# USES, FUNCTIONS, AND FREQUENCY OF ROM. *PĂI* AND ENGL. *WELL* IN PROFESSIONAL SPOKEN INTERACTION

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*Abstract*

This paper analyses the uses and functions of the Romanian discourse maker *păi* and the English *well*, based on two comparable corpora of professional spoken interaction, CIVMP and ITICMC, trying to point out their possible equivalence. We have analysed these two discourse markers in an attempt to see their uses and functions and to record in statistics the number of occurrences and the frequency of *păi* and *well* in this type of discourse. In addition, according to corpus analysis, it could be said that speakers seem to constantly adapt to the conditions imposed by the interactional, social, ideological, and cultural requirements of the context.

***Keywords:*** *Romanian; English; professional spoken interaction; discourse markers; comparison; corpus linguistics; discourse strategies; statistics.*

## 1. Introduction

Based on two comparable corpora of professional spoken interaction, CIVMP[2] and ITICMC[3], this paper analyses the discourse markers *păi* and *well*, trying to emphasize their possible equivalence, by

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2 Gheorghe, M., (coordinator), S. Măda, R. Săftoiu, 2009, *Comunicarea la locul de muncă. Corpus de interacțiune verbală în mediul profesional*, Brașov, Transilvania University Press.

3 Coposescu, L., G. Chefneux, 2008, *Institutional Talk and Intercultural Communication in Multinational Companies. Corpus of Spoken Interactions in English*, Brașov, Transilvania University Press.

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paying attention to their occurrences, distribution, discursive functions, and frequency in professional spoken interaction. Also, this paper aims to analyze the speakers' language choices and the way in which they use language in socio-professional interaction. The analysis of the use of discourse markers illustrates the properties of professional spoken interactions. Moreover, identifying and understanding certain communication principles and strategies help us to interpret this type of interaction.

Regarding the corpora, it is significant to emphasize that CIVMP and ITICMC are similar in terms of content, both illustrating exclusively professional spoken interactions. Another similarity is that both contain phone-mediated and face-to-face interactions. Also, the years (2008 for ITICMC and 2009 for CIVMP) in which the corpora were published represent an indication that Romanian and English used by the speakers for professional reasons are in the same stage of development, therefore, the comparison between the two is relevant. In addition, even the way in which the two corpora are structured is similar, and thus the comparison is facilitated.

## 2. Professional Spoken Interaction

Ghiga (2009: 9) mentions that we can talk about a workplace culture. Consequently, the distinction between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a given interaction depends on workplace culture. Therefore, the employee must decipher the linguistic and paralinguistic signals that indicate transitions from social to transactional conversation, from joke to order, and from criticism to irony (Măda 2009: 203-204). Trying to give a clearer picture, Ghiga (2009: 9) highlights that failure in business may often originate in lack of workplace culture knowledge. Those who have to communicate cross-culturally need to learn how to take advantage of cultural similarities and how to build up bridges over cultural differences. Doing business with someone that has a different cultural, social, and educational background involves not only simply observing a different cognitive and affective environment, but also finding effective instruments to connect to it and develop cooperative and long-lasting relationships. Thus, the present analysis highlights that

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language, a very complex communicative system, is used by people who need to adapt, according to their purposes to the real-life situations such as their job – "through linguistic communication, we display our attitudes, feelings, beliefs and wishes" (Duranti 2004: 452).

According to Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 166), there are two fundamental functions of professional spoken interaction: *transactional function* and *social function*. Consequently, very important in professional spoken interaction is to maintain the balance between the imperative of the transactional objectives and the care to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. These functions are equally important because social integration is the key to professional success. Despite the fact that organizations are different, thus having very different transactional goals, it can be noticed that all of them use language to achieve their goals.

## 3. The Discourse Markers *păi* and *well*. A Contrastive Study

According to Ștefănescu (2005: 675), *păi*, an epistemic and phatic discourse marker, as its English equivalent *well*, is an element that regulates assumptions that form the cognitive contexts of the speakers. The main functions of *păi* and *well* are to ensure the coherence and to structure the discursive ideas. Sometimes, it is possible, in the same discursive sequence, that the marker has several values simultaneously (see *infra*, ***6.1***.).

All pragmatic expressions, and especially *păi* and its English equivalent *well*, have certain things in common. They share in the task of helping speakers plan what is to be said and organize their message into intelligible chunks. Moreover, they facilitate the often-thorny task of making communication between speakers successful. The functions of *păi* and *well* are updated with each new context in which they occur.

## 4. The Romanian *păi*

Zafiu (2002: 420) mentions that in present-day Romanian, *păi* is often perceived as a *response signal*. Also, the large number of occurrences points out *păi* as being a very active discourse marker in spoken

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Romanian. The pragmatic roles (see *infra*, ***6.1.1***.) can justify its high frequency. In addition, it should be mentioned that the absence of a referential meaning, the fact that it does not change the truth conditions of the enunciation, and also that it does not add anything to the propositional content, include *păi* in the class of discourse markers. The marker occurs especially in the question-answer pair contexts, where it can precede the question, but especially the answer.

Popescu (2019: 189-204) mentions that *păi* has become the main multifunctional dialogic marker of response and hesitation in the popular and familiar registers of contemporary spoken Romanian. Thus, *păi* has become the main multifunctional dialogic marker of response and hesitation, being accompanied by different other discursive nuances (see *infra*, ***6.1.1***.).

## 5. The English *well*

Crystal (1988: 47) underlines that *well* is widely criticized as being a marker of unclear thinking, lack of confidence and inadequate social skills. Nevertheless, this marker is criticized only when is overused. Most of the time when *well* is used in everyday conversation, it is not irritatingly noticeable. Usually, speakers do not even realize that *well* is there. *Well* is not overused, *well* is just used (Crystal 1988: 47). Moreover, the author mentions that *well* and other parenthetical phrases of English are really far more complex than one thinks. Crystal has also noticed that this discourse parenthetical phrase helps us to perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and of efficient interaction. Last, but not the least, Crystal has pointed out that *well* has the power to give the speaker the opportunity to check back, to plan ahead and to obtain listener's reaction. It gives the listener the possibility to keep up and react.

## 6. Analysis of the Data and Research Methodology

In terms of research methodology, we have used methods aimed at analysing spoken interactions such as discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. For this type of analysis, the use of methods specific to

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pragmatics is essential, on the one hand, because the description of English and Romanian in professional spoken interaction means discourse level research and, on the other hand, because by this type of methods, authentic interactional phenomena are captured, as they were produced and received in their specific context.

Thus, the two comparable corpora, CIVMP and ITICMC, were analysed mainly from a functional perspective (see *infra*, ***6.1.***), but other analytical research methods were used as well: distributional analysis (see *infra*, ***6.2.***), mathematical research methods (statistics, see *infra*, ***6.3***.), non-specific research methods (observation, induction, and hypothesis), and also the comparison method, which is useful for contrastive studies.

Consequently, we have identified the common discursive functions that *păi* and *well* can have in professional spoken interactions (see *infra*, ***6.1.1.*** and ***6.1.2.***), basically to mark a disagreement and reproach (for *păi*, see *infra*, ex. 3 and ex. 4; for *well*, see *infra,* ex. 11 and ex. 13), and to mark a pause/hesitation (for *păi*, see *infra*, ex. 1; for *well*, see *infra*, ex. 10).

### *6.1. Functional Analysis*

In professional spoken interactions, we have identified cases in which *păi* and *well* can have simultaneously two functions, this being the reason why one conversational fragment serves to illustrate several discursive roles. For instance, a single professional spoken interaction (see *infra*, ex. 19, ex. 10, and ex. 11) illustrates that *well* can mark a refusal (see *infra*, ex. 11), a pause/a delay (see *infra*, ex. 10), and a contrast (in this situation being used as an alternative to the contrastive marker *but*, see *infra*, ex. 19).

#### *6.1.1. The Discursive Functions of păi*

According to Popescu (2019: 189-204) and Zafiu (2009: 779-793), *păi* has the following discursive functions that could be identified also in our corpus analysis:

***(a)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of hesitation:

(1) *Maria. Deci vreau sa vămai atrag atenția că zilele astea am tot circulat pe la contabilitate.* < MARC *jos e holu plin de elevi* > *Când îi intrebi ce faceți ,,**păi** mergem la*

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*doamna: psiholog". Știți dar doamna nu are program.* / So I want to draw your attention to the fact that these days I have gone to the accounting office. Downstairs the hall is full of students. When you ask them "What are you doing" "***well***, we're going to the psychologist". But, you know, she is not at work. (CIVMP 2009: 60);

***(b)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of justification:

(2) *Ioana. Și cu puțini copii în case.* / And with few children in the houses.
*Adina.* ***Păi*** *nu↓ că dacă au bani↓ o să înceapă să facă și copii.* / ***Well***, if they have money, they will start having children. (CIVMP 2009: 43);

***(c)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of disagreement:

(3) *Dorin. Eu fac contract↓ crede-mă că nu mi-e greu↓ că trebuie să trec niște date# dac-acele contracte↓ hîrtiile contează↓ atuncea...* / I will write a contract, believe me it's not hard for me to write some data if those documents matter, then…
*Carmen.* ***Păi*** *nu contează hîrtiile↓ contează relația.* / ***Well,*** the documents do not matter, the relationship matters. (CIVMP 2009: 146);

***(d)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of reproach:

(4) *Valentina: […]* ***păi*** *de ce nu am făcut?* […] / ***well*** why didn't I do that? (CIVMP 2009: 100);

***(e)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of surprise:

(5) *Ina. Ai primit și trebuia sa faci.* / You have received [it] and you had to do [it].
*Irina.* ***Păi***↓ *dar ieri nu am știut↓ eu acum aud.* / ***Well***, but yesterday I did not know, I'm finding out now. (CIVMP 2009: 161);

***(f)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of confirmation:

(6) *Irina. Vreti exact cifra?* / Do you want the exact number?
*Ina. Cifra↓* ***păi*** *CIFRA* / The number, ***well***, the number (CIVMP 2009: 161);

***(g)*** *Păi* – discourse marker of highlighting different parts of the discourse:

(7) *Ina.* ***Păi*** *măi↓ obișnuiti-vă ↓măi să lucrați la nivelul vostru mă ↓****păi*** *eu să vă spun?* / ***Well***, get used to work at your level. ***Well***, is it necessary for me to tell you [this]? (CIVMP 2009: 161).

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### *6.1.2. The Discursive Functions of* well

According to Schiffrin (1987: 102-128), *well* has the following discursive functions that could be identified also in our corpus analysis:

***(a)*** *Well* – discourse marker of completing/extending the answer:

(8) *R. So F2 had a VCB, and S had a VCB but S I think he fixed it, before going to vacation.*
*F. Yeah, you're right.*
*R. And* ***well*** *now I have a VCB which can make a verify to be fixed, but I guess there is no problem her it's the very file P has crashed when he in a wrapping algorithm in a vibrant solution.* (ITICMC 2008: 79);

***(b)*** *Well* – discourse marker of the attempt to change the answer:

(9) *F. Ok? So we cannot define them on the on the centre of elements mesh.*
*R. Mhm.*
*F. Right* ***well*** *I guess it should be possible, you can create a wheel connector at the centre of elements, I think.* (ITICMC 2008: 91);

***(c)*** *Well* – discourse marker of pause/delay:

(10) *R.* ***Well****, is this, I think, I realize I cannot appreciate now, but it seems too much, or is there something else that I also have to do in these 35 days?*
*F.* ***Well*** *yes, test object, you have a separate task for test object for five hard days, that we need time allocation to preparate the test object.* (ITICMC 2008: 86);

***(d)*** *Well* – discourse marker of refusal:

(11) *R. Ok and I'll have 35 days for this analysis case 94.*
*F. Yes.*
*R.* ***Well*** *is this, I think, I realize I cannot appreciate now, but it seems too much.* (ITICMC 2008: 86);

***(e)*** *Well* – discourse marker of the attempt to return to the initial topic of the discussion:

(12) *F1. Ok? so we cannot define them on the on the centre of elements mesh.*
*R. Mhm.*
*F1. Right,* ***well*** *I guess it should be possible, you can create a wheel connector at the centre of elements, I think.*
*F2. Mhm.*
*F1. But then we will have problems using low set and data set.* (ITICMC 2008: 91);

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***(f)*** *Well* – discourse marker of disagreement/objection:

(13) *R. Even if they exist over there I should not create them.*
*F.* ***Well****, I don't think they exist in the CS file.* (ITICMC 2008: 94);

***(g)*** *Well* – discourse marker of the fact that the answer does not correspond to what is required in the question / of the fact that the speaker wants to avoid the answer:

(14) *F. We have to check in the specifications. But I think there was a check needed.*
*R.* ***Well*** *I remember only about the X export and import which has a new. A couple of new things.* (ITICMC 2008: 84).

### *6.2. Distributional Analysis*

The fundamental concepts with which this type of analysis operates and implicitly the concepts we have had in mind in researching the distribution of *well* and *păi* in professional spoken interactions are: the *context*, *distribution*, *combinatorial properties*, *the absolute frequency*, and *the relative frequency* (Irimia 2011: 75-76). Thus, in the case of *păi* and *well*, respectively, it is not possible to talk about a total identical distribution, because there is no other discourse marker that can substitute for *păi* and *well* in all possible utterance contexts. Nonetheless, we can talk about partial identical distribution (Irimia 2011: 75-6), because, based on the analysis of the discursive contexts that illustrate professional spoken interaction, we can prove the existence of instantiations in which *păi* can be used instead of *bine* and *dar*, and *well* as an alternative to *ok* and *but*.

***(a)*** Professional spoken interaction fragments in which *păi* can be substituted for the contrastive marker *dar:*

(15) *Valentina. […]* ***păi*** *pe mine nu m-a informat nimeni că trebuia până în data de să spun # […] /* ***Well****,* no one informed me that I had to say [it] until a certain date (CIVMP 2009: 119-120);

(16) *Valentina. […] iar dumneavoastră⊥ când vă întruniți data viitoare (specificați) ,,aici suntem deficitari↓ nu s-a făcut↓* ***păi*** *de ce nu am făcut"↑ ,,nu: mi-ați transmis" […] /* And when you meet next time (specify) "here we are deficient, it didn't work out. ***Well,*** why I didn't do it", "You didn't send it to me" (CIVMP 2009: 100);

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***(b)*** Professional spoken interaction fragments in which *păi* can be substituted for the discourse marker *bine*:

(17) *Adina. Da↓* ***păi*** *o să supunem la vot cele două propuneri și-o să vedem. Domnu profesor [nume] vrea să ne mai spună ceva în legătură cu# treaba asta.* / ***Well***, yes, we will vote on the two proposals and will see. Professor [name] wants to tell us something more about this. (CIVMP 2009: 22);

(18) *Maria. Deci vreau sa va mai atrag atenția că zilele astea am tot circulat pe la contabilitate.* **<** MARC *jos e holu plin de elevi > Când îi intrebi Ce faceți ,,****păi*** *mergem la doamna: psiholog". Știți dar doamna nu are program.* / So I want to draw your attention to the fact that these days I have gone to the accounting office. Downstairs the hall is full of students. When you ask them "What you are doing [here]" "***Well***, we're going to the psychologist". But, you know, she is not at work. (CIVMP 2009: 60);

***(c)*** Professional spoken interaction fragments in which *well* can be substituted for the contrastive marker *but:*

(19) *R. Ok. And I'll have 35 days for this analysis case.*
*F. Yes.*
*R.* ***Well*** *is this, I think, I realize I cannot appreciate now, but it seems too much […]* (ITICMC 2008: 86);

(20) *R. And well now I have a VCB which can make a verify to be fixed, but I guess there is no problem her it's the very file P has crashed when he in a wrapping algorithm in a vibrant solution.*
*F. Yeah.*
*R.* ***Well but*** *he brings his scenario from another version of seven A.* (ITICMC 2008: 79);

***(d)*** Professional spoken interaction fragments in which *well* can be substituted for the discourse marker *ok:*

(21) *F.* ***Ok***, ***well*** *guys, then I'll see you on Monday.*
*R. Ok.* (ITICMC 2008: 100);

(22) *R. We keep the meeting on Monday? Or we will talk on the phone.*
*F. W****ell***, ***yes***, *we can keep the meeting on Monday to talk this beginning of the develop day.*
*R. Ok.* (ITICMC: 2008: 99).

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According to our analysis, in CIVMP there are 16 professional spoken interaction fragments in which *păi* can be sustituted for *dar*, and 7 professional spoken interaction fragments in which *păi* can be substituted for *bine*. The number of occurrences in which *păi* can be used as an alternative to *dar* is higher than the number of occurrences in which *păi* can substituted for *bine* because within professional spoken interactions the speakers usually use *păi* when they need to add a contrastive idea or when they do not agree with what has been mentioned before. On the other hand, in ITICMC, we have identified 4 professional spoken interaction fragments in which *well* can be used instead of *but*, and 7 professional spoken interaction fragments in which *well* can be used instead of *ok*. The number of occurrences in which *well* is substituted for *ok* is higher than the number of occurrences in which *well* is substituted for *but* because in English *well* is mainly felt as bringing an improvement to the discourse, in terms of structuring and emphasizing its ideas.

### *6.3. Statistics*

The number of occurrences of *păi* and *well* (37 occurrences of *păi*, in CIVMP, and 17 occurrences of *well*, in ITICMC) proves that the speakers frequently use these discourse markers within professional spoken interactions, unconsciously or consciously, for different reasons (see *supra*, ***6.1.1*** and ***6.1.2***). The discourse marker *păi* is used with a higher frequency in CIVMP (see *infra*, ***6.3.1*** (a)) than the discourse marker *well* is used in ITICMC (see *infra*, ***6.3.2*** (a)).

*Păi* is mainly used to highlight different parts of the discourse (see *supra*, ex. 7, and *infra*, ***6.3.1*** (b)) or to insert a reproach (see *supra*, ex. 4, and *infra*, ***6.3.1*** (b)), and it has the fewest occurrences when it has the function of marking the surprise (see *supra*, ex. 5, and *infra*, ***6.3.1*** (b)) and justification (see *supra*, ex. 2, and *infra*, ***6.3.1*** (b)). It is also important to mention that in Romanian *păi* is mainly felt as bringing a contrasting note (see *supra*, ex. 15 and ex. 16).

In English, *well* in mainly used when the speaker wants to change the answer (see *supra*, ex. 9, and *infra*, ***6.3.2*** (b)) and it has the fewest occurrences when it has the function of marking the attempt to return to the initial topic of the discussion (see *supra*, ex. 2, and *infra* ***6.3.2*** (b)).

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Also significant is to point out that in English *well* is mainly felt as bringing an improvement to the discourse, in terms of structuring and emphasizing its content (see *supra*, ex. 21 and ex. 22).

### *6.3.1. Occurrence Statistics for the Discourse Marker* **păi**

***(a)*** Depending on the corpus:

| The discourse marker *păi* | The number of occurrences |
|---|---|
| CIVMP | 37 |

***(b)*** Depending on the discursive functions that it has in professional spoken interactions:

| Discursive functions (Popescu 2019: 189-204), Zafiu 2009: 779-793) | CIVMP<br>The number of occurrences |
|---|---|
| *Păi* – discourse marker of hesitation | 4 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of justification | 3 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of disagreement | 4 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of reproach | 9 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of surprise | 3 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of confirmation | 6 |
| *Păi* – discourse marker of highlighting different parts of the discourse | 8 |

### *6.3.2. Occurrence Statistics for the Discourse Marker* **well**

***(a)*** Depending on the corpus:

| The discourse marker *well* | The number of occurrences |
|---|---|
| ITICMC | 17 |

***(b)*** Depending on the discursive functions that it has in professional spoken interactions:

| Discursive roles (Schiffrin 1987: 102-128) | ITICMC<br>The number of occurrences |
|---|---|
| *Well* – discourse marker of completing/extending the answer | 2 |
| *Well* – discourse marker of the attempt to change the answer | 6 |
| *Well* – discourse marker of pause/delay | 2 |
| *Well* – discourse marker of refusal | 2 |

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| | |
|---|---|
| *Well* – discourse marker of the attempt to return to the initial topic of discussion | 1 |
| *Well* – discourse marker of disagreement/ objection | 2 |
| *Well* – discourse marker of the fact that the answer does not correspond to what is required in the question / of the fact that the speaker wants to avoid the answer | 2 |

## 7. Conclusion

The first step of the present research was to observe some aspects of how people communicate at work, the professional environment being generally seen as a socially complex setting. One of the most important observations regarding the professional spoken interaction is that language suffers social constraints, being perpetually conditioned by social distance. During professional spoken interaction, speakers usually use discourse strategies. These strategies are achievable thanks to the insertion of different types of discourse markers. For instance, a discourse strategy is when the speaker inserts in initial position the discourse marker *păi* or *well*, to postpone or even cancel the answer. Based on corpus analysis, we have intended to demonstrate that professional spoken interaction is a very complex linguistic phenomenon which involves the use of pragmatic strategies. The careful reading of the corpora allowed us to observe the common features specific to communication in the professional environment, the fact that individuals involved in this type of interaction are in a continuous process of adaptation to the dynamics of the professional context and to ever-changing real-life situations. Yet, there are also major differences regarding the choice of communication strategies considered by speakers more effective in a certain context. We have also observed how all aspects of professional communication can respond to a linguistic research and we hope that the results of such an analysis can be useful in understanding the dynamics of verbal interaction in the professional environment.

The number of occurrences of *păi* and *well* proves that the speakers frequently use them within professional spoken interactions, unconsciously

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or consciously, for different reasons. Regarding their uses, it is essential to point out that *păi* is mainly felt as bringing a contrasting note, whereas *well* is mainly felt as bringing an improvement to the discourse in terms of structuring and pinpointing its content. With reference to their discourse functions, according to our analysis on CIVMP and ITICMC, we can conclude that *păi* is mainly used to highlight different parts of the discourse and to insert a reproach, whereas *well* is mainly used when the speakers want to change his/her answer.

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