has found an astonishing discrepancy between speakers' (sometimes very frequent) use of *well* and their own perception or rather non-perception of it. He found convincing evidence for the fact that native speakers evaluate discourse markers negatively even if they use them very frequently themselves.

One of the problems that must be tackled by any description of discourse markers is their polyfunctionality, that is to say the range of different uses in which they can occur. The discourse marker *well* is no exception in this respect. It appears in seemingly different contexts.

There are basically three ways of solving this problem (cf. Hölker 1991: 86). The first solution is to say that a particular discourse marker, for instance *well*, is ambiguous and requires several separate entries in a lexicon. The second solution is to say that all uses can be related to one core meaning. The third solution, finally, does not accept the polyfunctionality but claims that – properly understood – all uses can be summarised under one general description.

The first solution is actually no solution at all, because it fails to capture any generalisation. It is more an admission of defeat. The third solution entails the danger of the sweeping generalisation that loses the descriptive precision (see also Carlson 1984: 28).

Many different approaches falling into one or the other of these categories can be found in the extensive literature on *well*. The ambiguity solution is – unintentionally perhaps – represented by those analyses that concentrate on a single use of *well*. Of the researchers mentioned above, Lakoff (1973), Owen (1981), James (1983) and Quirk et al. (1985) fall into this category. The unitary solution is best represented by Watts (1986). Carlson (1984), too, claims to have found a unitary explanation for all uses of *well*, but he does go on to spell out subtypes, in particular the use of *well* as a qualifier and as a frame. Most other researchers tend to list a number of different uses while pointing out the common core of all of them. In the following I shall also argue for this middle solution.

My analysis of *well* differs from earlier analyses in that it uses Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory as a descriptive framework. Schourup (1982), Carlson (1984) and Schiffrin (1987), for instance, use frameworks that were explicitly established to account for discourse markers. Owen (1981, 1983) and Watts (1986), on the other hand, use existing frameworks but fail to account for all uses of *well*. Lakoff (1973); Svartvik (1980) and Quirk et al. do not base their analyses on any explicit theory of communication.
Relevance theory, I believe, is the only theory that can account for all the uses of well on the basis of a general theory of human communication based on cognitive principles.

The discourse marker well has distinct uses but they can all be related to one core meaning. Four main uses can be distinguished. (1) It can be used as a marker of insufficiency, indicating some problems on the content level of the current or the preceding utterance. (2) It can be used as a face-threat mitigator, indicating some problems on the interpersonal level. (3) It can be used as frame marking device indicating a topic change or introducing direct reported speech, and (4) it can be used as a delay device.

In all these cases well is some kind of signpost, directing the way in which the following utterance should be processed by the addressee. Utterances are of course not processed in isolation by addressees. They are always processed against a background, against the background of the addressee’s personal cognitive environment and against the background as created by the previous discourse. The discourse marker well indicates that the addressee has to reconstruct the background against which he can process the upcoming utterance. What seems to be the most relevant context is not appropriate.

2. The notion of context in relevance theory

Three aspects of relevance theory are particularly important if we want to understand how the notion ‘context’ is used in relevance theory. First, every utterance comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance; second, the relevant context is established as part of the utterance interpretation, and third, discourse coherence is the outcome of negotiating relevant backgrounds.¹

Every act of communication comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance, that is to say, a speaker, by making an utterance, makes the claim that it will be worthwhile to process this utterance. There will be a maximal effect in cognitive terms for a minimal effort in terms of processing cost. The more information an individual can get out of an utterance the more relevant it will be; and the higher the processing effort needed the smaller the relevance.

There is a trade-off between processing effort and the information the addressee can get out of a particular utterance. Depending on the situation, this may of course vary. In a lecture, the audience is most likely to be prepared to put in a fair amount of processing effort, but they also expect to get a lot of information in return, information that connects in interesting

¹ It cannot be the purpose of this paper to give a comprehensive summary of relevance theory. Blakemore (1992) offers an excellent and very readable introduction.
ways with knowledge (i.e. assumptions) which the individual members of the audience have already stored. At a cocktail party, on the other hand, people engaging in small talk (phatic communion) do not normally expect to get a lot of information out of the utterances addressed to them, but likewise they will not put in much processing effort.

To engage in communication is to say to our addressees that it will be worth their while to process our utterances. We may get this wrong, of course. Our utterances may not contain enough interesting information, or they may be too difficult to interpret (the Scylla and Charybdis of giving a lecture). But even the most tedious bores mean to be relevant.

Second, context is created as a function of utterance interpretation, it is not given antecedently. Utterances are always processed on the background of a relevant context consisting of the linguistic context and the assumed background assumptions of the addressee.

(2) The drill was boring.

This sentence is ambiguous. It can refer to a mechanical drill boring a hole, or it can refer to a language exercise which is not very interesting. In a particular context, there is no problem.

(3) [1] We started the new lesson yesterday. [2] The text was interesting but [3] the drill was boring.

The ambiguity is resolved not by the linguistic context, but by background knowledge of what lessons are like (text, vocabulary, grammar, drills, etc.). Thus the processing of [1] and [2] creates a frame against which [3] is processed.

Speaker and hearer do not, not even under ideal circumstances, have access to a set of assumptions or facts that are mutually known, that is to say they do not have any mutual knowledge in the strict sense. However, they have a mutual cognitive environment. That is each conversationalist has a number of assumptions about what is manifest to the other. These assumptions may be strong (close friends have a fairly good idea of each other's assumptions); or they may be very weak (strangers can only make very rough guesses about each other's assumptions).

This brings us directly to the third point. The mutual cognitive environment is constantly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the conversation. Every utterance adds new assumptions to the shared (mutual) cognitive environment, or it makes old assumptions stronger and more manifest. For any utterance the immediately preceding utterance has a special significance because it is against the mutual cognitive environment as established by this previous utterance that the oncoming utterance is going to be interpreted.
The first utterance sets up a context which yields relevant information for the interpretation of the second. In (4) the second utterance is a result of the former, in (5) it is an explanation.

Whenever the hearer recognises an utterance as relevant within the context established by the immediately preceding utterance, he will perceive the discourse as coherent. Cohesive devices such as proforms or semantic links do not guarantee coherence. Coherence is a function of utterance interpretation. The same discourse can be perceived as coherent by one listener and as incoherent by another depending on their ability to recognise each utterance of the discourse as an optimally relevant background for the following utterance (cf. Blakemore 1988a and Blass 1990).

However, in real life conversations, consecutive utterances are not always optimally coherent. Digressions and topic changes are common. Speaker and hearer may have mistaken assumptions about each other's assumptions which necessitates the renegotiation of the mutual cognitive environment. In the following analysis I will show that well can be seen as a signpost signalling to the hearer that the context created by the previous utterance – whether produced by the current speaker or the current listener – is not the most relevant one for the interpretation of the impending utterance.

In the following sections, I will offer reinterpretations of examples cited in the literature on well in terms of relevance theory. In some cases my analysis does not differ radically from the analysis given by the original authors. However, the relevance-theoretical account offers a greater degree of generalisation across a large number of – seemingly – disparate uses of well, and it does this on the basis of a more general theory of human communication.

3. Well as a marker of insufficiency

This use is very well attested in the literature on well. Lakoff (1973), who deals with the discourse marker well in the context of questions and answers, notes that it is used in cases in which respondents know that they are not giving directly the information which the questioner has requested (1973: 458), or in other words in cases in which they sense ‘some sort of insufficiency’ (1973: 463) in their replies. Such replies can be insufficient because speakers leave it to the questioners to fill in some of the details, or because the respondents are going to give some additional information themselves. Example (6) is a relevant example.
In truth-conditional terms there is no difference whether B, a defendant, prefaces his reply by *well* or not. The answers are true or false in the same set of circumstances. But the two answers would not be interchangeable. The first is a direct answer which gives all the information asked for by A, the judge. The second answer, however, is not a direct answer. It suggests that *yes* on its own is not a complete answer presumably because there are extenuating circumstances. The judge would most probably follow up the second answer by something like ‘what do you mean by “well yes”?’

In terms of relevance theory the following interpretation suggests itself. The judge’s question – as all utterances – makes manifest its own propositional content, which predicates about A, the defendant, that he either has or has not killed his wife. The judge does not take any stand on whether this is actually the case or not. But through the judge’s utterance more assumptions are made manifest than just the explicit one mentioned above. Many of the culturally defined assumptions will instantly be accessed by B, such as ‘to kill somebody is a crime’, ‘to kill your own wife is a particularly terrible crime’, ‘to kill implies volition and intention on the part of the killer’ (in contrast to ‘accidentally kill’); ‘the punishment for such a crime may be life imprisonment’, etc. Some of these assumptions will be strongly manifest, others only weakly. The actual set of assumptions that becomes manifest to B through A’s utterance will very much depend on the situation and the actual speakers involved, but it is reasonable to assume that it includes some of those just mentioned. All these assumptions – together with A’s utterance – provide the relevant background against which B’s utterance will be processed. By prefacing his utterance with *well*, B suggests that at least some of these implicit assumptions do not hold. The relevant background for his utterance has to be renegotiated.

This interpretation accords well with the intuitive understanding of the exchange. As Lakoff says, the most likely next move will be that the judge asks ‘What do you mean by “well, yes”’, that is to say ‘what extenuating circumstances are you claiming?’, and ‘which of the assumptions made manifest previous to your utterance do you suggest are invalid?’.

Quirk et al. (1985), in their monumental grammar, describe the meaning of *well* in an informal manner.

(7) A: That man speaks extremely good English.
   \[
   \begin{align*}
   [1] & \text{Well} \\
   [2] & \text{Yet}
   \end{align*}
   \]
   he comes from a village in Mongolia
   (Quirk et al. 1984: 1470)
If speaker B precedes her answer by well she takes it to be an established fact that Mongolia is a good place for learning English (well, of course!). This is seen in contrast to the preface yet, which suggests that there is a contrast between a Mongolian upbringing and a good command of English. In [1] it is because of the Mongolian upbringing and in [2] it is despite the Mongolian upbringing that 'the man' has a good command of English.

Speaker A finds the man's command of English remarkable enough to comment on it. The man's command is 'extremely good'. B's answer suggests that she shares A's opinion on the quality of B's English, but she does not find it as remarkable as A does. Consider the slightly more extreme case in which B answers as in (8).

(8) A: That man speaks extremely good English.
   B: Well, he is American.

Again, there is no disagreement about the man's command of English, but B suggests that there is nothing remarkable about this. Speaker A's utterance makes sense only if the man's good command of English is surprising. If he is American, a good command is not surprising. If he is from a Mongolian village, the surprise depends on one's estimation of the quality of English teaching in Mongolian villages. Thus the speaker sets up a signpost to indicate that there is a discrepancy between the background assumptions which she and her interlocutor are using. A renegotiation has to be initiated.

Svartvik (1980) and Carlson (1984: ch. 5) call well used in this way a qualifier. Extracts (9) and (10) give relevant examples.

(9) B: I think they've got quite a good opinion of him
   A: well er I I have too
(10) A: are these copies
   B: well that's a copy er that's only a Stoke student has made a copy of
   the painting which, the painting's in Madrid, I think it's not in
   London. (Svartvik 1980: 173, 174, slightly simplified)

In these utterances well is said to qualify the content of the previous move or the move which it introduces, it indicates some sort of insufficiency. Answers that fail to supply the information required by the question are habitually introduced by well. In (9), speaker A adds some information but also suggests that B has overlooked a point. Speaker B predicates a particular opinion to a group of people referred to by they. The reference of this pronoun excludes the addressee, A. The obvious conclusion is that B thinks A's opinion is either indifferent or negative. Otherwise B would have included A in the reference of those people who have a good opinion of that particular person. But contrary to B's apparent opinion, A has a good opinion of this person, too. Using well
suggests that the relevant set of background assumptions has to be renegotiated. The exclusion of A was based on a mistaken assumption of B.

In (10), the answer is *yes* for one painting, but for the others it isn’t. One of the implications of a *yes/no* question is that it can be answered with *yes* or *no*, but for A’s question the answer is not the same for all items referred to; for one of them it is *yes*, while for the others it needs some more information. B has to fill in some background facts before A’s question can be answered. Once again the set of relevant background assumptions turns out to be in need of renegotiations.

Schiffrin (1987: 102–127) notes that *well* is often used when an answer is not optimally coherent with the preceding question because the respondent cannot supply the requested information, that is to say the respondent does not provide the missing element of a *wh*-question, or a clear confirmation or denial to a *yes/no* question. When respondents do no more than follow the response options given by the question, they are unlikely to use *well*.

(11) Zelda: Are you from Philadelphia?
    Sally: Well I grew up uh out in the suburbs. And then I lived for about seven years up in upstate New York. And then I came back here t’go to college. (Schiffrin 1987: 106)

Zelda assumes that Sally either is or is not from Philadelphia. This assumption turns out to be ill-founded. Sally cannot give a maximally coherent answer.

Zelda’s question again assumes that it can be answered either by *yes* or *no*, but this is not true. Sally has to fill in a lot of background assumptions in order to answer Zelda’s question.

In (12) Irene makes a suggestion. She wants to return to the main items on the agenda so that the interviewer, Debby, can get home at a reasonable hour.

(12) Irene: Let’s get back because she’ll never get home.
    Debby: Well, actually we don’t have that much more. (Schiffrin 1987: 114)

Some of the assumptions underlying Irene’s suggestion are wrong. There is not a lot more on the agenda, and therefore Irene’s suggestion is unnecessary. In this particular example, there is little difference between Schiffrin’s explanation that *well* signals a lack of coherence and my description that *well* signals the need for renegotiating the relevant background assumptions. However, the relevance-theoretical approach captures the generalisation from this example to the whole range of other occurrences of the discourse marker *well*. 
4. **Well as a face-threat mitigator**

As a face-threat mitigator, *well* indicates a problem on the interpersonal level. Either the face of the speaker or the face of the hearer is threatened.

According to Owen (1981, 1983) *well* signals and mitigates some sort of confrontation; for instance an assessment which is followed by disagreement rather than agreement; a request which is refused rather than granted; or an offer which is rejected rather than accepted. In such situations the image of one of the participants, that is to say his or her face is threatened. These situations, therefore, are called face-threats, and the actions that create them face-threatening acts or FTAs (based on Brown and Levinson 1978 [1987]).

(13) A: they must worry about you though Eddie, don’t they, your Mum and Dad, when you’re doing all these jumps
B: er well they always come to all the shows
(14) A: can I just see them
B: um well I’m not allowed to to do that
(15) A: what about coming here on the way or or doesn’t that give you enough time
B: well no I’m supervising here (Owen 1981: 109)

In (13), an assessment is followed by a disagreement rather than an agreement. In (14), a request is followed by a noncompliance rather than a compliance. And in (15) an offer is followed by a rejection rather than an acceptance. In all these situations the respondents react in a way that potentially threatens the face of their interlocutor. The discourse particle *well* both signals and mitigates this confrontation.

This analysis of *well* in terms of face-threat minimisation may seem to be more difficult to incorporate within a relevance-theoretical framework. But if we look at Owen’s examples, it turns out that they, too, can be accounted for.

The underlying assumption for the interviewer A in (13) must be: ‘it would be normal for parents to worry about their son doing dangerous jumps’. The epistemic use of the modal ‘must’ and the tag question *don’t they* presents these assumptions as though everybody should agree. The interviewer just wants to elicit an agreement from Eddie. However, Eddie’s parents apparently do not worry unduly otherwise they would not come to all the shows. What the interviewer – implicitly – presents as an almost unquestionably obvious assumption turns out to be ill-founded, and therefore A’s utterance cannot be taken to provide a maximally relevant background for the interpretation of B’s utterance.

In (14) a request for the permission to see something is followed by a denial rather than a granting of that request. To ask for permission implies that the addressee is in a position to grant it. But this is again a background
assumption which turns out to be ill-founded. B is not in a position to grant the request at all.

In the same way that a request implies the addressee’s authority to grant it, an invitation implies the addressee’s ability to accept it. But in (15), this implication is wrong. Speaker A assumes that B could come here on the way, in case B has got enough time, but B will not be on the way because he or she is supervising at some other place.

Watts (1986) uses the same framework but supplements it by an early version of relevance theory. According to him well is used to minimise an imminent face-threat caused by a failure to be maximally relevant. This account also includes turn-internal instances of well which are more difficult to explain as face-threat minimisations.

(16) A: It must be rather disturbing when your cat goes around spraying all the time, though, mustn’t it?
B: It’s not so bad if it’s a female that’s spraying, but if you have a good tomcat that’s spraying, well, it can empty the room, it can empty the house. (Watts 1986: 51)

For Owen this would be a difficult example because there is no obvious face-threat. However, the shift from female cats to tomcats preceding well may appear to be less than relevant, but the implications are listed immediately after well. Watts (1986: 58) concludes that well is “a device available to the speaker for the minimization of a possible face-threat contingent on a failure (whether real or assumed) to abide by the axiom of relevance”).

The discourse marker well in B’s utterance does not really constitute a face-threat in any recognisable sense; there is no lack of coherence (pace Watts); and it is neither a ‘frame’ nor a ‘qualifier’ in Svartvik’s or Carlson’s sense. The question introduced by A is whether cats going around spraying all the time are disturbing or not. For female cats apparently it is not very disturbing but for a good tomcat we have to think in different categories altogether; not just disturbing or not. It is so bad that everybody will leave the house. Thus the use of well can again be described as a signpost to the addressee to readjust the set of background assumptions. The categories that were appropriate for female cats are no longer valid. The addressees, the radio listeners, have to think in different terms.

2 Within relevance theory as formulated by Sperber and Wilson (1986), it is of course a mistake to speak of a ‘failure to abide by the axiom of relevance’. The principle of relevance cannot be violated in the same way that Grice’s maxims were said to be liable to being flouted.
5. Well as a frame

As a frame well is used to separate discourse units. In this function, it is often not placed at the beginning of a turn.

(17) A: but if they wanted people around to talk to, then I would be very happy to stay, and got a letter back saying we have arranged for you to stay – well let's take the interview first

(18) A: and I said well I don't really think I could write – and this sort of ninety-six page booklet you know about that big. (Svartvik 1980: 174, 170, slightly simplified)

In (17) there is a shift in the topic focus, a "zooming in on the interview, the setting of which has been given previously" (Svartvik 1980: 174). In (18) there is an instance of reported direct speech. Here, too, well is taken to function as a frame. Subtypes of well as a frame are its use as a focusing element, as in (17), or as an element indicating a partial shift of topic (1980: 175), or as an element introducing direct speech.

At the beginning of a new topic it is particularly relevant to reorient the interactants to a new set of background assumptions. To say that well functions as a frame in this example, is of course intuitively highly plausible but it misses the generalisation with the other uses of well. If we see well as a signpost that directs the addressees to renegotiate the relevant background assumptions, either because a new set of assumptions becomes relevant or because some of the manifest assumptions are mistaken, we have an equally plausible interpretation for this example plus a generalisation across all the other examples, too.

In (18), well is used to introduce reported direct speech. Quite clearly there is a switch in the background assumptions. The hearer must first of all readjust to the different point of view which the speaker temporarily adopts (e.g. switch from past tense to present), which can again be seen as a (temporary) invocation of a new set of relevant background assumptions.

James (1983: 35) notes that well in reporting clauses normally follows immediately after the reporting verb (say or think) and far less frequently after an indirect object (I said to Paul well ...; I thought to myself well ...) or an adverbial (I thought then well ...). Well may either belong to the reporting clause or to the direct speech, which may be indicated by prosodic features. If it belongs to the reporting clause, "well has the local effect of indicating the 'more or lessness', the 'words to the effect' of the quotation that follows. The function of well here, then, is that of an 'approximator'" (James 1983: 36). In story-telling, on the other hand, well typically belongs to the quotation in direct speech because the demands of story-telling, in particular the demand that quotations be verbatim, "obviates the need for any 'approximating' functions of a well".
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(19) \[1\] -- Dave said \[1\] well there you are you see | you said | you didn't believe in fairies | so how can you expect the fairies to come and see you if \[1\] oh | but I do believe in fairies | you know | I really do | so Dave said \[2\] well . try again tonight | -- so that night | thank goodness we remembered \[1\] so the next morning | she gets up | all happy \[1\] oh they've been | I've got my money | and Dave said \[3\] well there you are \[1\] -- that just shows \[1\] that you i if you they hear you saying you don't believe \[1\] . no money \[1\] she says \[1\] -- she says \[4\] well . I know you're only saying that | because you forget to put it there \[1\] (Crystal and Davy, Advanced Conversational English, p. 75; quoted after James 1983: 36)

According to James, the first, third and fourth use of well in (19) belong to the quotations in direct speech, whereas the second belongs to the reporting clause. \[1\] and \[3\] are stereotyped responses in which well can unambiguously be assigned to the quotation. James assigns \[2\] well to the reporting clause and \[3\] well to the quotation on the basis of prosodic features.

The analysis of well as an approximator, meaning "Dave said something like, 'Try again tonight'" (James 1983: 36), is markedly different from a relevance-theoretical interpretation. It is of course true that the words in reported direct speech may not be exactly the same words that were used by the speaker who is being quoted. But it seems counterintuitive to suggest that instances of direct reported speech that are not introduced by well claim a higher degree of accuracy than those which are introduced by well. I would suggest that these instances of well -- as all the others -- indicate an impending shift in the relevant background. Well gives the listener processing instructions. Its use therefore depends on the speaker's estimation of the listener's background assumptions and not on the literal accuracy or otherwise of the words in reported direct speech.

If the words in reported direct speech cannot be claimed to be verbatim, it makes little sense to distinguish between those instances of well that belong to the reporting clause and those that belong to the quotation. The original words may or may not have included well, even if the prosody of the reporting clause and the quotation seem to indicate a difference between the two.

I will have more to say on well introducing reported direct speech below.

6. **Well as a delay device**

*Well* can also be used as a temporizing or delaying tactic (Svartvik 1980: 171), as in example (20).

(20) B: on the floor
A: on on [ði] well on [ði:] you know on [ði:] hatchway there. (Svartvik 1980: 171, slightly simplified)
Speaker A apparently needs time to think about an answer. He or she repeats the prepositional phrase uttered by B but with a more specific noun. The straight repetition of the preposition does not pose any problems and follows immediately after the end of the previous turn, but the lexical item hatchway does not come easily to the speaker’s mind. The ensuing pause is filled with delaying or floor-holding devices. They indicate that the speaker has more to say and does not yet want to yield the floor.

B’s utterance is presumably a statement asking for confirmation. But speaker A corrects speaker B’s place adverbial. Apparently, the location of some (in this extract) unspecified entity is not exactly on the floor but on the hatchway. Thus B’s cognitive environment contains apparently a mistaken assumption which has to be corrected. Speaker A himself cannot provide the correct lexical item straight away. Thus the renegotiation of cognitive environments includes that of the speaker A herself.

Pomerantz (1984) lists well as one of the devices that preface disagreements but not agreements or more generally dispreferred second-pair parts of adjacency pairs but not preferred ones (see also Levinson 1983: 334). (21) is a relevant example.

(21) R: ... well never mind. It’s not important.
D: Well, it is important. (Pomerantz 1984: 74)

In this use, there is some overlap with the category of well as a face-threat mitigator because here, too, well indicates problems on the interpersonal level.

7. Textual analysis

All above examples were very short, some even invented. In this section I shall extend my analysis to a somewhat longer excerpt with several instances of well. Most of them are more difficult to analyse, because I have chosen an extract with many instances of well rather than an extract with an example that beautifully illustrates my theory.³

1 SW what/what/how did the the the cooking for the solicitors *start
2 AB well* there’s a friend of mine er my brother’s friend is a solicitor in his

³ I thank Susan Wright, who made the recordings from which the following extract was drawn available to me. The following transcription conventions were used: *...* indicates overlaps of talk by two speakers; (1.5) indicates a pause of roughly 1.5 seconds duration; [laughs] specifies paralinguistic features. SW is the interviewer, AB, a housewife, the interviewee. The situation is a sociolinguistic interview in which SW elicits casual speech from her interviewee. The interview was conducted in view of research interests in phonetics. Thus it can be safely assumed that neither interviewer nor interviewee paid any attention to their use of discourse markers, apart from the increased general attention that is likely to have emerged through the formality of the situation.
practice and he said we're, opening up some new offices and we want to
have a lunch once a week do you know anybody who can do it for us. so
he said oh yes my sister can do that [laughs] she's quite a good cook
[laughs] and erm, so I said well I'll give it a try
SW ya
AB and er (1.5) I suppose it's about twelve people a week, for lunch. I
wouldn't want to do any more than that though once is quite enough
SW ya *ya
AB it really* it's very time consuming *(1.0) and hard work
SW what kind of things do they* expect
AB well they want a three course, lunch
SW mhm
AB so, for instance today I did chicken liver paté. and then I did French
onion tarts with four different salads. and erm. pears and cream and
little biscuits that sort of thing
SW that's really nice yea
AB well it's light but, you know they can have as much as they want if
they're really hungry they've got the salad or something

AB, a housewife, tells about her activities throughout the week. Once a week
she cooks for a group of solicitors. In this extract SW asks her about this
cooking (line 1). AB cannot answer the question straight away. Some back-
ground is missing which she has to fill in before she can say how the cooking
actually started. She has to fill in some background about her brother's friend
and the new practice. All this is information which she assumes to be lacking
in SW's context.

In line 6, well prefaces an instance of reported direct speech. As in the
examples above, this can be interpreted as a shift in the relevant background.
The deictic centre switches from the here and now to a point of reference
sometime in the past and – presumably – at some other place. This seems to
be a straightforward and plausible interpretation. However, in the context of
real data which is not cut down to provide only the examples that fit the
theory, it begs the question as to why well does not occur in the two previous
instances of direct reported speech. In the second instance (line 5) there is the
discourse particle oh, but in the first (line 3) there is none.

Both instances of direct reported speech which are not preceded by well are
introduced by he said whereas the one instance that is preceded by well is
introduced by I said. This suggests the hypothesis that generally only the latter
but not the former tend to be prefaced by well. In order to test this
hypothesis, I counted all instances of direct reported speech in 90 minutes of
sociolinguistic interviews. The results are summarised in table 1.
These figures provide some evidence for the plausibility of this hypothesis. I can only speculate why this is so. After the first person pronoun it appears to be more important to indicate a shift in the background assumptions because the speaker of the current and of the original utterance is the same person. The switch in the deictic centre is not so drastic but at the same time it is not quite as immediately obvious as in the case of reported direct speech ascribed to a third person pronoun. In these latter cases the difference is greater and more obvious, and therefore less in need of extra signalling.

There are two more instances of the discourse marker well in this extract. In line 12, SW asks AB about the expectations of these people who come for lunch. AB presumably understands the question as asking about the sort of food that the solicitors want to have for lunch. But again one relevant piece of background information is missing. They want a three-course lunch. It is only in the context of this additional knowledge that AB can answer the question. As soon as she has given this additional piece of information, which SW acknowledges with the backchannel item mhm (line 14), she proceeds to answer the real question about what kind of things she prepares.

In line 18, SW pays AB a compliment. It sounds like a ‘nice’ menu, but AB thinks that ‘light’ is the more relevant dimension on which the meal should be judged. Moreover, ‘nice’ implies that AB is a good cook. But the compliment is partly implicit. AB’s utterance is not really a disagreement (it would be difficult to interpret this occurrence of well as mitigating a face-threat). ‘Light’ is also a positive evaluation of a meal, but this does not necessarily have to be construed as a compliment to the cook. It is the selection of the ingredients which makes a meal light, while it is the quality of the cooking that makes it nice. Once again, well is used as a signpost to renegotiate the set of background assumptions.

8. Summary and conclusion

In a conversation, the relevant context is continually being negotiated throughout a text or discourse. This is not necessarily a straightforward and linear movement; digressions, mistaken assumptions about partner’s context, etc. may occur. It is exactly in these positions that the discourse marker well can occur. It signals that the context created by an utterance may not be the most relevant one for the interpretation of the next utterance.
The discourse marker *well* is used to indicate a shift in the relevant context. It is not the context as set up by the immediately preceding utterance which is most relevant, because the speaker wants to embark on a new topic; because there is a change in perspective (as in reported direct speech); or because it turns out that the interlocutor uses a slightly different context (contradicting assumptions, missing assumptions, etc.).

These situations are often face-threatening for one of the participants, but *well* does not directly signal the face-threatening act but the shift in the relevant context. Therefore it can occur even if there is no conceivable FTA (reported direct speech); and it does not occur with every single FTA.

The analysis of the discourse marker *well* within a relevance-theoretical framework provides what I believe to be plausible explanations for a wide range of occurrences. If it is superior in accounting for *well* it is not because the analyses offered by other authors were necessarily less plausible. All the examples discussed by the different writers who have dealt with *well* can of course be interpreted within those frameworks. Relevance theory is superior because it accounts for all the examples cited in the relevant literature. Moreover, it provides a maximally general interpretation which can handle all examples with one unique explanation.

References


