The Use of ‘Oh’ and ‘Well’ as Discourse Markers in Conversation of Bandung State Polytechnic Students

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Abstract: Discourse markers could be particles such as ‘oh’, ‘well’, ‘then’, ‘you know’, and the connectives ‘so’, ’because’, and, ‘but’, and ‘or’. In this research, the writers focused on discourse marker as particles: ‘oh’, and ‘well’ since ‘then’ and ‘’you know’ could not be found in students’ conversation. The research, entitled The Use of ‘Oh’ and ‘Well’ as Discourse Markers in the Conversation of Bandung State Polytechnic Students conducted in qualitative and quantitative method by using descriptive/interpretative approach. The aims of the research are: the first, it is to analyze the use of ‘oh’ and ‘well’ in the conversation of students’ Polytechnic State of Bandung. The second, it is to analyze the error use of ‘oh’, and ‘well’ as discourse markers in students’ conversation. After analyzing the data, ‘well’ was mostly used as face-threat mitigators, while the use of ‘well’ as a qualifier indicating some problems on the preceding utterance was not found. Meanwhile, the use of ‘oh’ mostly used was as pure surprise. The other uses of ‘oh’ as assertion, emphasis, and reaction were not found. From this research it can be found that the use of discourse markers ‘oh’ was used more than ‘well’ since ‘oh’ is also often used in Indonesian conversation than ‘well.’ Another finding is, students made error in using ‘oh’ more than ‘well’ though students are more familiar with ‘oh’.

Keywords: ‘oh’, ‘well’, assertion, emphasis, Polytechnic State of Bandung

Introduction

When participants in conversation want to express their ideas, sometimes they do not know how to respond speaker or hearer’s questions directly, especially if the speaker doubts or confuses what to say. To fill the empty ‘space’ before they decide what to utter, they use some particles occasionally such as: ‘oh’, ‘well’, ‘um’ and many other things. Discourse particles, or later it is called discourse marker by Schourup (1982) could be used to ‘stabilize’ conversation with different meanings so that there is no vacuum ‘period’ during the conversation, and it makes the flow of conversation run smoothly. The use of discourse markers could make conversation more interesting, more understandable, and even more polite, and more powerful, though it won’t change its grammatical meaning. It can be read from Fraser’s statement: ‘the absence of the discourse marker does not render a sentence ungrammatical and /or unintelligible. It does, however, remove a powerful clue about what commitment the speaker makes regarding the relationship between the current utterance and the prior discourse’ (Fraser, 1988:22). From that statement, we can see that discourse marker can make conversation easier, and more interesting to be discussed.

Based on that reason, the researchers analyzed on students’ conversation and it could be identified that some students made some mistakes in using them. The researchers carried out the research entitled ‘The Use of ‘Oh’, and ‘Well’ as Discourse Markers in Conversation
of Bandung State Polytechnic Students. The aims of the research are: first, it is to analyze the use of ‘oh’ and ‘well’ in the conversation of students of Bandung State Polytechnic. The second, it is to analyze the error use of ‘oh’ and ‘well’ as discourse markers in students’ conversation.

**Literature Review**

There are many researchs on discourse markers that have been observed, one of them is investigated by John Heritage (1998). His research of which title is *Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry* describes the particle ‘oh’ from the point of view of the answerer. He find out that in responses to English questions, a question is problematic in terms of its relevance, presuppositions, or context. Furthermore, he says that ‘oh’-prefacing is used to foreshadow reluctance to advance the conversational topic invoked by a question. ‘Oh’ based on him could be part of a ‘trouble –premonitory’ response to various types of ‘how are you’ inquires in conversational openings and elsewhere. From his research, it could be pointed out that ‘oh’-prefaced responses markedly show that the question to which they respond has caused a shift in the respondent’s attention.

The next research on discourse markers is defined by Tree and Schrock (1999). In their research entitle ‘Discourse Markers in Spontaneous Speech: ‘Oh’ what a Difference an ‘Oh’ makes’, they argue that recognition of words is faster after ‘oh’ than when the ‘oh’ is either excised and replaced by a pause of excised entirely. They also report that semantic verification of words heard earlier in the discourse is faster after ‘oh’ than when the ‘oh’ is either excised and replaced by a pause or excised entirely, but only when the test point is downstream from the ‘oh’. From their research, it can be deduced that ‘oh’ is not only a potential signal to addressees, as has been suggested by corpora analyses, but that it is in fact used by addressees to help them integrate information in spontaneous talk.

**Discourse Markers**

The first theory used by the researchers is discourse markers. Discourse marker in linguistics is a word or phrase is relatively syntax-independent and it doesn’t change the sentence’s meaning and somehow it does empty meaning. Discourse markers as phenomena in linguistics have been analyzed and discussed broadly by some linguists (Levinson 1983; Schriffin 1987; Aijmer 2002; Lenk 1998, etc). Discourse markers have significant interactive role in discourse as they show a relationship between the interlocutors, namely, the speaker and the hearer, between the addressee and the addressee. Furthermore Hulker (1991: 78-79) draw attention that there are four basic features that characterize discourse markers: (1) they do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; (2) they do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; (3) they are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; and (4) they have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function. For that reason, the use of discourse markers can make discourse to be explored widely, since the use of them has different functions.

‘Oh’ as discourse marker

In this research, the researchers used theory of discourse markers from Aijmer (2002) because she could be considered as one who has done the most extensive study of ‘oh’ in the London-Lund Corpus of speech and indentified a large number of ways the use of ohs. In her
book English Discourse Particles (2002). She explains several uses of ‘oh’ from many linguists such as: Stenstrom (1984), who points out ‘oh’ and lexical collocation, Wilkin (1995), who connects ‘oh’ as interjection with indexicality. Aijmer (2002) also describes functional indicators of ‘oh.’ The first is: collocation with other discourse particles. For example:
- Oh well...
- Oh that’s good...

While the second point of functional indicators is: the distribution of ‘oh’ over different text types, such as: telephone, discussion, prepared, public and other things. Aijmer admits that many other factors may affect the frequency of ‘oh’ in a particular text type, for example how well the speaker and the hearer know each other. From the different text types, she also identifies the high frequency of ‘oh’ on the telephone is partly explained by ‘oh’s’ function as a success marker at the moment when the answerer knows the caller (Schegloff 1979:38).

Moreover, Aijmer (2002:111) states the functions of ‘oh’ that can be described not only in terms of how it serves to regulate discourse and information flow but in terms of affect and emotionality. She states ‘oh’ is often used in context which the core meaning of ’surprise’ is backgrounded: to arrive at a realization ‘oh I see’ as it is also mentioned by Heritage (1998). Pure surprise could also express clarification after correction, to denote emphasis or intensification, or to register objection or reaction such as ‘oh but’, ‘oh because’.

Another function of ‘oh’ is, it may function as a ‘topicalizer’ or ‘newsmark’, to promote topic development ‘oh are you?’. ‘Oh’ can be used as backchannel device to register reception and recognition as a sign of assessment such as: ‘oh that’s good’, or ‘oh’ can be used as a signal of endorsement as: ‘oh yes’ and ‘oh no’. In addition, Aijmer (2002) states that ‘oh’ has a variety of politeness functions in inviting, thanking, apologizing, and expressing appreciation. For example:
A: ‘Will you give me a favour?’
B: ‘Oh, I am sorry. I have something to do’.

From the conversation above, we can see the use of ‘oh’ has similar function as mitigator to avoid face threatening act (FTA), though B, has used negative politeness, I am sorry that has the same meaning that is, to avoid FTA. We can compare with the conversation below in which there is no ‘oh.’
A: Will you give me a favour?
B: I am sorry. I have something to do.

For the second conversation, we can see the hearer tries to avoid FTA by using negative politeness strategy, apologizing, but the first conversation is considered to be more polite than the second one.

‘Well’ as discourse marker

The next theory of discourse marker used in this research is from Jucker (1997). He defines that in modern English, discourse marker ‘well’ has four distinct uses. The first is ‘well’ as a frame marker; it introduces a new topic or prefaces direct reported speech. For example:
A: I think it is not a big problem because our financial report will shown by the simple graphs. Are you going to present it?
B: It’s ok. ‘Well’ did you study marketing also during your training?
The conversation above shows us, ‘well’ marks the starting of a new topic in a conversation. The hearer B recognizes the explanation of the speaker A by responding ‘it’s ok’ and then the hearer introduces a new topic in a question form.

A: Did he ask you to train him how to play Polo?
B: Yes, and he said ‘well’ tell me more about Polo?

The respond of the hearer uses ‘well’ introduces direct speech. Jucker (1997) admits that ‘it’ separates the reported speech from the immediately preceding reporting clause ‘he said.’ The switch from the reporting clause to the reported speech entails a deictic reorientation.

The second use of ‘well’ in Modern English is as a **face-threat mitigator**. This use shows some problems between interlocutors. Both the face of the speaker and the face of the hearer are threatened. According to Owen (1981) ‘well’ signals and mitigates some sorts of confrontation. For instance, an assessment followed by disagreement rather than agreement. Then a request which is refused rather than granted; or it could be an offer which is rejected rather than accepted. In those situations, no matter what the speaker and the hearer utter, it will threaten participants of conversation, and both of them might do FTA. These situations, therefore, are called face-threats, and the actions that create face threatening acts or FTAs (based on Brown & Levinson, 1987). The conversation below is the example:

A: I think you need a doctor to make your legs walk better.
B: Well, I can handle my legs because I know them well.

From the conversation above, we can see that actually it is very difficult for A to offer B a therapist, because A is afraid that B will be offended. On the other hand, B thinks that A’s utterance makes him upset because actually he has tried hard to consult with some doctors to cure his legs, and none of the doctors has succeeded in curing his legs. To avoid face threatening act (FTA), B uses discourse marker ‘well’ to mitigate the effect of his utterance.

The third use of ‘well’ in Modern English is ‘well’ as a **qualifier**. It shows some problems on the content level of the current or the previous utterance. The use of ‘well’ as a qualifier has been much discussed greatly in the literature. Lakoff (1972, 458-463) who deals with discourse marker ‘well’ in the context of questions and answers, notes ‘that it is used in cases in which respondents know that they are not providing directly the information the questioner asked for’ or in other words in cases in which they sense ‘some sort of insufficiency’ in their replies. The replies can be not sufficient because speakers leave or give it to the questioners to add in some of the details, or because the respondents are going to give some additional information themselves. For example:

A: What do you think about the way to get out from this isolated place?
B: Well, there does seem to be difficult to get out from here, we are really tired.

The conversation above shows us that speaker A asks a question that is difficult to answer. Hearer B therefore, prefices his reply with ‘well.’ This sort of ‘well’ functions on the level of interpersonal shows a problem between the speaker and the hearer.

The fourth use of ‘well’ in Modern English is ‘well’ as a **pause filler** to bridge interactional silence. In this use, it marks a speaker’s claim to the floor. The example can be seen from the reply of speaker above:

A: What do you think about the way to get out from this isolated place?
B: Well, there does seem to be difficult to get out from here, we are really tired.
A: ‘Well’ there you are’
‘Yes’...
‘Quite’...

Each answer of A stands for a separate tone and it indicates the speaker’s hesitation. A tries hard to find something to say or A thinks the correct words to answer it, but A wants to keep the floor and A does so to fill the silence between them.

**Politeness**

Brown and Levinson (1987) are famous for their theory of politeness. According to them, politeness is seen as an active serving to enhance, maintain, or protect the face. They also suggest politeness as a compensation action taken to counter balance the disruptive effort of face threatening act (FTAs). Furthermore, they describe face threatening acts as ‘acts that infringe on the hearer’s need to maintain his /her self-esteem and be respected’. Politeness theory of Brown and Levinson consists of three notions, namely: face, face threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. The first basic notion of politeness is face. In accordance with Brown and Levinson (1987), face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. The next basic notion of politeness is face threatening act (FTAs). Face threatening acts are acts that infringe on the hearers’ need to maintain his/her self-esteem, if we do or are about threaten someone’s positive or negative face, but we don’t mean it, we need to minimize it by applying politeness strategies. Politeness strategies as the last basic notion of politeness, they try to repair or compensate in some ways threat to positive and negative public self-image when performing a specific act. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) divided politeness strategies into two strategies: negative and positive strategies. Negative politeness strategies are aimed at minimizing the imposition on the hearer, while positive politeness strategies will not be described in this paper, as it does not relate to this research. Negative politeness strategies consist of ten strategies, and one of them is hedges. G. Lakoff, who introduced firstly the term of hedges in 1972, referring it to words that “make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (1972:195). Then Brown and Levinson (1987) stated hedges as one of negative politeness strategies, and they divided hedges into four: quality, quantity, manner and relevance hedges. Since discourse marker of ‘oh’ and ‘well’ relate to relevance and quantity hedges, the researchers only used both of the hedges and not the other kinds of hedges such as: quality, and manner hedges.

**Quantity hedges**

There are many English expressions used in quantity hedges. One of the uses of quantity hedges is to express a piece of information given by speaker is not precisely the same or the information provided is not the same as it might be expected by hearer. Another use of quantity hedges is to express clear politeness functions, as we can see from this short conversation:

A: *How far is it?*
B: *Well, it's too far to walk.* (R. Lakoff 1972)

The conversation above shows us ‘well’ as mitigator in order to make the mitigation of the utterance lessen. Jucker (1997) states that discourse marker of ‘well’ can function as a face threat mitigator, but in the conversation above, the function of ‘well’ is as mitigator to lessen
the imposition of the utterance. Without using ‘well’, the conversation above will change its politeness level as we can see below:

A:  How far is it?
B:  It’s too far to walk.

From the conversation above, we can see that the imposition of the utterance in the second conversation is stronger than the first conversation.

Relevance hedges

According to Brown and Levinson (1987) relevance hedges are used as mitigator to mitigate the imposition of utterance, for example when speaker wants to change topic since it is very sensitive and it can impose on the hearer’s face. Hedges mark the change, and perhaps partially apologize for it, are:

-Sorry ...
-Oh...
-By the way...
-Oh I know...

From those expressions, it can be seen discourse marker of ‘oh’ can be used as mitigator to reduce the imposition on the hearer’s face.

Method of Research

In this research, qualitative and quantitative methods were used by the researchers to analyze and to identify a number of the data. The research carried out by analyzing conversation of students of Bandung Polytechnic. There were 62 conversations spoken spontaneously by 62 students of Banking and Finance Study Program. All the students worked in pairs, and each pair spoke 2 conversations. While they were having their conversation, the researchers recorded them. After they had finished their conversations, the researchers analyzed discourse markers in students’ conversation. The researchers accomplished this task, firstly by utilizing quantitative methods to identify the basic and generalizable function of ‘oh’ and ‘well’, which we discerned via an analysis of the discourse contexts in which the variable occurred. Secondly, from qualitative analysis, we exposed the nature of the conducing in the case of each individual ‘oh’ and ‘well’ and the results are as the followings:

1.  Oh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of marker</th>
<th>Functions of marker</th>
<th>Number of markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oh</td>
<td>Pure surprise</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh My God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh in my opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh</td>
<td>Arriving at a realization</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh yeah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh</td>
<td>Mitigator</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh well</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh by the way</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were 13 errors of ‘oh’ in students’ conversation, two of them are:
A:  Merdeka Street number 37, okay?
B:  What? Can you repeat?
A:  Oh yes... Merdeka... number .... 37.

One of the uses of ‘oh’ is to clarify something which had been mentioned previously, but in the conversation above, B just wants to make sure that ‘A’ address is correct without repeating it. Another example of “oh” used not in correct way can be seen from the conversation below:
A:  Anggi! Right here!
B:  Oh. Hi Ninis. I’m terribly sorry I’m late.

In conversation, A says her position by saying ‘Anggi! Right here!’ and B replies A’s invitation by using discourse marker ‘oh’ and then she says ‘Hi’ as a greeting. In fact the use of ‘oh’ here is not correct because it is enough for B to say ‘Hi’. From those of two conversation above, we can see that the use of discourse marker ‘oh’ do not have any meanings or functions.

From students’ conversation, the researchers found out that students used discourse marker of ‘oh’ as mitigator for two new different functions. We can see the functions as the following conversations:
A:  Absolutely no! I’m very diligent
B:  Ha...ha...ha, just kidding. Oh, by the way I have to go now. I have important meeting see you later.
A:  Ok, see you.

A:  I don’t know what to do. I am confused with this situation.
B:  You may discuss it with your parents.
A:  I don’t know...
B:  Oh, my mom is calling. I have to go now.
Those conversations above used discourse markers of ‘oh’ and the function of them is as mitigator to change the topic because the speakers want to end the conversations. In the first conversation, the speaker uses quantity hedge ‘by the way’, and the second conversation, the students add ‘oh’ as discourse markers to make the imposition of the conversation lessen because B as speaker wants to end it, but B does not want to impose on the hearer’s face.

Another function of ‘oh’ used by the students is to change the topic without wanting to end the conversation:

A: Absolutely. Hey, I have to go right now. Give my warm hugs to your parents.
B: Ok. Oh by the way, Raina. Thanks a bunch for your sweet invitation.
A: You’re welcome. I know that you have liked this show since we were at the same high school.

The above conversation shows us that A wants to finish the conversation, but B remembers something to be told, therefore B used ‘oh by the way’ to change the topic so that B’s utterance does not impose on the hearer’s face. Another findings in the research are, the speaker used ‘oh’ although he/she disappoints. We can see from conversations below:

A: I want to ask you joining me
B: I am sorry, I can’t. I have to do something else.
A: Oooh, forget it. That wasn’t your fault.

A: I am sorry, Ira. Tomorrow I have an appointment with my client. How about another day?
B: Oh…no problem. When it suits you?

From the above conversations, we could see that ‘oh’ can be used to hide speakers’ disappointment, in order not to impose the hearers’ face.

2. Well

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of marker</th>
<th>Function of marker</th>
<th>Numbers of markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well</td>
<td>Frame marker</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a face-threat mitigator</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a qualifier</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a pausefiller</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusions

After analyzing the data, it could be concluded:

1. Discourse markers of ‘oh’ are used by students more than discourse marker of ‘well’. There are 55 uses of ‘oh,’ while the use of ‘well’ is 20. ‘Oh’ is used more than ‘well’ because students are more familiar with ‘oh’ than ‘well’, besides, it is also often used in Indonesian language.

2. ‘Oh’ is used as mitigator to end conversation and change topic since two of them are considered to be sensitive, and they can impose on hearer’s face, therefore ‘oh’ is used to avoid FTA (face threatening act).
3. The function of ‘oh’ used mostly by students is as ‘pure surprise’, on the other hand, the function of ‘well’ mostly used by students is as a face threat mitigator, as conversations of the students were about asking and giving opinions which they did spontaneously.

4. The use of discourse marker ‘oh’ is often used by Indonesian students than the use of ‘well’, yet they made mistakes more in using ‘oh’ because they are more familiar with it without knowing what to say exactly.

Suggestions

1. Discourse markers are interesting points to be researched on a wider scope by using more sorts of them in students’ conversation.
2. The use of discourse markers also could be researched widely by analyzing conversations not only by students from commerce but also students from engineering to find out more different functions and uses of them, since engineering students and commerce students have different characters.

References


