

Discourse Markers in Written Arabic

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Abstract:

On the basis of Fraser's (1999) model of discourse markers analysis, this paper presents the results of an investigation of discourse marks in a Koranic text, namely Sura (91) Surat Al Shames. It is argued that discourse markers play a significant role in organizing Arabic discourse.

روابط الخطاب في اللغة العربية المدونة

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ملخص البحث :

يسترشد البحث الحالي بالنموذج البراغماطقي الذي استخدمه العالم فريزر في تحليل روابط الخطاب في اللغة الانكليزية حيث يستعرض البحث الخالي نتائج تحليل روابط الخطاب في سورة من سور القرآن الكريم (سورة 91) أي سورة الشمس . وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة بأن (الواو) استخدمت بكثرة في هذه السورة ولها عدة معاني كلها تساعد على تماسك هذا النص وترابطه .

1. Introduction:

Discourse markers (hereafter DMs), also known as cue phrases from a heterogeneous class of words and expressions which signal the structure of discourse⁽¹⁾. They are draw mainly from the class of adverbials, conjunctions and prepositional phrases. What all these classes have in common is that they line segments of discourse together to achieve coherence and cohesion. The connective functions of DMs has recently been heavily emphasized by a number of linguists (Schiffrin,

1987; Blakemore, 1996; Fraser, 1999; Farch and Hadman, 1999 and Bilimey and Monka, 2000) to mention only few.

Although the main function of DMs is to mark textuality, yet they have other functions too. The main problem in studying DMs in English, Arabic or any other language is whether or not DMs have literal or prepositional meaning. Here, there are conflicting views. Fraser (1999), for example, argues that all DMs have procedural meaning⁽²⁾. Schifffrin (1987) on the other hand, maintains that all DMs, in her corpus, have a core meaning. Whether DMs have procedural or literal meaning, that meaning is enriched by context. This means that DMs are basically technical terms, i.e. they acquire meaning when used in context. Hence, they are context dependent items. Accordingly, they are multifunctional and bidimensional, i.e. they operate at more than one level of discourse structure⁽³⁾. This aspect of DMs, i.e. their multifunctionality makes them fertile objects for discourse analysis. In discussing this aspect of DMs, Farch and Hamdan (1999: 590) state that “their functions in the discourse of a language do not usually coincide with those signaled by their lexical equivalents in another”.

Two points need to be made about the above quotation. First, it draws attention to the fact that all languages have devices which function as DMs. Recent studies of contemporary Arabic, for example, refer to the frequent recurrence of the coordinating functional ‘Wa’ at some portions of discourse (i.e. at the beginning of a sentence, a paragraph or even chapter). Second, it invites researchers to investigate the role of DMs in discourse to find out whether their categories and realizations are similar or different cross-linguistically.

The present paper is an attempt in the area of DMs in written Arabic. Like English, Arabic has also a set of expressions which enable Arabic writers to express ideas smoothly.

2. The Model of Analysis:

This paper adopts Fraser's (1999) discourse markers model of analysis. This model is binary in nature in that Fraser has classified DMs into two main categories each of which has a number of sub-categories.

These are:

1. Propositional DMs: These are used to related the propositions of sentences. They are further subdivided into:

One. Contrastive markers, e.g. 'contrary to this', 'yet', 'conversely', ... etc.

Two. Collateral markers, e.g. 'and', 'moreover', 'in addition', ... etc.

Three inferential markers, e.g. 'therefore', 'for this/that reason', 'so', ... etc.

2. Non-propositioanl DMs: These are used to signal an aspect of discourse structure like organization. They are further divided into:

One. Topic-change markers, e.g. 'by the way', 'incidentally', 'this reminds me', ... etc.

Two. Discourse activity markers, e.g. 'to explain', 'to clarify', 'to illustrate', ... etc.

Three. Discourse structure markers, e.g. 'first', 'second', 'to start with', ... etc.

Fraser's model is pragmatic in nature and reader-oriented. The position taken here is similar. We assume that a written texts is a reflection of different sorts of meaning, i.e. (ideational, interpersonal and textual) to use Halliday's terms (1984). These meanings are part of Long Term Memory (LTM). What is important for our purpose here is the way these meanings are realized in Short Term Memory (STM)⁽⁴⁾. The propositional or ideational meaning is realized in STM by a sentence; the

interpersonal function will be indicated by the illocutionary force indicators and syntactic mood and the textual will be realized by DMs.

Consider the following examples:

1. Unfortunately, John had failed in the exam.
2. Mary was tired, so she left early.

In (1), the item ‘Unfortunately’ is an indicator of the writer’s attitude to the content meaning of the sentence.

In (2) the connective element ‘so’ signals a rhetorical relation of consequence between the two sentences. When the marker is left out, the content meaning is not affected but the relation remains implicit.

Thus, it is taken for granted that readers look for cues like DMs in order to easily comprehend what they read. These cues help readers identify the meanings being conveyed in the written texts.

3. Previous Works:

A part from brief remarks on the redundancy of the coordinating functional ‘wa’ and ‘fa’, there is still little discussion of other DMs in Arabic. Linguistic literature which discusses written Arabic normally focuses on the connective function of DMs in Arabic texts (Cantarion, 1976; Wright, 1975; Farch and Humdan, 1999).

Cantarino (1975) discusses in a great detail a number of conjunctive conjunctions in Arabic. On his view, ‘wa’ is the most commonly used one where he states that “ ‘wa’ is the most generally used conjunctive particle” (p. 18). For him, ‘wa’ connects sentences without implying any closer, more logical relationships. He argues that the frequency of this particle and its manifold function can’t be reproduced in English. According to Cantarino, ‘wa’ is multifunctional in the sense that it is used to connect sentences which express a reciprocal idea; give

reason or result of the first one and which introduces the main idea of the sentence or larger portions of discourse. He concludes his discussion arguing that “In addition to the above, the connective significance of this conjunction [wa] has made common its use to join sentences which are actually very loosely related to the preceding statements or situations ... and at the beginning of chapters, with the natural exception of the first one of the book, when the division into chapters is not intended as a complete break in the narrative” (Ibid.: 18-19).

Wright (1975) calls DMs connective particles (حروف العطف) or conditional particles (حروف الشرط). He also focuses on the connective function of these particles where he states that “ ‘Wa’ is used to connect clauses as a simple coordination and ‘fa’ is used to connect two clauses indicating either subsequence or cause and effect” (1975: 209-291).

A more recent account of DMs in Arabic is given by Farch and Hamdan (1999). In an article entitled “The Translation of Arabic ‘wa’ into English”, they have investigated the nature and the scope of the problems which Arabic learners of English faces in translating DMs into English. They analysed in a great detail only one marker in Arabic namely, ‘wa’. The sample chosen for analysis consists of 100 second year English majors at the University of Jordan during the academic year 1996-1997.

The researchers prepared in advance a text and asked students to translate it into English. They have come to the conclusion that the multiplicity of the connectives in general and ‘wa’ in particular is one of the difficult problems that translators face in the process of translating from one language to another (1999: 590).

The approach adopted by Farch and Hamdan is limited in scope because it is based on the analysis of one marker only. They realized that

their focus was narrow, and thereby they invited researchers to investigate the problems which Arabic learners of English would encounter in translating ‘wa’ and other connectives like ‘aw – or’, ‘lakkin – but’, ... etc.

One approach to DMs in Arabic is purely pragmatic in nature. It is based on the assumption that language always occurs and is sensitive to the communicative use, and that the structure of language reflects this communicative use, and that the structure of language reflects this communicative basis. DMs are regarded here as cues which signal the communicative functions of language.

4. The Material:

This paper analyses DMs in a Koranic text (Sura 91), the Sura of the Sun, representing the expository genre. This text is continuous, yet it is not too long. The main advantage of selecting a short text is that it helps the analyst to make a complete analysis within time limits. A short text is also better than an unfinished extract which is not sufficient to reveal the richness of texture in Arabic texts. This needs the whole text or at least a finished section of it if it is too long⁽⁵⁾.

For ease of reference, the verse of the Sura are numbered and DMs are underlined (see the appendix).

5. The Analysis of the Text:

There are a number of generalizations to be made about the functions of DMs and their role in achieving both cohesion and coherence. To reiterate, DMs signal the underlying as well as the cohesive structure of discourse. The underlying structure is here equated with the communicative intentions of written texts.

The underlying structure of this Koranic text is multidimensional. It is basically framed in terms of parallel structures like “By the Sun and his morning brightness, and by the moon when she follows him, ...”. These parallel structures consist of propositions, sets of propositions and speech acts. The Sura is about those who will be prosperous, happy, lucky, etc. and about those who will be unfortunate, sad and miserable in the after life. This is the main topic of the Sura as a whole. This main topic is not stated directly at the beginning of the Sura as it is usual in order texts, but comes after seven oaths by God. The main topic is: prosperous is the one who purifies his soul, and failed he who seduces it (Arbery, translation).

This way of presenting topics is one of the characteristic features of Koran. Many Suras begin with oaths by God, then followed by the main line of discourse development. The topic of this Sura has two speech acts: a promise and a threat or warning. There is a contrast which is signaled by the use of the markers ‘wa-qad’. This coordinator introduces the second aspect of the topic (i.e. the threat) and relates it to the first part which is in contrast (i.e. a promise). Here, ‘wa-qad’ operates at both levels of discourse: propositional and non- propositional, non-propositionally, it introduces one part of discourse topic⁽⁶⁾. While propositionally, it is used in the contrastive sense.

The same is also true of other coordinators in particular ‘wa’ which is dominant in this text since it occurs 14 times within the 15 verses

which comprise the text. There is one instance of ‘wa-qad’, one instance of Wa-la and five instances of ‘fa’. The total number of DMs in this Koranic text is therefore 21. Like ‘wa-qad’, ‘wa’ is also found to operate at more than one level of discourse. Propositionally, it is used mostly in Fraser’s collateral sense to link propositions as in the following verses:

By the sun and his morning brightness	وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا
And by the moon when she follows him,	وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا تَلَاها
And by the day when it displays him	وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا
And by the night when it surrounds him	وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا
By the heaven and That which built it	وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا
And by the earth and That which extended it!	وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا
By the soul, and That which shaped it	وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا
And inspired it to lewdness and god fearing	فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا

Non-propositionally, ‘wa’ introduces oaths. It is called (واو القسم) in Arabic. This sort of ‘wa’ is a purely deictic marker which is devoid of any literal meaning. The main pragmatic function of this ‘wa’ is that it draws attention to the newsworthy information. Hence, it functions as an orienter. In her analysis, Schiffirin (1987: 322) draws attentions to the diectic function of DMs where she states: “We need another dimension of analysis if we are to go further in understanding the contribution of discourse markers to coherence”. Probably this dimension is deixis and all markers seem to have indexical functions (cf: Levinson, 1983: 87).

After stating the topic, the Sura gives us an example of a digression or topic change: the prophet or the messenger of God said to them:

“The she-camel of God; let her drink?” فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ نَاقَةَ اللَّهِ وَسُقْيَاهَا

But they cried him lies, and hamstrung her فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَعَقَرُوهَا

So their Lord crushed them for their **فَسَوَّاهَا** **رَبُّهُمْ** **يَذْنِبُهُمْ**

Sin, and levelled them;

And he fears not the issue thereof **وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا**

The prophet advises people to take care of the she-camel but
people disbelieve him and they killed it.

Accordingly, God punishes them. In the word “**فَسَوَّاهَا**” ‘fa’ signals consequences of result. While ‘wa’ in “**وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا**” functions in the contrastive sense whose meaning is similar to ‘but’. It also functions as a terminator in the sense that it closes the text.

6. Conclusions:

All in all, the analysis lends support to Fraser’s study in matters related to the role played by DMs in creating texture. Yet, there are differences concerning the different or various meanings of DMs in Arabic in particular the marker ‘wa’. Fraser, for example, regards ‘and’ as a connective element. In our analysis, it has been found that ‘wa’ is used to open the Sura; to introduces a topic; to mark topic-change and to link topic together. Here we can say that ‘wa’ in Arabic has more functions than ‘and’ in English. This is due to the text-type and cultural considerations. We tend to use ‘wa’ more frequently than other markers for the sake of harmony and symmetry. This leads as to the conclusion that ‘wa’ is one of the components of coherent Arabic discourse.

It is hoped that more in depth-studies of some other DMs in English and Arabic will provide further support for pragmatic approaches to the analysis of DMs.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that the terms ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ are used interchangeably here.
2. Procedural meaning refers to the sequential function while propositional meaning refers to the truth-conditional aspects of meaning.
3. Schiffrin (1987), for example, argues that DMs operate at five levels of talk which she labels: exchange structure, action structure, ideational structure, participant structure and information structure.
4. For further details on terms LTM and STM, the reader is referred to Van Dijk (1980).
5. For more details on the selection of texts, see Fries (1993).
6. Discourse topic is a broad notion. For the sake of analysis, scholars normally divide it into global and local (Van Dijk, 1980).

APPENDIX

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

﴿وَالشَّمْسُ وَضُحَاهَا (1) وَالْقَمَرُ إِذَا تَلَّاهَا (2) وَالنَّهَارُ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا (3) وَاللَّيْلُ إِذَا

يَغْشَاهَا (4) وَالسَّمَاءُ وَمَا بَنَاهَا (5) وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَا طَحَاهَا (6) وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا (7) فَأَلْهَمَهَا

فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا (8) قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا (9) وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا (10) كَذَبَتْ ثَمُودُ

بَطْغُوهَا (11) إِذِ انْبَعَثَ أَشْقَاهَا (12) فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ نَاقَةَ اللَّهِ وَسُقْيَاهَا (13) فَكَذَّبُوهُ

فَعَقَرُوهَا فَدَمْدَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ فَسَوَّاهَا (14) وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا (15)﴾

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