Procedural meanings of *well* in a corpus of Xhosa English.[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the use of the pragmatic marker *well* in a large corpus of the discourse of non-mother tongue speakers of Xhosa English, which is a sub-variety of Black South African English. A brief overview of discourse markers in general and of *well* in particular is provided, and the problems they pose to linguists in terms of difficulties in defining their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties are examined. After a brief description of the nature of the corpus of Xhosa English on which the study is based, and of the methodological approach which was followed, the rest of the article focuses on a fairly detailed exposition of the overall trends in contextualised uses and procedural meanings of *well* in the corpus, along with examples. Some (limited) parallels are drawn between the use of *well* in XE and other English corpora, in order to highlight the problems experienced by L2 learners in acquiring discourse markers.

Keywords: pragmatic marker; *well*; discourse marker; non-native speakers; Black South African English; Xhosa English; corpora.

1.   Introduction

This paper reports on the use of the discourse marker *well* by second-language English speakers for whom Xhosa is a mother tongue (Xhosa is the second largest indigenous black language in South Africa). To sound like a native one has to know 'how things are said', and to use "conventional expressions" and standard ways of talking (Langacker, 1983:34; de Cock, 1999:52). Among the very useful words and phrases which contribute towards natural, native-sounding language are discourse markers (words like *oh, well,* and *so*), which are ubiquitous in all spoken discourse. Despite the crucial role these words play in signaling to hearers what to attend to in discourse and how to interpret messages, they seldom attract attention in the formal language classroom (Romero Trillo, 2002). As a consequence, more often than not they are invisible for second-language learners, who are left to 'pick

them up' outside of the formal learning environment. In light of the important discoursal functions of *well*, and the dearth of studies on the use of discourse markers by non-native speakers, this study aimed to explore the patterns of usage of this discourse marker in a corpus of over half a million words of spontaneous dialogue between Xhosa English (XE) speakers.

2.   Discourse markers

Only in the last twenty years has serious interest been shown in the study of discourse markers, leaders in the field being Levinson (1983), Schourup (1985) Schiffrin (1987), Blakemore (1987; 2002) and Fraser (1988). (Other key role-players are listed in Watts(1988:241) and Schourup (2001)). Sometimes called discourse particles (e.g. Schourup, 1985), and more recently referred to as "expressions of procedural meaning" (Blakemore 2002; Watts 2003) these words are an important tool by means of which interlocutors attempt to guide the processes of interpretation and social involvement in verbal interaction (Watts, 1988), and 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 aspect of ongoing interaction, and are usually independent of the propositional content of the syntactic structure of which they form part.

Because oral interaction occurs in real time, requiring instantaneous cognitive processing, most of which is below the level of consciousness, it is crucially important that the addressee is given some clues as to what to focus on, what to ignore, what to retain in short-term memory, what to let go of, and how to interpret what is being said. Discourse markers play a vital role in giving such clues, and are therefore a very important part of day-to-day discourse.

Despite all of the work to date, in which discourse markers have been analysed from a discourse analytical perspective (e.g. Schiffrin, 1987), from the point of view of conversation analysis (Owen, 1983; Watts, 1987), interactional sociolinguistics (Watts, 1989), relevance theory (Blakemore, 1987, 2002; Watts, 1988, Jucker, 1993) and lexical approaches (e.g. Bolinger, 1989), there is still no clear definition of exactly what is understood by the term 'discourse marker'.

Firstly there is the vexing question of their syntactic identity. Discourse markers are a heterogeneous set of expressions ranging from non-lexical items (*oh*), through words such as *well,* and phrases like *all right* and *of course* to larger fragments such as *you know* and *you*

see. They are drawn from a wide range of syntactic categories, including verbs (*look*), adverbs (*now*), prepositional phrases (*in particular*), idioms (*by and large*), literal phrases (*as a result)*, interjections (*well*), coordinate conjunctions (*and*), subordinate conjunctions (*so*), and odd words like *okay* or *right*, which don't really belong anywhere! Such a disparate group obviously cannot belong to any particular syntactic category. Nonetheless they clearly merit attention syntactically, since they display regularities of occurrence in relation to utterances with a propositional structure, and they form a very important part of speakers' linguistic competence. While not a separate syntactic category *per se*, they are nevertheless propositionally separate (Fraser, 1999:943), and in English they tend to occur outside the syntactic sentential structure, mostly as lefthand discourse brackets in sentence initial position. In some cases they can occur medially, acting parenthetically, and therefore remaining 'outside' the syntactic structure despite their position. Only a few can occur utterance-finally. Thus discourse markers are generally lexical adjuncts which are syntactically independent of the discourse of which they form part, and yet there is a crucial link between their syntactic regularity of occurrence in sentences and the meta-pragmatic functions they fulfil in such sentences.

The actual number of so-called discourse markers as such is still a matter for debate, as is the question of whether they comprise a legitimate category in the first place (Schourup 1999, Blakemore 2002). For example, whether *y'know* and *I mean* qualify is a moot point: according to Fraser (1999) they do not qualify because they fail to signify how the current discourse is linked to the preceding discourse, but even this criterion is not commonly accepted, and Blakemore (2002) argues against it at some length. Also not generally included as discourse markers are pause markers such as *um* and *uh*, which serve rather to fill spaces and maintain the floor than to offer pragmatic commentary (Fraser, 1988:27).

Secondly there is the question of their meaning. It is generally agreed (see Schourup, 1985, Schiffrin, 1987 and Fraser, 1988) that each of the discourse markers has a general core meaning, such as a speaker commitment to topic change (*by the way*), parallelism (*similarly*), reorienting (*anyway*), dissonance *(well; actually)* and consequence (*so*). However, no agreement has been reached on what exactly these core meanings are (see Watts, 1989; Schourup, 1999, 2001). While most theorists see them as tending to encode pragmatic rather than content meaning (Watts, 1988:246), Blakemore (2002) argues that discourse markers actually do contribute in some way to the conceptual content of utterances, in that while they

are non-truth-conditional, their meaning, in the broadest sense, is inferred from and determined by the context in which they are used. She refers to this as "linguistically encoded non-truth conditional meaning" (2002:33). Discourse markers undoubtedly do influence meanings, and it has been shown that while these expressions can be deleted with no loss of meaning, the force of the utterance would consequentially be less clear. However, definitions of core / content meanings remain unsatisfactorily vague, with each discourse marker permitting a fairly wide range of interpretations.

In terms of their functions, discourse markers are no less complex. Schiffrin (1987) identifies three main roles for the eleven discourse markers she discusses: they act as contextual coordinates, they index adjacent utterances to the speaker, hearer or both, and they index the utterance to prior and/or subsequent discourse. She sees them as serving an important integrative function, acting as some sort of "discourse glue" (Fraser, 1988:20). But while it has been claimed that discourse markers are those expressions which "mark off one segment of the overall discourse with reference to some other segment(s)" (Watts 1988:242) and commit the speaker to a specific communicative intention of some kind (Fraser, 1988:19), there is no general agreement on these points. Even the claim that they contribute to the interpretation of the utterance rather than to its propositional content, giving powerful clues about the level of commitment the speaker makes regarding the link between the current utterance and prior (and sometimes subsequent) discourse (Fraser, 1988:22; Schiffrin 1987)[2] is not fully supported (e.g. Schourup 2001, Blakemore 1992), especially in cases when there is no prior discourse and a speaker relates his/her utterance to a proposition derived from observation of a state of affairs (e.g. "So you're back").

Blakemore (1992 (cited in Blakemore 2002:95)) suggests a classification of discourse markers in terms of constraints on relevance, based on a view that the meanings of discourse markers directly encode the type of cognitive effect intended. She observes that these words indicate how the relevance of one discourse segment is dependent on another segment, and recognises three types of cognitive effect, depending on whether:

a.	they lead to the derivation of contextual implications (e.g. Ben can open Tom's safe. *After all, he knows the combination (*Blakemore 2002:95);

b.	they strengthen an existing assumption (e.g. I can drive you. *After all I'm going there anyway)*;

c.	they lead to the contradiction and elimination of a foregoing assumption (e.g. They

are giving away free beers. *But you have to pay an entrance fee*).

While Blakemore supports the existence of the three broad categories, she acknowledges the lack of more finely grained distinctions between the meanings of the different expressions within each category (2002:96), and she uses *well* in order to demonstrate that procedural meaning must go beyond encoding and cognitive effects. In her view (see also Schourup 1999:260) there is no single category of discourse markers, and concern with classification of coherence or discourse relations will not yield a universally acceptable account of discourse markers (2002:184).

3.   *Well* as a discourse marker

Well is one of the most well-studied discourse markers (Schourup, 2001:1025), possibly because it is one of the more complex. It never occurs as a right-hand discourse bracket (Watts 1988:249), and regardless of whether it is placed initially or medially, it is always outside the propositional structure of its host clause, and has pragmatic scope over the ensuing proposition. This important little word anchors the speaker into a conversation at those points where some guidance is needed for the receiver as to how to interpret what is to come and relate it to what has gone before. The fact that it is never placed finally reinforces its prospective focus, or continuative properties. There is much debate about the role of *well,* and while it is generally agreed that when it is at the head of a response in conversation, it signals hesitation, due to a contribution somehow inconsistent with the foregoing discourse, there is little agreement (see Blakemore 2002) about claims that its 'usual' functions are to preface utterances which reject, cancel or disagree with the content or tenor of such discourse.[3]

Blakemore (2002:130) makes the point (following Jucker 1993) that "the elusiveness of *well* derives from the range of different purposes it seems to serve in different contexts". While she says that it is impossible to say what *well* conventionally implicates, she supports Carlson (1984) and Bolinger (1989) in claiming that it broadly encodes the procedure of indicating a speaker's acceptance of something, namely that the utterance it introduces is "consistent with the principle of relevance, and hence that things are well" (Blakemore 2002:129). The interpretation of this procedure is necessarily wide-ranging, and her examples (2002:130-1) include it's use to preface counter-arguments, direct denials, concessive dissent, defensive and diffident responses, antagonistic refusals, consent, correction of wording, strategising, vagueness, emphasis, questions, astonishment, mild curiosity or reluctance to

5

speak. It can even introduce an utterance where there has been no prior discourse at all. In every case, she argues convincingly that the broad overarching procedure indicated by the presence of *well* is linked to the establishment by the speaker of a mutual understanding of what is relevant to speaker and hearer, and hence the achievement of coherence. The word gives the go-ahead to the hearer to proceed "with the inferential processes involved in the recovery of cognitive effects" (2002:138). In her account, the communicative principle of relevance is accepted as universal (one does not have the option, as speaker or hearer, of violating it), but while it is always presumed that interlocutors are aiming for optimal relevance, the additional use of *well* serves to ensure the hearer's effort in processing the message. Because interlocutors know that speakers cannot always produce the "perfect" maximally relevant utterance to suit the contextual demands of the situation (given their own personal limitations, needs and physical and ethical constraints, *well* is used "to encourage the hearer to process the utterance for relevance in a context which the speaker believes would not have otherwise yielded a maximally relevant interpretation" (Blakemore 2002:141).

This broad theoretical underpinning of the use of *well* serves to account adequately for the wide-ranging functions it appears to perform: in every case, the search for relevance in an imperfect communicative context is evident, as will be demonstrated in the examples analysed from the XE corpus (section 5). Often, the hearer is required to renegotiate a context, but each time this is a result of the hearer's recognition that the speaker was aiming for optimal relevance. The speaker must either produce a "perfect" utterance, or must reorient the hearer to a context of assumptions which will yield the intended interpretation, aiming for optimal relevance. In the latter case, *well* serves to signal this reorientation. Levels of relevance may be constrained by the hearer's lack of prior knowledge or by the speaker's own preferences (e.g. to be polite or tactful) or abilities (e.g. to find the right word).[4]

4.   The study

This study reports on the contexts of use of *well* by non-native speakers of Xhosa English, a variety of Black South African English (BSAE). It does not seek to identify fundamentally distinct context-specific uses as such, but rather to provide evidence, following Blakemore (2002) for a unified treatment of the discourse marker, in terms of which all its uses can be accounted for.

The development of particular styles of discourse has been viewed as a fundamental

part of the process of nativisation of English (Kachru, 1992), but while non-native discourse patterns, including rhetorical patterns, pragmatic norms and the coding of politeness are receiving increasing attention in the literature (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993), in South Africa there has been comparatively little research into the discourse features of BSAE, apart from Gough (1996).

While there is considerable debate about the linguistic status of BSAE, it is generally regarded today as the variety of English commonly used by mother-tongue speakers of South Africa's indigenous African languages in areas where English is not the language of the majority. It is also commonly referred to as a 'new' English, whose roots lie in the history of the teaching of English to the black people of this country, where the role models through whom English is taught to most learners in South Africa are second language learners. Roux and Louw (2000:7) and Van Rooy and van Huysteen (2000) draw attention to the question of whether BSAE is a monolithic entity or whether there may be distinct varieties based on the mother-tongue of the speaker. Given the low levels of English competence and tuition in the country, and the localised, rural and isolated nature of many of these linguistic communities, it is natural to assume that different varieties of BSAE have evolved along slightly different lines in different areas. Although the nine official languages form 4 families or groups (Sotho, Nguni, etc) whose members share some characteristics, the language groups themselves differ quite significantly. There are also 'unofficial' indigenous languages, such as the Khoi and San languages and minor Bantu languages such as Phuti. For this reason, a separate corpus comprising exclusively the English of Xhosa speakers (of whom there are some 7 million at last census date) has been compiled (de Klerk, 2002a, 2002b).

The corpus of Xhosa English stood at 540,000 transcribed words at the time of this analysis. The 299 contributors to the corpus were all Xhosa speakers of direct Xhosa descent who were at least 15 years old (grade 10) and had either been exposed to formal English tuition at school for at least 8 years or had a more limited education but at least 20 years exposure to normal use of English in their daily lives. Contributors all resided in the Eastern Cape Province. The corpus comprises unrehearsed spoken English with a tendency towards a somewhat 'formal' bias. The reason for the formal bias is that XE is likely to be fairly formal at all times, since truly private informal conversations between friends would be most likely to take place in Xhosa. Using a second language usually takes an extra effort, and there is usually a particular reason why it is used. This reason is commonly the fact that the person to

whom one is speaking is English-speaking, or the audience speaks a range of different languages, of which English is the most likely *lingua franca*. Such contexts are, by their very nature, likely to be more formal. However, this is not viewed as a problem, since the corpus aims to represent what is most typical, not what is unusual.

While it would obviously be desirable to compare usage of *well* in XE with its use in other corpora, this paper restricts itself because of space limitations to only limited cross references to it's use in the native-speaker and non-native speaker corpus-based study of Romero Trillo (2002) (which compares child and adult usage of *well* by native English and non-native (Spanish) English speakers), and with native speaker usage in the New Zealand English (NZE) spoken corpus.[5]

Using WordSmith (a commercially available Concordancer), all instances of *well* were identified in the XE corpus, each in a context of 20 words on either side. All cases in which *well* was clearly used as a lexical adverb or adjective (e.g. *They were well prepared; I know him very well; he is well)* were then excluded from the database. Following Blakemore's view of a broad relevance-based theoretical underpinning for the wide-ranging functions *well* appears to perform, the subsequent analysis focussed on contextualised uses of the discourse marker, aiming to ascertain whether the search for relevance in an imperfect communicative context was evident, and whether there were any noticeable patterns of distribution of the type of relevance being sought. While acknowledging that *well* has a unified context-free 'core' meaning, all the pragmatic usages of *well* were then classified according to their use in terms of the four broad cognitive effects exemplified below.

5. **Results**

Altogether there were 788 uses of *well* in the XE corpus, of which 494 (62.6%) were pragmatic. This is much lower than the 2199 pragmatic uses of *well* in the NZ corpus (74% of all uses of *well*) (a rate of .5 versus .09 per 1000 words, which is a considerable difference). Of the uses of *well* in a 50,000 word sample of the London Lund Corpus[6], 87.4% (439/502) were pragmatic (Romero Trillo, 2002:777). Although the XE corpus yielded a lower frequency than both of these mother-tongue corpora, use of pragmatic *well* is significantly higher than the 53% of pragmatic usage reported for non-native Spanish speakers of English (op. cit. 779).

In addition, Romero Trillo reports a significant correlation between its use in combination with *I* by native speakers, reflecting a strongly interpersonal function relating to

cognitive and social activities (2002:777). Of the 494 pragmatic uses of *well* in the XE corpus, 35% (n=175) were immediately followed by a personal pronoun (105 *well I'm / I've*; 34 *well you*; 13 *well he*; 11 *well they*; 12 *well we*). In comparison, the NZ corpus had 33% (n=733) collocations of *well* directly with a personal pronoun. This therefore suggests a similar strongly interpersonal role for *well* in both NZE and XE. Other notable collocates in XE included signs of agreement (29 *okay / oh / yes / yeah / ja*), and common formulaic expressions such as *well I think* (12), *well you know* (11) and *well you see* (5). This was considerably lower than the distribution of such expressions in the NZ corpus (169 *okay/oh well,* 45 *yes/yeah* and 79 *well I think / you know / you see).*

Of further interest is the fact that of all occurrences of *well*, 32.4% (158) were turn-initial (in a further 48 cases, *ja, um* and *okay* preceded *well).* This tendency for *well* to precede utterances could generally regarded as natural, since discourse markers typically act as a guide to addressees as to how to react to what is about to be said, rather than acting retrospectively on what has already been said. Indeed, Watts (1988:244) makes the point that native speakers are less aware of those discourse markers which occur initially, since they are less marked (and therefore less salient) in such a position.

Table 1 summarises the overall trends in contextualised uses of *well* in the XE corpus. The headings used do not represent an attempt to force *well* into a classification system, but rather to provide a foundation for finer-grained distinctions of the types of cognitive effects achieved. In all cases, *well* acts as a linguistically encoded signal that there are cognitive effects to be derived, or, in other words, that "all is well" (Blakemore 2002:147). Additional texts containing further uses of *well* are provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Summary of cognitive effects of *well* in the corpus (n=494)

	Cognitive effect	**Number**	**Percentage**
A	*Allow me to think ...*	*315*	*63.8%*
	Evincive	224	45.3%
	Comparative	52	10.5%
	Filler	39	7.9%
B	*We aren't on the same wavelength ...*	*116*	*23.5%*
	Contradictory	86	17.4%

	Accepting	23	4.7%
	Harmonising	7	1.4%
C	*Achieving discourse coherence ...*	*53*	*10.7%*
	Topic shifting	36	7.3%
	Narrative staging	17	3.4%
D	*Whose turn is it now ...*	*10*	*2.0%*
	Prompting	7	1.4%
	Bid for Floor	3	0.6%

*5.1. **Well** to indicate that the speaker needs time to contemplate*

As Schourup puts it (2001:1026) *well* often serves as a "quasi-linguistic mental state" interjection used to indicate the speaker's state of mind. The word is thus used epistemically, and the speaker is taking into account their own perception of the current state of affairs (or at least what s/he perceives to be relevant from that state of affairs), alongside the hearer's probable perception of the current state of affairs. In addition to these retrospective characteristics inherent in the act of consideration involved in saying *well*, the use of this word also brings with it the suggestion of continuation, prospecting something to follow, and hints at a procedural meaning. In this sense, *well* is an 'evincive' (Schourup, 1985), indicating that the speaker is mentally cogitating or consulting with themselves before proceeding. In terms of Blakemore's relevance-based model, the speaker is making it clear to the hearer that what they are saying is indeed relevant, but that their own ability to express it well requires extra effort on their part. In other words, it's use indicates that all is well as long as the hearer understands that the speaker is inadequate in some way. 49.2% (243) uses of *well* in the corpus signalled this sort of careful deliberation to the hearer. Of these, 210 were clear cases of contemplation (see 1-6).

(1)   SD: But what about the people? They say "no the only the nurses and teachers who are employed there in Grahamstown Grahamstown Foundation during the festival". What are your views in that?
         LS: Mm *well* I think that thing should be look out, because those people are working eh they must, they must take people who don't have jobs ja, who are not working.

(2)   LM: What do you think about eh what is happening currently at eh Zimbabwe?

10

LH: *Well* I think uh it's, there's something wrong, because uh the guy is taking back his people's land and, *well* by that uh the whites have been staying on those lands for a long time. That is why I think it's going wrong.

(3)   PP: This one time I was busy playing solitaire and [pause] all of a sudden it just went 'boom' you know like you know no eh i- it's not like it was off. It was on. I switched it on and then fine I thought, *well* maybe it doesn't want to work or whatever.

(4)   SD: And then what are people - what kind of the huts they use in there, when they are in the bush?

        SN: *Well* it depends, because now in the townships they are using cardboards. In farms they are using grass.

(5)   LM: So [pause] do you think that em [pause] em what what do you think is going to be the outcome of Mugabe's actions?

        LH: *Well* uh I think because um British Britain they are not very much afraid of Mugabe's army and things like that, maybe they will like [sniff] declare war on Zimbabwe.

(6)   LP: If she does come over then I'll [pause] *well* she can't come at seven and expect to go half seven.

What could be viewed as *comparatives* form a sub-category of contemplatives following Bolinger (1989) (cited in Schourup, 2001). Bolinger sees comparison to a norm as the core use of *well*, closely related to its historical lexical origin of 'relatively good, relatively strong'. In this sense, this use of *well* is also inherently epistemic, involving inference based on what is already known or assumed, and making use of assumptions that are already accessible. In terms of relevance, with such uses of *well*, the hearer's task is to determine why the speaker has bothered to bring epistemic consideration in at that point (Schourup, 2001:1052). In the corpus, there were 52 cases (10.5%) in which *well* was apparently used in order to compare something to a norm.

(7)   TA: So is it difficult or easy?

        AS: *Well* I think [unclear] so far I'm managing but the work sometimes it's difficult because grade twelve is different from other grades.

(8)   SD: Do you think its fair?

        UU: Okay *well* um *well* um on that particular question I'm going to say something. You know as I read the bible, I'm a methodist, but I actually find that, you know, I don't criticise the bible but I I actually find that in the bible you see, the bible, there are some places, you know, where it criticises everything.

(9)   MG: I just want to ask you, you know, how do you find life at Rhodes, social life?
      SM: *Well* [pause] for somebody like me I mean
      MG: ja
      SM: It's going to be uh different.

(10) LS: *Well* I can compare the South African team to the national squad of Italy or
            Brazil, France. We when we play, just an example when we play against
            France there are chances of scoring scoring goals or winning the game, so I
            I've seen there that there is spirit.

(11) MV: It's the same?
      KM: Ja
      MV: Ja are you also, do you also get forced to stay six months?
      KM: [laugh]
      MV: Like in the olden days?
      KM: *Well* my father says so. He says uh they used to spend about six months in the
            bush [laugh] but now ja things change.

In addition, it was often evident (39 times) that, while still indicative of contemplation and signalling a procedural meaning to the hearer, *well* was possibly being used when the speaker actually had nothing to say, or was seeking a word. In other words, it was acting as a place filler, and the contemplation taking place was not 'philosophical', but linguistic. In this respect, one also needs to remember that these are second language speakers, less practised in English, and often in need of an extra moment to find words and formulate sentences (see example 12). In this use, *well* therefore signals to the hearer that their own ability to produce the optimally relevant response is compromised in some way, and that the hearer needs to take that into account when interpreting the response. In this category the notion of insufficiency or failure to achieve the type of coherence normally anticipated by the hearer is relevant: the use of *well* communicates that all is well, as long as the hearer recognises that any inadequacies in the response are not because of deliberate 'evasion', but due to the speaker's ignorance or verbal incompetence. The frequency of occurrence of *well* in close proximity to *um/er/uh* further reinforces this interpretation (25 *well uh / um*; 7 *well eh*). In other words, *well* was a often signal of uncertainty, providing the speaker with a bit more time to think (particularly necessary when using a second language). It often performed this function immediately following a question, and was also often collocated with *I think, maybe,* and *perhaps*.

(12) NB: I feel, *well* I feel [pause]
      ST: Badly

NB: Nie badly

ST: Why?

NB: Not actually not not badly I wouldn't say badly. I actually I'm a person of who uh uh have got a lot of patience well I I've got that hope that some some day something will happen.

*5.2: **Well** to signal the need for the hearer to reconsider an assumption*

Well was often used in the corpus to signal that some extra cognitive processing may be required on the part of the hearer, because of a misunderstanding or misconception. There were three ways in which *well* is used in the corpus in order to signal to the hearer that all is well as long as common understanding and expectations can be established, owing to the need for a shift from what the hearer may have expected or presupposed. Firstly, it often calls the hearer's attention to an act of ongoing mental assessment as a way to warn of something unexpected or divergent to follow. 17.4% (n=86) of all instances of *well* in the corpus suggested this kind of subtle effort to contradict a foregoing assumption. In 9 of these cases, it preceded correction of a previous error. Efforts to rephrase, accompanied by 'explain' were also evident.

(13)   MG: Ja so it's just going to be easy to to to just famili- familiarise yourself with other people, because you know these people, the Xhosa people, he just uh it's easy for him just to socialise with them, okay, especially if you just get to know the guys, I mean, as you say, with the coaching basketball so you just -

       SM: *well* actually when you say that Xhosa people

       MG: ja

       SM: I want to agree with you but uh there's there is there is - most people are not aware

       MG: ja

       SM: that I may come from uh as far as Zimbabwe.

(14)   XN: Do you know what we did in movies together? *Well* I was going to say the bathroom, I never thought I would go with a guy in a bathroom, it's something I never thought it would happen to me.

(15)   JT: Like everyone in the family

       LS: all have a cell

       JT: but I didn't I didn't want I didn't want one so [pause] they uh *well* it was my brother's cell phone, so, like, I don't have my own that's my

       LS: your own

       JT: *well* it is mine but not kind of like - they didn't buy it for me, they bought it for brother and my brother gave it to me

       LS: they bought it

       JT: and he bought another one so like uh they they are giving me crap.

(16) LH: Mugabe is [laugh] is uh taking back the lands that were taken from him by the British and he doesn't want to compensate, that's the problem.

LM: *Well* my friend let me em em correct you eh Zimbabwe, there were no floods at Zimbabwe, in Zimbabwe, the floods were in Mozambique.

Well also signals the need for the hearer to realise that there is a lack of fit between mutual understanding of current relevance in cases where there is implied resignation by the speaker in the face of some unkind or undesirable norm, e.g. "Oh *well*, I guess we will just have to accept it". In this use, according to Bolinger (1989) (cited in Schourup 2001:1031), the epistemic nature of the discourse marker is still evident. In terms of the overarching relevance theory guiding this investigation, its use could be seen as encouraging the hearer to recognise as relevant a contextual assumption which s/he seems not to have recognised. 4.8% (n=23) of all usages of *well* in the corpus indicated resignation or acceptance of this kind, thereby signalling to the hearer that a special procedural meaning was intended. Example 21 demonstrates it use as a single-word utterance with a long and breathy upglide-downglide, signalling some slight disagreement or a violation of expectation, and thus indirectly, reference to a norm.

(17) SD: This clay is being exported.

GH: *Well,* anything that could bring food to the table of Grahamstown, Grahamstown's people, it's fine with me.

(18) ZP: She told his husband that I'm not her daughter, she has one child, I - *well* do understand that, now that I'm old, that she wanted ... and then I told her what I should have told her when I was seven years old.

(19) KO: Absolutely. *Uyabona [do you understand]*?

MR: Okay, oh *well,* I get the point mm eh.

(20) SS: Okay is is that what you are trying to tell me?

LM: Yes that's what I'm trying to tell you.

SS: Okay *well* I I I can agree with you on that because really, America is a rich

LM: Yeah

SS: and it's got everything to make its own cities.

(21) PP: What's so funny [pause] mm?

XN: That's crazy.

PP: No, you laughed [unclear] laughed -

LO: She's smiling.

PP: Smiling and laughing is not the same thing.

JT: *Well* [extended, with rise-fall tone]

The other way to signal the need for reconsideration, although still challenging, is far more indirect and gentle, making more of an effort to soften the illocutionary effect of what is to come. While it indicates that something possibly undesirable is about to be said, its presence (often followed by a brief pause, allowing for thought) acts as a gentle warning that expectations will not be met in some way, softening its force and making it almost placatory and less abrasive by showing that it has been given due consideration. In this way, *well* still calls the hearer's attention to the need for extra procedural effort, but seems to mitigate the effect of the implication that the following utterance is likely to diverge from the options set up by foregoing discourse. Collocation with words like *maybe, but, though, despite* and negatives was noticeable in such cases.

Although this harmonising use of *well* was not frequently used (only 1.4% of uses), the low occurrence may have had something to do with the nature of the corpus, which does not reflect the full range of speech acts equally (for example, it does not include requests for assistance or invitations). In terms of the theory of Conversation Analysis (CA), in which turn-taking is described in terms of preferred and dispreferred pair-parts, it is commonly noted that a dispreferred second pair-part, which goes against expectations in some way, is often couched or signalled by hesitation and by discourse markers, such as *well*. Such softening devices help give the deliberate impression that the speaker is thinking carefully and having some trouble putting their thoughts into words, even although in reality they may not be experiencing any such difficulty. By giving signs that one is thinking carefully, one shows the listener that the feelings or decisions one is about to express are not easily or lightly reached.

(22)   TS: Have you spoken to him?
       AN: *Well,* not really [laugh]
       BB: Have you?

(23)   LS: The Zim party.
       JT: uhuh that one.
       LS: No it was great.
       NK: No, I don't think it was I don't think it was exciting [pause], *well* maybe for some of you people.
       LS: Were you there?
       NK: Mhm, I don't go to parties any more.

(24)   KM: Uh I don't go for tradition

MV: Why not?
KM: [laugh]
MV: It's your identity man.
KM: Hey!
MV: No *well* it's your belief anyway.

(25)   FM: But anyways you you ne were commenting about Ken Price.
       AN: Yes uh I was just -
       FM: Oh playing along were you?
       AN: *Well* you know ...
       FM: And stop wielding that pan, it's very intimidating [laugh]

5.3.   *Well* as a marker of discourse coherence.

Often it seems necessary for the speaker to reestablish with the hearer a common understanding of 'where they are' in the discourse. One way in which this is done is by using *well* to indicate a shift of topic, in closing preceding discourse and focussing on following discourse (Svartvik 1980). In these cases, optimal relevance and coherence would require no such deviation from topic (Sperber and Wilson 1995), so *well* is used to signal to the hearer that while all is well (so to speak), the forthcoming utterance is not the expected one, and that the speaker is aware of this but still considers it necessary to shift. The hearer is, in a sense, being asked to renegotiate the context, and the utterance of *well* is the signal to them to make the necessary cognitive adjustment. *Well* thus plays what Carlson (1984) (cited in Blakemore 2002:141-2) refers to as a transition role "in easing recognition of the resulting topic shift". Shifts in topic or closure of dialogue have important interpersonal spin-offs, and call for careful evaluation by both speaker and hearer. Because it is in the speaker's interests to engage the hearer's attention by being relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1995), they need to signal (by using *well)* that they are fully aware that the shift may not seem relevant to the hearer, but that it is worth the hearer's effort to keep up and maintain a common understanding of the context. In the corpus 7.3% (n=36) of the uses of *well* indicated a shift of the focus of the discussion (e.g 26, 27 and 28 below), and occasionally marking imminent closure of the conversation (example 29).

(26)   PG: Even today you may go to a newspaper, seeing an advert eh, having a vacancy. You may find out they more preferring people who are having skills on computers. So for me at the moment eh, I may say I'm one of the victims of that. *Well,* about this question of unemployment in Grahamstown, which is in high rate in Grahamstown and it's serious ...

(27) AN: Okay, she always with your brother?
      SV: mm mm.
      AN: Okay [long pause] wha- okay *well,* do you ever play with Snoopy?

(28) NJ: There are no blacks.
      SM: No blacks, there's no development in our national rugby around schools and our local teams. *Well,* let's talk about soccer. How do you feel about soccer, our South African national soccer squad?

(29) NJ: Okay so do you see yourself in the next coming years, do you see yourself playing for the national team?
      ST: It is my dream to play for the national team.
      NJ: *Well*, I wish you all the best and thanks for your time.

Closely related to the use of *well* to indicate a topic shift but continued relevance is its use as a narrative discourse marker (Norrick, 2001:853), signalling stages in oral narrative such as the beginning, a resolution or an evaluation. It can also acknowledge the state of affairs up to the point of narration, before proceeding (e.g. 32), thereby in a sense establishing a mutual understanding between speaker and hearer of the relevant context. Altogether the corpus contained 16 examples of this function.

(30) NM: What can they do?
      PG: Ja.
      NM: *Well,* firstly, Hoogenoeg - I'm sorry ma- I may be racial. Is that a coloured township?
      PK: It's a coloured township.

(31) LM: Ah *well,* let me start with the president, cos ah the president, our president in South Africa is Mr Thabo Mbeki ...

(32) ML: Ja ja it will educate the people because more most eh most of the things that we are going to be covered there there are the things that are happening in the community ne, ehm, and secondly there will be things that are going to be written about the - like, eh many people need some kind of advice or some kind of eh ... for instance people who do not know now, hey there is a water is being cut in my in my yard, you see, *well* that person apparently, he goes to the city hall many times, he does not get satisfaction there you see. When he turns to the newspaper, hey shoo, this thing can be solved in this way in this way in this way. The newspaper can be able to come up with the right sources, right place, right way of solving that problem.

*5.4. **Well** to signal a change of turn*

One of the other procedural effects of using *well* was when it signalled a change in floor-holding. Firstly, it was used, occasionally, as a bid for the floor, usually in isolation, interjecting at a pause in the middle of someone else's discourse (see example 33). In a sense, such uses could be regarded as procedural signals that the hearer should adjust their understanding of how the discourse is proceeding, and make allowance for a possible 'lack of fit' between what the speaker and hearer believe to be relevant.

The second use of *well* as a turn-taking signal is its use as a prompt, indicating that a response is awaited. This isolated use of *well,* often with rising intonation to demand more information has a continuative property, and signals to the hearer that there is some sort of insufficiency in terms of what has been said so far, usually in regard to the amount of information that they have provided, and that the speaker believes the hearer has not recognised this insufficiency (see Blakemore 2002:142). In this case, *well* is used as a prompt, and is more insistent and demanding than acknowledging responses with *yes?* or *huh?* In fact, such unadorned use of *well* can run the risk of being insulting, especially in the mouth of a subordinate e.g:

> Professor: I've marked the essay
>
> Student: *Well*?

The corpus contained only 3 cases in which *well* was used to encourage the speaker to continue (examples 34 - 35). It should also be remembered that turn-taking conventions place enormous pressure on interlocutors to speak at certain moments, and using *well* at such times is a useful stalling device. In examples 36 - 40 *well* appears to be used to indicating the speaker's awareness that in terms of conversational rules, all is well and it is their turn to speak, but that they have little or nothing relevant to add.

(33)   LM: What would you say if I were to say that Mugabe is not being racist but he's doing the right thing?
        LH: *Well* I
        LM: Because those people should not in the first place have taken the land

(34)   PS: Of course, no, that is what I was talking about. Mugabe is more persistence. I hate those kinds of leaders ...
        SS: *Well* my friend go ahead.
        PS: And also being a leader, you should not be too much greedy or rather suffer you know than accepting everything as a leader ...

(35)   AN: Okay, anything about your school your teachers your principal ..?

	SV:	Oh my teacher, oh my principal, my principal he is very very very naughty.
	AN:	*Well,* what's what's what's did he do?
	SV:	He punishes us a lot.

(36) LS: All the things like what?

   JT: *Well*

(37) KS: Do you think the the experience you've gained in performing here in [unclear] and overseas have made you think of like gumboot dances is it the way of living for you? Do you?

   MX: *Well*

(38) BH: Ja, the schools were closed and then there was - you you you there was a festival and other things. What was it?

   NO: *Well*

   BH: Did you go to festival?

   NO: Yes, I went to the festival. There - I first go to church and then I went to the festival and I come back.

(39) SD: So what can you advise the Grahamstown muni- council about? How maybe to put up youth and do some development here in Grahamstown, because even they put there some box in the street. But they didn't put anything in town, and also they promise uh the people about the free water and free electricity

   AM: *Well*

   SD: So that, is that, is possible?

   AM: That is not the council's water. It's the government who made those promises, not the council.

(40) BH: Ja, the schools were closed and then there was - you you you there was a festival and other things. What was it?

   NO: *Well*

   BH: Did you go to festival?

   NO: Yes, I went to the festival. There - I first go to church and then I went to the festival and I come back.

6.   Final remarks

There were inevitably several ambiguous cases, where it was difficult to decide which procedural or cognitive effect was desired as a result of using *well*. For example, (41) could be indicating a need for further contemplation or gently challenging the speaker's assumptions, and (42) could be accepting or harmonising (in light of GR's apparent disagreement) or indicative of a topic shift. In such cases the wider context was examined, and ultimately a decision (arguably subjective) was made in assigning one function. Despite this high degree of ambiguity, it is important to remember that this paper does not aim to

describe a classification system for uses of *well*. It aimed rather to support Blakemore's view of a broad relevance-based theoretical underpinning for all of its functions, to ascertain whether the search for mutual relevance in an imperfect communicative context was evident, and whether there were any noticeable patterns of distribution of the type of relevance being sought.

(41)   AF: For example, they must they must do gym.
        FB: Gym ja okay, *well*, we don't maybe have any idea because we've got ...

(42)   GR: Holomisa was just a puppet
        ST: eh
        GR: Alright *well*, what what does, what else, what do they say now?

It seems highly plausible, from all the examples discussed here, that *well* has a unified context-free 'core' meaning, and within this common core, certain loose categories of procedural meanings have emerged. It must be remembered that the corpus reported on here represents the speech of non-MT English speakers, and while certain general trends appear to be fairly robust, it is possible that these are not exactly parallel to MT norms. While the way *well* is used in XE may well be somewhat different from native speaker usage, this does not detract from the fact that it is still an expression of procedural meaning (Watts 2003). The reasons for possible differences would lie in the educational system which XE speakers have experienced, and the nature of their exposure to the discourse patterns of English. However, any such differences remain to be explored by undertaking a close comparative analysis of MT speech, and, ideally, additional non-native varieties of English.

Nevertheless, two important points need to be made. The first of these relates to the apparent absence in Xhosa of any lexical or pragmatic equivalent to *well*. Fraser (1990:395) speculates on the extent to which all languages share a basic set of discourse markers, and lists *well,* along with *anyway*, as possibly less likely to occur universally. Enquiries among several expert MT Xhosa speakers confirmed that such a marker is basically absent in Xhosa, and that the nearest equivalents are the words *ngathi* ("like"), *ke* ("what's next") and *eeh* (a signal of contemplation). Schourup (1999:261) also raises questions regarding the extent to which generalisations about English discourse markers can be carried over to different languages, whether some languages lack them altogether, and if so how they carry out the functions performed by discourse markers in English. Several Xhosa informants indicated

that as soon as they had acquired *well* in English, they had subconsciously borrowed it into their day-to-day MT Xhosa, since they found it so useful in achieving the effects described in this paper. This question deserves more serious attention among comparative linguists.

The second point relates to the context in which XE speakers acquire their English. One needs to remember that these second-language speakers have had limited first-hand experience of MT English, and have been taught by second- or third-generation L2 English speaking teachers. In addition, they have not been exposed to any formal tuition in this regard. Although a thorough survey has not been carried out, none of the typical grammar books used for ESL teaching in the eighties in South Africa, such as Murphy (1985), Parkin and Blunt (1988), Dawson (1988), Murray and Johanson (1989), Mbhele and Ellis (1988) or Hurford (1994) make any explicit reference to any discourse markers, let alone the specific functions and uses of *well*. In the rather stilted practice dialogues in *Let's use English* for grade 9, (Mbhele and Ellis, 1988), which have presumably been designed expressly to promote communicative skills such as asking for help (p98), giving advice and making suggestions, the absence of *well* is markedly conspicuous (see examples 1 and 2 below). The books in this series for grades 10 and 11 offer no further examples of dialogue and instead require learners to construct their own dialogues on given topics. By this stage, *well* has become invisible, and learners are left to pick up the rules for *well* from a fairly distant observation of whoever they encounter.

Example 1: Asking for and giving opinions (ibid. p145)

Mary: What do you think about the way girls dress these days Abel?
Abel: I think it's terrible. They don't dress decently
Mary: In my opinion they dress the way that boys like
Abel: Do you think they should wear such short skirts then?
Mary: Yes I do. I think it makes them look great
Abel: Do you think they should wear tight jeans as well?
Mary: Yes I do. As I see it they should wear whatever they like
Abel: If you ask me, Black girls are just copying whites. (145)

Example 2: Agreeing and disagreeing (ibid. p156)

Dickson: What do you think about smoking, Mercy?
Mercy: I think smoking should be banned
Dickson: I'm afraid I don't agree. I think people should be free to make up their own minds
Mercy: As I see it many people would like to stop but can't
Dickson: No, you are wrong anyone can stop smoking when they really want to ....

Part of the reason for the avoidance of discourse markers in pedagogic materials is the fact that such words are typical of the oral and not the written mode, and curricula usually focus on the latter. The other obvious reason is their lack of clear semantic denotation and syntactic role. Formal or explicit intervention or commentary on their use is thus extremely unlikely. Thus, apart from chance encounters with *well* in the practice dialogue of their language textbooks and the fictional dialogue of prescribed literature that they might read, typically second-language learners of English are left to observe the spoken English of their teachers and others around them and pick up the rules for using *well* for themselves. In one sense, discourse markers occupy the same outer-linguistic realm as slang and expletives, which are equally hard to pin down in terms of meaning, and are therefore often avoided. However, unlike expletives, which carry strong taboo values, discourse markers are much safer territory, and they are very useful as well. Since extensive exposure of L2 learners to genuine native speaker interaction is not always impossible in South Africa, one viable solution could be to encourage the watching of more of the popular 'soap-operas' on TV, in which there is a measure of realistic discourse.

Romero Trillo (2002:770) claims that second-language learners tend to follow a "binary track", focussing in the classroom on grammatical and semantic rules of the language, and being left to pick up the subtle cline of rules of use for pragmatic markers in different contexts and registers on their own, or through fairly artificial, decontextualised classroom activities, resulting in "pragmatic fossilisation". In the case of XE, it would seem that there is diversified and complex usage of *well* in the discourse of the informants, and that it should not simply be labelled 'fossilised', although overall frequency of use is less than that reported in native-speaker discourse. The various usages revealed in this corpus provide evidence of considerably diversified use of *well*, even more remarkable given the absence of an equivalent expression of procedural meaning in Xhosa. It is to be hoped that further studies of the usage of such discourse markers in New Englishes will follow, in order to establish whether putative differences relate to different levels of proficiency in the language, as a result of limited exposure to the social, cognitive and contextual aspects of discourse (i.e. whether there is pragmatic fossilisation) or whether such differences relate to the pragmatic conventions which have been transferred from speakers' native languages. Such studies would also provide comprehensive descriptions of the differences and preferences in different

22

Englishes in seeking the means to establish mutual relevance between interlocutors in an imperfect communicative context.

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Footnotes

1. This material is based upon work supported by the National Research Foundation under Grant number 2053214.

2. Interestingly, Fraser's claim that the core meaning of discourse markers need not be related to their content meaning (e.g. *well* = hole in ground / good) is rejected by Watts (1989), who argues powerfully for some link between the two types of meanings.

3. Norrick (2001:851) provides a comprehensive list of authoritative sources to support this claim. However, other uses of *well* indicate a far more complex situation (see section 5).

4. As Blakemore puts it:

   ... a speaker may recognise that there are circumstances in which his utterance will be recognised as being consistent with the principle of relevance only if certain assumptions which are manifestly not manifest to the hearer are made manifest. These may be assumptions which the hearer uses in the derivation of cognitive effects , or they may be assumptions about the speakers interests and preferences. Since it is in the speaker's interests that the hearer take up the guarantee of relevance he is communicating and invest effort in the derivation of cognitive effects, it will be in his interests, in such circumstances for him to provide a linguistically encoded signal that there are cognitive effects to be derived, or, in other words, that all is well." (2002:147).

5. For the purposes of comparison with NZE, only those files in the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English(Holmes 1995; 1996) which contained spontaneous discourse were used (a total of 420,000 words). These included natural conversations, class lessons, broadcast discussions and interviews, business transactions, as well as unscripted spontaneous speeches, commentaries and monologues. The parliamentary debates, legal cross-examination and legal presentations were deemed to be somewhat too specialised, and were therefore excluded].

6. *Well* represents 10.33% of the total use of discourse markers in the London-Lund Corpus (Romero Trillo, 2002:776), second only to *you know* and *you see*.

7. *Yizo Yizo* is a popular local TV soap opera. It is Xhosa-medium, and occasionally screens controversial and very explicit programmes

8. *Days of our Lives* is an equivalent English-medium televised soap opera.

Appendix 1

Text 1:
<081:250:TS> Ah Yizo Yizo[7] yes it is the right thing
<081:255:NP> I don't think so
<081:260:TS> What is wrong about Yizo Yizo?
<081:265:NP> [laugh] many things. I don't think that they should be showing sodomy to
      children, I mean children you say -
<081:270:TS> They must be aware of what is happening in prison so that they won't commit
      a crime that will make them end up in prison.
<081:275:NP> What if they like having sex?
<081:280:TS> Then *well,* it is time to stop that activity. Yizo Yizo is here.
<081:285:NP> I don't think they will stop if they don't want to.
<081:290:TS> *Well* they will, they will in time. Everything takes time, you just give it a time.
<081:295:NP> *Well* do you think that Yizo Yizo will write that law?
<081:300:TS> No but if we just can all sit back and and just comment after all the scenes
<081:305:NP> *Well* I'm just commenting on the scenes that I have seen in some [indistinct]
<081:310:TS> What about them what about them what about those scenes
<081:315:NP> I've don't think it's pr- proper for children to watch them.
<081:320:TS> To watch? To watch what?
<081:325:NP> To watch sodomy or sex that people having sex in front of them I don't think
      so.
<081:330:TS> But what about Days of Our Lives[8] ? Do you think that Days of our Days, of
      our Lives is good for children to watch?
<081:335:NP> *Well* did you ever see someone [unclear] sodomy?
<081:340:TS> At least they are showing condoms in Yizo Yizo
<081:345:NP> Haai [laugh]

Text 2:
<007:095:LM> What would you say if I were to say that Mugabe is not being racist but he's
      doing the right thing
<007:100:LH> *Well* I
<007:105:LM> Because those people should not in the first place have taken the land
<007:110:LH> *Well* it was not them [unclear]
<007:115:LM> and you cannot compensate a person for returning your property
<007:120:LH> *Well* I think that's true but eh you have to consider the fact that the land now
      belonged to the white people the British
<007:125:LM> But it was not theirs
<007:130:LH> So the colonisers took the land from the blacks. Now they have to confisc- to
      compensate because they would mm be taking the land that has already been fixed up
      for like [pause] growing crops and stuff like that.
<007:135:LM> Okay let me ask you this: if I were to take your house, your parents' house,
      the house you live in
<007:140:LH> ja
<007:145:LM> and I renovate it and you wanted the house back, would you would you
      compensate me?

<007:150:LH> Ja I think I would because you have done all the right things, I mean, you've got the house uh maybe it was dirty or it was not in a a good condition

<007:155:LM> Why did I get - why did I take a house that's not mine in the first place?

<007:160:LH> *Well* I don't know. Because maybe you were bullying me or something.

<007:165:LM> *Well* if I were bullying you, then that means that I should I should not be compensated because I was doing the wrong thing in the first place.

<007:170:LH> But you did the right one by renovating the house

<007:175:LM> Who asked me to?

<007:180:LH> *Well*

<007:185:LM> who asked me to renovate the house?

<007:190:LH> No one did.