A procedural analysis of the Tunisian Arabic discourse connective ?ama

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Within the Relevance-based approach, discourse connectives such as but and so are linguistic expressions that encode a procedural meaning (i.e., instructions) which guides the addressee to derive the intended interpretation of a discourse segment (a phrase, a clause, or a sentence) based on context derived from the previous one (Blakemore 87, 1992, 2002; Blass 1990; Sperber and Wilson 1995). This paper uses the Relevance-Theoretic framework to propose a procedural account for the Tunisian Arabic discourse connective ?ama. The distribution of ?ama in a data corpus shows that it occurs in different syntactic positions to conjoin two phrases or two clauses; or to introduce a new sentence or even a new utterance. Further, ?ama signals three different meanings: contrast, denial of expectation, and cancellation. The paper argues that ?ama is not ambiguous and propose a unitary account for its meaning. I argue that ?ama encodes one general procedure that instructs the hearer to see an asymmetric relationship between two properties or two propositions. The general procedure that ?ama encodes constrains the meaning of the discourse segment it introduces by guiding the hearer to derive the specific meaning (i.e., contrast, denial, or cancellation). In doing so, ?ama constrains only the implicit side of communication without contributing to the truth conditions of the utterance that contains it as shown in examples (1-3).

(1) ?ama ma n-hibbi-ʃ ni-t-daxil fi ?umūr ma ta-ʃni-ni-ʃ,
I NEG 1SG-like-NEG 1SG-interfere in business NEG 3PL-interest-me-neg

?ama dāhirli kān na-bdaw na-ʃru ?arwāʔ-na […]ʔabsan milli n-sibbu fi in-nās
but apparently if 1sg-start 1PL-know self-our better than 1PL-curse in the-people
‘I don’t want to interfere in other people’s business, but I think starting to understand ourselves would be better than cursing other people.’

In (1) from a comment on a blogger’s criticism of politicians, the use of ?ama indicates that the hearer might have derived the proposition that the speaker was not going to interfere with the blogger’s criticism of politicians. The use of ?ama therefore, signals to the hearer that the ?ama-introduced clause is relevant as a denial of the implication derived from the previous clause.

(2) xū-h l-kbīr ʃandu l-djār w l-hnāʃr ?ama huwa ma ʃandu ʃaj.
brother-his the-old has the-houses and the-farms but he neg has nothing
‘His old brother owns houses and farms, but he has nothing

In (2), the speaker uses ?ama to draw the hearer’s attention that the two brothers are incompatible with respect to the semantic property rich.

(3) A: zūz ahawkum l-zūz ʃand-hum nafs l-fās
two there.they.are the-two have same the-front
‘There are two, both have the same front and have the same corner.’

B: ?ama ta-ʃrif inti l-muʃkla l-kul fi- l-dār ʃnuwwa?
but 2-know you the-problem the-whole in-the-house what?
‘But do you know that the whole problem in the house is?’

In (3), speaker A tells the hearer that they have two house blue prints. Speaker B uses ?ama to cancel the importance and significance of the proposition communicated in the previous utterance and started talking about what he thinks the real problem is.

In the three examples discussed above, ?ama contributes only to the implicit but not to the truth-conditional side of utterance interpretation. For example, in (2), the contrast relationship signaled by ?ama does not make the utterance true or false. The utterance is true only if the two propositions ‘the old brother is rich’ and the ‘young brother is poor’ are true.