

The Role of the Turkish Modal Particle *ya* in Discourse Relations: An Experimental Study

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Background. This presentation examines how the Turkish modal particle YA functions as a common ground (CG) managing operator in the role of re-mentioning a proposition in varying discourse conditions and briefly compares it with its German counterpart JA. Unlike prior studies which have mostly relied on informal analyses or corpus-based methods (e.g., Özbek, 1998; Repp, 2013; Ruhi, 2013), this study uses an acceptability judgment experiment to investigate discourse conditions favouring YA and to determine how its absence also affects the judgments, which (i.e., the difference between its presence and absence) has so far been neglected (e.g., Döring & Repp, 2019, among many others). By employing synthetic data, we address challenges inherent in corpus methods, including limited control over discourse elements, potential confounding factors (the length of and the context & theme surrounding the propositions), and the time-intensive manual annotation of individual discourse units. The particle YA illustrates the need for experimental approaches in discourse studies, as its use requires specific contextual conditions that are both difficult and costly to prime in authentic interactions, therefore, remains unexplored (e.g., Özbek, 1998; Altıparmak, 2022).

That is why we adopt an experimental approach to analyse its role as a CG-managing operator. We posit that Turkish YA, like the German JA, functions to remind the interlocutor of a proposition *p* (Karagjosova, 2004; Repp, 2013, p.244; Döring & Repp, 2019), [RETRIEVE] (*p*), aligning with C-at-issueness (Koev, 2018) and commonly occupying in the ancillary position in asymmetric discourse relations as outlined in Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann and Thompson, 1988), which suggests that discourse is the accumulation of units connected to each other via functional and hierarchical relations.

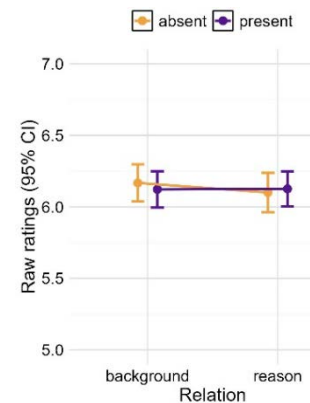
We expect to see that, when all the confounding factors are controlled for, BACKGROUND is a more incoherent relation than JUSTIFICATION (which is a causal relation) in the absence of any discourse marker. Therefore, YA must be ameliorating BACKGROUND by introducing another layer to the discourse, i.e., ‘re-mentioning a proposition’. Such a role is not fundamentally needed in a causal relation since its units are expected to be more connected even without YA. Based on these interpretations, in order to test our predictions and show the efficiency and reliability of an experimental approach, we ran an acceptability judgment task with a 2x2 factorial design where the first factor was the discourse RELATION: BACKGROUND and REASON (which is another causal relation that resembles JUSTIFICATION, and in which the ancillary part (satellite) provides a rationale for the nucleus (Mann & Thompson, 1986)); the second factor was the PRESENCE of the modal particle YA: ABSENT & PRESENT. We preferred a dialogue format for the test items because we believe its functions can be observed more directly when an interlocutor utters it as opposed to a monologue. Unlike Döring & Repp 2019 where JA has been shown to favour BACKGROUND over JUSTIFICATION, we do not expect to see a significant difference between the levels in the presence of the modal particle YA for Turkish, but expect to see a significant decrease in the ratings in its absence for the BACKGROUND relation (level: BACKGROUND:ABSENT).

The experiment used a 1-7 Likert scale task (1 = completely unnatural) and had 3 repetitions per condition. Test items and standardized fillers (in a 1:3 ratio) were distributed across 4 pseudo-randomized, counterbalanced lists according to a Latin square design. The standardized fillers, which were included to safeguard against scale distortion, intended to map out 7 equally-spaced points on the Likert scale. The experiment recruited 130 participants of which 3 were excluded from the statistical analysis (linear mixed-effects modelling using R’s lmerTest package (Kuznetsova et al., 2017), fitted via maximum likelihood estimation). A sample set is given below where B’ represents the REASON and B’’ the BACKGROUND relation.

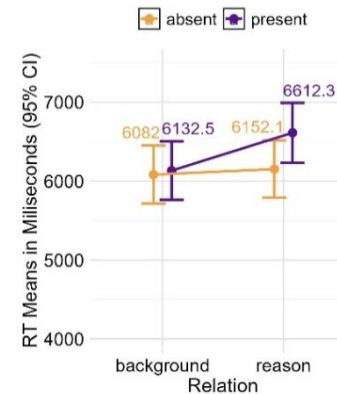
A: Ev-den çalış-mak yasakla-n-acak-mış. **B’:** Haa evet, sosyal hayatı öldür-üyor-muş (ya).
home-ABL work-INF ban -PSS-FUT-EVD oh yes, social life kill-PROG-EVD Mod.
‘Working from home will be banned (as I heard)’ ‘Oh yeah, it is killing the social life.’

B’’: Geçenlerde bakan öyle bir karar ver-miş (ya).
Recently minister as such one decision make-EVD Mod.
‘The minister has recently made such a decision.’

Results. The plot suggests that there was no significant difference in any of the conditions, supported by the statistical analysis: RELATION (t-value: -0.629; p-value: 0.537); PRESENCE (t-value: -0.556; p-value: 0.582); INTERACTION (t-value: 0.527; p-value: 0.601). These results, either reflect a difference between Turkish and German modal particles of the same function or reflects that by manipulating the study design different interpretations may arise. Döring and Repp's corpus analysis found that JUSTIFICATION+JA combination shows up 1.8 times more than the base level whereas BACKGROUND+JA combination occurs 5.82 times more (also supported by their forced choice experiment), suggesting that BACKGROUND is a significantly more frequent relation than a causal relation. In Turkish data, though, which was designed in a Likert scale format, the modal particle YA does not seem to favour one relation over the other, nor does its presence or absence contribute to or disrupts the coherence more.



Although the results for the level PRESENT have met our expectations, for ABSENT it tells a different story. We expected to see lower ratings for BACKGROUND:ABSENT because we thought the discourse units under this construction are less relatable as compared to REASON:ABSENT. However, the results suggest that there is no significant lack of coherence between the units in either of the relations. Since this was different than our expectations, we presumed there may be variability in the response times (RT) data because, although participants were able to construct meaning between the discourse units, for them to construct that meaning might have taken longer in BACKGROUND:ABSENT than REASON:ABSENT. To test that, we compared RT across the levels (it is important to note that this experiment was not designed to test reading time differences). Although the graph displays a marginal response time difference for REASON:PRESENT, the statistical results have shown no significant difference: RELATION (t-value: 0.196; p-value: 0.847); PRESENCE (t-value: 0.307; p-value: 0.762); INTERACTION (t-value: 0.559; p-value: 0.579). We interpret this seemingly marginal RT difference as an artefact of significant subject and item variability, also supported by the statistical analysis (to be shared in the talk).



Conclusion. We have managed to show that YA can appear in both BACKGROUND and REASON (i.e., a causal relation), and its presence or absence do not negatively or positively affect the acceptability. Moreover, its appearance does not necessarily result in significant RT differences, suggesting there may not be any processing load alteration for adding another layer (i.e., [RETRIEVE] (*p*)) into the discourse. We can, therefore, extrapolate that YA does not favour one relation over the other, unlike what has been suggested for its German counterpart (Döring and Repp 2019). We have also tried to highlight that corpus may not be the most robust and reliable way of testing modal particles (it cannot explain, for example, why JA (as well as DOCH) still occurs in ELABORATION and CONDITION relations while the opposite was expected; it can also not explain why JA is more ubiquitous among certain relations and not the others (e.g., BACKGROUND vs CAUSE)), and experimental design may be affecting the results, too.

Keywords: Modal Particles, Discourse Analysis, Experiment, Turkish

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