Commitment or Hedge Marker? The Discourse Marker $yaʕni$ (lit. ‘it means’) in spoken Arabic and Hebrew

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Discourse markers (DMs) are an important key for the understanding of the structure and dynamics of naturally occurring language. As often observed, DMs do not operate at the clause level, syntactically or semantically (cf., e.g., Schourup 1999 and contributions in Fischer 2006). Rather, DMs serve to enhance communicative coherence by explicitly indicating supra-clausal relations, conversational procedures, cognitive processes, and interactional goals, at the discourse and meta-discourse levels (Schourup 1985, Schiffrin 1987, Maschler 2009).

This paper presents a functional analysis of the Arabic DM $yaʕni$ (lit. ‘it means’), as used in spoken Egyptian Arabic and in Modern Hebrew. The analysis of $yaʕni$ in Arabic is based on data collected during interviews with Egyptian women which I conducted and recorded in Cairo in 2011 (Author, forthcoming). This analysis shows that the core function of $yaʕni$ is to facilitate and cue the speaker’s mental efforts to produce the most satisfying expression of her intended message, as affected by her constant calculation of changes in the interlocutors’ epistemic and affective stance. Various realizations of $yaʕni$ differ, accordingly, in terms of the information that is being processed (i.e., new, accessible, given) and the orientation of the speaker, either to her internal world of thoughts or to (what she makes of) the world of others. These distinctions are illustrated below:

(1) intu kull $l$amma tğību $yaʕni$ šēx
you every when bring $yaʕni$ sheikh

‘Every time you will bring $yaʕni$ a sheikh […]’ (H 2, 14:24)

(2) inti $ṭhibbi$ wîlādu
you will love his children
$wi-ṭhibbi$ $mrātu$
and love his wife
$yaʕni$ tkūni kuwayyyisa maṣâhum
$yaʕni$ you will be good with them

‘[…] you will love his children and love his [first] wife $yaʕni$ you will be good with them’ (ʕAb 3, 02:27)

In (1), $yaʕni$ helps the speaker to carve a new chunk of information from her pre-uttered world of thoughts (i.e., the object ‘sheikh’), whereas in (2), $yaʕni$ introduces an elaboration of information that has already been activated in previous discourse and therefore is accessible to the hearer (i.e., ‘love’ ~ ‘be good’). However different, in all the cases in which $yaʕni$ is used, the speaker is engaged in making explicit what her precise communicative intentions are, thus $yaʕni$ can be described as a marker of the speaker’s commitment to the accuracy and veracity of the contents of her message.

The Arabic marker $yaʕni$ has also been borrowed into Modern Hebrew. Unlike the situation in Egyptian Arabic (and other spoken Arabic dialects), in which $yaʕni$ is an unmarked lexical term, $yaʕni$ (or $yaʕnu$) in Modern Hebrew is indexical of particular sociolinguistic attitudes.
and identities (e.g., casualness, authenticity, Easternism), whether these are positively or negatively intended. Moreover, the repertoire of DMs indicating cognitive processes in Hebrew includes also Hebrew markers, the closest to \textit{yaʕni} in both its distribution and functional scope is the pervasive \textit{ke’ilu} (lit. ‘as if’). Like other DMs of the same lexical source (e.g., En. ‘like’, Fr. ‘genre’, cf. Andersen 1998, Fleischman and Yaguello 2004), \textit{ke’ilu} is reported to function in some cases as a hedge marking the speaker’s reduced commitment to the contents expressed (Henkin 1999, Maschler 2009:137ff.). Based on data found in The Haifa Corpus of Spoken Hebrew (Maschler 2015), this paper examines the distribution and function of \textit{yaʕni} in Hebrew, as compared to those observed in Arabic, and as possibly affected by the contact with the Hebrew DM \textit{ke’ilu}. The paper will attempt to determine whether in the Hebrew context \textit{yaʕni} has developed meanings other than the marking of commitment, to the extent that loose commitment can also be expressed by this DM.

References

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