



Topic Management and Evaluative Discourse in Spoken Jordanian Arabic: Evidence from Natural Conversations

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Abstract

This article examines how speakers of Jordanian Arabic manage topic continuity, topic shift, stance, and evaluation in naturally occurring spoken discourse. This study focused mainly on word order and focus marking, the present paper gives special attention to topic management and evaluative discourse. The analysis is based on a corpus of Jordanian Arabic data consisting of naturalistic conversations, semi-structured interviews, and written dialectal texts, with particular emphasis on the conversational extracts. This study argues that topic management in spoken Jordanian Arabic is not achieved only through grammatical subject position. It is also achieved through demonstratives, left-dislocated topics, null subjects, discourse markers, repetition, elliptical structures, and evaluative predicates. The findings show that speakers commonly place known or socially salient referents in clause-initial position, then attach comments, judgments, complaints, or emotional evaluations to them. In institutional, family, emotional, religious, educational, and digital contexts, evaluation is often collaboratively built across turns. The paper concludes that spoken Jordanian Arabic is a discourse-sensitive system in which grammar, interaction, and social meaning work together to organize conversation.

1. Introduction

Topic management is one of the main ways speakers keep conversation coherent. In ordinary interaction, speakers must decide what the sentence is about, whether the same topic should continue, whether a new topic should be introduced, and how their attitude toward that topic should be expressed. These decisions are not purely grammatical. They are also social and pragmatic. A speaker may begin with a person, a situation, or a demonstrative expression because that referent is already known, emotionally important, or socially problematic in the interaction. This makes topic management closely related to evaluation and stance.

Jordanian Arabic is a useful variety for studying these issues because it allows flexible word order and rich discourse marking. Speakers may use SVO clauses, verb-initial clauses,

verbless clauses, left dislocation, wh-fronting, null subjects, and elliptical expressions. These structures are not used randomly. They help speakers maintain continuity, signal topic shift, mark contrast, produce complaints, express criticism, and build alignment with other speakers. This view agrees with functional and pragmatic approaches which treat language as a resource for organizing social meaning, not only as a set of abstract syntactic rules (Halliday, 1978; Levinson, 1983).

The present paper is derived from the doctoral thesis entitled *Word Order, Focus, and Topic in Jordanian Arabic*. The thesis showed that word order in Jordanian Arabic is flexible but patterned. SVO structures were strongly associated with topic continuity and topic-comment organization, while verb-initial structures often foregrounded events and changes of state. Left dislocation and demonstrative-initial expressions were used to activate, reactivate, or evaluate discourse referents. Focus was expressed through wh-elements, negation, focus particles, repetition, marked constituent position, and prosodic prominence. The present paper develops one part of that broader study: the role of topic management and evaluative discourse in spoken interaction.

This focus is important because many examples in the data are not neutral reports of events. They are comments, complaints, judgments, emotional expressions, humorous evaluations, or moral assessments. For example, when a speaker says *Rami šār mǧayyer šuʕbateen* “Rami has changed two sections,” the initial proper name *Rami* functions as a topic, but the utterance also frames *Rami* as responsible for an administrative problem. Similarly, expressions such as *il-waḍʕ mizrī* “the situation is miserable” or *as-sūshāl mīdiyā ǧayyarat in-nās* “social media has changed people” do more than describe reality; they evaluate it.

Accordingly, this article addresses three research questions: (1) How do speakers of Jordanian Arabic maintain topic continuity and introduce topic shifts in spoken discourse? (2) How do discourse markers, elliptical structures, and flexible word order contribute to the organization of topic and evaluation? (3) What linguistic resources are used to express evaluation, stance, and social criticism?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Topic, Topic Continuity, and Information Structure

The concept of topic is central to information structure. A topic is commonly understood as the entity or frame about which a proposition is made. Lambrecht (1994) explains that sentence form is closely connected to the mental representation of discourse referents. In other words, speakers choose a sentence pattern partly according to what they assume the hearer already knows. Givón (1983) also shows that topic continuity can be observed through repeated reference, reduced reference, and the way speakers keep the same participant active across a stretch of discourse.

In spoken Jordanian Arabic, topic continuity is often visible in clause-initial position. A proper name, pronoun, demonstrative noun phrase, or known social category may appear at the beginning of the clause because it functions as the discourse anchor. This does not mean that every subject-initial clause has the same pragmatic value. Rather, the initial element often carries a topic function when it is already accessible or socially salient. The predicate then gives the new information, evaluation, or complaint.

Topic shift occurs when the speaker moves the discourse from one referent or frame to another. This can be achieved through a new lexical noun phrase, a demonstrative expression, or a discourse marker such as *yaʕni* “I mean,” *hassa* “now,” or *šūf* “look.” In this sense, topic management is not only a matter of constituent order. It is a coordinated interaction between word order, lexical markers, turn-taking, and shared knowledge.

2.2 Evaluative Discourse and Stance

Evaluation refers to the way speakers express attitudes, judgments, emotions, and social positions. It may appear through adjectives, metaphors, intensifiers, negation, rhetorical questions, contrast, and repeated expressions. Stance is closely related to evaluation because it

shows how speakers position themselves toward what they say and toward other participants in the interaction (Du Bois, 2007).

In Arabic conversation, evaluation is often interactional. A speaker may begin with a complaint, and the next speaker may support it, intensify it, joke about it, or add a religious or moral frame. This means that evaluative discourse is built across turns. It is not only located inside a single sentence. The appendix data show many such cases, including institutional criticism, family and social evaluation, emotional distress, religious mitigation, educational judgment, and criticism of social media.

This paper therefore treats evaluative discourse as a central part of topic management. A topic is not simply introduced and then left alone. It is developed through stance. Speakers keep a topic alive by adding judgments to it. They may also shift topics because a new evaluative frame becomes relevant.

2.3 Jordanian Arabic and the Syntax-Pragmatics Interface

Arabic dialects are well known for the interaction between word order and discourse function. Studies of Arabic syntax have shown that syntactic movement, agreement, definiteness, and interpretation are closely connected (Benmamoun, 2000; Aoun, Benmamoun, & Choueiri, 2010). Work on Jordanian Arabic has also argued that word order is sensitive to information structure and pragmatic context (Al-Shawashreh, 2016; Jarrah, 2019; Jarrah & Abusalim, 2021).

The present analysis follows this syntax-pragmatics view, but it emphasizes the discourse side more directly. It asks how ordinary speakers use available grammatical resources to organize topics and express social meaning. The aim is not to separate grammar from discourse, but to show how grammar becomes meaningful in interaction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design supported by quantitative frequency counts. This design is appropriate because the aim is to identify recurring discourse-pragmatic patterns and explain how they function in context. The quantitative component provides a general overview of the corpus, while the qualitative component explains how the relevant structures work in real interaction. Such a mixed descriptive approach is common in applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research when the purpose is interpretation rather than large-scale prediction (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei, 2007).

3.2 Corpus and Data Sources

This study thesis corpus contains 4,090 analyzable clauses. The clause was used as the basic unit of analysis because it is the smallest domain in which word order, topic continuity, focus, predication, and pragmatic function can be systematically examined. The corpus includes naturalistic conversations, semi-structured interviews, and written dialectal texts. The present paper focuses mainly on naturally occurring spoken interaction because topic shift, stance, evaluation, repair, repetition, and discourse markers are most visible in spontaneous conversation.

Table 1. Corpus Composition by Modality

Modality	Number of Clauses	Percentage
Naturalistic conversations	2,140	52.3%
Semi-structured interviews	1,320	32.2%
Written dialectal texts	630	15.5%
Total	4,090	100%

The distribution shows that the corpus is strongly oriented toward spoken data. This is important for the present paper because spontaneous conversation gives the clearest evidence of how speakers negotiate topics and express evaluation in real time.

3.3 Coding and Analytical Procedure

Each relevant clause or sequence was examined at several levels: Arabic transcript, transliteration, free translation, syntactic pattern, topic function, focus function, pragmatic

function, and interactional interpretation. The main topic labels included given topic, topic shift, contrastive topic, left-dislocated topic, and right-dislocated topic. The main focus labels included informational focus, contrastive focus, emphatic focus, corrective focus, and exhaustive focus. Pragmatic labels included emphasis, contrast, clarification, repetition or repair, attention drawing, agreement, disagreement, humor, complaint, evaluation, and narration.

For the present article, the analysis gives special attention to six recurrent discourse-pragmatic functions: topic continuity, topic shift, evaluative stance, complaint, interpersonal alignment, and moral or social criticism. Extracts were selected from different discourse domains in the appendix in order to show that the same broad mechanisms appear across institutional, social, emotional, educational, religious, and digital contexts.

Table 2. Selected Discourse Domains Used in the Analysis

Domain	Main Topics	Dominant Discourse-Pragmatic Features
Educational and administrative discourse	Class distribution, institutional organization, workload	Topic shifts, complaints, evaluative expressions, elliptical constructions
Social and family interaction	Engagement, marriage, relationships, family talk	Emotional evaluation, humor, interpersonal alignment, pragmatic emphasis
Workplace and institutional pressure	Responsibility, accountability, technological change	Collective frustration, contrastive evaluation, social criticism
Emotional distress	Overthinking, loneliness, anxiety, psychological pressure	Metaphorical evaluation, complaint, religious mitigation, solidarity
Media and digital communication	Social media, online fame, misinformation, privacy	Moral judgment, generalized claims, irony, technological criticism

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Topic Continuity through Subject-Initial Clauses

The first major finding is that subject-initial clauses are strongly connected to topic continuity. When a person, institution, or situation is already active in the conversation, speakers often place it at the beginning of the clause. The predicate then adds new information, judgment, or complaint. This supports the idea that topic continuity is not only semantic; it is also visible in grammar and discourse organization (Givón, 1983; Lambrecht, 1994).

Example 1

رامي صار مغير شعبتين
Rami šār mǧayyer šuʕbateen
 “Rami has changed two sections.”

In this example, Rami is placed first because he is the discourse anchor. The rest of the clause reports the problematic action. The utterance does not simply say that two sections were changed; it organizes responsibility around Rami. The topic therefore carries social relevance, while the predicate carries evaluative information.

Example 2

سطام مش عارف كيف يعمل هيك
Saṭṭām miš ʕāref kīf yiʕmal hēk
 “Sattam does not know how to do this.”

Here, Saṭṭām remains the topic and the predicate gives the speaker’s negative assessment. The topic is continued across the discourse, while the comment develops a complaint about competence. This pattern is frequent in institutional and workplace talk because speakers often discuss the same person or procedure across several turns.

These examples show that SVO order in spoken Jordanian Arabic is not always neutral. It often serves a topic-comment function. The initial noun phrase identifies the referent under discussion, and the rest of the clause gives the speaker’s evaluation. This pattern is especially useful in complaint sequences because it lets speakers maintain a stable topic while adding successive judgments.

4.2 Topic Shift and Reactivation through Demonstratives and Left-Dislocated Topics

The second major finding is that topic shift and topic reactivation are often marked through demonstratives and fronted expressions. Demonstratives such as *hāy* “this” can do more than identify a referent. They can also indicate that the speaker is pointing to the referent as socially relevant, problematic, or worthy of evaluation. This agrees with the view that clause-initial positions are important for discourse-related functions such as Topic and Focus (Rizzi, 1997).

Example 3

هاي نداء ما تشتغل

hāy Nidā? mā tištġil

“This Nidaa does not work.”

The expression *hāy Nidā?* functions as a marked topic. It does not introduce Nidaa neutrally; rather, it presents her as a referent already known in the interaction and available for evaluation. The negative predicate *mā tištġil* carries the focal judgment. The demonstrative also adds stance because the speaker sounds critical, not merely descriptive.

Left-dislocated and demonstrative-initial structures are therefore useful for topic management. They allow speakers to bring a referent into the center of attention before making a comment about it. In spoken discourse, this is important because topics may disappear and return quickly. A speaker may reactivate a topic when it becomes relevant again, especially in arguments, complaints, or evaluative narratives.

4.3 Evaluative Discourse in Educational and Administrative Talk

The appendix data show that institutional and educational discourse is rich in evaluation. Speakers discuss class distribution, work organization, competence, responsibility, and administrative instability. These topics are often expressed through complaints, rhetorical questions, imperatives, and elliptical structures. The social function is not only to report administrative facts, but also to evaluate people and procedures.

Example 4

شو بده رامي؟

šū biddu Rami?

“What does Rami want?”

This question does not function only as a request for information. In the context of repeated administrative changes, it works as evaluative questioning. The *wh*-word *šū* marks the information gap, while the mention of Rami keeps the same topic active. The question expresses frustration and invites the other participants to share the evaluation.

Example 5

الأصل ما يعطي واحد شعبتين

il-ʔaʃl mā yiʕṭi wāḥad šuʕbateen

“Normally, one person should not be assigned two sections.”

The expression *il-ʔaʃl* “normally/the proper rule” creates an institutional norm. The speaker evaluates the situation by comparing what happened with what should happen. The sentence therefore combines topic management, moral evaluation, and institutional criticism.

In these examples, evaluation is often built through short, direct, and context-dependent clauses. This is typical of spoken institutional discourse. Speakers do not always provide long explanations. They use compact forms because the background is shared by the participants. Elliptical structures such as “Enough, decide” or “Only the students remain” are understandable because the context supplies the missing information. This supports Levinson’s (1983) view that pragmatic interpretation depends heavily on shared context.

4.4 Interpersonal Alignment in Social and Family Interaction

Social and family conversations show another side of topic management. Here, speakers use evaluation to build alignment, humor, sympathy, and shared interpretation. The topic may be a person who changed after engagement, the cost of marriage, or the pressure of social expectations. The language often includes exaggeration, metaphor, and discourse markers such as *wallāh* “by God” and *ḥatta* “even.”

Example 6

لا والله، صار رسمي كثير

la wallāh, šār rasmi kīr

“No, seriously, he has become very formal.”

The marker wallāh strengthens the speaker’s commitment and builds alignment with the previous speaker. The clause comments on a person’s behavioral change after engagement. Topic continuity is maintained because the same person remains under discussion, while the predicate expresses social evaluation.

Example 7

الزواج صار بده ميزانية دولة

iz-zawāj šār biddoh mīzāniyyat dawleh

“Marriage now requires the budget of a state.”

This utterance uses hyperbole to evaluate the cost of marriage. The topic iz-zawāj “marriage” is socially shared and culturally important. The predicate “requires the budget of a state” expresses a strong collective complaint. The evaluation is humorous, but it also reflects real economic pressure.

Such examples show that evaluation is not always negative in a simple sense. It may be playful, humorous, ironic, or sympathetic. Speakers use evaluation to show that they understand each other’s experiences. In this way, topic management also becomes a way of managing social relationships.

4.5 Emotional Stance and Psychological Discourse

The emotional distress data show that psychological experience is often expressed indirectly and collaboratively. Speakers use metaphors, generalized statements, repetition, and religious expressions to talk about pressure, loneliness, and uncertainty. This indirectness does not weaken the emotional meaning. On the contrary, it can make the evaluation more powerful because it connects personal feeling with shared cultural frames.

Example 8

التفكير صار ياكل راسي

it-tafkīr šār yākul rāsi

“Overthinking has started consuming my mind.”

This metaphor presents thinking as something that eats the speaker’s head. The topic it-tafkīr “thinking/overthinking” is not an external object; it is an internal psychological state. The predicate gives a strong bodily image, making emotional suffering concrete and shareable.

Example 9

والله العقل ما عاد يرتاح

wallāh il-ʿaql mā ʿād yirtāh

“Honestly, the mind no longer finds rest.”

The marker wallāh strengthens sincerity and emotional stance. The topic il-ʿaql “the mind” is evaluated through negation and loss of rest. The utterance is personal, but it is framed in a general way that other speakers can easily align with.

These examples reveal that emotional discourse in Jordanian Arabic is highly interactional. A speaker’s complaint may be taken up by another speaker, repeated, intensified, or softened through religious language. Expressions such as in šāʾ Allāh “God willing” or rabbna aʿlam “God knows best” can function as mitigation, acceptance, or emotional closure. Thus, topic management in emotional discourse includes not only what is talked about, but also how the emotional burden is socially shared.

4.6 Digital Discourse and Moral Evaluation

The digital discourse data show that speakers evaluate social media, online fame, misinformation, privacy, and authenticity through generalized statements and moral judgments. Social media is often treated as a broad topic that explains changes in people’s behavior. The evaluation is usually collective: speakers do not speak only about one person, but about society, people, or the younger generation.

Example 10

السوشيال ميديا غيرت الناس

as-sūshāl mīdiyā ġayyarat in-nās

“Social media has changed people.”

The topic *as-sūshāl mīdiyā* is placed first and functions as a broad social cause. The predicate *ġayyarat in-nās* “changed people” gives a strong evaluative claim. The utterance frames digital media as a force that affects social identity and behavior.

Example 11

أي شي بنزل على النت الناس تصدقه

ayy šī binzal ʕala in-net in-nās tiṣaddgoh

“People believe anything posted online.”

This example uses a generalized judgment. The topic is not a single post or person, but online content as a whole. The evaluation criticizes lack of verification and prepares the ground for further moral assessment about misinformation.

Digital discourse therefore extends the same mechanisms seen in institutional and social talk. Speakers introduce a broad topic, attach an evaluative predicate, and build criticism through intensification, contrast, and generalization. This supports the broader conclusion that spoken Jordanian Arabic uses topic-comment organization not only for referential clarity, but also for social judgment.

4.7 Discourse Markers as Tools for Topic and Evaluation Management

Discourse markers are central to the organization of topic and evaluation in the data. Markers such as *yaʕni* “I mean,” *šūf* “look,” *hassa* “now,” *bas* “but/only,” *lā* “no,” *wallāh* “by God,” and *ḥatta* “even” help speakers guide the hearer’s interpretation. They introduce explanations, mark contrast, signal correction, draw attention, intensify evaluation, and build alignment. This is consistent with discourse-marker research which shows that such forms organize interaction and help speakers manage coherence (Schiffrin, 1987).

Table 3. Main Discourse Markers and Their Functions in the Data

Marker	Approximate Meaning	Discourse-Pragmatic Function
<i>yaʕni</i>	I mean	Reformulation, clarification, explanation
<i>šūf</i>	look	Attention drawing and preparation for evaluation
<i>hassa</i>	now	Temporal or procedural framing
<i>bas</i>	but / only	Restriction, contrast, qualification
<i>lā</i>	no	Correction, rejection, disagreement
<i>wallāh</i>	by God	Sincerity, emphasis, interpersonal alignment
<i>ḥatta</i>	even	Intensification and scalar emphasis

For example, in *yaʕni šār fī taḏārūb bi-š-šūʕab* “I mean, there is now conflict in the sections,” *yaʕni* introduces a reformulation. It tells the hearer that the speaker is clarifying the real problem. In *šūf il-mʕallim aḥsan miḥne bas innak tištġil bi-šaraf w-šidq* “Look, teaching is the best profession, but you must work with honor and honesty,” *šūf* draws attention, while *bas* introduces a moral qualification. The utterance moves from topic introduction to evaluation and then to a condition.

These markers show that topic and evaluation are not produced by word order alone. They are produced by a set of interacting resources. A clause-initial topic may identify what the utterance is about, but a discourse marker may show how the listener should understand the utterance: as a complaint, correction, explanation, warning, joke, or moral judgment.

Table 4. Summary of Main Findings

Finding	Main Linguistic Resources	Discourse Function
Topic continuity	SVO clauses, repeated proper names, null subjects	Maintaining an active referent across turns
Topic shift and reactivation	Demonstratives, left dislocation, lexical noun phrases	Introducing or returning to a socially relevant referent
Evaluation and stance	Evaluative predicates, negation, metaphor, hyperbole	Expressing judgment, complaint, emotion, or social criticism
Interpersonal alignment	<i>wallāh</i> , repetition, agreement responses, humor	Building shared stance and solidarity

Contrast and correction	bas, lā, wh-questions, rhetorical questions	Rejecting, correcting, or narrowing an interpretation
Moral and social criticism	Generalized statements, prescriptive forms, intensifiers	Evaluating institutions, relationships, and digital behavior

Overall, the results show that topic management and evaluative discourse are deeply connected in spoken Jordanian Arabic. Speakers rarely manage topics in a purely neutral way. They often introduce, maintain, or reactivate topics because they want to evaluate them. This is especially clear in complaint sequences, emotional talk, humorous exchanges, and digital media criticism.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined topic management and evaluative discourse in spoken Jordanian Arabic. The analysis showed that speakers use a range of grammatical and discourse-pragmatic resources to organize conversation. Subject-initial clauses often maintain topic continuity. Demonstratives and left-dislocated expressions help introduce, reactivate, or evaluate discourse referents. Null subjects support discourse economy when the referent is already accessible. Discourse markers such as *yaʕni*, *šūf*, *hassa*, *bas*, *lā*, *wallāh*, and *ḥatta* guide interpretation by marking clarification, contrast, correction, sincerity, and emphasis.

The paper also showed that evaluation is not an extra layer added after grammar. It is part of how spoken discourse is organized. In institutional settings, speakers use topic-comment structures to assign responsibility and express complaint. In social and family talk, evaluation builds humor, alignment, and shared understanding. In emotional discourse, metaphors and religious expressions help speakers express suffering and seek solidarity. In digital discourse, generalized topics such as social media and online behavior become sites of moral criticism and social reflection.

The main conclusion is that spoken Jordanian Arabic is a discourse-sensitive system. Grammar, topic management, and evaluation work together. Word order helps speakers identify what the utterance is about, but discourse markers, particles, ellipsis, repetition, and stance expressions help show why that topic matters in the interaction. Therefore, the study of Jordanian Arabic should not separate syntax from pragmatics. A fuller account must examine how speakers use grammatical form to manage shared knowledge, express social judgment, and maintain coherence in conversation.

This article contributes to Arabic dialectology, discourse analysis, and the study of information structure by showing that topic management in Jordanian Arabic is both grammatical and social. Future research may expand the corpus, compare different Jordanian regions, examine gender and age differences more closely, and include acoustic analysis of intonation and stress. Further work may also examine written dialectal Arabic in social media, where topic management and evaluation appear in new digital forms.

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