

ARABIC CONJUNCTION *WA*: A CONFLICT IN PRAGMATIC PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Arabic coordination particle *wa* and its use and function on the basis of the Gricean cooperative principle. It aims to provide an outline of the maxims utilized by Arabic speakers in their interpretation of this conjunction. It demonstrates that interpretation brings out a conflict between the Gricean conversational maxims. The context of communication is investigated for a resolution of the conflict. It is argued that context and the functional understanding of language are more decisive in the interpretation of language utterances than either the conventional meaning of a linguistic element or the principle of communicative cooperation.

KEYWORDS: Arabic; coordination; cooperative principle; conversation maxim; context.

1. Introduction

The conjunctions *and* in English and *wa* in Arabic are peculiar words in that they have a basic conventional semantic meaning and a large list of pragmatic meanings. English *and*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is, *inter alia*, a simple connective (e.g., *the bond between man **and** wife*); a particle expressing repetition (e.g., *miles **and** miles*); an adverbial connective (e.g., *Cut it nice **and** thin*); a numerative (e.g., *Dance **and** song **and** athletic contests adorned the Solemnity*); an additive (e.g., *Love mourned long **and** sorrowed after Hope*); adversative (e.g., *He said, "I go, sir", **and** went not*); consequential (e.g., *Speak one word, **and** you are a dead man*); parenthetical (e.g., *The French would certainly have recovered the stolen French provinces whenever they could; **and** quite right too*); continuative (e.g., ***And** the stars sat each upon his ruby throne **and** looked with sleepless eyes upon the world*); assentive (e.g., *"This applies to all men, I suppose?" – "**And** women too"*); surprise-expressive (e.g., *O John! **and** you have seen*

him!'). Arabic *wa* has also a long list of pragmatic meanings. Al-Farahidi (1995) lists at least six distinct functions: simple connection (e.g., *kallamtu zajdan wa ʿamran*¹ ‘I talked to Zayd and Amr’); resumption (e.g., *xaradtu. wa zajdu dʒælison* ‘I left. And Zayd was sitting’); proposition (e.g., *wa ʿænijatīn kalmīskī tēba nasjmohæ* ‘And an Aniya like musk is her scent’); vow (e.g., *wa ʾaffamsī wa duhæhæ* ‘By the sun and his rising brightness’); vocative (e.g., *wæ zajdu* ‘O Zayd’); replacement by *aw* (e.g., *fa hja kalhīdʒæratī wa ʾafaddu qaswatan* ‘It is as hard as rock and even harder’); and superfluosity (e.g., *ʾinna allādīna kafaru wa jasudduna ʾan sabīlī llæhī* ‘The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God’).

Studies have recently been conducted on how this conjunction compares in English and Arabic, but focus seems to have started out at the syntactic and semantic levels (e.g., Cantarino 1975; Holes 2004) and then proceeded to the textual level (e.g., al-Batal 1985; Fareh 1998). Contrastive pragmatic studies have thus far been lacking.

Arabic has three conjunctions that overlap in function: *wa*, *fa*, and *thumma*. The three are used to link one item to another in a participatory relationship, but *fa* ‘next’ is used when succession and immediacy are in focus, *thumma* ‘then’ – when succession and non-immediacy are meant, and *wa* ‘and’ – when general coordination is intended. The question is: What makes Arabic speakers use the conjunction *wa* to imply sequence when they have at their disposal *fa* and *thumma* that are specifically marked for sequence?

2. Literature review

Since the early times of Arabic Traditional Grammar, there has been a well-known disagreement amongst grammarians and jurists as to the functions of *wa* and whether or not it indicates order. They all recognize its conjunctive function but disagree as to its pragmatic meaning. The majority of grammarians and jurists (e.g., Sībawayh 1977; Ibn Hisham 1985; al-Juwaynī 1996) believe that the terms conjoined by *wa* enter into a *participatory relationship without any implication of sequence or synchronicity*; i.e., *wa* is used for sheer combination. Some Kufic grammarians (e.g., Thaʿlab and Abi ʿOmar Al-Zahid, and some Shafīite jurists, according to al-Shīrāzī 1985 and many others) view *wa* as having a *strict indication of sequence*. A third group (e.g., the Hanafite jurists Abu Yusuf and Muhammad as reported by al-Shīrāzī 1985) view it as *primarily indicative of synchronous combination* but believe that it can be used metaphorically for other senses. A fourth group (e.g., al-Farra 1983) believe that *wa implies sequence only when combination is untenable*. Since the implication of sequence is the primary concern here, what is the evidence used to prove or disprove this implication? Traditional grammarians and jurists alike customarily resort for support of

¹ The transcription used here is that of the IPA. Generally it adheres to Arabic phonology, and takes graphemics into account only when absolutely necessary.

their linguistic claims to *al-Qur'an* and Arabic poetry, being the oldest records of the classical language, to documented historical incidents, and to diagnostic semantic testing.

Here are some examples used in support of the opinion of the majority, the contention that *wa* does not imply sequence:

- (1) وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ
 wa qælu mæ hja ʔillæ ʔajætunæ æddunjæ namutu **wa** naħjæ wa mæ
 juhlɪkunæ ʔillæ æddahrũ. (*al-Qur'an al-Karīm*, 45:24)
 'They say, "There is nothing but our present life; we die **and** live, and nothing but Time destroys us".' (transl. by Arberry 1998)

In this verse, the atheists' statement of "dying and living" is only acceptable because the conjunction is taken not to entail order; for it is the natural sequence for people to live first and then die. Had *wa* entailed order, this and many similar instances in *al-Qur'an* and Arabic poetry would have been denied.

Some verbs require a conjoined noun phrase because the eventuality that they express can only be possible if two parties are involved. Verbs such as *differ*, *agree*, *disagree*, *fight*, *quarrel*, etc. stand for states which require, in Arabic as well as in English, that there be at least two experiencers.

- (2) اختلف زيدٌ و عمرو.
 æxtalafa zajdun **wa** ʔamru.
 'Zayd **and** Amr disagreed.'

The statement in (2), therefore, does not entail sequence in anyway because the state expressed by the verb necessitates that there be more than one experiencer. Since sequence is unobtainable here, it cannot be claimed that order is part of the entailment of conjunctive *wa*.

Even in statements where sequence is probable, as in (3), deniability testing reveals that *wa* is not necessarily indicative of order. Consider this statement:

- (3) جاء زيدٌ و عمرو.
 ɕæʔa zajdun **wa** ʔamru.
 'Zayd **and** Amr came.'

One might ask whether Zayd and Amr came together or one came before the other. Had *wa* been indicative of order, it would have been deniable for the question to be asked in the first place, for it would have been part of *wa*'s entailment to indicate order.

Traditional grammarians and jurists who subscribe to the view that order is part of the entailment of *wa*, do not accept this evidence as conclusive. They primarily rely on history and traditional linguistic use as evidence, saying that several instances of

wa-coordinated phrases in *al-Qur'an* that prescribe behavior have been interpreted by Muslims for centuries as prescriptive of sequential behavior; they cite examples of ritual acts in prayers and pilgrimage. In the following example, Muslims are enjoined to trot between two hills named Safa and Marwa (as Biblical Hagar did when she scoured the area for water for her infant, Ishmael):

- (4) إِنَّ الصَّفَا وَالْمَرْوَةَ مِنْ شَعَائِرِ اللَّهِ.
 ʔinna əssafæ **wa** əlmarwata min ʃaʔæʔiri llæhi. (*al-Qur'an al-Karīm*, 21:58)
 'Safa **and** Marwa are among the waymarks of God.' (transl. by Arberry 1998)

Historical evidence is also cited to strengthen the interpretation of sequence. It has been narrated in an authentic saying of Muhammad that he led pilgrims to start their trotting at Safa, commenting that they should all begin with what God began with in the coordinated verse quoted here. Linguists and jurisprudents who subscribe to the view that *wa* implies sequence take this comment of Prophet Muhammad as evidence of that. Shafi'aite jurisprudents argue that the fact that pilgrims over the ages start their circumambulation between the two hills from Safa and end it at Marwa should be taken as evidence that Arabs interpreted *wa* in this and similar cases as implying sequence. On the strength of that, Shafi'aites and Hanbalites, to some extent, deduce from the verses in (5) that the ablution ritual of "washing the face with water or wiping it with dust when water is not available" comes before "washing the hands or wiping them with dust" (al-Jaziri 2003):

- (5) "يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قُمْتُمْ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ فَاغْسِلُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ إِلَى الْمَرَافِقِ وَامْسَحُوا بِرُءُوسِكُمْ..."
 jæ ʔajuhæ əllaðina æmanu ʔðæ qumtum ʔilæ əssalæti fayʔsilu wuðɣuhakum
wa ʔajdikum ʔilæ əlmaræfiqi wa əmsaħu biruʔwsikum... (*al-Qur'an al-Karīm*, 5:6)
 'O believers, when you stand up to pray, wash your faces **and** your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads...' (transl. by Arberry 1998)
- وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ مَرْضَىٰ أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ فَلَمْ تَجِدُوا مَاءً فَتَيَمَّمُوا صَعِيدًا طَيِّبًا فَامْسَحُوا بِوُجُوهِكُمْ وَأَيْدِيكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُوًّا غَفُورًا
 wa ʔin kuntum mardæ ʔaw ʔalæ safarin falam taɣidu mæʔan fatajammamu
 saʔidan ʔajiban famsaħu briwuðɣuhikum **wa** ʔajdikum ʔinna əllæha kæna
 ʔafuwan ʔafuran. (*al-Qur'an al-Karīm*, 4:43)
 'If you are sick, or on a journey [...] and you can find no water, then have recourse to wholesome dust and wipe your faces **and** your hands; God is All-pardoning, All-forgiving'. (transl. by Arberry 1998)

Shafi'aites take sequence as a necessary implication of *wa* so much so that they nullify the ablution ritual if the hands preceded the face. Hanafites and Malikites, on the other hand, do not consider sequence to be an integral component of the meaning of *wa*, and

thus consider it to be preferable that worshippers follow the order prescribed by the two verses but treat washing the hands before the face as permissible (Ibn Hazm 2001).

In another historical incident, a speaker said in the presence of Prophet Muhammad,

- (6) مَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ، فَقَدْ رَشِدَ؛ وَ مَنْ يَعْصِيهِمَا، فَقَدْ غَوَى.
 man juṭiʔi ʔllæha **wa** rasulahu faqad raʃada wa man jaʕsihimæ faqad ɣawæ.
 ‘Whoever obeys God **and** His messenger, is indeed wise, but whoever disobeys them is truly deluded.’

Prophet Muhammad objected to the implication of this statement because the anaphoric reference of the dual third person pronoun in ‘disobeys **them**’ might have implied equality of status between God and His messenger. This objection stemmed from the fact that the statement is made up of two conditional clauses with conflicting implications: the first contains an and-coordinated phrase, ‘God and His messenger’, which preserves the precedence of God to His messenger through the sequence-implying conjunction, whilst the second clause fails to maintain the superiority of God’s status when it refers to the two with the dual third person pronoun, allowing for no discrimination of status.

The debate continued in this vein for centuries. It is the contention of this article that pragmatics may offer valuable insight. Therefore, the following section will discuss the same issue from a Gricean perspective.

3. *Wa* in the light of Gricean principles

At first, it is necessary to establish the conceptual meaning of conjunctive *wa* and its English equivalent *and*. The logical conjunction is very much commutative in a mathematical sense (i.e., $p \& q \equiv q \& p$). Allwood et al. (1977: 33–34) state that

In logic, $p \& q$ is always equivalent to $q \& p$. This makes logical conjunction atemporal and unable to handle the temporal aspects of *and* [...]. There are many other uses of *and* in everyday language. Often these should not be analyzed as logical conjunction.

This conjunction is used in logic to construct a conjoined statement which is true only if both of the terms it is composed of are true.

It is the contention here that the conceptual meaning of conjunctive *wa* is indeed identical to the meaning of the logical conjunction. It is simply unmarked for temporality; i.e., sequentiality and synchronicity are not parts of the entailment of this conjunction. Any indication of sequence or synchronicity is only inferred pragmatically.

Thus, these two utterances would be logically equivalent:

- (7) باع سالم سيارته القديمة و اشترى سيارة جديدة
 bæfa sælimu sajjæratahu əlqadimata **wa** əʃtaræ sajjæratan ɟadidatan
 'Salim sold his old car **and** bought a new car.'
- (8) اشترى سالم سيارة جديدة و باع سيارته القديمة
 əʃtaræ sælimu sajjæratan ɟadidatan **wa** bæfa sajjæratahu əlqadimata
 'Salim bought a new car **and** sold his old car.'

In other words, the conjunction in (7) and (8) does not logically imply whether

- (a) Salim sold his old car first and then bought a new car;
 (b) Salim bought a new car first and then sold his old car; or
 (c) Salim sold his old car and bought a new car simultaneously.

However, there is a tendency for language users to interpret the utterance in (7) as in (a). This interpretation is certainly not based on the conceptual (i.e., logical) meaning of the conjunction since it is perfectly acceptable to say (9) when the sequence of the individuals making up the agent is counterfactual.

- (9) جاءني سالم و حامد
 ɟæʔani sælimu **wa** hæmidu
 'Salim **and** Hamid came to me.'

What is the basis then for considering (a) a more acceptable interpretation of (7)? Could it be that (a) is grounded on the assumption that speakers tend to be orderly in their communication? This assumption, which is formulated by Grice (1991) as a sub-maxim of manner, constitutes a single component of the more general principle that speakers are generally inclined to be cooperative with one another. Perhaps this is the reason why (10) seems to be more natural than (11). In fact, the latter is odd.

- (10) ركب داوود سيارته، وأغلق بابها، وانطلق بها مسرعاً
 rakıba dəwudu sajjæratahu **wa** ʔaylaqa bæbahæ **wa** əntalaqa bihæ musrɪʔan
 'David got in his car, closed the door, **and** tore off.'
- (11) انطلق داوود مسرعاً بسيارته، وأغلق بابها، وركبها
 əntalaqa dəwudu musrɪʔan bi-sajjærathı **wa** ʔaylaqa bæbahæ **wa** rakıbahæ
 'David tore off in his car, closed its door, **and** got in.'

Sentence (11) is odd because the speaker is expected to be orderly, mentioning events in succession. The speaker is in violation of the maxim of manner.

What one may conclude is that *wa* implies sequence only pragmatically. If the sequence of events is to be intended for its own sake, the speaker would use a different

particle that entailed sequence (e.g., *fa* ف 'as soon as', which is conventionally designated for conveying succession and immediacy or *thumma* ثم 'then', which is also normally used for the expression of succession but non-immediacy).

If the speaker of the utterance in (10), then, were to intend sequence as part of their message, they would have experienced a conflict between the Gricean principles of orderliness and informativeness; on the one hand, the speaker needed to be orderly in their cataloguing of events, on the other they needed to make their contribution to the conversation as informative as was required (the maxim of quantity: Grice 1991). Informativeness stipulates that if a speaker makes a weak statement when they are able to make a stronger one, the strong statement would not be intended as part of the message (Yunis Ali 2000). It is very often that the weaker statement implicates that the speaker holds the negative of the stronger one (Leech 1983). In the case of sentence (10), then, a strong statement would contain either the conjunction implying succession and immediacy (i.e., *fa* 'next, as soon as') or the one marking succession and non-immediacy (i.e., *thumma* 'then') rather than *wa*, because the latter falls short of being informative when sequence is a primary component of the conveyed message.

In the light of this fact, therefore, sequence may be inferred from the conjunction *wa*, but should not be viewed as being intentionally communicated by the speaker.

Both sentences (7) and (8) above, then, would only be informative if the use of the conjunction *wa* instead of either *fa* or *thumma* were meant to implicate that the order of events was not part of the speaker's intended message. Had the speaker wanted to indicate a sequence of events, they would have used either *fa* or *thumma*. Since they did not, they should not be interpreted as implying it.

If this is the case, why is it that (a) rather than (b) is the most preferable interpretation for (7)? Why is (11) odd?

It is our contention that, although the sub-maxim "be orderly" and the maxim "make your contribution to the conversation as informative as is required" are both important to the interpretation of the utterances in (7) and (10), and the hearer may appeal to either of the maxims in determining whether the sequence of events is or is not part of the speakers' intentions, the decisive factor is the hearer's knowledge of the world. Utterances with sequence implication do vary in context. In an utterance like (10), the only logical order of events is that of getting in a car, closing its door, and then dashing off. Hence, the hearer is inclined to make out that sequence is part of the intended meaning. If the speaker were to use either *fa* or *thumma*, they would have given the impression of redundancy since the stated order is the only possible sequence of events; thus, violating the principle of quantity. In utterances like (7), on the other hand, both the expressed sequence and its opposite are possible. Determining which sequence of events is intended is actually dependent on the hearer's estimation of people's behaviour in such circumstances. In certain cases, one must admit, it is still difficult to decide the sequence of events. The utterance in (9) above, for example, is ambiguous; it could mean:

- (a) Salim came first;
- (b) Hamid came first; or
- (c) Salim and Hamid came together.

There is a conflict here between the maxims of manner and quantity. That is why it is hard to give preference for (a), (b), or (c). If precedence is given to the maxim of quantity, then inference (a) is most likely. Such an inference, however, would be so weak that it could be cancelled without any contradiction since it is based solely on the weak assumption that speakers tend to be orderly in their communication. Inference (a) is cancelled in (12) without any apparent contradiction.

- (12) جاءني سالمٌ و حامدٌ، لكنَّ حامداً جاءَ أولاً
 ḡæʔani sælimun **wa** hæmidun lækinna hæmidan ḡæʔa ʔawwalan
 ‘Salim **and** Hamid came to me, but Hamid came first’.

Had the conjunction in this utterance been *fa* or *thumma*, cancellation would have caused contradiction as in (13) or (14).

- (13) جاءني سالمٌ فحامدٌ، لكنَّ حامداً جاءَ أولاً
 ḡæʔani sælimun **fa** hæmidun lækinna hæmidan ḡæʔa ʔawwalan
 *‘Salim came to me, **next** Hamid did, but Hamid came first.’

- (14) جاءني سالمٌ ثمَّ حامدٌ، لكنَّ حامداً جاءَ أولاً
 ḡæʔani sælimun **thumma** hæmidun lækinna hæmidan ḡæʔa ʔawwalan
 *‘Salim **then** Hamid came to me, but Hamid came first.’

Thus, sequence is an undeniable implication of *fa* and *thumma* but not of *wa*. Sequence is part of the entailment of the first two conjunctions but only a conversational implicature of conjunctive *wa*. In other words, *fa* and *thumma* are designated for the indication of succession, whereas *wa* cannot imply succession unless certain conversational and communicative principles are utilized.

4. *Wa* in the light of functional linguistics

Functionalists would expect specific motivation for why Arabic speakers use *wa* to imply sequence when they have at their disposal *fa* and *thumma* that are specifically marked for succession. Langacker (1987) (cf. Goldberg 1995; and Geeraerts 2006) would view the *wa* construction as a pairing of form and function; it can, therefore, be explained only in terms of the function that it is associated with. In the tradition of the functional approach, grammar in general is like all biologically-based systems “adaptively motivated and thus in principle non-arbitrary” (Givón 2001: 34).

In his statement of the principles of “iconic grammatical organization”, Givón lists four spacing and sequence rules that are most relevant to the explanation of why *wa* is used to imply sequence:

- Information chunks that belong together conceptually are kept in close spatio-temporal proximity.
- Functional operators are kept closest to the operand to which they are relevant.
- A more important information chunk is fronted.
- The temporal order in which events occurred will be mirrored in the linguistic report of the events.

(Givón 2001: 35)

The *wa* construction necessitates the conjunction of two syntactic units. They have to be in close spatial proximity because they share the same conceptual context; *living and dying* in (1) are the two processes that constitute our present life; *Safa and Marwa* in (4) are two waymarks of God; *faces and hands* in (5) are body parts that would be washed; and *God and His messenger* are the two who must be obeyed. These two-item sets must be close to the conjunction operand to fall within its scope. In fact, one chunk must precede it whilst the other must follow it for the conjunctive operation to take effect. In terms of sequence, the first chunk is pragmatically viewed as being more important than the second. Although this principle might not be so critical in (2), because the verb there entails equal participation in the process represented by the verb, it is the most important factor in (6):

- (6) “Whoever obeys God **and** His messenger is indeed wise, but whoever disobeys **them** is truly deluded.”

Had the pronoun *them* been replaced by *God and His messenger*, there would have been no objection; the repetition would have preserved the precedence of the first.

Most important of the functional grammar principles above is the understanding that temporal order in reality is mirrored in the linguistic report of it. Thus, the first chunk that *wa* conjoins must temporally precede the second in the mind of the speaker. Delancy (2001) explains this in the context of speaker and hearer attention as follows:

In actual perception, our attention begins with one element of a scene, and scans through the perceptual field, taking its various elements in decreasing order of their intrinsic or contextual interest. When we present a mental image, we perform an imaginary scan of the same type, and present the elements of the image to our hearer so as to help him recreate not only the image, but the image scanned as we scan it.

(DeLancey 2001: 128)

It is, therefore, entirely understandable why Arabic speakers would interpret the *wa* conjunction in (4, 5, 6, and 10) as entailing order, even though it is not specifically designated for this function. They expect the speaker to have depicted reality in their report of it and, therefore, to have preserved temporal order. It is because the first conjoined item came temporally first in real life that it preceded the second item in the cited examples. Hence, the temporal order in reality is mirrored in the linguistic utterance that reports it.

5. Conclusion

Although sequence is not part of the entailment of conjunctive *wa*, language users occasionally interpret it as order-indicative. Their interpretation seems to be based upon the assumption that speakers tend to be orderly (i.e., the Gricean maxim of manner). In the cases where *wa* is not interpreted as order-indicative, it appears that language users assume that speakers are being as informative as is required (i.e., the Gricean maxim of quantity) and so they would use *fa* or *thumma* when they desire to communicate an intention of sequence; hence, their choice of *wa* is in itself an indication that they are not interested in implying order.

Determining whether *wa* is or is not indicative of order appears to rely on the hearer's estimation of people's behaviour in specific contexts. This is tantamount to saying that the conflict between the maxims of manner and quantity can be resolved by appealing to the hearer's knowledge of the world and by appealing to the functional principle that linguistic expressions mirror reality's temporal order.

Context and the realization that language is a reconstruction of reality are more decisive in human interpretation of language utterances than either conventional meaning or the principle of speaker-hearer cooperation.

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