Conjunction and Disjunction in Arabic (al-Faṣl wa-l-Waṣl)

From The Encyclopedia of Arabic Rhetoric

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Conjunction and Disjunction in Arabic (al-Faṣl wa-l-Waṣl) describes the linguistic principles governing the joining and separation of clauses in Arabic, particularly the use or non-use of the coordinating particle *wa* (و).

For the rhetorical devices in which the deliberate use or omission of *wa* serves a particular communicative purpose, see CONJUN: Rhetorical Conjunction and DISJUN: Rhetorical Disjunction.

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Overview

From the sources

Classical Arabic rhetoric treats Conjunction (*al-waṣl*) and Disjunction (*al-faṣl*) together as complementary aspects of clause construction.

- **Conjunction (*al-waṣl*):** Joining one clause to another using the coordinating particle *wa* (و).
- **Disjunction (*al-faṣl*):** Leaving one clause unjoined to another by *wa*.

The choice depends upon the grammatical and semantic relationships between the clauses and the intended interpretation. The classical sources examine the conditions under which joining or separating clauses is appropriate.[1][2][3][4]

The importance of distinguishing Conjunction from Disjunction is emphasised throughout the rhetorical tradition. Later scholars preserve the saying:

البلاغة معرفة الفصل من الوصل

"Eloquence is knowing when to separate and when to join."[2][4]

This article presents the underlying linguistic framework, including the classical conditions governing conjunction and separation. Their specifically rhetorical applications are treated separately in the corresponding device articles.

The coordinating particles

From the sources

Arabic possesses several coordinating particles (*ḥurūf al-ʿaṭf*).

The classical discussion of *al-faṣl wa-l-waṣl* concentrates specifically on *wa* (و). Other coordinating particles convey additional relationships that help determine their appropriate use.[3][1][4]

Wa (و)

Wa ordinarily coordinates two expressions without itself specifying a temporal order between them. It can join words, phrases or clauses.

Constructed Example

يَقْرَأُ عَلِيٌّ وَيَكْتُبُ.

ʿAlī reads and writes.

Explanation

The coordinating particle *wa* joins two verbal expressions attributed to the same subject. The construction does not, by itself, establish that reading occurs before writing.

Fa (ف)

Fa can express ordered succession, commonly with immediate or closely connected progression.

Constructed Example

دَخَلَ عَلِيٌّ فَجَلَسَ.

ʿAlī entered and then sat down.

Explanation
The particle *fa* connects the actions while presenting sitting as following entry in close succession.

Thumma (ثم)

Thumma ordinarily expresses succession with an interval or delay.

Constructed Example

دَخَلَ عَلِيٌّ ثُمَّ جَلَسَ.

ʿAlī entered, then sat down after a while.

Explanation
The particle *thumma* indicates that sitting follows entry, with an intervening interval.

The classical treatment of *faṣl* and *waṣl* is therefore not a general classification of all Arabic coordinating particles. It principally concerns the choice between coordinating clauses with *wa* and leaving them without that coordination.[3][1][2]

The relationship between clauses

From the sources

A central concept in the classical discussion is the *jāmiʿ*, the relationship or common association connecting the meanings of two clauses.

The presence of such an association helps explain why two clauses can appropriately be presented together. Its absence may make their coordination inappropriate.[1][4]

The sources distinguish several kinds of association, including relationships based on intellectual judgement, imagination and habitual or associative perception.

Intellectual association

Two propositions may be connected because their meanings share a common subject, quality or intelligible relationship.

Constructed Example

العِلْمُ نَافِعٌ وَالجَهْلُ ضَارٌّ.

Knowledge is beneficial, and ignorance is harmful.

Explanation
The two propositions concern opposed intellectual states and their respective consequences. Their meanings provide an intelligible basis for coordination.

Associative and imaginative relationships

Classical discussions also recognise that the association between expressions may depend on what the addressee habitually or imaginatively connects.

A relationship need not consist solely of obvious lexical similarity. Two apparently different subjects may be associated through a shared context, experience or conceptual framework.[1]

The classifications of the *jāmiʿ* explain the conditions governing appropriate coordination. They do not themselves represent separate coordinating particles or distinct grammatical constructions.

Conjunction (al-Waṣl)

From the sources

Waṣl is the joining of one clause to another using *wa* (و).

The classical sources describe several principal circumstances in which conjunction is appropriate.[1][2][3][4]

1. Agreement in mode of discourse

Two clauses may be joined when both are reporting statements (*khabar*) or both are directive or non-reporting constructions (*inshāʾ*), provided that an appropriate semantic relationship exists between them.

Source Example

إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ لَفِي نَعِيمٍ وَإِنَّ الْفُجَّارَ لَفِي جَحِيمٍ

Indeed, the righteous will be in bliss, and indeed, the wicked will be in Hellfire. (Qur'an 82:13–14)

Explanation

The two reporting clauses concern contrasting groups and their contrasting destinies. They are joined by *wa* and presented as a related pair.[3][4]

Source Example

فَلْيَضْحَكُوا قَلِيلًا وَلْيَبْكُوا كَثِيرًا

So let them laugh a little and weep much. (Qur'an 9:82)

Explanation

The two directive clauses are coordinated using *wa*. Their contrasting contents are presented together within one connected expression.[3]

The semantic relationship between the clauses remains relevant: merely sharing the same grammatical sentence type does not establish that any two clauses should be joined.

2. Prevention of an unintended interpretation

Conjunction may be appropriate where leaving clauses separate could permit an unintended interpretation.

Source Example

لَا، وَشَفَاهُ اللَّهُ.

No, and may God heal him.

Explanation

The coordinating *wa* separates the negative response from the following supplication, preventing the negation from being understood as extending to the prayer for healing. The example illustrates the interpretive importance of coordination in its grammatical context.[1][2]

3. Sharing a grammatical position or judgement

Conjunction may be used where two clauses or predicates participate in a shared grammatical construction.

Source Example

عَلِيٌّ يَقُولُ وَيَفْعَلُ.

ʿAlī speaks and acts.

Explanation

The two verbal predicates are coordinated in relation to the same subject. The particle *wa* makes their grammatical connection explicit. The construction does not inherently assert that ʿAlī always fulfils his promises.[1]

These three circumstances describe classical conditions governing appropriate conjunction. They are presented here as part of the linguistic framework, not as separate rhetorical annotation units.

Disjunction (al-Faṣl)

From the sources

Faṣl consists of presenting two clauses without joining them using *wa*.

The fuller classical classification distinguishes five principal circumstances of Disjunction.[1][4][5]

Some sources present a shorter classification concentrating on the first three circumstances. The difference concerns the degree of detail in their exposition, rather than a different basic definition of *faṣl*.[2][3]

1. Complete Connectedness (kamāl al-ittiṣāl — كمال الاتصال)

Complete Connectedness occurs where the second clause is so closely related to the first that it functions as its confirmation, explanation or substitution.

The classical account treats coordination as inappropriate because the second clause is not presented as an additional independent statement.

Source Example

مَا هَذَا بَشَرًا إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا مَلَكٌ كَرِيمٌ

This is no human! This is none but a noble angel. (Qur'an 12:31)

Explanation

The second clause reinforces the first by presenting the person as an angel rather than a human. The clauses are left without coordinating *wa* because of their close explanatory and confirmatory relationship.[1][3]

Source Example

وَاتَّقُوا الَّذِي أَمَدَّكُمْ بِمَا تَعْلَمُونَ أَمَدَّكُمْ بِأَنْعَامٍ وَبَنِينَ

And fear the One who provided you with what you know. He provided you with cattle and children. (Qur'an 26:132–133)

Explanation

The second clause specifies the provision referred to in the first. Its explanatory or substitutive relationship accounts for the absence of coordinating *wa*.[1][2][5]

2. Complete Disconnection (kamāl al-inqiṭāʿ — كمال الانقطاع)

Complete Disconnection occurs where the clauses differ in their mode of discourse or lack an appropriate semantic association.

Source Example

لَا تَحْسَبِ الْمَجْدَ تَمْرًا أَنْتَ آكِلُهُ لَنْ تَبْلُغَ الْمَجْدَ حَتَّى تَلْعَقَ الصَّبِرَا

Do not think glory is a date for you to eat; you will not attain glory until you taste bitterness.

Explanation

The first clause is a prohibition, whereas the second is a reporting statement. Their difference in discourse mode is given by the classical sources as a reason for leaving them without coordinating *wa*.[1][2][3]

Constructed Example

القَمَرُ بَدْرٌ اللَّيْلَةَ. اشْتَرَيْتُ الخُبْزَ هَذَا الصَّبَاحَ.

The moon is full tonight. I bought bread this morning.

Explanation

Without a contextual relationship connecting the statements, their juxtaposition does not provide an obvious basis for coordination.

3. Near-Complete Connectedness (shibh kamāl al-ittiṣāl — شبه كمال الاتصال)

Near-Complete Connectedness occurs when the first clause raises an implicit question and the second functions as its answer.

The second clause is left uncoordinated because it operates as a response to an understood question rather than as an additional coordinated statement.

Source Example

يَقُولُونَ إِنِّي أَحْمِلُ الضَّيْمَ عِنْدَهُمْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّي أَنْ يُضَامَ نَظِيرِي

They say I bear injustice among them — I seek refuge in my Lord that my equal should be wronged.

Explanation

The first clause gives rise to an implicit question about whether the accusation is true or how the speaker responds to it. The second clause supplies the response without coordinating *wa*.[1][2][3]

4. Near-Complete Disconnection (shibh kamāl al-inqiṭāʿ — شبه كمال الانقطاع)

Near-Complete Disconnection occurs when coordination with an earlier clause is possible, but the presence of an intervening

clause could cause the coordination to be understood as attaching to the wrong clause.

Source Example

وَتَظُنُّ سَلْمَى أَنَّنِي أَبْغِي بِهَا بَدَلًا أَرَاهَا فِي الضَّلَالِ تَهِيمُ

Salmā thinks that I seek a substitute for her — I see her wandering lost in delusion.

Explanation

The final statement belongs to the speaker's judgement, not to Salmā's supposition. Introducing coordination could risk attaching it to the intervening clause and thereby misrepresenting whose judgement is being expressed.[1][4]

5. Intermediate Between the Two Complete States (al-tawassuṭ bayn al-kamālayn — التوسط بين الكمالين)

This circumstance arises where a meaningful relationship exists between the clauses, but coordination is prevented by an interpretive or grammatical consideration.

Source Example

وَإِذَا خَلَوْا إِلَى شَيَاطِينِهِمْ قَالُوا إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُسْتَهْزِئُونَ ۝ اللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ

And when they are alone with their devils, they say, "We are with you; we were only mocking." God mocks them in return. (Qur'an 2:14–15)

Explanation

The final statement is related in meaning to the preceding speech, but it is not part of what the hypocrites said. The absence of coordinating *wa* helps preserve the distinction between the reported speech and the subsequent divine statement.[1][4][5]

Additional grammatical constructions

From the sources

The broader linguistic discussion of coordination extends beyond the clause-level choice central to the classical treatment of *faṣl* and *waṣl*.

Coordination of words and phrases

Wa can coordinate nouns, adjectives, phrases and other grammatical constituents, not only complete clauses.

Constructed Example

حَضَرَ عَلِيٌّ وَخَالِدٌ.

ʿAlī and Khālid attended.

Explanation

The particle *wa* coordinates two nouns sharing a grammatical function. This is ordinary constituent coordination, rather than the specific clause-level choice discussed under rhetorical Conjunction.

Circumstantial wa (wāw al-ḥāl)

Arabic also uses *wa* to introduce circumstantial constructions.

Constructed Example

جَاءَ زَيْدٌ وَالشَّمْسُ طَالِعَةٌ.

Zayd arrived while the sun was rising.

Explanation
The clause introduced by *wa* expresses a circumstance accompanying Zayd's arrival. Its function should be distinguished from simple coordination of two independent statements.

Modern treatments, including Abdul-Raof, discuss such constructions alongside broader conjunction and disjunction phenomena.[6]

Interpretive relationships and ambiguity

From the sources

The presence or absence of coordination may influence how clauses are interpreted.

The classical sources discuss several recurring interpretive considerations:

- Whether two clauses are intended to share a grammatical position or judgement.
- Whether a second clause explains, confirms or substitutes for the first.
- Whether a second clause answers an implied question.
- Whether coordination could cause a statement to be attached to an unintended clause.
- Whether coordination could cause an utterance to be attributed to the wrong speaker.
- Whether conjunction is needed to prevent a negative expression from being misunderstood as extending to a following statement.

[1][2][4][5]

These considerations explain the grammatical and interpretive background to the classical conditions of *waṣl* and *faṣl*.

From ordinary grammar to rhetorical use

Encyclopedia Interpretation

The constructions described above provide the linguistic framework within which rhetorical Conjunction and Disjunction operate.

The ordinary grammatical question concerns whether and how expressions can appropriately be joined or separated.

The rhetorical question concerns the communicator's deliberate choice of conjunction or separation for an intended communicative purpose.

The Encyclopedia therefore treats the two rhetorical operations separately:

- **CONJUN: Rhetorical Conjunction:** The deliberate joining of clauses using *wa* for an intended rhetorical purpose.
- **DISJUN: Rhetorical Disjunction:** The deliberate presentation of clauses without coordinating *wa* for an intended rhetorical purpose.

The classical conditions and examples presented on this page remain relevant to recognising those choices, but are not themselves treated here as separate rhetorical annotation units.

See Also

- **CONJUN: Rhetorical Conjunction** — rhetorical uses of clause coordination with *wa*.
- **DISJUN: Rhetorical Disjunction** — rhetorical uses of leaving clauses uncoordinated by *wa*.

Notes

- **Encyclopedia Interpretation**

  The classical *mawāṭin* are presented as conditions governing conjunction and separation, rather than automatically treated

as rhetorical subtypes.

- The broader grammatical category of coordination includes particles other than *wa*. The classical discussion of *al-faṣl wa-l-waṣl* has a narrower focus.[3][1][6]
- The shorter and longer classical classifications of *faṣl* are preserved without assuming that every source enumerates all five conditions.[2][3][1][4]
- Detailed source comparisons, historical disagreements and the full provenance audit are intended for the shared Research treatment of *al-faṣl wa-l-waṣl*.

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