

Well-prefaced constructed dialogue as a marker of stance in online abortion discourse

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This paper offers an analysis of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue as a stance-taking resource in written discourse on abortion. Drawing from four corpora collected from editorials, blogs, Twitter, and Reddit, I demonstrate that writers use the discourse marker *well* to indicate a stance of disalignment and convey negative attitudinal information when there is tension between the writer's beliefs and those expressed in the constructed dialogue; the discourse marker allows the writer to position and align themselves to construct a specific identity that reinforces a positive-self, negative-other evaluation.

Keywords: constructed dialogue, stance, *well*, discourse markers, abortion discourse, reported speech, reported thought

1. Introduction

Constructed dialogue is a rich interactional resource that allows speakers to report on what others have said as well as to indicate their personal positioning relative to the thoughts and words of the individual they are quoting. The term constructed dialogue refers broadly to the reporting of real, internal, or imagined speech or thought (Tannen 1989), and can be used to represent dialogue that was never actually stated as well as to express generalizations. As such, it operates on somewhat of a continuum, with verbatim quotation, which requires that the words in the constructed dialogue were actually spoken and that the surface syntactic structure of the original quote be preserved (Clark and Gerrig 1990), on one end, and cases where a speaker reports on dialogue that was never actually spoken (Tannen 1989) on the other end. The range of utterances that can be considered constructed dialogue are shown in Examples (1) and (2). The example in (1) illustrates an instance of verbatim reproduction, with the original utterance shown in

(1a). Examples (1b), (1c), and (1d) illustrate the multiple ways that the same utterance could be reported using verbatim direct quotes.

- (1) a. I've only been...we've only been to like...four of his I...five of his lectures, right?
 b. Sidney says, "I...I've only been...we've only been to like...four of his I...five of his lectures, right?"
 c. Sidney says, "We've only been to, like, five of his lectures, right?"
 d. Sidney says, "We have only been to five of his lectures."
 (Clark and Gerrig 1990, 175)
- (2) You can't say, "Well Daddy I didn't HEAR you." (Tannen 1989, 113)

Example (1) shows different ways that the same utterance could be reported using verbatim reproduction. The original utterance is completely preserved in (1b), including the pauses and the use of the discourse marker *like*. In (1c), the pauses have been removed, but the discourse marker usage is retained and the syntax remains the same as in the original utterance. The example from (1d) differs the most from the original utterance in that the pauses and the discourse marker have been removed, as well as the contraction *we've*. Since the speaker in (1d), from Clark and Gerrig (1990), has not added any of their own words and has preserved the overall syntactic structure of an utterance that was actually said, this is still an instance of verbatim quoting. In Example (2), on the other hand, since the speaker is explicitly reporting on something that was never truly said, this cannot be an instance of the speaker directly repeating what they were told. Indeed, this ability to use constructed dialogue to report something that the speaker was not actually told is not surprising, as Tannen (1989), Streeck and Knapp (1992), and Niemela (2011) all note that the accuracy and veracity of the relationship between the original event and the constructed dialogue can vary. The example in (2) also includes the discourse marker *well* in the left periphery of the constructed dialogue. It is this particular category of use of *well* that I focus on in the present paper, demonstrating that *well* is used as an indicator of affective stance (Ochs 1993) in online abortion discourse.

In this study, I propose a previously undiscussed discourse function for *well* in showing that *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue are used as a stance marker to indicate disalignment. I further demonstrate that the considerations that go into the use of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue are nuanced and multifaceted, as there is a split between the ways that writers use reported thought and reported speech; specifically, reported thought is used to create distance between the writer's current beliefs and a position they previously held, while reported speech is used to distance the writer from the position of others. Within the larger discussion of stance-taking, I also demonstrate that the particular kinds of subjects

of evaluation differ depending on whether the discourse context is monologic or dialogic in nature.

2. Discourse marker *well* in constructed dialogue

Well is among the most widely studied discourse markers in English, and, as a result, it has a wide range of attested discourse functions. Broadly speaking, *well* helps to establish coherence between the speaker and the hearer's expectations (Schiffrin 1987), though the exact mechanism by which it accomplishes this varies. In some cases, the discourse marker has been noted to mark insufficiency (Lakoff 1973; Svartvik 1980; Carlson 1984) where prefacing a response with *well* signals that the speaker's response is insufficient or may leave the hearer in the position of having to fill in details. In other cases, *well* acts as a face-threat mitigator (Owen 1981; Jucker 1993, 1997) and signals that a face-threatening act is about to occur. Other authors have discussed *well* as a frame (Svartvik 1980; Carlson 1984; Jucker 1993, 1997) and as a qualifier (Svartvik 1980; Carlson 1984; Jucker 1993, 1997). From a more conversation analytic perspective, it has also been noted to indicate departure (Svartvik 1980; Carlson 1984; Schourup 1985/2016; Heritage 2015), "resuming" (Kim 2011, 2013), as well as topic shift and closure (Heritage 2015). Though these are all different discourse functions, with some, like framing, being more textually oriented and others, like face-threat mitigation, being more interpersonal, they all arise from a common feature of *well*. Heritage (2015) notes that "there is clear evidence that turn-initial objects like *well* are primarily addressed to the relationship between a prior and a current turn" (88). Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2003) make a similar observation that the use of *well* indicates the speaker's awareness of a discrepancy between a prior and current utterance, though their account proposes an understanding of *well* as serving a modal function. These conceptions are not out of line with previous attempts to produce a unified account of *well*'s discourse functions, as Jucker (1993) notes that "*well* signals that the context created by an utterance may not be the most relevant one for the interpretation of the next utterance" (450). Taken as a whole, it is clear that the particularities of the various discourse functions arise from the common purpose of resolving discrepancies between clauses, whether within a single speaker's turn or between turns. Though it has not been previously attested, the stance-taking function of *well* in constructed dialogue that this paper proposes is a further natural extension of this shared property, as it indicates and draws attention to the difference between a backgrounded stance of neutrality and a constructed stance of disalignment.

The fact that discourse markers are often used in constructed dialogue has also been widely studied. *Well*, in particular, has been noted to act as an indicator of the beginning of reported thought (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018) or to contextualize the beginning of a quote (Mathis 1991; Schourup 1985/2016). In this capacity, *well* allows speakers to clearly delineate their thoughts and words from those of the individual they are quoting; other perspectives suggest that, while *well* indicates the initial boundary of the constructed dialogue, it can also be used to anchor the constructed dialogue to a previous utterance (Holt 1996), especially when the reported speech was a dispreferred second (Pomerantz 1984). Saxton (1992), on the other hand, builds on Lakoff's (1973) analysis that *well* is a marker of insufficiency by arguing that the discourse marker is used to preface constructed dialogue when the reported speech is felt to be insufficient in some way.

More recent research has sought to address how discourse markers fit into the identity construction potential of constructed dialogue. Trester (2009) notes that discourse markers are a known identity construction strategy and tracks the function of *oh* in the left periphery position in constructed dialogue. In this position, illustrated in Example (3) from the corpora collected for the present study, *oh* not only introduces the quoted dialogue, but additionally serves an evaluative function. In this capacity, it articulates the speaker's position with respect to the contents of the constructed dialogue.

- (3) I agree with your overall premise, but actually watching this as an impressionable teen, the thing that struck me is that abortion came across as filthy butchery, regardless of its legality. Perhaps it was the use of the word "knife" but I certainly don't think "*oh* if only she'd had access to safe abortion," I just thought the whole situation was grubby & depressing & highlighted the dangers of sex. [Blog: *That the Bones* 2012]

Trester further demonstrates that *oh* is used to convey negative attitudinal information, particularly when there is tension between the speaker's beliefs and those expressed in the constructed dialogue. In these instances, "*oh* helps the speaker use constructed dialogue to position himself (relative to the quoted material) and align himself (to others in the interaction) to accomplish a specific identity" (Trester 2009, 163–164). *Oh* is not, however, the only discourse marker that appears in the left periphery of constructed dialogue. As illustrated in (4), *well* is also commonly used to introduce quoted material.

- (4) Now, I could fight my conscience (God given moral compass) and think "*well* he/she's not moving, can't respond to anything, useless, cost a lot of money and heartache to the family...just unplug him/her. It's the "humane" way to go about my day" then do my best to justify my thinking or actions by collecting

partial or incorrect data to support my claims or I could just listen to my conscience saying “find the truthful facts and don’t spin them”.

[Blog: *Honest Search for Truth* 2012]

In this example, the author expresses their negative orientation toward what they view as a callous attitude toward ending medical intervention and life-sustaining treatment. To do so, they present a hypothetical argument which they state as the opposite of what their conscience would advise. This particular use of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is similar, though not identical given that *well* lacks the information display features of *oh* (Schiffrin 1987), to the function of *oh* outlined above. I argue that in written discourse on abortion, *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue does not index insufficiency (Saxton 1992) or anchor the constructed dialogue to a previous utterance (Holt 1996), but, instead, serves an interactional stance-taking function where it acts as an alignment marker (Du Bois 2007).

3. Stance framework

Stance is perhaps best conceived of as an interactional process (Ochs and Schieffelin 1983; Du Bois 2007) wherein speakers linguistically mark their “attitudes, feelings, judgements, or commitment concerning the message” (Biber and Finegan 1988, 1). When one person takes a stance and expresses their judgment or evaluation on a conversationally salient topic or issue, it invites others to do the same, creating an ongoing process of stance-taking (Sakita 2013). In doing so, we create relationships between speakers and other discursive figures (Du Bois 2007). As such, stance and stance-taking are closely tied to other interactional and participatory frameworks. Goffman’s (1981) theory of footing, in particular, seeks to understand the roles that conversational participants inhabit and the ways that different roles orient toward one another. As Kockelman (2004) points out, however, Goffman’s theory of footing does not necessarily account for these interactional roles as actions; further, it leaves the specific role that language plays in footing vague (Levinson 1988; Wortham 1994, 1996; Chaemsaithong 2012). Stance, on the other hand, allows for the study of the semiotic resources that are linguistic stance-markers and the ways in which they help to make micro-macro connections in the “locally realized public act” of stance-taking (Noy and Hamo 2019, 287).

It is this understanding of stance as an interactional process that informs the idea of stance as a strategy for evaluative positioning; in positing a system for stance, Du Bois (2007) suggests that the act of stance-taking takes place within the

framework of the stance triangle. That is, there are three central components of a stance act: evaluation, positioning, and alignment. Further, each stance act has three key entities that represent the nodes of the triangle: the first subject, the second subject, and the stance object. These pieces all come together into a stance act when the first subject evaluates a stance object, positions themselves with relation to the stance object, and invites the possibility of alignment with the second subject, if present, who also evaluates the object. This relationship is illustrated in Example (5) from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), where the first subject, A, positively evaluates the stance object of the band.

(5) **A:** They're my dudes. My new favorite band.

B: Mine too

(COCA 2019)

In this case, speaker A provides a positive evaluation of the band, stating that they are his favorite, positions himself on an affective scale of *liking*, and leaves room for the second subject, B, to evaluate the band. Speaker B similarly produces a positive evaluation, putting themselves in alignment with A.

Subjects do not have to agree in their evaluation, however. The alignment between the first and second subjects can be convergent or divergent, depending on whether they are in agreement in their evaluation and positioning with respect to the stance object. The conversation presented in (6) illustrates a divergent stance, with the second subject disagreeing with the first subject's evaluation.

(6) **Rocca:** No, I mean, I've got some muscles.

Costa: I don't think so.

Rocca: No, I really do.

(COCA 2011)

Regardless of whether both stance subjects are present in a conversation or whether a stance act is organized around only one subject evaluating an object, the subject has the ability to distance themselves from objects they have evaluated negatively or to position themselves as being in line with objects to which they have granted a positive evaluation. In the following sections, I use Du Bois's (2007) theory of stance as a framework to demonstrate that writers use *well* in the left periphery in constructed dialogue to distance themselves from statements and positions that they disagree with or that they find objectionable.

4. Methods

4.1 Data and corpus collection

Discourse on abortion tends to be both highly personal and highly adversarial or agonistic in nature; for many, the stakes behind abortion access are perceived as a matter of life and death rather than a debate on policy (Goi 2005). As a result, it is an interactional context where evaluative positioning frequently occurs and where ideologically situated identities are negotiated, both within larger narrative contexts and in shorter, direct responses. These evaluative positions and identities are complex and multi-faceted, involving alignment with an individual's own personal experiences, the personal experiences of others, as well as the beliefs and positions of larger ideological groupings. For instance, an individual may identify as personally pro-life but politically pro-choice, which requires them to position themselves relative to multiple other stances. These considerations make abortion discourse a rich context for examining the stance function of *well* in constructed dialogue, though I predict similar patterns of use would arise in other agonistic contexts.

The examples in this study come from four corpora composed of data collected from Reddit, Twitter, blogs, and editorials, respectively, that were written in the five-year period between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2017. Examining written discourse allows for a focus on the stance-taking function of *well* in constructed dialogue without the complicating factors of prosodic stance cues in constructed dialogue (Niemela 2011) that accompany spoken discourse. Reddit and Twitter were chosen as the focus of two of these corpora due to their social influence as well as the discursive nature of both platforms in allowing users to respond to one another, and Reddit, in particular, has been found to have distinct patterns of language use for more specialized communities (Zhang et al. 2017).

To that end, I have gathered a dataset containing examples of discussion about abortion. Data from Reddit were collected using RStudio, with the assistance of the `RedditExtractoR 2.0.2` script package (Rivera 2015) designed specifically for scraping data from the platform. Twitter data was similarly collected using a web scraping script package, though in this corpus I relied on the Python code `TwitterScraper` (Taspinar 2016). Data from editorials was collected using the Nexis Uni newspaper database, while, due to the fact that there is not a centralized database of blogs, blog data was collected using Google's advanced search interface to locate sites that were either dedicated to posting about abortion or that featured individual onetime posts on the topic. In total, each individual corpus contained around 200,000 words, with 709 being instances of *well* and a total of 218 examples of *well* used as a discourse marker.

4.2 Identifying constructed dialogue

From the 218 instances of discourse marker *well* across the corpora, I identified 40 cases where *well* was used to introduce constructed dialogue. These instances were located using the lemma and headword search functions of AntConc (Anthony 2018) and #LancsBox (Brezina et al. 2015; Brezina et al. in prep), focusing on common quotative verbs such as *say* (Blythe et al. 1990; Buchstaller 2006), *go* (Butters 1980), *be + like* (Cukor-Avila 2002; Dailey-O’Caine 2000; Hesson and Shellgren 2015; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2004), and *all* (Waksler 2001; Buchstaller et al. 2010) as well as cognitive verbs such as *think* or *wonder*.

This dataset was further narrowed down by removing data points where the quoted information included an instance of discourse marker *well* that was definitively spoken by the quoted speaker rather than having been added by the writer. In these cases, since the discourse marker did not originate with the writer, but rather with the quoted speaker, it cannot be said to reflect the writer’s stance. These examples come largely from cases of people responding in real time to quotes from recorded or televised interviews as well as from editorial writers including quotes from the subject of their editorial. In total, after the quotes where the use of *well* could be determined not to have originated with the writer were removed from the dataset, I was left with 40 instances of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue.¹

5. Stance-taking with *well* in constructed dialogue

Well works to not only display information in allowing the writer to shift their footing (Goffman 1981) into a different voice, but also to evaluate information. Similar to the evaluative function of *oh* outlined by Schiffrin (1987) and Trester (2009), *well* “makes accessible speaker/hearer [writer/reader] assumptions about each other’s subjective orientations toward information ... [which allows it to] dis-

1. The removed examples include those contained in (a)–(c)

- (a) “Well, people in certain parts of the Republican party and conservative Republicans would say yes, they should be punished,” the candidate replied.
[Editorial: *New York Times* 2016]
- (b) Before legal abortion, women and girls’ lives were limited.
“Well, Donald: Those days are over.” #ShesWithUs [Twitter 2016]
- (c) “Some women won’t be able to get abortions.”
“Well, they’ll have to go to another state.”
#NOGODNONONONONO #60Minutes [Twitter 2016]

play speaker/hearer alignments toward each other” (Schiffrin 1987, 100). In the case of *well*, when writers use *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue to signal their awareness of different positions or perspectives on abortion, they simultaneously signal their evaluation of those positions and perspectives. This function of *well* is similar to the evaluative stance and alignment functions of discourse markers such as *now* (Aijmer 2002) and *I mean* (Maynard 2013), as well as *hao* and *dui* in Taiwan Mandarin (Wang et al. 2010).

As indicated in Table 1, below, *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue most frequently expresses reported speech where the dialogue represents the position taken by someone other than the writer. Of the 40 total instances, 25 show constructed dialogue clearly presented as speech, and in all of these instances, the reported speech represents Other. There are no instances within the dataset of constructed dialogue as speech representing the writer’s own opinion. Instead, when the writer chooses to represent themselves using constructed dialogue, the dialogue is presented as reported thought. There are seven examples of constructed dialogue as thought representing the Self within the dataset.

Table 1. *Well*-prefaced constructed dialogue (CD) as reported speech and reported thought

	CD as Self	CD as Other
CD as thought	7	–
CD as speech	–	25
Unclear	–	8
Total	7	33

There are an additional eight examples where it is unclear whether the constructed dialogue is intended to be presented as speech or as thought. These are generally the instances that lack any quotative verb that could be used to recover the writer’s intention; because it is equally plausible for the constructed dialogue in these instances to represent speech or thought, they were excluded from further analysis.²

2. For reference, the example below shows one such example of ambiguous constructed dialogue:

- (d) Also, I take issue with your characterization of people who believe in “choice,” for lack of a better word. I certainly wouldn’t equate a fetus to a tumor (though, if we’re going to get scientific, I feel differently about very early termination). It can be utterly devastating for a woman to have to make a choice between her own bodily autonomy and health, and the potentiality of a developing human. It’s not fair to brush that off as, *well* some women just want a “simple solution.” [Reddit: /r/TwoXChromosomes 2017]

Whether *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is presented as reported speech or as reported thought, it is used as a distancing technique in written abortion discourse. Given the controversial nature of the topic, it is not surprising that writers would engage with linguistic strategies to distance themselves from positions that they disagree with, and to evaluatively construct their own identities. These are the kinds of constructions that I focus on in the remainder of this study, and, in particular, the differences that exist in the kinds of stances that are enacted through constructed dialogue with reported thought and reported speech. In the next section, I focus specifically on the ways in which writers use reported thought to distance their own, currently held beliefs, from previous positions they may have held.

5.1 Constructed dialogue as reported thought: Disalignment with self

Constructed dialogue is often used to express internal thought. Within written abortion discourse, it is notably used to signal a shift in the beliefs or understandings of the writer themselves rather than to indicate a positioning with respect to the thoughts of others, with *well* occurring in the left periphery of the quote. In this capacity, *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is a marker of negatively-evaluated stance because the writers use *well* to introduce their previous ways of thinking, and go on to explain why they no longer hold these same positions; they mark themselves as being in disalignment with the reported position. Consider the example in (7), where the writer contrasts their initial belief that the original author of a Reddit post's grandmother was irresponsible for her experience with abortion with their perspective after having read the post.

- (7) Though I am pro choice, not gonna lie; my first thought was '*well* that's irresponsible' and I didn't expect to sympathize with your grandmother. I'm glad you shared her story. This is a good example of not judging until you walk a mile in someone else's shoes. She has reason to be proud. And I'd be proud to have such a strong grandmother. [Reddit: /r/TwoXChromosomes 2017]

In this case, *well* can only reflect the Reddit poster's own evaluative stance because they use the constructed dialogue to report their initial thoughts upon reading the post. This example also differs from more traditional understandings of *well* as a marker of a dispreferred second (Jucker 1993; Lerner 1996; Tanaka 2008) because the entire example is written to represent a consistent writer's voice. As a result, the *well* that comes halfway through the turn cannot be interpreted as a hedge or delay that marks a dispreferred second.

The positional shift in thought is most noticeable in (8). The discourse marker *well* plays a similar role as the marker in (7), allowing the writer to distance them-

self from their initial reaction. The writer starts out explaining what their initial thoughts were prior to reading the post; the constructed dialogue represents their preconceptions about abortions performed after 20 weeks gestation, namely that they have a prior negative evaluation of people who get abortions at that point.

- (8) Well i [sic] came into this post thinking (Well you know what, if you still haven't aborted by 20 weeks, than [sic] you should have to keep the baby you dumb indecisive idiot), but you really changed my mind.

[Reddit: /r/TwoXChromosomes 2016]

They go on to specifically note that having read the post changed their opinion, making the shift in stance overt by commenting to the author of the post that *you really changed my mind*. If we focus just on the semantic, or propositional, content of the constructed dialogue, there is nothing to indicate how the commenter feels about their previously held stance. The attitudinal information which creates distance between the writer and the content of the constructed dialogue comes from the addition of *well* as a stance-marker within the larger stance-event. The constructed dialogue itself marks the writer's stance toward individuals who have abortions past a certain point, and *well* marks the same writer's stance-reversal and interest in illustrating that they have moved beyond that opinion. It should be noted that the example in (8) also begins with *well*. In this case, the first *well* that comes at the beginning of the comment acts as a hedge as part of the discourse marker's face-threat mitigating function (Jucker 1997). The hedge helps to lessen the intensity of the writer's initial, strongly negative assumptions as they are presented in the comment; in this capacity, the two instances of *well* work together to signal the writer's change in stance and more fully distance them from the previous, negatively-evaluated stance. In each of the above instances, the writers use constructed dialogue with *well* to show the growth and progression of their personal ideas, and to signal their negative evaluation of their previous thoughts. In doing so, they position themselves as having placed distance between their current voice and the voice that represents their earlier thought patterns and beliefs.

Well-prefaced constructed dialogue is also used to illustrate the conflict between two opposing directions of thought. It is worth noting that, although the choice to include *well* to mark the shift into constructed dialogue may seem frivolous or insignificant, Example (9), repeated from (4) above, illustrates the choice to include the discourse marker does matter with respect to the writer's self-alignment. In the first instance of constructed dialogue in (9), where the writer distances herself from the content of the constructed voice's message by stating *well he/she's not moving, can't respond to anything, useless...*, in a secondary instance of constructed dialogue within the same conversational turn, the writer

forgoes the discourse marker, moving straight to the reported thought with *find the truthful facts*.

- (9) Now, I could fight my conscience (God given moral compass) and think “well he/she’s not moving, can’t respond to anything, useless, cost a lot of money and heartache to the family...just unplug him/her. It’s the “humane” way to go about my day” then do my best to justify my thinking or actions by collecting partial or incorrect data to support my claims or I could just listen to my conscience saying “find the truthful facts and don’t spin them”.

[Blog: *Honest Search for Truth* 2012]

This is an interesting and important contrast to note, because when the writer wants to position themselves as taking a stance that reflects their core beliefs, those in line with their conscience, they do not use a discourse marker. When that same speaker wants to create an understanding that their stance is not in line with the reported thought, however, they do preface the quote with *well*. A similar strategy is seen in (10); although the particular opinion expressed by the writer in the constructed dialogue may be controversial within their ideological group, it is stated as a position that they recognize as being an important and useful strategy to consider. Rather than seeking to distance themselves from the position, they, in fact, encourage others to adopt the same position, even going so far as to use the plural *we* to extend the stance to others.

- (10) Instead of jumping to religious doctrine and methods maybe we should pause and think “Is forcing my religious views on someone going to help the cause for life?” If so, then great preach away! But if the person you’re trying to reach with a prolife message is overran with religious messages instead they will be far less likely to be open to anything you have to say about abortion.

[Blog: *ProLifeWife* 2017]

Since the writer makes no attempt to distance themselves from the thoughts represented in the constructed dialogue, there is no need to use *well* as a prefacing stance-marker. Within the larger context of discourse on abortion, however, much of the evaluative positioning is between multiple individuals rather than between one individual’s internal course of thoughts. In the next section, I turn to an analysis of stance-taking to create disalignment between multiple individuals through the use of reported speech.

5.2 Constructed dialogue as reported speech: Disalignment with others

Writers engaging in public discourse on abortion also make use of discourse marker *well* to distance themselves from the stated and assumed positions of oth-

ers with whom they do not agree. Rather than using reported thought, as indicated by the use of a cognitive verb, writers who utilize constructed dialogue to distance themselves from others do so by reporting speech, indicated by the use of quotative verbs. One such function of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is to mark how absurd the writer finds the position espoused by the other side of the ideological divide. This is the case in (11); the Twitter user marks the beginning of the speech of a hypothetical abortion supporter, with whom the rest of their dialogue makes clear they do not agree, with *well*. Their response to the hypothetical conversation, though, has no such discourse marker use.

- (11) Abortion supporter: “**Well**, since you are so against abortion, I hope you have adopted kids.” Me: “I have.” [Twitter 2015]

The writer’s use of *well* here introduces a perspective they wish to position themselves in opposition to, and marks the hypothetical abortion supporter’s words as condescending. In contrast, the writer of the tweet marks themselves as being in a higher moral position.

As reported speech, *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is also used to highlight what the writer views as the absurdity of the ideological positions that they, themselves, do not ascribe to. This is the case in Example (12), where the Twitter user uses constructed dialogue to illustrate that they do not believe that abortion is related to healthcare.

- (12) If health & abortion rights are synonymous, they can be used interchangeably. Tell grandma, “**Well**, at least you have your abortion rights.” [Twitter 2013]

From the beginning of the tweet – the assertion that *if health & abortion rights are synonymous, they can be used interchangeably* – it is not clear whether the writer of the tweet identifies with this position or believes it is something to be mocked. Similarly, the propositional content of the constructed dialogue, that a woman has the right to have an abortion, is not particularly clear with respect to the writer’s position. Instead, it is the attitudinal stance information offered by the addition of *well* that makes it clear that the stated position is one that the writer finds absurd and worthy of ridicule, though the writer’s choice of the phrase *tell grandma* contributes to the sense that they find the position worthy of ridicule.

Similarly, *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue can be combined with other, more overt stance-markers such as adverbs (Biber et al. 1999; Conrad and Biber 1999) to emphasize a writer’s negative evaluation of the stance within the constructed dialogue. This is the case in (13), where the writer distances themselves from what they view as the doctor’s callousness by prefacing the doctor’s reported words with *well*. This stance-marker combines with the earlier description of the doctor’s attitude as *chillingly disturbing* to create a strongly negative evaluation.

- (13) My parents told me that this doctor calmly (which made this conversation even more chillingly disturbing the casual way ending my life was insisted upon) told them that they must have an abortion because their child would have no “quality of life.” My mom said, “Our child will have quality of life because this baby will know the unconditional love of God.” The doctor went on to say, “Well, you will have many other children.” [Blog: *Save the 1* 2017]

Each of the previous examples showed how *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is used to distance oneself from broader ideological positions. It is also used, however, to create more subtle distinctions among individuals who share larger ideological beliefs. For instance, it is used by both pro-life and pro-choice individuals not to criticize the other side of the debate, but to point out and distance themselves from what they see as harmful rhetoric within their own groups. This is the case for the examples in (14)–(16). In (14), the Twitter user uses *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue as a critique of perceived complacency among those who want to see abortion access be protected.

- (14) They keep saying... “well the abortion ban has been in the platform for years, so Pfft. But guess what folks... they are implementing it. [Twitter 2012]

The underlying argument here seems to be that many who identify as pro-choice have accepted the fact that pro-life lawmakers have included abortion bans in their political platforms for years, but since those bans have not been enacted, many have viewed there as being little cause for concern. The author of the tweet, then, uses constructed dialogue to set up the idea that this is a sentiment they believe is held by other pro-choice individuals and that they could feasibly imagine someone saying. They further use *well* to frame the contents following the discourse marker as a position they do not align with and do not think others who identify as pro-choice should align with, either. Though they hold the same core ideological beliefs, the writer in (14) uses *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue as a stance-taking strategy to set themselves apart as belonging to a smaller sub-group of more aware or concerned individuals within the larger pro-choice identity.

Example (15) shows a similar pattern, but illustrates that *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue is a linguistic strategy that is used by people who identify as pro-life as well. In the blog where this example originates, the author specifically addresses what they see as an area where the pro-life community’s attempts to define in what circumstances abortion should be allowable come from inherent sexism. They use constructed dialogue to illustrate the perceived implication behind arguing for exemptions for method of conception in legislation limiting abortion access, and to show how the message comes across as condescending to women.

- (15) But offering exceptions based on mode of conception is sexist, honestly. It's saying "Well, you poor innocent woman, you shouldn't have to be further victimized by carrying this baby because it wasn't your fault. But as for the rest of you sluts, you play, you pay." [Blog: *Life in Every Limb* 2012]

The author of the blog uses overt stance-markers in making this statement, such as the adverb *honestly* to note their sincere belief that sexism is at issue, to directly articulate their negative orientation toward the condescending attitude. *Well* adds another layer to this stance event, with the explicit voicing of the underlying message behind telling women that abortion is acceptable but only under certain circumstances being prefaced with the discourse marker. In making this additional discursive move, the writer signals that this is not a position with which they wish to be aligned, even though it comes from people who share the same broader beliefs. They thus create a pro-life identity for themselves that marks them as distinct from the more mainstream pro-life ideology without fully distancing themselves as a wholly unrelated identity.

As (16) shows, this strategy is also used by pro-choice individuals to point out harmful arguments in the larger pro-choice rhetoric. In this case, however, the Twitter user does not draw a sharp distinction between themselves and other pro-choice individuals. Instead, by using the plural pronoun *we*, they include themselves in the criticism, while still making clear that the argument presented in (16) is one that they have a negative stance toward and do not want to be aligned with.

- (16) 'Well *I* could never have an abortion, but I support a woman's right to choose.' Can we not say this anymore, please? You don't know. [Twitter 2012]

The stance event here begins with the presentation of constructed dialogue, where the writer shifts into the voice of someone who is politically pro-choice but who wants to signal that they are someone who would not personally have an abortion. Immediately following the constructed quote is a request that this stop being a sentiment that pro-choice individuals express, explicitly spelling out the writer's negatively evaluative stance and desire not to be associated with the quoted position that was previously signaled through their use of *well* to introduce the constructed dialogue.

In the previous Sections 5.1 and 5.2, I showed that stance-taking through reported thought differs from stance-taking through reported speech in terms of whether the writer is creating disalignment with the self or with others. While these patterns held across the four corpora used for this study, the specific discourse contexts for the data also introduced an additional level of analysis as to how monologic registers differ from dialogic. I discuss these differences in Section 5.3, explaining how monologic registers involve the writer evaluating and

aligning themselves relative to larger groups or ideological positions while dialogic registers allow the writer to align with and evaluate specific individuals.

5.3 Engaging with the proximal and the distal

Lempert (2009) introduces the idea of proximal and distal with respect to stance subjects and objects in order to explain how the idea of dialogicality (Du Bois 2007), or the ways in which stance-takers engage with the words, thoughts, and ideas of others, links a stance-taking subject to speakers in another speech event. Proximal subjects are those second subjects in the here-and-now of the speech event where the stance-taking occurs, and similarly, proximal objects are those objects of evaluation that are denoted in the immediate context. Distal subjects, on the other hand, are second subjects who are not present in the speech event but with whom the first subject can still create alignment. Distal objects, then, are those objects which are not denoted in the speech-event but that are still evaluated. In the context of the current research, proximal subjects and objects both tend to be specific individuals, while distal subjects and objects are larger groups or ideological positions.

5.3.1 *Proximal stance subjects and objects: In the immediate context*

The particular discursive choice that a writer makes in aligning themselves with another has further implications for the stance objects that they evaluate in written abortion discourse. In dialogic registers which allow for direct interaction between individuals, such as Reddit and blog comments, writers position themselves as being aligned with specific individuals who are also participating in the conversation. These individuals are generally either the author of the blog, the original poster on Reddit, or another commenter on either platform, and, as such, they represent those who are directly salient to the speech situation in which the stance-event occurs. Following Lempert's (2009) discussion of proximal and distal subjects and objects with respect to stance-taking, I similarly analyze these as proximal stance subjects. It should be noted that the distinction between proximal and distal subjects is distinct from Du Bois's (2007) concept of convergent and divergent stances; in expressing stance, one can express a convergent stance, or agreement, with either a proximal subject or a distal one. The same is true for divergent stances, where the subjects disagree or are in disalignment with one another.

As they align themselves with proximal stance subjects, writers focus on evaluating particular individuals as stance objects – those objects of evaluation which are immediately present in the discourse – and end up signaling their identification with the individual circumstances that lead specific, discourse salient women

to seek abortions while maintaining a degree of distance from people who have abortions as a larger group. The examples in (17) and (18) show this focus on specific stance objects in comments on Reddit. In both cases, the comment comes as a direct reply to the original post, allowing the writer of the comment to engage align with the author of the post in the adjacency pair. At the start of (20), the immediate stance object is the title of the post itself, which the commenter reveals through their use of constructed dialogue. From there, in the constructed dialogue itself, they move into evaluating the author of the post's grandmother, signaling their sympathetic view toward the woman.

- (17) After I read the title, my first thought was “Well, that’s probably because her grandmother lived without birth control (the Pill is only 55 years old) and the ability to refuse unprotected sex.” [Reddit: /r/TwoXChromosomes 2017]

By evaluating the original poster's grandmother as the object of their stance-act, the Reddit user who wrote the example in (17) signals their understanding of the external factors that might have led the grandmother to obtain multiple abortions. At the same time, they avoid commenting on how those same factors might affect larger groups of people. As stance objects, it is only the individual whose actions are evaluated rather than the entirety of people who have had abortions. In the case of (17), this means that while the commenter signals a sympathetic or understanding position toward the unique circumstances the original poster's grandmother faced, they do so without signaling their position on abortion as a whole or even on abortion in modern U.S. society.

In (18), the Reddit user comments on the same post as the writer of the comment in (17), although the writers of each example have different usernames and are not, ostensibly, the same person. This example again demonstrates a writer in a dialogic register engaging in evaluation of a proximal stance object, though the writer's end positive evaluation of the original poster's grandmother is more overt than the reported thought shown in (18).

- (18) Though I am pro choice, not gonna lie; my first thought was ‘well that’s irresponsible’ and I didn’t expect to sympathize with your grandmother. I’m glad you shared her story. This is a good example of not judging until you walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. She has reason to be proud. And I’d be proud to have such a strong grandmother. [Reddit: /r/TwoXChromosomes 2017]

The Reddit user enacts a stance that expresses their sympathy toward the original poster's grandmother, using *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue to signal their shift toward understanding. Once again there is no mention of outside groups that could serve as more indirect stance objects; instead, the focus is on evaluating a figure that is immediately salient within the discourse. In the next section, I show how writers orient themselves with relation to obscure or absent others.

5.3.2 *Distal stance subjects and objects: Absent others*

In other registers of written abortion discourse where there is not necessarily an interactional aspect of the discourse, writers engage with distal stance subjects, or “absent others to whom one aligns” (Lempert 2009, 100). The pattern of stance object evaluation in these cases show two larger themes: the evaluation of the larger ongoing conversation around abortion and prior stances taken by others, and the evaluation of larger groups who are not immediately present in the discourse. The examples in (19) and (20) show this dual pattern; in both cases, the author of the tweet uses constructed dialogue to evaluate an intertextual stance object, positioning themselves with respect to the stances and attitudes they associate with the broader cultural debate about abortion. At the same time, they also evaluate the larger groups to which they attribute the constructed dialogue.

Example (19) highlights the contrast between the types of stance objects associated with proximal and distal subjects. In the former, as evidenced in (17) and (18) in the previous section, writers focus on evaluating specific individuals who are directly linked to the immediate discourse context. When they align with distal subjects, on the other hand, writers do not evaluate specific individual stance objects. This is seen in (19) with the focus on the referring expressions *people* and *women* as stand-ins for larger groups.

- (19) People act like women just nonchalantly get late term abortions. “Well, I painted the nursery, but I’m kind of over it now.” [Twitter 2016]

In this statement, the writer focuses broadly on prior stances that they attribute to *people* at large. In doing so, they avoid evaluative commentary on any one individual whose stance they disagree with in particular. Beyond the immediate stance-marker of *people* as a referring expression, perhaps the more interesting aspect of the stance-event enacted by the writer in (19) is their evaluation of other stances rather than of groups or individuals. There is an intertextual nature to the stance object in (19) in that it refers to stances enacted throughout the conversation on abortion rather than just signaling the writer’s personal stance toward a single object. They use constructed dialogue as a mechanism with which they can push back against the perception that people who get abortions do so without thought and without understanding the weight of their choices, even though it is not a stance specifically ascribed to any one individual. This is similarly the case for the example in (20), where the stance object is the larger position that men do not have a right to comment on abortion rights.

- (20) I am tired of men on my TL saying, ‘well, I don’t support abortion but I’m a man and do ‘t [sic] have a say’. Yes. You do. @king_ruckus [Twitter 2015]

The focus on specific types of stance objects is relevant in highlighting the underlying belief systems that inform the linguistic choices that writers engaging in abortion discourse make; constructed dialogue is used to evaluate abortion-seeking individuals as a larger social group as well as to evaluate specific individuals. In the latter capacity, the choice to focus on linguistically signaling understanding toward one individual or the specific circumstances that led them to have an abortion serves to reinforce aspects of a positive-self, negative-other evaluation. The individuals with whom writers identify are linguistically positioned closer to the writers themselves and are afforded a level of sympathy that is not extended to those groups that writers position farther away from themselves. This pattern follows a known tendency for people to be able to rationalize their own abortions, as well as those of individuals with whom they consider themselves to be close or with whom they identify, while still arguing against broader abortion access for all. While writers in abortion discourse do not explicitly state that the only moral abortions are the ones they can personally understand, they signal at this belief through their choice of stance objects in constructed dialogue.

6. Conclusion

The present study has sought to create an account of discourse marker *well* that allows for its meaning as an interactional stance-taking strategy. In doing so, I examined and introduced novel data showing that *well* seems to serve as a negative-evaluative stance-marker in abortion discourse, indicating disagreement and an unwillingness to allow oneself to be positioned next to a disagreeable evaluative position. This function of *well* represents a natural extension of its known capacity to clarify the relationship between adjacent clauses, both between and within turns; in addition to marking a negative evaluative stance, *well* makes clear to the reader that a shift from a neutral stance into one of overt evaluative positioning has taken place. This study also adds a richer understanding of how discourse markers can contribute to interactional identity construction following the positionality and indexicality principles of identity construction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). It further supports the idea that discourse markers and reported speech share complementary functions; building on the work that Trester (2009) conducted with respect to *oh*, I have demonstrated that *oh* does not represent a unique case where only a single discourse marker serves as a resource for identity construction and management in constructed dialogue as an evaluative process. Instead, this appears to potentially be a shared function among at least a small set of discourse markers; although it can occur in the presence of other, more overt stance-markers, the consistent use of *well* as a signal of negative evaluation

across different written registers of abortion discourse both reported thought and reported speech constructions indicates that it is somewhat of a conventionalized strategy for marking group and identity alignment.

In this research, I also demonstrated the contrasting use of *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue to represent thought and speech in mediated abortion discourse. As writers use constructed dialogue to represent thoughts they no longer agree with, they preface the reported information with discourse marker *well* to create distance between positions they previously held and their position at the time of writing. In this way, *well* is used as a strategic positioning resource used to demonstrate personal growth or a developed sense of understanding. Where *well*-prefaced constructed dialogue occurs in dialogic discourse contexts like comments on blogs and Reddit, it takes a proximal stance object and is used to signal a sympathetic evaluative position regarding specific abortion-seeking individuals who are discourse salient but does not evaluate broader groups related to reproductive rights. Reported speech functions a bit differently from reported thought, and, rather than distancing the writer from their own earlier stances, it is used to position the writer as being disaligned with ideologies they find objectionable. This linguistic strategy is used by individuals who identify as both pro-life and pro-choice and allows them to distance themselves with respect to members of their own ideological camp that they feel do not represent their value systems, as well as to members of other groups. Unlike reported thought, reported speech is widely used in monologic discourse contexts and evaluates distal stance objects, with particular focus on evaluating the ongoing conversation regarding abortion and prior stances taken by others.

Acknowledgements

I thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper. Additional thanks are extended to Michael Ippolito and Emily Finley for their help coding discourse marker data.

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Zhang, Justine, William L. Hamilton, Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Dan Jurafsky, and Jure Leskovec. 2017. "Community Identity and User Engagement in a Multicommunity Landscape." In *vol. 11 Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence*, 337–346.

Publication history

Date received: 15 September 2020

Date accepted: 5 May 2021

Published online: 2 August 2021