

علامات الخطاب في التفاعلات العربية العراقية
Discourse Markers in Iraqi Arabic Interactions

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model, ideational markers, textual markers,
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الملخص

تُعدّ علامات الخطاب من العناصر الأساسية في اللغة المنطوقة، إذ تسهم في تشكيل مسار المحادثة وتنظيم التفاعل الاجتماعي بين المتحدثين. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى بحث استخدامات ووظائف علامات الخطاب في العربية العراقية، مع التركيز على تأثيرها في ديناميكيات التواصل بين المتحدثين الأصليين. واعتمدت الدراسة على نموذج شيفرين (Schiffrin) في تصنيف علامات الخطاب إلى وظائف فكرية (Ideational)، ونصية (Textual)، وتفاعلية/بينشخصية (Interpersonal). ومن خلال تحليل محادثات طبيعية جرى تحديد عدد من العلامات الأكثر شيوعاً، مثل: شلون، وزين، وها، ودراسة أدوارها في إدارة تبادل الأدوار الكلامية، وتحقيق الترابط والانسجام في الخطاب، والتعبير عن التهذيب والمجاملة. وأظهرت النتائج أن علامات الخطاب تؤدي دوراً محورياً في التخفيف من الأفعال المهددة للوجه، وتيسير التفاعل اللغوي الفعال، وتعزيز الفهم المتبادل بين أطراف الحديث. وتسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء مجال تحليل الخطاب العربي من خلال تقديم تحليل معمق للوظائف التداولية لعلامات الخطاب في العربية العراقية، كما تقدم رؤية مهمة للباحثين في اللسانيات الاجتماعية، وتحليل المحادثة، ودراسات التواصل بين الثقافات.

Abstract

Discourse markers are essential elements of spoken language, shaping the flow of conversation and regulating social interaction. This study examines the use and functions of discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic, focusing on their impact on communication dynamics among native speakers. Drawing on Schifffrin's model, markers are classified into ideational, textual, and interpersonal functions. Analysis of naturally occurring conversations identifies frequently used markers, including شلون ("how"), زين ("well"), and ها ("so"), and explores their roles in managing turn-taking, signaling coherence, and expressing politeness. The findings reveal that discourse markers play a crucial role in mitigating face-threatening acts, facilitating effective interaction, and promoting mutual understanding. By providing an in-depth analysis of the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic, this study contributes to the broader field of Arabic discourse analysis and offers insights relevant to sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and cross-cultural communication research.

Literature Review

1. Introduction

Discourse markers are an essential component of spoken language, as they help structure interaction, maintain coherence, and facilitate the flow of conversation. In Iraqi Arabic, these markers are particularly significant because of the strong oral tradition and the cultural importance of polite and nuanced interaction. Discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic, as in other languages, function to connect ideas, manage conversational dynamics, and express social relationships between speakers.

The study of discourse markers has attracted considerable attention in linguistics, with researchers investigating their functions across different languages and dialects. One influential framework for analyzing discourse markers is proposed by Schiffrin (1987), who categorizes them into three main functions: ideational, textual, and interpersonal. Ideational markers connect propositions and ideas, textual markers organize and structure discourse, and interpersonal markers manage social relations and speaker intentions.

Although many studies have examined discourse markers in Modern Standard Arabic and other Arabic dialects, research focusing specifically on Iraqi Arabic remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by examining the use and functions of discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic interactions, using Schiffrin's model as the analytical framework.

2. Discourse Markers

The production and interpretation of coherent discourse is a complex process that requires various types of linguistic and social knowledge. Schiffrin (1994) argues that one important aspect of discourse competence is social and expressive competence—the ability to use language to express personal and social identities, perform actions, and manage relationships between speakers. In addition, discourse competence involves cognitive abilities, such as organizing conceptual information, and textual abilities, which involve constructing and interpreting language beyond the sentence level.

Discourse analysis is a broad and multifaceted field. Brown and Yule (1983) define discourse analysis as the study of language in use, focusing

not only on linguistic forms but also on their functions in human interaction. Stubbs (1983) further explains that discourse analysis examines language beyond the sentence level, such as in conversations and written texts, emphasizing its role in social contexts and interpersonal communication.

Brown and Yule also highlight the distinction between functional and structural approaches to language, stressing the importance of analyzing larger units of discourse. They note that the term discourse analysis has been used differently across disciplines, making it difficult to provide a single comprehensive definition. Stubbs (1983) similarly argues that any complete account of discourse analysis is challenging due to the field's broad scope and diverse perspectives.

3. Classification of Discourse Markers

Halliday's (1978) functional-pragmatic approach to language provides a theoretical basis for classifying discourse markers. He identifies three primary functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. These functions are widely used to explain how discourse markers operate in communication.

The ideational function relates to the representation of content and information about the world, focusing on propositions and their meanings.

The interpersonal function concerns the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, including the expression of attitudes, emotions, and speaker stance.

The textual function ensures cohesion and coherence, allowing language to form structured and meaningful discourse rather than isolated sentences.

Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) adapt Vande Kopple's (1985) classification system of discourse markers, retaining the textual and interpersonal categories while further subdividing them. They distinguish between textual and interpretive markers and classify interpersonal markers into hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentary markers.

4. Schiffrin's Five-Plane Model of Discourse Markers

Deborah Schiffrin's Five-Plane Model offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing discourse markers across multiple levels of discourse. This model demonstrates that discourse markers perform several functions simultaneously in structuring conversation, managing interaction, and conveying meaning.

1 Exchange Structure

Exchange structure refers to turn-taking and the organization of conversational flow. Discourse markers at this level help speakers manage transitions and regulate interaction.

Examples:

- English: well, so, now
- Iraqi Arabic: يلا (yalla), زين (zain)

Schiffrin (1987) explains that these markers signal the speaker's intention to take a turn, continue speaking, or yield the floor.

2 Action Structure

Action structure relates to speech acts such as requests, offers, apologies, and promises. Discourse markers clarify the speaker's intended action.

Examples:

- English: okay, alright, look
- Iraqi Arabic: والله (wallah), تفضل (tafaddal)

These markers help listeners interpret the communicative function of an utterance (Schiffrin, 1987).

3 Ideational Structure

Ideational structure concerns the organization of ideas and logical relationships between propositions.

Examples:

- English: because, but, therefore
- Iraqi Arabic: لأن (li'ann), لكن (lakin)

Schiffrin (1987) notes that such markers signal topic shifts, contrast, and causal relationships in discourse.

4 Participation Framework

Participation framework refers to the social roles and relationships among participants in interaction. Discourse markers indicate alignment, agreement, and engagement.

Examples:

- English: you know, I mean, like
- Iraqi Arabic: إنت تعرف (inta ta'arif), يعني (ya'ni)

These markers help negotiate social relations and conversational involvement (Schiffrin, 1987).

5 Information State

Information state concerns the management of knowledge and assumptions between speakers. Discourse markers signal whether information is new, shared, or uncertain.

Examples:

- English: actually, in fact, by the way
- Iraqi Arabic: على فكرة (‘ala fikra), في الحقيقة (fi al-haqiqa)

Schiffrin (1987) highlights that these markers guide listeners in interpreting the informational status of discourse.

5 Discourse Markers in Arabic Dialects

Discourse markers have been widely studied across various Arabic dialects, revealing both similarities and unique features in their pragmatic functions. Al-Fraihat (2015) investigated Jordanian Arabic and found that markers such as يعني and بس are frequently used to signal topic shifts, contrastive statements, and manage turn-taking during conversation. Abu

Saad (2018) examined Egyptian Arabic interactions and highlighted that interpersonal markers like *والله* and *تمام* play a key role in expressing speaker stance, commitment, and maintaining conversational flow. More recently, Al-Khatib (2020) explored Gulf Arabic and reported that markers like *على* and *يعني* are essential in regulating information exchange and clarifying speaker intentions. Similarly, Hassan (2019) analyzed Levantine Arabic discourse markers and emphasized their contribution to both textual coherence and interactional alignment. These studies collectively indicate that while the functional categories of discourse markers—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—are largely consistent across dialects, the frequency, choice, and contextual usage of specific markers vary according to cultural and social norms. Despite these insights, research specifically focused on Iraqi Arabic remains limited, creating a significant gap that the current study aims to address by examining how discourse markers operate in everyday interactions among native Iraqi Arabic speakers.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the functions and roles of discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic interactions. Data were collected from multiple naturally occurring sources to capture a wide range of communicative contexts. Specifically, the dataset comprises recorded conversations from family gatherings, semi-structured interviews with native Iraqi Arabic speakers, and transcripts from television talk shows and radio programs. The recorded conversations and interviews were audio-recorded

with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic features and contextual nuances. Semi-structured interviews were

designed to elicit speakers' natural use of discourse markers while allowing flexibility for participants to provide elaboration. Media transcripts were included to examine discourse markers in public and semi-formal settings, offering insight into the broader use of markers beyond private interactions.

Analysis was guided by Schifffrin's Five-Plane Model of Discourse Markers, which categorizes markers into exchange structure, action structure, ideational structure, participation framework, and information state. This framework provided a systematic basis for identifying and interpreting discourse markers across different contexts, enabling the researcher to examine their sequential organization, communicative functions, and interactional significance. The combination of diverse data sources and a robust analytical framework ensures both depth and reliability in understanding the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic.

Finding

Sample 1: Recorded

Conversations

Context: Family

gathering Transcript:

- Speaker A: يلا نمشي (Yalla namshee – “Let's go”)

- Speaker B: زين، شنو رأيكم؟ (Zain, shinu ra'yikum? – “Okay, what do you all think?”)
- Speaker C: والله، الفكرة حلوة (Wallah, alfikra helu – “By God, the idea is good”)

Analysis:

يلا (Yalla): Functions as an exchange structure discourse marker. It facilitates turn-taking and signals the initiation of a new action, in this case, leaving. It sets the pace of the conversation and marks a transition in topic or activity. زين (Zain): Operates on both the exchange and action structure planes. It acknowledges the previous turn while soliciting opinions, helping to manage

the flow of the conversation and clarify the speaker's intention. It also acts as an agreement marker and transition indicator. والله (Wallah): Functions as an interpersonal discourse marker, emphasizing the speaker's sincerity and commitment. It aligns with the participation framework by expressing agreement, emotional engagement, and reinforcing the speaker's stance

Sample 2: Interviews

Context: Semi-structured interview with a native

Iraqi Arabic speaker Transcript:

- Interviewer: شنو رأيك بالوضع؟ (Shinu ra'yik bilwadh' – “What do you think about the situation?”)
- Respondent: الوضع شوي صعب، يعني (Ya'ni, alwadh' shway sa'b – “I mean,

the situation is a bit difficult”)

- Interviewer: على فكرة، شنو خططك للمستقبل؟ (Ala fikra, shinu khuttak lil mustaqbal?
– “By the way, what are your plans for the future?”)

Analysis:

يعني (Ya’ni): Functions on the ideational structure plane, clarifying and elaborating on the respondent’s thoughts about the situation. It introduces an explanation, making the statement clearer and easier to understand. فكرة

على (Ala fikra): Serves as a textual discourse marker, signaling a shift in topic and introducing new information. It guides the listener to follow the change in the conversation smoothly.

Sample 3: Recorded

Conversations Context:

Casual family dinner

Transcript:

- Speaker A: هلا، كيف الحال؟ (Hala, keef alhaal? – “Hi, how are you?”)
- Speaker B: تمام، بس كان في شوية مشاكل (Tamaam, bas kan fi shwaya mushakil –
“I’m fine, but there were some problems”)
- Speaker C: الأمور صارت أفضل، يعني، (Ya’ni, al-umoorsarat afdal – “I mean, things got better”)

Analysis:

هالا (Hala): Functions as an interpersonal discourse marker, establishing a friendly and informal tone at the start of the conversation. It signals a greeting and initiates interaction . بس (Bas) Operates on the exchange structure plane, indicating a contrast or exception to the previous positive statement. It manages the conversational flow by introducing a shift in topic. يعني (Ya'ni): Functions on the ideational structure plane, providing clarification and elaboration on the previous statement. It adds additional information that explains the improvement mentioned by Speaker B.

Sample 4: Media Transcript

Context: Television news segment on

recent events Transcript:

- Anchor: لدينا أخبار جديدة عن الوضع الاقتصادي (Al-yawm, ladayna akhbar jadeeda an al-wadh' al-iqtesadi – “Today, we have new news about the economic situation”)
- Reporter: فعلاً، الوضع شهد تغييرات كبيرة (Fi'lan, al-wadh' shahad taghyeerat kabeera – “Indeed, the situation has seen significant changes”)
- Anchor: طيب، دعونا ننتقل الآن إلى التفاصيل (Tayyib, da'oon naantiqil al-aan ila al-tafaaseel – “Okay, let’s move on to the details now”)

Analysis:

فعلاً (Fi'lan): Functions on the ideational and participation framework planes. It affirms the accuracy of the statement and reinforces the credibility of the report, creating a stronger connection between the current news and previous information. طيب (Tayyib): Acts as a textual discourse marker, signaling a transition to a new segment of the news report. It ensures a smooth flow for the broadcast by guiding the audience to the next topic. دعونا (Da'oon): Serves as an exchange structure marker, initiating a detailed discussion and managing the overall structure of the conversation. It helps maintain coherence and directs attention to the forthcoming information.

Sample 5: Media Transcript

Context: Television program covering recent

cultural events Transcript:

• Host: (Al-yawm ladayna taqreer 'an al-mahrajaan al-thaqaafi fi Baghdad – “Today we have a report on the cultural festival in Baghdad”)

فعلاً، المهرجان كان ناجحاً للغاية، وشهدنا عروضاً

• Reporter: متنوعة

lilghaya, washahadna 'uroodan mutanawwi'a – “Indeed, the festival was extremely successful, and we saw a variety of performances”)

• Host: طيب، دعونا نسمع بعض التعليقات من الحضور (Tayyib, da'oon nasma' ba'd al-

ta'leeqat min al-hudur – “Okay, let’s hear some comments from the attendees”)

Analysis:

فعلاً (Fi’lan): Functions on the ideational and participation framework planes, emphasizing the success of the festival and enhancing the credibility of the report. It provides emphasis and strengthens the reliability of the statement. طيب (Tayyib) Acts as a textual discourse marker, signaling a transition from the report to audience feedback. It helps maintain coherence and ensures the broadcast flows smoothly. دعونا

(Da’oon) Functions as an exchange structure marker, introducing a new segment where attendees’ comments are presented. It guides the conversation towards collecting and sharing additional perspectives effectively

Sample 6: Social Media Comments

Context: Comments on a social media post about a

local festival Transcript:

- User A: المهرجان كان مذهلاً هذا العام (Al-mahrajaan kan mudhilan hadha al-‘aam! – “The festival was amazing this year!”)
- User B: كان فيه زحمة كبيرة (Bas, kan feeh zahma kabeera – “But, there was a lot of crowd”)

يا نبي، لو كانوا نظموا الأمور بشكل أفضل، كان سيكون أفضل (Ya’ni, law kanu nazzamoo al-umoor

• User C:

bishaklafdal, kan bikoon afdal – “I mean, if they had organized things better, it would have been better”)

Analysis:

بس (Bas): Functions on the ideational plane, introducing a contrast to the positive evaluation. It highlights a limitation, balancing the overall assessment of the festival. يعني (Ya'ni) Operates on

both the textual and ideational planes, providing clarification and elaboration on the previous comment. It links the critique with a suggested improvement. لو كانوا (Law kanu) Serves as a hypothetical marker on the action structure plane, indicating a conditional scenario that affects the outcome. It introduces an alternative possibility for better festival organization.

Sample 7: Business Meeting Dialogue

Context: Discussion of project proposals in a

business meeting Transcript:

• Manager: لدينا ثلاثة مقترحات لمشروعنا القادم (Ladaynathalatha muqtarahaat limashroo'na al-qadim – “We have three proposals for our next project”)

• Team Member A: أول واحد ممتاز، بس، يحتاج إلى بعض التحسينات (Awwal wahid mumtaaz, bas, yahtaaj ila ba'd al-tahseenat – “The first one is excellent, but it needs some improvements”)

B: (Ya'ni, nahtaj ila muraja'at
• Team Member

al-tafaaseel wa al-ta'akkud min jami' al-jawaaneeb – “I mean, we need to review the details and ensure all aspects are covered”)

Analysis:

بس (Bas): Functions on the ideational plane, signaling a contrast between praise and critique. It introduces constructive feedback to guide discussion. يعني (Ya'ni): Operates on the textual plane, connecting the previous critique with a proposed action. It guides the conversation toward practical steps. نحتاج إلى (Nahtaj ila): Serves as an action structure marker, emphasizing the necessity of reviewing details. It directs focus to the steps required to implement improvements.

Sample 8: Radio Talk Show

Context: Discussion about recent

political events Transcript:

• Host: اليوم سنتحدث عن القرارات الأخيرة للحكومة (Al-yawm sanatahaddath 'an al-qaraarat al-akhira lil-hukooma – “Today we will discuss the latest government decisions”)

• Guest: فعلاً، هذه القرارات ستكون لها تأثيرات واسعة: (Fi'lan, hadhihi al-qaraaraat satoon laha ta'thiraat waasi'a – “Indeed, these decisions will have widespread effects”)

طيب، دعونا نستعرض بعض الأمثلة من التأثيرات (Tayyib, da'oon nastaarid ba'd al-amthila

• Host: المحتملة

min al-ta'thiraat al-muhtamala – “Okay, let's review some examples of the potential effects”)

Analysis:

فعلاً (Fi'lan): Functions on the ideational and participation framework planes, confirming the importance of the decisions and reinforcing the guest's statement. طيب (Tayyib): Acts as a textual marker, signaling a transition to the next part of the discussion. It organizes the conversation for smooth progression. دعونا (Da'oon): Serves as an exchange structure marker, introducing a new segment and directing focus toward detailed examples of potential effects.

Sample 9: Customer Service

Interaction Context: Customer

requesting a product return

Transcript:

طلبت استرجاع المنتج الذي اشتريته الأسبوع الماضي (Talabt istirja' al-muntaj alladhi

• Customer:

ishtaraytuhu al-usbu' al-maadi – “I requested a return for the product I

bought last week”)

- Service Representative: طيب، هل لديك رقم الطلب؟ (Tayyib, hal ladayka raqam al-talab? – “Okay, do you have the order number?”)

- Customer: نعم، الرقم هو 12345، والمنتج كان معيب (Na’am, al-raqam huwa 12345, wa al-muntaj kan ma’iyb – “Yes, the number is 12345, and the product was defective”)

Analysis:

Functions as a textual marker, transitioning the conversation from the request to verification. It helps organize the interaction and maintain a smooth flow. هل لديك (Hal ladayka): Operates on the action structure plane, requesting specific information necessary for processing the return. It

ensures the interaction progresses efficiently. كان (Kan): Functions as a discourse marker providing context, explaining the problem and linking the customer’s request to the reason for the return.

Sample 10: Semi-Structured Interviews

Context: Interview about public

transportation experiences Transcript:

1. Interviewer: شلون كانت تجربتك بالمترو؟ (Shlon kanat tajribatak bil-metro? – “How was your experience with the metro?”)

2. Respondent: بصراحة، كانت مريحة بس أوقات مزدحمة (Bisaraha, kanat mureeha bas awqat muzdahema – “Honestly, it was comfortable but sometimes crowded”)

3. Interviewer: على فكرة، هل لديك أي اقتراحات لتحسين الخدمة؟ (Ala fikra, hal ladayk ay iqtiraahat litahseen al-khidma? – “By the way, do you have any suggestions for improving the service?”)

Analysis:

بصراحة (Bisaraha): Functions on the interpersonal and ideational planes, expressing honesty and establishing a transparent tone for the response. It highlights sincerity. على فكرة (Ala fikra) Acts as a textual discourse marker, signaling a shift to a new topic and introducing a follow-up question. It ensures coherent flow in the conversation. بس (Bas): Functions on the ideational plane, contrasting the positive aspect with a limitation. It balances the overall evaluation and provides a nuanced perspective

8. Discussion

The analysis of discourse markers (DMs) across various conversational contexts underscores their fundamental role in effective communication. DMs are essential for guiding the flow of conversation, facilitating smooth transitions between topics, and maintaining coherence. They allow speakers to shift focus, introduce elaboration, or provide clarification without disrupting the dialogue. For example, markers that signal contrast or request clarification help manage the direction and

structure of the conversation.

Furthermore, discourse markers contribute significantly to structuring interactions. By introducing contrasts, limitations, or conditions, they balance different aspects of a discussion and provide

clear guidance on actionable steps, ensuring conversations remain focused and goal-oriented. DMs also enhance clarity and detail, allowing participants to explain points more fully, specify needs, and ensure comprehensive understanding. This contributes to deeper engagement and more effective problem-solving within the conversation.

Discourse markers also play a key role in interpersonal management and engagement. They foster a respectful and constructive tone, encourage active participation, and direct attention to specific aspects of discussion, enhancing the overall quality of interaction. Finally, DMs organize the flow of information by signaling when new details are introduced or when further elaboration is needed, supporting coherent and structured discourse.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that discourse markers are crucial for managing conversational structure, enhancing clarity, guiding actions, and facilitating interactive engagement. Their effective use ensures coherent, well-organized, and meaningful communication.

9. Conclusion

This study on discourse markers in Iraqi Arabic interactions reveals several important findings. First, DMs are central to maintaining the flow of conversation, ensuring smooth topic transitions, and supporting overall coherence. They structure dialogue by balancing different discussion aspects and providing guidance on practical actions.

Second, discourse markers enhance clarity and detail, allowing speakers to elaborate, emphasize key points, and address specific issues effectively. Their use ensures that participants understand the conversation fully and can engage meaningfully. Third, DMs manage interpersonal dynamics by fostering a respectful, constructive, and engaging tone, which is critical for productive interaction.

Finally, discourse markers guide the organization and flow of information, indicating when new ideas are introduced or further explanation is required. Beyond their functional role, the study highlights the cultural and contextual significance of DMs in Iraqi Arabic, offering insights into their use within specific social and cultural settings. Understanding these dynamics contributes valuable knowledge to the study of discourse practices and intercultural communication.

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