

Research Article

# Discovering the Discourse Functions of a Moroccan Arabic Discourse Marker

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## Abstract

This paper is a case of the quantitative type of discourse analysis, which focuses on discrete items or particles. This research is data-oriented, i.e. not meant to confirm or confute any given theory on discourse organization or structure. It purports to deal with the relation between form and function of the discourse particle /waxa/ in Moroccan Arabic (henceforth, MA) in order to learn more about discourse organization in MA and the roles played by such particles in terms of their functions and distributions within MA discourse. This study provides a functional classification of 'waxa' together with a distributional analysis which accounts for its occurrence in turns at speaking. The data on which this paper is based were collected by extensive observation and note-taking on the spot. The observation was done over a period lasting more than four months in Casablanca, mostly, and in Rabat as well. This functional analysis has identified eighteen (18) different functions of 'waxa'. Fourteen (14) of these are highly interactional functions whereas the other four (4) have a more syntactic or structural function. The eighteen (18) functions may not prevail in other varieties of Moroccan Arabic (e.g. Hassani variety; personal communication from Prof Tamek). It is worth noting that this particle is strictly restricted to spoken language and it is hard to find an appropriate equivalent to it in Standard Modern Arabic. Basically, 'waxa' has no inherent static semantic or structural properties; its meaning is actually mainly based on its context of occurrence.

## Keywords

Discourse Markers, OK, waxa, Conversation, Multifunctional, Coherence, Organization

## 1. Introduction

Discourse Analysis ramifies into different types of analyses depending on the type of data collected and the type of analysis within which the researcher has set the goal to achieve from such analysis.

As examples of Discourse Analysis, there is quantitative analysis, grammatical complexity analysis, topic analysis, cohesion/coherence analysis, propositional and functional analysis, narrative analysis, analysis of rhetorical structure in

written discourse, etc.

Discourse Analysis is the linguistic analysis of naturally-occurring spoken or written discourse. On the one hand, it "includes the study of linguistic forms and the irregularities of their distribution and, on the other hand, it involves a consideration of the general principles of interpretation by which people normally make sense of what they hear and read" [1].

The core of any research in Discourse Analysis is the data

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of naturally-occurring speech, which should be highly representative of the particular issue to be studied. However, data collection is no easy task. Were it biased or not representative enough, any analysis thereof would be incomplete, if not irrelevant. This is due to the fact that for any data, there are many variables, like sex, age, degree of literacy or urbanity, etc. that are interrelated and sometimes too slippery to be aptly manipulated and mustered. These variables, however, have to be taken into consideration while targeting the situational contexts in which the relevant data is to be collected.

There is a lack of accepted and recognized rigorous principles for collecting, presenting and analyzing conversational data. Basically, there are practical problems pertaining to the difficulty of collecting naturally-occurring conversations, the observer's paradox, and transcription, translation and interpretation of data. Considering these facts, every research in Discourse Analysis would be a particular case, in which particular problems would be faced and suitable solutions thereto would be proposed not as conclusive ones but as compromising between the real and ideal type of discourse analysis, in which no particular problems would be faced.

This paper is a case of the quantitative type of discourse analysis, which focuses on discrete items or particles. This research is data-oriented, i.e. not meant to confirm or confute any given theory on discourse organization or structure. It is an updated version of an earlier article published in Bouhout [2]. This paper purports to deal with the relation between form and function of the discourse particle /waxa/ in Moroccan Arabic (henceforth, MA) in order to learn more about discourse organization in MA and the roles played by such particles in terms of their functions and distributions within the discourse.

## 2. Discourse Markers

Words like 'actually', 'so', 'OK', 'right?' and 'anyway' all function as discourse markers in English as they help the speaker to manage the conversation and mark when it changes. Discourse Markers (also labeled Discourse Particles) are an important feature of both formal and informal native speaker language. Analyses of discourse markers like 'well', 'ok', 'uh-huh', 'now', 'yeah', etc. have shown their important conversational roles. It is obvious that 'uh-huh' and other vocalizations like 'um-hum' or 'yeah' are multifunctional, since they can be used to initiate a turn-extension, to show interest, attention and understanding, to exhibit understanding that discourse is underway, and also, when repeated in four or five consecutive slots, to express disinterest. However, Schegloff found that "The status of 'uh huh' as an indication of understanding or agreement is equivocal in a way in which its status as a continuer is not, as participants who have relied on it will have discovered and regretted." [3].

Condon tackled 'ok' and considered the syntagmatic position of 'ok' at points in discourse representing boundaries or transition points and the paradigmatic dimensions of 'ok' by

contrasting the distribution of 'ok' and similar interjections like 'well', 'now', 'yeah', etc). Condon's analysis has reached the conclusion that "Transitions where several levels of organization coincide are choice-points at which many decisions must be made. OK seems to signal that, at each level, unmarked alternatives have been chosen". [4] This means that OK follows consensus and precedes an utterance that orients to the next decision, and signals unmarked responses (that do not require extra information or elaboration).

Schiffirin focused on the role played by 'well' for the achievement of conversational coherence, which is "a cooperative enterprise in which speaker and hearer jointly negotiate (a) a focus of attention—a referent—and (b) a response which further selects what aspect(s) of that referent will be attended to". [5] This division of labor is shown through different pairs (referents and responses) like question/answer, request/(non) compliance, etc. This fact led Schiffirin to suppose "that conversational coherence proceeds in a pairwise fashion" [5], i.e. referent/response. Her analysis shows that "WELL anchors its user in a system of conversational exchange when the options offered by a referent for the coherence of a response are not precisely followed". [6].

For Fraser, Discourse Markers "are free morphemes, they are proposition-initial, they signal a specific message either about or in addition to the basic message, and they are classified as pragmatic markers by virtue of their semantic/pragmatic functions" [7]. On the other hand, the importance of discourse markers (words like 'so', 'but', 'however', and 'well') lies in the theoretical questions they raise about the nature of discourse and the relationship between linguistic meaning and context. Blakemore maintains that such expressions "pragmatic meaning rather than semantic meaning" [8]. It is true that Discourse Markers are regarded as being central to semantics because they raise problems for standard theories of meaning, and to pragmatics because they seem to play a role in the way discourse is understood.

## 3. Moroccan Arabic Discourse Marker /waxa/

These are some of the particles that play important roles in the achievement of coherence and the organization of discourse. 'waxa', as a discourse marker, does play such roles in MA. This study will provide a functional classification of 'waxa' together with a distributional analysis which accounts for its occurrence in turns at speaking.

The data on which this paper is based were collected by extensive observation and note-taking on the spot. The observation was done over a period lasting more than four months in Casablanca, mostly, and in Rabat as well. During the task of observation, the major concern was to jot down inasmuch as feasible the stretches of talk in which there were instances of 'waxa'. Immediately after, details on the interactants were appended to the field notes together with any

other pertinent information on the context of occurrence which would bear some relevance and importance in the sequel.

In collecting the data, some theoretical sampling was undertaken, namely, seeking out people and situations likely to be particularly revealing with respect to the discourse functions of 'waxa' in MA. The basic point of theoretical sampling is that 'all data are biased in some way, but that these biases may be systematically exploited' [9]. The rationale behind this procedure of data collection is that recording sessions did not prove to be fruitful and revealing enough. On the other hand, the data collected for this paper have gone through the procedure of triangulation, that is, it was cross-checked against other independent accounts. One major idea behind triangulation is "that the analyst's account should be compared with participants' accounts lest it be theoretically biased". [10].

Before accounting for the highly interactive value of 'waxa' in MA, it is worth noting that this particle is strictly restricted to spoken language and it is hard to find an appropriate equivalent to it in Standard Modern Arabic. Basically, 'waxa' has no inherent static semantic or structural properties; its meaning is actually mainly based on its context of occurrence. In many instances, 'waxa' shows that it can potentially signal unmarked responses, i.e. which do not require any extra information and which can be elliptical or nonverbal. There are even cases where the functions of 'waxa' cannot be conclusively determined although it highly contributes to the carrying of the overall function of a piece of discourse.

The unit of analysis is turns at speaking within adjacency pairs in specific encounters from larger gatherings. From the data collected, eighteen (18) different uses of 'waxa' were identified to denote potentially different functions. It must be specified that there is some overlap and ambivalence among the different functions, depending on the context of occurrence, which creates potential ambiguity. Such fact warranted the classification of these functions under cover terms to capture the common features of slightly different functions.

Brown & Yule state that 'the principle of analogy will provide a reasonably secure framework for interpretation for the hearer and for the analyst most of the time'. [1].

A careful analysis of the different uses of 'waxa' has led us to single out four (4) outstanding groups of functions. Basically, two larger categories can be identified: one for functions of 'waxa' with a low interactional value, and the other for functions with a highly interactional value. In the latter group, a further differentiation can be made between compliance, refusal and expressive functions of 'waxa'.

### 3.1. Highly Interactional Functions

These functions express the speaker's (dis) approval, acceptance, confirmation or (non) compliance with a request expressed in the preceding turn at speaking. In such cases,

'waxa' occurs in adjacency pairs as well as in single self-contained turns triggered by non-verbal action.

#### 3.1.1. Compliance Functions

There are six different functions expressing various shades of acceptance, confirmation or compliance. For technical reasons, only one example of each function will be provided hereunder:

- i. F1: Sheer compliance or acceptance
  - naʕima !
  - Naima !
  - nʕam.
  - Yes.
  - ʕibi (leʕda) !
  - Bring it (lunch)!
  - waxa.
  - Ok.
- ii. F2: Ironic concession or ironic confirmation
  - ʕhal men xaʕra gelt li-kum had l-ʕurbal ma jet-ʕalleq-hna ?
  - How many times did I tell not to hang this sieve here?
  - waxa sidi. welliti nta huwa lemra hna !
  - Yes Sir. You have become the housewife of this place!
- iii. F3: Compliance plus deferral or irritation
  - mmi, ʕʕini lli gelte lija (leflus) !
  - Mummy. Give me it (the money)!
  - waxa bniti, ʕa-siri tsaxri beʕda.
  - All right my daughter. Go now and fetch me the thing.
- iv. F4: Respectful compliance (cf. power relationship)
  - ʕadi tʕajjeʕ l-hasan baʕ n-ʕawdu had ʕʕi men lewwel li ʕannahu maʕi xedma hadi.
  - You will have to call Hassan so that we can start this thing again because that's not good at all.
  - waxa sidi majkun ʕir xaʕterkum.
  - Ok Sir, as you will.
  - l-masaʕl djal l-ʕidara xeʕsha tkun meʕbuʕa llah jexallik.
  - The documents of the administration must be well attended to.
  - nʕam asidi.
  - Yes Sir.
- v. F5: Compliance of admittance or acknowledgement
  - So, then, it's fifteen.
  - No, sixteen.
  - Ah?
  - It should be sixteen.
  - Sixteen. waxa.
- vi. F6: Impatience or indifference toward the interlocutor
  - ʕu men baʕd n-tlaqaw f-le-mdina jak ?
  - And, then, we will meet in the city center, won't we?
  - waxa waxa ʕir siri daba rah ʕa-jemʕi ʕlik ʕubis.
  - Yes, yes. Now go catch the bus before it goes away.
  - ʕu temma tʕawd lija kulʕi.
  - And up there, you will tell me everything.
  - ʕiwa ʕafi.

-We're not going to dwell on this.

All these functions are cases of positive responses to previous requests. Such positive responses come in different shades; that is why they are subsumed under the cover term of compliance functions.

### 3.1.2. Refusal Functions

In this case, there are only two different functions. Although apparently positive, they are, in fact, negative responses to previous responses. Unlike 'ok', according to Condon, potential ambiguity does not deter participants from using 'waxa' in situations where it might be confusing or ironical.

i. F7: Mild rejection

-yadi t-kemmel lija l-flus jak ʔa hasan.

-I still need more money, Hassan.

-waxa ʔir ʔawwel.

-Don't count on me!

ii. F8: Polite ironic negative response marker to reject a point of view

-waxa hta hada raʔij, ʔila byiti.

-All right. That's another point of view if you want.

Both compliance and refusal functions are highly interactional and signal the speaker's commitment by accepting, refusing, rejecting or complying with a previous request or statement. This is not the case for the third category of functions, which is also highly interactional, whereby the speaker expresses feelings and attitudes toward a previous statement or request.

### 3.1.3. Expressive Functions

i. F9: Encouraging exclamation or cheering (soccer match in Rabat won by Wydad)

-waxa ʔel leqraja.

-Look at the good soccer-playing.

ii. F10: Astonishment or appreciation

-ʔiwa sidi hadik llila qaʔʔerna mezjan.

-And that evening, we enjoyed ourselves very much.

-waxa waxa !

-Lucky you!

-ʔaf men ʔtiħ hada waf men rkiz.

-Everybody was dancing.

-ʔijeh !

-Really!

iii. F11: Threatening

-xarreʔti ʔumubil ʔawd tani waxa hahuwa ʔaj.

-Are you taking the car out again? When he comes I'll tell him.

-sir mennu llih nxarreʔha weqt ma byit.

-I don't care. I'll take it whenever it pleases me.

-ʔu malek melli kajebda jseb fik kateħder rras.

-I know that you're only a coward.

-jak dima kanxarreʔha ʔaf qditi.

-You're wasting time. I always take it out.

iv. F12: Call for the recipient commiseration (importance of contextual and kinesic features)

-ʔari ʔwija ʔaxti buʔra !

-Give me some (toffees) Bouchra!

-lla, ʔunti kateʔtini ?

-No. Do you give me any yourself?

-waxa ʔaqli fiha hahija rebʔa derjal hta ana.

-Please! Don't forget I have some money, too.

v. F13: Sense of triumph

-waxa !

-I've caught you (red-handed)!

vi. F14: Feeling of indignation

-nta dxul suq karrek !

-Mind your own business !

-waxa sidi smeʔ lberhuʔ kber ʔir lbareħ uħel lih lfum.

-That's all that's wanting, a little child addressing me in this way.

## 3.2. Functions with a Low Interactional Value

There are four different functions in this category. The primary role of 'waxa' in such cases is organizational, i.e. a role that is more syntactic or grammatical, organizing interactions from the structural point of view, than pragmatic.

### 3.2.1. F15: Syntactic/Grammatical Function of Quantifiers or Linking Words (Subordinating Conjunctions)

-ʔasidi ʔanaqa hadi !

-What elegance!

-waxa tʔuf bħal hukkak rah ʔir lebbux.

-Although she looks like that, it's only a show-off.

-iwa beʔda bajna yadi ʔiħ lih hadi.

-Anyway, she seems to be an easy prey for him.

-lala. waxa ʔħak liha felewwele ma-jakulʔ.

-No, no. Though he smiled to her, he has no chance.

-ʔtini waxa ʔir rwijel.

-Give me just/only five centimes.

### 3.2.2. F16: Grammatical Function of Question-tags

-dduz mʔaja ndebru ʔla ʔi ħaʔa waxa ?

-Will you accompany me to get one?

-waxa hta l-bellati.

-Ok, but later.

### 3.2.3. F17: Boundary Marker (a Frame in Coulthard's Terms) or a Device Signaling a Transition from One State of Talk to Another

-ʔafi ʔir kuni hanja ... beslama.

-Now don't worry about anything... Goodbye.

-waxa sidi, af kenna ngulu gbila ?

-Ok, then. Where were we?

-xallinaha f-qaʔijet lebnadma lli...

-We were talking about that girl who...

### 3.2.4. F18: Metalinguistic Function in Citations, Sayings and Proverbs

- ‘waxa’ matxasser xaṭer ma teqḍi ḥaḥa.
- ‘waxa’ as such would not get you anywhere.
- leḥjalat gul lihum ‘waxa’ ʔu red lihum nsit.
- Say ‘waxa’ to women and give them back ‘I’ve forgotten’.
- ḥta tefhem ḥad gul lija ‘waxa’.
- Don’t say ‘waxa’ until you’ve understood.
- ḥta nefhem ḥad ngul lik ‘waxa’.
- You’re telling me not to say ‘waxa’ till I’ve understood.
- ʔijeh.
- Yes.
- waxa.
- All right!

## 4. Discussion

After presenting different examples illustrating various functions of /waxa/, we are going to analyze these functions from the pragmatic point of view. On the whole, the data gathered has revealed 18 eighteen different functions of the Moroccan Arabic discourse marker /waxa/. If we look at these functions with more scrutiny, we will notice that we can group them into two major categories: highly interactional functions and functions with low interactional value.

Within the first category of highly interactional functions, we identify 3 three sub-categories, namely, compliance functions, refusal functions, and expressive functions. There are 6 six compliance functions, all of which express some form of positive response to a prior initiation. F1 is used for sheer compliance or acceptance, F2 is used for ironic concession or ironic confirmation, F3 is used for compliance plus deferral or irritation, F4 is used for respectful compliance due to some power relationship, F5 is used for compliance of admittance or acknowledgement, and finally F6 is used for expressing compliance with some impatience or indifference toward the interlocutor.

In the second sub-category of refusal functions, there are only 2 two functions that express some form of negative response to a prior initiation. F7 is used for expressing mild rejection, and F8 is used to show a polite ironic negative response marker to reject a point of view.

The third sub-category of expressive functions subsumes 6 six functions, namely, F9 to express an encouraging exclamation or cheering, F10 is used to express astonishment or appreciation, F11 is used to express some form of threatening, F12 is used to call for the recipient’s commiseration (with a relative importance of contextual and kinesic features for this function), F13 is used to show some sense of triumph, and finally, F14 is used to show some feeling of indignation.

The second major category includes functions with a low interactional value but a highly syntactic value. There are 4 four functions subsumed in this category, namely, F15 is used

for syntagmatic or grammatical function of quantifiers or linking words (subordinating conjuncts), F16 is used to express the grammatical function of question-tags, F17 is used as a boundary marker (a frame in Coulthard’s terms) or a device signaling a transition from one state of talk to another, and finally, F18 is used to express some Metalinguistic functions in citations, sayings and proverbs.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has identified eighteen (18) different functions of ‘waxa’. Fourteen (14) of these are highly interactional whereas the other four (4) have a more syntactic or structural function. This functional analysis of ‘waxa’ remains not without limitations. A distributional analysis of ‘waxa’ should provide more insight on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic features, i.e. analyzing the use of ‘waxa’ in either initiations or responses and the implications thereof, and the comparison of ‘waxa’ with other particles that might play some of its functional or syntactic roles. The eighteen (18) functions may not prevail in other varieties of Moroccan Arabic (e.g. Hassani variety; personal communication from Prof Tamek). No account of intonation contours was provided, which is instrumental in conveying/perceiving some functions. Finally, a major recommendation would be to encourage researchers in studying the use of ‘waxa’ in other varieties of Moroccan Arabic as well as the different varieties of Berber spoken in Morocco to establish comparisons and contrasts.

*Table 1. Key to Phonetic Symbols used in the transcriptions.*

1. /i/: high front vowel	16. /z/: voiced alveolar fricative
2. /a/: low back unrounded vowel	17. /ʃ/: voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
3. /u/: high back rounded vowel	18. /ʒ/: voiced palato-alveolar fricative
4. /e/: mid front vowel	19. /ç/: voiceless palatal fricative
5. /b/: voiced bilabial stop	20. /x/: voiceless velar fricative
6. /t/: voiceless alveolar stop	21. /ʁ/: voiced velar fricative
7. /d/: voiced alveolar stop	22. /h/: voiceless glottal fricative
8. /tʃ/: voiceless palatal stop	23. /ħ/: voiceless pharyngeal fricative
9. /dʒ/: voiced palatal stop	24. /ʕ/: voiced pharyngeal fricative
10. /k/: voiceless velar stop	25. /m/: voiced bilabial nasal
11. /g/: voiceless velar stop	26. /n/: voiced alveolar nasal
12. /ʔ/: voiceless glottal stop	27. /l/: voiced alveolar lateral
13. /q/: voiceless uvular stop	28. /r/: voiced alveolar trill
14. /f/: voiceless labiodental	29. /w/: voiced labiovelar glide

fricative

15. /s/: voiceless alveolar  
fricative

30. /j/: voiced palatal glide

## Abbreviations

MA Moroccan Arabic

## Author Contributions

Fathi Said is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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