

The pragmatic functions of religious expressions in Najdi Arabic

Yousef Ibrahim al-Rojaie

Department of English Language and Translation, Qassim University,
Buraydah, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study attempts to identify and analyze the pragmatic functions of religious expressions, that is, invocations that include the name of Allah (God), in naturally occurring social interactions in Najdi Arabic, which is spoken in Central Saudi Arabia.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on the speech act theory and politeness model, an analysis of the data illustrates that religious expressions, in addition to their prototypical religious meanings and uses in everyday interactions, are employed to communicate a wide range of pragmatic functions.

Findings – These include signaling the end of a conversation, persuading, mitigating and hedging, showing agreement and approval, reinforcing emphasis, expressing emotions, seeking protection from the evil eye, conveying skepticism and ambiguity, expressing humor and sarcasm, and showing respect and honor. The embedded multifunctional dimension of religious expressions in the present data is interpreted as serving as a politeness marker with which speakers promote both positive politeness (by showing solidarity, claiming common grounds, and building rapport) and negative politeness (by reducing imposition and emphasizing personal autonomy).

Originality/value – This study further highlights the interplay between religion, culture, and language use in Najdi Arabic.

Keywords Religious expressions, Speech acts, Politeness, Najdi Arabic, Pragmatic functions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The use of religious expressions, such as *inshallah* “God willing,” *alhamdulillah* “praise be to God” and *Allah ysallimaka* “May God protect you,” is frequent, recurrent and prevalent in everyday Arabic speech (Abboud, 1988; Morrow, 2006; Piamenta, 1979, 1983; Welji, 2012). Such expressions include an explicit or implicit reference to Allah (literally translated as “the God”). The expressions are identified by different names in the literature, such as “Allah expressions” (Jaradat, 2014; Piamenta, 1979, 1983), “Allah lexicon” (Morrow, 2006), “Arabic God-phrases” (Welji, 2012), “religious invocations” (Clift and Helani, 2010) and “religious formulas” (Migdadi and Badarneh, 2013). They are heard in everyday conversations in a variety of forms, and in private and public settings, as wishes, offers of congratulations, greetings, farewell and gratitude expressions, curses and other forms. Another important characteristic of these expressions is that they can be used in a variety of contexts with primary, secondary and metaphorical meanings, regardless of the religious affiliation of the speaker (Abboud, 1988; Clift and Helani, 2010).

The earliest studies examining the phenomenon of Arabic religious expressions are probably those by Piamenta (1979, 1983). He accumulated a comprehensive inventory of



God-phrases and discussed their religious and cultural presuppositions in classical and colloquial Arabic. In his study of “God-wishes” in Syrian Arabic, [Ferguson \(1983\)](#) examined a corpus of 31 religious expressions and discussed patterns of their contextual meanings. Drawing on [Searle’s \(1969\)](#) classification of illocutionary acts, [Farghal \(1995\)](#) examined the pragmatics of *inshallah* “if God permitted” in Jordanian Arabic. He found that the use of this religious expression has undergone a wide pragmatic drift during which it has acquired pragmatic functions as a directive, a commissive, or an expressive, depending on the related situation. A similar study was conducted by [Migdadi et al. \(2010\)](#) of the expression *mashallah* “What God has willed” in a variety of settings using naturally occurring examples in colloquial Jordanian Arabic. Findings show that in addition to its prototypical employment as a protective invocation against the evil eye, the expression is used as a compliment, an expression of gladness, an expression of modesty, a marker of sarcasm, a conversational backchannel, a mitigating device and a membership marker.

Further evidence of the multidimensionality and multifunctionality of religious expressions in Arabic discourse comes from [Migdadi and Badarneh \(2013\)](#), who examined the pragmatic functions of prophet-praise formulas in colloquial Jordanian Arabic. They found that these formulas are used for a set of seven pragmatic functions: (1) holding the floor, (2) seeking protection from the evil eye, (3) expressing success, (4) claiming the floor, (5) terminating disruptive or undesirable activities, (6) eliciting involvement and agreement and (7) intensifying the basic message of the utterance. [Clift and Helani \(2010\)](#) used the methods of conversation analysis to investigate the sequential contexts, particularly in topic-transition sequences, of using *inshallah* “God willing” and its cognates in Levantine (predominately Syrian) Arabic. Findings indicate that it serves as a recurrent interactional means by which speakers may bring a conversational topic to a possible close and then shift to a new topic.

[Welji \(2012\)](#) explored the performative functions of God-phrases used in Levantine Arabic (i.e., Arabic spoken in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine/Israel). Drawing on excerpts and examples from three Arabic films, she argued that because of peoples’ beliefs about invoking the power of the name of God, the God-phrases are used for a number of functions, including establishing a connection and a bond of community with new people, adding legitimacy and authority to one’s speech, showing that the speaker has a persona of religious devotion, and enhancing the speaker’s power and control so that the speaker can try to manipulate the behaviors of others.

Similarly, in a recent study of Jordanian Arabic, [Jaradat \(2014\)](#) found that some of these expressions have lost their original meanings as invocations but have acquired totally new meanings, such as expressing astonishment or seeking protection and guidance.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this article combines two theories: speech act theory and the politeness model. Speech act theory ([Austin, 1962](#); [Searle, 1969](#)) is concerned with the ways in which utterances can be used not only to describe or report information but also to perform communicative actions. Actions performed through such utterances are called speech acts, and they may involve promising, complaining, offering and other functions. In pragmatics, this theory can help to explain and analyze the linguistic meaning of utterances in everyday language by examining the speaker’s intention (illocutionary force) in producing utterances and the addressee’s interpretation of these utterances. Speech acts can be classified into two types: direct and indirect. In direct speech acts, the speaker explicitly states the intended meaning of an utterance by making a direct relationship between the structure of an utterance and its communicative function. In contrast, in indirect speech acts, the speaker does not communicate the literal meaning of the words as it would be found in

conventional speech; rather, the speaker makes the intended meaning implicit, and the hearer's task is to analyze the utterance to figure out its meaning.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model is probably the most widely used theoretical framework for analyzing the way people establish and maintain politeness in their conversational settings. According to this model, politeness is a universal feature in social interactions across languages and cultures. An important concept in this model is the notion of face, which has been derived from Goffman's (1967) seminal work on facework and from usage of the word as a folk term in English. Face can be defined as the public self-image that each person wants to portray when interacting with others. Thus, face is understood as "something that can be emotionally invested, and that can be not only lost, but also maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Brown and Levinson treat the aspects of face as wants that every individual desires during interactions with others. There are two types of face wants: negative face and positive face. Negative face is concerned with the individual's wants for freedom of action and freedom from imposition, whereas positive face is related to the individual's wants to be appreciated and approved of by others.

In social interactions, the use of certain kinds of speech acts can threaten the positive and negative face wants of the hearer and the speaker. Those acts are called face-threatening acts (FTAs). For example, the giving of orders or advice, the making of promises, and the offering of compliments may threaten the hearer's negative face, whereas acts such as thanking and apologizing may threaten the speaker's negative face. The hearer's positive face may be threatened by acts such as expressing contempt, offering criticism, interrupting, or complaining, whereas acts such as apologizing, accepting a compliment, or confessing may threaten the speaker's positive face.

To minimize the effects of potential FTAs in social interactions, speakers frequently attempt to use certain politeness strategies to save the hearer's face. Such strategies include the bald on-record strategy, negative politeness, positive politeness and the off-record strategy. The speaker's choice of which politeness strategy to employ in an interaction depends on social variables related to the interlocutors' relationship, including the social distance between them, the level of power relative to each other and the amount of imposition in their particular culture. Positive politeness strategies are oriented to the hearer's positive face by showing solidarity, expressing love and respect, and offering assurances of common rights, goals and expectations of reciprocity. On the other hand, negative politeness strategies are concerned with the wants of the hearer's negative face by showing deference, expressing apology for imposition and emphasizing the hearer's time and concern. The use of religious expressions in the present study can be classified as an exemplary case of indirect speech acts via the use of positive politeness strategies by which the speaker expresses solidarity and in-group membership with the addressee and the presupposition of shared knowledge and interests.

This study seeks to identify and analyze the pragmatic functions of religious expressions as used in naturally occurring social interactions in colloquial Najdi Arabic in Central Saudi Arabia. As is evident in the literature review, above, most previous studies were based on data from Levantine Arabic and Egyptian Arabic. No study, to my knowledge, has investigated the functions of religious expressions in Najdi Arabic. In fact, empirical research on the pragmatics of Najdi Arabic in general is extremely sparse, and the current study is, therefore, intended to address the dearth of research in this area. Given the tremendous diversity of linguistic usage in the Arabic-speaking world, as well as "the linguistic, historical, and social peculiarities of the Arab sociolinguistic situation" (Albirini, 2011, p. 540), this study will further explore the pragmatic behavior of such expressions and the possibility that they may serve different functions than their prototypical religious meanings, as well as the functions observed in other Arabic dialects. In addition, instead of focusing on a single

expression (cf. Farghal, 1995; Migdadi and Badarneh, 2013; Migdadi *et al.*, 2010), the study will explore the possibility that it would be of great importance to have a comprehensive account of the functions of religious expressions, particularly those that are pragmatically used in different ways from their semantic and prototypical meanings and uses. Thus, the aim is to discover the main communicative purposes of religious expressions, taking into account the often subtle differences between the uses of these expressions and how ignoring such differences may lead to serious misunderstandings and misjudgments (Davies, 1987, p. 75). Besides, because these religious expressions invoke God, it is of great interest to examine the link between religion and culture and its impact on language use in different contextual settings.

In sum, the present study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the pragmatic functions of religious expressions as used by speakers of Najdi Arabic in ordinary conversations?
- RQ2. Is the use of religious expressions associated with the local culture and understanding of religion and does it have an impact on everyday language?

3. Method

3.1 Data

Data for this study have been drawn from a corpus of 1,385 examples of religious expressions used in naturally occurring social interactions and collected by the ethnography of communication approach. Examples of religious expressions used for religious purposes as rituals were not included in the analysis, because they have already been examined in some previous studies (e.g., Piamenta, 1979, 1983).

The corpus was collected and recorded by observation of participants and nonparticipants for over one year between 2016 and 2017 by the researcher, along with five fieldworkers, two male and three female; all of them were native speakers of Najdi Arabic. Two sources of the collected data were included, face-to-face interactions and telephone conversations; most of the collected data were based on face-to-face interactions, however. The data collection was conducted in a variety of conversational settings, including homes, campuses, coffee shops and workplaces. Participants were all native speakers of Najdi Arabic, living in different cities and towns across Najd, Central Saudi Arabia, albeit most of them were from the cities of Buraydah and Riyadh. The occurrence of religious expressions was documented by field notes in which fieldworkers recorded utterances that they heard in an exchange, along with the contextual information and the participants' social variables, such as age, gender, and social relationship. Both genders are represented in the data; the use of religious expressions was nearly equal among male and female participants. Ages vary from 20 years to the mid-70s, although religious expressions were mostly used by middle-aged and older participants. Interlocutors' social distances vary from family members to friends and acquaintances to strangers.

3.2 Data analysis

The analysis of the data is qualitative in nature. It involves identifying every deployment of a religious expression and then classifying it into its appropriate functional category based on the context and speech event in which it occurred. The identification of religious expressions includes all types of invocations that include the name of Allah (God), including traditional religious expressions, such as *inshallah* "God willing" and *alhamdulillah* "praise be to God"; and Allah-based expressions, or "God-wishes" as called by Ferguson (1983), such as *Allah yahfidhik* "May Allah protect you."

As noted by Clift and Helani (2010, p. 358), religious expressions are embedded in Arabic interactions in “fugitive” contexts that require a close examination of data. In the current data, identifying the actual pragmatic function of each deployment of a religious expression was sometimes difficult, and ambiguity could ensue if the researcher did not take into consideration the related context and the cultural background behind the expression. Thus, analysis of the expressions was based on the researcher’s intuitive judgment and background knowledge of the usage of such expressions as a native speaker of Najdi Arabic. If the function of an expression was not clear enough for the researcher or if more than one function may have been included, two professors of Arabic linguistics who speak Najdi Arabic were consulted for verification.

4. Findings

Analysis of the collected examples has revealed that religious expressions in Najdi Arabic are used as speech acts for multifunctional purposes that are often different from their semantic meanings and prototypical uses as invocations in everyday interactions. To interpret the actual usage of these expressions, speakers rely largely on contextual factors, including societal and cultural norms and the social distance among interlocutors, within the speech event in question. Due to the large number of religious expressions included in the present data, as well as the various pragmatic functions that have emerged out of their analysis, the main pragmatic functions will only be discussed here based on their frequency. For each function, related examples will be presented with the contextual information necessary for their interpretation, and they will be discussed within the theoretical framework of the speech act theory and the politeness model.

4.1 Signaling the closure of a conversation

As mentioned above, Clift and Helani (2010) noted that the religious invocation *inshallāh* is frequently employed in Levantine Arabic as an interactional device across sequences of talk to bring a topic to a possible end before making a shift to another topic. In the present data on Najdi Arabic, however, such a function of *inshallāh* was found to be used rarely. Instead, religious invocations are deployed in Najdi discourse to signal the closing of the whole conversation and not just a change in topic. Examples (1–3) illustrate how this function is employed:

- (1) (A man is talking on the phone to his friend, and suddenly he wants to end the call).
 - *tayb..tayb.. Jazāk Allāh Khayr..wa Allāh yahfidhik wa ybārik fik.*
“Okay..okay.. May Allah reward you, and may Allah protect you, and may Allah bless you”.
 - *tā khayr.. salam ‘laikum.*
“All right.. Peace be upon you”.
- (2) (A middle-aged woman talks with her relative in a family gathering).
 - *mmh.. yalla Allah ywafqak wa yussir umūr*
“Mmh, okay, may Allah bless you and make things easy for you”
 - *Allāh ysallimak ma‘a al-salāmah*
“May Allah protect you.. Goodbye”

(3) (A young girl is speaking with her friend at a party).

- *zayn 'la khayr inshallah*
“Okay, things will be okay, *inshallah*”
- *tayyb ajl.narāk 'alā khayr*
“Okay, then.. See you well”

The speaker in (1) attempts to indirectly signal the addressee over the phone by means of the religious invocations *Jazāk Allāh Khayr..wa Allāh yahfiduk wa ybārik fik* that he wants to end the call. To do so, the speaker first uses *tayb* “Okay” to hold the hearer’s attention and then immediately uses a few religious expressions as cues that he is ready to end the call. The addressee interprets the speaker’s invocations accordingly and ends the conversation by saying *salam laikum*, which is conventionally used in Najdi Arabic in this particular form and placement to end a conversation. Interestingly, the speaker uses more than one religious expression to emphasize the intended meaning of his utterance and to make it clear that it should not be confused with another function. This is because if only one expression is used, it could be understood by the addressee as a reply to something mentioned in a prior sentence. Similarly, in (2), the speaker uses two religious invocations preceded by *yalla* ‘Oh God’ so that they will work together as cues to the addressee about a conversation closure. In such situations, this may engender reciprocal invocations by the addressee before the conversation ends. In (3), *inshallah* is used along with *'la khayr* “all right” in a higher pitch to announce to the addressee that the conversation should end.

These expressions can be considered as compliments used by the speaker as extensions of their prototypical meanings as invocations to thank the addressee and show solidarity. Moreover, instead of threatening the positive face of the addressee by abruptly ending the conversation, the speaker uses invocations to lessen the transitional move and, at the same time, show respect and appreciation to the addressee, thus employing a positive politeness strategy.

4.2 Persuading

The use of religious expressions for persuasion is a salient and pervasive function in the present data. It is ideologically rooted in the power that the word *Allah* “God” can add to an expression and the influence that it can exert on the hearer. Thus, some speakers use religious expressions to add dominance over the actions of others, for instance, to make others do something or warn others not to do something. Consider examples (4–5):

(4) (A father is talking to his son before travelling to another city by car).

- Allāh Allāh lā tisru ʿon*
“Allah, Allah, do not speed up”

(5) (A woman talks to her husband about her wish to move to a new house).

- Allāh yabi yihdik inshallah wa natla' l-bait jadid*
“Allah will guide you, *inshallah*, so that we move to a new house”

In the exchange in (4), the father is asking his son not to speed up by adding the name of Allah and repeating it twice to intensify his request, combined with a rising intonation so that his son will take his warning request seriously. Note that the father does not repeat the intended action (i.e. no speeding up) to emphasize his message as reported in previous studies (Johnstone, 1991). Rather, he repeats the name of Allah at the beginning of his request to create a serious tone and make his request more persuasive; linking the request with the name of God creates a sense of authority. As Hsieh (2009, p. 163) states, “Pragmatically speaking,

repetition, both self-repeats and other-repeats, can be used to double up the illocutionary force, i.e. to do emphasis or to do persuasion, by means of repeating the linguistic form.” In this example, the father attempts to do two things at the same time: He adds emphasis to his message by repeating his utterance and adds persuasion by invoking God’s name.

In (5), to persuade her husband, the wife says *Allāh yabi yihdūk* “Allah will guide you” as a way of encouraging her husband to move to a new house, as she wants him to do. The use of *inshallah* here is to emphasize the expression of hope for the desired outcome with Allah’s guidance.

Persuasion normally involves a threat to the addressee’s negative face by the expected imposition of the act being requested. To reduce such a threat, speakers in the examples above employed invocations as negative politeness strategies to lessen the illocutionary force of their persuasive requests and make them more acceptable to the addressees.

4.3 Mitigating and hedging

Religious expressions are used in Najdi Arabic as interactional pragmatic devices to soften the illocutionary force of speech acts by minimizing imposition on the hearer, thus acting as negative politeness markers; this is especially true in utterances where the speaker is making a request or giving a command to attempt to get the interlocutor to do something. The use of these expressions does not change the propositional content of the speech act itself; rather, it generally mitigates or intensifies the pragmatic force of the act. This is because using such acts without these expressions may cause embarrassment to both the addressor and the addressee, leading to communicative breakdown. The expressions are usually used before or after the head act. In some cases, two or more religious expressions are used to add intensity to the act. The following examples illustrate the use of religious expressions for this function:

- (6) (A middle-aged man is speaking to his male friend in a coffee shop).

Allāh la yikhalīk ‘tan jawalīk

“May Allah save you. Give me your mobile”

- (7) (A young security guard requests that an older driver move his car in the street).

Tla’ siyaratik Allāh la yheynik.

“Move your car. May Allah not humiliate you”

- (8) (A young girl talks to her father, asking whether they can travel to Makkah).

takfa yubah nabi nuruh la Riyadh Allāh ya waḥḥik.

“Please, Daddy, we want to go Riyadh; may Allah”

- (9) (A woman talks with her sister about her colleague in school, who is named Maha).

Allāh yadhkirha bi al-khayr Maha bajaḥah wa ghabḥyah

“Allah remembers Maha with good deeds; she was rude and stupid”

- (10) (A middle-aged man speaks to his boss, who is an elderly man).

shif ṭāl ‘umrak al-matḥūb bas twiqi’ ha al-khitāb

“Look, may Allah make you live longer; what is needed is just to sign this letter”

- (11) (A young man speaks to his colleague in their shared office).

ant māshā’ Allāh alīk tamām law inīnk tishof lina ḥal bha almushkilah

“You, *mashallah*, okay if you can find a solution for this problem”

- (12) (A woman is talking to her husband about a domestic issue).

Ant lā ilāh illā Allāh ‘alayk dā’iman tehīb al-mashākil

“You, *lā ilāh illā Allāh*, always like to make problems”

- (13) (A principal is talking to a visitor about his complaint).

yā ra’āk Allāh kalāmik ghayr ṣaḥīḥ

“*yā ra’āk Allāh*, you—what you are saying is incorrect”

- (14) (An old woman is responding to her son while they are looking for a relative’s house).

gazāk Allāh khayr bautuhum mhub hina

“*gazāk Allāh khayr*; their house is not here”

In the examples above, the speakers use various religious expressions as modifying lexical devices or communicative strategies to mitigate the negative face-threatening to the hearer that might be the result of the anticipated negative effect of the speech act. In (6), for example, the speaker begins his request with a religious phrase, *Allāh la yikhalik*, in order to weaken the strength of his request for the addressee to let him use his mobile, a request that could cause discomfort for the hearer. In example (7), despite the security guard’s authority, he chooses to use *Allāh la yheynik* at the end of his admonition to the driver to make him move his car. An admonition such as this can be very face-threatening for the hearer, given the age difference between the speaker and the addressee, as well as the local cultural norms that determine how younger people speak with older ones regardless of the difference between them in terms of social status and position. Similarly, example (8) presents a case in which the religious expression *Allāh ya wafqik* is used by the young girl at the end of her request to reduce the imposition of such a request. Note that the girl uses a religious expression even though she has already used the word *takfa* “please”; it is a word commonly used in Najdi society in general to intensify the force of a request. Thus, the girl’s use of the religious expression can be seen as a way to weaken the negative effect of her request and to balance the illocutionary force after using *takfa*.

Unlike previous speakers, the woman in example (9) uses the phrase *Allāh yadhkirha bi al-khayr*, which means literally “May God remember her with good deeds”. Here it is used as a mitigation device to weaken the critical remark she is about to make about her sister’s colleague. This expression is widely used in the Najdi speech community for this very specific situation. It can also be viewed as a way to avoid sounding as if she is making a backbiting comment about a person, and thus the religious expression serves to weaken the feeling of guilt that may occur after a critical remark is made. Interestingly, in recent usage, this expression is not used only as an appendage to weaken any statement involving the potential criticism of another person; rather, it is used in some limited cases as a criticism in itself, particularly if it is used alone in a statement without specifying the negative adjectives. This is probably because speakers associate the use of this expression with a subsequent criticism, whether stated explicitly or not, and, thus, the original use of the expression as a mitigating device has been lost.

Example (10) includes another religious expression that is widely used in Najd in formal and informal settings, *tāl ‘umrak*. This expression originally had the name of Allah in the middle, but it has been deleted for ease of pronunciation as a result of its heavy use in everyday conversations. It also is heard in different forms but is used for the same purpose. Here, it is employed as a mitigation device for the request that the middle-aged man is about to present to his boss. It also imbues a sense of respect and honor, so that speakers of Najdi Arabic generally associate its use with situations involving differences in age or status.

The expression *māshā' Allāh* “What God wishes” is used in example (11) by the speaker to weaken the potential imposition of his request by praising the addressee, his colleague, in a general statement.

The phrase *lā ilāh illā Allāh* in example (12) is very interesting because it is used here in a way that is contrary to its literary meaning (“There is no god but God”), commonly called *shahada* “the testimony.” This is contrary to its major purpose in Islamic traditions as part of the remembrance *dhikr* rituals. It is used here as a prefacing mitigation device to the critical words the woman is about to say to her husband about him. By using a strong religious expression such as *lā ilāh illā Allāh*, the woman attempts to soften the face-threatening effects that her direct criticism may have on her husband. Just like the use of the words *māshā' Allāh* in example (11), the woman uses a relatively stronger expression as a praising appendage to mitigate the criticism that she is about to say. Given the confrontational nature of disagreement, religious expressions are also used as a preface to mitigate a subsequent statement of disagreement. In example (13), the principal’s opposing view is softened by the expression *yā ra’āk Allāh* before he directly disagrees with the visitor. In some other examples in the data, speakers pause for a while immediately after saying the expression as a soft preface and preparation for a subsequent disagreement. In a similar way but with a different expression, in example (14), an old woman mitigates her disagreement in her response to her son with the phrase *gazāk Allāh khayr* “may Allah reward you well”. This way of using this particular expression may be unexpected not only because of its new pragmatic function but because of the age difference, as well the family relationship, between the speaker and the hearer, which may not require the mitigation of opposing views. The reason for such a usage, however, is related to the context of the interaction, in which the son is driving and is expected to have better navigation skills than his old mother.

4.4 Showing agreement and approval

Agreement can be defined broadly as an expression that lets the hearer know that the speaker assents to, approves of, and is in accord with an opinion of the hearer. Agreement is generally seen as a positive move that creates harmony and good will between interactants; it has no FTAs for either the speaker or the hearer. In addition, as noted by Pomerantz (1984, quoted in Sifianou, 2012, p. 1555), agreement between persons is comfortable, supportive, reinforcing, and perhaps sociable because it demonstrates that the interlocutors are like-minded. The following examples demonstrate how religious expressions are used to show agreement between speaker and hearer about views and actions.

- (15) (An old man is giving directions to his young friend in a hospital).

Old man: *idhā waslat al-ishārah. . . mā fīh maṭ'am alā al-yamān?*

“If you reach the traffic light, is there a restaurant to the right?”

Young man: *Allāh Allāh*

“Allah, Allah”

- (16) (An old man speaks to a young man about his father).

Old man: *abūk aslan mā yahūb al-sifr*

“Your father undoubtedly does not like to travel”

Young man: *'azz Allāh*

“Of course”

(17) (A middle-aged man speaks to his boss about his request for a leave of absence).

tayyab amānna bi- Allāh lakin min haqqī ijāza bi-al-saif

“Okay, *amānna bi- Allāh*, but I have the right to take a vacation in the summer”

(18) (A young man responds to his family members’ suggestion that he should become a teacher).

tayyab ajl shūr-kum wa-hidāyat Allāh

“Okay, then, *shūr-kum wa-hidāyat Allāh*”

Unlike its use for persuading, as shown above, in example (15) the name of God, *Allāh*, is used to show agreement with and approval of the speaker’s question. The young man does not use the Arabic standard form, *na’am* “yes”, or the classical Arabic form, *balā* “indeed”. Rather, he repeats God’s name twice to intensify his approval and also attempts to make the speaker continue giving directions.

Similarly, the young man in example (16) employs the expression “*azz Allāh*, which was originally a way of swearing by God’s power. It is used here to show the speaker’s full approval of the old man’s description of his father. In this way, it is employed to emphasize approval, even strong approval. This expression is a shortened form of a sometimes used longer form, *azz Allāh innk sādīq*, which means ‘You’re truly right.’”

In (17), the religious expression *amānna bi- Allāh* “We believed in God” is stated in the context of an argument between a boss and an employee about the employee’s request for a leave of absence during the following week. The boss has rejected his request based on a recent decision by the company’s manager to hold all new requests. The employee used *amānna bi-Allāh* to temporarily agree with his boss’s subsequent view before stating opposing views in the next turn.

In (18), a young man asserts his agreement with his family’s suggestion by saying *shūr-kum wa-hidāyat Allāh*, which can be translated as “I’ll go with your opinion, and may Allah guide us.” This expression is widely used in Najdi Arabic as an agreement marker that expresses respect for and approval of the addressees’ positive face desires, and, at the same time, it denotes a religious belief that making a decision is blessed by God’s guidance. Note that the speaker states his initial agreement by saying *tayyab ajl* “Okay then,” and his agreement could be considered complete with this statement. Instead, he also uses the religious expression to further emphasize his agreement and add a polite touch.

This pragmatic function is employed in the utterances above as a positive politeness strategy to assert respect for and approval of, and establish a common ground with, the hearer, thereby contributing an interactional device to save the hearer’s positive face. The use of religious invocations as markers of positive politeness arises from the cultural notion in Najdi Arabic that referencing the name of God in expressing agreement adds a sense of approval to the act of view in question.

4.5 Reinforcing emphasis

The use of the expression ‘*azz Allāh*, analyzed above, has been extended in such a way as to add emphasis to an utterance. In many cases, it is used at the beginning of an utterance. It is sometimes employed as a response to something previously stated or done, but it can be used as a statement that has no connection with previous speech. Consider the following examples:

(19) (An old man is praising his friend).

‘azz Allāh innk wafī

“You are certainly loyal”

(20) (A young man is describing his financial situation to his older brother).

‘azz Allāh rḥmā fihā

“We are truly in a bad situation”

In examples (19–20), speakers have added the expression *‘azz Allāh* at the beginning of their utterances to emphasize their statements. In example (19), the old man inserts this expression at the beginning to add emphasis to his compliment of his friend. It is a response to an act (loyalty) that his friend will do in favor of him. In example (20), the expression is used to describe a terrible financial situation after a younger brother and an older brother have discussed some bad news. From a politeness perspective, this pragmatic function is employed to express appreciation in praising (19) or to establish common grounds and interests while complaining (20). It thus acts as a positive politeness device to save the hearer’s positive face.

4.6 Expressing emotions

Another common and pervasive pragmatic function of religious expressions in the data is to express the speaker’s emotions, such as pleasure, surprise, grief or pity, contempt, satisfaction, anger, or annoyance. According to Welji (2012, p. 20), most religious expressions in Arabic serve grammatically as interjections. Four criteria, suggested by Kockelman (2003, quoted in Welji, 2012, p. 20), define the interjections: They are conventional lexical items, they are not part of any other word class, they usually lack additional inflections or derivations, and they are often anomalies to the language. Similarly, Wierzbicka (1992) suggests that interjections refer to the speaker’s mental state or mental act, and they can be classified into three types: emotive, volitive, and cognitive. Religious expressions in the current data can be used to function as emotive interjections based on Wierzbicka’s classification because they have in their meaning the component “I feel something.” The following examples demonstrate how religious expressions can be used in expressing a variety of emotions, including surprise, anger, pleasure, satisfaction, grief and contempt.

(21) (A middle-aged woman upon seeing her sister’s new baby).

sibḥān Allāh al-‘azīm kinnahā ‘ammhā bi-al-dabt

“*sibḥān Allāh al-‘azīm*, she looks exactly like her mother”

(22) (A middle-aged man comments angrily to his friend upon hearing about his company’s decision to freeze future leaves of absence).

tā ilāh illā Allāh ha al-sharikah bas teḥāwil istifzāznā biha al-qarārāt

“*tā ilāh illā Allāh*; this company is just trying to provoke us with these decisions”

(23) (A father speaks to his little daughter, Shaden, who is wearing a new dress for Eid).

māshā’ Allāh tabāarak Allāh wish ha al-zain ya Shaden

“*māshā’ Allāh tabāarak Allāh*; what a beautiful dress you have, Shaden”

(24) (A man responds to his friend’s question about whether he needs additional help).

gazāk Allāh khayr, al-ḥamd li-llāh ma qaṣir ‘alina shi

“*gazāk Allāh khayr, al-ḥamd li-llāh*; we’re satisfied nothing is needed”

(25) (A woman is responding to a visitor in her house upon losing her youngest son).

innā lil Allāh wa’innā ‘ilayh raji’un Allāh yaṣabbirna ‘tā muṣībātānā fi waladnā

“*innā lil Allāh wa’innā ‘ilayh raji’un*; may Allah help us endure our loss of our son”

- (26) (A young man comments upon seeing a woman wearing immodest clothes).

astaghfiru Allāh al-‘azīm Allāh la yablānā bimithil ha al-ashkāl al-sakhifāh

“*astaghfiru Allāh al-‘azīm*; may Allah not test us to meet silly people like these”

- (27) (A young girl comments to her friends about songs made up by fans of the competing team).

bi-llāh hādhi ahāzīj? al-ḥamdili-llāh al-shukr bas

“By God, are these songs? Just *al-ḥamdili-llāh wa al-shukr*”

- (28) (A woman is speaking to her younger brother about how he has not visited her recently).

Allāh akbar ‘alīk ya-Muhammad thalāth sinīn mā tazūrūnā

“*Allāh Akbar* on you, Muhammad; you did not visit us for three years”

- (29) (An old man comments about his current situation to his son).

Allāh aqwā bas shif wishsh ṣrnā ‘alayh al-ḥn

“*Allāh, aqwa*; just look what we have become like”

Examples (21–29) have been selected from a long list of examples in which religious expressions are used to express more than 20 different emotions. A complete account of every emotion will not be possible here for reasons of space. Example (21) is a typical use of a religious expression to convey surprise. The middle-aged woman uses the religious expression *sibhān Allāh al-‘azīm*, commonly employed in the data, to express astonishment about the many similarities in appearance between the newly born baby and his mother. The expression *lā ilāh illā Allāh* is also used in other examples for the same function but less frequently than *sibhān Allāh*.

Anger is expressed via the religious expression *lā ilāh illā Allāh* in example (22). Using such an expression, as well as the expression *lā ḥawla wa lā quāh illā billāh*, in anger situations is recommended in Islamic traditions and teachings because the expressions can manage the speaker’s anger and weaken its negative effects.

In example (23), the expressions *māshā’ Allāh* and *tabārak Allāh* are used by the father to show pleasure about and appreciation of his daughter’s dress. They also make his daughter feel happy to know that her dress is nice and attractive. Double expressions are used to reinforce the expression of the father’s happy feelings about his daughter’s dress.

Expressing satisfaction is exemplified in (24), where the man responds politely to his friend’s question about any help that he might need. The first expression, *gazāk Allāh khayr*, is used here to thank the addressor, his friend, whereas the second expression, *al-ḥamd li-llāh*, is used to express his gratitude for and satisfaction about all the services and help that his friend provided during their visit.

Example (25) is a typical use of religious formulas in the speech act of condolence. Here, the mother uses two expressions. The first, *innā lil Allāh wa’innā ‘ilayh raji’un*, serves as a prototypical expression commonly used in Muslim societies. It is used here by the interlocutor, the mother, upon hearing the news that her son has died, to express sorrow and grief. This expression can also be used by speakers giving condolences in these situations. The mother also uses a second expression, *Allāh yaṣabbirna ‘lā muṣibatānā*, to comfort herself and control her grief.

Interestingly, religious expressions can also be used to express contempt, as shown in examples (26–27). The speaker in (26), a young man, attempts to speak out about his disapproval of a woman's dress, which he believes is immodest. To show his contempt for this situation, he uses the expression *astaghfiru Allāh al-'azīm*, which is commonly used according to Islamic traditions when someone does or says something wrong. The speaker's use of this religious expression can be partially seen as an index of piety and the presentation of a religious persona. The use of religious expressions is not limited to showing contempt for violations of religious or social traditions; it can also be a comment to show that the speaker has no respect for someone or something that a person has done. In example (27), instead of using the religious expression *al-hamdili-llāh wa al-shukr* for its religious denotation, which is to express satisfaction and thanks to God, the girl uses it to express contempt and mockery of the other team's songs; she has preceded it with a cynical question. Just as in example (26), the girl's use of this expression captures her feelings of disrespect for the other team. It sounds as if she is thanking God that she is not one of them.

In (28), *Allāh akbar* is not used for its literal meaning "God is great," nor is it used as a common religious ritual for remembering Allah. Rather, it is used to reproach the addressee, the speaker's brother, for not visiting his sister for years. Given the negativity associated with blaming someone, the speaker uses *Allāh akbar* to soften the illocutionary force of the reproach. It thus acts as a negative politeness strategy to reduce a potential imposition on the addressee, along with the embarrassment associated with such acts.

In (29), the speaker uses *Allāh aqwá* to express grief about his situation in an attempt to comfort himself. This use can be viewed as a self-sympathy device whereby the speaker attempts to show solidarity with the hearer by emphasizing their in-group membership and common interests. In this way, it acts as a positive politeness strategy.

4.7 Seeking protection from the evil eye

From an Islamic perspective, uttering religious expressions in daily life in the form of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) is one of the most praiseworthy acts of worship through which Muslims seek closeness to and refuge with God for protection. To be protected by God, Muslims are encouraged to remember Allah at all times so that they are less likely to be affected by potential threats, particularly those from Satan and the evil eye. Believing in the evil eye is a sociocultural act widely spread throughout Arab-Islamic societies, as well as many other cultures across the globe (Abu-Rabia, 2005; Edwards, 1971; Mughazy, 2000). It is based on the assumption that certain individuals possess an evil eye that can cause harm to people, animals, and objects, and its harmful effects can be transmitted from one individual to another by a look, touch, or verbal expression of envy without blessing (Abu-Rabia, 2005). The harm is caused when a person is unaware that it is happening. It usually affects personal and socially valuable possessions, such as wealth, beauty, children, health, and achievements. Among the various verbal expressions commonly used to ward off the evil eye in Najdi society, as well as in many other Arab communities (e.g., Jordan: Migdadi *et al.*, 2010; Egypt: Mughazy, 2000), is *māshā' Allāh* "What God wishes". It is the prototypical utterance to grant divine protection for such functions. It is sometimes completed with the expression *tabārak Allāh* "blessed by God" to add a further effect and more blessings. The expression of *lā ilāh illā Allāh* "no god but God" is also frequently used in Najdi Arabic, not for its literal meaning but for its symbolism of the remembrance of God, which is the most effective means of countering the negative effects of the evil eye. In Najdi society, unlike in Jordanian (Migdadi and Badameh, 2013) and many other Arab and Muslim societies, the prophetic-praise conventional formulas, such as *allahumma salli 'ala sayyidna Muhammad* "May God bestow blessings upon our Prophet Muhammad", are rarely used for this specific purpose. This may be due to the fact that religious expressions are conventional formulas

that acquire certain pragmatic functions, which may vary from one community to another based on the sociocultural norms and expectations that each community develop in daily interactions. Examples of religious expressions used for seeking protection from the evil eye are illustrated in examples (30–35):

- (30) (A middle-aged teacher speaks to one of his students).

māshā' Allāh alīk ḥallyat al-mas'alah bi-ha-al-sur'ah

“*māshā' Allāh alīk*; you solve the problem so fast”

- (31) (A young female comments about one of her relatives, Muhammad, in his absence).

māshā' Allāh alā Muhammad 'induh khams 'iyāl wa zawjatuh hamil bi-tūm

“*māshā' Allāh alā*; Muhammad, he has five boys, and his wife is pregnant with twins”

- (32) (A middle-aged woman comments about a big house that she has just seen in Riyadh).

wa kubur ha-al-bait māshā' Allāh tabāarak Allāh yakfi thalāth 'awā'il

“What a big house; *māshā' Allāh tabāarak Allāh*; it can hold up to three families”

- (33) (An old woman comments about a cow that she saw at her neighbor's farm).

shifī biqirat jirānanā māshā' Allāh 'alayhā ḥalīb miskkit

“Have you seen our neighbors' cow? *Māshā' Allāh 'alayhā*; its milk is so delicious”

- (34) (An old man comments about a desert spring field that he has just seen on a trip to the desert).

tā itāh illā Allāh wish ha-al-rabī'!

“*tā itāh illā Allāh*; what a desert spring field!”

- (35) (A middle-aged man speaks to a young man, who sleeps for only very short times).

Allāh tā yaḍurk māshā' Allāh alīk. mita tanam ant?

“May Allah not hurt you; *māshā' Allāh alīk*. When do you sleep?”

All the examples above include a communicative strategy in the form of a religious expression as a means of reducing the potential negative effect of the evil eye. The speaker may cast it consciously or unconsciously in the overt expression of the admiration of goods related to an individual, whether the person is present (example 30) or absent (example 31), an object (example 32) or an animal (example 33). The religious expression *māshā' Allāh* is the most frequently employed strategy for such a function, as demonstrated in examples (30–33 and 35). It is used sometimes with a modifier, including *alīk* “on” or *alā* “to”, to identify the referent to whom the expression is addressed or about whom it is spoken. From these examples, it appears clearly that this expression has lost its literal meaning (“what God wishes”) and has acquired a new meaning associated with a belief in the divine will of God. In this way, the expression conveys the speaker's explicit intention not to harm the addressee in person or the addressee's objects of admiration. In example (34), the expression *tā itāh illā Allāh* achieves the same function but in a relatively stronger manner; this is because of the Islamic belief and local understanding that it includes the best and strongest defense possible against the evil eye: the remembrance of God.

In example (35), the speaker explicitly indicates that he does not want any harm to come to the addressee by saying *Allāh tā yaḍurk* “May God not hurt you,” followed by the expression *māshā' Allāh alīk*. This practice has become popular recently in Najdi speech to serve as a

strategy with double effects to assure the addressee of the good intentions of the speaker and to protect the addressee from any harm that may result unconsciously out of the admiration expression.

In situations where the speaker unintentionally forgets to utter these expressions or any other means of deflecting potential harm from the evil eye while expressing verbal admiration, the addressee usually reminds the speaker to explicitly say these expressions using commands such as *idhker rabbik* or *idhkir Allāh* (“Haste unto remembrance of God”), or *gill māshā’ Allāh* (“Say *māshā’ Allāh*”). Failure to do so may lead to a breakdown in communications, the termination of the conversation, or the turning of the conversation into a confrontation. This is because there are culture-bound expectations associated with the use of religious expressions in such contexts. The absence of them may be perceived by the hearer as a sign of disapproval, thus reducing the positive effect that these expressions may serve. The use of religious expressions for protection against the evil eye becomes part of the communication norms in everyday conversations in Najdi society. It is deeply rooted in the sociocultural beliefs associated with the protective nature of religious expressions against envy.

In light of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the formulation of utterances using religious expressions in contexts of overt admiration and personal praise of others’ goods can be classified as a type of expressive speech act, namely, a compliment. A compliment is “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good position, characteristics, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1986; cited in Migdadi *et al.*, 2010, p. 487). Accordingly, the use of religious expressions as compliments acts as a socializing device with an illocutionary force to express and maintain solidarity and rapport between the speaker and the hearer. It is therefore considered a positive speech strategy through which the speaker maintains and attends to the addressee’s positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and related desires to be valued and accepted. Using religious expressions can also be a strategy for overcoming potential FTAs in compliments that are intended for the hearer but are not explicitly said, thus making the addressee vulnerable to negative effects of the conscious or unconscious evil eye.

4.8 Conveying skepticism and ambiguity

In response to directive speech acts, such as requests, commands, and questions, and expressive speech acts, such as complaints, religious expressions may convey skepticism and ambiguity to cast doubt on the likelihood that the actions in question will be fulfilled. Consider examples (36–39), below:

- (36) (An old man responds to his son’s request to buy a toy).

Allāh yisahhil al-Amar

“May God make things easy”

- (37) (A middle-aged man responds to his daughter’s request to get a new mobile).

yijīb Allāh sail

“May Allah bring rain”

- (38) (A middle-aged man responds to his friend’s complaint regarding water leaks in his new apartment).

Allāh yṣliḥ al-Aḥwāl bas

“May Allah make things very easy”

- (39) (A middle-aged woman responds to her daughter's question about a trip they may take in the summer).

yiṣīr khayer in shā'a Allāh

“Things will be better if God permits”

The utterances in examples (36–39) include general invocations in the form of petitions to God to fulfill wishes in the future. Despite the fact that the actual addressee in these invocations is God, not the human hearer, the semantic meanings are understood by the hearer and pertain to the context in which they are being used because of their positive connotations, as well as the good things that are being requested. From a pragmatic perspective, however, they are used with an illocutionary force of casting doubt or creating ambiguity about the speaker's future intentions or views about the speech act in question. For example, in responding to his son's request in (36), the old man hopes that God will make things easy. Such an answer may sound irrelevant and does not respond to the request in question; it is, however, understood pragmatically to serve as an evasiveness strategy employed by the speaker to provide no clear response, either because he does not want to make a decision at the moment or a commitment in the future or because he does not want to make a direct refusal. From a politeness perspective, the son's request constitutes FTAs to the hearer, the middle-aged father, regarding his negative or autonomy face. To respond to this request, the speaker (the father) uses the religious invocations as a politeness marker to maintain the positive face of the interlocutor (his son) about his desire for approval. At the same time, such a function can be considered a negative politeness strategy by which the speaker responds to speech acts that constitute face-threatening in terms of their autonomy and freedom of action. Thus, invocations serve as strategies for self-protection by keeping persons at a safe distance from each other.

The same analysis can interpret the response to the request in (37), the complaint in (38), and the question in (39). In (39), the name of God is omitted at the beginning of the sentence but the expression is understood as an invocation of God; it is followed by another religious expression, *in shā'a Allāh* 'if God permits, which adds further uncertainty about whether the trip will take place, by weakening the illocutionary force of the speaker's promise.

This pragmatic function of using religious expressions can be a source of confusion for some speakers, not only because of their ambiguity but also because of the pragmatic knowledge required to understand the context in which they can be used in culturally appropriate ways. Speakers of other dialects of Arabic in the Arab world, including some Saudi dialects, as well as learners of Arabic as a second language, may not find this use a normative response, thus making it extremely incomprehensible for them in situations where it is used. The use of religious expressions for such a function is often constrained by the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee, and, consequently, its use is mostly limited to interactions between close friends, family members, and acquaintances. In some cases, however, those working in high-ranking jobs in the government and business sectors have recently adopted this function in situations where they want to cast doubt about their future plans or views on certain sensitive topics.

4.9 Humor and sarcasm

Interestingly, religious expressions used in everyday social interactions in Najdi Arabic can also be used to make fun of someone in a friendly way in humorous conversations. In her analysis of Arabic learners' humor practices in the classroom, Hillman (2011) reported that some students used religious expressions as humor practices. This ultimately contributed, in association with other practices, to the construction and display of identity, building of rapport, and creation of contexts for the scaffolding of and learning about Arabic culture and

dialects. In the following examples (40–45), speakers use different expressions when injecting humor into a conversation.

- (40) (A middle-aged woman responds to a joke told by her female friend at a party).

ḥasbi Allāh ‘alayki y-al-dubba ma nisaiti ha-al-salfah!

“*ḥasbi Allāh ‘alayki*, you fat girl; you did not forget this story!”

- (41) (A young man describes the new sport clothes of his brother).

māshā’ Allāh ya Muhammad širt mith Messi

“*māshā’ Allāh*; Muhammad, you became like Messi”

- (42) (An old man comments about his close friend, Abu Fahad, who has purchased a new house).

akhīran ṭal’an al-darahim ya-bu-fahad. . . Allāhu akbar ‘alayk

“Finally your money is out, Abu Fahad; *Allāhu akbar ‘alayk*”

- (43) (A middle-aged man responds to a joke told by his friend).

Allāh yaqta’k wish h- al-qiṣṣah al-niktah

“*Allāh yaqta’k*; what a funny story”

- (44) (An old woman comments about a new car that her young son has just bought).

Allāh ykhissak ant w-ha-sayyarah al-shīmāh

“*Allāh ykhissak*; you and this ugly car”

- (45) (A middle-aged man comments about his wrong delivery of a gift).

Jeet misra’ li al-hārah jazān Allāh khayer wa bidal ma a’ū al-hadīyah li-bayt khālī a’ūtahā le- ma-abu al-jūrān

“I rushed to the neighborhood and, *jazān Allāh khayer*, instead of delivering the gift to my uncle’s house, I placed it at their neighbor’s house”

In (40), two middle-aged women converse in a humorous way about a funny story they heard in the past. In a joking comment about the story by her friend, the speaker uses the expression *ḥasbi Allāh ‘alayki*, which can be translated in this particular context as “Oh my God!” The expression is intended as a teasing way of blaming her friend for not forgetting an embarrassing story as time has passed. (She also teases her friend by calling her *al-dubba* “fatty”.) The expression *ḥasbi Allāh ‘alayki* used here is a shortened and modified form of a longer one, *ḥashbuna Allāh wa-n’am al-wakīl* ‘God alone is sufficient for us, and he is the best disposer of affairs.’ Using the longer expression would definitely not be a normative response here, based on its semantic meaning, along with the strong religious force prototypically associated with it in normal conversation. Additionally, the short form of this expression is often used in different situations as a way to express anger and disappointment, particularly in confrontations and disputes. In contrast, it appears here that *ḥasbi Allāh ‘alayki* has acquired a pragmatic value associated with humor and joking situations. It is used here as a positive politeness strategy to establish intimacy and rapport between the interlocutors. The use of such a form is always accompanied by certain contextualization cues, such as lengthened vowels and an exaggerated intonation, so that the precisely intended function can be identified and interpreted by the hearer. The same observation can be made about the use of *māshā’ Allāh* in (41) and *Allāhu akbar* in (42), where they are used to display humor, in

contrast to their inherent and typical meanings. In (43) and (44), the invocations *Allāh yaqta'k* and *Allāh ykhissak* are inserted by speakers to make fun of the addressees in a playful way, in contrast to their actual meanings. The speaker in (45) uses the expression *jazān Allāh khayr* as a self-denigrating joke by complaining about his intellectual shortcomings. As such, he replaces the commonly used object pronoun [-k] (as in *jazāk*) with the pronoun [-ni] to make himself the focus of the verbal self-denigration. The humorous force of religious expressions in these examples stems from the contradictions between their traditional uses and their transformed intended meanings.

The use of religious expressions in the examples above can be seen as a positive politeness marker with which interlocutors try to soften the FTAs in conversational joking situations and activities, such as expressing criticism, embarrassing the addressee, or showing potential contempt. Thus, they are used to save the positive face of the addressees by emphasizing shared background knowledge and values between the interactants (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 124). Furthermore, like the function of expressing ambiguity, the use of religious expressions in humor situations mostly occurs in close-knit communities with strong social relationships, such as close friends and family members.

Interestingly, religious expressions can also be employed for pejorative functions to show sarcasm and insult. Such a function is often used with interlocutors that have a certain social distance or only a slight relationship, such as strangers, and/or are lacking the contextualization cues that signal speakers' humorous intentions. Examples (46–49) illustrate how these functions are deployed:

- (46) (A middle-aged man comments about the behavior of a man named Muhammad while talking to a friend in a meeting).

Muhammad jazāh Allāh khayr ma tarak shay illa wa akalah

“*Muhammad*; may Allāh reward him no leftovers”

- (47) (A middle-aged woman reacts to the news that another woman, named Umm Azzam, unexpectedly travelled by airplane).

māshā' Allāh Umm Azzam sāfarāt ba al-tayyārah!

“*māshā' Allāh*; Umm Azzam travelled by plane!”

- (48) (A young girl compares her situation with the travelling done by a relative named Ahmad).

Allāh yakhlif 'alaynā Ahmad fi Ūrūbbā wa ḥinna bayn al-nakhl

“*Allāh yakhlif 'alaynā*; Ahmad is in Europe and we are in the middle of palm trees”

- (49) (A manager is criticizing the performance of some employees).

'amal ba'd h-al- muwazzafīn Allah bi-al-khayr la jawdah wa la inzībāt

“The work of some employees has, *Allah bi-al-khayr*, no quality or discipline”

The speaker in (46) uses the common expression *jazāh Allāh khayr* but not to express thankfulness and praise in reference to the absent other, Muhammad, as it is prototypically employed in normal conversation. Rather, he expresses in a sarcastic hyperbole his annoyance and criticism of Muhammad's gluttony to the extent that he claims Muhammad will have no leftovers in any meal he joins. As with all talk, much of the intended meaning here can be captured from the context, particularly what comes after the religious expression. The speaker clearly does not mean to praise the referent; he is trying to express annoyance about his behavior, as described explicitly in his subsequent criticism. From a pragmatic

perspective, this statement serves as a complaint where the use of *jazāh Allāh khayr* is meant to deepen the speaker's criticism and annoyance by the use of it as an ironic statement to its basic meaning.

Similarly, the speaker in (47) uses the expression *māshā' Allāh* to intensify her sarcasm regarding the referent, Umm Azzam, who, according to her evaluation, is not expected to travel by plane, based on her status and personal shortcomings. The employment of this expression as a sarcastic device is not clear from its prototypical meaning, and thus the speaker used a markedly pointed intonation as a contextual cue in pronouncing *māshā' Allāh* to signal to the hearer her sarcastic intent.

In (48), the expression *Allāh yakhlif 'alaynā* is used sarcastically to set up a playful frame before presenting a humorous comparison of the speaker's own situation with the absent Ahmad's situation. The interpretation of this function and the contextual cues employed signal that the intended meaning is deeply shaped by the speaker's cultural background and the social norms associated with the local use of religious expressions in everyday conversation.

In (49), the expression *Allāh bi-al-khayr* is used for a derogatory function to insult the referents by describing them as being stupid and lacking skills. This expression has clearly undergone a wide pragmatic drift in its meaning in Najdi Arabic from its prototypical use as a short form of greeting to a pragmatic meaning expressing contempt and ridicule to the referent(s).

4.10 Expressing respect and honor

The use of religious expressions may be extended to markers of respect and honor for an addressee in certain situations where politeness is required because of cultural considerations. The pragmatic use of religious expressions for this function is more evident when topics that are considered taboo are mentioned during a conversation. Brown and Levinson (1987) listed mentioning taboo topics as a potential threat to an addressee's positive-face wants because it shows that the speaker does not care about the addressee's feelings. In the examples below, speakers use religious expressions to save the addressee's positive face by showing respect and appreciation as a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships.

- (50) (A man narrates a story about something that happened to him during hajj in the past).

kint amshī wa-ashuf ḥimār Allāh ykrimikum giddami

"I was walking and I saw a donkey, *Allāh ykrimikum*, in front of me"

- (51) (A woman is giving directions to her brother for her new house).

shift maḥa al-ni'āl Allāh y'zik baiti allīb-janbuh

"You see the shoe shop, *Allāh y'zik*; my house is next to it"

As examples (50–51) illustrate, the religious expressions *Allāh ykrimikum* "May Allah honor you" and *Allāh y'zik* "May Allah regard you with greatest respect" are used when certain inappropriate topics are raised in a conversation; the expressions serve as markers of politeness to save the addressee's positive face and act as apologies to excuse the speaker from the embarrassment and disrespect that such topics may cause the addressee. In Najdi culture, mentioning the name of certain animals such as dogs, donkeys, and pigs during conversation, referring to objects such as shoes and sandals, or commenting on disgusting issues is considered inappropriate and offensive. If a speaker does so, the mention is commonly followed or preceded by certain religious formulas to weaken the negative and

offensive feelings associated with it. This function is definitely culturally bound. It is similar to an English-speaking person saying "Excuse my French" when the speaker crosses the line of propriety.

In certain cases, religious expressions are used to show respect for doing acts that are viewed as inappropriate or indecent in the local culture. For example, it is culturally unacceptable to shake hands with a person who is standing while you are sitting or while you are not facing each other. To avoid potential embarrassment to both the speaker and the addressee, certain religious expressions are employed as a means of showing politeness and restoring proper etiquette. The most frequent expression in these situations is "*zz Allāh maqāmik*" "May Allah honors your rank." From a pragmatic perspective, this use of religious expressions is considered a positive politeness strategy to show the addressee the required respect based on cultural norms.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that religious expressions – invocative formulas containing the name of Allah – are used in naturally occurring social interactions in Najdi Arabic society to serve a variety of pragmatic functions. Apart from their ritualistic and semantic value as expressions of worshipfulness, religious expressions are used by interlocutors as multipurpose interactional linguistic resources to communicate functions categorized in this article. Such functions are signaling the end of a conversation, persuading, mitigating and hedging, showing agreement and approval, reinforcing emphasis, expressing emotions, seeking protection from the evil eye, conveying skepticism and ambiguity, expressing humor and sarcasm, and expressing respect and honor. Such functions amply illustrate that religious expressions have pragmatically drifted from their traditional religiously based uses and prototypical meanings to be used in different ways in everyday Najdi Arabic speech to serve a wide range of pragmatic purposes based on interactional, social, and cultural considerations. The interpretation and use of these expressions are therefore considered in the particular situated contexts in which they have been employed, and are sensitive to social norms and expectations among the members of the linguistic community in question: Najdi Arabic speakers. Religious expressions in this article provide an ideal example of the importance of the analysis of speakers' intended meanings of their utterances rather than what the expressions might literally mean in those utterances. This is the essence of the study of pragmatics.

The current study contributes to the understanding of how religious expressions in social interactions in Najdi Arabic are used in culturally appropriate ways, interpreted pragmatically and influenced by contextual factors as they are interpreted in different contexts. Understanding this aspect of usage can be an integral part of the pragmatic knowledge required for the use and interpretation of these expressions, which are widely heard in Arabic social interactions in various contexts. This study also highlights the interplay between religion, culture, and language use. In particular, it sheds light on the social and cultural motivations that drive the extensive drifting in pragmatic function of religious expressions and lead them to acquire meanings beyond their traditionally prototypical meanings. Such findings can be useful for learners and teachers of Arabic as a first or second language, especially Najdi Arabic, and for those who engage in communication among Arabic dialect communities, Arabic translation and Arabic dialectology.

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Appendix

The data analyzed in this article is Romanized and transliterated based on the standards of ALA-LC (2012) defined by the American Association of Library- Library of Congress, as illustrated in the following table. This process is based on how utterances are pronounced in Najdi Arabic.

The Arabic letter	The Romanization symbol
<i>Consonants</i>	
أ	a*
ب	b
ت	t
ث	th
ج	j
ح	ḥ
خ	kh
د	d
ذ	dh
ر	r
ز	z
س	s
ش	sh
ص	ṣ
ض	ḍ
ط	ṭ
ظ	ẓ
ع	(ayn)
غ	gh
ف	f*
ق	q*
ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
هـ	h*
و	w
ي	y
<i>Long vowels</i>	
إ or آ	ā
و	ū
ي	ī
<i>Short vowels</i>	
ا	a
و	u
ي	i

Note(s): * Additional rules may apply depending on the context of some letters in the word (check ALC-LC, 2012 Arabic Romanization for additional information)

Corresponding author

Yousef Ibrahim al-Rojaie can be contacted at: yrojaie@qu.edu.sa

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