



# Oh dear, that's not what you want to hear from doctors or the media



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**A** FRIEND commented recently that people being interviewed often began their responses with "oh". I was sceptical but I started to listen for this phenomenon. Discourse particles such as "oh" and "well" have attracted a good deal of attention from linguists analysing conversations.

Though short and innocent-looking, they pack a lot of meaning which English speakers are skilled at interpreting.

One meaning of "oh" is surprise. Opening the door to find a friend, my husband said: "Oh, we weren't expecting you till later." Fortunately, he also managed to convey pleasure rather than dismay that she had arrived early.

In some conversational exchanges, "oh" can be a sign of trouble. In a news interview, for example, "oh" often indicates that a question has taken the interviewee by surprise or that it conveys unexpected information.

Responding to a sports interviewer who said "some of your fans are picking that you won't make the cut", the interviewee replied "Oh, I don't think that's likely", challenging the unwelcome information conveyed by the interviewer.

In a commercial context, an interviewer asked: "So, what's the feeling in the boardroom after a poor performance like that?"

Again, the interviewee rejected the negative aspersion: "Oh, it's not that bad; we're tracking pretty well alongside others."

So this is one reason that "oh" is rare in news interviews (and hence my scepticism in response to my friend's observation). "Oh" suggests that whatever the speaker has just said is "news" to the recipient.

And in a news interview, the interviewee is supposed to be supplying information for the benefit of the audience, so they shouldn't be surprised by anything the interviewer asserts.

**F**OR the same reason, "oh" is rarely heard at the beginning of responses from teachers in classrooms, lawyers in courtrooms, and doctors in medical interactions. They are supposed to be the experts, to know everything, and to be reassuring.

Patients don't like their doctors to indicate that they are surprised by what they find. If your doctor comments when taking your blood pressure "oh that's unexpectedly high", you would have reason to feel worried.

In other contexts, "oh" serves to emphasise or upgrade the message – "did you enjoy the movie?" asked my son; my reply "oh yes" indicated that it was very enjoyable.

By contrast, an initial "well" tends to act as a qualifier or a softener. Often it softens a reply which the speaker wants to indicate that they would prefer not to give, such as a refusal.

"Come to dinner tonight."

"Well, I'd love to but I've promised to visit my mum".

Or a reluctant admission: "Was the weather good?"



“Well, it could have been better.”  
Alternatively “well” may indicate that the speaker is about to qualify what they said: “ I thought it was a great movie – well, maybe not great, but very very good.”

Similarly, “well” may indicate that the addressee can’t answer a question with a simple “yes” or “no”.

“Are you from Wellington?”

“Well, I live there now but I wasn’t born there.”

And “well” can also be a warning of a complicated or long response.

“How’s the sailing?”

“Well, that’s a long story.”

“Well” may also occur with other hesitation markers, signalling that the speaker does not have a ready contribution to make to the conversation.

I asked a student “what are you planning to do next year?”, and he answered: “Well, erm er you know erm I haven’t

really quite decided yet.”

Discourse analysts search for patterns among all this diversity. The most general meaning of “oh” is as a “newsmarker”. It emphasises or signals a response to new information.

“Well”, on the other hand, indicates the speaker’s awareness that their response is not precisely what might be expected: it marks the response as a potential surprise to the listener. So these two discourse markers do have something in common. Both indicate the speaker’s sensitivity to the knowledge of the person they are speaking to.

And why should we care about such little pieces of language? Oh well, extremely little things can be very significant in the analysis of language.

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