

The Pragmatic Functions of (*Now*) in Informal Arabic in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the pragmatic meaning and functions of *halhen* (*now*) as a discourse marker in informal Arabic. To do so, the researcher implemented Aijmer's (2002) classification of the discourse functions of *now*. The results show that *halhen* has textual and affective functions. Regarding its textual functions, *halhen* could be a topic changer for telling new information or returning to an earlier point; a frame between discourse units; a turn-taking signal; an item separating sub-topics; a marker of a new step in an argument; a marker of a new action in a cumulative series of actions; or an indicator of background information in the form of elaboration, explanation, clarification, or support. The findings also indicate that *halhen*, in its affective functions, works as a marker of affective stance for evaluation, an expression introducing the speaker's opinion in contrast to others, a shift in the perspective, or as a hearer-oriented intensifier.

Keywords: Discourse markers, Pragmatics, Informal Arabic, Textual functions, Affective functions

1. Introduction

Discourse markers are linguistic, "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. The boundaries of units not only of talk, but of social life and social organization in general, are often marked in some way" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31, 36). Schiffrin (1987, pp. 31–32) indicated a number of items that are used as discourse markers, such as *oh*, *well*, *and*, *but*, *or*, *so*, *because*, *now*, *then*, *I mean*, and *y'know*. Fraser (1990) suggested that discourse markers are "expressions such as *now*, *well*, *so*, *however*, *and then*, which signal a sequential relationship between the current basic message and the previous discourse". Schiffrin (1987) investigated discourse markers in oral interaction, while Kapranov (2019) and Tottie (2017)

studied them in written discourse. According to Schourup (1999), there are seven features of discourse markers: connectivity, optionality, non-truth conditionality, weak-clause association, initiality, orality, and multi categoriality. Although there has been plenty of research on oral and written discourse markers in English, discourse markers need to be studied in Arabic, where little research has been conducted to investigate their features and meaning.

The aim of the study is to investigate the functions of *halhen* as a discourse marker in Arabic following Aijmer's (2002) classifications of discourse markers. To the best of my knowledge, no studies have been conducted to examine the meaning or functions of *halhen* as a discourse marker in Arabic. *Halhen* is an informal Arabic word that is equivalent to the adverb of time *now* in English.

2. *Now* as a Discourse Marker in English

The discourse marker *now* has been studied in detail regarding its functions, meaning, features, and grammatical usage (see Aijmer, 1988, 2002; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 2011). Schiffrin (1987) described *now* as being used to “mark a speaker's progression through discourse time by displaying attention to an upcoming idea unit, orientation, and/or participation framework” (p. 230). She argued that *now* is a temporal adverb and a reference to time that is used to indicate an upcoming shift, for negotiation as a turn-taking or topical development for local discourse coherence, or to mark shifts in orientation. In her investigation of *now*, Aijmer (2002) distinguished the “S-use” and “D-use” of *now*, refereeing to Hirschberg and Litman's (1993) work examining the textual and prosodic features of *now*. S-use of *now* means using it as a temporal function and D-use refers to using it as a discourse function. Aijmer (2002) classified the functions of *now* into two categories: textual and affective. In its textual function, *now* works as a “boundary marker between conversational actions both in monologue (i.e., the same speaker) and dialogue” (Aijmer, 2002, p. 73). The affective function of *now* includes a switch in orientation as a result of using an interpretive filter in talk. Adamczyk's (2020) summary of Aijmer's (2002) classification of *now* is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Aijmer's (2002) Textual and Affective Functions of *Now* as summarized by Adamczyk (2020)

Textual function of *now*

- 1) A topic changer signaling either new information or a return to an earlier subject (e.g., “now switching to,” “now going back to,” “now let's go back to”)
 - 2) A frame between discourse units (e.g., preliminaries, understood as a preparatory stage, and the main topic)
 - 3) A turn-taking signal indicating who occupies the floor and sometimes helping the speaker to monopolize it
 - 4) An item separating sub-topics (the examples provided illustrate the relation of contrast and comparison)
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- 5) A marker of a new step in an argument or a narrative
 - 6) A marker of a new event/action in a cumulative series of events/actions listed
 - 7) An indicator of background information which “introduces a subordinate speech act” (Aijmer, 2002, p. 95) in the form of (a) elaboration or subtopic or (b) explanation, clarification, or support.
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Affective function of *now*

- 1) A marker of affective stance signaling, for instance, a transition to evaluation (e.g., “now that’s dreadful,” “now this is very difficult”)
 - 2) An expression introducing a disclaimer about the speaker’s opinion standing in contrast to that of others (e.g., “now I do not agree,” “now I think”)
 - 3) An indicator of a change of “footing” (Goffman, 1981), i.e., a shift from the perspective taken by the speaker to that of the hearer (e.g., “now do you agree”)
 - 4) A hearer-oriented intensifier indicating that the speaker directs his/her attention toward the hearer (e.g., “now look,” “now come on,” “now wait a moment”)
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3. Studies on *Now* Equivalents as a Discourse Marker in Different Languages

Shirtz (2021) examined the usage patterns and features of *now* as a discourse marker in Alsea and Siuslaw as two dormant languages of the Oregon Coast. The most significant goal of *now* in these two languages is to structure narrative and descriptive discourse. The results showed that the main function of *now* in that study is to start a plotline after finishing a prior topic. Al Kayed (2021) examined *hasa* in Arabic, which although a different word from the one in the present study (*halhen*), also means *now*. The researcher studied the lexical meaning and grammaticalization of *hasa* in Jordanian Arabic based on relevance theory. The study concluded that *hasa* has many functions in Jordanian Arabic, such as ideational shifting, openings markers, marking of a reason, orientation shifts, and showing disagreement. Gonen et al. (2015) examined the discursive and prosodic features of *axshav* in Hebrew. The results showed that the main discursive functions of *axshav* as a discourse marker are holding the floor and segmentation to emphasize the importance of certain pieces of information by different means, such as comparisons and contrasts. In a recent study, Adamczyk (2020) explored the meaning of the discourse marker *now* and its Polish equivalents. The findings indicated that there are two main functions of *now*: discourse-structuring and intensifying functions. Discourse-structuring functions include contrasting, resulting, returning, and explaining, while intensifying functions can be more explicitly emotive, emphatic, or conative in nature. Adamczyk’s (2020) results supported Aijmer’s (2002) model of the functions of *now*. Olanrewaju et al. (2020) studied *now* with other discourse markers in Nigerian courtroom discourse. The study concluded that discourse markers, including *now*, are used to enhance lawyers’ power, coercion, and challenging nature. In a much more specialized and detailed study, Oladipupo and Unuabonah (2021) investigated the discourse and pragmatic usage of *now* in Nigerian English. The researchers examined the phonetic properties of *now* in Nigerian English and its meaning, frequency, syntactic patterns, and

extended discursive-pragmatic functions. The findings showed that *now* in Nigerian English has only interpersonal functions, where it works as an emphasis and a mitigation marker. Furthermore, Perera and Strauss (2015) investigated the functions of *dæn* as a discourse marker in Sinhala. They concluded that *dæn* functions as a discourse management marker in different categories to establish/build contrast, as a means of building arguments in a stepwise fashion, and as a defensive strategy.

After reviewing the literature, we can see that researchers and linguists have discussed the discourse marker *now* in English and other languages. Nonetheless, no studies have examined the functions of *halhen* as a discourse marker, despite it being one of the most common discourse markers in informal Arabic. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the functions of *halhen* as a discourse marker in informal Arabic to contribute to the existing literature.

4. Textual Functions of *Halhen* in Arabic

This section examines *halhen* according to Aijmer's (2002) textual functions of *now*. Firstly, *now* serves as a topic changer by introducing a new topic or by closing or dismissing a topic (Aijmer, 2002). In informal Arabic, people may introduce a new topic by saying *halhen*, as in Examples 1 and 2:

- (1) Halhen rah nitkalam an al taqs.

Now we will talk about the weather.

- (2) Halhen rah abda ashrah al dars.

Now I will start explaining the lesson.

Halhen is also used to mark closing or dismissing a topic in Arabic, as seen in the following examples:

- (3) Wa Halhen khalona noghaer almawdowa.

And now let's change the topic.

- (4) Halhen ninteqal le mawdowa akhar

Now we are switching to another topic.

- (5) Halhen nirjaa ll almawdowa alraeasi

Now going back to the main topic.

- (6) Wa Halhen khalowna nirjaa le nafs alfekra.

And now let's go back to the same idea.

- (7) Halhen nabgha nghaer al mawdowa

Now we want to change the topic.

Aijmer (2002) argued that *now* could work as a frame between discourse units, especially

when it becomes a break between two parts in the text. For instance, it can mark a break between the first part of the text, such as preliminaries, and the second part, which is the main topic. In Example 8, the speaker starts by trying to pronounce the name correctly, then shifts to the main topic, which is asking about participation in the sports activity, by using *halhen* as a frame between these two text units.

(8) Fe almagmoah al akherah endana Jawan.

In the fifth group we have Jawan.

Madri Jeawan ow Jawaan.

I don't know if it is Jeawan or Jawaan.

Maalesh jabdo anha Jawan.

I'm sorry it is Jawan.

Wa thalath banat ghair.

And three more students.

Halhen Abi asalkum ween al albanat alli jabghon yosharikon fe alnashat alryadhi.

Now, I would like to ask you about the students who want to participate in the sport activity.

Another example of a frame is when *now* works as a transition from the main topic to agreement signaling (Aijmer, 2002), as shown in Example 9.

(9) Aiwa aiwa lazam.

Yes, yes, you must.

Halhen, lazem ashofak alsaah ashir ywm alarbiaa alsabh.

Now, I should meet you on Wednesday morning at 10 o'clock.

Aijmer (2002) indicated the following regarding turn taking: "To announce who has the turn and to keep the turn in order to say something more, the speaker may for example use it because he has a story to tell or in order to elaborate on a topic" (p.79). This can be seen in Example 10, where Speaker C elaborates on his idea.

(10) C: Mn ale akhathat almarkz alawal, whish kan esmaha?

Who is in first place? What's her name?

A: Abeer

Aywa.

Yes.

C: Abeer.

Halhen, he tadrise engleze fi almostawa alkhamis.

Now, she is studying English level five.

Wa sharkat fi hafl al am almadi wa laha kather nashatat fi aljameah.

And participated in most university activities.

According to Aijmer (2002), the fourth textual function of *now* is to shift between sub-topics to move the discourse forward and to show a speaker's progression, for example, when comparing and contrasting subtopics, as in Example 11. In Example 11, Speakers A, B, and C are discussing their majors and the element of comparison introduced by *halhen* to compare math to other majors.

(11) A: Fi al saydahal ndrs thalath mwd englezi.

We are studying three English courses in pharmacy.

B: Sdq hena baad fi al handasah nadres thalath mokrarat.

Really, we are also studying three English courses in engineering.

C: Halhen, hena fi alriadhiat ndris khams mwd.

Now, in math we are studying five English courses.

Madri lish hena gher ankm.

I don't know why we are different.

The fifth textual discourse function of *now* is to mark the steps in an argument or a narrative (Aijmer, 2002). In Example 12, the speaker uses *halhen* to focus the attention on the logical steps of the argument. He is submitting an application for a PhD program and talking about his expectations regarding the admission process.

(12) Halhen lazam atakd mn daragt altofl wa wathaqat almasteer.

Now, I have to check my TOEFL points and my master papers.

Km gbt daragah wa segeli wa awraqi.

My TOEFL score and my master transcript and other papers.

Halhen etha gbt tesean aw ala rah inshallah.

Now, if I get 90 or higher on the TOEFL, hopefully I'll get admitted.

Aijmer (2002) stated that the sixth textual discourse function of *now* is to mark a new event or action in a cumulative series of events or actions listed in the text. Aijmer (2002) discussed common examples of this function of *now*, such as sports commentaries. In Example 13, *halhen* is used in a sports commentary to mark a new event in a cumulative series of events.

(13) Entalq Ali.

Ali starts.

Mashi llyasar.

To the left.

Belmoqabl Hadi.

Hadi in front.

Alheh, hatha alshe ally qail lkm.

Now, this is a thing I told you.

Belqadam.

By feet.

Dharbah qawiah.

Strong hit.

Nshoof alhakam wesh yqol.

Let's see what the referee will do.

Alheh, hatha alshe ally qail lkm menzman.

Now, this is a thing I told you a long time ago.

Mostahel hath yaser fi malabhum ala ardhm.

It's impossible for that to happen on their ground.

According to Aijmer (2002), *now* can mark an element as background in the form of elaboration or subtopic, or as explanation, clarification, or support. The speaker in Example 14 explains why students need to proofread their paper before submission, and *halhen* marks this explanation process.

(14) Lazim traga warakatk qabl altaslem.

You should proofread your paper before submission.

Halhen, itha slmt bdon mwraja rah tkon fiha akhta imlaeah wa nahwia.

Now, if you submit your paper without proofreading, there will be punctuation and grammatical mistakes.

Lazm trajeha.

You should proofread it.

Based on the previous examples, the Arabic word *halhen* has textual functions similar to the English word *now*. It works as a topic changer, a frame between discourse units, a turn-taking

signal, an item separating sub-topics, a marker of a new step in an argument or a narrative, and an indicator of background elements.

5. Affective Functions of *Halhen* in Arabic

Aijmer (2002) described *now* as marking affective stance signaling, for example, a transition to evaluation (e.g., “now that’s dreadful,” “now this is very difficult”). Example 15 shows an Arabic speaker using *halhen* as a transition for evaluation.

(15) Ande ashia kather aswiha abi akhals albahth wa endi ektebar wa quez hath ghair.

I’ve many things to do. I have to finish my paper, and I have an exam and quiz.

Sheghl al bait.

Housework.

Halhen, walla hatha sab gdan.

Now, this is really very difficult.

In its affective function, *now* is used as an expression to introduce a disclaimer about the speaker’s opinion contrasting that of others, such as “now, I do not agree” or “now, I think” (Aijmer, 2002). This is used by Speaker C in Example 16.

(16) A: Ekhtibarna yom alethnin.

A: Our exam is on Monday.

B: Sdk?

B: Really?

C: Halhen, ana aqoulkm anh yom alarbea wa enti msera anh alethnin.

C: Now, I told you it is on Wednesday, and you are still saying it’s on Monday.

According to Aijmer (2002), *now* in its affective function is also used as an indicator of a shift from the speaker’s perspective to the hearer’s, such as “now do you agree?” Example 17 shows this meaning.

(17) A: Nb nroh lsoq alsah khams.

A: We are going to shopping at 5 o’clock.

B: La mstahel endi mawed blmostashfa.

B: No, it’s impossible; I have a hospital appointment.

A: Tayb nroh alsaa tesa alsabh.

A: So, we’ll go at 9 o’clock in the morning.

A: Halhen wafaqti?

A: Now do you agree?

Now can also work as a hearer-oriented intensifier indicating that the speaker directs his/her attention to the hearer, such as an overtone of urgency and interest or a friendly overtone, as in “now look” or “now come on.” It could also be used with turn-taking and turn-holding devices, such as “now wait a moment,” “now excuse me two minutes,” or “now let me finish” (Aijmer, 2002). In Arabic, speakers use *halhen* for these functions as well, as shown in Example 18 (overtone of urgency) and Example 19 (combination with a turn-taking device).

(18) Tb trohen maei?

Are you going with me?

Halhen, yallah.

Now, come on.

(19) B: Tsama kubiba.

B: It is called kubiba.

A: Awal mrah asma alasm.

A: First time I have heard that.

B: Warag enb mahshi rz.

B: It is stuffed grape leaves.

A: Halhen, lahdhah shwai.

A: Now, wait a moment.

A: Kubaa.

B: Kubiba kaf waw ba ya ba alf.

B: Kubiba K U B I B A.

As an affective function in Arabic, *halhen* works as a marker of an affective stance for a transition to evaluation, an expression introducing a disclaimer about the speaker’s opinion, an indicator of a change of “footing,” or a hearer-oriented intensifier indicator.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the discourse functions of *halhen* (*now*) as an Arabic discourse marker using Aijmer’s (2002) classification functions of *now*. Aijmer (2002) classified the function of *now* into two categories: textual and affective. This investigation showed that the textual functions of *halhen* include working as a topic changer to signal new information or a return to an earlier topic (see Shirtz, 2021); a frame between different discourse units; a turn-taking signal to indicate the floor occupier; an item to separate sub-topics (see Adamczyk, 2020), a marker of a new step in an argument or a narrative; a marker of a new event in a cumulative

series of events listed; or an indicator of background information in the form of elaboration, explanation, clarification, or support. As for the affective functions, the present study found that *halhen* works as a marker of affective stance to present a transition to evaluation, an expression introducing a disclaimer about the speaker's opinion in contrast to others, a marker to shift from the perspective taken by the speaker to the hearer, or an attention-grabbing device (see Oladipupo & Unuabonah, 2021). The following are the limitations in this research and relevant recommendations for the future studies. It should be noted that the results of this study cannot be generalized to all Arabic language speakers, but rather these results are representative of using this discourse marker in informal Arabic in Saudi Arabia. This study is focusing on examining the textual and affective functions of the discourse marker without investigating the other pragmatics functions referring to its lexical, functional and sociolinguistic effects. Future research should analyze in detail the interrelation between the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *now* and its semantic meaning. Further, due to the fact that Arabic language has many discourse markers that mean *now*, future research should examine the difference between these discourse markers referring to their pragmatic functions.

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