The Meanings and Functions of *ʔlħin* in Informal Arabic in Saudi Arabia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT

The present study inspects the semantic and pragmatic meanings of ʔlħin, which is one of the most frequently used discourse markers in informal Arabic. Studies on the discourse marker 'now', which is the equivalent of ʔlħin in English, discuss its use as a temporal adverb and a coherence marker. Similarly, the meanings and functions of ʔlħin are examined in this paper. A dataset from Twitter, which is one of the most popular platforms that are rich with millions of conversations between users in all languages, was used to examine temporal and coherence meanings of ʔlħin within different contexts, and whether it works as a constraint on relevance. The analysis showed that ʔlħin conveyed a semantic meaning 'now' when used as a temporal adverb to refer to the present time, and was indicative of a pragmatic meaning when used as a discourse marker that has a coherence function. Similar to Schiffrin's analysis of 'now' as a discourse marker, the functions of ʔlħin as a coherence marker include ideational shifting, raising the possibility of disagreement, marking of a reason, engaging in negotiations, and orientation shifts. In relation to relevance, the analysis showed that ʔlħin facilitates the recovery of the most relevant pragmatic interpretation by constraining the addressee's search for the required interpretation in different contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION
The study of meaning lies in the heart of the study of language. It is the basis of successful communication between individuals. To study meaning, it is essential to look at the semantic and pragmatic meanings of words. Semantic meanings refer to what words conventionally mean without any account of subjective meaning (Yule, 2014). Pragmatic meanings, on the other hand, 'depend more on context and the communicative intentions of speakers' (Yule, 2014, p. 125). Since Semantics and Pragmatics are complementary disciplines rather than opposing ones (Recanati, 2003), it is necessary to study both meanings when we investigate the meanings of words. Therefore, this paper studies the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the discourse marker *ʔlħin* in Saudi Arabic.

Discourse markers, as essential components of natural language, have long been considered in studies on discourse, communication, and meaning in general. Schiffrin (2008) defines them as 'one set of linguistic items that function in cognitive, expressive,

social, and textual domains' (p. 54). Although discourse markers in English have been studied somewhat considerably, not many studies have been conducted on them in Arabic. The significance of the study stems from the scarcity of studies conducted on discourse markers in Arabic. This leads to a need to enrich the literature with more research efforts to vary the empirical base.

The present study aims to investigate the meanings and functions of *ʔlħin*, an informal Arabic word that is equivalent to the temporal adverb 'now' in English. The study is based on the Relevance Theory. The central claim of Relevance Theory, as its founders Wilson and Sperber (2004) put it, is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer toward the speaker's meaning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
The literature related to studies on discourse markers reveals that the variations in definitions, methods of investigations, and research interests led to a controversy regarding the particular theoretical approaches used to study discourse markers (Azi, 2018). According to Müller (2005), examples of these approaches include signaling a sequential

relationship between utterances, marking discourse coherence, and studying discourse markers from a relevance-theoretic point of view. Since these are broad areas of study, this paper will focus on rendering a relevance-theoretical account of the Saudi Arabic discourse marker *ʔlħin* and examine its functions as a temporal and coherence marker.

The Relevance Theory is based on two principles: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance which states that 'human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance', and the Communicative Principle of Relevance which states that 'every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance' (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 610, 612). Relevance, as Sperber and Wilson (2004) explain, is not an all-or-none matter but rather a matter of degree. Although there are many potential relevant inputs, 'the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater its relevance will be' (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 609). The input that is picked out has optimal relevance. This means that we pick the input that is 'MORE relevant than any alternative input available to us at that time' (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 609). The processing effort affects the relevance of the input. Therefore, the core of the Relevance Theory relates to the assessment of cognitive effects and processing effort. The greater the processing effort required, the less relevant the input will be (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

Blakemore's work on semantic constraints on relevance provided significant remarks of the crucial distinction between procedural and conceptual encoding (Blakemore, 1987). Conceptual encodings are applied by procedural encodings. Although some words have conceptual content, their function is procedural which constrains the interpretation of conceptual meaning by limiting the available ground in relation to which it is to be interpreted (Blakemore, 1987). Blakemore (1987) argues that discourse markers are expressions which 'impose constraints on relevance in virtue of the inferential connections they express' (p. 141).

One of the significant works on discourse markers is a study by Schourup (2011) which was conducted on the discourse marker 'now' from a relevance-theoretic approach. Schourup reviews Schiffrin's characterization of 'now' as a marker of temporal relations between utterances in a discourse, and reviews Aijmer's characterization of 'now' as a coherence marker. Schourup argues that formulating the meaning of 'now' without reference to coherence or discourse structure is preferable. He promotes two relevance-theoretic proposals. In the first proposal,

'now' contributes to the development of a higher-level explicature. The second proposal, which Schourup argues to be of more advantages than the first, promotes that 'now' encodes a procedural constraint on context selection. Schourup does not only provide insightful remarks on earlier significant works by Schiffrin and Aijmer, but also sheds a light on alternative approaches to formulate the meaning of 'now' as a discourse marker (Schourup, 2011).

Schiffrin (1987) proposed a model of coherence which focuses on coherence that is constructed through relations between adjacent units in discourse. It is designed as a source of definitions as well as a framework for the analysis of discourse markers. Schiffrin (1987) viewed markers as 'indicators of the location of utterances within the emerging structures, meanings, and actions of discourse' (p. 24). Schiffrin's model is constituted of five different planes of talk that are connected to one another and that contribute to conversational proceedings. These planes are an exchange structure, an action structure, an ideational structure, a participation framework, and an information state (Schiffrin, 1987). She based her analysis of several discourse markers on her framework. Among the discourse markers she discussed is 'now'. Schiffrin (1987) explained that 'now' is deictic because its meaning depends on a parameter of the speech situation, which is the time of speaking. She stated that 'now' is a temporal adverb whose deictic meaning influences its use on several different discourse planes (Schiffrin, 1987). When 'now' had a deictic relationship, she referred to it by the term 'reference time' (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 228). Her analysis of 'now' also included functions related to coherence such as ideational shifting, raising the possibility of disagreement, marking of a reason, engaging in negotiations, orientation shifts, and marking a speaker's progression through discourse (Schiffrin, 1987).

Similar to Schiffrin's analysis of 'now' as a deictic expression, *ʔlħin* is also deictic since it refers to time, and is thus considered a temporal adverb. In addition, *ʔlħin* has functions related to coherence that can be identified by discourse context. These functions include ideational shifting, raising the possibility of disagreement, marking of a reason, engaging in negotiations, and orientation shifts. *ʔlħin* as a temporal adverb can occur in any position in the sentence, initial, medial or final. As a coherence marker, *ʔlħin* can also occur in any position in the sentence in all the functions except when it indicates an ideational shift. In this case, it only occurs in initial position.

In relation to studies conducted on Arabic discourse markers, Azi (2018) provides an investigation of Arabic pragmatic markers in spoken discourse. His paper is a literature review that demonstrates a detailed and critical exploration of different approaches towards the study of pragmatic markers. He sheds light on the confusion in terminological identification of pragmatic markers between researchers. The article is a review of many works that were done on Arabic pragmatic markers in Standard Arabic as well as on different dialects of Arabic. Though the review includes works that were done on the word 'now' in Arabic, it does not include any works on the discourse marker ʔlħin, which is used in Saudi Arabic. Azi (2018) concludes his article by stating that researchers' perspectives and different analytical frameworks might be the cause of the confusion of terminology. He also states that having a broader understanding of what Arabic pragmatic markers are and how they function requires an analytical approach that treats them as communication devices.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Researchers and linguists discussed discourse markers in English over the years. Nonetheless, studies conducted on discourse markers in other languages, including Arabic, are very limited (Alshamari, 2015). The discourse marker ʔlħin is widely used in informal Arabic but is not examined in previous studies. To obtain an informative analysis of ʔlħin as a discourse marker, it is beneficial to observe the analysis of 'now', which is its equivalent in English. Studies on the discourse marker 'now' discuss its use as a temporal adverb and a coherence marker, which can be investigated when analyzing the meanings and functions of ʔlħin.

As a discourse marker, ʔlħin is one of the most frequently used words in informal Arabic. It is widely used in spoken as well as written Arabic. One of the most popular platforms that are rich with millions of conversations between users in all languages is Twitter. Since it includes conversations in informal Arabic, a dataset from Twitter is used to examine the functions and meanings of ʔlħin within different contexts.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions:
1- How does the Arabic discourse marker ʔlħin render temporal and coherence meanings?
2- Does the Arabic discourse marker ʔlħin work as a constraint on relevance?
3-

5. METHODOLOGY

Over one thousand tweets were streamed from Twitter using Twitter API. All the streamed tweets were written in Arabic and contained the word ʔlħin. The streamed tweets were cleaned manually to remove inappropriate, political, commercial, and repeated tweets. In addition, to match the requirements of the study, tweets streamed from accounts that are not Saudi and tweets in Standard Arabic were pruned. As a result, the finalized dataset that was used in this study was composed of one hundred tweets, all included the word ʔlħin, were written in informal Arabic, and were taken from accounts that are based in Saudi Arabia.

6. ANALYSIS

A qualitative analysis was conducted on the dataset in order to examine the meanings and functions of ʔlħin in informal Saudi Arabic. The analysis showed that ʔlħin has both semantic and pragmatic meanings. ʔlħin conveyed a semantic meaning 'now' when used as a temporal adverb to refer to the present time, and was indicative of a pragmatic meaning when used as a discourse marker that has a coherence function. The data showed that 74% of the tweets represented ʔlħin as a temporal adverb whereas 26% of the tweets portrayed functions related to coherence. ʔlħin can be identified either as a temporal adverb or as a marker according to discourse context. It should be noted that this percentage is peculiar to the tweets streamed randomly at a specific amount of time and might not represent the percentage of uses of ʔlħin in general. Figure (1) shows the percentage of ʔlħin functions in the sample.
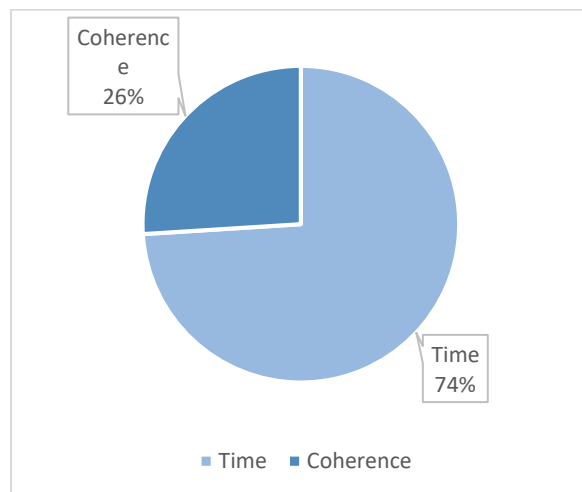

Figure 1. Percentages of time and coherence functions.

ʔlħin as a temporal adverb

Most of the tweets in the sample showed that *ʔlħin* is mostly used as a temporal adverb to refer to time. As explained earlier, *ʔlħin* is a deictic expression that is used to represent the present time. It can be used to refer to the moment in which someone is speaking or as a comparison between the past and the present times. The following example illustrates the semantic meaning of *ʔlħin* when used as a temporal adverb:

(1) wiʃəbælɛk **ʔlħin**?
     What-in your mind-now
     What is on your mind now?

In (1), the speaker is addressing someone and asking him about the thoughts that he has on his mind now. *ʔlħin* in this example is used in final position. It is used here as a deictic expression that basically functions as a temporal adverb and refers to the present moment of the utterance. This is also aided by the grammatical structure of the sentence indicated by the use of the present tense. *ʔlħin* as a temporal adverb is not restricted to the present tense of the utterance but can also be used to refer to the current situation of something or when drawing a comparison between the past and the present:

(2) kæn maːdˤɪː dʒæmɪːl tɛħɛs bmʊtˤʕæt ʔʃ ʃɛɪ
     bɡɛlətæ mʊː **ʔlħin** kʌθɾʌh bælæ əstəmtaːʕ
     Was-past-beautiful-you feel-of joy-thing-by
     its lack-not-now-availability-without-joy.
     It was a beautiful past in which we enjoyed the tiny bits of things, unlike our present days where everything is available but with no value.

In (2), the speaker is comparing between the past and the present times. He starts by saying that the past was beautiful and that people were able to enjoy the tiny bits of things even though they didn't have much, unlike the present days where everything is available but with no value. *ʔlħin* in this example is in medial position. It is used here as a temporal adverb to draw a comparison between the past and the present times without an indication of the exact point in time like the one used in (1).

ʔlħin as a coherence marker

The dataset shows that *ʔlħin* has many functions that contribute to discourse coherence and textuality. Similar to Schiffrin's (1987) analysis of 'now' as a discourse marker, the functions of *ʔlħin* as a coherence marker include ideational shifting, raising the possibility of disagreement, marking of a reason, engaging in negotiations, and orientation shifts. Orientation shifts can be from the declarative to the

interrogative form, and can be a shift into the evaluative mode.

The examination of the tweets in the sample showed that 31% of the tweets related to coherence represent the orientation function, 27% represent the negotiation function, 19% represent the disagreement function, 11% represent ideational shifts, and 12% represent marking of a reason as a function. Figure (2) shows the percentage of *ʔlħin* coherence functions in the sample. Examples of tweets that include different coherence functions of *ʔlħin* are presented in the following part.
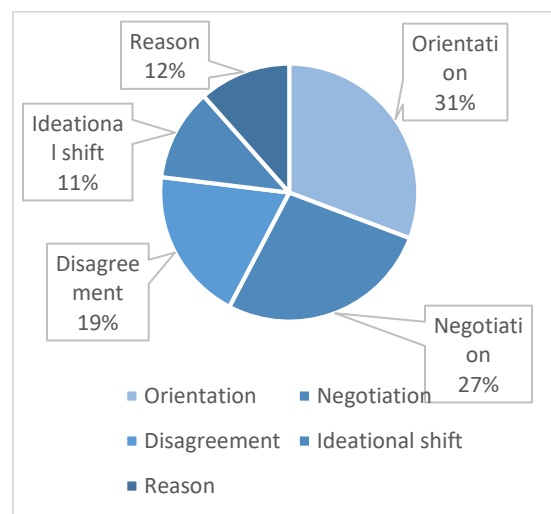

Figure 2. Percentages of coherence functions.

(3) **ʔlħin** sˤæħɪːħ ʌlmɑlɛk bjɛdʒɪː ʔʃ ʃʌɾɡɪːjæ
     ʔlʔæħæd
     Now-true-king-will come-Eastern Province-Sunday?
     Is it true that the king is coming to the Eastern Province on Sunday?

In (3), the speaker uses *ʔlħin* in initial position to change the topic and ask the addressee whether it is true or not that the king is coming to the Eastern Province on Sunday. *ʔlħin* is used here to indicate an ideational shift. It is important to mention that when *ʔlħin* functions as an ideational shift, it always comes in initial position.

(4) **ʔlħin** ħætˤɑʊ bkɛl əlmæħælɑːt bænɑːt
     msɛkʌt ʕælæ stæɪbʌks bæs
     Now-put-in   all-shops-girls-just-on-
     Starbucks-only?
     All shops hire girls. Why are you criticizing Starbucks for doing it!

In (4), the speaker says to the addressee that female workers are now hired in all kinds of shops, and asks

why not Starbucks as to object to the addressee's comment on hiring women there. *ʔlħin* is used here to show disagreement. It is used in initial position as a way to indicate disagreement with the addressee about hiring female workers in shops.

(5) **ʔlħin** ʔldʒʊmhʊːr ʕæræf mɪːn əs sæbæb laʊ jɛtɛm əstɛbʕaːd mʊhænæd mæræ θaːnjæ ʔldʒʊmhʊːr mæ ɾaːħ jærħæmk
Now-the spectators-know-what-reason-if-happen-exclusion-Mohannad-time-second-the spectators-won't-have mercy on you.
Now the spectators know who was behind this. If Mohannad ever gets excluded, the spectators will not forgive you.

In (5), the speaker says to the addressee that the audience now knows the reason behind something that has happened, which is most likely related to the exclusion of Mohannad. He goes on to say that if this ever happens again, the audience will not forgive the addressee. *ʔlħin* comes in initial position here and functions as an indicator of a reason. Because the audience knew the reason for Mohannad's exclusion, they will not accept such behavior in the future.

(6) tˤæjɛb **ʔlħin** wiʃ ʔlbæs jaʊm əlʔɾbiʕaː lʕæziːmɑt xaːltʊ wʊmiː tɡʊːl laʊ ɛiʃ mæ wʌdɛitɛk ʔs sʊːɡ
Ok-now-what-wear-day-Wednesday-for party-aunt-and-mom-says-if-what-won't-take you-the mall.
What am I going to wear to my aunt's party on Wednesday now that my mom refused to take me to the mall?

In (6), the speaker asks the addressee about what she can wear on Wednesday to her aunt's party as to say she doesn't have anything good to wear. She goes on to add that her mother said that she wouldn't take her to the mall no matter what. *ʔlħin* is used in this example in medial position. The speaker uses the word *ʔlħin* here for the purpose of negotiation. She is negotiating her mother's refusal to take her to the mall and saying that if she doesn't, she won't have anything to wear on Wednesday for her aunt's party. This is in hope for the addressee to interfere or help the speaker negotiate her mother's refusal.

(7) **ʔlħin** ʔʌnæ mæ fæhæmt ʔɾʊːħ ʔlmʌtdʒʌr wɛl lælmælʕæb
Now-I-don't-understand-I go-the store-or-playground?
I don't get it. Should I go to the store or the playground?

In (7), The speaker starts with a statement to say that he doesn't understand what he needs to do, and then follows with a question asking if he should go to the store or the playground. In this example, *ʔlħin* is used in initial position and has an orientation function. There is a switch from the declarative to the interrogative mood. The speaker starts the sentence with a declarative statement that he does not understand a certain situation. This is followed by a question to confirm his understanding of the situation.

(8) **ʔlħin** ðaː seʕɛr ʕæsˤɪːɾ wɛl læ tæħæd dɪː
Now-this-price-juice-or-challenge?
Is this a challenge or the price of a can of juice?

In (8), the speaker asks if the number he sees is the price of a can of juice or if it is a challenge, indicating that it is too pricy. In this sentence, *ʔlħin* is used in initial position to make a shift into the evaluative mood. Judging the price of the can of juice as way too expensive, the speaker shifts from a narrative to an evaluative mood. This shift is embedded in a sarcastic comment about the price by describing it as a challenge.

The analysis of the previous examples shows that *ʔlħin* was used as a temporal adverb in some examples, and as a discourse marker that has a coherence function in others. What determines its use is the context in which it occurs. This answers the first research question which seeks to investigate how *ʔlħin* can render temporal and coherence meanings.

ʔlħin from a relevance-theoretic approach
According to Blakemore (1987), discourse markers are expressions that 'impose constrains on relevance in virtue of the inferential connections they express' (p. 141). Therefore, discourse markers help limit the possible interpretations of sentence meaning through constraining the inferences that are relevant. *ʔlħin* as a discourse marker can work as a constraint that helps the addressee find the optimal relevance. The following part contains an analysis that shows how *ʔlħin* helps limit the possible number of interpretations and thus leads the addressee to find the optimal relevant interpretation.

(9) tˤæjɛb **ʔlħin** wiʃ ʔlbæs jaʊm əlʔɾbiʕaː lʕæziːmɑt xaːltʊ wʊmiː tɡʊːl laʊ ɛiʃ mæ wʌdɛitɛk ʔs sʊːɡ
Ok-now-what-wear-day-Wednesday-for party-aunt-and-mom-says-if-what-won't-take you-the mall.

What am I going to wear to my aunt's party on Wednesday now that my mom refused to take me to the mall?

Example (9) was explained previously to show that the word *Ɂlħin* is used for the purpose of negotiation. The presence of *Ɂlħin* in this example helped the addressee understand that the speaker is negotiating and is not simply asking a question. Removing the word *Ɂlħin* will make the sentence seem like a question that requires an answer. Therefore, it constrained the relevance of the intended meaning as a problem that needs to be addressed rather than a question that needs to be answered, making the hearer focus on what the speaker wants to discuss or negotiate.

(10)   **Ɂlhin** Ɂldʒʊmhʊːr ʕæræf mɪːn əs sæbæb laʊ jɛtɛm əstɛbʕaːd mʊhænæd mæræ θaːnjæ Ɂldʒʊmhʊːr mæ ɾaːħ jærħæmk
Now-the spectators-know-what-reason-if-happen-exclusion-Mohannad-time-second-the spectators-won't-have mercy on you.
Now the spectators know who was behind this. If Mohannad ever gets excluded, the spectators will not forgive you.

In (10), the function of *Ɂlħin* is to mark a reason. Its presence constrains the meaning as it indicates that what follows is a negative reaction. The addressee spends less effort realizing that what happened is negative. The sentence uttered without *Ɂlħin* would simply be a statement that does not convey any feeling and that could be equally positive or negative.

(11) **Ɂlhin** ħætʕaʊ bkɛl əlmæħælaːt bænaːt msɛkʌt ʕælæ stæɪbʌks bæs
Now-put-in all-shops-girls-just-on-Starbucks-only?
All shops hire girls. Why are you criticizing Starbucks for doing it!

In (11), the discourse marker *Ɂlħin* is used to show disagreement. Similar to (10), the presence of *Ɂlħin* indicates that what follows is negative. Removing the discourse marker from the sentence would render a meaning in which it is basically a statement. Therefore, it asserts the negativity and the disagreement of the speaker with the addressee.

(12) **Ɂlhin** sʕæħɪːħ ʌlmɑlɛk bjɛdʒɪː Ɂʃ ʃʌɾgɪːjæ Ɂl Ɂæħæd
Now-true-king-will come-Eastern Province-Sunday?

Is it true that the king is coming to the Eastern Province on Sunday?

In (12), *Ɂlħin* functions as an ideational shift. Its presence contributes to the meaning as it attracts the attention of the addressee to the topic that is to be discussed, indicating that the topic is important. Hence, *Ɂlħin* here constrains the relevance of the interpretation by clearly clarifying to the addressee that the speaker is no longer talking about the previous topic and that a new topic is to be introduced.

The previous analysis answers the second research question investigating whether the Arabic discourse marker *Ɂlħin* works as a constraint on relevance. As shown by the analysis, *Ɂlħin* facilitates the recovery of the most relevant pragmatic interpretation by constraining the addressee's search for the required interpretation in different contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion
This paper aimed to investigate the meanings and functions of *Ɂlħin* as a discourse marker in informal Arabic. Through the investigation of the literature on discourse markers, it was found that no studies were conducted on *Ɂlħin* in informal Arabic. In order to investigate its meanings and functions, studies that were conducted on its semantic equivalent in English 'now' were examined.

An extensive analysis of discourse markers was done by Schiffrin (1987) in which she provided a thorough analysis of the meanings and functions of the most important discourse markers in English. One of the discourse markers she discussed in her book was 'now'. She provided meanings and functions of 'now' that relate to time and coherence (Schiffrin, 1987). According to Schiffrin (1987), 'now' is a deictic expression when it serves as a temporal adverb. It can also function as a marker of coherence to signal ideational shifting, raising the possibility of disagreement, marking of a reason, engaging in negotiations, orientation shifts, and marking a speaker's progression through discourse.

This paper also aimed to investigate whether the discourse marker *Ɂlħin* works as a constraint on relevance. A relevance-theoretic approach is used to describe the degree of cognitive effort required for an addressee to understand an utterance (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). According to Blakemore (1987), discourse markers are expressions that impose constraints on relevance by the inferential connections they express. The current study examined if *Ɂlħin* as a discourse marker can work as a

constraint that helps the addressee find the optimal relevance.

A sample of one hundred tweets collected from Twitter was used in this study. The tweets were taken from a raw streaming of more than a thousand tweets and were compiled as a dataset after cleaning it from any tweets that were inappropriate, political, commercial, or repeated. The finalized dataset was composed of one hundred tweets, all of which were taken from Saudi accounts and included the word *ʔlħin* in informal Arabic.

Analyzing the different meanings and functions of *ʔlħin* as a discourse marker in informal Saudi Arabic showed that it can function as a temporal adverb and a coherence marker, which is similar to what Schiffrin (1987) explained about 'now' as a discourse marker in English.

It also worked as a constraint on relevance which helped to limit the possible interpretations of a sentence making it easier for the addressee to find the optimal relevant interpretation.

For future work, a larger sample can be used to examine all the meanings and functions of *ʔlħin*. Also, sample tweets that are not streamed at once but rather collected at different times can be tested. The meanings and functions of *ʔlħin* can also be investigated through the use of a dataset that is taken from a corpus instead of Twitter. The results can be compared to the results of the current study.

Moreover, further research can be done on *ʔlħin* by comparing it to its equivalent in Standard Arabic *ʔlʔaːn*, and examining whether they render the same functions. It is also suggested to investigate the use of two discourse markers in the same context, like *ʔlħin* and *tˤæjɛb* for example, and check if using more than one discourse marker in a sentence differs from using only one.

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