

NATIVE SPEAKER – NON-NATIVE SPEAKER INTERACTION: THE USE OF DISCOURSE MARKERS

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Discourse markers have a basic role in oral interactions. Apart from providing coherence and regulating turn-taking, they have important interactive functions that indicate the conversational commitment and the social behaviour of the interlocutors in an interaction. In the case of the L1, discourse markers are acquired as part of our communicative competence, and, therefore, it is important that they also be part of an L2 student's communicative competence. In this article, I will analyse the use of "well" as a discourse marker (DM) by Spanish students of English in interaction with native speakers. The analysis will indicate that "well" is hardly used as a DM in the students' discourse, resulting in distinctly non-native discourse, which can negatively affect the students' images. These results may be significant to teachers and researchers in regard to their approach to the teaching of foreign languages from a pragmatic point of view.

1. Introduction

This article is part of a larger study about the use of discourse markers (DMs) by non-native speakers (NNSs), specifically, by Spanish students of English, in their interaction with native speakers (NSs). This study is framed, therefore, within interlanguage pragmatics, which is both a subdiscipline of second language acquisition research and a subset of pragmatics. As Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) explain, as a subdiscipline of second language acquisition research, interlanguage pragmatics contrasts with other interlanguage studies, namely interlanguage phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. As a subset of pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics is defined as an area of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics or simply linguistics, depending on how one describes the scope of pragmatics. According to Kasper (1996), interlanguage pragmatics deals with how NNSs understand and produce linguistic acts in the target language and how they acquire the target language pragmatic knowledge.

The vast majority of interlanguage pragmatics studies have focused on analysing NNSs' pragmatic comprehension and production as well as pragmatic transfer, which may lead to pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), i.e. an unnatural or inappropriate use of the language. A high percentage of these studies have analysed NNSs' comprehension and production of speech acts, particularly "the illocutionary and politeness dimensions of speech act performance" (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993: 4). This may be, as Ellis (1994) points out, because those dimensions are the ones to which more attention has been paid in second language acquisition research. This is what Kasper and Dahl (1991: 216) have defined as "... the 'narrow sense of interlanguage pragmatics', the performance and acquisition of speech acts by L2 learners"¹. Nevertheless, although these studies have undoubtedly shed light on L2 students' pragmatic knowledge, in my opinion, they are still insufficient to account for their pragmatic competence. In fact, they do not take into account aspects of discourse by means of which the interlocutors make decisions and negotiate the local and global objectives of an interaction so that it is satisfactory to both parties. Studies about L2 students' performance of those discourse phenomena (how to take turns, how to open and close a conversation, the use of DMs, etc.) are less frequent, thus my interest in analysing the use of one of those discursive phenomena by NNSs, specifically the use of DMs.

My concern in analysing DMs -items like *well, you know, right, okay, I mean*, etc., so frequent in oral interactions- is also due to the fact that, despite being considered performance errors for a long time, more recent studies acknowledge their primary role in the conversation. As a matter of fact, these particles not only help to build coherence, they also fulfil multiple interactive functions fundamental to the speaker-hearer relationship. Among those pragmatic functions are showing politeness to the addressee, carrying out repairs, attention-getting, feedback and a number of others. Therefore, DMs, as well as other discourse phenomena, signal the conversational commitment and the social behaviour of the interlocutors in a particular interaction. These characteristics turn them into essential elements in the everyday conversation and, as such, it is important that they form part

¹ From Ellis (1994: 159)

of the L2 students' pragmatic competence.

If we briefly revise the general characteristics of DMs, one main feature is their interactive function. According to Romero Trillo (1997), DMs act as interaction-organizers and, therefore, it would be difficult to study them from a purely lexical-syntactic perspective. Along the same lines, Östman (1982) argues that DMs have mainly a pragmatic function, namely, providing the interlocutors with clues about how to decode utterances so that communication is effective. Therefore, DMs must be studied from a pragmatic point of view. In Levinson's words (1983:33):

[...] we find words whose meaning-specifications can only be given by reference to contexts of usage. For example, the meaning of words like *well*, *oh*, *anyway* in English cannot be explicated simply by statements of context-independent content: rather one has to refer to pragmatic concepts like relevance, implicature, or discourse structure. So either grammars (models of competence) must make reference to pragmatic information, or they cannot include lexical descriptions of a language.

In short, the general characteristics of DMs could be summarized as follows:

- DMs simultaneously operate on the textual and functional levels, providing coherence on the one hand, and fulfilling interactive functions on the other.
- They do not affect the truth-conditions of an utterance.
- They are not part of the propositional content of the utterance, i.e. DMs do not add anything to the semantic content expressed in the utterance.
- They depend on both the linguistic context (or co-text) and the extralinguistic context. In fact, through the context the hearer does not limit him/herself to decoding what has been said, he/she also enriches it in a certain way, as Pórtolés (1998) points out. This is achieved through the use of DMs, among other elements, since they guide the communication process, allowing us to obtain the right inferences.
- DMs are more frequent in everyday oral interactions.
- They are multifunctional.

2. Methodology

Data for this study include fifteen conversations in English between NNSs and NSs. The conversations are five to eight minute long each. The NNSs were undergraduate students in their third, fourth and fifth year of English Language and Literature at the University of Seville, aged 21 to 25. Previously, the NNSs had been handed out a questionnaire on which they were asked about their age, university courses, stays in English-speaking countries, if they had conversation partners, and for how long they had been studying English. Also, they had to evaluate their level of English, whether beginner, intermediate or advanced. The questionnaires revealed that all of them had been studying English for more than ten years. Most of the fourth and fifth year students had been to an English-speaking country, although the length of their stay had been relatively short, with the exception of one fourth year student who had stayed in London for a whole year. The majority of the third year students, though, had never been to an English-speaking country. On the whole, most of the students met with NSs of English for conversation practice, but only sporadically. The NSs were two American students from Wisconsin and an English teacher from London. Dialectal variation was not taken into account.

The topic was also a determining factor. According to Woken and Swales (1989), the topic defines the conversational roles of the participants in an interaction, and it is often the case that NNSs adopt a passive role in conversation with NSs [Beebe & Giles (1984), Gass & Varonis (1985)], especially when the NSs hold a higher institutional status. This may result in a low conversational commitment on the part of the NNSs, affecting their image and their relationship with their interlocutors. My intention was for the NNSs to participate actively in the conversation. Thus, I chose a general, everyday, topic so that the conversation would be as natural as possible although, all the participants were aware of the recording, but they were not told the aim of the present study. The topic was "Places to visit in Seville", which not only included sightseeing, but also stores, bars, restaurants and so on. It could lead to any other topic without my study being affected. Moreover, to guarantee a good participation on the part of the NNSs, the NSs were told to obtain as much information as possible from their

interlocutors by means of questions. This way, the possibility of active participation was higher as was the likelihood of NNSs producing DMs. Otherwise, the NSs might have taken control of the conversation due to their own command of the English language and their acquaintance with the Sevillian culture. The interactions took place in dyads to guarantee more conversational compromise.

The following transcription symbols were taken from Gallardo (1998:30). Only those relevant for this article will be presented:

- § Two utterances produced by different speakers follow one another without noticeable pause.
- Self-repair without pause.
- / Very short pause.
- // One second-long pause.
- Rising intonation.
- oooo Vocal length.
- ? Questions.
- ! Exclamations.
- [] Brackets that signal the conversation to which the exchanges belong.

3. Data Analysis

The analysis of the *corpus* showed the low occurrence of DMs in the students' discourse, although in this article I will only discuss some uses of *well*. The following chart displays the occurrence of this marker in all the conversations.

3rd year	1 st Conv. ----	4th year.	1 st Conv. ----	5th year.	1 st Conv. 2
	2 nd Conv. ----		2 nd Conv. 5		2 nd Conv. ----
	3 rd Conv. ----		3 rd Conv. ----		3 rd Conv. ----
	4 th Conv. ----		4 th Conv. 2		4 th Conv. 1
	5 th Conv. ----		5 th Conv. 1		5 th Conv. 2

The results of the table show the absence of *well* in most conversations, particularly in the third year students', although this absence can also be seen in some fourth and fifth year students' discourse. Moreover, despite the fact that a particular student may have used the marker several times, in some cases the use is not appropriate, as I will explain below. My analysis was mainly based on Schiffrin's (1987) theoretical model of DMs.

According to Schiffrin (1987), *well* is normally used in the following cases²:

A) When the interlocutors do not fulfil the coherence options opened by an initial member of a question/answer adjacency pair, whether it is a Yes-no question or a WH-question. As Schiffrin (1987: 104) explains, in Yes-no questions respondents have a choice between two possibilities, positive or negative. In WH-questions the adverbials (what, where, when, etc.) specify the information that will be needed to provide a coherent and appropriate answer, so the range of possibilities is wider. Nevertheless, as Schiffrin (1987) points out, questions generally share the same conversational constraint, i.e. the need to be answered, and they only differ in the ideational options that satisfy that constraint, which depend on the linguistic form of the question. Therefore, *well* preceding an answer in an question/answer adjacency pair suggests that the response does not belong to the set of coherent options encoded by the linguistic form of the question. Consequently, this DM acts as a negative politeness strategy.

This particular use of *well* leads us to briefly revise Brown and Levinson's politeness theory based on the notion of face, or the image that everybody wishes to maintain in the eyes of others. Our face has two sides,

² Due to space limitations, not all cases proposed by Schiffrin (1987) are dealt with here.

negative (the desire to enjoy freedom of action) and positive (the desire to be approved of). We all usually wish to protect our image and that of the others, but our everyday interactions can be affected by face-threatening acts (FTAs). With the aim of mitigating such FTAs, speakers may resort to both positive politeness strategies (displaying a positive evaluation towards the addressee's face) and negative politeness or "avoiding behaviour which might infringe on the addressee's rights and freedoms and which might be considered to constitute some kind of imposition on the addressee". (Davies, 1986: 124).

Going back to our study of *well*, failure to restrict oneself to the coherent options offered in a question may involve an FTA, and, therefore, *well* acts as a negative politeness strategy that mitigates that threat. An example from the *corpus* is the following:

1. [Conv. 5th year]
NS: aaaand/ could you tell me what a *tapa* is?
NNS: uhm/ **well**/ *tapa* is like a dish [continues]

On introducing his utterance with *well*, the student suggests that he finds it difficult to satisfy the conversational demand of a coherent answer within the options offered by the question. This difficulty is also reinforced by the use of the lexical pause *uhm* at the beginning of the utterance that indicates doubt or hesitation, delaying his answer and thus allowing him to plan his utterance. *Like* also introduces a comparative sentence which signals once more the difficulty the student is facing in explaining what a *tapa* is. The NNS, therefore, resorts to different phonic, lexical and structural elements so as to give an answer that suggests his intention to be cooperative and polite towards the addressee. In this way he is also saving face.

However, in most cases *well* is absent in the students' discourse as the following examples show:

2. [Conv. 3rd year]
NS: [...] what are you thinking of doing/ when you leave university?
NNS: uhm I don't want to be a teacher

3. [Conv.4th year]
NS: did you have any problems understanding the accent in Hull?
NNS: uhm it was funny at first/our teacher was always/hey you have to take the BUS§
4. [Conv. 5th year]
NS: [but] it's still COMPULSORY to join the army?
NNS: you have the option of doing another thing because you are supposed to NOT AGREE with arms and so on§
5. NS: [so] what are you going to do? d'you know? (as a conscientious objector)
NNS: I have talked to the director-the uhm of a high school§

In the exchanges above the NNSs do not strictly adhere to the response options encoded by the form of the question, but none of them mitigates the FTA produced by their answer with *well*. This results in abrupt answers, affecting their face in the conversation. Moreover, in exchanges 2 and 3 the students begin their answers with an oral pause that expresses hesitation, a desire to maintain the turn and, probably, the need to fill that conversational slot with a DM that they are unable to activate from their interlanguage. Instead they use the lexical pause, but it does not have the mitigating function that *well* possesses and, consequently, the pause does not help the speaker save face nor does it show deference to the hearer, like *well* does.

On some occasions the students use another DM instead of *well*, usually *okay*. This probably happens because they are not familiar with the typical functions of the two DMs (declarative knowledge)³ and, also,

3. According to Faerch and Kasper (1984) pragmatic competence is made up of two types of knowledge: declarative pragmatic knowledge and procedural pragmatic knowledge. The former is static and consists of the knowledge about linguistic rules and linguistic elements of one or more languages, without it being submitted to communicative objectives or the use of a language in real time. The latter selects and combines certain aspects of the declarative knowledge in order to reach specific communicative objectives, taking into account the constraints imposed by the context. Both are essential components of communicative competence.

because students may equate the use of *okay* with that of *bueno* in their L1, since this is one of the meanings of *bueno*. Therefore, the students transfer the functions of *bueno* to *well*, which may be correct in some cases but not always. This can be seen in the following example:

6. [Conv.5th year]

NS: uh-uh/what-is there anything you don't like about Seville?

NNS: **okay**//I like the weather

Before this exchange was produced the NNS had said that she was from Madrid, which she preferred to Seville because it was more cosmopolitan. In this example, the NS asks her what she does not like about Seville. The student, however, answers what she likes about it and thus does not follow the coherent options offered by the question. Theoretically, she should have prefaced the answer with *well*. The NNS tries to be cooperative and polite by introducing her utterance with a DM to mitigate the FTA that she is going to carry out. Nevertheless, she fails to select the appropriate DM, which should have been *well*. The use of *okay* is incorrect since this marker is usually used to signal agreement with what has been said before and as a transition marker towards a new topic in the discourse. Obviously, both of those functions are inappropriate in this exchange.

In other cases the NNSs use *bueno* from their L1, or its apocopated form *bue*, as we see below in the second part of these adjacency pairs.

7. [Conv. 4th year]

NS: okay//what do you want to do when you finish at university?

NNS: **bue**/I don't know// I probably I will try to-to make Pragmatics
ooooo I don't know if I'm going to study translation

8. [Conv. 4th year]

NS: [...] so/ what do you do there? (In a boring town, according to the student, where she spends her summer holidays)

NNS: bue/ I go-when my father go to the nearest town or my boyfriend
go to visit me there[↑]// weeee go out at night/ uhm in the nearest town

In these examples the NNSs try to mitigate the FTA of their answers, since they do not adhere to the coherent expectations offered by the question. They use *bue*, as they would have done in a conversation in their L1. The use of *bueno* in those exchanges is probably due to the sociopragmatic need to mitigate the FTA of their answers; however, the students are unable to select from their interlanguage the appropriate DM of the L2 for these situations (procedural knowledge) or they still have not developed the declarative knowledge that allows them to differentiate among the diverse uses of this DM. Owing to this lack of knowledge and to the nature of conversations, in which decisions have to be made more quickly than in written discourse, the students sometimes unintentionally use a DM from their L1 that has the same functions, at least in the examples above, as its L2 counterpart.

B) According to Schiffrin (1987) *well* is also normally used to precede the second part of a request/confirmation adjacency pair. In this type of adjacency pair, both the speaker and the hearer supposedly share the same degree of knowledge about a particular topic or situation, and the speaker requests confirmation from the hearer. Nonetheless, such confirmation is not always provided and, in order to mitigate that FTA (showing disagreement), *well* is used. In the following example, the NS produces an utterance that should be interpreted as a request for confirmation from the NNS. However, she does not produce such confirmation, so she does not follow the coherent expectations presented in the first part of the adjacency pair.

9. [Conv. 3rd year]
NS: oh!/ you are from Canarias!
NNS: yes/ Tenerife/ you know?
NS: uh-uh/ lots of English people go there
NNS: uhm I don't know

In my opinion, the use of *well* would have been more appropriate here because the student would have mitigated the FTA of her answer with that DM. However, she does not preface her utterance with *well* and the

result is abrupt and not entirely polite: *I don't know*.

In all these cases and in many others that will not be dealt with here, the use of *well* would have signalled a greater degree of politeness towards the addressee, saving face both for her/himself and the hearer.

4. Conclusions

My analysis suggests that *well* and other DMs such as *you know*, *I mean*, *right*, *okay*, *really*, etc. are hardly used in the students' discourse. This results in scarcely fluent, natural discourse. But, most importantly, by unintentionally omitting the DMs, the students ignore many interactive functions that are essential for the speaker-hearer relationship and that these markers fulfil. In my study, this gave rise to the fact that the students sometimes seemed impolite and non-cooperative. Moreover, this negative image is reinforced with advanced students, as was the case with all the subjects in my study, because they are thought to have pragmatic competence in the use of DMs, and absence or incorrect use of DMs may negatively affect the students' face and, even worse, offend that of their interlocutors.

The absence or inappropriate use of DMs is likely due to the lack of declarative and/or procedural knowledge on the part of the students with respect to the DMs. The declarative knowledge allows us to know the functions of the DMs and the procedural knowledge allows us to use them in real-time situations.

However, classroom discourse may also be a determining factor in the poor use of DMs. According to Kasper (1989) the function of the L2 in the class context is highly referential and, consequently, the multiple interactive functions of the DMs are carried out in the L1 or not carried out at all.

As a result of these conclusions, I believe that it is necessary to approach the teaching of foreign languages from a pragmatic point of view. A pragmatic syllabus would include activities in which the students can participate actively, as well as communicative, cooperative tasks that allow the use of DMs, along with other discourse phenomena, and reflection about

them. I also think that it would be very important to carry out longitudinal studies that analyse how the students' declarative and procedural knowledge about the use of DMs is developed. This way teachers and researchers would be able to conscientiously design tasks that help students to assimilate these elements in their interlanguage.

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