RELEVANCE IN CONVERSATIONAL MOVES:
A REAPPRAISAL OF *WELL*

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1. A few years ago, whilst applying the Labov-Waletzky highpoint narrative analysis (Labov/Waletzky 1967) to oral folk narratives in an attempt to assess its descriptive and explanatory adequacy in accounting for longer narrative texts than the natural narratives that they had investigated, I was interested to note that the lexemes *well, now* and a combination of the two in *well now* had a curious habit of occurring at the intersections between different segments of the text, e.g. between an orientation section and a narrative sequence or between the final narrative sequence and the coda. To test whether this was pure coincidence or whether some more significant regularity might not be in evidence, I took six folk narratives, deleted all occurrences of the relevant lexemes and gave them to ten native speakers, asking them to re-insert the lexemes wherever they felt them to be necessary. Two of the test persons indulged in an orgy of *well*-insertion, and I was obliged to discount their suggestions. Amongst the rest, however, an astounding regularity in *well*-insertion emerged, displaying a very high level of agreement with the original texts. This led me to surmise that such elements must have a conventional functional significance in narrative texts, although I did not carry the experiment further. My attention was redirected to *well* and other such lexemes by an increasing interest in conversation analysis.

In analysing conversational data linguists have been compelled to come to terms with linguistic material which was previously felt at best to be of a formulaic, ritualized nature, or at worst to be merely the outward sign of a native speaker's inability to express his/her ideas fluently. Terms such as "hesitation phenomena" and "fillers" have been used to characterize the "umms", "ers" and "mmhmms" of conversation, but also lexemes such as

well, *now*, *right*, etc. and phraseological units such as *you know*, *you see* and *I mean*.

One such filler lexeme which has received attention of late is *well*, for which Robin Lakoff (1973), Jan Svartvik (1980) and Marion Owen (1978, 1983) have suggested ways of deducing pragmatic meaning. I shall argue here, however, that we need to review their arguments in the light of an extended corpus of data — which must include oral narratives — and to revise their contributions somewhat in order to account for a wider selection of occurrences of *well*.

2. Lakoff considers the use of *well* in the following four positions:

1. as what she calls the "prefix" to answers,
2. as the "prefix" to questions,
3. as the "prefix" to a sequence of utterances within a narrative that I would term a "narrative sequence",
4. as a single utterance occurring in isolation.

The use of *well* as an isolated utterance is not analysed in detail. Lakoff merely comments that it is "spoken in surprised indignation", possibly "without reference to an audience, to indicate that the action or utterance that elicited it did not meet the expectations of the speaker" (1973: 463). In the remaining three cases she takes *well* to be a hedge addressed to Grice's Maxim of Quantity. In responding to a question the speaker may only use *well* in reference to the propositional content of the question — in other words when the response is what she calls an "answer". It may never be used to prefix what she calls a "reply", i.e. a response not to the prepositional content of the question, but to the illocutionary act itself. Thus adjacency pair (1) is possible, but not adjacency pair (2):

(1) *A* Did you kill your wife?
    B Well, yes.
(2) *A* Did you kill your wife?
    B Well, it's none of your business.

In (1) *B* indicates that the answer to the question is quantitatively incomplete and that there are extenuating circumstances.

Lakoff takes *well* as the prefix to a question to indicate that "the speaker is especially impatient for an answer". Presumably, then, it indicates that the questioner considers the previous speaker to have violated the Maxim of Quantity.

The use of *well* in narratives is taken "to indicate that details have been omitted, that [the speaker's] narrative is not really complete". Again it is interpreted as a hedge addressed to the Maxim of Quantity. The hitch in this interpretation is that details are always omitted from any narrative — necessarily. So why should the narrator feel "insufficient"? This certainly doesn't appear to be the case in the oral narratives that I have examined.

3. Owen criticizes Lakoff on two major grounds:

1. Lakoff's data are intuited, i.e. they are not based on a corpus of conversations.
2. The analysis is pragmalinguistic rather than socio-communicative, i.e. it lays too much stress on the appropriateness conditions for the use of *well* in sentences and too little on the function that *well* fulfills within an interactional framework.

Owen examines the use of *well* in the second pair-parts of adjacency pairs and as the opener and closer of a side-sequence. As the preface to a second pair-part, where the speaker's move either contradicts, modifies or qualifies any of the moves made in the first pair-part, it can be used to minimize a possible face-threat to the previous speaker, or even to oneself. It can indicate that the present speaker finds it difficult but necessary to contradict, modify or qualify.

Extract (3) is an example from my own data:

(3) *A* Ah — you couldn't see Stone//henge?[1]
    B Oh no. Well, it was dark anyway.

B has already told *A* that she had not seen Stonehenge, so that *A*'s question is felt to be unnecessary. *B* anticipates the completion of *A*'s turn and interrupts to answer the question. *B*'s second move clarifies why she didn't see Stonehenge, i.e. quite apart from anything else it was not physically possible. But since the abrupt answer interrupting *A*'s turn might be taken as an affront to his right to ask the question, in other words as a potential face-threat to both *A* and *B*, the *well* prefaces *B*'s second move to minimize the danger.

Such an interpretation has much to commend it. In opening up a side-sequence in a verbal interaction, for example, the speaker is leading the topic of the conversation off-track, as it were, and needs to signal that in doing so no offence is meant. What Owen doesn't explain, however, is how we are to understand *B*'s answer to *A* in example (1) as the minimization of a possible face-threat. Is *B* likely to offend *A* by not giving a clear, unequivocal answer to his question? Does *B* experience difficulty in giving a full answer, and does he prefer to intimate to *A* that he has more information to give if *A* wishes

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[1] I have used relatively few transcription conventions for the data extracts in this article in an effort to make the text as easily readable as possible. Punctuation as in a written text has been retained — by and large — but attempts to represent graphologically rather than phonetically utterances such as *wanna*, *dju*, *probly* have been avoided. The following conventions have been retained:

// =interruption by co-interactant or turn overlap
/ =self-interruption, restart
— =repetition of word or phrase, stammering (e.g. *wha-wha-what*)
{ =simultaneous turns

to hear it? The latter explanation seems more probable, but, as I shall show, it can still be interpreted as the minimization of a face-threat if we are prepared to consider it within the framework of a theory of relevance.

4. Svartvik, like Owen, takes a functional approach to the problem of interpreting *well*. He identifies two major functions fulfilled by what he calls "the particle 'well'":

1. as a qualifier either of the content of the previous move or of the move to be made by the speaker uttering *well*,
2. as a discourse frame indicating that a side-sequence is about to be opened or that such a side-sequence has just been closed.

In order to underpin the subcategories of functional meaning within these two major functions, he presents contrastive data from Swedish. His argument is that since Swedish does not have one unique lexeme to express these subfunctions, the phraseological and lexical units it does have are evidence of differences in pragmatic meaning.

Whether we can make reliable use of such contrastive data is a problem I shall leave unresolved for the moment.[2] What is interesting about the subfunctions that Svartvik identifies is that they can all be deduced from underlying interactional principles involving the notion of pragmatic relevance, as can Owen's primary function of the minimization of a possible face-threat. Indeed Svartvik gets fairly close to the analysis I shall suggest when he says that "the common denominator of the uses of *well* in the corpus seems to be that of shifting topic focus in discourse" (1980: 177).

5. To assess the adequacy of Owen's interpretation of *well* as the minimization of a possible face-threat, we need to consider carefully what is meant by saying that a person's face is threatened in verbal interaction. We also need to extend Owen's analysis to include turn-internal occurrences of *well*, e.g. in oral narratives and longer expository or descriptive turns. In doing so I shall have recourse to a compelling suggestion made by Sperber and Wilson (1978) that Grice's conversational maxims may all be reduced to, or deducible from, an overriding axiom of relevance.

Brown and Levinson (1978: 66) derive their concept of "face" from Goffman (1967). In general "face" may be defined as "the public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself", and it consists of *negative*

face, defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction — i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition", and *positive face*, defined as "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants".

In any socio-communicative interaction, interactants may commit *face threatening acts* (FTAs), wittingly or unwittingly, or may decide to avoid FTAs. FTAs demand repair on the part of the perpetrator, and the interchange in which repair takes place and is accepted (or declined) by the offended can be termed a *remedial interchange* (cf. Owen 1983).

It is generally accepted that verbal interaction is structured in a succession of interchange, or adjacency, pairs (cf. Sinclair/Coulthard 1974, Goffman 1981, Halliday 1975, 1978).[3] An utterance by an interactant, a first pair-part, is completed by some form of response, a second pair-part, by another interactant. The second pair-part need not always be linguistic,[4] but I shall assume for my present purposes that it is. In setting up a first pair-part, an interactant claims the right to conversational territory, i.e. to negative face, and the recognition of this right by another interactant in the form of a response, i.e. positive face. An FTA in relation to the speaker's negative face is committed by the second interactant through interruption or the setting up of a further first pair-part either with the speaker or with a third interactant. FTAs in relation to the speaker's positive face are committed when a response is given in the form of a second pair-part which does not display relevance to the first pair-part.

The principle of *face* thus regulates the responses in verbal interchanges such that, given that x is a first pair-part and y a second pair-part, y is to be understood as a response to x if and only if y is an utterance and may be interpreted as relevant to x. If the utterer of x fails to deduce relevance, y may be understood to display unwillingness, inability, etc. on the part of the utterer of y to participate in the socio-communicative verbal interaction. In this situation such a display may be interpreted in two different ways:

1. as an FTA committed by the utterer of y and directed at the utterer of x,
2. as an inadvertent blunder by the utterer of y and a possible loss of his own positive face.

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[2] There is an unfortunate logical circularity in this type of argument. Having discovered a variety of possible translation equivalents in Swedish for *well*, pragmatic meanings are then postulated for those equivalents and said to be realized by the lexeme *well*. No consideration is given to the possibility of discovering some unifying aspect in the variety of meanings postulated, since this would then imply that each of the Swedish lexemes is likely to realize a further subset of meanings which would then not be realized by the lexeme *well* in English.

[3] The "British school" of discourse analysis tends to use the functional term "exchange" to express the utterance pair set up by two interactants which I have termed an "interchange". The latter can also be considered a functional term, but it lays more stress on the interactional function realized by the structural concept of adjacency pair, i.e. the communication-directed change from one interactant to another, rather than on any metaphorical association of bartering.

[4] We could stretch a point here and say that the first pair-part needn't be linguistic, either.

Since no-one likes to lose face, verbal interaction becomes self-regulatory in that its common goal is to avoid loss of face on the part of any of the inter-actants. I shall maintain that the central concept underlying this self-regulatory system is that of *relevance*.

6. Sperber and Wilson (1978) maintain that the extent to which an utterance is relevant is established in accordance with a set of beliefs and assumptions, i.e. with a set of propositions. An utterance *y* is relevant to an utterance *x* if *y* is related either directly or indirectly by pragmatic implications to *x*. Sperber and Wilson discuss the following interchange:

(4) *A* Do you ever talk to Charles?

    B I never talk to philosophers.

A sets up an interchange with a first pair-part requesting information from *B* and thereby granting him the floor. According to the principle of face *B* must respond with a second pair-part. Lakoff maintains that two types of response are possible, an answer to the propositional content of the question or a reply addressed to the speech act type, or move, itself. In choosing the second option *B* could reject *A's* right to request the information and thus threaten *A's* negative face, thereby rejecting the verbal interaction or at least this part of it. *B* could, however, acknowledge the fact that *A* has set up a first pair-part but ask for a re-run of it to enable *B* to give an answer. *B* would thereby risk the loss of his own positive face, but would allow a sub-interchange to be inserted into the interchange begun by *A*.

In (4) the second option has not been chosen by *B*, and to avoid interpreting his utterance as an FTA, *A* must search within *B's* second pair-part to construct a proposition which will logically relate to one expressed in his utterance. If an obvious relation is not deducible, *A* will interpret *B's* utterance as an FTA.

In the case of (4) the relation between the two pair-parts of the interchange can be reconstructed on the basis of a direct pragmatic implication, i.e. the shared knowledge that Charles is a philosopher, or an indirect pragmatic implication, e.g. in this case that philosophers are human beings and Charles is a human being, therefore Charles must be a philosopher and *B* never talks to Charles. The indirect pragmatic implication is deducible precisely because of the linguistic fact that the verb *talk* is retained in *B's* assertion.

7. Let us now turn to occurrences of *well* in verbal interaction. In example (1) from Lakoff's article (repeated here for the sake of convenience):

(1) *A* Did you kill your wife?

    B Well, yes.

B's response to *A's* request for information is an answer, so that no FTA is committed. The utterance *yes* entails the proposition "I killed my wife", no

pragmatic implications having to be deduced by *A* on the basis of *B's* utterance.

The first significant point about *well* as a prefix to any utterance is that it stands outside that utterance, i.e. it is not part of the utterance's syntactic and semantic structure[5]. It may thus be said to constitute a move modifying an utterance in some way. In (1) it modifies the utterance *yes* and thus by extension the proposition "I killed my wife". Now although *B* does not commit an FTA with respect to *A* by admitting that he has killed his wife, he certainly risks loss of his own positive face.

Well may thus be taken to minimize possible face loss on *B's* part. *A* now knows that although *B's* answer is relevant, something has been left unsaid. *A* may now open another interchange by uttering a first pair-part such as (5):

(5) What do you mean by "well"?

The principle of face will guarantee that *B* is willing to continue the interaction because of his promise of further relevant information. To say *yes* without prefacing it with *well* would be to admit openly to having committed a capital offence.

There is a further possible interpretation, however. *B* could be challenging the relevance of *A's* first pair-part either to propositions made during the course of the interaction prior to the interchange or to the proper facts of the case, i.e. to knowledge which *A* does not yet share with *B*. The second pair-part in (1) is thus relevant to the first pair-part, but simultaneously questions the relevance of *A's* utterance, thereby opening up further possibilities for the interaction, or, as Svartvik puts it, "shifting the topic focus" in the interaction.

7.1. It is conceivable that *well* could be used to question relevance without the minimization of an FTA being obviously involved. *Well* can occur as a turn in its own right with either a fall-rise, fall or rise intonation contour as the response to a verbal or non-verbal move made by another interactant. The intonation contour provides the other interactants with information regarding the move being made by the utterer of *well*, i.e. whether it is a display of surprise or an expression of doubt followed either immediately, or after a "pregnant" pause, by a further response[6]. If it is an expression of doubt, then clearly

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[5] As Svartvik (1980: 168) points out, it is thus difficult to clarify the word-class status of *well*. His own choice is to label it "particle".

[6] With non-isolated occurrences of *well*, as Svartvik points out, there does not seem to be much correlation between its prosodic features and its function(s). In isolated occurrences the prosodic contour seems to be particularly significant. I shall not take these contours fully into account at the moment, since I do not consider them to influence my main line of argument in any significant way. The suggestion by Brazil (1975) that different intonation contours are linked in different ways to given and new information in the discourse, i.e. to previous moves and to moves still to be made, might, however, correlate with relevance backwards or forwards in the conversation.

the utterer of *well* thereby indicates that he finds it difficult to substantiate pragmatic implications which would allow the previous person's move (whether verbal or non-verbal) to become relevant on the basis of their shared knowledge.

An expression of doubt, however, is merely a display of the speaker's inability to deduce any immediate relevance, since the information is new. Does this then necessarily involve an FTA to either *A* or *B*? Positive face loss on the part of the utterer of *well* might be involved if we assume that a speaker will make every effort to discover relevance if he possibly can in order to maintain the interaction. The expression of surprise carried by the intonation of the utterance might then be said to be neutralized by the lexeme used to carry that information.

7.2. Used as a preface to a question, *well* is particularly interesting. There are two possibilities here:

1. The question is a response to a first pair-part and must be understood as the opening of a temporary side-sequence before the interchange is completed.
2. The question is a first pair-part in its own right and opens up a new interchange.

An example of type 1. is given in extract (6), which is taken from Marion Owen's data:

(6) *A* Roughly how many pages?
   B um well could/let's see, could you do them in such a way that it would be printed on A four?
   A A four. Right.
   B But folded so that it would come down to A five?
   A Yes. What sort of quantity?
   B Well, in that case I would think about fifty sheets perhaps.

B's response to *A*'s question is neither an answer nor a reply and as such must be interpreted as an FTA. It thus seems perfectly in order to interpret *well* as a move minimizing the face threat. But we need to ask why this is so. We assume that *A*'s question is relevant to propositions expressed or implied at an earlier stage in the interaction, so that denying *A* an answer which is relevant to propositions expressed in his first pair-part is tantamount to denying that those propositions are relevant. The *well* concedes their relevance, thus minimizing the face threat, and intimates that *B*'s question, in opening up a side-sequence and thereby apparently shifting the "topic focus", will ultimately lead to a relevant response.

A may assume this to be the case if he gives a relevant answer to *B*'s request. In fact his answer provides the missing information which *B* needs to complete the original interchange. The reorientation of the overall interaction,

which is needed to provide the basis upon which *B* can give a relevant response, certainly involves the risk of *B* committing an FTA with respect to *A*, and the use of *well* seems to fit Owen's analysis adequately.

B's second move with *well*, however, reorients the interaction without an obvious FTA. It has the function of reorienting a second time and providing the missing response to *A*'s initial question. A closer look at the total interchange reveals that the side-sequence opened up by *B* is completed by *A*'s move *yes*, upon which *A* repeats the original first pair-part, albeit with a different choice of lexical and grammatical structure. *B*'s response is now clearly relevant. So why does he need to modify it with *well*? Note that the answer is not modified by *well* alone, but also by the phraseological unit *in that case*. If we deleted this from *B*'s turn, the *well* would appear to be somewhat misplaced within the framework of the total interchange. It would indicate that although *B*'s response is entirely relevant, not everything has been said — at least with respect to *A*'s original question. It thereby opens up the possibility of a further side-sequence. If we deleted the whole phrase *well, in that case*, *B*'s response would still be relevant and no FTA would be committed. The phraseological unit *in that case* functions rather like an apology for *B* opening up the side-sequence in the first place, [7] since it refers anaphorically to that sequence. It is as if a possible FTA to *B*'s positive face is avoided by his referring back to the side-sequence as the establishment of knowledge which is now shared by both interactants and on the basis of which a relevant response can be given.

Thus the minimization of a possible FTA is intimately bound up with the notion of relevance once again. As this FTA involves positive face, loss of *A*'s negative face not being involved, *well* need not in fact have been uttered at all. Its occurrence as a reorientation marker, shifting the interaction back to the original sequence, or in Svartvik's terms to the "topic focus", is an indication of how aware some speakers are of the possible loss of their own positive face if the relevance of their moves is not — in their eyes — immediately obvious. Thus Owen's comment that "to describe both these disjunctions 'caused' by *B*, as threats to *A*'s face, seems implausible, although the first could perhaps be seen in this light" (1983: 45) is a little too pessimistic.

Let us now turn to occurrences of *well* prefacing questions which function as first pair-parts, i.e. type 2. above. I shall take two interchanges, one intuited and one from my own data.

Consider the following intuited interchange:

(7) *A* It's not in the drawer and it's not on the table.
   B Well, where is it?

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[7] If this is so, it will be a typical marker for remedial work in an interchange like *sorry, I'm sorry, I'm afraid...* etc. Cf. Owen (1983).

A's turn can only be taken as a second pair-part, since the anaphoric *it* refers back to a noun phrase that has occurred previously in the interaction.[8] If *B* does not preface his turn with *well*, the second move in the turn, *where is it*, must be taken functionally as a first pair-part, although it may or may not be a reiteration of a previous first pair-part.

The problem resides in the direct pragmatic implication of *B*'s question, viz. "*A* knows where the object in question is". Unless the total interchange is a game or *A* is teasing *B*, it is unreasonable for *B* to imply this, since the direct pragmatic implication of *A*'s utterance is that he or some other person has unsuccessfully looked for the object in at least two places.

The only way for *A* to interpret *B*'s move as being relevant is for him

1. to take the question as not being directed at him,
2. to reinterpret the question as implicating that he (*A*) has lied and that *B* is re-opening the interchange, or
3. to reinterpret *B*'s question as implicating that he (*A*) should know.

Reinterpretations 2. and 3. involve loss of *A*'s positive face. We might then say that *well* minimizes the FTA. Yet even with *well* reinterpretations 2. and 3. are still open to *A*, and *B*'s turn still contains an FTA. In the case of option 1, what *B* says can't be interpreted as a possible threat to *A*'s positive face, since the question isn't interpreted as being addressed to him.

Let's try another tack. We could say that *B* is aware that his question will create difficulties for *A* to work out the indirect pragmatic implications needed to make *B*'s question relevant. *Well* thus seems to indicate

1. that *B* is about to challenge the assumption that *A* has abided by the axiom of relevance in doing his best to make a maximally relevant response, and
2. that *B* is about to make an utterance which in the light of *A*'s utterance might not immediately appear relevant to *A*.

Thus it prefaces a re-run of the interaction, a re-run considered necessary by *B*, and it reorients the course of that interaction.

Note that if we insert either *then* or *in that case* into *B*'s turn — similar to speaker *B* in (6) — this interpretation virtually becomes mandatory, since both insertions refer anaphorically to the propositions expressed in the previous sequence of the interaction, i.e. to shared knowledge:

(8) *A* It's not in the drawer and it's not on the table.
{ *B* Well, in that case where is it?
{ *B* Well, where is it then?

[8] This does not mean that the first pair-part has been uttered immediately prior to *A*'s turn. *A* may have gone looking for the object in question and then returned to report lack of success.

The second example of *well* prefacing a question which must be taken as a first pair-part (extract (9)) is taken from my own data:

(9)

A	*C*
The whole//yeah, the China clay/what	*C* area
people are allowed to use it//but all the/	*C* ah
/most of the houses round about in Char-	
lestown are-//are in fact owned by the	*C* mm
Charlestown Estates. And the people who	
live in them pay rent to Charlestown	*C* mm
Estates//and, typical Cornwall//even in	*B* Well, who's behind
this-	Charlestown Esta-tes?

B's question interrupts *A*'s turn, and it is possible that *well* minimizes the potential threat to *A*'s negative face, i.e. to his claim to conversational territory. *B*'s interruption, however, is aimed at eliciting information which he considers to have been implied indirectly by *A* and to be necessary in order to complete the knowledge shared by all the interactants in the conversation. He is thus challenging the assumption that *A* has abided by the axiom of relevance and conceding that his question may not immediately appear relevant to *A*. Such a challenge constitutes a threat to *A*'s positive face which is minimized by *well*.

The beginning of *A*'s turn does in fact reveal that *A* was about to suggest which organization controls Charlestown Estates before he changed tack and, as a consequence, omitted the verb — *the China clay/what people are allowed to use it*. In addition, the co-referent of the pronoun *it* is not made clear; it could be the village of Charlestown, but *B* is not sure that this is so. Thus *well* prefaces a side-sequence to enable *A* to provide the missing information. As we can see from extract (10), *A* promptly gives the second pair-part to *B*'s first pair-part and then continues from precisely the point at which he was interrupted by *B*:

(10)

A	*C*
I don't know, *B*. But even in this/we- we	
notice when we're out, 'cos we get people	
who live there//who claim benefit/but	*C* mm
even in 1984 the rents//are ridiculous.	*C* mm

Shifting the topic focus and thereby making it difficult for the co-interactant(s) to deduce the relevance of an utterance leads to a possible loss of face on the part of both the speaker and the co-interactant(s). As in (8) *well* does indeed tend to minimize the force of the FTA by indicating that the shift is nevertheless relevant.

7.3 So far an analysis based on the minimization of the force of an FTA can be upheld as long as we take the theory of relevance as a framework within

which to interpret the moves made. There are, however, several cases of *well* occurrence which cause difficulty, above all those within narrative turns and longer expository turns.

To begin with, however, let us consider the following two extracts:

(11) *A* Good afternoon, Mrs Connolly.
     B Good afternoon.
     A What would you like to ask Walter?
     B Well, I've got this little kitten [...]
(12) *A* Good afternoon, Mrs Higginbottom.
     B How d'ye do.
     A What would you like to ask Walter?
     B Well, a friend of mine bought/got a little bird [...]

In both cases the opening interchange is GREETING/GREETING followed by a second interchange whose first pair-part appears to be a question. *B* has been granted the floor and has an obligation to respond. In neither case does the turn therefore constitute a threat to *A*'s negative face.

Both interactions were taken from a Radio Manchester phone-in programme, a fact which is relevant to my analysis. From *A*'s utterance *B* can logically deduce the pragmatically implied proposition "*A* believes that I would like to ask Walter something", a proposition which constitutes shared knowledge because of the phone-in situation. In each case *B* has phoned the studio and has been selected to put a question. The studio has then phoned *B*, who is to be the next caller, before the anchor-man *A* [9] is ready for her, so that *B* is waiting for *A* to address her. *B* would not have been selected as a co-inter-actant if she had not wanted to put a question. It is even highly likely that she has already put that question to the first person with whom she spoke at the studio.

Note, however, that *A* is not really putting a question to *B* but inviting her to put her question to the guest expert, Walter. *B*'s second pair-part in this section of the total interchange is thus acceptance of the invitation to take the floor *and* concurrently the setting up of a first pair-part to which Walter is expected to respond. Beyond acceptance of the floor, therefore, the second pair-part does not relate to anything in *A*'s first pair-part, nor to any

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[9] The term "anchor-man" is commonly used in local radio jargon to designate the person compèring a phone-in programme. He may be the audience's only communicative partner in the sense that he takes the incoming calls, deals with them and comments on them, but he is far more likely to be the mediator between the caller and an expert or group of experts in the studio specifically invited to deal with callers' problems. Behind the anchor-man is the producer, who exerts ultimate control over the length of the callers' contributions in advising the anchor-man to continue the interaction or discontinue it at the earliest possible opportunity.

propositions entailed or implied (whether directly or indirectly) in the previous interchanges. Because *B* is concerned not to commit an FTA either to *A*'s negative face or to her own positive face, *well* again signals that the speaker is about to make an utterance whose relevance will not be immediately apparent in the sense in which relevance has been defined here.

The question which *B* has been invited to put will not occur until *B* has oriented her co-interactants, *A* and Walter. What is said before she puts the question will set up a store of common knowledge on the basis of which the interaction may be developed. The only way in which we can interpret *well* as an FTA minimizer is to suggest that *B* staves off possible loss of positive face by indicating that what she says before she reaches the question will be relevant to it.

Since the co-interactants in a phone-in programme[10] will expect to be oriented before the question is put, it might be objected that real loss of face is not involved here. This may in fact be so, and it may be more useful to interpret such prefacing moves in well-defined, conventionalized interactional situations as ritualized. Evidence for this is provided by the fact that the listeners who phone-in during such programmes almost invariably preface the turn with the lexeme *well*. Its ritualized nature, however, follows on directly from considerations of possible negative and/or positive face threat contingent on the relevance of the utterer's turn to propositions directly or indirectly implied by utterances in the previous turns.

7.4 The instances of *well* which are most difficult to interpret as the minimization of a possible face threat are those which occur turn-internally, i.e. in longer descriptive, expository or narrative turns. Yet if we make use of the principle of face (section 5) and link it to the axiom of relevance dealt with in section 6, this interpretation turns out to be the most natural. I shall illustrate this with a number of examples from my own data collected from radio phone-in programmes and natural conversation situations, dealing in this section with expository turns and in section 7.5 with narrative turns.

Consider the following two extracts both taken from an afternoon session of discussion, small-talk and anecdote within the family circle:

(13) *A* Well, what make are these Am.? Wha- wha-
     B They're British, but Am. started off as a car (0.8) car radio firm (1.1) and they branched out into hi-fi. And in the early days of hi-fi equipment they always got a bad name (1.6) Well, I say a bad name. People said, "If they're British, they're no good" (0.8) but people twigged that they (0.9) they had improved their quality.

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[10] These also include the total number of people listening to the programme and not merely the anchor-man, the caller and the expert(s).

(14) *B* [...] if you could buy that flat, how much would it cost?

    A It's- it's erm the quality of the flat is not particularly good. The whole house re- really and truly needs to be renovated inside, you know, taken apart and re-done well. I mean, there's a lot wrong with it, a lot wrong. But in the condition that it is now and looking at the p-position that it is in- in the middle of Z., well, fairly near the middle of Z., its value/a four-room flat would be something like/well, I don't know, four hundred thousand.

In extract (13) we are concerned with the occurrence of *well* within *B*'s turn, not with the *well* prefacing *A*'s first pair-part, which can be interpreted in precisely the same way as those analysed in section 7.2.

B's turn is expository, rather than narrative. His second pair-part is a relevant answer to *A*'s question, but is modified by the rest of his turn,[11] which can be taken as a long first pair-part explaining why the fact that Am. is a British firm has been detrimental to its reputation. Long turns such as this may contain a number of move types, all of which are considered by the co-interactants to contribute towards the overall communicative function of the turn. For this reason they are not generally interrupted by co-interactants' attempts to gain the floor. In (13) several transition relevance places are allowed to pass by. The response to such long first pair-parts is generally given in the form of back-channel behaviour (cf. extracts (9) and (10)). When the turn is completed, there may be an overt response on the part of a co-inter-actant,[12] or a significant pause to allow for self-selection and/or the setting up of a further first pair-part.

B's *well* is interesting in that it prefaces a short side-sequence within his own turn, a reorientation of the topic focus, which he inserts to clarify how the bad name that the firm has acquired can be linked to his answer to *A*'s question. In other words, not enough information has been given to allow *A* to link the proposition "Am. is a British firm" to the proposition "Am. has a bad name". In not abiding by the axiom of relevance:

(15) The speaker has done his best to make the most relevant remark available to him. (Sperber/Wilson, 1978: 15),

B has committed an FTA with respect to his own positive face — at least as far as he is concerned— and the side-sequence is a way of remedying the situation. For this reason it is prefaced by *well*.

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[11] I shall assume that a narrative or expository turn covers the total narrative or set of explanations whether or not it is interrupted and restarted. If it is interrupted, it is more convenient to consider the turn as being composed of a number of sub-turns.

[12] Such responses may take the form of laughter, expressions of surprise, commentary and assessment, or even another story.

A's turn in extract (14) is a second pair-part to *B*'s question, but it isn't until the very end of the turn that the relevant response is given. Since this is so, we might well have expected the whole turn to be prefaced by *well* (cf. section 7.2). Presumably *A* is counting on *B*'s ability to deduce from his utterances indirect pragmatic implications which may be taken as relevant to propositions contained in the question. However, it is still rather a long preamble to the explicit relevant response at the end of the turn. *A* needs to signal his apology for having committed an FTA to his own and *B*'s positive face with *well* before giving the relevant response to the first pair-part. Even so, it is not an unequivocal answer, since he also prefaces it with the phraseological unit *I don't know*.

The first occurrence of *well* in *A*'s turn signals a very short re-run of the previous phrase. The fact that it occurs within the very long preamble to the expected response — a preamble which runs the risk of being interpreted as irrelevant — heightens the probability of *well* at this point.

So far we have been able to explain why *well* functions as a minimizer of a possible face threat by linking the principle of face in socio-communicative verbal interaction to the pragmatic axiom of relevance (15). In listening to extensive samples of such interaction, it becomes clear that some speakers use the lexeme very frequently indeed, others hardly at all. The former appear to insert *well* arbitrarily, so that upholding the explanatory hypothesis I have developed here might be felt to lead to *ad hoc*, tenuous assumptions. The difficult cases are almost always those that occur turn-internally, in particular those that occur as the preface to a closing sequence in the turn.

One such proliferant user of *well* is the expert on the Radio Manchester phone-in programme from which extracts (11) and (12) are taken. This particular expert is a vet, and after a long (and rather interesting!) expository turn on the subject of cats spraying, in response to a question from one of the audience co-interactants, the anchor-man gives his own assessment of the problem and asks for agreement from the vet. The interchange is given in extract (16):

(16) *A* It must be rather disturbing when your cat goes around spraying all the time, though, mustn't it?

    B It's not so bad if it's a female that's spraying, but if you have a good tomcat that's spraying, well, it can empty the room, it can empty the house.

B's second pair-part is entirely relevant to *A*'s first pair-part, so it's surprising that *B* inserts *well* where he does. Extract (16) looks as if it were a counter-example to the analysis presented so far.

As we saw in extracts (13) and (14), *well* need not occur at the point of interchange between two turns. In (13) it opens a side-sequence within the speaker's turn which he feels is necessary to provide the relevant proposition.

In (14), as in (16), it opens a final move or set of moves before the floor is handed back to the other co-interactants. But whereas the speaker in (14) has good reason to doubt whether the moves made previous to the occurrence of *well* can be interpreted as relevant to his co-interactant's first pair-part, no such doubts can really exist for the vet in (16). How can he then be said to have committed a possible FTA with respect to the anchor-man?

Recall that *well* is not part of the semantico-syntactic structure of a move, but must be interpreted as a move in its own right modifying the move that follows. In (16) it modifies the two assessments, *it can empty the room, it can empty the house*. I have hitherto analysed it as tying a second pair-part to a first pair-part (or vice versa) logically in terms of the axiom of relevance. Thus, if the speaker has reason to doubt whether he is about to make or has made such a relevant remark, he may preface the next utterance with *well* to avoid a possible FTA. *Well* thereby takes on the communicative function of reorienting the interaction.

In a longer turn the speaker has been granted the floor by the co-interactants and has taken on the responsibility of making that turn relevant. He has to justify his implicit (sometimes even explicit) request that the others waive their rights to the floor for a longer stretch of time. In these circumstances a speaker often feels that he must stress the relevance of what he is saying and thereby justify his claim to the floor. In (16) the theme of *B*'s turn has been female cats spraying, from which he switches to tomcats spraying. The relevance between the two moves is beyond dispute as is the relevance between *A*'s first pair-part and *B*'s second pair-part. I suggest that *B* is acutely aware of his audience at the point when *well* occurs. It is almost as if he imagines this audience — which includes listeners to the programme as well as the anchor-man — questioning the relevance of the tomcat to what has just been said, i.e. he conceives of the audience as being unable to deduce the necessary pragmatic implications. He follows it up immediately with those implications which, he imagines, should have been made.

The fictional interchange might be something like (17):

(17) *B* It's not so bad if it's a female cat that's spraying, but a tomcat is different.
     A Why?
     B Well, because it can empty the room, it can empty the house.

In fact *B* is trading in on the functional significance of *well* in socio-communicative verbal interaction in order to gain dramatic effect. At the same time, as in extract (14), he's allowing the co-interactants to reorient towards the imminent closure of his turn.

7.5 Examples of *well* in longer narrative turns are relatively common, whether the narrative is embedded within conversational interaction or is

performed before an audience in the form of an anecdote, a joke or a folktale. I shall give two examples, one taken from the same session of conversational small-talk from which (13) and (14) were taken, the other a folktale in Somerset dialect[13].

The same point must be made concerning oral narratives as was made in reference to longer expository turns in section 7.4, viz. the narrator has been granted the floor for a longer turn than is usual in verbal interaction and is thus obliged to justify his request that the co-interactants waive their rights to the floor. In section 2 I rejected Lakoff's suggestion that the use of *well* in a narrative turn indicates that the speaker's narrative is incomplete. Clearly encoding the complex of events stored in the narrator's memory in the form of a turn at talk involves making a choice concerning those aspects of the events to be narrated which are salient to the point the narrator wishes to make. In this sense all narratives are incomplete, since they can never encode events *as* they were experienced.

Consider extract (18), which is taken from my own data:

(18) *A* You talk about that. Today Mr Bennett
said to me, "You know the last time you
came and painted the bathroom//toilet?"   *B* yeah
I said, "Yeah." Well, it's toilet and
bathroom separate//I said, "Yeah." He   *B* mm
said, "You said you'd made a grave
mistake." He goes on a bit, like//and I-   *B* mm
I said, "Well, what did I do then?" He
said, "You didn't screw back the locks,"
he said, "the plates."//Now I w-/I didn't   oh yeah
argue with him, did I? But I remember the
day I did it was/the last job I did was
paint the locks, obviously//and he didn't   *B* mm
want me to come back any more. So I
told him before I went, I said, "They're
all loose, those. You see, when the- when
the paint's dry, you'll//have to screw   *C* Screw them
them back in again." Well, he totally   back in again.
forgot about it, you see//He goes in the   *B* oh dear
bathroom   (laughter)//You've guessed   *B* (laughter)
what happened//He shut the door all   *B* oh (laughter)
right, and when he went to- to- to leave

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[13] Briggs and Tongue (1965). Unfortunately most of the stories in this collection have been edited rather radically from oral interaction for the purposes of written publication.

again and pulled the door-handle//and of
course the whole//lot came
out//The handle came out this side, but
the- the- the rod went shooting out the
other side//He had to go and get out
the window, didn't he?//And that bath-
room window is pretty/you know, it's
quite a high step for a man of seventy-odd
to get over it//He did manage it. But it
was his own fault. I mean//I did tell him.

B (gasp)
D It came apart in
his hand, Mum. *B*(gasp)
C (laughter)
(general laughter)
B oh God

C Oh no. Silly old-
B yes

The frequent back-channel behaviour in (18), including a short inter-
change between two of the co-interactants which I have chosen to omit here,
indicates that the story was well received. The narrator, *A*, has clearly ful-
filled his obligation to the audience in holding the floor for so long, but he
still inserts *well* twice. (I have excluded from consideration the occurrence of
well in the embedded interaction between the old man and the narrator.)

The first occurrence of *well* prefaces a short side-sequence in which the
narrator departs from the sequence of narrative events constituting the orienta-
tion to the story in order to clarify a point which might, in his eyes, create
confusion. It was not the toilet *in* the bathroom which he had painted, but the
bathroom. It is thus relevant to know that the toilet and bathroom are sepa-
rate rooms. *Well* at this point is explicable in precisely the same way as the
first occurrence of *well* in extract (14), viz. *in the middle of Z., well, fairly near
the middle of Z.*, so we need not dwell on it any further.

The second occurrence prefaces the first narrative sequence of the story
proper, thus signalling that the initial orientation section is complete. The
orientation section sets up a store of common knowledge to which the rest of
the story will relate. Thus, although the co-interactants are highly likely to
be encoding the information presented in the moves prior to *well* as the orienta-
tion rather than the story proper, the narrator may be forestalling a possible
FTA with respect to his own positive face by inserting it. In fact, as in extract
(17), he is trading in on the functional significance of the lexeme to allow his
co-interactants to reorient towards the next section of the story.

Such occurrences of *well* thus function rather like verbal signposts helping
the narrator to organize his turn and allowing the audience to locate itself
within the narrative. It is what Svartvik recognizes as a "shifting of the topic
focus", but it is derived from the use of *well* as the minimizer of a possible face
threat.

In more complex oral narratives the use of *well* as a verbal signpost becomes
particularly significant, as is clear from the following narrative:

(19) After Walford were 'anged up there to Dowsburgh, there was a lot o' talk
down to the Castle o' Comfort Inn, and they got to talking, and then they
got to drinking cider, and then one fellow getting a bit over-merry, they
dared 'en to go up to Walford's gibbet. Well, 'twere getting late at night,
and being over full o' cider, 'e said 'e would, and off 'e goes. Well, no
sooner be 'e out o' the front door than a couple o' rascals gets out by the
back door, and straight up over the 'ill. Laughing to themselves, they came
up through the barn, and the bushes like, till they came to the foot o' the
gibbet, and they 'ided in the bushes. And bye and bye they 'ears bootses
coming up the 'ill, getting a bit slower like, as they comes nearer to where
the gibbet was, and they chuckles to theirselves, and then boots comes a
bit slower like, and then out o' the air above 'em comes a voice — "Oh!
Isn't it cold up 'ere! Be you cold too?" Well, by the time the fellow with
the boots and they two got down to the Castle o' Comfort, they weren't
cold no more.

The lexeme *well* occurs three times within the total narrative turn. The
narrative opens with two clauses, one embedded syntactically into the other,
both giving a short orientation to the first sequence of narrative event clauses
as far as *Walford's gibbet*. The story is clearly not completed at this point; the
relevant information is to come. The information given up to this point helps to
set up a common store of shared knowledge and will be relevant to a later stage
in the narrative. The narrator forestalls any possible threat to his own positive
face in shifting the topic focus by inserting *well*.

As in (18) *well* thus functions as a signpost indicating to the audience how to
structure the turn, but it is obviously contingent on the analysis of *well* as
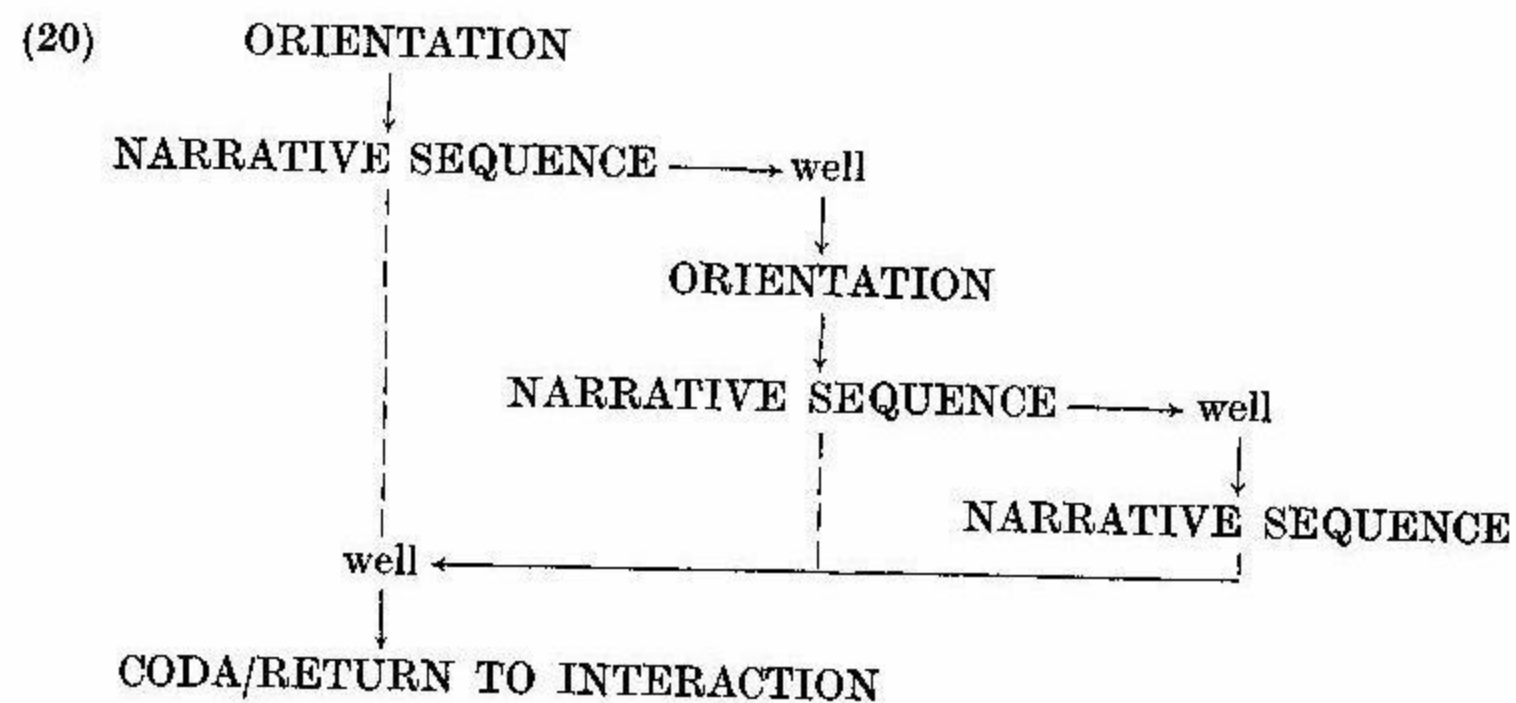the minimizer of an FTA.

The second sequence begins with another short orientation section followed
by two narrative clauses, the whole sequence terminating at *off 'e goes*. The
second occurrence of *well* introduces a third sequence of narrative events
culminating in the high-point of the narrative turn, i.e. what the voice says.

The third occurrence of *well* is very similar to that dealt with in extracts (6),
(14) and (16). Any possible FTA committed by the narrator to his own positive
face is avoided by his referring to the preceding sequences of the narrative turn,
which have established a common store of shared knowledge on the basis of
which the final comment — termed the *coda*[14] in high-point narrative analysis —
can be assessed. The narrative turn has, in the narrator's eyes, been relevant

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[14] Cf. Labov and Waletzky (1967), Labov (1972), Watts (1981). The interactiona
function of the coda is to signal to the participants that the narrator's turn is complete
and that floor is now open for responses to the story.

to this comment. In addition, this use of *well*, in closing a side-sequence and opening the closing sequence, has a crucial interactional function in that it signals that the floor is about to be returned to the co-interactants. It promises a return to the overall topic of the interaction.

The total turn is structured as in (20):

(20)   ORIENTATION
               ↓
NARRATIVE SEQUENCE ⟶ well
                   ↓
              ORIENTATION
                   ↓
        NARRATIVE SEQUENCE ⟶ well
                              ↓
                   NARRATIVE SEQUENCE
well ⟵
 ↓
CODA/RETURN TO INTERACTION

8. My purpose in the present paper has been to review the arguments put forward by Lakoff (1973), Svartvik (1980) and Owen (1978, 1983) for deducing pragmatic meaning for the lexeme *well* when this is used not as an adjective or an adverb within the semantico-syntactic structure of an utterance, but as a marker in socio-communicative verbal interaction.

From the outset my hypothesis has been there is a unitary interpretation for the way in which this marker functions in conversation, which can encompass many of the descriptive statements made by the three researchers mentioned above.

Lakoff's solution is to appeal to the Gricean Maxim of Quantity and to interpret *well* as a hedge addressed to this maxim. Two of the cases she cites, *well* used as an isolated utterance and *well* used in a narrative turn, are not satisfactorily accounted for in this way. Svartvik identifies two functional meanings for *well*, as a qualifier of the move just made or the move to be made and as a discourse frame indicating that a side-sequence is about to be opened or that such a side-sequence has just been closed. These uses correspond to *well* as the preface to a first or second pair-part and to turn-internal and sequence-internal occurrences of *well*. Svartvik does not consider the possibility of deriving both these functional meanings from one unitary meaning. Owen rejects Lakoff's analysis and takes *well* to function as the minimizer of a possible face threat. She does not, however, consider turn-internal occurrences,

and by her own admission she finds it hard to uphold her interpretation when *well* signals a return from a side-sequence to the original interchange.

Of the three approaches Owen's is the most satisfactory, since it takes account of the sociological significance of verbal interaction and tries to find linguistic correlates of such principles as face-threat, remedial action, territory, etc. However, I contend that she has not gone far enough in her analysis and has not considered ways of linking up a sociolinguistic interpretation of *well* with a pragmatic interpretation. She seems overly pessimistic in attributing the face-threat-minimization analysis to every occurrence of *well* as a conversational marker.

The link between a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic interpretation is perfectly natural if we consider Sperber and Wilson's pragmatic axiom of relevance within the framework of a theory of face as applied to socio-communicative verbal interaction. Co-interactants in a verbal interaction will make every effort to establish the relevance of their own and their partners' utterances, since failure to do so will result in an FTA with respect to one's own positive or negative face and/or that of one's co-interactant. Speakers do their best "to make the most relevant remark available to [them]" (Sperber/Wilson 1978: 15).

The definition of relevance given by Sperber and Wilson relies on the notions of *proposition* and *direct* or *indirect pragmatic implication*, but these are perfectly acceptable notions which can be applied to the form of linguistic utterances and/or to the common store of knowledge shared by the co-interactants. As Sperber and Wilson show, all of Grice's maxims can without great difficulty be reduced to an overriding axiom of relevance. A hedge is nothing more or less than a verbal safety mechanism to make the speaker temporarily immune from criticism. *Well* thus guarantees immunity from the charge of having committed or being about to commit an FTA. Looked at in this way, we not only see that Lakoff's and Owen's interpretations of *well* are essentially the same, but we can also provide an explanation for the analysis of *well* as a face-threat minimizer.

Svartvik's analysis of *well* as a means for shifting the topic focus of a conversation stems from a discourse analysis approach to conversation which concentrates on the theme or topic of the interaction rather than on the social relations which hold among the co-interactants.

Clearly, both the thematic and the socio-communicative aspects of verbal interaction are equally important. They do not exclude one another. I maintain, however, that it is more useful to begin the examination of conversational data by examining what the co-interactants are *doing* in and by means of this social activity and what happens to them while they are doing it than by analysing the content of the interaction. This is essentially the point of view

adopted by Allen and Guy (1974)[15] and I believe it to be fundamentally correct. After all, it's much more likely that we can verify or refute hypotheses concerning conversational territory and face-threat by considering how they might be seen to be encoded by the smallest units of conversation and then assessing how they depend on the propositional content of shared knowledge (either prior to the interaction or set up by it) than by looking at things the other way round.

The use of *well* as a discourse frame, or a disjunction marker, follows on in a natural way from my interpretation of this lexeme as a device available to the speaker for the minimization of a possible face-threat contingent on a failure (whether real or assumed) to abide by the axiom of relevance. One use can be derived quite naturally from the other.[16]

Not all speakers make use of *well* with equal frequency, which implies either that other devices are available to them in neutralizing an FTA or that they are less worried about committing an FTA. I tend towards the second explanation, since it seems more intuitively satisfying from a psychological point of view, but this can only be validated or refuted by a similar type of analysis carried out on other hesitation phenomena, fillers and gambits in verbal interaction. The burden of proof thus lies with me, and I intend to accept the challenge — although not here.

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[15] Allen and Guy consider conversation to be "a sharing process which develops a common social experience. This experience necessarily implies an equivalence of viewpoint and a tendency toward concensus" (1974: 11).

[16] This does not of course mean that speakers really *believe* that they are committing a possible FTA whenever they use *well* as a disjunction marker.

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