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Multifunctionality of mʕliʃ in Jordanian Arabic: A Discourse-Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines the pragmatic functions of mʕliʃ in Jordanian Arabic and explores how this discourse marker operates in naturally occurring interaction. The analysis is based on 175 tokens collected from everyday conversations across different social contexts. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach supported by descriptive frequency analysis, the study identifies eleven pragmatic functions of mʕliʃ, including consolation, request mitigation, reassurance, apology, permission-seeking, conflict calming, disagreement, disapproval, threat-making, turn-taking, and conversational closure. The findings show that the most frequent functions are related to facework, particularly consolation, reassurance, request mitigation, and apology. These uses suggest that mʕliʃ plays an important role in maintaining solidarity, reducing interpersonal tension, and softening face-threatening acts. However, its occurrence in disagreement, disapproval, threat-making, and interactional management demonstrates that it is not limited to politeness. Rather, mʕliʃ functions as a context-sensitive pragmatic marker whose meaning depends on speaker intention, sequential position, and interactional context. The study also reports preliminary gender-related patterns, with female speakers using mʕliʃ more often in supportive contexts and male speakers using it more often in assertive or confrontational contexts. The study contributes to Arabic pragmatics by offering a systematic account of an under-researched discourse marker in Jordanian Arabic.

Keywords: Discourse Markers, Jordanian Arabic, MʕliJ, Multifunctionality, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Discourse markers (DMs) are a class of expressions widely recognized for playing an important role in connecting discourse, organizing conversations, and conveying interpersonal meanings (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1999). Even though these expressions are syntactically optional, they play a significant role in maintaining and organizing interaction (Fraser, 1999). One distinct feature of DMs is multifunctionality, as they are adapted to perform different pragmatic functions in different situations (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 1999; Andersen 2001; Brinton 1996). Discourse markers (DMs) are a class of linguistic expressions widely recognized for their role in connecting discourse, organizing conversational flow, and conveying interpersonal meanings (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999). Although such expressions are syntactically optional, they play an important role in maintaining coherence and managing interaction (Fraser, 1999). A central feature of discourse markers is their multifunctionality: the same marker may serve different pragmatic functions depending on the interactional context in which it occurs (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999; Andersen, 2001; Brinton, 1996).

Previous scholarship has approached discourse markers from several theoretical perspectives, including structural, pragmatic, and relevance-theoretic approaches (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999; Blakemore, 1987; Brinton, 1996; Hansen, 2006). (Cite here). Schiffrin (1987, p. 31) defines discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk," emphasizing their role in linking discourse segments and supporting the organization of spoken interaction. Fraser (1999), in contrast, views discourse markers as linguistic signals that guide hearers in interpreting the relationship between an utterance and the preceding discourse. While these approaches highlight the organizational role of discourse markers, relevance-theoretic accounts emphasize their function in constraining interpretation and increasing the relevance of utterances within context (Blakemore, 1987). In addition, Brinton (1996) identifies discourse markers as pragmatic devices that may express politeness, attitude, harmony, and solidarity, while Hansen (2006) highlights their contribution to interactional and interpersonal coherence. Taken together, these perspectives show that discourse markers are central to spoken interaction not only for their lexical meanings but also for the pragmatic functions they perform across contexts.

Jordanian Arabic includes a wide range of discourse markers that contribute to the management of social interaction. Previous studies have examined markers such as *hasa* "now" (Al Kayed, 2021), *yalla* "come on" (Al Kayed, Al-Ajalein, Al Khawaldah, & Alkayid, 2023), *mashi* "okay" (Al-Shishtawi, 2020), and *bas* "enough" (Qaishat & Al-Hyari, 2002). These markers have been shown to perform various functions, including expressing politeness, managing turn-taking, closing conversations, showing agreement, and signaling threat. Such studies demonstrate the importance of discourse markers in Jordanian Arabic interaction. However, the discourse marker *mʕlif* remains under-researched and has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Investigating *mʕlif* is therefore important for developing a fuller understanding of the pragmatic system of Jordanian Arabic and the multifunctional nature of its discourse markers.

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The present study addresses this gap by examining the pragmatic functions of *mʕlif* in everyday interactions in Jordanian Arabic. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive classification, the study offers an initial data-driven account of the functions of *mʕlif* as they emerge in naturally occurring discourse. By doing so, it provides a context-sensitive and exploratory analysis that may serve as a foundation for future large-scale, comparative, and cross-dialectal research. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the pragmatic functions of *mʕlif* in Jordanian Arabic?
- How does *mʕlif* relate to facework, interactional management, and stance?
- What is the impact of gender on the use of *mʕlif* in Jordanian Arabic?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The current study adopts a three-domain functional typology (politeness theory, conversation analysis, and stance-taking) to account for the multifunctionality of the DM mʕliʃ.

2.1.1. Facework-Oriented Functions

The concept of facework is a fundamental element in the study of the function of mʕliʃ, particularly in managing interpersonal relationships through communication. This area of study is based on politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of communication, which defines FTAs and strategies for mitigating them. Brown and Levinson (1987) define the two aspects of face as positive face (the desire for approval/acceptance from others) and negative face (the desire for freedom and autonomy from others' imposition).

Politeness strategies are considered redressive acts that lessen the effects of FTAs, such as making a request, issuing an apology, or disagreeing with someone. Within this context, the many uses of mʕliʃ, e.g., as a request mitigator, an apology,a reassurance, ora consolation, can be interpreted as reducing imposition, repairing tensions in the relationship, or increasing solidarity among individuals. These uses of mʕliʃ correspond to classic politeness theories of Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as more contemporary relational approaches to politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005; Kádár & Haugh, 2013) that view politeness as a part of a larger interpersonal negotiation that occurs during discourse. However, facework is only one aspect of mʕliʃ's functions. Not every instance of this marker is used to mitigate face threats, and its pragmatic functions extend beyond traditional politeness.

2.1.2. Interactional Management Functions

The second domain concerns the function of mʕliʃ in coordinating and organizing interactional flow within discourse, rather than primarily serving as a means of expressing politeness; discourse markers assist speakers in organizing their talk and coordinating their participation. Research in conversation analysis shows that conversation is systematically organized through mechanisms such as turn-taking, sequence organization, and repair (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). Within this framework, markers such as *mʕlif* play a role in facilitating the ending of a conversation, signaling turn-taking, and managing speaker transitions. Additionally, discourse-pragmatic approaches illustrate how the use of discourse markers contributes to the structure and cohesion of discourse (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999; Hansen, 2006). In this regard, the use of mʕliʃ in turn-taking and providing closure to a conversation can be conceptualized as strategies for managing social interaction. While these strategies may sometimes overlap with politeness strategies, their focus is on managing social interaction rather than on mitigating face threats for participants.

2.1.3. Stance-Marking and Evaluative Functions

Mʕliʃ may be used as a marker for taking a stance, in which speakers use this marker to index their evaluative, epistemic, or affective position with respect to an interlocutor or proposition. Research on stance demonstrates that speakers are always positioning themselves in relation to what they are saying and with respect to other participants in the interaction (Du Bois, 2007; Kärkkäinen, 2006). Within this domain, *mʕlif* occurs in contexts of disagreement, disapproval, and occasionally threats. The use of *mʕlif* in these contexts does not typically serve to mitigate an FTA or to organize discourse, but rather it serves to manifest or frame the speaker's stance. The three frameworks used in this research can help to capture the different functions of the DM mʕliʃ observed in the data. These frameworks allow examination of the role of mʕliʃ in politeness and relational work, while also capturing how *mʕlif* contributes to the organization of discourse and the expression of stance.

2.2. Discourse markers in Jordanian Arabic

Numerous studies have examined the pragmatic functions of discourse markers in Jordanian Arabic (Huneety, Alkhawaldeh, & Mashaqba, 2023; Alkarazoun & Riziq, 2025; Alghazo, Alkhatib, Rababáh, & Algazo, 2025). These studies can be grouped according to the main pragmatic functions that discourse markers perform in interaction. Some studies have focused on discourse markers as tools for organizing discourse and managing conversational flow (Kärkkäinen, 2006; Huneety, Alkhawaldeh, & Mashaqba, 2023; Alkarazoun & Riziq, 2025; Alghazo, Alkhatib, Rababáh, & Algazo, 2025). For instance, Al Kayed (2021) investigated the marker "hasa" ("now") within Relevance Theory, showing that it served five main functions: indicating disagreement, marking a reason, opening markers, ideational shifting, and orientation shifting. In a subsequent study, Al Kayed et al. (2023) explored the DM yalla and found that it was employed to signal a topic shift, indicate the end of a conversation, yield a turn, take turns, and initiate a topic. Similarly, Al-Daher et al. (2024) investigated halaʔ ("now"), identifying its syntactic behavior and discoursal functions in natural conversations. The study identified six pragmatic functions: marking shifts in the participation framework, introducing a contrast or comparison, listing, changing a topic, marking disagreement, explanations or clarifications, and producing reasons. In addition, Qaishat and Al-Hyari (2002) studied bas ("enough") and found that it served functions such as ending a conversation, reasoning, condition, and conjunction, all of which contribute to structuring discourse.

Other studies have emphasized the role of discourse markers in expressing stance and emotional meanings. For example, Al-Shishtawi (2020) examined the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker mashi "walking" in Jordanian Arabic. The compiled mini-corpus consisted of 400 instances taken from the website Arabicorpus. The study found an impressive range of 28 pragmatic functions, including threat, walking, approval, not bad, behavior, execution, contentment, confirmation, acceptance, and irony. Other studies focused on less frequent but culturally salient markers. Hamdan and Abu-Rumman (2020) examined Yahummalali, revealing its use in conveying dissatisfaction, disappointment, dismay, regret, surprise, anger, sarcasm, jealousy, shock, and unhappiness. More recently, Hamdan, Al-Shuaibi, Zarour, Alyafe, & Khalil (2025) analyzed how it occurred in real-life situations. The study showed that "away" was employed to signal reserved approval, indicate interest, express confirmation, convey irritation, and show understanding, depending on the conversational setting.

A further line of research has explored discourse markers as politeness and mitigation devices. Kanakri and Al-Harahsheh (2013) explored ʔa:di ("normal/fine") in Jordanian Arabic, showing that it served various functions, including expressing consolation, asking for permission, indicating disapproval, expressing disappointment, and showing courtesy. In a recent study, Al Rousan and Sharar (2024) studied the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker basita in Jordanian Arabic. The data were compiled from 70 conversations containing the DM basita. The study identified 11 functions of basita, including providing reassurance, expressing disappointment, making a threat, offering consolation, expressing irony, signaling insufficiency, showing courtesy, offering assistance, and expressing mitigation. Several specialized studies also highlighted the multifunctionality of bas. Ennasser and Hijazin (2021) conducted a detailed pragmatic analysis of bas, identifying twelve functions, including indicating insufficiency of information, denying expectation, signalling a topic shift, making a repair, showing a threat, returning to main topic, indicating a completion of cognitive process, mitigating a face-threatening act (FTA), acting as expressive marker, a filler marker, modifier, and directive marker.

Some studies have also highlighted the role of discourse markers in expressing logical relations between ideas (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Fraser, 1999). More recently, Alqahtani (2023) analyzed baʕdin, using a small corpus consisting of 105 tweets. The study found that bʕdın served different pragmatic functions, including a marker of result, a marker of reason, a marker of orientation shift, a marker of disagreement, a conditional marker, and a marker of agreement. Similarly, earlier findings on bas (Qaishat & Al-Hyari, 2002) also showed its use in expressing reasoning, condition, and exception. Despite the breadth of research on Jordanian DMs, mʕliʃ has yet to be systematically identified and classified. Most studies ignored it, leaving its pragmatic functions under-researched. Thus, the present study aims to address this gap by enriching the analysis of discourse markers in Jordanian Arabic and helping cross-pragmatic studies investigate how a discourse marker may serve different functions across languages and dialects.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative discourse-pragmatic design, supported by descriptive quantitative analysis, to examine the pragmatic functions of *mʕlif* in Jordanian Arabic. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to identify how the marker operates in naturally occurring interactions rather than to test predetermined hypotheses or produce statistically generalizable findings. Each occurrence of *mʕlif* was analyzed within its immediate conversational environment, with attention to speaker intention, sequential position, interpersonal relationship, and the observable role of the marker in the unfolding interaction. The qualitative analysis was therefore context-sensitive and interpretive, focusing on how pragmatic meaning was produced through situated use. Frequency counts and percentages were used only to describe the distribution of the identified functions and to support the qualitative interpretation. They were not treated as evidence for inferential statistical claims.

The analysis was informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: conversation analysis, politeness theory, and stance theory. Conversation analysis supported the interpretation of *mʕlif* in relation to turn-taking, sequence organization, and conversational closure. Politeness theory helped explain its role in mitigating face-threatening acts, expressing apology, seeking permission, and maintaining interpersonal harmony. Stance theory was used to interpret cases in which *mʕlif* indexed disagreement, disapproval, evaluation, or threat. Together, these frameworks provided a multidimensional basis for analysing the multifunctionality of the marker across interactional contexts.

3.2. Data Collection

The dataset was compiled between June and October 2025 from naturally occurring Jordanian Arabic interactions across different social contexts. The purpose was to capture authentic uses of *mʕlif* in everyday communication rather than responses elicited through experimental tasks.

3.2.1. Sampling Procedure

The study used a purposive-opportunistic sampling approach, which was appropriate because *mʕlif* occurs spontaneously in everyday interaction and cannot be reliably elicited without affecting its pragmatic function. Interactions were included in the corpus if they met three criteria: first, they occurred naturally without researcher prompting or intervention; second, they contained a clearly identifiable occurrence of *mʕlif*; and third, they provided sufficient surrounding discourse to support a context-based pragmatic interpretation. Instances were excluded when the occurrence of *mʕlif* lacked adequate contextual information, when the speaker's intention could not be reasonably inferred, or when the token was too ambiguous to be assigned a primary pragmatic function. Although the sampling was not statistically controlled, examples were drawn from a range of social situations to increase contextual diversity and reduce overreliance on a single interactional setting.

3.2.2. Recording and Transcription

The corpus was developed through a combination of short audio recordings and contemporaneous field notes. When audio recording was possible, the relevant interactional segments were transcribed with attention to the conversational turns surrounding each occurrence of *mʕlif*. When recording was not feasible, detailed field notes were written immediately after the interaction to preserve the relevant context, participant roles, and pragmatic situation.

The transcription focused on the immediate discourse environment of each token rather than on full-length conversations, because the study was concerned with the local pragmatic function of *mʕlif* in specific interactional sequences. Each Arabic example was transliterated and translated into English, with the translation aiming to capture the pragmatic force of the utterance rather than only its literal meaning.

3.2.3. Settings

The interactions were drawn from domestic, educational, commercial, and workplace contexts. Domestic settings included homes and family gatherings; educational settings included classrooms, universities, and student interactions; commercial settings included markets, cafés, and shops; and workplace settings included offices and semi-formal professional exchanges. This range of contexts allowed the study to examine how *mʕlif* functions across informal, semi-formal, and institutional settings, as well as across relationships involving family members, friends, classmates, customers, service providers, and colleagues.

3.2.4. Corpus Description

The final corpus consisted of 4,527 words of spoken Jordanian Arabic and included 175 identifiable tokens of *mʕlif*. A token was defined as each occurrence of *mʕlif* within a conversational turn. When more than one occurrence appeared in the same interaction but performed a different pragmatic function, each occurrence was counted as a separate token. Each token was analyzed together with its immediate conversational context. This procedure ensured that *mʕlif* was not treated simply as a lexical item, but as a discourse-pragmatic marker whose function emerges from its sequential position, speaker intention, and interactional environment.

3.3. Participants

The dataset included naturally occurring interactions involving Jordanian Arabic speakers from different age groups and social backgrounds. Because the study adopted a naturalistic and non-intrusive design, participants were not recruited through a controlled sampling procedure, and individual speakers were not tracked longitudinally. Therefore, the estimated number of approximately 200 participants should be understood as an observational estimate rather than as a precise demographic count. It is also possible that some individuals contributed more than one token, particularly in repeated or extended interactional settings. For this reason, the study does not claim that the distribution of tokens represents the behaviour of all Jordanian Arabic speakers. Instead, the participant information is used to contextualize the corpus and to support an exploratory account of how *mʕlif* functions across naturally occurring interactions. Special caution was taken in interpreting gender-related patterns. Since the corpus was not balanced by speaker gender, age, or social background, gender-based findings were treated as preliminary tendencies within the dataset rather than as generalizable sociolinguistic conclusions. This cautious interpretation is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study and the naturalistic method of data collection.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed several stages designed to ensure transparency, reliability, and analytical rigor in identifying the pragmatic functions of mʕliʃ. All occurrences of mʕliʃ in the data were first identified and extracted from their immediate conversational contexts. All instances of mʕliʃ were transcribed and translated into English, with contextual information to allow for the pragmatic interpretation of each occurrence. Each occurrence of mʕliʃ and its surrounding discourse constituted a unit of analysis. The analysis adopted an inductive, data-driven coding approach. Rather than applying a predetermined classification scheme, functional categories were derived from the data through close examination of each token in context. Initial coding focused on identifying the interactional role performed by mʕliʃ, guided by pragmatic criteria including (1) the speaker's communicative intention, (2) the sequential position of the utterance within the interaction, and (3) its observable effect on the hearer and the unfolding discourse.

In the first stage of analysis, a provisional functional label was assigned to each instance of mʕliʃ, resulting in 14 categories. These initial categories underwent iterative refinements through comparative analysis of the instances to identify distinctions in their meaning. Categories that had considerable functional overlap or could not be reliably distinguished from one another were merged; conversely, categories that demonstrated unique patterns were retained. From the initial analysis of all mʕliʃ tokens in the dataset, nine functionally distinct categories emerged, providing a more accurate representation of the pragmatic uses of mʕliʃ. Following the development of the coding scheme, all tokens were assigned to one of the nine primary functions according to the refined category set. Two trained independent coders, who were provided with descriptions and examples of the categories, did the coding. Both coders assigned each token only one primary function based on its dominant role in the interaction.

For mʕliʃ tokens where it was not clear which primary function the token should be assigned, coders used the token's dominant role in a sequence of turns to determine its primary function. Any ambiguous coding resulted in the designation of that token as 'ambiguous'. This was done through a separate discussion among coders, during which they reached a final agreement on the primary classification of mʕliʃ tokens. In situations where tokens could fulfill several pragmatic roles, their main function was identified as the one with the greatest interactional impact in a given sequence. Any ambiguous cases were highlighted at the coding stage and later on resolved through discussions with the coders. The final categories were assigned by consensus to ensure consistency in their application.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed by comparing the independent classifications produced by the two coders across all tokens. Agreement was calculated using percentage agreement, yielding a concordance rate of approximately 90%. Discrepancies were examined and resolved through iterative discussion, leading to the refinement of category boundaries where necessary. To further enhance the robustness of the classification scheme, a team of four linguists specializing in pragmatics and discourse analysis conducted a review of the finalized coding. Their input helped refine the definitions of the categories and ensure that the theoretical and analytical differences between the functions are accurate. Following the finalization of coding, the distribution of pragmatic functions was quantified using frequencies and percentages. These descriptive statistics were used to identify dominant patterns in the data and to support the qualitative analysis. The findings were then interpreted using three frameworks: conversation analysis, politeness theory, and stance theory. Given the observational and exploratory

nature of the data, the analysis emphasized context-based interpretation and analytical transparency over statistical generalization.

3.5. Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability, two independent coders classified all instances of mʕliʃ, achieving an agreement rate of approximately 90%, which indicates a high level of consistency in functional categorization. Several steps were taken to enhance validity. First, the use of naturally occurring data supported ecological validity by reflecting authentic language use. Second, expert review by four linguists helped refine the classification scheme and reduce individual bias. Third, the integration of qualitative analysis supported by descriptive statistics provided both contextual depth and systematic pattern identification. While strict replicability was limited by the dataset's opportunistic nature, the study ensured methodological transparency in data selection, coding, and analysis, enabling analytical comparability with future research.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Given the study's naturalistic, observational design, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations related to privacy, consent, and data handling. The data were collected in everyday social contexts where interactions occurred spontaneously, and no sensitive personal information was intentionally elicited. In public and semi-public settings (e.g., cafés, markets, and university spaces), interactions were observed in contexts where participants could reasonably expect to be overheard. In more private settings (e.g., homes and small group interactions), verbal consent was obtained where feasible prior to recording. In cases where prior consent was not practicable due to the spontaneous nature of interaction, only non-sensitive excerpts were documented, and no identifying information was recorded. All data were anonymized during transcription. Personal names and any identifying details were removed or replaced with pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality. The examples presented in this study were limited to short excerpts that could not be traced to specific individuals. The study adhered to general ethical guidelines for linguistic research involving naturalistic observation, prioritizing minimal intrusion, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' privacy.

4. Findings

4.1. The pragmatic functions of mʕliʃ in Jordanian Arabic

For analytical clarity, the identified functions were interpreted within a three-domain framework: (1) facework-oriented functions (e.g., consolation, request mitigation, reassurance, asking for permission, calming a conflict, apology), (2) interactional management functions (e.g., turn-taking, conversational closure), and (3) stance-marking and evaluative functions (e.g., disapproval, disagreement, threat). These results support the multifunctionality of *mʕliʃ* as a discourse marker in Jordanian conversation (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: The pragmatic functions of mʕliʃ

Pragmatic function	Frequency	Percentage
Providing consolation	34	19%
Politeness marker of requests	30	17%
Providing reassurance	27	15%
Expressing apology	23	13%
Expressing disapproval	14	8%
Asking for permission	13	7%
Indicating disagreement	9	5%
Taking turns	8	5%
conversational closure	7	4%
Calming a conflict	6	3%
Making a threat	4	2%
Total	175	100%

Source: Developed by the researcher based on the analyzed dataset.

The results in Table 1 indicated that *mʕliʃ* was mostly used for facework-oriented functions, especially in situations involving consolation, request mitigation, reassurance, and apologizing; these functions accounted for 64% of the total occurrences. The high frequency of these functions demonstrated a tendency to use the discourse marker for solidarity purposes and to save the hearer's face. In contrast, the less frequent functions, including disagreement, threat, turn-taking, and conversational closure, illustrated how *mʕliʃ* operates across both stance marking and interaction management, highlighting its flexibility beyond facework-oriented functions.

Table 1 also revealed that the most frequent functions of mʕliʃ fall within the facework-oriented domain, particularly in contexts involving consolation, request mitigation, reassurance, and apology, as they account for 64% of all occurrences of mʕliʃ. The frequent use of these functions suggests a tendency toward using the discourse marker to show solidarity and save the hearers' face. Less frequent functions, such as disagreement, threats, turn-taking, and conversational closure, illustrated how mʕliʃ operates across the domains of stance-marking and interactional management, highlighting its flexibility beyond facework-oriented uses. Table 1 showed that a relatively small number of tokens represented certain functions, such as turn-taking, conversational closure, making threats, and calming a conflict. These low-frequency categories should be interpreted as tentative, exploratory observations rather than as robust or fully established functional patterns.

4.1.1. Providing Consolation

Providing consolation was the most frequent function of mʕliʃ (19%) in the dataset. It was used to express sympathy and to offer hope, assistance, and encouragement after loss, pain, or disappointment. Consider the following example:

Example (1)

Ahmed: خسرت امبارح ألف دينار بالبورصة

xsirt ʔmbaːrħ ʔlf djnaːr bilbwrsˁah

"I lost a thousand dinars in the stock market yesterday."

Noor: معلش. تعوض المرة الجاية

mʕliʃ. tʕawwaḍ ʔlmarr ʔldʒaːj

"Don't worry. You'll make it back next time."

This conversation occurred between two friends: Noor and Ahmed. Ahmed told his friend Noor that he lost 1 thousand JD in the stock market. Noor employed mʕliʃ to encourage her friend and to give him hope that he will compensate for his loss next time. The use of mʕliʃ was functional, as it appears to reduce the negative impact of the event and to focus on hope and optimism.

Example (2)

Shahid: ما زبطت بالامتحان

maː zabtˁt bilʔimtħaːn

"I didn't do well on the exam."

Farah: معلش. رح تزبطي بالفاينل

mʕliʃ. raħ tzˁbṭi bilfaːjnl

"Do not worry. You'll do better in the final."

This was an exchange between two colleagues at the university. Shahid did not do well on the midterm exam, and Farah sympathized with her and tried to encourage her, telling her she would do better on the final exam. Farah used mʕliʃ to save the face of her colleague by offering sympathy and support. The use of this discourse marker to provide consolation was consistent with Brown & Levinson's (1987) notion of positive politeness, which aims to save the hearer's positive face by reinforcing self-esteem and highlighting hope. The use of discourse markers, such as mʕliʃ and similar markers, was found in Arabic discourse (Al-Shishtawi, 2020) to reduce pain and maintain harmony and solidarity.

4.1.2. Politeness marker of a request

The findings of the study indicated that 17% of mʕliʃ's occurrences were used as a politeness marker to reduce and mitigate the impact of the request. The speakers in the following examples used mʕliʃ as a mitigating device to make their request more polite.

Example (3)

معلش. ممكن تعطيني دفترك؟

mʕliʃ. mumkin tʕtˁiːni daftarak?

"Excuse me, could you give me your notebook?"

In the previous example, a classmate asked his friend to lend him her notebook. The speaker used mʕliʃ as a mitigating device to reduce the force of the speech act of a request.

Example (4)

معلش تعطيني كاسة قهوة؟

mʕliʃ. tʕtˁiːni kaːsit ʔahweh?

"Excuse me; could you give me a cup of coffee?"

In example 4, a customer asked a waiter for a cup of coffee. The speaker used mʕliʃ as a politeness marker to soften his request. In the previous examples, mʕliʃ functions as a politeness marker that softens the impact of a request and reduces its force on the addressees' negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Here, mʕliʃ operates as a lexical hedge 'excuse me' in English, indicating politeness in conversations. Similar findings were reported in other Arabic dialects, such as Egyptian Arabic and Gulf Arabic (maʕlesh) (Al-Khazraji, 2019), indicating that this discourse marker was used to express politeness.

4.1.3. Providing Reassurance

One of the main functions observed in the dataset of mʕliʃ in Jordanian Arabic was to reassure others that what happened was not a serious problem. It appears to be used as a soothing strategy to decrease anxiety and the seriousness of an issue. The findings revealed that this strategy was used 27 times (15%). Consider the following example.

Example (5)

Child: بابا كبيت العصير

baːbaː! kbeːt ʔlʕaṣˁiːr

"Daddy, I spilled the juice."

Father: معلش. ولا يهمك. بشتريلك غيره

mʕliʃ. wala jhimmak. bʃtiriːlak ɣeːruh

"It's okay. Do not worry about it. I'll get you another one."

The previous example was a conversation between a father and his child. The child spilled the juice, and the father comforted him, saying not to worry about it. The father used mʕliʃ to minimize the child's feeling of guilt and anxiety by reassuring his child that spilling the juice was not a serious problem and could be easily fixed. The use of mʕliʃ to provide reassurance aligns with the positive politeness notion, which focuses on expressing support and empathy. Moreover, providing reassurance with discourse markers such as mʕliʃ echoes Jordanian cultural norms of tolerance and resilience (Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

4.1.4. Expressing Apology

An apology is a strategy used by a speaker to admit the responsibility of an offense and therefore to mend relational damage to the hearer. The data showed that in 13% of tokens, mʕliʃ appeared to function as an apology marker, as shown in the following example:

Example (6)

Lama: استيننتك اكثر من ساعة. وين كنتي؟

ʔstajjanitk ʔaktar min saːʕa. weːn kunti?

"I waited for you for over an hour. Where were you?"

Malk: معلش. تأخرت شوي، كان فيه أزمة.

mʕliʃ. taʔaxxart ʃway, kaːn fiːh ʔazmeh

"Sorry about that. I was a bit late; there was some traffic."

This was an exchange between two friends. Malk apologized to her friend and explained why she was late. Here, mʕliʃ was used to express an apology and to minimize conflict with the hearer. The findings of the study showed that the discourse marker mʕliʃ was employed as an apology marker, with the same function as "sorry" in English. It aims to repair positive face (by showing concern for approval) and negative face (by acknowledging imposition). In cross-cultural studies, the use of discourse markers such as mʕliʃ to express apologies plays a significant role in maintaining understanding, agreement, and harmony (Holmes, 1995; Culpeper, 2011).

4.1.5. Expressing Disapproval

Disapproval is an expressive speech act that is used by speakers to express their disapproval or negative evaluation of a behavior or an action done by others (Searle, 1976). This speech act threatens the positive face of hearers. The results of the study found that disapproval was used in 8% of mʕliʃ's tokens.

Example (7)

Driver A: معلش ليش تصف مكاني

mʕliʃ, leːʃ tṣuff makaːni?

"Seriously? Why are you parking in my spot?"

Driver B: أنا اسف

ʔnaː ʔaːsif

"I am sorry."

In this example, driver A complained that another driver had taken his private parking spot. He used mʕliʃ to express disapproval, framing the complaint and signaling an evaluative stance toward the situation. Rather than functioning solely to reduce confrontation, mʕliʃ can be understood here as modulating the speaker's stance. This use is compatible with observations in interactional pragmatics that certain markers can temper or frame potentially confrontational acts without necessarily neutralizing their force (Culpeper, 2011; Bousfield, 2008).

4.1.6. Asking for Permission

Asking for permission is a speech act in which the speaker asks the hearer to give him/her permission to do an action without imposing authority or restricting the hearer's freedom. The data showed that mʕliʃ was employed in 13 instances.

Example (8)

معلش أروح على عرس صاحبتي؟

mʕliʃ, ʔaruːħ ʕala ʕurs ṣaːħbti?

"Is it okay if I go to my friend's wedding?"

In the previous example, a daughter asked her mother for permission to attend her friend's wedding. The speaker used mʕliʃ to ask for permission while respecting her mother's authority. The use of this marker in permission-seeking contexts aligns with the notion of negative politeness. It also mirrors Jordanian cultural norms of respect for authority and social hierarchy (Hamdan & Abu-Rumman, 2020).

4.1.7. Indicating Disagreement

Disagreement is a speech act that threatens the hearer's positive face as it is used to reject opinions and propositions of others (Malamed, 2010). The data showed that this strategy accounted for (5%) of all mʕliʃ's instances, often used in friendly exchanges as shown in the following example.

Example (9)

Mohammad: ما حبيت الكافيه اللي رحنا عليه امبارح

ma ħabbayt il-kafeeh illi ruħna ʕaleh ʔmbaːrħ

"I didn't like the café we went to yesterday."

Marwan: لا. معلش، بس المكان كثير حلو

la. mʕliʃ, bas il-makaan kteːr ħilu

"No. Come on, it is actually a nice place."

This was a conversation between two friends in which Marwan disagreed with his friend about a café. The speaker used mʕliʃ to express disagreement, signaling a stance of non-alignment with the prior utterance. The analysis of the data suggests that mʕliʃ can function as a marker of stance, framing the disagreement and modulating its delivery. Mʕliʃ in this context serves to index the speaker's evaluative position rather than functioning primarily as a face-saving device. (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999).

4.1.8. Calming a Conflict

Conflict-calming is a speech act performed by a third party to reduce conflict and preserve harmony. Although relatively infrequent in the dataset (n = 6), mʕliʃ appeared, in some cases, to function as a marker of conflict mitigation or de-escalation. These instances occurred in interactional contexts where tension was present, and the speaker attempted to reduce disagreement or restore conversational balance.

Example (10)

Ali: ما حبيت عرضك. كان غير منظم

maː ħbeat ʕrdˤk. kaːn ɣear mnðˤm

"I did not like your presentation. It was disorganized."

Jawad: ما بدي نصيحتك

maː bdj nsˤjħtk

"I do not want your advice."

Kamal: معلش ما كان قصده هو يحاول يساعدك

mʕliʃ, maː kaːn qaṣduh. hw jħaːwl jsaːʕdk

"It's okay, he didn't mean it. He is trying to help you."

This interaction occurred between colleagues at the university. Ali criticized Jawad's presentation, and Jawad responded negatively to Ali's comment. Kamal used *mʕlif* in his speech to mitigate the conflict between them and redirect it towards forgiveness. The use of this marker to calm a conflict between people appears to mirror the discursive politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005), which highlights relational harmony in daily exchanges.

4.1.9. Making a Threat

Although it was represented by only 4 instances in the dataset (n = 4), mʕliʃ appeared in some cases to function as a marker of threat. In these instances, the expression occurred in contexts where the speaker adopted a potentially confrontational or warning stance. Consider the following example.

Example (11)

(Context: Sami called his co-worker multiple times to ask him a favor. However, he did not answer his calls. When they met at work, Sami threatened him that he would not answer his calls in the future.)

Sami: معلش. رح تحتاجني وما رح أرد عليك

mʕliʃ. raħ tħtaːdʒni w maː raħ ʔrudd ʕaleːk

"Just wait. You'll need me one day, and I won't answer you."

This utterance was produced by a speaker engaged in a heated argument with their colleague. By using the expression mʕliʃ, the speaker framed a threat directed at the co-worker, signaling strong misalignment and negative evaluation. Rather than functioning as a politeness marker, mʕliʃ in this context contributed to the speaker's interactional positioning, conveying an assertive and potentially hostile stance.

4.1.10. Turn-taking

Discourse markers such as mʕliʃ may be used by speakers to manage turn-taking and organize the flow of interaction (Sacks et al., 1974). Although not among the most frequent functions (n = 8), mʕliʃ appeared in some instances to play a role in

coordinating speaker transitions. These occurrences suggested that the marker might be used to signal a shift between turns or to negotiate speaking rights within the ongoing interaction, thereby contributing to the organization of conversational exchange.

Example (12)

Context: three friends were sitting in a café discussing the quality of education in Jordan. One of them took his turn to speak, saying:

معلش بدي أحكيلك شي

mʕliʃ, biddi ʔaħki:lak ʃi:

"Excuse me, can I tell you something?"

In the previous utterance, the speaker employed mʕliʃ to take his turn politely among other speakers. Mʕliʃ may function as a polite discourse marker similar to 'excuse me' in English, which is used as a polite discourse marker to manage the flow of conversation (Schiffrin, 1987; Hansen, 2006).

4.1.11. Conversational Closure

Although represented by a small number of instances (n = 7), mʕliʃ appeared in some cases to function as a marker of conversational closure. In these contexts, it was used to signal the end of a topic or to facilitate the termination of an interaction.

Example (13)

Context: Alaa and Dina were sitting on the campus discussing midterm grades. Dina was late for her grammar lecture so she wanted to end the conversation and leave. She said:

معلش، نحكي بكرة

mʕliʃ, naħki bukra

"Okay then, we will talk tomorrow."

In this example, a friend used mʕliʃ to bring the conversation to a smooth, orderly close. The marker appeared to facilitate conversational closure by signaling the end of the exchange and coordinating the transition out of the interaction. Such uses were consistent with analyses of discourse markers as markers for structuring talk and managing discourse boundaries, including the closing of conversations (Brinton, 1996).

4.2. Gender variation in mʕliʃ's patterns

The analysis of the dataset suggests observable differences in the distribution of *mʕlif* functions across male and female speakers. However, these patterns should be interpreted with caution, as they are based on descriptive frequency counts from a relatively small, imbalanced dataset rather than on inferential statistical testing. Overall, female speakers produced 105 tokens of *mʕlif* (60.0%), whereas male speakers produced 70 tokens (40.0%). Both male and female speakers used *mʕlif* across the eleven identified pragmatic functions, but the distribution of these functions varied across gender groups. Female speakers appeared to produce a higher proportion of tokens in supportive and affiliative functions, whereas male speakers produced a higher proportion of tokens in more assertive or confrontational functions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of *mʕlif* by Gender and Function

Pragmatic Function	Total Tokens	Female n (%)	Male n (%)
Consolation	34	23 (67.6%)	11 (32.4%)
Reassurance	27	19 (70.4%)	8 (29.6%)
Apology	23	15 (65.2%)	8 (34.8%)
Request mitigation	30	18 (60.0%)	12 (40.0%)
Permission-seeking	13	7 (53.8%)	6 (46.2%)
Disapproval	14	5 (35.7%)	9 (64.3%)
Disagreement	9	4 (44.4%)	5 (55.6%)
Conflict calming	6	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)
Turn-taking	8	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)
Conversational closure	7	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)
Threat	4	1 (25.0%)	3 (75.0%)
Total	**175**	**105 (60.0%)**	**70 (40.0%)**

Source: Developed by the researcher based on the analyzed dataset.

Table 2 shows that female speakers produced a higher proportion of *mʕlif* tokens in supportive functions such as consolation, reassurance, apology, and request mitigation. For example, women produced 23 of the 34 consolation tokens (67.6%), while men produced 11 tokens (32.4%). Similarly, women produced 19 of the 27 reassurance tokens (70.4%), compared with 8 tokens produced by men (29.6%). In apology contexts, women produced 15 tokens (65.2%), whereas men produced 8 tokens (34.8%). Request mitigation also showed a higher female distribution, with women producing 18 tokens (60.0%) and men producing 12 tokens (40.0%). By contrast, male speakers produced a higher proportion of *mʕlif* tokens in assertive or confrontational functions. Men produced 9 of the 14 disapproval tokens (64.3%), compared with 5 tokens produced by women (35.7%). They also produced 5 of the 9 disagreement tokens (55.6%) and 3 of the 4 threat tokens (75.0%). However, because some of these categories are represented by very small numbers, particularly threat, conflict calming, and conversational closure, these findings should be treated as exploratory tendencies rather than strong evidence of gendered pragmatic behavior. The results suggest that gender may be associated with different patterns of *mʕlif* use in the present dataset. Female speakers appeared to use the marker more often in contexts involving support, sympathy, politeness, and relational maintenance, whereas male speakers appeared to use it more often in contexts involving disagreement, disapproval, and

confrontation. Nevertheless, because the corpus was not systematically balanced by gender, age, social background, or interaction type, these patterns should not be generalized to all Jordanian Arabic speakers. Instead, they point to a promising area for future sociopragmatic research, using larger, more controlled datasets.

5. Discussion

The findings should be interpreted as exploratory and indicative, reflecting patterns observed within a relatively small, naturalistic dataset rather than a definitive account of all possible functions of mʕliʃ. The analysis of the study's results indicates that mʕliʃ appears to be a multifunctional discourse marker in the present dataset. Although the word mʕliʃ literally means "it does not matter" or "it is okay", it appears to be used to convey different meanings across pragmatic contexts such as reassurance, apology, and comfort, in addition to serving as a means of turn-taking and showing disagreement. The multifaceted nature of mʕliʃ suggests that it plays an important role in managing social interaction in Jordanian Arabic.

5.4. Mʕliʃ across Three Functional Domains

The most frequent uses of mʕliʃ in the dataset—consolation, reassurance, request mitigation, and apology—fall within the domain of facework-oriented functions. These uses align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of redressive action, as they attend to the interlocutor's positive and/or negative face. In these contexts, mʕliʃ functions as a marker for expressing empathy, minimizing imposition, and maintaining relational harmony. Using mʕliʃ for consolation purposes is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of positive politeness, which reinforces solidarity, reduces disappointment, and provides reassurance. For example, when someone loses one thousand Dinars, their friend might respond by saying mʕliʃ tʕawwaḍ ʔlmarr ʔldʒaːj, meaning "It will be okay, you'll get it back next time." Thereby, it saves the hearer's positive face by providing hope. Request mitigation and permission-seeking can be seen as examples of negative politeness strategies that minimize imposition on the hearer. A student, for instance, uses mʕliʃ in the utterance *mʕliʃ mumkin tʃtˤiːni daftarak?* "Excuse me, could you give me your notebook?" to save the negative face of the hearer by softening his/her request. Apologies can function to repair both positive and negative face, addressing both approval and acknowledgment of disruption. For instance, a friend who arrives late apologizes using mʕliʃ, taʔaxxart ʃway, kaːn fiːh ʔazmeh "Sorry, I was a bit late; there was traffic", directly restoring the need to maintain approval and lessen the inconvenience caused. A second set of functions reflects the role of *mʕliʃ* in organizing interaction. Uses such as turn-taking, conversational closure, and permission-seeking illustrate how the marker contributes to the coordination of discourse. These functions are not directly related to facework and are better understood in terms of managing conversational flow and speaker alignment. Finally, *mʕliʃ* is used to show disagreement, disapproval, and threats. In these instances, it serves as a stance marker indicating the speaker's evaluative position. Although some examples may exhibit some degree of softening, that is not always the case. Therefore, mʕliʃ cannot be treated as a politeness marker but rather as a contextually shaped marker.

5.5. Cultural values reflected in mʕliʃ

The analysis of the data suggests that the dominant functions of mʕliʃ (consolation, reassurance, politeness marker of request, and apology) are associated with preserving social cohesion, understanding, acceptance, solidarity, and forgiveness. Additionally, these functions can be interpreted as a reflection of Jordanian tradition and culture, as they may help maintain social harmony and discourage conflict while promoting sympathy in social interactions. The analysis also indicates that mʕliʃ appears in a range of contexts within the dataset, including family and close friends. It is often used in the dataset as a means of providing emotional support, reassurance, and minimizing other people's disappointments. For example, after her friend lost her watch, one friend said mʕliʃ, raħħ tlaːqjhaː ("it's fine; you will find it") to minimize the loss. Similarly, a wife reassured her husband, saying mʕliʃ ħabibi ("it's ok honey") when he forgot the groceries, which suggests the importance of emotionally supportive behaviors in interactions among family and friends in Jordan.

Moreover, the analysis indicates that Jordanian speakers in the dataset use mʕliʃ in formal contexts to show respect for social authority and hierarchies, to lessen the force of a request or an order, and to encourage the listener to engage in polite behavior. For instance, a client employs mʕliʃ to mitigate his order and express politeness by saying *mʕliʃ, dʒiːbliː kaːsit ʃaːj!* "Excuse me, bring me a cup of tea!" Mʕliʃ can signify cultural values in contexts that are meant to reduce conflict or tension. By using *mʕliʃ maː kaːn qaṣduh* "it's okay, he didn't mean it", a speaker not only reduces the tension between the speakers but also maintains cultural values of harmony and tolerance.

5.6. Sociolinguistic variation

One of the study's main findings is the observed gendered distribution of mʕliʃ in the dataset. While men tended to employ it more frequently in assertive functions such as disapproval (64%) and threats (75%), women tended to use it more often in supportive roles, including consolation (68%) and reassurance (70%). Mʕliʃ is often used by female speakers to express sympathy, encouragement, and support. For example, a female student comforts her friend after an exam failure, saying mʕliʃ, raħ tzˤbṭi bilfaːjnl "it's okay, you'll do better in the final". These uses reflect values of social cohesion, solidarity, hope, and care. On the contrary, men more frequently used mʕliʃ in assertive or confrontational functions. In a heated argument, for example, a male speaker employs mʕliʃ to disapprove how a stranger spoke with his child by saying mʕliʃ laː tħkj mʕ ʔbnj hjk "Hey, do not talk to my kid that way". These findings agree with previous research suggesting that women tend to use supportive and polite strategies more than men (Lakoff 1975; Tannen 1990; Holmes 1995; Coates 2004). This demonstrates that mʕliʃ can be interpreted as an index of identity in Jordanian Arabic speakers.

Although the observed distribution of functions across genders aligns with patterns reported in previous sociolinguistic research, the findings related to the impact of gender in the distribution of mʕliʃ's function should be interpreted as exploratory. The dataset does not provide sufficient evidence to support general claims about gendered language use in Jordanian Arabic, but it highlights tendencies that warrant further investigation in larger, more controlled studies. The findings from this research have several theoretical and practical implications. This study contributes to the growing corpus of research on Arabic discourse markers by providing an in-depth pragmatic analysis of an under-researched discourse marker. The findings also support the use of politeness theory in the Arab world by illustrating how linguistic forms are employed to negotiate face and preserve social harmony. As a result, this research can be useful for foreign language instruction, intercultural communication, and translation professionals, as a better understanding of the multifaceted usages of mʕliʃ may help enhance students' pragmatic

competence and the quality of cross-cultural translations. Furthermore, this research illustrates how discourse markers may function within the Jordanian dialect to reflect social identity, stance, and cultural values within Jordanian society.

6. Limitations And Future Research

The present study has several important limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the corpus is relatively small, consisting of 175 tokens of mʕliʃ, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the present dataset. Second, the study relied on opportunistic sampling. Although this approach was appropriate for capturing naturally occurring uses of mʕliʃ, it means that the dataset was not statistically controlled or balanced across variables such as age, gender, social class, region, or interaction type. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of all Jordanian Arabic speakers. Third, the data were drawn from mixed sources, including short audio recordings and contemporaneous field notes. While this combination allowed the researcher to document naturally occurring interactions in contexts where recording was not always feasible, it may have affected the level of detail available for analysis, particularly in relation to prosody, pauses, overlap, and sequential organization. This limitation directly affects the interpretive strength of some functional classifications. Fourth, the data were collected through face-to-face interactions and did not include digital modes of communication, such as social media or instant messaging, in which mʕliʃ may perform different pragmatic functions. Fifth, several identified functions were represented by a small number of tokens, which limits the strength of conclusions that can be drawn regarding their distribution and interactional significance. These categories should therefore be considered preliminary and subject to confirmation in future research using larger, more systematically balanced datasets. Future studies may also examine the prosodic features, regional variation, and digital uses of mʕliʃ, particularly in relation to solidarity, harmony, stance, and deference in Jordanian Arabic interaction.

7. Conclusions

This study shows that mʕliʃ is a multifunctional discourse-pragmatic marker in Jordanian Arabic whose meaning depends strongly on context. Rather than functioning only as a simple expression meaning “it is okay,” mʕliʃ operates across facework, interactional management, and stance-marking domains. The findings indicate that the marker is most frequently used for consolation, reassurance, request mitigation, and apology, suggesting its important role in maintaining solidarity, reducing interpersonal tension, and softening face-threatening acts. However, its use in disagreement, disapproval, threat-making, turn-taking, and conversational closure shows that mʕliʃ cannot be treated solely as a politeness marker. The study also provides preliminary evidence of gender-based variation, with female speakers using mʕliʃ more often in supportive contexts and male speakers using it more often in assertive or confrontational contexts. However, these findings remain exploratory and should be tested on larger, more balanced datasets. Therefore, this study contributes to research on Arabic discourse markers by offering a context-sensitive account of mʕliʃ in Jordanian Arabic. Future research should examine its use across regions, age groups, digital communication, and other Arabic dialects.

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