

The discourse-pragmatic marker *well* in the private correspondence of a late nineteenth-century Northern Irish family

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Abstract

Interlocutors frequently use discourse-pragmatic markers such as *like*, *sure*, or *well* in everyday conversations, and the latter has been studied extensively in the English language. In Irish English, however, this feature has received limited attention, particularly in written discourse. This paper investigates the use of *well* among two generations of a late nineteenth-century Northern Irish family. The analysis is based on letters included in the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR) and uses a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative analysis examines the communicative functions attributed to *well*. Quantitative analysis of these results allows for an assessment of the frequencies with which individual writers used this feature, its variation across age groups, and the differences between family members who migrated and those who remained in Ireland. The results show the presence of traditionally oral functions of *well* in the correspondence of all writers and corroborate earlier research on the orality and informality of these text types. The youngest writer, Mary, even demonstrates a rise in her usage of *well* during her time in Canada, which decreases again upon her return to Ireland. Particularly her use of interpersonal functions of *well* suggests that she uses this feature to maintain social relationships and solidarity with her family at home. This study thus advances our understanding of written personal communication, particularly concerning the discourse-pragmatic marker *well*. However, it also calls for further investigations into the discourse functions of this marker, especially in speech-like texts such as letters and in the context of Irish English.

Keywords: *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR), discourse marker 'well', intergenerational variation, migration studies, personal correspondence.

1. Introduction

According to Amador-Moreno (2024, p. 226), “the study of discourse-pragmatic markers (D-PMs) in Ir[ish] Eng[lish] has become one of the most fertile areas within the scope of pragmatic research since the need of variational pragmatics was identified”, but *well*, despite being one

of the most widely studied discourse markers in English, has not been specifically investigated in Irish English (IrE). Bonness (2024, pp. 240-241) observed this feature to be the most frequent discourse marker used by a member of the Smyth family, the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Northern Irish family who provide the data for the present study. Beyond that, I am only aware of Kirk's (2018) and O'Sullivan's (2022, pp. 148-152) investigations of *well* in Irish broadcasting discussions and advertisements.

In general, discourse markers are characteristic of spoken conversations but may occur in written texts as well. They indicate whether an utterance has ended, where it is headed, or whether it sufficiently relates to previous utterances (McCarthy, 1993, p. 171), but they do not affect its factual meaning. Schiffrin (1987, p. 31) describes them as “sequentially independent elements that bracket units of talk” and make the discourse coherent. Discourse markers can have both textual and interpersonal functions, meaning they organize the utterances as a text, or they indicate speakers'/writers' attitudes and assessments through which they establish a social interaction with the addressee (Brinton, 1995, p. 380). For *well*, Jucker points out that both functions will always be present, but one will typically be more prominent than the other (1997, p. 93).

In contrast to its functions as noun (*She is sitting by the well*), verb (*Tears well in her eyes*), adverb (*She sings well*), or adjective (*She is not feeling well*), the discourse marker *well* neither has a grammatical function, nor propositional content, but rather serves a pragmatic purpose. This paper will therefore refer to *well* as discourse-pragmatic marker (D-PM). Kirk (2018, p. 168) stresses that it is the “most complex” of all D-PMs, and Aijmer (2009, p. 9) points out that “there is little consensus on how many functions it has”.

The following sections review relevant literature on the D-PM *well* and present the research questions (2), detail the data sources and methodological framework employed in this

study (3), present the results with a focus on qualitative (4.1) and quantitative analyses (4.2), and provide a discussion of the findings (5).

2. Theoretical background

Well has been studied extensively across spoken and written, synchronic and diachronic, native and non-native varieties of English during the last decades. One of the first studies, done by Lakoff (1973), looked at *well* being used to introduce indirect, or insufficient, responses to questions in conversation. Shortly after, Svartvik (1980) focused on the different functions of *well* in spoken conversations, and specifically points to its qualifier and frame functions. Schiffrin (1985, 1987) then examined this feature from a perspective of conversational coherence, i.e. the development and presentation of links between utterances, especially when discourse moves do not meet coherence expectations. Her focus was both on adjacency pairs (e.g., question/answer and request/compliance) and on situations where *well* does not relate to pairwise coherence, e.g., when preceding a request or responding to one's own statement. Jucker (1993) approached this topic from a relevance-theoretical perspective, in which utterances guarantee optimal relevance, context is established during interpretation, and discourse coherence results from negotiating relevant backgrounds (p. 438). Norrick (2001), in contrast, dealt with *well* in oral narratives, which do not have the classical turn-by-turn structure as adjacency pair. He found that the use of discourse markers depends on the audiences' expectations about structures and conventions in storytelling (866). In 2009, Aijmer investigated *well* in different spoken text types included in the British Component of the *International Corpus of English*. This D-PM has further been studied in native varieties of World Englishes, such as Hong Kong English (Lam, 2009) or Irish English (Kirk, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2022), while Müller (2005), Aijmer (2013), Buysse (2015), or Öztürk & Durmuşoğlu Köse (2021) looked at its use among non-native speakers of English.

Finell (1989, 1992), Jucker (1993, 1997), Marcus (2009), or Lutzky (2012) approached *well* historically, focusing on written discourse. Finell (1992) and Lutzky (2012) investigated the use of *well* in letters written in the Early and Late Modern English periods. Finell (1992) focused on the topic changing function of (among others) *well* in letters by Dorothy Osborne and Virginia Woolf, whereas Lutzky (2012) included personal correspondence as one of several speech-like texts from the Early Modern English period in her study. A rare exception that examined the use of *well* in modern written prose, i.e. journalistic writing, is Rühlemann and Hilpert (2017). They traced an increase of *well*, including novel functions, to colloquialization processes in this genre.

This paper examines the use of *well* in the personal letters of the late nineteenth-century Northern Irish Smyth family. Prior to this analysis, it is necessary to consider the various functions of this D-PM.

2.1. Functions of *well*

As indicated before, the D-PM *well* is multifunctional (see Aijmer, 2009, p. 9). Jucker (1997, p. 93), for example, states that *well* can have four different pragmatic functions, either on the textual or the interpersonal level. On the textual level, *well* can function as a frame marker to signal a topic change and introduce a new topic, or to introduce direct reported speech (see also Svartvik, 1980). In the latter case, *well* separates the reported speech from the reporting clause (Jucker, 1993, p. 93), as in *Mrs Allison says "Well Mary has always been distant towards me"* (James Alexander Smyth, 10 August 1904).

Another framing function addressed by Svartvik (1980, pp. 175-176) is *well* as an editing marker for self-correction, indicating “what I mean is/I mean”. Also Biber et al. (1999, p. 1087) note that *well* can be used as “a signal of self-correction or deliberation over the choice

of expression”. Finally, Jucker (1997, p. 97) notes that in Old English, *well* + vocative was used to draw the listener’s attention to what follows, i.e. it functions as an “attention-getting device”. In addition to this he finds that this use of *well* has a textual function as it is found in important structural positions. Lutzky (2012, p. 147) confirms this for her Early Modern English data.

On the interpersonal level, *well* can be used as a face-threat mitigator (Jucker, 1997, p. 94; Lutzky, 2012, p. 83), as a qualifier indicating potential issues at the content level (Jucker, 1997, p. 94), such as when the respondent realizes that their answer may be inadequate, or as a pause filler. The latter function indicates that the speaker needs some time to organize their thoughts (Jucker, 1997, p. 95; Aijmer 2013, p. 107). Aijmer (2009, p. 7) refers to this as a speech management function. This function is not relevant in written narratives as the writer has plenty of time to think about their statements. As a face-threat mitigator, *well* aims to save the speaker’s/writer’s or hearer’s/reader’s face. Negative face is hereby the desire of discourse participants to act self-determined, maintaining freedom of action and freedom from imposition, whereas a person’s positive face reflects their wish to be valued and accepted by interlocutors (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). As a qualifier, *well* has been found to signal potential issues related to the content of current or earlier statements, traditionally with adjacency pairs that are being followed by insufficient or dispreferred responses (Lakoff, 1973, p. 463; Svartvik, 1980, pp. 173-174; Jucker, 1997, p. 94). Another qualifying function of *well* reported in the literature is emotions (Lutzky 2012, p. 84), which can convey feelings and attitudes such as disapproval, reluctance or annoyance, but also concession, reassurance, or surprise. Aijmer (2013, p. 109) speaks of attitudinal *well*, which “expresses attitudes towards the hearer or the text. It can soften or downtone an utterance and is used before an opinion, corrections, clarifications, or denials. It can also express an emotion or feeling such as disapproval or resignation”. *Well* can further express reinforcement, agreement, and positive reaction or attitude (Svartvik, 1980, p. 173).

2.2. Orality in letters

As noted above, *well* is characteristic of oral language, accounting for one of the most recurrent words in spoken discourse. In fact, Svartvik states that it “is virtually restricted to spoken language” (Svartvik, 1980, p. 169). It might therefore not be expected to appear as frequently in historical written documents, as they rarely include quoted speech (Marcus 2009, p. 235). However, personal letters have been described as relatively close to spoken language (see, e.g., Amador-Moreno, 2019). They can be viewed as asynchronous forms of conversations, in which writers frequently refer to previous conversations and expect replies to current content. Personal letters also tend to be more natural and less self-aware than other forms of writing since they are addressed to close friends and family who are familiar with the writer. Biber and Finegan (1989, p. 497) state that this allows the writer to openly reference emotions and experiences. They found that personal letters became increasingly more oral and involved during the nineteenth century and thereafter (p. 512), which is reflected in an increased use of private verbs, contractions, first- and second person pronouns etc. (501). Many earlier letter writers also had limited formal education, and Schneider (2002) notes that these semi-literate writers often put their “imagined” words into writing. This is specifically obvious in lack of punctuation, random capitalization, or phonetic respellings (p. 76; see de Rijke, 2016 for phonetic respellings in the Smyth letters). Amador-Moreno (2019, pp. 90-134), moreover, investigates orality in personal letters by analysing D-PMs in the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR, McCafferty and Amador-Moreno, 2012).

In some cases, letter writers themselves even view their letters as a substitute for face-to-face communication. Jane Austen, for example, notes in a letter to her sister Cassandra that “I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth. I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter” (cited in Cornish, 1929, p. 56; for further

examples of these types of reflections in CORIECOR see Amador-Moreno, 2019, p. 69). Investigating *well* in personal letters is, therefore, a justified endeavor.

2.3. Research questions

The present study can be placed in the field of historical sociopragmatics (cf. Culpeper, 2011) and investigates the use of the D-PM *well* by a nineteenth-century Northern Irish family whose letters are included in CORIECOR. More specifically, it looks at the letters of four siblings and their father. While two of the siblings migrated to Ontario, Canada, in the late nineteenth century, the rest of the family remained in Ireland. The research questions examine a) how the discourse marker *well* is used by the various family members and whether it reflects the functions typically found in oral discourse and b) whether differences emerge in its usage across the two generations or between individuals with varying migration backgrounds.

3. Data and Methodology

The data for this investigation stem from CORIECOR (McCafferty & Amador-Moreno, 2012), a collection of personal letters written by Irish migrants and their families between 1731–1940. Particularly, the sub-corpus examined here contains the letters of siblings James Alexander Smyth (born ~1874), Eliza Catherine Smyth (born ~1878), John Charles Smyth (born ~1881), Mary Smyth (born ~1884), and their father John James Smyth (born ~1836) and were written between 1891–1925. The letter writers belonged to a family of farmers from Castledamph in rural Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland. The correspondence started when 17-year-old James Alexander migrated to Ontario, Canada in 1891 and ended with him returning to Ireland in the late 1920s. Of the letters James wrote, 163 survive and are included in this study. Between 1901–1904, he was joined by his youngest sibling Mary (17 years old), who aspired to educate herself further in Canada. Mary contributed 100 letters. Eliza Catherine (N=63 letters), John

Charles (N=21) and John James (N=79) remained in Ireland. We know from the *Censuses of Ireland* (1901 and 1911) that all family members were able to read and write. In total, the sub-corpus comprises 426 letters and has a word count of just above 300,000 words.

Amador-Moreno (2024, p. 229) points to the importance of considering context when applying corpus linguistic techniques to pragmatic investigations because although frequencies and word distributions may offer robust quantitative evidence, detailed qualitative analysis is needed to interpret this evidence – especially in specific sociocultural Irish contexts. The analysis of the letters in this study is primarily qualitative, but some aspects have been quantified. To start with, all instances of *well* were extracted using the concordance feature of *AntConc* 3.5.8 (Anthony, 2019). Removing duplicates and all instances of *well* not functioning as a D-PM resulted in 440 relevant occurrences. These were then analyzed considering the functions presented in section 2. The aim was to find out whether the functions typically described for oral discourse can be found in the letters, which may be seen as asynchronous conversations between family members. In many cases, the use of *well* in the data does not relate to question/answer pairs but includes narratives. Nevertheless, even these often refer to previous letters, thereby strengthening the claim that the personal letters are asynchronous conversations and relatively oral in character. Quantifying the data allows us to examine the frequencies of *well* for each letter writer. Since they contributed varying amounts of letters, normalized frequencies (*Nf*) per 10,000 words were calculated to compare their individual uses of *well*.

Amador-Moreno (2019, p. 67) notes that “[m]obility in the context of emigration involves the transportation of culture, attitudes, customs and speech, all of which combine to maintain contact with those at home” and that “[d]iscourse-pragmatic variation is often strongly determined by social situations or by the identity of the speaker” (Amador-Moreno, 2024, p. 428). Hence, extralinguistic variables should be considered when analysing the data.

For the present study, age and migration status have been regarded as relevant for further investigation. Language is constantly changing, and looking at variation between generations can reveal such changes. This can be done through real-time studies, in which informants are revisited at different points in time, or through apparent-time studies, in which participants of different generations are investigated at the same point in time (see Meyerhoff, 2011, ch. 7). Apparent-time studies assume that speakers barely change their language after the critical period of childhood/early adolescence. Variation between different generations, as in the Smyth correspondence, can then reveal whether a feature has changed or not, or whether it is in the process of changing. Even though the Smyth letters stretch over several decades, I have primarily treated them as apparent-time data in the quantitative analysis. That is, they were not analyzed according to the points in time they were written, but rather compared two generations. However, the analysis of Mary's letters follows a real-time approach as the investigation looks at her use of *well* before (1891–1901), during (1901–1904), and after (1904–1908) her stay in Canada.

Migration can be seen as “a key extra-linguistic factor leading to externally-motivated change”, and different forms of migration can have varying effects on the migrants, their place of origin, or their place of destination (Kerswill, 2006, pp. 2271-2272). Mary and James Alexander Smyth can be labelled return migrants (Kerswill, 2006, p. 2275) as both of them eventually returned to Ireland. Return migration can have important implications for language use, maintenance, and change, potentially affecting the migrants themselves and their places of origin (p. 2276). It is therefore important to examine both family members who migrated and those who remained in the home country.

4. Findings

The following section examines the occurrences of *well* in the Smyth data both qualitatively (4.1) and quantitatively (4.2).

4.1. Qualitative Analysis

The D-PM *well* can have textual and interpersonal functions. On the textual level, it can function as a frame marker, e.g., when introducing a new topic (Jucker, 1997, p. 93). Example (1), for instance, illustrates a rather abrupt switch from the birth of a baby in the family to a party that Mary attended the previous night. The change is accompanied by a new paragraph in the original letter (here visualized by an extra blank space). These topic changes can also be partial (Svartvik, 1980, p. 174; Norrick, 2001, p. 855; Müller, 2005, pp.115-117) and shift back to a topic already discussed. In example (2), Mary details a concert in which the string of her instrument broke. Using *well*, she redirects the focus from the event to the rest of the concert, thereby closing the discourse and returning back to the main topic – the concert.¹ In the Smyth data, *well* with a closing function is further often used when literally closing the letter itself as in (3). Lutzky (2021, pp. 161-162) notes that this is used to “mitigate the conclusion of the letter, which would otherwise be rather abrupt”.

(1) Cass has got a young son on Tuesday 13th So as I never saw a young baby I thought I would come down and see this one. **Well** as I told Bella about the party last [night?] that I was invited to. I did go and enjoyed myself very well (Mary Smyth, 17 January 1902)

(2) It snapped so quick I jumped I don't know whether many noticed me or not it was pretty hot & my hands perspired so that the string was damp. **Well** after we got all cleared off we took

¹ *Well* here also indicates that Mary has taken a shortcut and information has been omitted in the narrative (see Lakoff, 1973, pp. 463-464).

seats down in the audience the front seats were not taken so we sat there till our next turn came. That Miss Huntley I wish you could hear her play she was loudly applauded but she didn't respond [...] (Mary Smyth, 10 June 1904)

(3) **Well** this is all at Present, Yours James A Smyth (21 September 1902)

In example (4), *well* signals that the next part is reported direct speech (Aijmer, 2013, p. 106). Whether *well* in such cases belongs to the reporting clause or the direct reported speech depends on prosody, which is not accessible in the letters. When the D-PM is part of the reporting clause, it functions as an approximator, indicating the “more-or-lessness” of the quotation (Jucker 1993, p. 446).

(4) I never heard a man as he done you could listen to him all day he said one Dr [doctor?] asked how they kept her without any bed [sores?] **well** he said we done our part and god done the rest (Eliza Catherine Smyth, 2 July 1904)

Schiffrin (1987, p. 123) states that speakers not only respond to other's talk, but also to their own statements as in (5), where *well* is used for self-correction. Mary here decides that her utterance of being “alone” is imprecise and needs editing. Svartvik (1980, p. 175) refers to this as claim editing. Although typically a feature of hedging in spoken discourse, self-correction seems the closest explanation to such examples in the Smyth data.

(5) Jim was there but I lost him [...] I was all alone and enjoyed it. **well** [for?] occasionally I saw one or two that I knew so I would stop and talk and then go on again (Mary Smyth, 14 June 1904)

In a letter to James Alexander (6), Eliza further uses *well* to introduce her reasons for not writing more, which helps her maintain her positive face wants after having been criticized by her

brother for not giving him enough news (which in itself can be seen as a threat to her negative face wants). *Well* thus functions as a reaction to the threat to her negative face wants and introduces what follows. This example again illustrates that these personal letters served as a form of asynchronous conversation.

(6) I forget what all I have to tell you as I intend giving you all kinds of news in future as you made a complaint in one letter that I did not give you enough **Well** I know I keep a lot from you that I think you would'nt bother reading so I'll change my way of writing (Eliza Catherine, 07 January 1904)

Examples (7) and (8) also illustrate ongoing, asynchronous exchanges between writer and reader in the Smyth data. In reply to his parents' question how he is managing his finances (7), James qualifies his answer with *well* before admitting that he has run out of money and providing an explanation for what he has spent it on. Qualifiers often indicate potential problems with the content of current or previous statements, particularly when adjacency pairs receive insufficient or dispreferred responses. This is specifically the case with *wh*-questions (Schiffrin 1987, 104-109).

(7) You ask me how my money is holding out, **well** I am just out I was waiting on your letter to write and tell you I dare say I have spent this in a hurry. I have bought some things and I took in a couple of concert (sic) [...] (James A. Smyth, 31 January 1899)

Example (8) presents an unusual instance of *well* as Mary presents a direct and informative answer to a question, thereby contradicting Lakoff's (1973, p. 458) finding that *well* is not possible in direct answers. Müller (2005, pp. 125-126) also found the use of *well* with direct answers in her German learner data and explains it with the above-mentioned use of *well* in

wh-questions, which allow for a broader set of responses than *yes/no*-questions (cf. also Aijmer, 2009, pp. 14-15).

(8) I think you asked me one time the name of Cass baby **Well** it is called Charles Alford Bennett (Charlie). I saw them all Sunday getting pretty big (Mary Smyth, 17 June 1903)

Example (9) refers back to a letter (as reflected in *I see*) which informed the family in Canada that John Charles had joined the Good Templars. Mary's use of *well* here introduces her opinion, which is basically positive, but incomplete. The reader would naturally expect an explanation of why this is *not so bad*. In (10), Mary expresses surprise and disapproval of the fact that her sister Eliza and (presumably) their mother work out in the fields in addition to their household duties. Some may argue that it is actually the phrase "I am surprised" rather than *well* that expresses bewilderment. However, Schourup (2001, pp. 1030-1031), referring to Bolinger (1989), states that in cases of surprise and disapproval, which usually is a one-word expression in oral conversations, context and intonation are significant for the interpretation. As the instance in (10) is an asynchronous conversation, Mary needs to establish the context for her surprise (*to hear of you being out tying the corn*) first. Instead of intonation, she expresses her surprise verbally (*I am surprised*) after introducing her statement with the discourse marker *well*.

(9) I see John C. [Charles?] has joined the Good Templars **well** its not so bad (Mary Smyth, 30 May 1902)

(10) I see by your letter that you are still busy at work. **Well** I am surprised to hear of you being out tying the corn I think you are foolish where there are five men I suppose if there were ten of them it would be the same thing. Now I think you two has got enough inside work to do alone going outside (Mary Smyth, 23 October 1903)

The Smyth data occasionally show collocations of *well* + a vocative as in (11) and (12). In example (11), *well* + vocative reflects both an attention-getting and a textual function (Jucker, 1997, p. 97). James Alexander first reminisces the Irish scenery before changing the topic to the Canadian school system (textual function) and encouraging John (interpersonal function) to enquire their sister about her thoughts on this matter. The topic change is accompanied by a new paragraph. Example (12) illustrates a change in addressee. The letter by James Alexander is addressed to his parents, and the beginning of the letter clearly addresses several people. He, furthermore, writes about the letter received by his brother John before addressing him directly. Lutzky (2012, p. 149) also found *well* + vocative to signal a change of addressee in some of her speech-like data.

(11) The scenery over there is beautiful, Say the first chance you get go up to Belfast, then you will see a city, **Well John** ask Mary what she thinks of our school system. I'll bet she thinks she never learned anything in Castledamph N.S. [National School?] and we did not learn much (James Alexander Smyth, 4 February 1902)

(12) In looking over the letter I got from you people since I last wrote I [meet?] one from John [just?] - so I will give him the first of my knowledge.- **Well John** I notice a marked improvement in your writing (James Alexander Smyth, 4 April 1897)

In addition to *well* + vocative, the Smyth letters also show instances of *well* + *now*. Example (13) presents an instance of *well* + the temporal adverb *now*, whereas (14) illustrates a collocation with the discourse marker *now*, which serves a discourse structuring function (cf. Lutzky, 2012, p. 153) by closing the topic.

(13) I said in my last one we would send You Some more money for a suit of cloathes [clothes?] **well now** we will try and keep to our word so I now send you five pounds (John James Smyth, 18 November 1897)

(14) He is one of those horses that when he takes a notion to go you might as well let him he has got to [too?] little to do, Ill make a fine jockey yet I can hold him very well. **Will now** this is a long story over nothing (Mary Smyth, 13 January 1902)

Example (15) illustrates a function of *well* that is more challenging to explain. John James writes about farming business and selling livestock at the nearby (Gortin) fair. His use of *well* does not align with the functions described above. Instead of changing the topic or coming back to the main topic, John James rather continues his narrative. The use of *well* to indicate a continuation has been discussed in the literature for oral discourse (e.g., Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Schourup, 2001), but usually in turn-taking contexts. Müller (2005, p. 130-131) found the use of *well* among German speakers of English to continue expressing their opinion or an answer to a question. Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 269) state that with a continuation by the same speaker, *well* serves as an explanatory comment. This is not the case here as John James adds new information, which aligns with many of the continuative uses in the Smyth data. Schourup (2001, p. 1043) notes that *well* can have both retrospective and prospective qualities, which becomes clear in this example. The sentence introduced by *well* adds further information on people already mentioned in the immediately preceding context.

(15) they Sold the remender [remainder?] of the sheep in Gortin fair that is what they had to spear [spend?] they got 15s 6d per head But they had to take a note for the money John Hugh Brine [Brien?] got them they have all the others with him but the lambs **well** I must tell you that he Bought a trap in gortin fairday at £11[...] (John James Smyth, 20 November 1895)

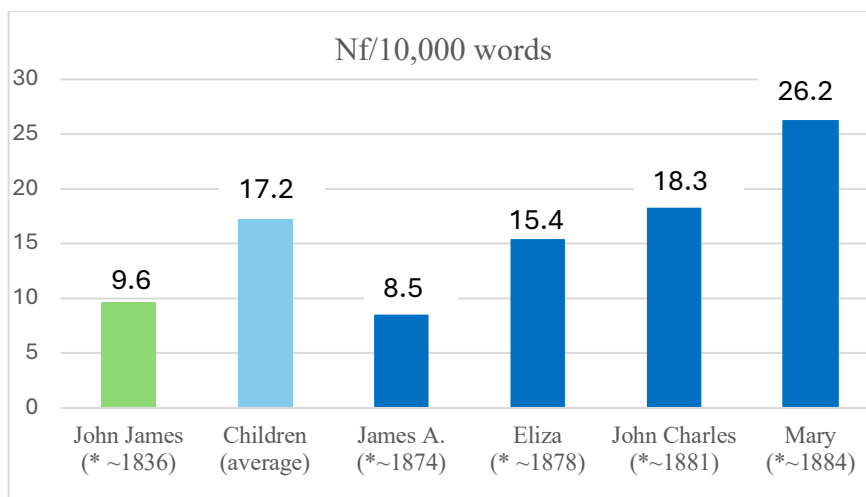
Summing up, this section has identified functions of *well* characteristic of oral discourse in the letters of the Smyth family. The following section presents how this D-PM is distributed quantitatively among the individual letter writers.

4.2. Quantitative Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates that the Smyth children on average use *well* more frequently ($Nf=17.2$) than their father ($Nf=9.6$). Looking at the letter writers individually further indicates an increase in line with age, whereby James Alexander ($Nf=8.5$) starts out at just below the level of his father. The difference is most obvious between James Alexander (oldest) and Mary (youngest), the two siblings who migrated to Canada. Mary uses 17.7 more instances of *well*/10,000 words than her brother.

FIGURE 1

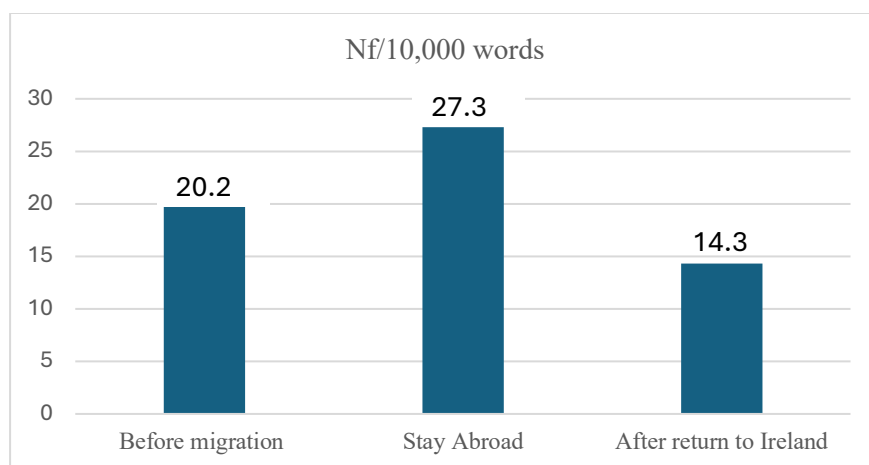
Use of Discourse Marker Well/Letter Writer



Mary migrated to Ontario, Canada between 1901 and 1904. Her letters yielded 202 occurrences of the D-PM *well*. When breaking these down into pre (1891–1901), in-between (1901–1904) and post migration (1904–1908), we see that her use of *well* increases during her stay in Canada from 20.2 to 27.3/10,000 words but falls to a level closer to Eliza ($Nf=15.4$) after her return to Ireland ($Nf=14.3$).

FIGURE 2

Use of Well According to Migration Status (Mary)



Looking more closely at the functions of *well* (Table 1) reveals that the majority (N=182) of Mary’s occurrences are structural in nature – across all three periods. What is most interesting, however, is the appearance of interpersonal uses of this D-PM during Mary’s stay in Canada and thereafter (*Nf*=2.7 during migration and *Nf*=3.2 after migration). These interpersonal uses include expressing her opinions or attitudes, *well* prefacing a direct answer, *well* as a face-threat mitigator, and *well* + vocative to get attention.

TABLE 1

Functions of Well in Mary’s letters

Function	Before migration	Stay Abroad	After migration
	(5449 words) N	(66082 words) N	(6288 words) N
<i>Structural</i>			
(Partial) topic changes	6	90	4
Introducing and closing discourse	3	46	1
Continuative function	2	13	2
Self-correction/ <i>well</i> + <i>now</i> / <i>well</i> +vocative (structural)	0	15	0
<i>Interpersonal</i>			
Opinion/face-threat mitigator/emotion or attitude/direct answer	0	17	2
<i>Well</i> +vocative (attention-getting)	0	1	0
<i>Sum (total)</i>	11	182	9

The results presented here demonstrate various functions of *well* in the Smyth family's letters, and the following section will turn to their broader implications.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This investigation set out to study the discourse marker *well* in the Smyth family letters, examining its functions in written correspondence across different generations and migration statuses. The qualitative analysis found multiple functions commonly associated with oral discourse, both on the textual and interpersonal levels. Interestingly, interpersonal uses occurred in contexts where the letter writer simulated or recalled conversations, e.g., by referring back to previous letters (examples (6) – (10)), or when addressing the reader directly as in (11) and (12). Personal letters have long been considered as relatively close to speech, and this study confirms that they embody a level of informality and oral quality that resembles spoken communication.

The quantitative analysis indicates a change to a more frequent use of the discourse marker *well* in the letters of the Smyth family. Looking at apparent-time changes revealed a slight increase from the father to the children, with Mary using this feature most often. Further investigating Mary's use of *well* from a real-time perspective revealed that she only used this D-PM more frequently while in Canada. After her return to Ireland, her use of *well* resembles that of her sister Eliza. Mary frequently uses *well* for textual purposes, particularly topic changes as in (1) and (2). Finell (1992, p. 731) found that topic changers in personal letters can be used as hedging devices, softening the topic change and making it appear less abrupt. The use of *well* would have allowed Mary to include a lot of information from a surely exciting time while simultaneously structuring her letter and addressing questions from her family at home. What is more interesting, however, is her use of *well* with interpersonal functions. Svartvik (1980, p. 176) points to the use of *well* to maintain social relationships, and O'Sullivan

(2022, p. 151) found that *well* in Irish radio advertisements was used to introduce solidarity and camaraderie. Similarly, Amador-Moreno (2019, p. 199) found that some D-PMs in emigrant letters in CORIECOR helped signal shared cultural background and maintain social solidarity between correspondents. The use of *well* in Mary's letters aligns with these findings, as she began utilizing interpersonal functions after moving abroad, a period during which she had a greater need to maintain social relationships and solidarity with those at home. Still, she maintained this function after her return (see Kerswill, 2006 for return migrants).

This study adds to our understanding of personal communication in written formats, particularly in relation to the D-PM *well*. However, it acknowledges limitations related to the relatively small and specific sample of personal letters investigated, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, it supports previous research on the orality of personal and emigrant letters. Regarding the D-PM *well*, future research should expand this work by quantitatively investigating the different functions identified across the different letter writers, which was beyond the scope of this paper.

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