The Grammaticalization and the Polysemy of the Discourse Marker *Well*
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*Well*, which is used as a Discourse Marker, is notorious for its various uses. In this paper, we focus especially on the diachronic aspect of *well* as a face-threat mitigator, which, according to Owen (1981, 1983), signals and mitigates some sort of confrontation such as disagreement, refusal, or rejection. We consequently claim that *well* has developed its PDE usage through the process of grammaticalization.

Around the year nine hundred, *wel*, the earlier form of *well*, approximately means “clearly, definitely, without any doubt or uncertainty (cf. *OED2* s.v. well adv., sense 14.a).” This leads to the use of *well* in Middle English which signals that the speaker fully accepts the interlocutor’s utterance as in (1):

(1) ‘Aske what ye woll and ye shall have hit and hit lye in my power to gyff hit.’ ‘Well,’ seyde thyss lady, ‘than I aske the heede of thyss knyght…’

(Malory 1470 [Jucker, 1997: 99])

In the Early Modern English (henceforth ModE), however, there is a growing tendency of *well* to be used for signaling the speaker’s partial, not full, acceptance toward the interlocutor. (2) illustrates this use:

(2) Tom: Yes, you must keep a Maid, but it is not fit she should know of her Masters privacies. I say you must do these things your self.

Ione: *Well* if it must be so, it must.

(Samuel Pepys’ Penny Merriments 1684 [Jucker 1997: 102])

Although *Ione* in (2) cannot fully agree with Tom’s idea, she is willing to accept what Tom said. This partial acceptance is regarded as a face-threatening act, since it implicates the speaker’s disagreement with the interlocutor. *Well* here signals and mitigates the face-threatening act committed by *Ione*. Thus, *well* in Early ModE already has the force of a face-threat mitigator in the modern sense. The question now arises: why does *well* show such an expansion of usage; from full acceptance to partial acceptance? It is reasonable to suppose, as Jucker (1997) suggests, that just because a speaker accepts the hearer’s position does not necessarily mean that he should give full acceptance to it. Speaker signals by using *well* that he is considering whether he should accept the situation or not. In other words, there underlies a meaning such as “I WANT TO ACCEPT what you said, but…”

In Late ModE downward, *well* underwent a further change. Different from Early ModE, *well* in Late ModE decreased the function of acceptance and came to be used to express objection: “I want to accept what you said, BUT…” The relevant example is the following:

(3) Truly, says he, because I have lost all my estate, and can’t pay, nay I have nothing to live on. Well, but, returns the merchant, wasn’t you a knave to borrow money, and now can’t pay it?

(The Life of Robinson Crusoe, 1720: 40)

In (3), the speaker expresses objection to the interlocutor, which is marked by “well, but.” This clearly shows that the speaker is not accepting the interlocutor’s preceding utterance.

Well as a face-threat mitigator is often used in Present Day English (henceforth PDE). What is worth noting is that in PDE there are some cases where well just signals the face-threatening act and does not show the speaker’s wish to keep a good relationship with the interlocutor. This is often seen in a conversation between close friends where there is less need to mitigate the face-threat. Let us examine (4), extracted from a drama “Ally McBeal”:

(4) Ally: Maybe you should leave.
Billy: Me?
Ally: I like this firm.
Billy: So do I. I came all the way from Michigan…
Ally: Well if you hadn’t gone to Michigan in the first place…

In (4), Ally interrupts Billy, her ex-boyfriend, and begins to blame him. There is no pose before and after well, which shows that she has no hesitation to commit a face-threatening act. Well may still mitigate the face-threat but it is not intended by the speaker.

The same is also seen in a conversation between relative strangers if the speaker need not be polite to the interlocutor. Let us examine (5):

(5) Rabbi: … We don’t do that. We don’t just “modify” our faith to make it more popular.
Ally: You don’t need to be condescending.
Rabbi: Well, forgive me, I’m not used to people bouncing in here, asking me to “adjust” Judaism. (Ally “The Attitude”)

In (5), Ally first insults the stubborn Rabbi, which is a face-threatening act against him. The Rabbi apologizes but he does not at all seem nor sound at all sorry, in spite of the use of well. The Rabbi sarcastically utters well to show that he has no intention of being friendly to Ally.

We can conclude from this argument, therefore, that the function of acceptance which well first performed has been replaced by the one of signaling the upcoming objection in the face-threat mitigator use. Any unfriendly use of the term well, which is peculiar to PDE, would need further research.