

Discourse Markers as a Core Component of Stylistic Competence in Arabic L2 Writing: A Functional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines discourse markers as a core component of stylistic competence in Arabic L2 writing from a functional perspective. It addresses a persistent gap in which learners demonstrate grammatical accuracy but produce texts lacking coherence and rhetorical organisation. Adopting a qualitative conceptual-analytical approach, the study synthesises insights from Arabic rhetorical tradition and functional linguistics to model discourse markers as a system of cohesive devices that regulate inter-sentential relations. The analysis shows that weaknesses in learner writing are primarily discourse-functional, reflected in fragmented structure, under-specified semantic relations, over-reliance on a limited set of markers, and first language transfer. The study further establishes a functional classification of discourse markers into major categories, demonstrating that they operate as an integrated system governing textual organisation, with inferential, causal, and adversative markers carrying greater functional load in academic discourse. The findings position discourse markers as central to coherence and argument development, and argue for a shift toward discourse-oriented pedagogy that emphasises their contextual and functional deployment.

Keywords: Arabic L2 Writing, Stylistic Competence, Discourse Markers, Textual Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Stylistic competence in Arabic writing is not limited to grammatical accuracy but involves the ability to organize discourse in a coherent and rhetorically effective manner. Within Arabic linguistic tradition, style (*uslūb*) is understood as a system of relational organization in which meaning emerges from the structured interplay of linguistic elements rather than isolated forms.

From a functional perspective, this organization is realized through cohesive devices that regulate relations across discourse. Among these, discourse markers play a central role by explicitly signalling semantic and logical connections such as addition, contrast, and causality (Khattābī, 1991). They operate at the discourse level, guiding interpretation and ensuring textual coherence (Al-Şubayhī, 2008; Swales, 2010).

In Arabic L2 writing, learners often demonstrate adequate sentence-level accuracy but produce texts that lack cohesion and logical flow. This reflects limited control of discourse markers, frequently influenced by first language transfer and restricted exposure to authentic usage (Rusli, 2008).

Despite extensive work on cohesion and stylistics in Arabic, limited attention has been given to discourse markers as a *core component of stylistic competence* within a unified functional framework, particularly in Arabic L2 writing contexts.

This study examines discourse markers as a core component of stylistic competence in Arabic L2 writing, adopting a functional perspective that foregrounds their role in structuring coherent discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual-analytical framework grounded in functional linguistics and Arabic rhetorical theory. It synthesises prior literature to construct a systematic model of discourse markers as functional units of stylistic competence.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine stylistic competence in Arabic from a functional perspective.
2. To analyze the role of discourse markers as cohesive devices in Arabic writing.
3. To classify their main functional categories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Style

Style is a central construct in Arabic linguistic and rhetorical scholarship, though its definition varies by theoretical orientation. In classical lexicography, *uslūb* denotes a “path,” “method,” or “mode” of expression, also referring to a distinctive manner of composing speech (Ibn Manẓūr, 1999). These meanings foreground order, selection, and patterned expression as core features of style.

Ibn Khaldūn (2004) defines style as a mental image of systematically organized structures in their totality, as they conform to a particular compositional pattern. This shifts attention from isolated elements to an internalized schema derived from exposure to authentic usage. Style, therefore, is not merely lexical choice but a holistic system governing the organization of linguistic structures in accordance with established norms.

A parallel view appears in ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī’s theory of *nazm*, where style resides in the relational ordering of words and sentences according to grammatical and semantic principles. Stylistic value emerges from structural integration that ensures coherence and communicative effectiveness, rather than from individual lexical items (as cited in Al-Fārisī, 2001).

Some scholars define style as a mode of writing or composition, or a method of selecting and organizing lexical items to convey meaning for purposes of clarity or rhetorical effect (Al-Ashqar, 1995). Stylistic variation is realized along continua such as brevity versus elaboration, ease versus grammatical markedness, and simplicity versus complexity.

In sum, style (*uslūb*) in Arabic may be understood as a rule-governed, holistic system of linguistic organization that integrates the selection and arrangement of lexical and structural elements to produce coherent and effective discourse, grounded in established norms and actualized through context-sensitive language use.

Al-Fārisī (2001) conceptualizes style as an integrative linguistic process in which effective expression emerges from the coordinated interaction of lexical selection, syntactic organization, and rhetorical enhancement. He underscores that stylistically sound composition depends on the precise choice of lexical items to convey intended meanings clearly, their systematic arrangement into well-formed structures in accordance with established grammatical conventions, and the strategic use of rhetorical and aesthetic devices to achieve refinement and impact. In this view, style is not a peripheral ornament of language but a disciplined practice grounded in clarity, structural coherence, and rhetorical effectiveness.

In the context of second language instruction, Rusli (2008) conceptualizes style as the principled selection and organization of lexical items to express meaning with clarity or rhetorical effect. This practice is evidenced in the usage patterns of native speakers of the target language, across both spoken and written modalities, and is deployed in alignment with communicative purposes and situational contexts, while maintaining conformity to grammatical and morphological norms.

The Concept of Stylistic Error

Stylistic error (*al-khata' al-uslūbī*) may be classified as a form of linguistic deviation at the structural level, involving the inappropriate selection and organization of linguistic elements in relation to context, meaning, and communicative purpose ('Abd al-Salām, 1994). Such errors manifest in both written and spoken discourse through disruptions in textual coherence, weak alignment between structures and intended meanings, and ineffective realization of discourse functions.

From a functional perspective, stylistic errors often arise from inappropriate lexical choice, the use of contextually unsuitable structures, and crucially the misuse or underuse of cohesive devices that regulate relationships within the text (Sāmī, 1999). Cohesion, therefore, constitutes a central component of stylistic competence, as it ensures the integration of sentences and the continuity of meaning across discourse.

However, cohesion is not a uniform category. It encompasses a range of linguistic resources, including reference, substitution, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and conjunction (Al-Şubayhī, 2008). Within this broader system, discourse markers represent a functional subset of cohesive devices that explicitly signal logical and semantic relations between clauses and sentences.

In the context of Arabic language learning, stylistic error frequently reflects inadequate control of these discourse markers. Such errors are often driven by first language interference, particularly in lexical selection, syntactic structuring, and reliance on literal translation (Rusli, 2008). Consequently, learners exhibit difficulty in managing inter-sentential relations, resulting in weakened textual cohesion and reduced communicative effectiveness (Abd Rahman, & Abdullah, 2011; Alqasham et al., 2021).

Accordingly, stylistic error in Arabic L2 writing may be understood as a deviation in the selection and deployment of cohesive resources, particularly discourse markers, that undermines textual coherence and reflects divergence from established native-speaker norms.

Stylistic Errors Related to Discourse Markers as Cohesive Devices

Textual cohesion is essential for effective Arabic writing, as it ensures clarity and logical progression through the use of meaningful linking devices (Mohd Yusof & Nordin, 2025). For second language learners, limited control of these devices often results in fragmented and stylistically weak discourse, making cohesion a core component of writing competence (Rusli, 2008).

Within the broader system of cohesion, discourse markers play a central role in regulating semantic and logical relations between clauses and sentences (Gao, 2023). Their function extends beyond simple linkage: they encode relations such as addition, contrast, causality, and conclusion, thereby guiding interpretation and structuring discourse in a coherent and accessible manner (Halliday & Hasan, 1983; Khaṭṭābī, 1991).

A recurrent source of stylistic error among Malaysian learners of Arabic lies in their inadequate control of these discourse markers. Empirical findings attribute this primarily to negative transfer from the learners' first language, in which sentence linkage relies more heavily on punctuation than on semantically explicit connectors (Rusli, 2008). As a result, learners tend to organize discourse through punctuation rather than through appropriate discourse-marking expressions in Arabic.

This reliance leads to weak signalling of inter-sentential relations, producing texts that lack logical flow and cohesive integration. Moreover, limited exposure to authentic Arabic input constrains learners' repertoire of discourse markers, resulting in over-reliance on a narrow set of expressions and reduced flexibility in textual organization (Rusli, 2008, Mohd Yusuf, 2005).

Therefore, stylistic errors in this domain are not merely grammatical deficiencies but reflect a deeper inability to manage discourse structure through appropriate cohesive mechanisms particularly the functional deployment of discourse markers.

The Concept of Discourse Markers

The concept of discourse markers in Arabic has been described using various terminologies, all of which reflect the underlying notion of linguistic elements that function to connect and organize discourse. Ḥassān refers (n.d.) to them as "lexical indicators" that link related elements within a structure, while Van Dijk (1977/2000) employs the term "contextual connectors," and Faḍl (1992) refers to them as "textual keys." Other scholars have employed different terminologies to describe these elements. Hassan (1999) adopts the term "connecting expressions" (التعبيرات الرابطة), while Mohd Yusuf (2005) uses the term "linking phrases" (العبارات الرابطة), each emphasizing distinct aspects of their functional role in textual cohesion.

Despite terminological variation, these expressions converge on a common functional definition: discourse markers are a subset of cohesive devices that explicitly signal relationships between parts of a text and contribute to its structural and semantic organization.

In Arabic, these markers consist of frequently occurring expressions that play a crucial role in linking clauses and sentences while indicating the nature of the relationships between them. Their importance lies not only in their frequency but in their ability to facilitate clarity, coherence, and rhetorical effectiveness in discourse (Al-Naḥḥās, 1986).

Unlike single-word connectors such as conjunctions or pronouns, many discourse markers take the form of multi-word expressions that function at the level of discourse organization. They are particularly prominent in modern Arabic writing, where they contribute to the structuring, expansion, and refinement of ideas (Hassan, 1999).

A key characteristic of these expressions is that they do not convey complete meaning in isolation; rather, their function is relational. Their interpretation depends on the surrounding textual context, as they serve to specify how one segment of discourse relates to another (Zabidin, 2011).

From a pedagogical perspective, mastery of these discourse markers is essential for developing stylistically effective Arabic writing. Their appropriate and context-sensitive use enables learners to extend ideas, manage argumentation, express nuance, and achieve coherence at the discourse level.

The importance of Discourse Markers in Arabic L2 Writing

One of the essential components of Arabic stylistic competence that learners must develop is the effective use of discourse markers, which perform a fundamental function in writing by linking paragraphs into a coherent whole. Abrupt transitions from one idea to another disrupt textual flow; instead, writers must explicitly signal the relationship between ideas, particularly at paragraph boundaries, whether at the end of one paragraph or the beginning of the next (Ṣabrāh, 2013).

Beyond their connective role, discourse markers contribute significantly to discourse development. They enable writers to expand ideas, introduce digressions, express contrast, draw conclusions, and provide justification (Ḥassanein & Al Warraki, 1997). In this sense, they function not merely as linking devices, but as discourse-organising resources that structure argumentation and guide interpretation.

A recurrent issue among non-native learners of Arabic is that, although they can organise texts into introduction, body, and conclusion, the stylistic realisation of these sections particularly introductions and conclusions remain weak, often lacking appropriate discourse markers and rhetorical expressions that signal textual progression (Rosli, 2008). This limitation persists despite adequate grammatical competence, indicating a discourse-functional rather than structural problem, largely due to insufficient familiarity with Arabic discourse conventions (Zabidin et al., 2021).

Discourse markers and related expressions are essential for ensuring clarity, coherence, and effective meaning transmission, yet their mastery requires contextualised use rather than rote memorisation. The neglect of introductory expressions further weakens rhetorical framing, while limited exposure to authentic input restricts learners' access to the lexical and discourse resources necessary for effective writing (Farisi, 2001).

In light of the above, the presence of discourse markers in a text is not optional but indispensable. They serve as explicit indicators of the relational unity between textual components, ensuring that discourse is cohesive, logically structured, and interpretable. It follows that mastery of discourse markers constitutes a critical dimension of stylistic competence and is essential for the production of effective Arabic writing.

Discourse Markers in Arabic Writing

Discourse markers are highly frequent in Arabic, to the extent that nearly every sentence contains one or more elements that link it to preceding or subsequent discourse. These markers play a crucial role in facilitating comprehension, as they enable readers to track the progression of ideas and to recognise the semantic relations holding between sentences (Md Din & Zabidin, 2018). From a functional perspective, these discourse markers may be classified into the following categories (Al-Khūlī, 2001; Al-Shanaṭī, 2001):

Enumerative expressions (عبارات التعداد):

(“at the beginning” / في بادئ الأمر), (“at the outset” / في بداية الأمر), (“in the first place” / في المقام الأول), (“in the end” / في النهاية), (“last but not least” / أخيراً وليس آخراً), (“firstly speaking” / البادئ ذكره), (“to begin with” / ذي بدء), (“the primary factor” / العامل الأول), (“the first reason” / السبب الأول), (“conclusion/end point” / خاتمة / نهاية المطاف), etc.

Additive/expansive expressions (عبارات الاستطراد):

(“moreover” / يضاف إلى ذلك), (“in addition to this” / بالإضافة إلى هذا), (“in addition to the foregoing” / فضلاً عما سبق), (“it is also the case that” / كما أنّ), etc.

Inferential expressions (عبارات الاستنتاج):

(“from the above, we find that” / وعلى ما سبق نجد أن), (“based on the foregoing, it can be said that” / بناءً على ما تقدم / سبق، يمكن القول إنّ), (“we conclude from the foregoing that” / ونستخلص مما تقدم أن), (“from what precedes, we find that” / مما سبق نجد أن), (“thus, we find / it appears to us that” / وهكذا، نجد أن / يبدو لنا أن), (“thus it becomes clear to us that” / وهكذا يتبين لنا أن), (“the conclusion is” / والاستنتاج هو), (“we infer” / نستنتج), (“accordingly, it can be said that” / على هذا يمكن القول إنّ), (“the result is” / والنتيجة هي), (“it is inferred from this brief presentation that” / ويُستنتج من هذا العرض الموجز أنّ), (“on this basis” / على هذا), (“therefore” / وعلى ذلك فإن), (“thus” / بذلك), (“from this it appears that” / ومن هنا يظهر أن), (“for all these reasons” / ولهذا كله), (“accordingly” / وبناءً عليه), (“consequently” / ومن ثمّ), (“it is clear from the foregoing that” / يتضح مما سبق أنّ), (“it seems to us—by inference from the previous discussion—that” / المبحث السابق — أن), (“this is attributable to” / ويعود الأمر إلى), (“all this is due to the belief that” / كل ذلك بسبب الاعتقاد أنّ), (“it is understood from this argument” / ويفهم من هذا الطرح), etc.

Summative expressions (عبارات التلخيص):

(“in sum” / وصفاة القول), (“in conclusion” / وخلاصة القول إنّ), (“the gist of the matter” / ومحصلة الكلام), (“generally / overall” / عموماً / على العموم / بوجه العموم), (“in brief / generally speaking” / وحاصل القول إنّ), (“ultimately” / وحمادى القول إنّ), (“in essence” / وقصارى القول إنّ), (“in short” / وموجز القول إنّ), (“the conclusion is that” / وخلاصة الأمر أنّ), (“the point is that” / وجملة الأمر أنّ), (“very briefly” / اختصار شديد ونخلص إلى), (“for brevity, we mention” / وللاختصار نذكر), (“to summarize” / ونختصر فنقول), (“we conclude that” / خلاصة ما), (“from the preceding presentation it is clear that” / من العرض السابق يتضح أنّ), (“the summary of what we have reached is that” / توصلنا أنّ), (“it is evident from the overall argument that” / يتضح من مجمل ما ذهبنا إليه سابقاً أنّ), (“we derive from all the above that” / ونستخلص مما تقدم أنّ), (“the matter can be summarized as” / ويتلخص الأمر في), (“in summary” / ونوجز القول), etc.

Adversative expressions (عبارات الاستدراك):

(“be that as it may” / ومهما يكن من أمر), (“despite that” / ورغمما عن هذا), (“in any case” / وعلى كل حال), (“nevertheless” / وبالرغم من ذلك), etc.

Causal expressions (عبارات السببية):

(“the reason for this is”) وسبب هذا), (“this is due to”) ويعود السبب إلى), (“this can be attributed to”), ويعزى الأمر إلى), (“the cause is”) والسبب هو), (“this has resulted from”), etc.

Exemplificatory expressions (عبارات التمثيل):

(“by way of example”), ومثال ذلك), (“for instance”), وفيما يلي), (“the following is an example of”), etc.

Explanatory expressions (عبارات التفسير والتوضيح):

هذا يعني بالضرورة أن), (“that simply means that”), ذلك يعني بكل بساطة أن), (“this simply means that”), وبمعنى أصح / أدق), (“this implies that”), ومعنى ذلك أن), (“that is to say”), “more precisely”), (“the evidence for this is that”), ومن الدلائل على ذلك), (“among the indications of this is”), (“what is meant by ... is”), والمراد ب), (“this does not mean that”), ولا يعني ذلك أن), (“a clear example of this is”), وخير شاهد على ذلك), (“the following is an example of”), (“by this it is established that”), وبهذا يثبت لنا أن), (“what is intended by ... is”), والمقصود ب), (“among the indications of ... we find that”), etc.

These categories reflect functional distinctions rather than formal ones, as discourse markers may vary in length and syntactic composition while maintaining comparable pragmatic roles. Importantly, many of these markers take the form of multi-word expressions, positioning them at the interface between syntax, lexicon, and discourse pragmatics.

The significance of discourse markers extends beyond cohesion in the narrow sense. While they contribute to textual connectivity, their primary role lies in organizing argumentation, managing rhetorical flow, and signalling writer stance.

In the context of Arabic L2 writing, insufficient control of these markers often results in fragmented discourse, limited elaboration, and reduced stylistic effectiveness. Accordingly, mastery of discourse markers, particularly their functional deployment rather than mere recognition, constitutes a critical component of advanced writing competence in Arabic.

Semantic Functions of Discourse Markers

It is generally accepted that discourse markers exhibit a range of distinct types. For analytical clarity, they are best classified into groups according to their semantic functions, thereby making explicit their role within Arabic syntactic and discourse structures. Building on this, the present study outlines the meanings of these markers alongside illustrative examples in order to account for their functional roles across eight principal categories (Hassan, 1999; Mohd Yusuf, 2005; Zabidin, 2011):

Additive Markers (الإضافة والزيادة)

These markers indicate addition and reinforcement, serving to confirm and extend the propositional content of a preceding statement. Examples include: (“in addition,” أيضاً) (“also,” علاوةً على ذلك) (“moreover,” بالإضافة إلى) (“alongside,” فضلاً عن) (“besides.”

Adversative and Corrective Markers (الإضراب والاستدراك)

These markers signal contrast, correction, or modification of a preceding proposition, thereby refining or redirecting the interpretive trajectory of the discourse.

- I. **Iḍrāb (الإضراب)** refers to the replacement or cancellation of a prior proposition with one that is more accurate, appropriate, or rhetorically effective. In this case, the preceding statement is effectively overridden. A prototypical example is: (بل العكس) “on the contrary.”

- II. **Istidrāk (الاستدراك)**, by contrast, introduces a concessive or contrastive relation without nullifying the preceding proposition. Instead, it preserves the initial statement while qualifying, restricting, or counterbalancing it. Common realisations include: (مع أن) “although,” (بالرغم من أن) “despite the fact that,” (إلا أن) “however,” (غير أن) “nevertheless,” (بيد أن) “yet/however.”

Causal Markers (السببية / التعليل)

These markers encode cause–effect relations, indicating that one proposition arises as a result of another. They make explicit the logical dependency between clauses. Examples include: (من أجل ذلك) “for this reason,” (من ثم) “therefore,” (نتيجة لـ) “as a result of.”

Emphatic and Elaborative Markers (التوكيد والتفصيل)

These markers serve to clarify, emphasise, or elaborate upon a proposition, often preparing the ground for further explanation. Examples include: (غني عن البيان أن) “in fact,” (من المسلم) “it goes without saying that,” (في حقيقة الأمر) “it is generally accepted that,” (من المؤكد أن) “it is certain that.”

Restrictive Markers (الافتاء / القصر)

These markers express limitation or exclusivity, restricting the scope of a proposition through forms of negation and affirmation. They function to delimit meaning and specify boundaries within discourse. Examples include: (فحسب) “only,” (لا غير) “no more,” (ليس إلا) “merely,” (لا شيء غير) “nothing but,” (فقط) “only.”

Specificative Markers (التخصيص / الاختصاص)

These markers function to narrow or qualify a general statement without necessarily implying exclusivity. Unlike restrictive markers, they do not encode logical limitation but rather contextual specification. Examples include: (ولا سيما) “notably,” (بالأخص) “especially,” (خاصةً) “especially.”

Temporal Markers (الظرفية الزمانية)

These markers signal temporal relations between propositions, particularly sequential ordering in discourse. Examples include: (من قبل) “previously,” (بادئ ذي بدء) “to begin with,” (في بداية الأمر) “at the beginning,” (من قبل) “previously.”

Conditional Markers (الشرط والجواب)

These markers structure discourse through conditional relations, presenting propositions in terms of hypothesis and consequence. Examples include: (إلا إذا) “unless,” (أما ... ف) “as for ... then,” (أما إذا) “if, however.”

This classification shows that discourse markers form a systematic set of semantic relations rather than isolated linking devices. Their functions operate at both local and global levels of discourse, with inferential, causal, and adversative markers playing a central role in structuring argumentation. Effective stylistic competence therefore depends on the appropriate and context-sensitive use of these functional categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yields four principal findings:

1. Weaknesses in Arabic L2 writing are primarily discourse-functional rather than grammatical. Although learners demonstrate acceptable sentence-level accuracy, their texts lack coherence due to limited control of inter-sentential relations, resulting in fragmentation and weak rhetorical progression.
2. Discourse markers function as a systematic network of cohesive devices that encode semantic relations such as addition, contrast, causality, and inference. Limited control of these relations leads to under-specification or misrepresentation of meaning. Recurrent patterns include over-reliance on a narrow set

of markers, literal transfer from the first language, and reliance on punctuation in place of explicit linkage, indicating a deficit in functional rather than grammatical competence.

3. The study establishes a functional classification of discourse markers into additive, adversative, causal, inferential, summative, exemplificatory, explanatory, and structural categories. This classification demonstrates that discourse markers form an integrated system of discourse organisation. Inferential, causal, and adversative markers carry greater functional load in academic writing due to their role in structuring argumentation and signalling logical relations.
4. Discourse markers operate not only as cohesive devices but as rhetorical resources that regulate textual progression, support argument development, and enhance interpretability. Their limited or inappropriate use directly constrains coherence and stylistic effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Stylistic competence in Arabic L2 writing is best understood as a discourse-level ability grounded in the functional use of discourse markers, rather than mere grammatical accuracy. The persistent weaknesses observed among learners indicate limited control over the semantic and rhetorical functions of these markers, resulting in insufficient cohesion and textual organisation. These findings highlight the need for a shift toward discourse-oriented pedagogy that emphasises contextualised and functional usage. Ultimately, effective deployment of discourse markers remains a central prerequisite for coherent and academically appropriate Arabic writing.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should empirically validate the functional classification of discourse markers proposed in this study through corpus-based analyses of Arabic L2 learner writing. Experimental studies are also needed to examine the effectiveness of discourse-oriented instruction in improving textual coherence and stylistic competence.

In addition, longitudinal research may explore the development of learners' control over discourse markers across proficiency levels. Contrastive studies between Arabic and Malay are recommended to further investigate the role of first language transfer in shaping discourse organisation. Finally, future studies may extend the analysis to different writing genres to determine whether the functional load of discourse markers varies across contexts.

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Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

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