

Szakcikk

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Native speaker and non-native speaker discourse marker use

The use of discourse marker ‘well’

Abstract

During the last few decades serious interest has been shown in the study of discourse markers (henceforth DMs) and it has become an important and extensive field for research. This “growing industry in linguistics” (Fraser 1999: 932) produces a considerable number of books, edited volumes, and numerous articles in several languages every year.

They are an important tool by means of which interlocutors attempt to guide the process of interpretation and social involvement in verbal interaction (Watts 1988); also they act as important hints to the addressee as regards what has been or is about to be said. These expressions work meta-pragmatically, commenting on some aspects of ongoing interaction, and are usually independent of the propositional content of the syntactic structure of which they are part.

In this present paper I am going to give an account of the differences between native (henceforth NS) and non-native speaker (henceforth NNS) performances in terms of DM use and present some influencing factors as well as provide the explanations accounting for them.

1 Differences between NS and NNS use of DMs

1.1 Rate of use

The DM use of NSs and NNSs differs with respect to rate. Previous studies suggest, in general, that NNSs use DMs less frequently and sometimes for other functions than NSs do. The former also use a narrower variety of these expressions than the latter. According to Fuller’s study (2003) the DM rate of NSs is 43.2 per 1,000 words in the conversational context, while it is only 28.5 for NNSs (14.8 token per 1,000 words fewer than the NSs). So there is a quantitative difference between native and NNSs. Other researchers have come to the same conclusion as well (Fuller 2003a: 200).

1.2 Order of acquisition

According to a study carried out by Hays in 1992, Japanese learners of English in the first, second, or third year of their study used the DMs *but*, *and*, and *so* very frequently, while *well* and *you know* were rarely used. Hays suggests that there is a developmental order for acquisition of DM. The DMs which have bigger semantic weight and are taught first and overtly are on the ideational plane and these are the ones that are present first in the speech of language learners. This is logical, since these are crucial for developing ideas. Those which

are more pragmatic and are on the interactional plane (e.g. *well*, *I mean*, *you know*) are used later by them (Hellermann 2007: 161). This study suggests that ideational markers are acquired earlier than pragmatic markers.

Trillo's research (2002) also seems to support this theory on the order of acquisition. She found that NNSs of English use the DMs *well* and *you know* much less frequently than NSs and they use them mainly on their ideational plane (ibid.).

However, Müller (2004) pointed out that German learners of English used nine out of the twelve identified functions of *well* to a greater extent than NSs. She suggests that this is due to the way *well* is taught in the textbooks these students used.

1.3 Qualitative differences

As Fuller's study made it clear, there are not only quantitative but also qualitative differences between NS and NNS use of DMs. While the latter manage to acquire DMs and use them in a similar way to NSs, they are not able to differentiate between speech contexts in the same way as NSs do. She investigates how NSs and NNS of English use the DMs *oh*, *well*, *y'know*, *like*, and *I mean* in three different contexts, namely in interviews, conversations and narratives.

We cannot detect any major differences in the use of the first two DMs, *oh* and *well*, in the speech of NSs and NNSs, as they are used in a similar manner by both groups. These reception markers are present at a higher rate in conversations, since they perform a function that we need more frequently in conversations between interlocutors who are familiar with each other.

On the contrary, *y'know* is used almost as many times in the interviews (9.3) as in the conversations (8.4) by NNSs, whereas the difference between the use of this DM seems to be more significant for the NSs, who use it more in the interviews (8.0 compared to 5.2).

In contrast, a reverse pattern can be found for *like*, as NSs use this DM much more frequently (15.6) than NNSs do (7.6). Also, *like* occurs more in interviews when used by a NS, while NNS use it more frequently in a conversation.

I mean is present on more occasions in the interview data in the speech of both NSs and NNSs, but there is a significant difference between the interview (5.4) and the conversation rates (3.3) when used by NNSs. The high occurrence can be explained easily, as *I mean* is mainly used for correction or clarification, and we need these functions in interviews where there is no, or just little shared background knowledge between the interlocutors, since they usually do not know each other. (Fuller 2003a: 201-204)

Oh and *well* are defined as reception markers (markers which indicate the speaker's reaction to an utterance) and "they can only be properly inserted when the speaker is presented with a situation in which there is a need to respond to the received assumptions and background knowledge of the hearer" (Fuller 2003a: 206) and this is more characteristic for conversations than interviews. This is why they occur more frequently in the former.

Like, *y'know* and *I mean* are called presentation markers (markers which modify the speaker's own utterance) by Jucker and Smith (1998) and their primary function is to introduce the content that makes utterances more comprehensible to the hearer. According to Fuller, we can find them more in interviews, because - as I have mentioned it earlier - the interlocutors are relative strangers, therefore they need to clarify and explain their utterances as well as check the understanding of what is said.

I have to mention here the two main shortcomings of Fuller's study. First, the data for this study come from six NSs between the ages of 20 and 38 and six NNSs of English, so the number of speakers is small. Second, the sample size is relatively small, as the interviews range from 30 minutes to an hour, including the narratives. The recorded conversations are similar in length. Due to these restrictions we should consider the results with a critical eye.

The findings of a study done by Jucker and Smith in 1998 do not parallel Fuller's results. It examines the differential use of DMs based on the relationship between interlocutors, and says that presentation markers are used more among friends and reception markers are used more among strangers. According to their explanation, friends have a shared background knowledge and "the speaker is better equipped to provide advice on how to process her words, and this advice is encoded in presentation markers" (Fuller 2003b: 26). However, in interviews, the interlocutors do not know each other very well or at all, thus the use of reception markers is more frequent, as more feedback is necessary from "interlocutors about how they are integrating information into their knowledge states" (ibid.).

So we have seen that adult NSs and NNSs distinguish between interaction types and they use certain DMs at different rates accordingly. Andersen et al. (1999) found that children as early as at the age of four are able to vary DM use with speaker roles, and "children at the age of six consistently used DMs to represent different speakers in role play" (Fuller 2003a: 192). Similarly, Kyratzis and Ervin-Tripp (1999) found that children between four and seven used DMs differently according to the type of activity. The younger children used DMs to mark action only, whereas the older children used them to mark the level of ideational structure, too (ibid.).

1.4 Functional differences

In the previous subsections I presented the quantitative and qualitative differences of DM use between NSs and NNSs and this subsection is devoted to the functional differences. As I have already referred to it, there is a general assumption that NNSs use DMs for other functions than NSs do. In what follows, I am going to explore this presumption at some length. My intention is to describe the functional spectrum of the DM *well* used by NNSs on the basis of two studies that have been carried out recently. Then special attention will be given to the functional differences of this DM when used by a NS in comparison to a NNS using another prominent study.

Hellermann and Vergun (2007) collected data from 17 adult beginner learners of English who have not learned the language previously. They found that the three common DMs that occurred most frequently in the speech of these students were *like*, *you know*, and *well*. As my thesis focuses on *well*, I am going to elaborate on this DM only.

The DM *well* has been described as a marker of an upcoming dispreferred response by Pomerantz and Müller and Fuller identifies several of its functions. Hellermann and Vergun try to add some more categories of usage to these lists (Hellermann 2007: 171).

There are only ten tokens of *well* in the corpus and these have the functions described by the above-mentioned researchers. Although there is a new function of the DM classified in this study: a marker of a second response. For illustration, consider the following excerpt (p. 172):

- (38) (Task: information sharing about what one is capable of)
 Teacher: did you learn anything?
 Elena: mm hmm?

Teacher: who- is there anything different between you and uh Yuko?
 Elena: we:ll (pause) we talk about having a better life here

In this example Elena is asked a question to which she gives minimal response first, then to the teacher's follow-up question a longer one which is introduced by *well*.

It is important to note that the DM *well* occurred mostly in task-directed talk between the students: 70 % of the tokens in the data were embedded in teacher-assigned task talk (ibid).

Klerk's study (2005) explores the pragmatic functions of DM *well* used by NNSs of Xhosa English (henceforth XE), a variety of Black South African English. The corpus of this study consists of 540,000 transcribed words uttered by 299 speakers over the age of 15, who had either learned standard English at school for at least eight years or had been exposed to normal use of English for at least 20 years. Altogether there were 788 tokens of *well* in the XE corpus, out of which 494 (62.6 %) were pragmatic (Klerk 2005: 1188-1189).

Klerk identified four main functions of the use of DM *well*. According to this, NNSs use it for indicating that the speaker needs time to contemplate, to signal the need for the hearer to reconsider an assumption, to indicate a change of turn, and to mark discourse coherence. The following table summarises all the functions of *well* and the cognitive effects involved in its use described by Klerk:

	Cognitive effect	Number	Percentage
A	<i>Allow me to think...</i>	315	63.8
	Evincive	224	45.3
	Comparative	52	10.5
	Filler	39	7.9
B	<i>We aren't on the same wavelength...</i>	116	23.5
	Contradictory	86	17.4
	Accepting	23	4.7
	Harmonising	7	1.4
C	<i>Achieving discourse coherence...</i>	53	10.7
	Topic shifting	36	7.3
	Narrative staging	17	3.4
D	<i>Whose turn is it now...</i>	10	2.0
	Prompting	7	1.4
	Bid for Floor	3	0.6

Table 3. Summary of cognitive effects of *well* in the corpus adopted from Klerk (2005: 1190)

According to the findings of this study Schourup is right in saying that "*well* often serves as a "quasi-linguistic mental state" interjection used to indicate the speaker's state of mind" (p. 1191), because 45.3 % of the instances of *well* was used in an 'evincive' way, indicating that the speaker is consulting with himself/herself before proceeding. In most of the cases *well* was used for signalling the need of time to think and only 2 % functioned as a marker of change of turn. All of the functions mentioned here have been identified and analysed in previous studies on NS use of DMs.

Müller's paper (2004) adds empirical evidence to the theories and assumptions that have been introduced so far. She scrutinized how German English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) speakers used the DM *well* in comparison to American NSs. The data for

the survey was taken from the Giessen-Long Beach “Chaplin” Corpus. In this study pairs of university students watched a silent Chaplin movie, and one of the pairs was called out in the middle of the movie. Afterwards the students who were able to watch the whole movie had to retell their peers the second half of the movie, and they had to discuss the first half with each other. 34 American NS, 4 British NS and 77 German EFL speakers were involved in the study (Müller 2004: 1162).

Müller describes the use of *well* on three discursive levels – namely local, structural, and dialog level – and identifies 16 specific functions as it is shown in Table 4:

Level	Category	Short explanation of the function of <i>well</i>
Local level	RCP	Rephrasing or correcting a phrase
	SRP	Searching for the right phrase
Structural level	QUO	Introducing a (real or fictitious) quotation
	MTS	Move to story
	NSC	Introducing the next scene
	CCL	Conclusive <i>well</i>
Dialog level	IDA	Indirect / insufficient / delayed answer
	DIA	Direct answer to (combined y/n- and) wh-question
	RSQ	Response to a self-posed question
	CTA	Continuing answer
	COO	Contributing own opinion
	EPS	Evaluating previous statement(s)
Without level	RAG	Ragbag category, indefinable
	NCA	No category applied/applicable
Non-discourse marker use	ADV	Adverbial use (well-done; she played her part well)
	ADD	‘In addition’ (as well (as))

Table 4. Categories of well, adopted from Müller (2004: 1163)

As we can see it, *well* functions on three levels and in different categories in the data. The findings of the study confirmed the assumption that some functions of *well* are used more by NNSs while others are used more frequently by NSs. Moreover, German EFL speakers used almost all functions of the DM more than American NSs did.

Müller (2005) studied the NS-NNS differences in terms of the frequency of usage of *well* sorted out by level. He also represented two more categories: the ragbag category and the non-DM use of *well*.

He found that *well* is used more by German EFL students than by NSs on each level, but the results are more interesting if we look at the different functions separately. On the local level EFL students used *well* 7.5 times as much as NSs for searching for the right phrase (SRP), while *well* was less used by them for rephrasing or correcting a phrase (RCP). On the structural level, EFL students used the DM about half as often as NSs for introducing a quotation, but it occurred twice as many times in their speech when marking a move to a story or introducing the next scene. More interestingly, conclusive *well* (CCL) was not applied by NSs at all, only by EFL students. Similarly, on the dialog level *well* was used only by NNSs for continuing an answer. Another striking difference can be found in the category IDA (indirect/insufficient/delayed answer), which was employed five times more by EFL speakers than by NSs. *Well* for evaluating previous statement (EPS) was also used more by NNSs,

while the opposite is true for the function of contributing own opinion (COO). Müller does not analyse the remaining functions of this level, as they ranged below 0.02 %. I am not going to discuss the other two groups, because they show the use of *well* when it is not a DM (Müller 2005: 1172-1173).

In summary, except for RCP, QUO and COO, all the functions of the DM *well* were used more by NNSs than by American NSs. Müller identified several potential factors that might have influenced the use of *well* by German EFL speakers, out of which the most probable ones include how DMs are taught in German textbooks, the attempt to avoid the German-sounding ‘so’, and the frequency of translational equivalents (pp. 1176-79).

2 Influencing factors

2.1 Proficiency level

Most of the studies suggest that the degree and quality of DM use in NNSs is influenced by numerous factors. The major one is the proficiency level of the second language learner (henceforth SLL) and the other contributing elements are all in connection with it.

Hellermann and Vergun found that the DMs are used by more proficient learners of a language, but they do not use them to the degree a NS would do. These adult learners of English were not taught DM use at school, yet they used three of them, namely *you know*, *like*, and *well*, on a regular basis. The correspondence between the frequency of DM use and the learners’ proficiency level shows consistency: the number and the occurrence of DMs increases with their proficiency level. This is represented in Table 5 (adapted from Hellermann 2007: 167):

Proficiency level	Number of DMs used	Turns transcribed	Ratio of DMs used per turn
A	0	1209	0
B	7	2500	0.003
C	37	3499	0.011
D	55	1594	0.034
Total	99	8802	0.011

Table 5. All DMs: distribution by proficiency level

2.2 Time spent in the target country

It has been pointed out by Hellerman and Vergun that the students who have been in the US for less than a year used DMs less frequently, while those who have been there for a longer time were more likely to have the pragmatic DMs as part of their language. The more time students has spent in the target country and the more contact that they had with the target language culture, the more frequently they tended to use DMs in their speech. Those students, for example, who had been in the US for at least two years at the time of the study, used over three times as many DMs as those who had spent there less than one and a half years (*ibid.*).

2.3 Target language use and reading outside the classroom

The students who used by far the most DMs in their classroom talk reported using English outside school as well. In contrast, those students who used few DMs used their first language outside the classroom almost exclusively.

Reading in the second language also seems to have a great influence on DM use. Determining factors include the frequency, length and object of reading in the target language. The student who used the most DMs spent a lot of time reading books and articles in English. However, the students using less DMs were the ones who seldom read in the target language and even when they did, they read student picture books and children's books (Hellermann 2007: 168).

The results of this study supported the previous findings that showed that students with a higher proficiency in the target language are more likely to use more DMs, and these students are the ones who are more acculturated to the culture of the target country.

2.4 Teachers' DM use

Although the teachers in Hellermann's study did not directly teach DM use, their speech was a model for the students. Hellermann and Vergun recorded 135 minutes of teachers' talk, in which the DM *well* occurred only five times. More interestingly, *like* and *you know* were not used by the teachers at all. Two tokens of *well* occurred in a level D classroom, three in a level A classroom, but two of these occurred in the talk between two teachers. Teachers used other DMs that are characteristic of transitions between classroom activities (e.g. *now*, *so*) more frequently (pp. 174-175).

So DMs were not modelled for students, yet they learned and used them. Consequently they must have learned them incidentally. "Incidental learning occurs when the learner has repeated exposure to particular lexical items in oral contexts. This suggests that if DMs are retained and used as part of the learner's interlanguage system, then learners must be getting repeated exposure to and rehearsal of these markers through conversational interaction either inside the classroom or outside" (p. 176). In this case, this incidental learning must have happened due to exposure coming from outside the classroom, as the focal DMs (*well*, *you know* and *like*) were not taught at school and teachers used organizational DMs at class. These DMs are for linking activities to each other, not for establishing interpersonal relationships.

I suppose that teachers' use of DMs increases with the students' proficiency level, because teachers can use more lifelike talk and ignore foreigner talk when communicating with more advanced students.

3 Conclusion

In the present paper I reviewed some research on the differences between NS and NNS use of DMs, and I attempted to draw attention to the possible influencing factors as well. Special attention was given to the use of the DM *well*.

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