

Discourse analysis and teaching spoken language in ELT pedagogy: a study on functions of discourse marker “well”

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Abstract

In spite of the importance of spoken language, spoken grammar is ignored in English language teaching and using. Aiming to increase people's awareness of the significance of spoken language, the current study conducted an in-depth analysis on one of the most commonly used discourse markers “well”, discussing how it functions in spoken language. Specifically, the study took the novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* as the analysed corpus, utilizing a corpus analysis software Antconc to collect the discourse maker “well” and analyse its functions. Excluding “well” acting as an adverb and part of formulaic language, 71 sentences with discourse maker well in spoken language were analysed. After examining the raw data in the original contexts, five main functions of “well” including shifting a topic, gaining time for consideration, attracting listener's attention, ending and continuing a conversation were detected. Among the five functions, indicating a topic shift and attaining time for thinking were used most frequently; the former one recognized the linking role while the latter built interpersonal relationships. Hence, discourse marker well played a crucial role in daily oral communication, and discussing its functions can be a beginning point and motivation for enhancing language education of spoken language.

Keywords

Discourse marker; language analysis; spoken grammar; ELT pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Today, English language has been generally regarded as a *lingua franca* and people in various contexts endeavor to learn English with an attempt to achieve worldwide communication. However, in English as a second and foreign language teaching, there is a strong preference for written English, with written grammar considered as correct and standard (Ruivivar, 2022). The over-emphasis on written grammar and the ignorance of spoken grammar can hinder learning authentic spoken interaction and be harmful to learners' oral productions (Lakew et al., 2021). To reverse this situation, English education should recognize the importance of spoken language and incorporate both written and spoken grammar in English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy (McCarthy & Carter, 2001).

Delving into spoken English which is highly interactive (Carter & McCarthy, 2017), it is common to use discourse markers such as “well”, “right” and “so” to help communicators to arrange their speech (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Therefore, studying discourse markers can be an appropriate way to study spoken grammar. In light of this, the current study focuses on the discourse marker well in spoken language in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). With an attempt to figure out the functions of discourse marker well, the current study adopts a corpus analysis approach, analyzing the initial data in specific contexts. The results of the research on function can further deepen the understanding of discourse markers and

spoken English and help to recognize the significance of spoken grammar, thus contributing to the increasing weight of spoken grammar in English Language Teaching (ELT).

2. Literature Review

Spoken language is used in real time in interpersonal interactions without any plans and spoken grammar can serve to organize the speaking contents (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Even though spoken grammar plays a crucial role in everyday communication, in ELT practice, spoken grammar has been stigmatized by written-based grammar standards, being seen as grammatically incorrect (Ruivivar, 2022). Also, English teaching practice may ignore spoken grammar used in real-world English usage, fitting the spoken language in the perceived forms of written-based grammar (Jones & Waller, 2011). The strong bias toward written and normative grammar may simplify the authentic use of English language, undermining the production of spoken language (McCarthy & Carter, 2001).

To shed light into the value of spoken grammar, discourse markers, as a significant part in spoken grammar, are discussed in this study. The investigation of discourse markers needs to highlight the forms as well as functions (Carter, 2003). Exploring the grammatical forms of discourse markers, they stand outside of the sentence, without affecting the sentence structure and grammar (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Jones & Carter, 2014). In terms of functions of discourse markers, they can link, monitor, and manage discourses (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Particularly investigate the linking role, discourse markers can organize speech and associate the current utterance with the following discourses (Schiffrin, 1987; Redeker, 1991). Not limited to linguistic linkage, discourse markers have social functions where they stimulate the interactions among speakers, listeners and message. (Aijmer, 2002; Biber et al., 2021). Therefore, in the current paper, discourse markers can be defined as spoken grammar which exists outside of the sentence structure, functioning to link discourse and signal interpersonal relationship in oral speaking.

Amplifying how discourse markers functions in spoken language specifically, they can be utilized to achieve three dominant purposes (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Rooted in the linking role, discourse markers can first be used to organize the discourse such as starting, ending, changing and restarting a topic, and they can also mark optional expressions to indicate the agreement and monitor discourse. Aligned with the social and interpersonal functions, discourse markers can also act to response to the speakers.

“Well”, as a high-frequency word in English, is usually used as a meaningful word showing satisfaction to something such as “She behaves well”, or as a formulaic sequence such as “as well”. In spoken language, well is not merely used for constructing meaning but also acts as a discourse marker, being one of the most widely used discourse marker. Previous research investigated its functions in diverse speaking contexts. Consistent with the linking and social functions discussed above, the functions of discourse marker well are structural and attitudinal (Innes, 2010), used to change a topic, offer speakers more time to earn listeners’ response and protect faces of communicators when they have some disagreements (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Biber et al., 2021; Holtgraves, 1997; Jucker, 1993).

In ELT practice, corpus can be considered as an appropriate English teaching and learning content. Collecting a large number of texts systematically, it is able to offer students actual data derived from everyday language usage (Biber et al., 2002; Friginal, 2018). However, in spoken English grammar learning, learners show complicated feelings towards corpus-informed instruction. For one hand, they may be optimistic about corpus-based learning (Lakew et al., 2021). One illustration is using role-play corpus to motivate students’ enthusiasm of English learning (Nava & Pedrazzini, 2011). On the other hand, they may find it challenging to understand some abstract linguistic rules and concepts merely learning from linguistic corpus

and under this circumstance, clear explanations of linguistic patterns can be a necessary supplement (Jones & Carter, 2014). The studies above took corpus as a real-life learning content, trying to discuss the possibility of teaching spoken grammar with corpus input. Similarly, recognizing the potential of corpus input in English education, the current paper will adapt corpus analysis to explore how discourse marker functions in spoken contexts and further discuss how corpus can be used in ELT practice.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

To increase the awareness of teaching spoken grammar, this study took Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (Rowling, 1997), a world well-known novel with lots of spoken conversation, as the analyzed corpus. A corpus analysis software Antconc (Antony, 2023) was adopted to collect the discourse marker well in the novel. Specifically, after inputting the key word well in the searching box of KWIC (Key Word in Context) in Antconc, 112 sentences with well in the novel were collected. Among the 112 sentences, considering the focus of the current study is spoken grammar, the following well was excluded: (1) a part of the clause structure such as “I hope you are well” “Well done”; (2) part of the formulaic sequences such as “as well” “might well” that do not link discourse in the conversation; (3) not in spoken language. Thereafter, 71 sentences in spoken language with discourse marker well were collected. The samples were examined sentence by sentence in contexts, used to figure out and categorize the functions of the discourse marker well.

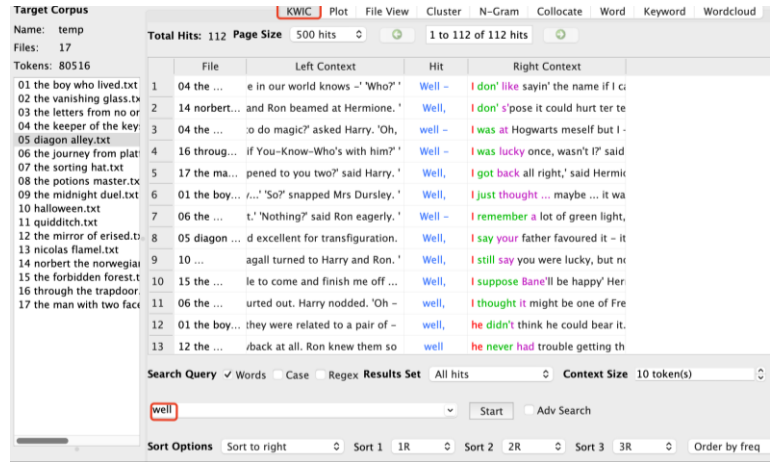


Figure1: Using KWIC of Antconc to collect sentences with well

3.2. Data Analysis

The study mainly employed corpus analysis, which can be considered as a kind of discourse analysis focusing on language use, utilizing quantitative methods to study all texts in a corpus and thereafter locates the discourse structures (Biber et al., 2007). Thus, the current study calculated the frequency of specific functions of discourse markers well. Not restricted to the quantitative approach, the analysis also adopted the qualitative method, delving into the particular discourse marker and categorizing its functions. Specifically, in data analysis, this study adapted Biber et al.'s (2007) seven-step corpus-based analysis and summarized it into five steps (see Table 1), adopting a bottom-up approach to analyze the collected samples. Thereafter, 5 basic functions with the corresponding patterns are categorized and discussed.

Table 1: Five-step corpus based analysis

Steps	Explanation in this approach
1.Segmentation	Segment the text into discourse units with discourse marker well and others
2. Analysis	Analyze how discourse markers used and functioned in discourse
3. Classification	Group the patterns and functions appearing in the analysis
4. Description of linguistic patterns	Describe the patterns
5. Description and categorization of functions	Describe the functions

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The analysis unveiled five core functions of the discourse marker well in the corpus, with 27 sentences using well to shift a topic, 25 leaving time for speakers to consider the speaking content, 12 attracting listeners’ attention, 5 ending a topic and 2 restarting the old conversation. Among all the functions, well is most frequently adapted to mark a topic change and indicate time for consideration. The following part describes the 5 functions and their related patterns and structures in the corpus.

Table 2: Functions, frequency and structures of well in the data set

Functions	Frequency	Discourse marker well in the spoken text
Mark a topic shift	27	One topic+ well+ new topic thinks about some words
leave time to think	25	speaker A asks +well+ speaker B answers (most common)
Focus attention	12	Repetition : “well, well, well”
close a conversation	5	Well+ that’s it/that
resume a topic	2	Well+ there’s nothing for it
		The original topic +another topic +Well+ original topic

To begin with, when discourse marker well is employed to switch a topic, it is usually used between two sentences on different topics, and it can also cooperate with other discourse markers such as “good: to alter the topic. For example, in the following conversations, Harry changed the conversation focus by using well:

Hermione: But Harry - what if You-Know-Who's with him?'
Harry: Well - I was lucky once, wasn't I?
Harry: 'Good - well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later.

When well helps to earn consideration time, it is usually used by responders who need some time to think about the answers, or it can also be utilized by interlocutors to gain more time to think about some expressions.

Mr Ollivander: 'Which is your wand arm?

Harry: Er –well, I'm right-handed.

Dumbledore : Only because you're too - well - noble to use them.

Well can also repeat itself to focus attention. Under this circumstance, well can repeat three times to emphasise and attract listeners' attention, e.g. "Well, well, well, 'we are in trouble". It can also play its role in contexts without an obvious pattern. For example, in the sentence, "Well, what are you all waiting for? Everyone stands by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up", there is not a clear structure like repetition, but the function can be detected in the context, where the speaker wants everyone to listen to her.

In terms of the latter two functions with the least occurrence in the corpus, discourse marker well ends the conversation with some formulaic language such as "that's it" and "that's nothing for it". When it is adapted to resume a topic, it is followed by the original topic, e.g. "Your father, on the other hand, favoured a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favoured it", where well is used to return the topic of Harry's father.

Overall, discourse marker well can be used for various functions with some features, and it can also function with other discourse markers such as "Good" and "Er", but there are no rigid or static structures of how discourse marker well functions. Instead spoken grammar functions in contexts, to identify the particular functions, it is crucial to associate spoken grammar and contexts.

4.2. Discussion

The findings in the corpus with abundant spoken language can indicate how discourse markers function in real-life conversations, offering some meaningful insights in ELT practice. Even though some research argues that spoken language in written text is different from that in actual contexts, since it is well-organized and not as casual as real-life conversations (Culpeper & Fernandez-Quintanilla, 2017), spoken grammar in novels is still fundamentally speech-oriented (Leech, 2000). Thus, discussing spoken grammar discourse markers in corpus including novels can discover how it is used in spoken conversations to some degree. Meanwhile, the two dominant functions of discourse marker well reported above are in harmony with the prior research considering the two main functions as the most typical functions in real use, with the first achieving the linking role while the second demonstrating the interpersonal and social function (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Biber et al., 2021). Hence, the findings are not limited to novels writing, but implying the authentic speaking communications. Simultaneously, the accentuation of the context highlights its role in fostering effective oral communications. In the instant and changing conversation, without sufficient learning, EFL speakers may find it difficult to recognize and use discourse makers. In this case, contexts can be utilized to reduce the uncertainty and make oral expressions more fluent (Crible, 2020). Particularly, three primary types of contexts including situational contexts, background knowledge context and co-textual context serve to promote spoken conversations (Cutting & Fordyce, 2021). They explain, the first two contexts go beyond the spoken discourse, demonstrating what speakers see around them at that moment and their background knowledge respectively. The third functions are within the spoken texts, referring to the contexts that was expressed earlier. Integrating all the three contexts in dialogues, communicators can select the appropriate discourse markers to organize the ongoing

conversations and thereafter better understand the spoken discourses (Biber et al., 2002). Thus, context contributes significantly to lessening the ambiguity and stimulating conversations, and it has a pivotal role in studying spoken grammar in ELT pedagogy.

In terms of ELT practice, the current research results indicate that the proportion of spoken language including discourse markers should be highlighted and increased. Acknowledging patterns of spoken grammar are able to enhance EFL learners' confidence in English using, thereby increasing their oral production (Rashtchi & Afzali, 2011). With insufficient approach to spoken grammar in English education, students may regard the written grammar as the only correctness, thus avoiding the "wrong" spoken features which are crucial to their English speaking (Ruivivar, 2022). Nevertheless, spoken grammar cannot be conceived as wrongness since it is widely used in daily communications, helping to fulfill diverse communicative and social functions. To foster them to speak English more, it is essential to incorporate spoken grammar into ELT practice, which can not only raise learners' confidence in English learning but also help them express themselves clearly in oral communication.

Specifically delving into the particular methods of teaching spoken grammar, consistent with the previous research on this area (Lakew et al., 2021; Nava & Pedrazzini, 2011), the findings of the current study promote real-life input of spoken grammar and efficient output in English teaching and learning design. The current study adapting the well-known novel as the analyzed corpus, emphasized the functions of the specific discourse marker in spoken contexts. Similarly, English teaching and learning can make use of corpus with authentic English sources as learning content. For instance, sitcoms rooted in real life such as *Modern Family* and novels with diverse face-to face conversations can be included into part of the lesson material, since there is diverse spoken grammar in specific speaking contexts in these discourse corpuses. Furthermore, concentrating on productive output, ELT practice can increase the opportunities of speaking English. For example, English learners can engage in instant role-playing games on certain topics, where they can consider how to use spoken grammar in real-life conversations, and they can further compare it with the written grammar they learn in textbooks. Hence, teaching and learning spoken language should be rooted in true-to-life material and encourage English speaking in concrete contexts.

In general, grounded in contexts, spoken grammar such as discourse marker well can help interlocutors organize spoken conversation and stimulate efficient communication. Applying corpus analysis in investigation of spoken grammar draws some insights into teaching spoken grammar in ELT practice, offering feasible possibility of utilizing a corpus to teach spoken language.

Future research can discuss various patterns of spoken grammar in different genres which are not limited to novels, thereafter increasing learners' and educators' awareness of the significance of learning spoken grammar.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to explore how discourse marker well functions in authentic spoken contexts, and thereafter enhance the awareness of spoken language teaching and learning in ELT practice. To meet the research aim, the study utilized a corpus analysis software Antconc to collect and analyze the discourse and texts. After data analysis, five key functions of discourse marker well were reported in specific contexts, namely switching a topic, attaining consideration time, drawing listeners' attention, closing and resume a topic, the first two of which are most used in the analyzed corpus and even everyday life. Therefore, analyzing discourse marker in a corpus with various spoken contexts indicate how spoken grammar used and functions in real world. ELT teaching and learning can also make use of corpus as learning material, paying more attention to spoken grammar and language.

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