

The Pragmatic Function of the Discourse Marker “Well” in TED Talks from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract

This paper uses 25 speeches under the topic *The most popular talks of all time* in the TED official website as the corpus, and analyzes the pragmatic function of “well” in the genre of speech. The study finds that the discourse marker “well” in TED talks can achieve the following pragmatic functions, that is, delaying thinking, moderating tone, linking discourse, emphasizing information, constructing discourse, making up for shortages, correcting information, and changing turns. The use of discourse marker “well” can make communication more fluent and increase the compliance of conversation. The purpose of this study is to strengthen the correct use of the discourse marker “well” when delivering English speeches, and to improve English speaking ability to a certain extent.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Discourse Markers, Pragmatic Function, TED Talks

1. Introduction

Discourse markers are everywhere in daily communication. These markers can be conjunctions, adverbs, or words in other categories. These words have different pragmatic functions in different daily communication. Levinson (1983) stated, “Undoubtedly, in most languages there is a class of words or phrases which signifies a certain connection between an utterance and a preceding utterance, which themselves contain non-truth conditional meaning.” The sentence actually alludes to the special pragmatic function of discourse markers. So far, there are four influential theories of discourse markers: Schourup’s core meaning theory of discourse markers; Schiffrin’s (2007) coherence theory; Fraser’s grammatical pragmatic theory and Blackmore’s discourse marker taxonomy under coherence theory. Among them, Blackmore (2002) studied discourse markers based on Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory (1995), and believed that relevance plays a pivotal role in the coherence of dialogue and communicative success, restricting the listener’s understanding of contextual coherence and reducing cognitive efforts on both sides of the conversation to achieve explicit-inference. In addition, the theory believes that discourse markers can restrict the comprehension and generation of discourse, and by helping listeners to reconstruct the relevant contextual assumptions, the speaker’s original intention can be correctly inferred and the best relationship between the two sides of the communication can be achieved.

This paper studies the discourse marker “well” in the framework of relevance theory. There are many scholars who study discourse markers, but the corpora they analyze vary. Wang Liang (2019) analyzed the role of discourse markers based on political speeches; Xia Xuyuan (2020) explored the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in British and American sitcoms; Wang Yanhong (2017) pursued the pragmatic functions and translation strategies in English speeches from the perspective of translation. However, it can be found that the classification of the pragmatic function of the discourse marker “well” in speeches

is not comprehensive enough. Generally speaking, the words of speeches are more imposing, and its language contains more parallel sentences, which has the effect of being clean and powerful. Discourse markers do not participate in the expression of propositions in language communication, and will not affect the truth-value condition of the speech. However, the use of “well” in speeches can also achieve a unique language function. Therefore, from the perspective of relevance theory, 25 different TED talks are selected to further study and explore the pragmatic functions of discourse marker “well” in different contexts. Hence, the purpose of this research is to make speakers pay more attention to the use of discourse marker “well” and enhance their speaking skills as well as abilities.

2. Relevance Theory

After the 1980s, relevance theory has become the focus of many researches. As a category of cognitive pragmatics, relevance theory plays an important role in human cognition. The relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson is the most influential theory in this type of research. These two scholars believe that human cognition is more focused on things related to oneself. Therefore, based on the theory of conversational implicature, with communication as the core, it focuses on attention of discourses and starts with a new explanation of association, that is, the relevance theory (1986). Under this theory, human cognition is usually matched with the greatest correlation, and each explicit action can find its best correlation in different contexts, and this theory generalizes human discourse as a process of explicit-inference. As what Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) pointed out, “Explicit and inference are two aspects of verbal communication.” Therefore, the explicit behavior is related to the speaker, and the inferential behavior is related to the hearer.

Discourse markers are widely used in many human languages, and almost all of them are used in the daily language of communication. It is a kind of marker at the language level, which has the functions of cohesion and pause in sentences and discourses. It conveys and expresses certain information markers for clear understanding of discourse. Such markers are usually two propositional discourse fragments before and after the cohesion, and they help to form the coherence and logic of the discourse, and play a role in prompting to a certain extent. Therefore, in the process of people’s communication, the discourse marker “well” has a very implicit function of pragmatic cohesion, and the content it conveys is contained in the dialogue, which needs to be deeply explored. Also, the pragmatic function of “well” plays an important role under the relevance theory. The role of explicit guidance can minimize the cognitive effort of the hearer in different contexts, so as to obtain the best association and enable both parties to achieve good communicative behavior. Ran Yongping (2000) believed that discourse markers did not constitute the semantic content of discourse, but provided information markers for discourse comprehension, which played a guiding role in discourse understanding. Hence, the use of discourse markers by people is largely having a pragmatic effect.

3. The Pragmatic Analysis of “Well” in TED Talks

In daily oral communication, “well” is used more frequently, especially in speech corpus, where discourse markers appear more or less. Under the framework of relevance theory, this paper uses real TED talks as corpus to conduct research and analysis on the discourse marker “well”. Among the 25 talks under the topic *The most popular talks of all time* on TED’s official website, statistics show that the word “well” appears 49 times as a discourse marker in the 25 talks. After analysis, it can be seen that 28 of them appear as discourse markers. The use of “well” in the speech corpus can be mainly summarized into the following six pragmatic functions:

1. Delay Thinking

Ran Yongping (2000) thought that “well” could be used as a delay marker or hesitation marker to avoid long pauses. In the process of real communication, normal communication is often with pauses or cohesion, and the speaker needs to think about it to organize the language well. Therefore, in order to avoid some embarrassing scenes caused by too long pauses, the speaker will use “well” to delay, and also to imply the listener to understand that the speaker will organize the next utterance information. There are quite a few examples of this in 25 TED talks.

Example 1: Speaker: So, why did I do that? That was awkward.

Audience: (Laughter)

Speaker: Well--

Audience: (Laughter)

Speaker: Hopefully not as awkward as that picture. Image is powerful, but also, image is superficial. I just totally transformed what you thought of me, in six seconds.

Cameron Russell is the speaker of this discourse, she admits she won the “gene lottery” in her talk *Looks aren’t everything. Believe me, I’m a model*. In this speech, because it is her tall, beautiful appearance, she can be a lingerie model. But she also mentions not judging her by her looks, and in this speech she takes a sarcastic look at the industry that made her look very polished at 16. Cameron Russell is going to change clothes on the spot. At this time, the audience may have some doubts, but the speaker does the self-questioning and says “Why did I do that? That was awkward.” Then she uses “well” to introduce her own thoughts. In such a context, the speaker is actually delaying thinking, because in the previous context, the speaker says “That was awkward”, and uses “well” in order to leave herself some time to organize what to say next. The speaker explains that she hopes that it would not be as strange as the picture, because the image can convey information, but at the same time it is superficial, so she wants to change her image in the audience’s mind within 6 seconds.

2. Moderate Tone

In ideal discourse communication, both the speaker and the hearer must abide by the politeness principle to a certain extent, so that the dialogue can be carried out harmoniously and smoothly, and a good interpersonal relationship can be formed. Brown and Levinson (1978) pointed out that in verbal communication, many speech acts might threaten face. For example, face threats may be caused when the speaker's request is rejected or the speaker gives orders to the hearer. But in reality, sometimes when the two sides are talking, the speaker and the hearer may hold different views, so when the speaker wants to express a different position, it will threaten the face of the hearer to a certain extent, and at this time the markers that appear are also known as "face threat mitigations". Therefore, the use of "well" can alleviate the threat of face and meet the face needs of the hearer, and this effect is also reflected in TED talks, which can help create a good atmosphere for interpersonal communication.

Example 2: So, I'll start with this: a couple years ago, an event planner called me because I was going to do a speaking event. And she called, and she said, "I'm really struggling with how to write about you on the little flyer." And I thought, "Well, what's the struggle?" And she said, "Well, I saw you speak, and I'm going to call you a researcher, I think, but I'm afraid if I call you a researcher, no one will come, because they'll think you're boring and irrelevant."

Brené Brown starts her speech *The power of vulnerability* with a dialogue, which is used to introduce the next topic she is going to talk about. In this dialogue, the discourse marker "well" is used to achieve better interpersonal communication. Brené Brown, a scholar of human connections, shares insights from her research which led her to embark on a personal quest to understand both oneself and human nature. During the speech, Brené Brown mentions an experience she had in the past. Because she was going to do a speaking event, and then an event planner called her to ask how she would introduce herself on the flyer. There are two "well" here. The first "well" is the speaker said, which is her mental activity, but she is giving a speech at this time, so the use of "well" is in terms of her interaction with the audience, in order to connect the discourse. Also, it reflects her inner thoughts and doubts that what the introducer has to worry about. She uses such explicit communication to find out the connection between the speaker and the interlocutor. Then, in order to alleviate the embarrassing scene or the unpleasant mood of the hearer, the event planner uses the discourse marker "well", where it can be inferred that the planner contains euphemistic words and hopes to avoid the behavior of face threat.

3. Emphasize Information

In discourse communication, when the speaker talks about the key information he thinks, he will subconsciously use some means to attract the attention of the hearer, which plays a better role in emphasizing the information. In order to ensure the continuity of the topic, the speaker will use discourse markers after changing the topic, or bring the interrupted topic back to the original topic, so as to attract the attention of the hearer. The discourse marker "well" can play the role in reminding the listener to adjust to the cognitive context, play the role of cohesion, and reflect the principle of optimal association, such as:

Example 3: And he said, "Yep. Yep. Absolutely. I beat someone up when I was 17. And I was in prison awaiting trial, and my cellmate said to me, "You know what you have to do? Fake madness. Tell them you're mad, you'll get sent to some cushy hospital. Nurses will bring you pizzas, you'll have your own PlayStation."

I said, "Well, how did you do it?"

He said, "Well, I asked to see the prison psychiatrist. And I'd just seen a film called 'Crash,' in which people get sexual pleasure from crashing cars into walls. So I said to the psychiatrist, 'I get sexual pleasure from crashing cars into walls.'"

Jon Ronson, a psychopath tester, uses "well" many times in his speeches. Through explicit-inference, he uses it to achieve the role of coherent discourse. In this context, Tony, who was talking to Jon Ronson, wanted to pretend to be crazy in prison. He thought that he could be sent to some comfortable hospital if he did that. But then, Jon Ronson used "well" to link up words and elicited the content of his question. In order to connect the content of the words as well, Tony also used "well" to guide what he was going to say, and explained that he had gone to see a psychiatrist. Therefore, it can be seen from this conversation that although the two parties are having a dialogue, the "well" used by both parties can help to emphasize what they want to say. It can achieve the effect of hinting, and let the other side know the focus of their conversation.

4. Make up for Shortages

Lakoff (1973) and Schiffrin (2007) had discussed the matter of information shortages in expression of "well". In some cases, the information provided by the speaker to the hearer cannot constitute a certain coherence, because the speaker uses an information shortage marker such as "well", which indicates that the speaker is unwilling or inconvenient to tell or reveal some information. So some discourse information is intentionally omitted. In addition, "well" can also imply that the speaker has an implication, and the listener needs to make a certain effort to understand what the speaker really wants to express.

Example 4: (Video) John Edwards: I'd be happy to participate in one. I know that it's not possible that this child could be mine, because of the timing of events. So I know it's not possible. Happy to take a paternity test, and would love to see it happen.

Interviewer: Are you going to do that soon? Is there somebody --

JE: Well, I'm only one side. I'm only one side of the test. But I'm happy to participate in one.

This is an excerpt from Pamela Meyer's speech *How to spot a liar*, where she mentions that in her book *The Liar* she shows the techniques used by those who are trained to recognize deceit, and she believes honesty is a noble virtue. She mentions an example of a paternity test, and the two sides of the conversation are John Edwards and a reporter. John Edwards said he was happy to do a paternity test even though he knew the child was not his own because he also wanted to know the results. Then the reporter asked him if he would do the paternity test soon, and John Edwards used "well" in his words, and then he

said that he was only one of the appraisal sides but was happy to do it. Pamela Meyer is actually watching from a third perspective here.

She can tell whether a person is lying from a person's micro-expression or micro-motion. In connection with the context at this time, Edwards is actually lying. He hides some key information by using "well", because he does not want others to know too much, and wants to skip this topic. In this context, "well" has an implication, which produces a suggestive contextual effect and is intriguing.

5. Correct Information

When the two sides are talking, what the speaker says is not necessarily coherent and correct, sometimes there may be a slip of the tongue, and the listener may also have a mishearing phenomenon, then people will use the discourse marker "well" to deal with that problem. This kind of conversation modification can be regarded as a kind of conversation management or conversation adjustment, which also reflects the principle of dynamic adaptation of conversation in the process of people's communication (Ran Yongping, 2003). The use of the discourse marker "well" can make the listener pay the least effort to understand the content when receiving information, so as to achieve the best correlation between the information. This correction function of "well" is mainly self-correction in speeches, such as the following example:

Example 5: If, after this amazing list, they still are like, "No, no, Cameron, I want to be a model," well, then I say, "Be my boss."

This paragraph is still quoted from Cameron Russell's *Looks aren't everything. Believe me, I'm a model*. In this speech, the speaker uses the discourse marker "well" when answering the questions of little girls who want to be models. Because the speaker thinks she can't decide anything, like whether people can become the editor-in-chief of American Vogue, or the next Steven Meisel (a famous fashion photographer), these things are out of people's control. So it can be deduced by linking the preceding and following sentences of "well" that "well" is a revision of the first half of the sentence. And the result of the revision is that she said the second half of the sentence, which forms a certain contrast with the information she said before. Therefore, "well" plays the role of information correction in her sentence in order to achieve better interaction with the audience.

6. Change Turns

In actual communication, the two sides of the dialogue will change the turn of the conversation. This phenomenon is a unique discourse expression mechanism of human beings. It is also a process in which both parties constantly seek the expression of each other's inner activities and try to figure out the inner meaning of the other side's words in verbal communication. George Yule (2000) stated that turn-changing referred to the change of speakers in a dialogue. When the speaker wants to start a round of utterance or end a conversation on a topic, the discourse marker "well" is usually used to indicate the speaker's intention and attract the attention of the hearer, so as to establish the next dialogue relationship and achieve better rotation of words.

Example 6: I said, "What's the story?"

And he (Anthony Maden) said, "Yep. We accept that Tony faked madness to get out of a prison sentence, because his hallucinations -- that had seemed quite cliché to begin with -- just vanished the minute he got to Broadmoor. However, we have assessed him, and we've determined that what he is a psychopath."

And I said, "Well, but why didn't he hang out with the other patients?" Classic psychopath -- it speaks to grandiosity and also lack of empathy. So all the things that had seemed most normal about Tony was evidence, according to his clinician, that he was mad in this new way. He was a psychopath.

Psychopath tester Jon Ronson has a "well"-marked passage in his speech *Strange answers to the psychopath test*, where speaker Jon Ronson explores the gray area between madness and sanity. Jon Ronson quotes a conversation he had before with a clinician, asking about Tony's condition. Jon Ronson first asked the doctor if Tony had any stories, and the doctor Anthony Maden replied that Tony was pretending to be crazy, which was a kind of cunning and controlling behavior of a psychopath. Also he said some symptoms, and then Jon Ronson wanted to ask for other contents, so "well" was used to seek the psychological activities of the other side. At the same time, it can express his intentions, and attract the attention of the other side, so as to switch turns. Because the speaker wants to realize why Tony doesn't want to interact with other patients, and in order to explore deeper contents, he uses the marker "well" which can move the focus to the next topic.

4. Conclusion

It can be seen from the above analysis that discourse markers can play a certain role in expressing attitudes and easing the situation. Starting from relevance theory and combining real speech data, this paper explores the pragmatic function of the discourse marker "well" in speech communication, and confirms the versatility of "well" in oral conversation. This paper interprets the dynamic adaptation of the discourse marker "well" in language communication, and analyzes the discourse of both sides in conversations and finds the best correlation in different communicative contexts. After the pragmatic functions of "well" are studied, it can give people better understanding of the discourse markers in different contexts. It is also a means and tool to promote the smooth progress of dialogue and communication. Through the research of this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn: the discourse markers of small words such as "well" can indicate the speaker's attitude and emotion, and have the effect on enhancing the harmonious interaction between people. In addition, discourse markers in the same example sentence may also have several different pragmatic interpersonal functions. By exploring the corpus of TED talks, the author analyzes the six pragmatic functions of "well", hoping that people can better understand and use discourse markers,

which will improve their English speaking ability to a certain extent. In future researches, it is possible to combine different theories with the analysis of discourse markers to make certain contributions to the study of pragmatic functions.

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