

## Another microlinguistic study: uses of *well*

*Well* can mark a change of topic or action (*well what book did you read, then?*) or introduce a piece of reported speech (*he said well not everybody thinks like that*). It can mitigate the force of a confrontation: *well I don't think so* is more pacifying and less abrupt than the bare *I don't think so*. It can express rapport: *Well how are you!* And it can be used to emphasize uncertainty (*well I'm not sure about that*), express an attitude (*well!*), or just fill a silence (*well ...*). In all cases we are dealing with one of the most distinctive and frequent features of colloquial style.

The first examples of this range of use are in Middle English, and provide an important indication of the way styles were evolving during that period. *Well* was often used in Old English in its adjectival, adverbial, and nominal meanings, but not in a clear discourse-marking way. The nearest we get to this function is the way *wella* or *wel la* was used as an attention-getting device before important statements, equivalent perhaps to 'Listen!', and sometimes translated as 'Alas!'

*Wel la* did not survive in Middle English. But Chaucer, with his sharp ear, shows that *wel* was already established in a discourse function introducing a piece of direct speech. The Manciple has been a little reluctant to tell his story, having stepped in to replace the drunken and incapable Cook, and his opening remark shows the softening force of the word (*The Manciple's Prologue*, ll. 25, 104):

'Wel,' quod the Maunciple, 'if it may doon ese  
To thee, sire Cook, and to no wight displese ...'

In other words: if people don't mind my stepping in ... The Host is delighted:

Telle on thy tale, Manciple, I thee preye.

And off the Manciple goes with the new topic:

'Wel, sire,' quod he, 'now herkneth what I seye.'

*Wel* (also in *now wel*) is used ten times by Chaucer's characters in its discourse function, always preceding a *quod* – *quod she*, *quod oure hoost*, *quod Pandare*. It is also used in prose. At about the same time as Chaucer was writing, we find it in Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love* (1384–5; Book 2, Chapter 7, l. 7). This particular instance is striking, as it contrasts with *well* in a different sense:

'Wel,' quod I, 'this inpossession [imposition] I wol [will] wel understande'

A century later we see *well* preceding the verb *said* in *The Morte Darthur*. In Book I, Chapter 1, for example, we find two *well*-users interacting:

Then for pure anger and for great love of fair Igraine the king Uther fell sick. So came to the king Uther Sir Ulfius, a noble knight, and asked the king why he was sick. I shall tell thee, said the king, I am sick for anger and for love of fair Igraine, that I may not be whole. Well, my lord, said Sir Ulfius, I shall seek Merlin, and he shall do you remedy, that your heart shall be pleased. So Ulfius departed, and by adventure he met Merlin in a beggar's array, and there Merlin asked Ulfius whom he sought. And he said he had little ado to tell him. Well, said Merlin, I know whom thou seekest, for thou seekest Merlin; therefore seek no farther, for I am he; and if King Uther will well reward me, and be sworn unto me to fulfil my desire, that shall be his honour and profit more than mine; for I shall cause him to have all his desire. All this will I undertake, said Ulfius, that there shall be nothing reasonable but thou shalt have thy desire. Well, said Merlin, he shall have his intent and desire. And therefore, said Merlin, ride on your way, for I will not be long behind.

Merlin is evidently being very accommodating.

But for the full range of discourse uses of *well*, we have to wait for Early Modern English. We find rapport uses, for example, in the second act of Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1566):

Talkapace: Well, Truepenny, never but flinging! [rushing around]

Alyface: And frisking!

Truepenny: Well, Tibet and Annot, still swinging and whisking! [dashing about]

Talkapace: But ye roil abroad. [gad about]

And earlier in the play we find Talkapace softening a caution with an early use of *well* inside a sentence:

If ye do so again, well, I would advise you nay.

It is Shakespeare who illustrates virtually every *well*-usage in his plays, and puts them into the mouths of characters from all social ranks. The only usage which is missing is the one introducing direct speech – unsurprisingly, as these are plays not narratives – but even this function is touched upon when the rebel Holland reflects (*Henry VI Part 2* 4.2.7, with First Folio punctuation):

Well, I say, it was never merry world in England, since Gentlemen came up.

Apart from this, we have *well* expressing group rapport, as when Horatio invites Barnardo to tell his story (*Hamlet* 1.1.33):

Well, sit we down ...

There is *well* expressing change of event, as when Hamlet gives the players leave to go (3.2.55):

Well, go make you ready

We see *well* offering the chance of a new topic when Hamlet, after an aside to Horatio, turns to Osrick once again (5.2.134):

Well, sir?

The word seems to be just filling the silence in Hotspur's account of his boredom in listening to Glendower ranting on (*Henry IV Part 1* 3.1.152):

I cried 'Hum', and 'Well, go to!'

And it becomes a substitute for articulate speech in *All's Well That Ends Well* when Parolles, returning from a battle, expostulates (2.5.87):

Lose our drum? Well.

Shakespeare actually gives us a discursal gloss when he has Hamlet warn his fellows (1.5.175) that they should not give the game away when he puts 'an antic disposition on':

by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,

As 'Well, well, we know' ...

And in this dialogue (*Henry IV Part 1* 1.2.45) *well* marks someone wanting to reduce the force of a confrontation. Falstaff has addressed Prince Hal in typical blustering style, but when he receives an equally forceful response, he yields:

Falstaff: What a plague have I to do with a buff jerkin?

Prince Hal: Why, what a pox have I to do with my Hostess of the tavern?

Falstaff: Well, thou hast called her to a reckoning many a time and oft.

This is a scene full of linguistic fencing: as many as 7 of the 60 exchanges begin with a discourse *well*. And one of them shows an expansion of the usage:

Prince Hal: Well then, once in my days I'll be a madcap.

*Well then* is one of several ways of adding emphasis. *Well now* is another, used by the Countess in *All's Well That Ends Well* (1.3.94). It is an interesting usage, as they are the very opening words of a private conversation with her steward, an invitation to speak intimately:

Countess: Well, now.

Steward: I know, madam, you love your gentlewoman entirely.

Doubling the *well* is another way of adding emotion to an interaction. Somerset's tension is apparent when he asks the others which rose they will choose, white or red, to show which side they are on (*Henry VI Part 1* 2.4.55):

Well, well, come on; who else?

In *Coriolanus* (2.1.26) the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius are so irritated by Menenius's long-windedness that they break out into a joint exclamatory prompt:

Well, well sir, well.

And in *Macbeth* (5.1.51) the Doctor uses a triple *well*, at a loss to know how to react on hearing the profound sigh from the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth:

Gentlewoman: I would not have such a heart in my bosom, for the dignity of the whole body.

Doctor: Well, well, well.

Gentlewoman: Pray God it be, sir.

What is interesting about the Gentlewoman's response, of course, is her taking the Doctor's words literally. This must be the first recorded instance of someone failing to understand a discourse function of *well* in written English.

(After D. Crystal, 2004.)