

## Procedural Functions of the Discourse Marker (ee) In Syriac Discourse: A Relevance Theoretical Study

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### Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the procedural functions of the discourse marker أي "ee"(yeah) used in the daily conversation of Syriac discourse. It is assumed that this discourse marker has many procedural functions that help to constrain the context relevance of both the speaker's and the hearer's assumptions. The constraining is achieved by deriving one of the contextual effects: contextual implication, strengthening, and contradiction, or by reorienting the recipient to a path in the given context that leads to these effects. The study tries to prove that the procedural encoding of this discourse marker in Syriac is necessary to conceptualize the utterance context to achieve the speaker's intended meaning. The data examples, selected from a play performed in the Syriac language, are transliterated, translated, and then analyzed within the relevance theory, concerning the procedural functions of the involved discourse marker. The results of this study showed that the procedural role of the discourse marker أي "ee"(yeah) in Syriac discourse is very significant in the interpretation of the intended meaning. In light of the findings, the study displays some recommendations to researchers interested in this field of research.

**Keywords:** Syriac interactional discourse, Relevance Theory, Constraints, Contextual effects, Procedural functions

الوظائف الإجرائية لأداة الخطاب (نعم) في الخطاب السرياني: دراسة مركزة على نظرية الترابطية  
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### المستخلص

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لدراسة الوظائف الإجرائية لعلامة الخطاب (نعم) المستخدمة في المحادثة اليومية للخطاب السرياني. تفترض هذه الدراسة أن يكون لعلامة الخطاب هذه العديد من الوظائف الإجرائية التي تساعد على تقييد ملاءمة سياق افتراضات كل من المتحدث والمستمع. يتحقق التقييد عن طريق اشتقاق أحد أنواع التأثيرات السياقية والتي تتضمن التضمن السياقي، التعزيز، والتناقض، أو عن طريق إعادة توجيه المتلقي إلى مسار في سياق معين يؤدي إلى هذه التأثيرات. تحاول هذه الدراسة إثبات أن الترميز الإجرائي لمؤشر الخطاب باللغة السريانية ضروري للترميز المفاهيمي لسياق الكلام لتحقيق المعنى المقصود للمتحدث. تم اختيار أمثلة البيانات من المحادثات اليومية للمتحدثين السريان الأصليين وترجمتها وتحليلها بالطريقة الترابطية فيما يتعلق بالوظائف الإجرائية لعلامة الخطاب المختارة. أظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الدور الإجرائي لعلامة الخطاب (نعم) في الخطاب السرياني مهم جداً حيث يساعد المتحدث على تفسير المعنى المقصود. في ضوء النتائج تعرض الدراسة بعض التوصيات للباحثين المهتمين بمثل هذا المجال البحثي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الخطاب السرياني التفاعلي، نظرية الترابطية، القيود، التأثيرات السياقية، الوظائف الإجرائية

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### معلومات البحث

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### Introduction

This study attempts to investigate the procedural encoding functions of the discourse marker أي "ee"(yeah) in Syriac daily discourse.

Discourse: specifically, the dialect of Qaraqoush, one variation of Syriac dialects. The data is a play in the Syriac language, performed at the theatre of

Qaraqoush. The approach used to study the selected discourse marker is the relevance theory developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986). Relevance theory explains how the participants comprehend each other and how the recipient infers the speaker's intended meaning. The speaker uses discourse markers to limit the number of interpretations of the utterance context and make the hearer derive the contextual effects (cognitive effects) that help him/her interpret utterances.

These necessary cognitive effects are of three kinds: creating a contextual implication when new information is added to the hearer, strengthening an existing assumption when evidence of the information is given to strengthen a previous assumption, and finally, contradicting an old assumption (i.e., contradiction). As a result, discourse markers work as inferential paths for the hearer to achieve the speaker's intended meaning.

### 1.2 The Problem of the Study

This study's major problem is how to deal with the discourse marker *أي* "ee"(yeah) from a cognitive relevance perspective in Syriac discourse. The minor issue is that nobody has investigated the procedural role of this discourse marker in Syriac discourse; thus, the study attempts to fill this gap.

### 1.3 The Hypothesis of the Study

The study hypothesizes that the discourse marker *أي* "ee"(yeah) is a marker that has procedural functions that help to guide or instruct the interlocutors to derive different cognitive effects. It is also hypothesized that relevance theory is a reasonable model to investigate the procedural role of this discourse marker.

### 1.4 The Aims of the Study

The study attempts to investigate the procedural role of discourse marker *أي* "ee"(yeah) and to

prove the multifunctionality of this discourse marker in Syriac discourse concerning its procedural functions.

### 1.5 Methodology

This research is qualitative since it uses a qualitative method to describe the nature of the discourse marker *أي* "ee"(yeah) in Syriac. It answers why and how a discourse marker is used procedurally.

### 1.6 Scope of the Study

In this study, the discourse marker *أي* "ee (yeah), taken from a play in the Syriac language, specifically the dialect of Qaraqoush, is analyzed, with special reference to its procedural functions.

### 1.7 Significance of the Study

This study will be significant because it highlights a discourse marker, *أي* "ee"(yeah) in the Syriac language that hasn't been studied before. It would also be valuable for the literature on discourse markers and for the literature on relevance theory that will be used to analyze other markers.

### 1.8 Labels of Discourse Markers

Discourse analysis is a crucial area in linguistics that has received significant attention since the previous century. According to Stubbs (1983, P.1), it attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or the clause. In other words, it studies larger units than a sentence, such as conversation exchanges and written texts. In addition, discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts, especially with the interaction and communication or dialogue between Ss (ibid).

In this sense, discourse analysis is seen as language in use (Brown & Yule, 1983, P.1 and Cook, 1989, P.1).

Discourse markers are an essential branch of discourse analysis. They are grammatical or function words used to either create or enhance coherence and discourse connections, or to guide participants to the interpretation of utterances, in the contexts used. So, they are expressions, words, and phrases that play an essential role in discourse analysis. However, the mere mention of the term discourse marker causes misunderstandings because different labels have been given to such expressions. One finds, discourse markers as in (Schiffrin, 1987, Discourse Connectives as in (Blakemore, 1987), Discourse Particles (Abraham,1991), Discourse Operators (Redeker,1990), Cue Phrases (Knott and Sanders,1998), Pragmatic Expressions (Erman,1987), Pragmatic Connectives (van Dijk,1979), Pragmatic Operators (Ariel,1998), Pragmatic Markers (Brinton,1990), Pragmatic Particles (Östman,1995), Semantic Conjuncts (Quirk et al., 1985). For more details regarding DMs, see ( Estaifo and Al-Bajjari, 2021; Abdurrahman, 2023; Estaifo et al., 2023). This study prefers the label discourse marker because many scholars agree.

### 1.9 Definitions of Discourse Markers

First, Discourse analysis is a significant area in linguistics that has received great attention since the previous century. It is defined according to Stubbs (1983, p.1) as an attempt to study the organization of language above the sentence, or above the clause. In other words, it studies larger units than a sentence, such as conversation exchanges and written texts. In addition, discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in

social contexts, especially with the interaction and communication or dialogue between speakers (ibid).

Discourse markers are a branch of discourse analysis. They are defined differently by different scholars. For instance, Schiffrin (1987, p.31) defined discourse markers as “ sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk”. Concerning this definition, two important aspects of discourse markers are introduced; the first aspect refers to the fact that discourse markers are items that work at the discourse level and are dependent on the sequence of discourse. Schiffrin claims that this sequential dependence can be seen where discourse markers join two units that don't belong to the same syntactic category.

According to Fraser (1999, p.31), Discourse markers are “a class of lexical expressions drawn primarily from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases which signal a relationship between the interpretations of the segment they produce”.

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.162), in Faghih and Mousaee (2015), Discourse markers are expressions that typically connect two segments without contributing to their meaning. These expressions include adverbials such as still, conjunctions such as but, and prepositional phrases such as *in fact*.

According to Siepmann (2005, p.138 ), discourse markers are defined from a coherence approach, he stated that “ Discourse markers are natural strings of varying length and morpho-syntactic structure whose primary function is to signal a coherence – relations obtaining between a particular unit of discourse and other surrounding units of the common situation and thereby to facilitate the listeners' or readers' processing task ”. This study defines discourse markers as

expressions that are empty of propositional content. These expressions belong to different categories, and their function is to guide the hearer on a path to interpret the speaker's intended meaning.

### **1.10 Approaches to Discourse Markers.**

Different approaches are used to investigate discourse markers, such as the coherence approach, pragmatic-grammatic approach, and relevance theory approach. This study adopts relevance theory, which is explained in the following sections.

#### **1.10.1 Relevance Theory**

Individuals are presented with different utterances that connect with their thoughts and senses, and they can distinguish those that are beneficial and relevant to them from those that are not. Relevance theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) in their first edition, *Relevance: Communication & Cognition*. This theory is a pragmatic cognitive theory that depends on the principle of relevance. It explains how individuals comprehend each other and how they make effective communication. According to relevance theory, utterances raise expectations for participants to interpret the intended meaning (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p.32).

More specifically, relevance theory plays an essential role in the speaker's capacity to construct an utterance that metal represents their thoughts (representations) and the hearer's ability to form assumptions derived from the speaker's utterance, during inferential interpretation. In this way, it is a theory of mind (thinking about and forming assumptions). Further, the mind-reading ability to form metarepresentations is central to human communication (Sperber & Wilson, 2002).

Relevance theory has two essential principles: the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. These two principles are defined as :

##### **1.10.1.1 Cognitive Principle**

The cognitive principle of relevance theory is defined as " Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance'' (Sperber &Wilson 1995, p.260). The cognitive principle of relevance represents that human cognitive resource tends to process an input that is the most relevant among available inputs. According to the mental principle, the new information may interact with the context of existing assumptions to achieve relevance in three ways: Create contextual implications, strengthen an expressed assumption, or contradict an existing hypothesis. The more cognitive effect achieved, the more relevant the input is.

##### **1.10.1.2 Communicative Principle**

This principle means that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p.158). The communicative principle of relevance states that the ostensive stimulus has optimal relevance with no exceptions. When this principle is satisfied (normally, any time, anybody, addresses, etc.), addressees undertake an interpretive process or interpretive task that aims to select the most appropriate interpretation among the range of interpretations that the utterance has in the immediate context.

When two conditions are fulfilled, an input is optimally relevant to an audience or participants. If:

- (a) It is relevant enough to be worth the hearer's processing effort; and

(b) It is the most relevant one compatible with a communicator's abilities and preferences (Wilson&Sperber, 2002a, P. 256).

### 1.11 Discussion and Analysis

In this section, the discourse marker **أي "ee"(yeah)** will be analyzed and discussed regarding its conceptual and procedural encoding using a model of relevance theory. The data is a play in the Syriac language. The data are transliterated, translated, discussed, and analyzed regarding the different procedural functions that this discourse marker serves in the contexts involved.

#### أي "ee"(yeah)

The most common discourse marker in the Syriac language is **أي "ee (yeah)**. It is used frequently in daily conversations of native Syriac speakers. According to the context, it can be used initially, medially, and even finally in the discourse. "أي" is observed to be used not only highly frequently but also with different functions. The functions in the selected play are dis/agreement, indicating an opinion, continuer, and emphasis.

#### **Extract 1 : (Ap.. 1, No.29-30)**

الام : ( متعجبة ) أما ... يعني كذيتلي ؟؟

**A . { 'imma, 'imma , 'imma, ya<ni kiThitli ya<ni kiThitlii ?}.**

{(Lit): Mother, mother, mother, so you know me, so you know me?}.

موسى : أي ودخ لكياذننخ ... وأهو الاها كمشادييري دمحان منخ .

**B. { ee, wdikh lakyaThi'nakh wahuu 'alaaha kimshadirii dimHakin minakh}.**

{(Lit) Yeah, how come that I don't know you if God has sent me to speak with you}.

This interactional context is between two speakers, **A** (Mother) and **B** (Mousa). **A** presents her manifest assumption after being astonished by **B**'s previous utterance when he named her by the word

"mother". **A**, doubtful about how **B** knows her from their first meeting, repeats the word mother three times, and then, with a loud voice, asks **B** for confirmation if he knows her. **B**, in his response, shows his attitude to **A**'s assumption by confirming and agreeing with her. **B** starts his assumption with the procedural marker "أي, ee, yeah" to function as a signal of agreement to remove **A**'s doubt. Then **B** completes his assumption by saying that God has sent him to speak with her; that's why he knows her. As a result, the cognitive effect achieved in this context is strengthening **A**'s previous assumption and removing her doubts by showing her how he knows her.

The strengthening of **A**'s assumption, with the agreement procedural strategy of the marker "أي", constrained the context relevance of the utterance. This process has led **A** to an inferential strategy to proceed with the conceptual representation of **B**'s utterance. Hence, the intended meaning of **B** is achieved.

#### **Extract 2: (Ap.1, No.66-67)**

الام : ما اوذخ كان طننى ايذح ممديثن وبشلا جهنم .

**A. { mu auThakh , mu auThakh , kaan Ti'nih iiThiH mmdithan wbishla jahinim}.**

{(Lit): what shall we do, what shall we do, if God has left our city and became a hell}.

موسى : اي صالوا بكل ادانا واهو بدشامنخو .

**B. { ee, Salu, Salu bkul ' idaana, wahuu bidsham'khu}.**

{(Lit) yeah, pray, always pray, and he will hear you}.

The utterance assumption, presented by **B** (Mousa) in this context, displays the procedural marker "أي, ee, yeah" as a marker for indicating the **S**'s **B** attitude toward the utterance mentioned by **A** (Mother). The procedural function of this marker in this context is to show an opinion to the **H. A**

presents a manifest assumption to tell **B**, in a depressed tone, that there is no hope from God because he left them, and their city became hell. **B**, to encourage **A** and to let her gain hope, responds to her with an assumption starting with the procedural marker "أي" to indicate his opinion. **B** constrains the relevance of the given context by deriving the contextual implication of the contextual effects. Therefore, **B** leads **A** to an inferential strategy for interpreting his utterance, hence accessing the conceptual representations of the utterance. In this way, **A** reaches the intended meaning of **B**, that God will listen and hear to their suffering if they pray, and they shouldn't lose hope. Praying is the solution for them.

### Extract 3 : (Ap.1, No.74-77)

موسى : زوريني لخلماميهي

**A. { zurena.. zurenal- lkhilmamehe}.**

{(Lit) They are young, young for their dreams}.

الام : زوريني لخلماميهي اي زوريني لخلماميهي زوريني لخلماميهي زوريني لخلماميهي ايلين بلطي مكسائن وكوسى خوارا ... وكخذنا من بشلى ديوانينا ... مدينا ربنا ليثى بكواح الا اماتا ديوانيئة مبثر موثا وسكورى دايليهى

**B.{zurenal-lkhilmamehe!! ,ee, zurenal-lkhilmamehe zurenal- lkhilmamehe , zurenallkhilmamehe!! zurenal- lkhilmamehe!! zurenal - lkhilmamehe!! ‘yaliinan bliTih mkaasan wkusin khwara.. WkudakhTha’minan bishla diwaniitha.**

mdiitha rabtha lithih bGawaH ‘iila ‘immatha diwanyatha mbathir mutha wsakuree di‘yaliihe . halima haa ?? halima ?halukh qruu wfarijil-lqahran halukh qruu wfarijil lqahran wlikyamit Salman ya nnbya}.

{(Lit) They are young for their dreams!! Yeah, young for their dreams!! , young for their dreams!! Young for their dreams!! Our sons were born adults with white hair, and each one of us became

crazy in this big city, which is full of crazy mothers as a result of the death and losing their sons.

Extract No. (3) Illustrates a context where **A** (Mousa) & **B** (Mother) are engaged in their topic about the suffering of **B**'s city. **A** is very satisfied with his short assumption, saying that it is too early for **B**'s young sons and other sons of the city to have dreams. **B** holds the floor by repeating **A**'s assumption, then using the procedural token "أي", **ee, yeah** " in the middle as an indicating attitude marker. The procedural function of "أي" here indicates **B**'s attitude as a signal of disagreement with **A**'s short assumption. **B** is unsatisfied and astonished by **A**'s assumption. Using the procedural marker "أي", with the extended assumption that contradicts **A**'s assumption, constrained the relevance of the context. The procedural role of the discourse marker "أي" as a disagreement and the contradiction achieved in the context guides **A** to an inferential strategy to eliminate his assumption and to get the route to infer **B**'s utterance's conceptual representation. The inferred conceptual representation is that their sons are young enough to have dreams and live peacefully, since they suffered a lot in their city. As a result, the intended meaning of **B** is accessed.

### Extract 4 : (Ap. 1, No.33-35)

موسى : شموء شموء يا أما كان اهت اتلخ شبونا دببشت ديوانينا ، بس لتلخ شبونا دشوقت خنى اماتا دتببشي ديوانينا .

**A.{shmuu‘, shmuu‘, ya ‘imma, kaan aahat ‘itlakh shbuuna ditbishat diwaniitha latlakh Haq dshuqat khinee ‘immatha ditbishi diwanyatha}.**

{(Lit) Listen , listen, mother, If you have the right to be crazy, you don't have the right to let the other mothers be crazy}.

الام : بس أنا ام اين ثيلي لاخا طنتنا حزقوثا ومرروثا أنا ام اين أما  
اي اما دمسكرهي ئيالح منح لسوئن مريخح ( تبدأ بالغناء ) طوءوا  
عزيزي طوءوا....

**B.**{bas aana ‘immayan aana ‘immayan, thilii  
lakha T’innta Hizqutha wmararuutha ‘ aana  
‘immayan ‘imma ‘ ee‘imma dimsukirhe ‘yalaH  
minaH lasuw’in mrikhaH (tabda‘ bilghina‘ )  
Tu‘uu <a zizi Tu‘uu.....)}.

{(Lit) But I am the mother, I am the mother, I  
came here carrying all the bitterness, yeah, the  
mother who has lost her sons( start singing) sleep  
my dears sleep...}.

In this situational extract, **A** (Mousa) presents his assumption to warn **B**(Mother) that she has no right to behave on behalf of all the other mothers. **B**, in her response, uses the encoding marker “أي, ee, yeah ” in the middle of the utterance to emphasize the notion of what it means to be a mother who carries all the bitterness of the sufferings. The procedural function of this discourse marker " أي " in this context is to show emphasis (i.e.) to emphasize what it means to be a mother who loses her sons in the war. The use of this marker constrained the context for **A** and showed that **B**'s assumption is still relevant to **A**'s although no cognitive effect is achieved. However, **B** reorients **A** to an inferential path to process the utterance by singing a sad song about her killed sons and other mothers' sons. All this guides **A** to the utterance's conceptual encoding information, and to **B**'s intended meaning, that the pain of losing their sons made the mothers mad.

### Conclusions

This study investigated the procedural functions of discourse markers أي, ee, and yeah in the Syriac

language (the dialect of Qaraqoush ) within the relevance theory. The study has come up with the following conclusions: first, the discourse marker "أي, ee, yeah " is multifunctional in the Syriac language; it serves many functions according to the context in which it occurs. It can function as a dis/agreement function, indicating an opinion function, a continuer function, an emphasis function, and a turn-taking function. Second, the procedural role of this marker is necessary to make communication effective by directing the hearer to the intended meaning. Third, relevance theory proved that the procedural expressions in Syriac guide the hearer to the interpretation of the intended meaning of the speaker by achieving one of the three cognitive effects: contextual implications, strengthening, and contradiction, or reorienting the hearer to a path to reach these effects to conceptualize the meaning. The discourse marker as أي, ee, yeah "optimizes the relevance and reduces the effort needed to interpret an utterance by maximizing the cognitive required effects. This study recommends that other varieties of procedural meaning in the Syriac language that have not been researched, like mood, intonation, and ideophones, can be analyzed. This study investigated just one discourse marker in the Syriac language; thus, I recommend research to explore other discourse markers in Syriac. Having investigated this discourse marker in Syriac using relevance theory, it would be interesting to analyze the same discourse marker in Syriac using the other mentioned approaches, such as the coherence approach.

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