

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF YA ʕNI, AN IRAQI ARABIC DM, AND ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS

Abdulkhaliq Alazzawie

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Nizwa
SULTANATE OF OMAN

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the linguistic element *ya ʕni* frequently found in the variety of Arabic spoken in Iraq. *ya ʕni* belongs to a host of expressions known as discourse markers, pragmatic markers, discourse connectives, pragmatic particles and discourse operators. Some examples in English speech are: *so, well, you know, oh, OK, like, you see, I mean, actually and right*; examples in writing would be *because, however, to sum up, admittedly, to begin, now, then and on the other hand*. *ya ʕni* performs numerous functions in naturally occurring conversational Iraqi Arabic in different contexts. It may serve to fill gaps, indicate agreement, soften criticism, direct statements, and to modify and clarify information and intentions. The use of these forms will be investigated using natural spoken conversation.

Keywords: Discourse markers, Pragmatics, Context, Implicature, Equivalence, Utterance.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the analysis of recorded spoken conversation by native speakers of Iraqi Arabic. I recorded the conversations of pairs of speakers and also conducted interviews with 10 other native speakers. Some were face-to-face conversations consisting of private dialogues which were used to identify the functions of the DM *ya ʕni*. All of these recordings were then transcribed and analyzed. The corpus was compiled and then searched for examples of the DM *ya ʕni*. Through analyzing this natural conversational variety of Arabic, the functions, meanings and roles of *ya ʕni* were identified.

Translation Technique

The translation technique is also used in this analysis as it is a useful strategy to illuminate the subtle, underlying and multi-layered context-dependent communicative meanings and purposes of the DM under investigation. In the process of translating, a three-pronged approach is adopted to analyze *ya ʕni* on a semantic, textual, and pragmatic level.

Within such an approach – translating the Arabic utterances into English in different ways and contexts in order to illuminate *ya ʕni*'s various meanings and to identify its functions– makes the utterances more comprehensible to English readers. Such a technique is also used by Brinton (2007) in the study of the English pragmatic marker *I mean* where it is translated into markers with a somewhat transparent form and function correlation such as *because, in other words, namely and for example*.

Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg (2004), in their analysis of Swedish and Dutch equivalents of English markers – *actually, in fact and really* – used the method of translation (English into Swedish and Dutch and back into English) to highlight the meaning encoded by such markers. These authors state that the translation method “provides rich details about both the

source and the target items involved” (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg 2004: 1797 cited in Mei (2012: 45). Mei (2012: 44), in the study of DMs in Chinese, notes that methods of translation or paraphrasing have been a useful tool used by researchers to explain the meaning and to identify functions of pragmatic markers (Wierzbicka, 1976, 2003; Svartvik, 1980; Carlson, 1984; Bolinger, 1989; Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2004; Brinton, 2007).

Significance of *ya ʕni*

Pragmatic Importance of *ya ʕni*

One reason why I am investigating the discourse marker *ya ʕni* in this paper is that it is a very important word pragmatically and is also the most frequently used marker in natural spoken discourse in Iraqi Arabic. It plays a vital role in facilitating understanding and communication. Fox Tree and Schrock (1999 cited in Mei 2012: 2) argue that *oh* in English helps in the processing of information, claiming that word recognition is faster when *oh* is present than when it is removed or replaced by a pause.

Likewise in Iraqi Arabic, misuse or removal of *ya ʕni* also makes spontaneous speech sound incoherent, unnatural, and lacking in fluency. Although DMS may be considered as “tag-ons”, leaving out the DM *ya ʕni*, like “you know” and “well” in English, makes speech less comprehensible or more disjointed. Spoken and informal varieties with such elements as *ya ʕni* and you know (in English) are viewed as mere gap fillers, meaningless DMs or pragmatic markers and those extra add-on words that really say and mean nothing. Although *ya ʕni* does not mean much of anything intrinsically, *ya ʕni* does contribute to the overall meaning of the intended message, statement or utterance and means slightly different things according to what function it is performing or means slightly different things depending on the context it occurs in.

Automaticity and Frequency of Usage

Since such words/phrases add little explicit and substantial meaning and are totally dispensable in that sense and are uttered with such abundance and regularity, more out of speech habit than anything, they almost have no intrinsic meaning. So, speakers do not take much notice of them, being so habituated to them. These words and phrases “fly under our radar”, our conscious level. They largely escape our domain/realm/threshold of awareness. Or should I say these words/phrases cause one to lose focus/concentration/awareness because we are so habituated to them and they have such little meaning? The situation is similar to those automatic, habitual and superficial conversational niceties and clichés you can almost predict in certain circumstances such as “It’s nice to meet you” when you’re meeting someone. Another automatic not requiring thought is when you say “You’re welcome” after someone says “Thank you”.

Much of what we do seems to be on autopilot. We do many things without being very conscious or mentally aware or engaged in the performance of a task, particularly if it is one we do with great frequency. In conversation, although we may love our senile grandparents very much, they often repeat the same story over and over using the same words and before too long, we can predict what they are going to say before they have even finished a sentence let alone the whole story. Our mind drifts; we start thinking of other things; we lose our focus; we “zone out”. In both words and actions, the habitual often escapes our notice. When we leave our house we lock our door without engaging our brain too much because our hands are so used to performing the action one does not really think about it. So when we

walk away, we often have to ask ourselves “Did I lock my door?” and then backtrack to check and see that the door is locked. After a transaction at an ABM or ATM, our hands fly to grab the card and receipt without much mental attention or engagement. Our hands almost seem to be a separate entity performing the action on their own. We have all heard “you know” a million times. It doesn’t really say anything, add anything, or render any meaning, so why would it catch our attention? Why would we tune in like a bat with radar? It is almost as if we did not hear it because we are not really listening to it, not paying attention, not focusing to a “throw away” (easily dispensable) word. It is just not words and actions, however, that suffer due to habit and lack of significance, but our actual level of awareness itself. When we go to visit someone’s house, even if it’s for the umpteenth time, do we really take note of the wallpaper in a certain room? In Arabic, because we are so habituated and accustomed to *yaʕni* being generated automatically (not unlike a bank slip after a transaction at an ATM), *yaʕni* has been termed as a “trivial filler” and is viewed as a speech habit more than anything else with almost no meaning; even if it didn’t escape our notice, it would still be viewed as unworthy of anybody’s attention. Why?

Negative Social and Linguistic Associations

Spoken and informal varieties of Arabic which use *yaʕni*, *adi*, *bas*, *tara*, *ajal* and other such DMs have been ignored because Arabic society at large think the spoken variety is not just insignificant but bizarre and characteristic of low forms of speech. Unlike linguists, sociolinguists, philosophers or semanticists, the usual everyday person doesn’t have much appreciation for the complexities of *yaʕni* and other discourse markers. Even educated people who are specialists in standard Arabic or classical Arabic have such a low and negative attitude towards *yaʕni* because they only think of the standard language as being prestigious and worth researching; only the standard and the classical form is taught in schools, codified (ie. is in grammar books, dictionaries, language of classical poetry – the signs of an educated person). These specialists in Arabic or the ordinary people alike think the colloquial, informal spoken form with *yaʕni* is “bad” language, a corruption and a deterioration of language when in fact it is the real, functional, communicative variety that every Arab speaker uses at home, with friends, in movies, and in all aspects of genuine human interaction. It is the real native language which we acquire naturally, whereas the formal and standard variety is learned at school with all its complex case systems such as nominative, accusative and dative, its pronunciation and vocabulary. It is almost like learning a foreign language. The spoken and informal variety with its DMS is the variety used even by highly educated Arab speakers with PhDs in classical Arabic, though they have negative attitudes towards it. These negative attitudes towards such DMS and the social stigma associated with their users are just more reasons why they have been neglected and largely excluded from any serious investigation.

Although a discriminatory attitude towards these DMs may be prevalent in Arabic countries, this is not the case elsewhere where there is a great interest in and thirst for all sorts of knowledge and no preference is given towards a particular Arabic variety – at least not among non-native speakers of Arabic, i.e. among westerners who do not know any Arabic and therefore do not understand the differences between Arabic dialects so they would have no preference, no bias, no proclivity towards any Arabic variety.

The English have studied “broken English” and the French patois, pidgins and creoles spoken in the Caribbean or Africa, for example, for years already although these varieties have been

viewed as worse than lowbrow.¹ There has undoubtedly stuff been already written about hip hop language/lyrics even though it is far from preferable English. Other European countries have also studied the various dialects of their language, German for instance, and therefore did not restrict their research and knowledge solely to preferred dialects.

Such bias does not exist in other professions. Personal preferences and prejudices have not stopped researchers from examining and researching those stigmatized or “spooky” areas that stirred up fear, suspicion and dread in people. Have zoologists refused to study snakes because they are “creepy and crawly”? Imagine if the ancient explorers only chose to sail the same safe short route and then turned right back home. Imagine if entomologists only studied butterflies because they are beautiful and ladybugs because they are cute over and over and ignored the rest of the insects because of their unsightliness or because they bite or sting? Imagine the state mankind would be in if doctors only concerned themselves with cosmetics and the birth of babies!

In opposition to any negative view or low interest level in the study of discourse markers, Crystal (1988: 48) states that elements such as *you know* are like the oil which helps speakers “perform the complex task of spontaneous speech production and interaction smoothly and efficiently”, a view which is also applicable to *yaʕni*. Macaulay (2006) also states that while “discourse markers have little explicit meaning; [they] have very definite functions, particularly at transitional points.” This is another reason for this investigation into *yaʕni*, the versatility of its functions. One of the difficult tasks is identifying all the functions because they are found in such a wide range of contexts. The elusive nature of *yaʕni* is similar to *you know* or *well* in English, the latter *you know* having been found to express thirty functions (Müller, 2005: 165). Müller (ibid) presents a thorough analysis of the functions of four DMs in English discourse: *so, well, you know* and *like*.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse markers in English have been the subject of extensive investigation. Using a “tripartite model”, Schourup (1985: 7) provides a detailed account of the DMs *well, like, oh, you know, I mean, sort of*, etc.

An example of *oh* would be:

Son (phoning his mother to tell her he won’t be able to make it to her place on Friday night for dinner):

Son: Hi mom.

Mother: Hi dear, how are you?

Son: I’m fine but I just got an email saying our high-school reunion is this Friday and I’d like to go to see some of my old pals.

Mother: Oh, so you won’t be coming for dinner on Friday then. Well, that’s fine dear.

¹ Other cultures have great biases against dialects that exist in their language. If this weren’t so, the movie “My Fair Lady” wouldn’t exist and carry the meaning and the interest that it did and still does. English accents wouldn’t “peg” a person to a certain class that is either preferable or not. Yet the English have studied the “low brow” and the “corrupted” versions for years - the African and Caribbean pidgins and creoles, the speech of the hippies, Afro-American speech and expressions and “ghetto talk” to name a few. Not only a person’s accent can peg them in a certain class, but also the words and expressions they use (“I don’t go there any longer” as opposed to “I don’t go there no more”), and also how people carry themselves and the way they talk/sound (druggies and alcoholics on the street sound very different from the usual citizen; rural people might sound different from city folk, etc.)

Son: That's right mom.

An example of *like* would be:

There are two young teenage boys (A and B) who are close friends and are standing in the hallway at high school. A sees a girl his friend B has a major crush on and reports to B:

A: Guess what? Don't turn around now. Laurie just came around the corner and she's headed straight towards us.

B: No! you're joking, right? What should I do? What should I say? And his friend replies....

A: Calm down. like, be cool, ok?

Another well-known study is Schiffrin's (1987) model of five planes of talk in which she gives a detailed account of *well, oh, and, but, so, now, because, I mean* and *you know*.

So is used in a context such as the following:

Let us say a professor talks about everything that makes up a galaxy but neglects to mention stars, so then a student asks, "*So* what about stars? Aren't they part of the galaxy?"

Within Schiffrin's model of discourse, there are three aspects of discourse: 1) the expressive or social aspect (language conveys identities and attitudes; performs actions; negotiates relationships between self and other) 2) the cognitive aspect (which corresponds to propositional functions; represents concepts and ideas) and 3) the textual aspect (organizes forms and conveys meanings within units of language longer than a sentence). Schiffrin defines discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31). This definition of markers is used here as the basis for the analysis of *yaʔni*. There are three different levels of analysis which to consider when translating *yaʔni*: the semantic, textual, and pragmatic aspects of *yaʔni*.

Investigations by Burrige and Florey (2002) suggest that the DM *yeah-no* used in Australian English may serve any one of the following purposes: discourse connector (textual function), attitude marker, such as a hedging device (expressive function), and it also provides referential meaning (propositional function).

Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory is also a major theory in the analysis of DMs. In their seminal work, Schiffrin (1987) and Fraser (1988) started investigating the problematic and curious nature of DMs, their properties, definition, classification and other theoretical issues.

An interesting example showing more than one layer of meaning is the DM *right* or *yeah right*. It is used in a context like the following: A husband trying to defend himself against his wife's accusation says "I always take out the garbage every week religiously." And the wife responds sarcastically "yeah, right and I'm the Queen of England." because what her husband is saying is not true. In fact the opposite is true.

So in this context when the wife counters her husband with "yeah" or "yeah right", she stands in opposition to the statement that precedes it ("I take out the garbage every week") and the underlying sarcasm denotes an intent to challenge the speaker and expose the truth and render the preceding statement as untrue and not to be believed. She is countering his untrue statement with sarcasm and another untrue statement. So, the sarcasm and her untrue statement together denote that his statement is not true plus she trumps his untrue statement. He is just talking about how he takes out the garbage and she is talking about being the

Queen of England. So, this embellishment aggrandizes the difference between what is being said and the reality. Well, it certainly is meant to expose the ridiculousness of his claim/"version" of the "facts". She makes a statement but sarcastically because it is so far-fetched it obviously is not meant to be believed.

Such related aspects or levels of meaning of utterances are distinguished by Austin (1962) in terms of three concepts - locution, illocution and perlocution. The locution is the act of producing a meaningful expression, the surface literal meaning. The illocution is what the utterance 'counts as doing' "to make a statement, an offer, an explanation, or for some other communicative purpose" (Yule, 1996: 48). The perlocution is the effect or consequence the utterance has. The illocutionary force of the utterance "If you take out the garbage religiously every week, then I'm the Queen of England" would be as follows: Since my claim was meant to be untrue based on your false claim, then we're all aware that everything just said is false. If what you're saying is true (and we know it is not), then I can say this is true. The illocution of this utterance is a statement telling the addressee (the husband in this case) that he is not fooling anybody. She is basically saying "You can't get away with this with me", or "Don't try to pull a fast one me", or don't try to pull the wool over my eyes because I know better. Her remark/statement is used as an utterance and thus is loaded and peppered with sarcasm. As for the perlocution, it is unpredictable; people react differently depending on their character traits or personality. He (the husband in this instance) might feel embarrassed and ashamed or resentful and defiant.

Establishing the Status of *ya ʕni* as a Discourse and a Pragmatic Marker: Uses and Functions of the DM *ya ʕni*

ya ʕni may have multiple functions, which might arise according to the context it is in. As such it may express the following functions:

A Rhetorical Question

In a rhetorical question, *ya ʕni* is used to preface an action or an event or to ask if it is okay to initiate an action or event. In the following example, a business executive looking to get a meeting underway says:

yaʕni nibda Alijtima?

"Well, shall we start (the meeting) now?"

The form of this sentence is interrogative but the speaker is not seeking information. The form of the sentence and the purpose and function of the utterance are independent of each other.² The core meaning here would best be reflected in English in the following rhetorical question:

Well, is everyone accounted for? Shall we begin?

² Kreidler (1998: 176) gives the following examples to illustrate the difference between form and purpose of utterances:

1. Did you really like this silly book? (rhetorical question without seeking information)
2. It's very warm in here with that window closed. (A statement intended as a request)
3. Have a good time. (A command not intended to take action)
4. Did you know it's raining? (A question intended to inform)
5. I suppose you'll go away for the holiday. (A statement intended to solicit information)

To use Austin's (1962) term, the illocutionary force of the utterance is making the statement "Well, if everyone is here . . . , or "since everyone is here, we can begin now."

This usage of *ya ʕni* is similar to the English DMs *well* and *so* which are also often injected in a context to preface a question or an answer, as in the following examples:

Well, I have to be honest, that colour doesn't really suit you.

Well, to tell you the truth, I don't think John is a good candidate for this position.

Well, have you decided what to wear to Julia's wedding?

Well, I thought they'd be here already.

So, what are you up to?

So, where do we start?

So, have you taken your new car out for a spin?

"Well, shall we start the meeting?" (You might hear something like this too: Is everyone here? Well then, let's begin.

Summing up

In the example below, a man explains to his friends the things he did with his relatives who flew in for a visit.

A: kef kanu athuouf min wislaw yum assabit?

So what happened on Saturday when your relatives flew in?

B: Istaqbalthum bilmatar wakhaðithum lmatʕm kabob tigadena a baʕadha akhaðithum lsoug alsimak wakhaðithum lalbuchayra.

I picked them up at the airport. Then, I took them to a kebob restaurant and then to the fish market and then to the lake.

A: ee yaʕni sawet alalek

Oh yeah, you mean you did what is expected/the duty.

It sounds like B went above and beyond what would normally be expected or what would be usual in such a circumstance. "You did what is expected/the duty" sounds a bit awkward in English, being a literal translation. If speaker (B) is interested in a casual, laid-back way, he/she might produce more authentic English responses such as the following:

"Well, you really showed them the town!"

"Well, you sure went above the call of duty."

"Wow, you sure did a lot in one day!"

"Wow, they (the guest/s) sure put you through your paces, didn't they?"

"Wow! Lucky them to have a pal like you!"

"Aren't they lucky? They've got their own private tour guide!"

Closing or Concluding Statements

In Arabic, in the context of closing a meeting, one is likely to hear something along these lines:

A: ahadʕinda istifsar aw tʕliq aw shakwa

Does anybody have a question or a comment or a complaint?

B: la

No.

A: yaʕni ninhi ijtimaʕna

So, we conclude our meeting.

The primary literal meaning of the lexical item “shakwa” is “complaint” but it should not be translated literally word for word as English speakers would not usually say the word “complaint” in such a context. At the end of a meeting, a speaker might close with “Does anybody have any questions or comments?” It would be more common to hear something like: “Does anybody have any questions or comments?” If no one responds, the speaker will make some kind of concluding statement to wrap things up such as: “No? Ok then, I guess that’s all for today.”; or “Well, I guess that’s all for today then.” In English, there are a lot of casual closing statements like: “So, that’s a wrap.”; “That’s it for today then; Well, I guess that’s it for today then; So, that’s all for today”, etc.

Certainly, in meetings set up to discuss something problematic (political, legal/justice issues, environmental, union grievances³, etc.), the elevated level of concerns will be reflected in the language. Then one might hear in closing “Does anyone else have any complaints to make? Other words or expressions in this vein might crop up such as “raise any questions or concerns”; “cause for concern”; address the issue concerning ...”, “look into the matter of ...”, “investigate further into...”, “examine more closely ...”, “address the problem of ...”, “find a resolution”, etc.

In formal meetings, like in a union or business meeting, there are definite protocols and procedures that must be followed, and formal language is used; certain wording is used at certain times and in a certain order. In such a context, a meeting may be closed with statements such as “I hereby declare this meeting is now adjourned”; or “This meeting is officially declared over.”; or “This meeting is now adjourned” with explicit performative verbs to make the utterance explicitly performative.

Fung and Carter (2007) refer to the phenomenon of multifunctional DMs – DMs which can perform more than one function and its function changes or depends on the context in which it occurs. In the following example, the DM, well, is used both to introduce and conclude a topic.

“Well” Introducing a Topic:

Well, shall we begin our class?

“Well, shall we begin now?”

“Well, this sure is a good turnout.”⁴

“Well” Concluding a Topic:

“Well, that’s all for now, so I’ll hang up and talk to you soon, all right?”

“Well, we’ve discussed everything on the agenda, so we’re done!”

A Focus Marker, Crux of the Matter, Crunch, Flagwaver or Flag Waving

In the following, A is talking to friend, B, about another mutual friend named Ali where Ali’s troubled finances are described and the severity of his financial troubles is highlighted by using *yaʕni*:

³ In unions, the term “grievances” is used. Many businesses have to deal with unhappy customers who call in to their customer service department to lodge complaints and the customer service rep. is expected to “address” or “resolve” the issue raised by the customer. It is more common to hear something like “Does anyone have any other concerns or issues they’d like to discuss before we close (the meeting)?”

⁴ This utterance could be said by a speaker giving a talk and looking at all the people in the audience who came to see him. Thank you for coming and good morning! or it could be a minister on a Sunday morning talking to the congregation.

A: Ali halta almadiyya saʿba, wʿinda ʿaʿila kibeera, wratba maykkafi, yaʿni maygdar yishtari ʿilaj latfala

“Ali’s financial situation is very tight. He has a big family and his salary is insufficient to support his family; I mean *he cannot even buy medication for his children.*”

B: yaʿni lhaddaraja

“REALLY? You mean it’s that bad?”

yaʿni corresponds to “actually” or “even” or “I mean” in the English translation and focuses meaning on a specific aspect of the topic being discussed. The italicized sentence in the English version is focused on and emphasized by *yaʿni* in the Arabic utterance. In this instance, *yaʿni* carries an inherent force-marking feature allowing it to place the material following it in a focus position - signaling that what follows is a matter of real concern, thus drawing attention or “focus” to the issue under discussion. Or, in other words, it really serves to highlight and emphasize the matter at hand. Clearly the speaker is worried for his friend and his statements here reflect the depth of his concern and also explain very clearly to the person he is currently speaking to why there is such cause for concern.⁵

yaʿni signals a focus or a contrast which spells out unabashedly the direness of Ali’s financial circumstances. What follows *yaʿni* expands upon and further explains the preceding discourse relating to Ali’s finances. It is as if to say “this is the nitty gritty of it;” “this is the situation in a nutshell;” “this is what it boils down to; this is the bare bones all laid out”. This is the associated conventional implicature in this instance in the sense of Grice (1967), a type of implicature attached by convention to particular lexical items or expressions.” (Levinson 1983: 127)

“I mean” could also be replaced by “What I really mean is...” to echo the pragmatic meaning expressed by *yaʿni*. When someone doesn’t understand what you are saying or what you mean to say or is not fully grasping the reality or the gravity of a situation, then you (the speaker) bearing the news might very likely say “I mean/what I really mean is...” and then spell it out the details to the other party you are talking to. So, *yaʿni* signals further explanation, that something will be expounded upon. *Yaʿni* precludes a further enlightenment, the revelation of some deeper meaning or truth to the listener who is either unaware of a situation or doesn’t catch the full drift of what someone is saying.⁶

⁵ Polite concern, however, might mask somebody’s propensity to be nosy and fish for personal details not offered up.

⁶ In some instances “I mean/What I mean is...” is used by a speaker to purposely expose the truth to a person who is trying to get away with something or pretend the issue at hand doesn’t exist or wasn’t a result of their actions. For example, below a female employee (A) is angered by the scent of cigar smoke in the workplace and she confronts her male co-worker (B) whom she knows for certain is the one breaking the company’s strict scent policy and causing the foul odour that bothers her and other non-smokers.

B: (not wanting to come clean that he’s the source of the problem) I wonder where it’s coming from.

A: Oh, I don’t know (sarcastically). It smells like smoke doesn’t it?

B: Well, maybe somebody burned something in the microwave.

A: No Bill I MEAN it smells like your cigars again.

B: No! Really? Maybe somebody else was smoking by the door downstairs and the smoke drifted up the stairwell.

A: No. you know what Bill. You reek and I can smell you a mile away. If this doesn’t stop right away, I’m going to have to talk to your supervisor.

Speaker A, angry and annoyed, could easily have said “No Bill, what I MEAN to say is you stink!, so “what I mean/ I mean” does draw attention in a sense and does bring “focus” to the core meaning in ways analogous to *yaʿni*.

Reasoning, Connector and Precursor

In the following statement-observation, the speaker (host) is making some sort of judgment. He is just being “polite” about it, stating it in a more polite, tactful, and gentle, less offensive way. But he is still basically saying “Why did you come here for a haircut?”

Shay? mudhik wʿajeeb, yaʿni msafreen kamsmiʿat kilometer hatta tihluqoun shaʿarkum ʿid haḏa alhallaq

“A funny and bizarre thing, I mean you have travelled 500 km to get a haircut at this hair dresser.”

The host is still finding fault with the guest’s reasoning or at least is questioning his rationale behind the visit. It is not really complimentary. He is not saying “Wow, you’ve come a long way and how nice to see you! I’m so glad you’re here.”

In this example, a speaker makes an initial statement *shay? mudhik wʿajeeb* “a funny and bizarre thing”⁷ which, on its own it, doesn’t really convey any meaning to the listener as it does not have a referent until the second sentence is completed. For all the listener knows, the speaker may be talking about a sudden change in the weather outside, a coincidental visit that same day by another friend or relative apart from his visit, or a pet who’s just begun to behave in an amusing and unusual manner, and any other number of possible scenarios that could explain and complete the meaning of the speaker’s introductory utterance. The speaker knows his first statement is insufficient and thus begins his next sentence with “I mean” (“What I mean is...”) and follows this with an explanatory phrase/sentence that expounds upon and completes the first. The *yaʿni* “I mean” at the beginning of the second sentence links the thoughts and statements and acts as a precursor to an explanatory statement so that one entire thought and meaning then becomes apparent to the listener. Then the entire meaning comes to light which is basically.... Wow, what are you doing here? You didn’t need to come all the way out here just to get a haircut. Or, it might be phrased as such: “That’s strange....”, “That’s odd...”, and “How odd!...” that you travelled out of your way to come here and get a \$10 cut at Magic Cuts when you have one and lots of other salons and better ones close to where you live?!” It would be unusual for someone to be so direct.

The speaker is clearly wondering why his visitor is there for a haircut. The visitor’s pretense for his visit (to get a haircut) doesn’t seem rational or plausible to the speaker, so he fishes for information in search of a plausible answer or confirmation of what he suspects is the real reason for the visit. But note once the two lines are combined and are understood as one complete thought by the listener, the impact on the visitor (the listener) is less than favourable as the speaker suspects that there is an underlying motive for the visit and is questioning the visit. The speaker is cognizant of the delicacy of the situation and knows he has to word things tactfully, so he uses a “soft” approach. He does not come out with a direct question that poses what he really means or is thinking: “Why did you bother coming all the way out here for a haircut?” or “Why are you really here? Hmmm, did you come here to see my sister? Aha! or is it because you want to borrow some money? Or “Wow, why did you make such an effort that doesn’t seem to warrant the time and energy spent?” Such questions would come across as being rude, or insensitive, perhaps a bit brusque and unwelcoming or invasive, or even presumptuous. After all, the visitor may have a perfectly valid reason for being in the area that day and going to that salon while he is in the area, unbeknownst to the speaker. The speaker is therefore cautious and frames his query in the form of an utterance.⁸

⁷ “Most unusual” and “most strange” would be fitting equivalents as well.

⁸ The speaker may be in a bit of a quandary, although it probably is not apparent to him on a conscious level. As a host he knows it is his duty to be welcoming to guests and not serve up biting speculative remarks about

It is also a statement and question all wrapped up in one akin to “Surely you didn’t come out all the way here just to get a haircut!”, a more direct approach which is common to hear but still toned down.

The pragmatic meaning is encoded in conversational *yaʕni* and the speaker says it like “I mean” partnered with the observation statement. It does seem so obviously the person is wondering and curious and trying to figure out the reason for this trip but he is not coming out and asking the question directly. He is framing it in an utterance and basically is more like “thinking out loud” as if to say: I mean to say or what I mean to say is...”. If the speaker utters *hmmmmmm yaʕni* without saying anything after in a timely fashion, the listener would probably say what is so peculiar? Then he might say: “Well, you have come a long way just to get a haircut.” So then *yaʕni* acts as a precursor and a connector that facilitates the flow of the insulting remark.

Turn taking

Turn taking refers to the order speakers engaged in a conversation are to take. *yaʕni* may act as a prompt which signals that the speaker has finished talking for the time being and is now expecting a response.

Possibility and Probability

Yaʕni can indicate uncertainty in ways similar to the words *maybe*, *probably*, *possibly* and *possibility* which, combined with the full sentences, all suggest uncertainty. In the example below, speaker A questions his friend B about making a trip to Baghdad which B takes into consideration.

A: mumkin nsafir lbaḡdad?

“Shall we make a trip to Baghdad?”

B: yaʕni

“Well, good question; it is a possibility”

Other typical English responses might be: “Hmm ... good question. Well, we’ll see. I’ll have to get back to you later on that.”; or, “Uh, not sure yet. I haven’t even thought about it. Maybe”.

B’s answer can be prolonged by adding the implicit unspoken information embodied in *yaʕni* to yield “*yaʕni itha ma sar ʕindi shughul aw hadith tari*”: “I mean, if I am not busy or unless something unexpected comes up”. However, as an implicature, the additional information is left unstated.

The closest English equivalents to *yaʕni* in terms of meaning that are commonly used are: “good question”, “maybe”, “possibly”, “possibility”, “likely” and “likelihood” as in the following examples:

A: Are you going to the dance on Friday?

B: Uh... Good question. I haven’t even thought about it yet. Maybe, we’ll see.

the reason for his guest’s visit that would only embarrass his guest. Yet his curiosity drives him in to an interrogative mode. Careful to avoid coming across as too rude, insensitive, unwelcoming, or prying, the speaker takes a “soft” approach in an effort to tone down the “acidity” and “sting” of his acrimonious question and observation statement.

A: (A brother asks his brother this question): Do you think you could go to Canada with me next year?

B: Um.... Hmm, possibly, but that'll depend if I can get time off work or not.

A: (A man asks his friend): Are you going to sell your house next year?

B: Hmm.... You know.... that's a definite possibility because Jane is going to retire this summer and I'll retire in Feb. So maybe.

A: (A friend asks his friend): Are you going to John's party this weekend?

B: Uh.... I want to. Yeah, probably. Why? Did you need a ride?

A: (A brother asks his sibling) Do you want to go to Mecca with me this year?

B: (the sibling) replies: Well...I'd love to, but what's the likelihood of that happening? I mean someone has to stay here and take care of mom.

Confirming the Action, Confirmed Action or Agreeing to a Course of Action

A: Bachir lazim nrouh nzour sahibna Abu Ahmed wmsawi 'alena fathil nayim balmustašfa msawi hadith

Tomorrow we should go visit our buddy Abu Ahmed (literally Ahmad's father); he's done a lot of favours for us. He was injured in a car accident and now he's in the hospital.

B: ya^ʕni nrouh wbass almot ymna^ʕna

Sure, we will go; only death could stop us.

Common typical English responses in this scenario might be: "Sure, let's go or Yeah, I'd like to; or Yeah I'd like to do that; or I'd really like to. In fact, you'd have to kill me to stop me; or only death could stop or prevent us".

There is also in English this saying: "you bet. Come hell or high water", an expression which echoes the phrase prefaced by : *ya ʕni* in (B) above, as in "Come hell or high water I'm going to go to the dance on Friday"; or maybe you might say "Come hell or high water, I'm going to make it to Canada next year." This expression means no matter what happens, we're going to go or we're going to make it. It is much more common to hear this expression than one that entails death, but those expressions do exist and are used too, as in "I'd have to be dead before I'd miss that concert"; or "You'd have to kill me to stop me from seeing Julia"; or the wedding vow "Till death do us part." And it is possible that someone might say "Only death could stop us", but it would be unlikely.

Aid the Speaker Holding the Floor, Continuation of Conversation or Exposition

In this function *ya ʕni* serves as a conversational aid facilitating the continuation or the flow of conversation and its exposition. It then allows and assists the speaker to "hold the floor".

Verbal Filler, Delaying Tactic

The marker here gives the speaker an opportunity to think or plan before continuing, similar to "-er", "um", "like.... uh/um...", "well....." as in "Well.... I don't know; or Well...(the person is considering something), I'll think about it; or Well.... we'll see."

Here are some English examples of verbal fillers or procrastinating words that delay:

A: Uh....dad, could I borrow \$10?

B: UHHHH, not today bud. I'm flat broke.

A: Do you want to go sky-diving with me next weekend?
B: AAAAHHH- not really. Sorry, I'm deathly afraid of heights.

A: (teenage boy asks a female classmate if she'll go to the prom with him) Uhhh, Julie, would you like to go to the prom with me?
B: (Julie): Gee... I don't know what to say. This is such a surprise! Uummmmm, yeah, ok. Yes, that would be nice actually.

A: (Mother to young son): Jimmy did you eat the last piece of cake that I left for your dad?
B: (Son): Well.... Um... I didn't know it was for dad.

A: (Nephew to his Uncle): Uncle Dave, will you let me drive your boat this weekend?
B: (Uncle, unsure if he should let his nephew do so; this uneasiness is reflected in his delayed response): Hmmmm. I'm not sure about that. You'd better check with your dad first. Jimmy.⁹

Expression of Confusion

itha agullak "hatha abyath", tulli "la aswad", wallahi ya'ni maadri shagullak
"If I say "this is white", you would say "no it is black". To tell you the truth, I'm puzzled. I don't know what to say to you."

In this instance, typical English responses might be: "You're always arguing with me. If I say something's white, you'll say it's black." Or, "I'm so confused I don't know what to think. No matter what I say, you say the opposite. We never agree on anything." The English expression "we don't see eye to eye on anything" captures the sentiments expressed here.

Indicator of Pleasant Surprise, Joy and Excitement

A: tidri inta darajtak kam bmadat maharat alluğa alingleeziyya
Do you know what your grade is in English Language Skills?

B: la kam?

No, what is it?

A: 100 min 100

100%

B: ya'n saheeh

Are you kidding! Really!

There are a lot of expressions in English that qualify as a replacement for the pragmatics of *ya'n*. That is, In English when somebody is pleasantly surprised, there is a whole myriad of expressions, words and sentences which may be used, such as WOW!, Awesome!, Unreal! Are you sure? Are you kidding me? Unbelievable!, Yay!, Yippee! Hooray! Yahoo!, What!!!!, Amazing!, How nice!, How lovely!, Wonderful!, Goody!, I can't wait!, Incredible!, No! Really?, Fantastic!, How exciting!, I'm so excited!, What a nice surprise! etc.¹⁰

⁹ OrMaybe in a few years. You're still a bit young..... Or. Um.... No I don't think so.... Not yet.... Maybe in a couple of years Jimmy when you're older..

¹⁰A lot of the words occur alone, but they are said with "How" or "It's" or "Isn't it?" or "That's" in front of them a lot as well, as in: Wonderful or How wonderful!; Nice! Or How nice!; Lovely! Or How lovey; or That's

The following are some examples in utterances:

Wow! We're going to Disneyland? Really!
Holy cow! Isn't he handsome!!!
Wow... this cake is delicious!
Oh boy! I can hardly wait.... We're going to go to Disneyland!!!
Unreal!! Really?

So so, in the Middle, a Balanced case, Neither Extreme

A: kef kanat asilat alimtihan
How were the questions on the exam?
B: yan^{fi}
So so. Not too easy, not too hard. I should do okay.
The French expression "comme ci, comme ca" is also sometimes used by English speakers as it also means so so..

Topic Shift/Partial Shift

This usage of *yan^{fi}* is similar to using *but* in English as in the following examples:
Teacher to his students in class: "I'd love to go over that issue as well, but in another class; today I'd like to focus on a more crucial issue, global warming.
A lady is talking on the phone and her doorbell rings. She says to the person on the phone: "I'd love to talk more, but my company just arrived. I've got to go."

Clarification, Explanation or expansion

A: indi rais mal warid astathmira bmashro
I've got some extra money and I'd like to invest it or grow it somehow.
B: shindak min fikra
What do you have in mind?
A: ya^{fi}ni shira bet, ya^{fi}ni shira matjar, ya^{fi}ni bina imara
Oh... maybe buy a house, or a store, or an apartment building (as an investment or to rent out apartments) for example.
Here *ya^{fi}ni* serves as a conversational expansion and can be paraphrased as the English "I mean" or "what I mean" or "for example". The information placed within parentheses in the translation above is not actually stated but is understood as an implicature.
In English, in ways parallel to *ya^{fi}ni* in Arabic, when a speaker wants to be more explicit and clarify or explain what he means, it is common for the speaker to use the words "for example" or "what I mean is" and then follow it with examples that illustrate what he means, or vice versa, as in the following:
A: (one friend to another): What do you have in mind?
B: Well, what I mean is buy a house, or a franchise, or an apartment building. Or, I mean like buy a house.

wonderful! It's lovely! Isn't that fantastic? Isn't that lovely? That's great! It's awesome! Or It's the best!, or like Stevie Wonder's song about a baby girl "Isn't she lovely?", etc.

Of course, for people who have a religious bent, especially evangelical Christian church-goers, you might hear hallelujah and/or Praise the Lord ("Allahu Akber" would be a fitting equivalent) when they are expressing their religious fervor or joy and excitement.

In response to A's question, "What do you have in mind?", B's answer "Well, what I mean is buy..." is closer to the Arabic in translation.

Introductory, prefatory

A Professor begins his class using *yaʿni* as an opener:

yanʿi mawthou talawwith albea huwa i mawthou khateer jiddan w yaʿni yihtaj dirasa wmuualaja jidiyya

To begin, let me say (that) the topic of environmental pollution is a very serious matter and, so, it needs some serious investigation.

In English there are many introductory or prefatory words or phrases which may begin an utterance, as in the following examples:

So, what are you up to tonight? Did you want to get together and go to the ballgame?
So, what's for dinner tonight?

There are no direct English equivalents *yanʿi* in this instance but, as illustrated in examples above, there are many words and phrases which can be used to accomplish the same effect. Of course, other words can be used to achieve the same function, as in:

To start, To start off, To commence, Let's (let us) begin, Let's start, Let's open, Let's kick off, First up, First, First off, for starters, Let's start now, etc.¹¹

Indignation and Exasperation

A student scolds his classmate who has grabbed his pen and notebook and scribbled all over it:

A: (upset student): Inta mazzaqit kitabi waikhathit aqlami
You wrecked my book and took my pen.

B: (the perpetrator): La mu ani
No, I didn't or No, it wasn't me.

A: Ee inta rah ashtaki alek ikdal mudeer
Yes, it was and I'm telling the principle

B: yaʿni shinu
So what!

yaʿni here expresses dismissal and a defiant, antagonistic attitude. The badly behaved student says *yaʿni shinu* which two words, when used together, act as one word meaning one thing, similar to its English equivalent *So what!*. It is as if the transgressor is saying "Big deal. See what I care." In both the Arabic *yaʿni shinu* and the English *so what*, you cannot separate the two words and achieve the meaning explained above. Both *yaʿni* and *so* can also be used to express exasperation when someone is impatient and wanting an answer from someone who is being indecisive, non-committal, or vague as follows:

(a mother is about to go to the store and asks her son): "So, are you coming or not?"

¹¹ As a matter of interest, there are two opening lines in English literature that are so famous and highly quotable. One is from a nursery rhyme (or children's story) "Once upon a time..." and the other is from the bible "In the beginning..." and both carry the sense of long, long ago.

The Arabic equivalent would be “*yaʕni inta rah tiji lo la*”

In the above example *yaʕni* is akin to the expression “So what!” in casual spoken English which is said all on its own as a reply; both words used together are like one word that has one meaning. Here this expression conveys the defiant, careless, and dismissive tone and attitude of the speaker who is probably sounding angry or annoyed.

Let’s say a mom has driven to her son’s school to pick him up. She waits in the car and after about 15 minutes, she calls him on her cell phone. He doesn’t answer. When he finally comes out to the car 20 minutes late, the mother scolds him:

Mother (sounding angry and annoyed) to her son: “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you for 20 minutes!”

Son: “SOOOOOOOO?” (drawn out and emphasized with an upward tone at the end) (Alternately, in this instance, the son could have just as well responded “So what?”)

In this scenario, it is as if the son is saying to his mother “What’s the big difference?” Such a response conveys the son’s inconsiderateness marked further by his dismissive tone and attitude.¹²

yanʕi in this instance, like “so what!”, usually means “big deal” as if to say “What’s the difference? Or “What difference does it make? Why should I care”.¹³

Sarcasm

Someone, known to be lazy, has no desire to work, failed in school and quit, is still living with and burdening his parents, tells them about his future plans;

A: Ana rah aseer tajir kebeer marouf ben annas wamtalik imarat wmihlat tijariyya

I’m going to become a well-known businessman who owns buildings and businesses

B: *yaʕni inta rah tishtagil wa timtalik bet wmolat. Ee saheeh*

Right, you’re gonna work and will have your own house and own malls. Yeah, right.

The expression which most closely aligns to the Arabic meaning is “Yeah, right” or “Yeah, sure”. Normally these two responses signify agreement, that is when the word “Yeah” is followed by “sure” or “right”, it means agreement:

A: Will you take out the garbage?

B: Yeah, sure.

A: I think Sally spends way too much money.

B: Yeah, right (meaning “I agree” or “Agreed”)

¹² It can work the other way around as well as this expression is not always used when someone is being inconsiderate; yet, defiance is still at play. For example, let us say the mother is very fussy and controlling and is always telling her son what to do and bosses him around over many things that most normal people wouldn’t bother with – ie. taking 15 vitamin pills at lunch every day; perhaps the mother asks her son for the millionth time “Did you take your vitamins today?”. Her son hates taking all these vitamins and usually just throws them out; today he’s choosing his battle over this one issue that irks him more than others so he tells his mother exactly what he does with the vitamins. She is irate and starts to scold him; he retorts. In this instance, the son is not trying to be inconsiderate or disrespectful at all but is simply bossed around too much about too many things. He is tired of all the unusual demands placed upon him by his mother and decides to stand his ground.

¹³ The phrase *yanʕi shunu*, like “So what!”, is even more impudent when combined with another discourse marker *adi* which is akin to *okay*. It becomes a more saucy response made by a person who’s being a real jerk and doesn’t give a hoot how his selfish actions and wrong-doings are affecting other people. In combination then, *adi yanʕi shunu* (*ok so what*) in such a context the meaning that comes across from its speaker, the transgressor, is “Big deal!” “Who cares?” or “See what I care. I don’t give a crap. Go ahead, tell the principal.”; or “oh, I’m really scared” uttered sarcastically.

However when the Arabic *ee* and *ee saheeh* which are akin to *yeah*, *yeah sure* and *yeah right* are said in a sarcastic tone, both actually mean “not likely”. Speaker (B) in the Arabic example has, for the sake of humour or sarcasm, produced a reply that is the exact opposite of what he/she actually thinks or means. That is, if you didn’t know the circumstances involving person (A) and you just examined the answer in script form, you would think that speaker (B) is being complimentary or is agreeing with (A). However, since (B) replied sarcastically and one listening to the conversation would gather this from the tone of speaker (B), one would understand that (B) is not being complimentary at all and doesn’t believe a word of what (A) is saying. The conventional implicature is signaled by *yaʕni* and the deictic *inta* “you”.

To sum up, because of all the minute, subtle and varied single-layered or multiple-layered complexities and variances of DMs, several characteristics may be occurring simultaneously. DMS are short utterances that occur so quickly and may contain very minute and quick changes in tone that may be totally almost unperceivable to a non-native speaker. Even if non-native speakers heard the DM/DMS, the meaning might be totally lost on them because they do not have the cultural knowledge of native speakers. Furthermore, if sounds or sound combinations or certain meanings do not exist in the language of the non-native speaker or do not occur in the same way/context, and if the non-native speaker can not make out the accent or quick speech of a native speaker, the ability to “hear” what is being said might be lost on them, as well as the meaning. DMS are more theoretical and cannot be sensed, perceived, or touched through the senses unlike concrete objects.

CONCLUSION

The DM *yaʕni* serves as a phrase/sentence ender, a pause, a connector or a prompt for what follows, acts as an indicator of the order speakers engaged in a conversation are to take, plays a role in utterance cohesion and signals personal attitudes. *yaʕni* is akin to a conversational flagwaver; it carries an inherent focus-marking feature signaling that what follows is the crux of the matter. It “sets up” what follows – the “distilled” information – to receive stress and to be focused upon. The speaker might as well be saying “Take note of the following. This is the nitty gritty; this is the situation in a nutshell; this is the crunch it has boiled down to; this is the bare bones all laid out; this is the nuts and bolts.” And then the speaker spells it all out, lays it on the line, to the listener who is unaware of the situation. In the example discussed in section 4 above, the focal point of concern, the matter of focus, is the direness of Ali’s financial circumstances.

Research concerning Arabic DMs existing in the domain of “low” forms of Arabic has been lacking due to discriminatory attitudes towards these “low” forms of speech, unlike other fields of study and other languages. These prejudices occur in every country and culture. For example, one just needs to think of the movie “My Fair Lady” in which a revered phonetician transforms Eliza Doolittle, a poor street merchant doomed to a life of hardship and poverty, into a “proper” lady first by ridding her of her dreadful accent and speech habits through intense, private speech lessons in the pronunciation of a much preferable English accent. Partnered with further improvements in her dress and mannerisms, her transformation is remarkable and the “lady” has got everyone fooled at high-society gatherings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work is funded by the University of Nizwa grant [number A/16-17-UoN/01/CAS/IF].

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