

Well, these discourse markers can mean a lot of things

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

When we were about six years old, there was a joke which we thought was very funny: "Have you heard about the three deep holes? Well, well, well...".

I agree it's not very amusing, but a correspondent to the EDP seems not even to have heard of it. He is "irritated beyond bounds", poor chap, by the continuous use of the word "well" at the start of "almost every report on the news". He wants the word to be banned, unless it applies to a person's state of health, or a hole in the ground which supplies water. He doesn't say how he'll set about enforcing this ban – I suppose a short prison-sentence for any offending journalist might work.

But he has completely missed the point about the important job words like "well" play in English – or in any language. They're called discourse markers, and they have very important functions. There are rules about how to use them which we all know, even if we don't know we know them. You can sometimes hear foreigners using "well" incorrectly because they don't know what the rules are.

An American linguist called Deborah



■ Sheltering from bombs in Syria, above, may well cause a discourse marker response.

Schiffrin wrote a whole book called "Discourse Markers" which is devoted to a study of the rules involved in the usage of "well, oh, so, y'know, now, then, I mean". One of the jobs that "well" does is to act as a warning that a response to what another person has said is going to be less than satisfactory. If someone asks the time, you don't reply "well, it's four o'clock". But you might say "well, I'm not sure – my watch is slow".

"Well" can warn that a reply will be unsatisfactory because it expresses disagreement. If someone says "Norwich City have a got a great team", you might agree; but someone else might reply "well, I'm

not so sure about that". "Well" can show reluctance – "well, I don't really want to"; resignation – "well, all right then"; or uncertainty – "well, yes, I suppose that's right".

Imagine you're a reporter for the Today programme. You're sheltering from the bombs in Damascus. The studio in London asks for your analysis of the current Syrian situation. You feel that any 60-second answer you could possibly give will be utterly unsatisfactory for conveying the total complexity, uncertainty and horror of it all.

Don't you think you might begin by saying "Well, John...?"