
The Discourse Function of “Well”, “And” and “Now” in Turn-initial Positions in Interruptive Speech

Siti Nurbaya Mohd Nor
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

Abstract

The central focus of this article is to discuss the discourse functions of “well”, “now” and “and” as turn-initial interruptive devices in a radio discourse. To achieve this goal, the study relies on a detailed analysis of transcribed recordings of four radio talk shows. It is observed that the participants’ use of these interruptive devices in turn-initial positions in interruptive speech have different pragmatic functions. The present study rests on the conviction that such discourse particles in interruptive speech have certain functions which signal coherence to prior utterance or to earlier segments of the discourse and play interactive roles in the interaction process.

Introduction

The primary aim of the study is to examine the discourse functions of “well”, “now” and “and” in turn-initial positions in interruptive speech in four radio talk shows. Interruptive speech results from the intervention by one participant of the verbal interaction in the on-going talk of another, therefore creating communicative dysfluency. My concern with this paper is to investigate why the participants in this particular type of discourse respond in the way they do at turn-initial positions in interruptive turns, and in particular how they use discourse markers “well”, “now” and “and” in conversational interaction typical of a Malaysian radio talk show. What I want to do in this paper is to analyse the meanings of each of these discourse markers in face-to-face interaction between the participants and investigate the purpose behind its production and the pragmatic functions that it performs.

Background to the Study

An analysis on turn-initial positions would not be possible without first dealing with the turn-taking mechanism (Sacks et. al 1974). Sacks et. al (1974) suggest that speech exchange systems in general are organized to ensure that 'only one speaker speaks at a time' and 'speaker change recurs'. These features are said to apply for casual conversation as well as for formal debate. Therefore, it appears that the range of speech exchange systems found in our society is constrained by some kind of turn-taking mechanism. What distinguishes casual conversation from talk radio is the variability of the distribution of turns, turn size, and turn content. For instance, in talk shows, there is pre-allocation of turns and standardization of turn size. However, in some instances, interruptions do occur when speaker selects next does not occur and speakers want to have a turn at talk when nomination by host does not take place.

Sacks et. al. (1974) turn-taking model describes the properties of the turn-taking mechanism for conversation. A turn consists of not only the temporal duration of an utterance, but also the right and obligation to speak which is allocated to a particular speaker. According to Sacks et. al (1974), a turn is constructed by the speaker which is called 'unit-types' and this can consist of single words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Each speaker upon being allocated a turn, has an initial right to produce one unit. In general the terminal boundary of a 'unit-type' e.g. the end of the sentence, is a possible transition relevance place (TRP), and the transfer of a turn from one speaker to another properly occurs at that place. Unit-types are generally projective; that is the beginning portion of the unit frequently furnishes a basis for anticipating when it will be concluded, and hence signals the upcoming transition place for purposes of speaker change. This property of 'unit-type' assumes that the listener performs a syntactic (and/or intonational) analysis of the unit in the course of its production, that is, the internal structure of the sentence; for example, in indicating its possible completion point.

This turn-taking model (Sacks et al, 1974) accounts for a number of regularly occurring features of observed conversations, including the alternation of speakers in a variable order with brief (if any) gaps or overlaps between turns, as well as variable lengths of turns. That is, the model provides for the systematic initiation, continuation and alternation of talks in everyday conversation and also other types of spoken discourse.

Discourse Markers Marking Speaking Turns

Discourse markers are linguistic expressions that are used to signal the relation of an utterance to its immediate context, with the primary function

of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context (Redeker, 1990). Some examples of discourse markers in English are "well", "now", "actually", "and" and "ok". According to Stenstrom (1994), a conversation is much less lively and less personal without discourse markers signalling receipt of information, agreement and involvement.

Stenstrom (1994) states that "well" at the beginning of a turn serves as a response marker to what has gone before while "now" at the beginning of a turn is used as a transition marker to introduce a new topic and change the direction of the discourse. Therefore, the very first word in a turn may announce whether the speaker agrees to, doubts or objects to what the previous speaker said or has just said. A distinction can also be made between turns that are topically related to the previous speaker's turn and those that are apparently not, and between turns that are explicitly linked to the previous speaker's turn and those that are not. Taking the turn may involve starting up, taking over or interrupting. Taking over or subsequent turns may be explicitly connected by an uptake or link. Uptakes (e.g. ah, no, well, yes) which occur in response to what the previous speaker has said acknowledges receipt and comprehension by the next speaker which he/she then evaluates before continuing with his/her turn. The response of "oh" tends to initiate answers to wh-questions and signals emphasis, while "well" as answers to yes-no questions and signals hesitation, reservations and indirectness. Linkers such as "and", "but", "because" or "so" have important interactive functions as well as forming the initiating move in a turn (Stenstrom 1994).

In other related studies, Halliday and Hasan (1976: 269) observe that "well" serves to indicate that "what follows is in fact a response to what has preceded: in other words, it slips in quietly the respondent's claim to be answering the question .. and hence is purely cohesive in function." Schiffrin (1987: 102-103) argues that "well" "is a response marker which anchors its user in an interaction when an upcoming contribution is not fully consonant with prior coherence options." Lakoff (1973b: 461) expresses a similar view that "well" "is used in case the speaker senses some sort of insufficiency in his answer" Pomerantz (1984: 72) finds that "well" occurs in disagreement sequences, thus "displaying reluctance or discomfort" In certain instances of face-to-face interaction, speakers do not give up the turn at once but take advantage of available stalling devices such as filled pauses (e.g. um..um..) and verbal fillers (e.g. well, I mean, you know) with the intention of saying something but need more time to put it into words. Therefore stalling devices tend to cluster at the beginning of turns.

Methodology

The data is drawn from four radio shows which were recorded for 40 minutes. In each talk show, three participants were involved, namely the radio host and two guest speakers. The spoken data from the talk shows were transcribed using Jefferson's (1979) transcription conventions, particularly when indicating points of interruptions and overlapping speech and in identifying the discourse markers under study. The study draws upon several approaches to analyzing interaction. A key element is Sacks et. al (1974) turn-taking procedures, which is used to provide a detailed analysis of conversational behaviour, the nature of turn-taking and overlapping of turns in interruptive speech.

In relation to the functional analysis of language and interaction, previous studies on discourse markers provided valuable background for the analysis and categorisation of discourse markers "well", "now" and "and" in conversational interaction. In analyzing interruptive speech, I have looked at the occurrences of discourse particles "well", "now" and

Table 1.1 Summary of the data

| Radio Talks | Hosts | Guest Speakers |
|-----------------------------|-------|---|
| 1. Women and Menopause | H1 | Prof. Liske - L Dr Chai - C |
| 2. Internet and Education | H2 | Mr Mohd Nazim - N Mr. C. Arum - A |
| 3. Cancer Support Programme | H3 | Dr Mohd Ishak - I Dr. Jacob Swilling - J |
| 4. Alzheimer's Disease | H4 | Dr Srinivass - S Mr Tony Lau - T |

"and" in turn-initial positions in interruptive turns. When these seem to occur at turn-initial positions marking interruptive points, samples of the speech are extracted for analysis. The analysis of the data concerned the functions of these discourse particles and the references that have been made to earlier segments of the discourse. Samples of the discourse particles are highlighted and indicated according to each extract given. Information about the data is summarized in Table 1.1 below.

Each extract selected for analysis in the study is referred to as Extract N Data N. For example, the first speech patterns selected for analysis from Radio Talk 1 is indicated by Extract 1 Data 1. Each speaking turn in the extract is numbered for ease of reference when the data is discussed. For instance, when a speaking turn is mentioned in the analysis, this is indicated by the number in brackets such as (8).

Analysis of Findings

Turn-Initial "well", "now" and "and" marking Interruptive Turns

According to Ochs and Shieffelin (1983b), when speakers are engaged in conversational activities such as agreeing, disagreeing, introducing, shifting or collaborating on a discourse topic, they are not only concerned with the choices in marking their incoming speech as relevant to the content of previous discourse, but also with strategies that can satisfy particular interactional demands. In the data analysed, it is discovered that participants in the talk shows use discourse markers "well", "now" and "and" at points of interruptions in order to fulfill certain interactional demands in the interaction process. Let us look at the markers in detail.

'Well'

The analysis provides evidence that pragmatic marker "well" exhibits differences in meaning in interruptive turns. In the first sample extract given, the use of "well" at points of interruptions in interaction serve as a response marker to what has preceded. An instance of "well" is shown in the following extract where it forms a cohesive tie within the interaction. In other words, 'well' marks responses at an interactional level.

In the above extract, speaker L (7) interrupts to get his turn with the use of "well" in response to the question by H1 about where "Black Cohosh" could be obtained. This is an example of an interruptive speech with the use of the particle "well" in response to an earlier question which speaker C has already responded. This shows that the discourse particle "well" forms a cohesive tie within the interaction.

Extract 1 Data1

- (1) H1. so where do you obtain this plant, I'm sure the ladies are dying to know where you can obtain this Black Cohosh =
- (2) C = North America =
- (3) H1. = ok otherwise they start dig [ing the back of]
- (4) C [Yah @@@]
- (5) H1. [their garden]
- (6) C: [@@@]
- (7) L →[well of] course if you want to buy the product you can buy here in Kay Lay=
- (8) H1 = KL [right]
- (9) L [KL]

In the second sample extract, the discourse particle "well" occurs in a disagreement sequence.

Extract 2 Data1

- (1) C: that you hate about that can start to occur as early as. ...ah. the age of [forty]
 (2) H1: [yes] Professor you hate the mood swings as well =
 (3) L: →[eh eh] = well no no actually not you know ..I just want to touch a little bit on males
 (4) H1: =ah yes that's the one we haven't come to yet

In the above extract, speaker L started with some filled pauses "eh..eh" before the occurrence of "well"(3) in response to H1's earlier comment(2). Here, turn-initial "well" is used when a speaker wishes to get a turn at talk even though in this instance, no overlaps occur. The host realises that speaker L wishes to have a turn at talk and thus allows him to have a turn. The extract shows the occurrence of "well" in a disagreement sequence which is evident by the use of "no no actually not. ." to display a sort of discomfort on the part of speaker L. Note also the shift in topic at this interruptive turn. In other words, speaker L's intention is not a response to the previous topic about "mood swing" but that he wishes to "touch a little bit on males" Therefore, the use of turn-initial "well" here shows speaker's intention to hold the turn and to change the direction of the discourse.

Extract 3 below shows a preemptive bid for space with the use of 'well' Here, the function is not to prevent the current speaker from continuing but simply to announce the intervener's intention to speak later

Extract 3 Data4

- (1) H4: in other words, would it be correct to say that um..if..lets say my father .ah. suffers from alzheimers disease. .does it naturally mean that I will..the possibilities are there =
 (2) S: = the possibilities are there =
 (3) H4: = I. don't. necessarily have to be there =
 (4) S: = only twenty five per cent of those [people] only [twenty five per cent]
 (5) T: →[well@@@] [well if] I may..if I may butt in..ah..ah..my grandfather had dementia and my father has dementia. that makes me ah. twenty five per cent at risk @@ doctor..

Speaker T (5) intervenes by using the interruptive strategy of "Well if I may butt in." to self-select himself and take a turn. The interruptive speech overlaps with current speaker S's turn in response to speaker H4's previous question on the possibilities of developing Alzheimer's. This is an instance where a participant wishes to respond to the current speaker by announcing his intention to speak with the use of turn-initial 'well' as a turn-holder. In other words, the discourse particle "well" used in a turn-initial position shows the speaker's intention to hold the turn or to compete for the floor and to carry on talking.

In analyzing the use of the discourse marker "well" in turn-initial positions in interruptive turns, it is obvious that this discourse particle serves different functions at interruptive turns as the three samples of extracts seem to show. There were 28 occurrences of turn-initial "well" in interruptive turns in the study.

'Now'

Another common interruptive strategy used by participants is the use of turn-initial devices such as 'now', 'now then' or 'ok now', to signal agreement with the previous activity or to signal termination of the topic. The following extracts show the use of such devices:

Extract 4 Data2

- (1) N: I would like to say that this the first kind of thing in Malaysia that we have done =
- (2) H2: = [mm]
- (3) N: { be}cause it is very interactive =
- (4) H2: = mm mm yes we're moving
[on]
- (5) A. → [now] I'll pick up from what Nazim [said]
- (6) H2: [yes] go ahead =
- (7) A. = ah. ...as I said the
XXX assessment the first one

The above extract shows the use of discourse particle "now" when speaker A wishes to intervene at H2's current turn at talk. This shows an indication that speaker A agrees with the earlier segment of the discourse and self-selects himself to "pick up from what Nazim said"

Extract 5 Data2

- (1) A: if you are given the internet connection saying that you want and I've given you the pass [word]
- (2) H2: [ok yes] yes you've got to set up and every [thing]
- (3) A: → [now] you may think that he's doing it

In the above extract, the point of interruption occurs at a TRP, in which when speaker H2 intervenes in the current talk of speaker A, speaker A uses a turn-initial framing signal "now" to indicate that he has not come to a turn completion, and thus simply chooses to ignore H2's contribution. The use of the discourse particle "now" acts as a framing signal to show the relation to the previous activity in the interaction process. In other words, the second turn of speaker A (3) is related to his previous turn in (1). The second turn surrounds the first turn like a frame, as one set of utterance in which the interruptive speech by speaker H2 is not considered by speaker A as contributive to the interaction.

Extract 6 Data 2

- (1) A: even three months before the exams it's every parent's concern, it doesn't matter where he is.. if he's working in the office .he's sitting late in the office but he can still look at it and see how the child does =
- (2) H2: = so parents who want you know who are very busy who are all over the world, travelling all over the [place]
- (3) A. → [ok now] we have the teacher comes into it, for example if a teacher has a particular student who takes interest in. .

However, in extract 6, speaker A uses the strategy of "ok now" to indicate to H2 that he wishes to continue his talk and to signal that he wishes to move on to a different topic. Note that the earlier focus on how "parents" could check on "how the child does" has now shifted to the role of the "teacher" This shows an example of a termination of topic with the interruptive device "now" prefaced by "ok" The data has 8 occurrences of "now" or prefaced by "ok" as a framing signal, an agreement signal or as a topic termination device.

'And'

Topic extension marker "and" is another turn-initial device used by participants in the discourse during their interruptive turns. This device is seen as functional in that it signals the organization and structure of the discourse. The following extracts show instances when a turn-initial "and" occur at a TRP interruptive turn:

Extract 7 Data 3

- (1) I you have to know that it is within its er..limits if you exceed and you just say that these herbs, then you go on eating, it can become to [xic]
- (2) H3: → [and] if you don't I guess you have to ask the experts

In the above extract, turn-initial "and" occurs at a TRP which overlaps with speaker I's utterance. In anticipatory turns at talk, speakers have to anticipate and monitor the current speaker's on-going talk in order to find the best possible completion point.

The function of this turn-initial device serves as an extension of the topic just introduced. Speaker I explains that "herbs" can become "toxic" if one exceeds the limit of taking them, and speaker H3 then adds by saying that if one does not know the toxic level of herbs, then one will "have to ask the experts"

Extract 8 Data 2

- (1) H2: so how..how.. would you work through the inter [net way]
N: [you know] it's [it's]
- (2) A. [ah] I'll explain that. you know the internet they call it course on [line] so the teacher will announce on the net that
- (3) H2: [ahah ahah]
- (4) A. the teacher is availa [ble]
- (5) H2: [ok] =
- (6) A. = from 9am to 11am on the net=
- (7) H2: = I see I see=
- (8) A: =
now you have on the internet chat mode or you have some soft [wares] the teacher can go on explaining
- (9) H2: [ah ah]
- (10) A. what he wants and the student. .any amount of students can shoot the course things. .and they all be depending on this thing also =

- (11) H2: = I see so there still is the element on the internet as [well]
 (12) N: [yes]
 that's right definite [ly]
 (13) A. [yes] you can interact
 (14) H2: [but] personal =
 (15) A. [you] =can inte [ract]
 (16) N: [so] you don't need to worry whether
 the teacher is strict or you are scared of the teacher or things like
 that or another way of actually is..not definitely the teacher
 must be there all the time..you know..interacting with the
 teacher..another way we can do is actually like emai [ling]
 (17) H2: [mm]
 (18) N: = we
 can email to them any problems that we have so we will get the
 response as soon as possible=
 (19) H2: = yes,yes I see=
 (20) N: = that's another mode
 also=
 (21) H2: [ok]
 (22) A. → [and]secondly in a school in a classroom when they're
 tea[ching]
 (23) H2: [ahah]
 (24) A. = normally they will prepare something and the
 moment the student misses the class he cannot take it [on]
 (25) H2: [ahah]
 (26) A. = so you know now he prepares it and leaves it on the net. and
 even if he prepares some materials so any day he can look at. you
 can look back=
 (27) H2: = I see it's [it's all]
 (28) A: [it's on] the net

This rather lengthy extract shows a negative blatant intervention with the use of turn-initial 'and' by speaker A, with the intention that he wishes to pick up on the topic that he has introduced earlier on 'course online on the internet' at the beginning of the discourse (2). Turn (16) indicates where speaker A has been interrupted by speaker N. Speaker A is able to resume his position after 6 speaking turns (22). Here, the discourse particle "and" is used as a turn-initial device to inform the participants that speaker A wishes to continue with his second point, giving the idea that his earlier turn is not complete. In other words, speaker A demands his speaking rights that he has to give up initially. This clearly illustrates the use of the particle "and" to show an extension of a topic in an interruptive turn. In the analysis,

it was found that the use of the discourse particle "and" in interruptive turns has an interactive function as well as forming an initiating move in a turn. In the data, there were 65 occurrences of "and" used as a turn-initial device in interruptive turns.

Discourse Markers and Interruptive Turns

The various use of turn-initial devices seem to show that during interruptive turns, speakers use different strategies to mark the relation between immediately adjacent utterances. In the analysis, it is clear that there are various types of discourse markers involved in turn-taking. Such discourse markers have a positive impact on the smooth flow of conversation, in that they help the participants in the interaction to take or hold their speaking turns. In interruptive turns, discourse markers also serve functional roles in displaying the relation between adjacent utterances, between segments of discourse which are further apart; and they also mark the discourse structure for the benefit of the listeners' understanding as well as for the speaker's cognitive orientation.

From the analysis, it is also shown that discourse markers have been recognized to fulfill important functions on the interpersonal levels of spoken discourse. The various pragmatic particles selected for the study are involved with indicating various features of spoken structure, as well as serving different functions in the interaction process. Pragmatic particles also help to signal the organization and structure of spoken discourse.

Conclusion

I have presented arguments to demonstrate that turn-initial devices like "well", "now" and "and" show significantly different pragmatic functions in interruptive turns. The analysis shows that the discourse particle "well" exhibits different functions in interruptive turns; "now" signals agreement or as a topic termination device to an earlier discourse, while "and" functions as an extension marker on a topic to a prior utterance or to earlier segments of the discourse. Since a talk show deals with a certain topic of interest in a particular show, it is interesting to note that participants are aware of the discourse functions that these markers seem to show during the interaction process.

References

- E. Ochs & B. Schieffelin (eds.). 1983b. *Developmental Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. and Hasan, Ruqaiya. 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Jefferson, G 1979 A technique for inviting laughter and its subsequent acceptance/declination. In G. Psathas (ed.). *Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology*. New York: Irvington, 79-96.
- Lakoff, Robin. 1973b. Questionable answers and answerable questions. In *Issues in Linguistics: Pares in honour of Henry and Renee Kahane*. B. B. Kachru et. al. (eds), 453-467 Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Pomerantz, Anita. 1984) Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In *Structures of Social Action. Studies in Conversation Analysis*, M. J Atkinson and J Heritage (eds.), 57-102. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Redeker, Gisela. 1990. Ideational & pragmatic markers of discourse structure. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 367-381
- Sacks, H., Schegloff E. A. and Jefferson, G. 1974. A simplest systematic for the organizational of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50, 696-73.
- Schegloff, E. A. 1972b. Some aspects of conversational structure. In Sudnow, D. (ed.) 1972b. *Studies in Social Interaction*. New York: The Face Press, 398-427
- Schiffrin, Deborah. 1987. *Discourse Markers* London. Cambridge University Press.
- Stentrom, Anna-Brita 1994. *An Introduction to Spoken Interaction* London. Longman.