

# ***Discourse Marker Well in British and Hong Kong English: A Comparative Analysis of Scripted and Unscripted Speech***

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**Abstract:** This study offers a comparative analysis of the discourse marker *well* in both British English (BrE) and Hong Kong English (HKE), focusing on its usage in scripted and unscripted speech contexts. Using Beeching's classification framework, 170 instances of *well* were analyzed to investigate its pragmatic functions, such as signaling hesitation, managing transitions, and structuring discourse. The analysis reveals that *well* is used more frequently in unscripted speech in both varieties, although BrE speakers tend to use it more for topic transitions, while HKE speakers employ it more frequently to express hesitation. These findings suggest that while *well* serves universal pragmatic functions, its use is influenced by cultural and linguistic factors in different English varieties. The study also highlights the significance of discourse markers like *well* in maintaining coherence in conversation, with important implications for teaching English as a second language, especially in multilingual and diverse regions such as Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** Discourse markers, British English, Hong Kong English, Pragmatic functions.

## **1. Introduction**

Discourse markers (DMs) are crucial for effective oral communication, helping both native and non-native speakers structure their speech [1, 2]. Research has shown variations in DM usage among English speakers from different backgrounds, highlighting differences in both functions and frequencies [3, 4]. While most studies focus on DMs in conversations (e.g. [5]), less attention has been given to their role in monologues, where they enhance fluency in spontaneous speech [6]. This study investigates the discourse marker *well*, known for its multifunctionality in signaling transitions, managing hesitations, and structuring discourse. Despite extensive research on its use in native contexts, less is known about its role in non-native varieties like HKE. To fill this gap, the study examines 170 instances of *well* used by BrE and HKE speakers across different speech contexts, utilizing Beeching's [7] classification framework. By comparing its use in scripted and unscripted settings, this research provides insights into the functions of *well*, offering practical implications for teaching English in multilingual environments like Hong Kong.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Definition of Discourse Markers

The definition of DMs has evolved through different frameworks by scholars like [8, 9-11], each emphasizing distinct aspects of DMs in communication. Schiffrin [9] viewed DMs as essential for linking utterances in social interaction, facilitating smooth communication without affecting sentence structure. Schourup [10, 11] focused on DMs' role in stabilizing conversation, linking utterances to inferential gaps and assumptions. In contrast, Fraser [8] defined DMs as lexical expressions that signal relationships between discourse segments, emphasizing their procedural rather than conceptual function. Collectively, these definitions highlight the multifunctionality of DMs in structuring speech and enhancing coherence.

### 2.2. Classification of Discourse Markers based on Functions

Chaudron and Richards [12] classified DMs into macro-markers (structuring discourse) and micro-markers (linking sentences), focusing on how they aid comprehension in academic lectures. Morell [13] expanded this by introducing structural and interactive markers, emphasizing DMs' role in organizing information and engaging students. These frameworks show that DMs are crucial for both structuring discourse and facilitating interaction, particularly in educational settings.

### 2.3. Empirical Studies Exploring Discourse Marker Usage

Studies by Fuller [14] and Kirk [15] provide critical insights into DM usage across native and non-native speakers. Fuller [14] found that native speakers use DMs like *well* and *oh* more frequently and flexibly than non-native speakers, whose DM use is more limited. Kirk [15] focused specifically on *well* in broadcast discussions, showing its role in managing discourse, turn-taking, and politeness. These studies highlight the varied functions of DMs, emphasizing their importance in maintaining discourse coherence and interaction.

## 3. Methodology

This study investigates the differences in the use of the DM *well* by BrE and HKE speakers in both scripted and unscripted speech contexts. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does the frequency of *well* differ between scripted and unscripted speech for both BrE and HKE speakers?
2. What functions of *well* emerge across these different contexts?

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The study utilized Beeching's [7] framework to measure the frequency and functions of *well* in the ICE-GB and ICE-HK corpora. AntConc software was used to extract occurrences of *well*, followed by standardization to compare usage across four conditions: BrE scripted, BrE unscripted, HKE scripted, and HKE unscripted.

### 3.1. Selection of Corpus

The spoken materials were selected from the ICE-GB and ICE-HK corpora, specifically focusing on scripted monologues (e.g., broadcast talks and non-broadcast speeches) and unscripted monologues (e.g., meetings and workshops). The study aimed to analyze the differences in how *well* is used across varying levels of formality and interaction in both BrE and HKE contexts. The following text types, along with their corresponding code numbers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the Corpus

|        | Text types             | Text codes | Number of texts | Number of words |
|--------|------------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| ICE-GB | Broadcast talks        | S2B021-040 | 20              | 43,506          |
|        | Non-broadcast speeches | S2B041-050 | 10              | 21,597          |
|        | Unscripted Speeches    | S2A021-050 | 30              | 66,065          |
|        | Broadcast talks        | S2B021-040 | 20              | 51,056          |
| ICE-HK | Non-broadcast speeches | S2B041-050 | 10              | 25,241          |
|        | Unscripted Speeches    | S2A021-050 | 30              | 81,580          |

Note: Scripted speeches include broadcast talks and non-broadcast speeches

### 3.2. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two phases. Quantitatively, the frequency of *well* was measured and compared across the four contexts using standardized frequencies. Only instances where *well* served as a DM (e.g., interjections, hesitation markers) were included. Qualitatively, A thematic analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke's [16] method. This combined deductive categorization (based on Beeching's framework) with inductive identification of new functions. This approach ensured that both established and emerging functions of *well* were captured. By integrating these methods, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the pragmatic roles of *well* across cultural settings, addressing gaps in previous research.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Frequency Analysis of *Well*

Table 2 shows that the DM *well* in BrE and HKE is more frequently used in unscripted contexts across both varieties. Specifically, the frequency of *well* is standardized at 8.33 per 10,000 words in unscripted speech for both BrE and HKE, compared to lower frequencies in scripted contexts (BrE: 3.84, HKE: 2.88). This suggests that the spontaneity of unscripted speech fosters a greater use of DMs, highlighting the significance of speech context over regional variety.

Table 2: Occurrences of *well* within the three Text Types (The standardised data is in brackets.)

| Varieties | Scripted (14,1400 words) | Unscripted (147,645 words) |
|-----------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| British   | 25 (3.84)                | 55 (8.33)                  |
| Hong Kong | 22 (2.88)                | 68 (8.33)                  |
| Total     | 47                       | 123                        |

Note: Scripted speeches include broadcast talks and non-broadcast speeches

### 4.2. Functional Analysis of *Well*

The qualitative analysis categorized *well*'s functions according to Beeching's [7] framework. Table 3 shows that the primary functions identified include transitional (69.1% in BrE unscripted and 76.5% in HKE unscripted) and hesitation (29.1% in BrE unscripted, 38.24% in HKE unscripted). These findings indicate that in unscripted contexts, *well* serves to manage discourse flow and allows speakers time to organize their thoughts. Notably, HKE speakers utilize *well* more frequently for hesitation and transition compared to BrE speakers, suggesting cultural and linguistic influences on DM usage.

Table 3: Overview of Functional Analysis

| Functions                         | ICE-GB<br>unscripted | ICE-GB<br>scripted | ICE-HK<br>unscripted | ICE-HK<br>scripted | Total |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Transitional                      | 38                   | 21                 | 52                   | 15                 | 126   |
| Hesitation                        | 16                   | 5                  | 26                   | 8                  | 55    |
| Self-correction                   | 5                    | 2                  | 5                    | 1                  | 13    |
| Quotative                         | 2                    | 1                  | 3                    | 3                  | 9     |
| Raising an objection              | 3                    | 3                  | 3                    | 2                  | 11    |
| Prefacing a dispreferred response | 4                    | 1                  | 6                    | 2                  | 13    |
| Multifunction                     | 13                   | 6                  | 28                   | 9                  | 56    |
| Total                             | 81                   | 39                 | 123                  | 40                 | 283   |

### 4.3. Overall Findings

This study confirms that unscripted contexts promote a higher frequency and functional diversity of *well* usage in both English varieties. While regional differences exist, they are less significant than the impact of speech context. The multifunctionality of *well* underscores its importance in maintaining discourse coherence, particularly in spontaneous speech.

These findings highlight the importance of teaching DMs to improve communication and pragmatic competence, especially for second language learners. The study also contributes to linguistic theory by showing how *well* functions pragmatically across different speech contexts, reinforcing its role in discourse coherence.

#### 4.3.1. Multifunction

One key characteristic of DMs is multifunctionality [11], which is essential for understanding the versatility of *well* in discourse. Although not explicitly highlighted in Beeching's [7] framework, this study reveals that *well* serves various functions, particularly in different contexts.

In this research, the functions of hesitation, transition, and self-correction account for a significant proportion of *well* usage, often appearing together or in combination with other functions. Table 4 shows that the combination of "Transitional + Hesitation" is particularly common, especially in Hong Kong contexts, likely due to learners' less fluent discourse in English compared to native speakers [17]. HKE speakers frequently use *well* to manage transitions and maintain conversational coherence, with combinations such as "Hesitation + Prefacing a dispreferred response" and "Hesitation + Self-correction" also being prevalent. This suggests a distinct approach to discourse management in HKE compared to BrE. Overall, the multifunctionality of *well* highlights its importance in facilitating effective communication, with specific combinations revealing the nuanced ways speakers navigate discourse.

Table 4: Top 5 Multifunctional Combinations of *well*

| Functions                                    | ICE-GB<br>unscripted | ICE-GB<br>scripted | ICE-HK<br>unscripted | ICE-HK<br>scripted | Total |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Transitional+Hesitation                      | 6                    | 2                  | 17                   | 6                  | 31    |
| Hesitation+Prefacing a dispreferred response | 2                    | 0                  | 4                    | 0                  | 6     |
| Hesitation+Self-correction                   | 4                    | 0                  | 2                    | 0                  | 6     |
| Transitional+Raising an objection            | 0                    | 1                  | 2                    | 2                  | 5     |
| Hesitation+Quotative                         | 0                    | 1                  | 1                    | 1                  | 3     |
| Total                                        | 12                   | 4                  | 26                   | 9                  | 51    |

### 4.3.2. Contextual Variations

This section discusses how different registers, such as scripted and unscripted monologues, affect the use and frequency of *well*. The data used in this study comes from monologues categorized into scripted and unscripted speech. In both the ICE-HK and ICE-GB corpora, lectures and broadcasts are common forms of monologue.

The language used in these contexts is carefully structured to convey clear communicative intentions [18]. In scripted contexts, speakers employ DMs like *well* to manage speech flow and signal transitions. The study finds that *well* is most frequently used in unscripted speeches across both the UK and Hong Kong, followed by scripted speeches in the UK, with the lowest frequency in scripted speeches in Hong Kong. This aligns with Tonio [19], who found similar results in the ICE Philippines corpus, indicating that the level of formality significantly impacts DM usage. In both regions, the primary functions of *well* are transition and hesitation. These findings are consistent with Beeching's [7] research, which also shows that coherence is the fundamental function of *well*.

### 4.3.3. Regional Variations

This section explores regional differences in the use and function of *well* across various English varieties. The study compares native English speakers with those from English as a second language regions, such as Hong Kong.

The analysis shows no significant difference in the frequency of *well* usage between the two contexts. This contrasts with Fung and Carter's [1] findings, which indicated significant differences in DM usage between BrE and HKE, potentially due to varying participant demographics. Studies by Li and Xiao [20] and Öztürk and Durmuşoğlu Köse [5] also highlight significant differences in DM usage between native and non-native speakers.

In terms of function, HKE speakers demonstrate a higher proportion of using *well* for hesitation and transition compared to their UK counterparts. This suggests that cultural and linguistic factors influence DM usage. The findings imply that while English learners can benefit from incorporating DMs into their language use, the choice of usage should remain flexible, allowing learners to navigate language use effectively in different contexts [21].

## 5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the DM *well* in BrE and HKE across scripted and unscripted contexts. The findings indicate that *well* is used more frequently in unscripted speech, serving key roles in hesitation, transition, and self-correction. Cultural and linguistic factors influence the frequency and functionality of DMs, with HKE speakers using *well* more for hesitation and transitions compared to BrE speakers.

The implications for language pedagogy are significant, highlighting the importance of teaching DMs to enhance communication and pragmatic competence, especially for second language learners. Additionally, this research contributes to linguistic theory by deepening our understanding of how *well* operates pragmatically, reinforcing its multifunctionality in maintaining discourse coherence. This study provides a foundation for future research on DMs in multilingual environments, suggesting that further exploration could focus on diverse speech contexts and participant profiles to enhance understanding of DM usage across various language backgrounds.

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