

# Wider possibilities of discourse meaning in Early Modern English

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper examines wider possibilities of discourse meaning in Early Modern English. By ‘discourse meaning’, I refer to the meaning or meanings which can be pragmatically conveyed through the discourse context beyond the sentence. Shakespearean texts, including Quartos, Folios and modern editions are used. Potential discourse markers in these texts were analysed from a collocational point of view in my papers read at PALA 2009 and 2010. The present paper focuses on pragmatic phenomena which must have bridged the development of the word *well* from propositional to discourse marker.

The following issues will be discussed: first, wider interpretative possibilities of the word *well*; secondly, possible bridge phenomena taking place particularly at the initial position of a dialogue turn, which can be multifunctional; thirdly, various usages of *well* which co-existed in the Early Modern English period, and might have been associated closely enough to be pragmatically used to invite slightly different conversational inferences as in Iago’s insinuations or equivocations, and also to delineate a comic character like Falstaff. Finally, pedagogical implications will be mentioned.

## 2. *Well* and interpretative possibilities: Some proposals

The word *well* can serve various different functions in its actual use. In Shakespeare’s play texts, the word *well* appears as a noun as in quotation (1), an adjective as in (2), an adverb as in (3) and a response token with a semantic meaning of compliance or ‘positive appraisal’ as in (4). The discourse marker use of *well* is also prevalent as in (5).

- (1) *Th[urio]*. Where meete we? – *Pro[teus]*. At Saint Gregories **well**. (F1 TGV 4.2.84)
- (2) Where is thy Master Dromio? Is he **well**? (F1 ERR 4.2.31)
- (3) That’s **well** said. (F1 MM 2.2.109)
- (4) *Gon[erill]*. [...] Remember what I haue said. – *Osw[ald]*. **Well** Madam. (F1 LR 1.3.21)
- (5) *Fen[ton]*. yes marry haue I [a wart about my eye], what of that?  
*Qui*. **Wel**, thereby hangs a tale [...] but for you – **well** – goe too  
*Fen*. **Well**: I shall see her to day: hold, there’s money for thee [...] (F1 WIV 1.4.148)

The reader of Shakespeare may be supposed to be able to readily judge and choose one of these semantic and/or discourse marker options. *Well* in Shakespearean texts, however, is sometimes

ambiguous as in (6).

(6) Three thousand ducates, **well**. (F1 MV 1.3.1)

It is not clear whether this example is understood as something like *Three thousand ducates, well*(↘), with a falling intonation on the *well* implying ‘That is acceptable’; or, as *Three thousand ducates, well*(→), with a level pitch on the *well* signalling that the speaker stops short groping for words to continue. The use of punctuation marks in the Early Modern English period tells us that the full stop immediately after the word *well* left on the page of the First Folio does not necessarily mean that the utterance ends there as in the modern way of punctuating, but it can also be interpreted to be what is indicated by means of three dots in Present-day English, signalling the potential continuation of the utterance.

In examples (7) and (8), scholars disagree on the interpretation of meanings and/or functions of the word *well*

(7) *Pan[thino]*. Wilt thou go? – *Launce*. **Well**, I will go. *Exeunt*. (TGV 2.3.59)

(8) *Pros[pero]*. Do not approach / Till thou dost hear me call.

*Ari[el]*. **Well**; I conceive [=‘understand’]. *Exit*. (TMP 4.1.50)

Blake (2004: 87) understands both of these *wells* as discourse markers which preface the speaker’s apparently positive response. On the other hand, in his discussion of discourse markers, Schourup (1999: 93) rejects these instances as ‘an independent content word for “compliance”’, which as he says ‘alternates with *I will* and *I conceive*’.

It is not too much to say that expressions which could be either a discourse marker or a lexical item in historical texts can become something like a pit or trap the reader is likely to fall into. This point can be illustrated by looking at the word *what*, one of the commonest markers in Shakespearean texts (Blake 1992, 2002: 290-92).

(9) a. **What** shall Cordelia speake? Loue, and be silent. (Q/F LR 1.162)

Quotation (9a) follows both the First Quarto and the First Folio with no punctuation after *what*. All of the modern editions I know follow the punctuation in (9a), which comes to indicate that they are interpreting the *what* as an interrogative.

It has been argued recently, however, that *what* in (9a) may be better understood as a discourse marker so that it expresses Cordelia’s dismay and apprehension (Blake 1992/3: 83-84, 2002: 292). This interpretation is shown in Present-day English with a comma after *what* as in (9b).

(9) b. **What**, shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent.

What is interesting in the discussion of *what* is that modern editors are more likely to take *what* as a lexical word than as a discourse marker. Blake (1992: 83) puts it:

[...] modern editors of Shakespeare have never paid attention to the possibilities of discourse markers and have consequently not been willing to consider alternative interpretations which involve such markers.

This is surely because discourse markers in historical texts have not received any serious attention until quite recently. This means that the same is the case with other potential markers also, and therefore that certain words and phrases should be considered as possible discourse markers where contextually and/or linguistically feasible even if they have hitherto been established as a lexical item in standard editions.

### 3. Development of *well* and bridge phenomena

Recent studies have revealed the process of development of the word *well* from semantic through pragmatic to discourse marker. Quotation (10) is proposed as an ‘earliest context for the marker’s further pragmatic evolution’ (Defour 2010: 162).

(10) And where as they saye that the Gospell must be taught after the interpretations approved by the church (**that is very well**) **but** all the stryfe is, which is the trewe church.

(OED, *well* [*a.* 10.a.]–1560. Finell 1989:655; Defour 2010:162)

The *well* in the boldfaced expression *that is very well* has a semantic or propositional meaning which can be strengthened by the preceding intensifier *very*. With the subject and verb preceded, it is still an adjectival *well*.

Tine Defour (2010:162) quotes example (11) from Schourup (2001; 1049) as an abbreviated form of the phrase *that is very well*.

(11) *Cloten*: Nay, come, let’s go together.

*Second Lord*: **Well**, my lord.

(*Cymbeline* [1.2.41], qtd. Schourup 2001: 1049; Defour 2010:162)

According to Defour, ‘adjectival *well* [placed in utterance-initial position,] allows the speaker to express “acceptance of a situation” or acceptance of a previous speaker turn.’ She also says, ‘the central positive meaning of propositional *well* can then be used as a starting point for additional disagreeing or concessive comments’ as in example (10). Defour (2010: 163) further points out that ‘this combination of acceptance and concession [...] recurs in present-day interpersonal uses of *well*’, as in example (12).

(12) – Are you coming to the lecture?

– **Well, I'd like to, but** I'm afraid I can't today.

(Finell 1989: 655; Defour 2010: 163; Defour and Simon-Vandenberg 2010: 649)

It may be quite interesting to know that the word *well* has developed through the three-stage process from propositional through pragmatic to discourse marker. For the purpose of the present paper, however, I would like to propose example (10'), repeated from example (4) above, as another phase, diachronic or synchronic, which coexisted with the concessive use.

(10') *Gon[eril]*. [...] Remember what I haue said. – *Osw[ald]*. **Well** Madam.

(F1 LR 1.3.21)

This semantic use of propositional *well* in an abbreviated form exactly indicates the speaker's immediate and strict compliance with the previous speaker's command without any implication of hesitation or concession. This non-concessive use of *well* in a totally or unconditionally positive response still has the propositional meaning of 'compliance or agreement', and it is more closely connected with an adjectival use of *well*.

The point here is that two slightly different functions of the abbreviated form *well* coexisted in Shakespeare, and that these two should be differentiated when we appreciate and explicate a theatrical or dramaturgical use of the shades of meaning which coexist in the same form *well*.

Figure (1) is a speculative process of the development or a synchronic state of the meanings and functions of *well*.

Figure 1: A speculative development or synchronic state of *well*

Stage I	S + V + ( <i>very</i> ) <i>well</i> ( <i>but</i> )	an adjectival <i>well</i> in propositional or semantic use
Stage II	<i>well</i> (+ address form)	an abbreviated form of an adjectival use
Stage III	<i>well</i> (+ address form)	an abbreviated form of Stage I & a starting point towards marker use
Stage IV	<i>well</i> (+ address form) (+ a certain continuation of words prefaced by <i>but, if... I will, etc.</i> )	as a discourse maker

The reader of Shakespeare may be supposed to be able to easily distinguish between propositional use at Stage I and marker use at Stage IV, but various interpretations or inferences often emerge through Stages II and III, both of which must have worked as bridge phenomena in the development of *well* from propositional to discourse marker.

Here I would like to focus on the collocational sequence in the passages quoted above. The semantic use of propositional *well* in example (10) is followed by the adversative conjunction *but*. *Well* in examples (10') and (11) is followed by the forms of address *Madame*

and *my lord* respectively, and it is still used with the semantic meaning of ‘compliance and acceptance’. *Well* in example (12) is immediately followed by the utterance *I’d like to*, which indicates the speaker’s positive reaction. The marker use of *well* here, however, should be understood in the combination with the utterance following the conjunction *but*. This conjunction introduces the speaker’s negative attitude which is deliberately introduced immediately after the apparently positive phrase *I’d like to*.

The combination with a form of address must have acted an important role in the bridge phenomena because this combination is most likely to invite pragmatic inferences in the use of *well* either for the propositional meaning of ‘compliance’ and for the discourse marker function. This leads to an alternative marker reading of *well* in quotation (13), although it is punctuated as a lexical word in standard modern editions.

- (13) *Ham.* [...] Give him heedful note, / [...] /  
 And after we will both our judgements join  
 In censure of his seeming.
- Hor.* **Well,** my lord.  
**If**’a steal aught the whilst this play is playing,  
 And scape detecting, **I will** pay the theft. (Riverside HAM 3.2.87)

The interesting point is that the marker reading of this *well* can be supported by the linguistic or formal mode of collocation involving the following utterances, which is one of the most prominent and well-established modes of collocation involving marker *well* as in examples (14) and (15).

- (14) (used frequently by Falstaff)
- a. [...] **Well, if** Percy be alive, **I’ll** pierce him. (1H4 5.3.56)
  - b. [...] **Well, and**[=‘if’] I be serv’d such another trick, **I’ll** have my braines ta’en out and buttered, [...] (Wiv 3.5.6)
  - c. [...] **Well, if** my wind were but long enough [to say my prayers], **I would** repent.  
 (Wiv 4.5.102)
  - d. **Well, and** the fire of grace be not quite out of thee, now **shalt thou** be moved. [...] (as Henry IV; 1H4 2.4.383)
- (15) a. [...] **Well, while** I live **I’ll** fear no other thing  
 So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring. *Exeunt.* (MV 5.1.306)
- b. **Well,** my lord, since you have given me leave to speak,  
 Freely **will I** speak. (Per 1.2.101)
  - c. **Well,** Catesby, **ere** a fortnight make me elder,  
**I’ll** send some packing [=send away] that yet think not on’t. (Ff R3 3.2.60)

#### 4. Coexistence and association of different usages of *well* in conversation scenes

Quotation (16) is taken from F1 *Measure for Measure* (with numbers in square brackets provided in the right-hand margin for the sake of convenience).

- (16) *Elb[bow]*. I beseech you Sir, aske him what this man [Froth] did to my wife.  
*Clo[wn]*. I beseech your honor, aske me.  
*Esc[alus]*. **Well sir**, what did this Gentleman to her? [1]  
*Clo.* I beseech you sir, looke in this Gentlemans face  
 [...] doth your honor marke his face?  
*Esc.* I sir, very **well**. [2]  
*Clo.* Nay, I beseech you marke it **well**. [3]  
*Esc.* **Well**, I doe so. [4]  
*Clo.* Doth your honor see any harme in his face?  
*Esc.* Why no. (F1 MM 2.1.143 ff.)

The verbal exchange in this scene is based on the coexistence and close association of different usages of *well* such as adjective, adverb, compliance token and discourse maker. Which usage the speaker intends or which usage the hearer infers, however, is not always clear. The speaker may sometimes leave intentionally less clear which usage is intended.

*Well* [1], used by Escalus, is followed by *sir*, the commonest form of address immediately after *well* in Shakespeare. It may be understood as a compliant *well* which gives the speaker's full consent to the previous request 'ask me'. The modern edition by Clark *et al.* puts a semi-colon immediately after the address form *sir*, which indicates that the editors understand *well sir* as an independent phrase detached from the following utterance, something like the modern 'Yes sir.' The Arden edition puts a simple comma both before and after *sir*, which probably indicates that the editor understands *well* as more closely connected with and introducing the speaker's own utterance following.

*Well* [2] may also be less clear. Combined with the preceding intensifier *very*, it makes a compliance formula *very well*, which can be interpreted as a full compliance to the preceding request, alternating with the turn-initial *I sir*. This interpretation is what Clown infers as shown in his response: *Nay, I beseech you marke it well*. Intentional or not, *well* [2] is far from what the questioner, Clown, may have pragmatically expected in his question: *doth your honor marke his face?* In spite of Clown's inference, however, *well* [2] can also be interpreted as a propositional *well* used as an adverb implying that 'the speaker, Escalus, marks the gentleman's face very well'.

*Well* [3] is used as an adverb modifying the verb 'marke'. By repeating the word *well* but twisting it into an adverbial use, the speaker tries to make his pragmatic meaning clear. This means that the speaker understands the previous *very well* as a response phrase with a certain propositional meaning which is under way to be bleached.

*Well* [4] may look more like a discourse maker introducing the speaker's subjective

reaction to the previous request when he says ‘I doe so’. The speaker’s intention, however, can be different, and *well* here may also be understood as an adverbial use of propositional *well* which is a simple repetition of the previous one (i.e. *well* [3]) followed by the alternate manner adverb *so*.

## 5. Theatrical use of pragmatic multifunctionality in conversation scenes

5.1 Pragmatic multifunctionality of *well* can be exploited in speeches of particular characters sly as well as comic. Quotation (17) is an example of a dexterous and cunning use of *well* in conversation scenes.

- (17) *Rod.* You haue told me she hath receiu’d them[=jewels], and return’d me expectations and comforts of sodaine respect, and acquaintance, but I finde none.  
*Iago.* **Well, go too: very well.**  
*Rod.* Very well, go too: I cannot go too, (man) nor tis not very well. Nay I think it is scuruy: and begin to finde my selfe foft[=cheated] in it.  
*Iago.* Very well.  
*Rod.* I tell you, ’tis not very well: I will make my selfe knowne to *Desdemona*. [...] (F1 Oth 4.2.188 ff.)

In Iago’s first response utterance: *well, go to: very well*, these words or phrases act as something like discourse markers. The point is that Iago is very sly and crafty in using these apparently meaningless small words, which he must be well aware can invite various pragmatic inferences. Accordingly, Roderigo comes to take these ‘meaningless’ words Iago has mumbled, for meaningful ones. And this is how he gets caught in the trap Iago has set.

The contrast between Iago’s carefully laid trap and Roderigo’s lapse into it, is shown linguistically in their respective syntactic patterns when Roderigo expresses his irritation by repeating Iago’s words or phrases rather than their sequence. The point here is that Iago’s <*go to + very well*> sequence is reversed into <*Very well + go too*> in Roderigo’s reaction.

When Iago says, ‘Well, go to: very well’, each of these expressions in this sequence acts almost as a discourse marker with little explicit propositional meaning discernible. Even the combination <*very + well*>, which is supposed to have a propositional meaning to be intensified by *very*, still sounds semantically implicit with no subject nor verb provided. What is ‘very well’? – it is blurred. In using this phrase, Iago is sly and crafty enough to blur his pragmatic meaning and seems to go between marker use and propositional use.

Roderigo gets trapped and takes Iago’s almost meaningless small words for meaningful ones, which can linguistically be traced in the reversed order of repeated phrases: <*Very well + go too*>. This turn-initial *very well* sounds more like an abbreviated form of ‘it is very well.’ with full propositional meaning ‘it is quite satisfactory’. The following *go too* sounds more like an imperative with the propositional meaning of ‘get moving, get to work’ (sv. *go to* (v.); Crystal & Crystal 2002: 201).

Iago's second use of *very well* is almost the same as the first one, and it also triggers the same reaction from Roderigo, who tries to simply negate an alternative propositional meaning of Iago's *very well* with subject and verb added.

This is one of the conversation scenes where so-called 'meaningless' small words are fully exploited to be bestowed much meaning – meaning which can be pragmatically inferred and significant in the progress of dramatic dialogues. The point is that Iago's pragmatic use of language can be better understood when the reader's attention is paid to the concept of coexistence and association of diachronically evolving meanings and functions of potential discourse markers.

5.2 Quotation (18) is an example where Falstaff's use of *well* can invite slightly different pragmatic inferences or implications which lead to different speaker attitudes.

(18) *Prince*. [...] But sirra, make haste, *Percy* is already in the field.

*Falst.* What, is the King encamp'd?

*Westm.* Hee is, Sir *John*, I feare wee shall stay too long.

*Falst.* **Well**, to the latter end of a Fray, and the beginning of a Feast, fits a dull fighter, and a keene Guest. *Exeunt.*

(F1 1H4 4.2.78 [in prose line])

Falstaff's use of the *well* here is dexterous and disloyal enough to invite either of these two possible pragmatic inferences depending on who it is intended to be heard by: as a positive response apparently intended to be heard by Westmoreland, who is leaving the stage possibly a couple of steps forwards in front of Falstaff; and also as a discourse device to preface the speaker's own negative personal attitude which is not intended to be heard by anybody else, but is spoken to himself behind Westmoreland's back just as in *aside*. This pragmatically attitudinal use of *well* is based on the concessive use at Stage III in my figure (1) above, which successfully bridges an adjectival use of *well* at Stage II and a marker use at Stage IV helping these two pragmatic inferences to be combined or merged in Falstaff's use of the single *well*.

These interpretative possibilities can be closely connected with alternative interpretations of the speaker attitude which can be observed in different stage directions given in various texts and editions as in quotation (18').



(18')	F1, 18/19c.	Q1, Riverside	Alex., Arden, Oxf.
<i>Prince.</i> [ . . . ]	[ — ]	[Exit.]	[Exit.]
<i>Falst.</i> What, is the King encamp'd?			
<i>Westm.</i> Hee is, Sir Iohn, I feare wee shall stay too long.	[ — ]	[ — ]	[Exit.]
<i>Falst.</i> <b>Well</b> , to the latter end of a Fray, and the beginning of a Feast, fits a dull fighter, and a keene Guest. (F1 1H4 4.2.78 [in prose line])	[Exeunt.]	[Exeunt.]	[Exit.]
Implications=>	↓ Concessive use (or DM)	↓ Concessive use (or DM)	↓ DM ( or Concessive?)

The First Folio puts the direction [*Exeunt.*] after the last line of the present scene, which is followed by almost all eighteenth and nineteenth editors. This means that these editors interpreted the three characters here in the present scene as leaving the stage together. Similarly, the First Quarto puts [*Exeunt.*] after the last line, but it gives [*Exit.*] immediately after the Prince's speech also. This is followed by the Riverside among modern editions, and indicates that, when the Prince has left the stage, the other two characters (i.e. Westmoreland and Falstaff) are still on stage to leave together finally.

These two modes of stage direction may be slightly different, but the implication is the same because in either way Falstaff is supposed to leave the stage with somebody else close by. Falstaff's use of the initial *well* is more likely to be understood as primarily and apparently intended to be a positive response to the previous speaker still within hearing distance on the stage, and secondarily as a discourse marker which leads to the following subjective utterance once he is left alone on the stage.

On the other hand, modern editions such as Alexander (Peter), Arden and Oxford give the stage direction [*Exit.*] immediately after the speech of each character, which means that the three characters in the present scene leave the stage one by one separately, and that Falstaff, who is finally left alone on the stage, has nobody else to speak to. In this interpretation, Falstaff's *well* is more likely to be understood as a discourse device to simply preface the following subjective statement.

## 6. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by mentioning pedagogical implications. I hope that references to the concept of coexistence and association of diachronically evolved meanings and functions of potential discourse markers, as well as to text and discourse, will help students pay more attention to wider possibilities of discourse meaning in texts.

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