

# ‘WELL’ IN SPANISH TRANSLATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE P-ACTRES PARALLEL CORPUS<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades there has been an increasing interest in cross-linguistic studies, especially with the new developments made available by computerised corpora. Moreover, contrastive studies have recently moved into new areas of research, such as pragmatics and discourse analysis, and a growing number of studies focus on spoken communication and units such as pragmatic or discourse markers, which are particularly common in speech.

A particle such as the English form *well* is multifunctional. This English adverb can carry meanings related to manner, degree or intensification. In addition, *well* is often grammaticalized into a discourse particle, especially in dialogue, and this requires a particularly careful treatment in the case of translations, as discourse particles do not carry easily definable meanings. Previous studies on the English particle *well* (Aijmer & Simone-Vandenberg 2003, Johansson 2006) have shown that the translation of this item into other languages is far from straightforward, as there are many different correspondences and a high degree of omissions. The translations of the English form *well* have been studied in the cases of Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, German and Italian, and this paper aims at expanding the analysis considering translations into Spanish.

The study will focus on the translations of *well* as it appears in the English-Spanish parallel corpus P-ACTRES, which will provide the empirical material for the analysis. This corpus contains about 2.5 million words of contemporary English texts and their corresponding translations into European Spanish. The corpus-based methodology employed will consist of the preliminary analysis of the cases of *well* in the English section of the corpus, followed by a detailed study of the various translational options identified for each function or meaning in the case of the discourse markers. The aim of the study is to provide an inventory of translation solutions available in Spanish for *well* in English original texts, in particular with regard to its use as a discourse marker. The trends observed in the options

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taken most frequently will provide useful information in the field of translator training as well as in translation practice.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Pragmatic or discourse markers are short words or phrases, particularly frequent in spoken communication, which do not add any propositional content to the utterance they are included in, but rather express the speaker's attitude towards the listener, negotiate background assumptions or express other types of interpersonal or textual meanings that contribute to the overall texture and coherence of discourse. Important studies on discourse markers in the past 20 years or so include Schiffrin (1987), Jucker & Ziv (1998), Lenk (1998) Hansen (1998), Andersen & Fretheim (2000), Fischer (2000), Aijmer (2002). Discourse markers behave syntactically like interjections and tend to occur in sentence-marginal positions or parenthetically. And as far as form is concerned, the most frequent items in English spoken conversation (BNC/spoken) are *yeah, oh, no, well, but, just know, mm, yes, like* and *cos*. The form *well* is one of the English discourse markers that has attracted most attention from scholars, from an intralinguistic perspective (Halliday & Hasan 1976, Carlson 1984, Bolinger 1989, Chafe 1986, Fraser 1990, Schourup 2001), as well as from a contrastive perspective, analyzing translations of this particle into Swedish and Dutch (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2003) into Norwegian and German (Johansson 2006) or into Italian (Bazzanella & Morra 2000). This paper will focus on the discourse marker *well* and the Spanish translations of this particle found in the P-ACTRES parallel corpus.

The English adverb *well*, used as an adverb of manner or degree, expresses positive values. Several authors have included *well* within the modal system of *evidentiality* (Chafe 1986), and it can therefore be considered as an interpersonal item concerned with the expression of the speaker's stance towards the proposition uttered. Moreover, there has been a clear process of grammaticalization in this case and *well* "has lost most of its original meaning in its evolution from a lexical adverb to a discourse particle." (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2003: 1126). The elusiveness of the meanings expressed by *well* is shown in the following statement:

If a foreign language learner says *five sheeps* or *he goed*, he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits a *well*, the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to etc, but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an 'error'. (Svartvik 1980: 171)

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I will follow Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg's (2003) approach as to the two main types of functions that may be expressed by *well* as a pragmatic marker in English:

- It contributes to the **interpersonal function** of language in the form of a politeness marker, establishing some kind of respect towards the addressee's face and recognizing the need to renegotiate meaning shared by both; positive appraisal as well as counter-expectation are here the core functions.
- It contributes to the **textual function** as a boundary marker and topic introducer, as it usually occurs in sentence-initial position.

(1) *Well, there are really no coincidences in nature ; everything happens for a reason.*  
(EWRIIE.s279)

Moreover, I have included another different use of *well* as a discourse marker in those cases where it followed a modal verb to form an idiomatic pattern as in (2). Examples such as this one show a high degree of grammaticalization of the particle *well* and are thus better treated as pragmatic markers too:

(2) *Extreme free variation may well have been the result, which it certainly is not.*  
(ETGIE.s45)

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The empirical data used for the analysis in this paper were extracted from the English-Spanish parallel corpus P-ACTRES compiled at the University of León, Spain. P-ACTRES contains original English texts and their corresponding Spanish translations. This corpus includes written material from a variety of different registers (fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, magazines & miscellanea) published in the year 2000 or later, thus representing the contemporary stage of the English language, and the corresponding translations published in the European variety of Spanish. Today P-ACTRES comprises nearly 2.5 million words, approximately 1.2 million words per language. The texts included vary in length depending on the register. In the case of books, the corpus contains fragments approximately 15,000 words long. In the case of newspaper and magazine articles, the texts included are complete units of around 1,000 words each for the former and around 3,000 words each for the latter. Miscellanea texts are always full texts of short length, mostly around 500 words long.

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The English source texts and their corresponding translations into Spanish are aligned at sentence level and can be searched with the Corpus Work Bench browser (CWB)<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 shows the number of words in each subcorpus.

Table 1: Contents of the English-Spanish Parallel Corpus.

|                            | <b>ENGLISH</b> | <b>SPANISH</b> | <b>TOTAL</b>     |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|
| <b>Books – fiction</b>     | 396,462        | 421,065        | 817,527          |
| <b>Books – non-fiction</b> | 494,358        | 553,067        | 1,047,425        |
| <b>Newspapers</b>          | 115,502        | 137,202        | 252,704          |
| <b>Magazines</b>           | 119,604        | 126,989        | 246,593          |
| <b>Miscellanea</b>         | 40,178         | 49,026         | 89,204           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>               | 1,166,104      | 1,287,349      | <b>2,453,453</b> |

All the cases of *well* as an adverb were extracted from the corpus, together with their corresponding Spanish translations. The various syntactic functions were identified and the cases classified as pragmatic markers were checked for their translations. The working hypothesis is that the multiple functions of *well* will be translated in a number of different ways in Spanish, thus highlighting the polysemic nature of this particle.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Overall classification.

The browser of the P-ACTRES parallel corpus provided 821 instances of the form *well* tagged as an adverb. However, 7 cases were errors and corresponded to uses of the form *well* as a noun or as an adjective in *well-off*. These forms were discarded and 814 instances were finally analyzed. The structural analysis of all of these instances revealed the results shown in Table 2 below:

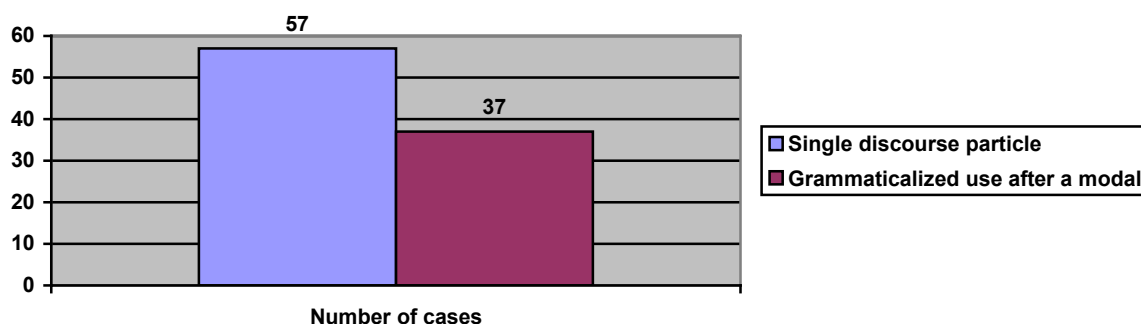
Table 2: Classification of all cases of *well* in P-ACTRES.

| <b>STRUCTURE</b>                      | <b>CASES</b> | <b>PERCENTAGE</b> |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <i>as well (as)</i>                   | 369          | 45.3%             |
| <i>Well</i> as main adverb /adjective | 184          | 22.6%             |
| <i>Well</i> as modifier of adjective  | 124          | 15.2%             |
| <i>Well</i> as discourse marker       | 94           | 11.5%             |
| <i>Well</i> as modifier of adverb     | 43           | 5.2%              |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                          | <b>814</b>   | <b>100%</b>       |

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It can be noticed that the vast majority of cases (45%) of the English form *well* occurred as part of the conjunction *as well (as)*. In 22.6% of the cases, *well* was the main adverb or adjective in its clause, in 15% of cases it was a modifier of an adjective, and in 5% of cases it was used as a modifier of another adverb. Finally, 11.5% of cases, a total of 94 cases, were labelled in the analysis as pragmatic uses of *well* as a discourse marker. This study will focus on the translations into Spanish of these uses of the English form *well*.

These 94 occurrences were further classified into two subgroups: on the one hand, the instances where *well* appears alone in sentence initial position, followed by a comma and in dialogue predominantly; on the other hand, the cases of *well* where the adverb was so highly grammaticalized that it cannot be considered to carry out another function but to reinforce the epistemic modality indicated by the modal verb it follows. This second group includes cases where *well* is not grammatically peripheral or marginal, but rather has become fused with the rest of the sentence and are therefore to be considered on the boundary between proper adverbs and discourse markers. This flexibility with respect to position is only apparent in some cases. I will claim in this paper that pragmatic markers tend to form collocations and patterns in text, precisely because of this textual function. Figure 1 below shows the number of instances of *well* in each subgroup of discourse markers.



#### 4.2. *Well* as a single pragmatic marker.

The 57 instances included 9 cases from the non-fiction subcorpus, 1 case from the press subcorpus and the remaining 47 cases (82% of the total) appeared in the fiction corpus imitating spontaneous conversation. The analysis of the 57 instances of *well* as a single-word discourse marker and the corresponding translations into Spanish revealed the list of 13

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different translations shown in Table 3 below, with their corresponding frequency of occurrence:

Table 3: Translational options of single discourse marker *well* in Spanish.

| WELL AS A SINGLE ITEM | CASES      |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Bueno                 | 30 – 52.6% |
| Pues                  | 5 – 8.7%   |
| Bien                  | 5 – 8.7%   |
| Omission              | 4 – 7.01%  |
| En fin                | 3 – 5.2%   |
| Vaya                  | 2 – 3.5%   |
| Pues bien             | 2 – 3.5%   |
| Entonces              | 1 – 1.7%   |
| En realidad           | 1– 1.7%    |
| De acuerdo            | 1– 1.7%    |
| Efectivamente         | 1– 1.7%    |
| Claro está            | 1– 1.7%    |
| Vamos a ver           | 1– 1.7%    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>          | <b>57</b>  |

The results show that there is a wide range of different translations, something which confirms previous studies on the translations of discourse markers (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2003). One form in particular, *bueno*, accounts for over half the cases (3), followed by *pues* (4) and *bien* (5), with less than 10% of occurrences each.

(3) '**Well**, it was pretty ghastly, by all accounts. (FIK1E.s320)

- **Bueno**, la cosa fue un auténtico horror, al decir de todo el mundo. (FIK1S.s323)

The use of the Spanish adjective *bueno*, the semantico-functional equivalent of *well*, shows that this particular adjective indicating positive evaluation has acquired a similar status in Spanish as a discourse marker.

(4) '**Well**, hang onto them. (FCJ1E.s612)

- **Pues** no los dejes escapar. (FCJ1S.s597)

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In contrast, the use of *pues* adds a clearly causal meaning that is not explicit in the English original text, but may be inferred from the context.

(5) "Oh, yeah, **well** I hope to hear 'em some of these days. (EDB1E.s7)

- Ah, **bien**. (EDB1S.s10) *Espero escucharlas un día de estos*. (EDB1S.s11)

*Bien* is the Spanish adverb that most closely represents the representative meaning of *well* as a manner adverb, but, as mentioned above, it is the corresponding adjectival form *bueno*, not the adverbial form, which is most commonly grammaticalized into a pragmatic marker.

Omissions occur in only 7% of cases, and the remaining options occur so infrequently that further data would be needed to get a clearer picture. The last two cases in the list are what previous authors have called *routines*, i.e., short fixed phrases or clauses (*claro está, vamos a ver*) with similar pragmatic and textual meanings in Spanish to the ones encoded by the English form *well*.

(6) '**Well**, did she or didn't she? (FWM1E.s333)

*Vamos a ver, ¿la cerraba o no la cerraba?* (FWM1S.s329)

#### 4.3. *Well* as a pragmatic marker used after a modal verb.

The second group of uses of *well* as a discourse marker include those cases where the particle closely follows an epistemic modal and acts as an idiomatic reinforcement of that particular modal. What we find in these cases are clearly collocational patterns, although the number of instances is so low that it is difficult to draw relevant conclusions. Out of the 37 cases, the modal *may* occurred most often (18 cases), followed by *could* (10) and *might* (9). As for the registers, only 3 cases were found in fictional texts and all the others either in essays or press texts.

The 9 different translations into Spanish found in our corpus are listed in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Translational options of *well* after a modal verb.

| <b>WELL AFTER A MODAL VERB</b> | <b>CASES</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Omission                       | 19 - 51.3%   |
| Muy bien                       | 5 – 13.5%    |
| Perfectamente                  | 4 – 10.8%    |
| Bien                           | 3 – 8.1%     |
| Muy posible                    | 2 – 5.4%     |

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|                    |           |
|--------------------|-----------|
| Igualmente         | 1 – 2.7%  |
| Con toda seguridad | 1 – 2.7%  |
| Modulation         | 1– 2.7%   |
| Acaso              | 1– 2.7%   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>37</b> |

In this case it is remarkable that the translational option most frequently taken is the actual omission of the pragmatic marker. In fact, over half the cases were not translated. This ties in with previous studies that show that the elusive nature of the meanings expressed by pragmatic markers makes them difficult to convey in another language and easy to omit in translations, as the propositional content is not affected at all.

(7) This might **well** have been fatal in a real operation... (ELAR1E.s240)

*En una acción real el desenlace hubiese resultado fatal [...] (ELAR1S.s224)*

When *well* is translated, it is generally an adverb that is chosen to express this meaning: *muy bien* (13% of cases), *perfectamente* (10%) or *bien* (8%), as in the examples below.

(8) If American automakers do not innovate quickly enough, in another decade you may **well** be driving a superefficient Chinese-made car. (RLA1E.s187)

*Si los fabricantes de automóviles de otros países no innovan rápidamente, dentro de una década pudiera **muy bien** ocurrir que el lector conduzca un coche de bajísimo consumo de manufactura china. (RLA1S.s194)*

(9) Men in British uniform acted suspiciously and may **well** have been spies. (EHJ1E.s2-19)

*Hombres vestidos con uniformes del Ejército británico actuaban de forma sospechosa por lo que **perfectamente** podrían haber sido espías. (EHJ1S.s224)*

(10) Because many are unwieldy and meticulously fashioned, they may **well** have been used to impress and woo. (EHF1E.s354)

*Dado que muchas de ellas eran difíciles de manejar y sin embargo habían sido talladas meticulosamente, **bien** pudieron utilizarse para impresionar y cortejar al amante. (EHF1S.s342)*



The first three translational options refer to the propositional content of the English particle *well*, but there are also two cases of *muy posible*, a combination that suggests the epistemic nature of the meaning conveyed here:

(11) If Freya was a machine, and the Germans were using it to defend their borders, it might **well** be in Denmark. (FFK2E.s691)

*Si Freya era una máquina, y los alemanes la estaban utilizando para defender sus fronteras, era **muy posible** que se encontrara en Dinamarca.* (FFK2S.s695)

The remaining options found in the corpus occur only once.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has studied the translations into Spanish of the pragmatic marker *well* as it appears in the P-ACTRES parallel corpus. All the instance of this form were extracted and analyzed. The cases were divided into two clearly differentiated groups: single discourse markers in sentence-initial position in dialogue, and collocational combinations with modal verbs with an epistemic meaning of reinforcement.

In the case of single discourse markers we find a large number of different translational options, although over half the cases corresponded to one single adjective, *bueno*, the functional equivalent of *good*. Other minor options included *pues* or *bien*, whereas only 7% of cases were actually omitted in translations.

As for the patterns of *well* following modals, there were also many possible options, but half the cases were actually omitted in Spanish. The most frequent options were the functional equivalents of *well bien*, *muy bien* and *perfectamente*.

Different uses of a polyfunctional item such as *well* provide, as expected, very different translational patterns. Pragmatic markers in dialogue tend to be viewed by translators as important part of the discourse and a translation is provided, whereas the case of the collocational patterns with modals is not viewed as so essential, so *well* is mostly omitted in these contexts.

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