

Perception of Arabic and Foreign-Origin Discourse Markers of Elaboration in Three Dialects of Arabic

Discourse markers (DMs) have been predominantly studied as markers of relations between discourse segments (Schiffrin 1987) or a type of ‘discourse glue’ (Fraser 1990: 385), but few studies examined them within a Relevance theoretical account as “acts of ostensive communication” carrying pragmatic information relevant to the listener/reader’s social and cognitive environment (Blackmore 2004). This paper reports on a verbal guise test comparing listeners’ attitudes towards Arabic-origin and foreign-origin variants of the discourse marker *I mean*, serving the meaning of elaboration, in three dialects of Arabic. It was hypothesized that foreign-origin DMs in varieties with a colonial past carry higher social-indexical value than Arabic-origin forms, and that the use of borrowed forms can be linked to perceived power and competence.

Thirty participants took part in the study. Ten were from Morocco (M), ten from Egypt (E), and ten from Saudi Arabia (SA). As this was a verbal guise study “in which the language varieties are recorded by different speakers” (Garrett 2010:41-42), the Moroccan participants heard passages read by a Moroccan speaker, the Egyptians heard the passages read by an Egyptian speaker, and Saudis heard passages read by a Saudi speaker. All speakers were male. The stimuli included a total of 9 short passages presented to listeners in a randomized order. Three target passages included DMs and six passages were so-called fillers, destined to prevent listeners from guessing that the study was focusing on DMs. Three Arabic-origin and two foreign-origin variants of the discourse marker *I mean* were manipulated in the guises. Each local form, *zəšma* (M), *šasdi* (E), and *gasdi* (SA), respectively, was embedded in the target passages presented to listeners in their own dialect. The French borrowing *cela veut dire*, used in Moroccan Arabic, was embedded in the target passages heard by Moroccan listeners. The English variant *I mean* was embedded in the passages heard by the Egyptian and Saudi speakers. For each passage, participants had to answer three questions for four social dimensions that were: power, solidarity, competence, and status. Participants were asked to attribute characteristics relevant to these dimensions to the speakers they heard using a scale from 1 to 7.

Mixed-effects ANOVAs showed that three factors obtained statistical significance: variants of DM, social dimension, and the interaction of nationality and social dimension. Post-hoc tests indicated that for all the listeners, variants of Arabic origin were ranked higher than the other variants. Thus, respondents from countries with a colonial past, Morocco and Egypt, and those from Saudi Arabia which did not have a colonial past ranked the Arabic-origin form similarly highly. For the factor “social dimension”, the variable “status” obtained higher scores on average compared to all other social dimensions. Moroccans ranked passages containing both Arabic-origin and foreign-origin DMs higher in status than competence. Egyptians and Moroccans perceived such passages as higher in status than solidarity. The results show that variants of DM in Arabic carry different socio-pragmatic meaning and that this meaning is linked to nationality and several social dimensions. Additional theoretical and empirical contributions of this study will be discussed.