

Well, oh well: Comparing oh well to the independent discourse marker well

In the extensive research done on various aspects of discourse markers, little emphasis has been placed on how the interpretation or purpose of select markers may be altered when combined. For example, the semantic content and function *well* has been heavily debated in the study of discourse markers (Bolinger, 1989; Fraser, 1999; Jucker, 1993; Murray, 1979; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 2001), with several different models developed in order to encompass its uses. However, these models fail to adequately account for *oh well*, which significantly changes the interpretation of an utterance when spoken without pause.

For this paper, data on the use of *well* and *oh well* in spoken conversation was collected from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) and The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), with focus placed on the positioning and scope of the two forms. From the samples collected, it appears that the two forms have different ranges in scope, and serve slightly different purposes as discourse markers. Fitting with Schourup's assessment that *well* marks continuation and consideration (Schourup, 2001), *well* is less natural in such places as clause-final, which sound perfectly acceptable for *oh well*. Other acceptable positions where *well* is found, such as clause-medial, fail to produce examples of *oh well*. Furthermore, *oh well* does not have the emotive force that *well* possesses, as *oh well* marks an utterance which minimizes the significance of a situation where the speaker lacks either the means nor the will to control the outcome. Following Schiffrin's discourse coherence model (Schiffrin, 1987), both *well* and *oh well* indicate a divergence from the expected response to the context or prior utterance, but *oh well* can be more specifically defined as a non-preferred response when a stronger reaction is requested of the situation.

Number of words: 305

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