

Pragmatic Functions of Insha'Allah and Masha'Allah in Saudi Arabian Dialects: A Comparative Study of Hijazi and Ghamdi Varieties

Mohammad Ali Al-Ghamdi

Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics (CALL),

English Language Unit, Applied College, Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: MASAlGhamdi@uqu.edu.sa - <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1059-3631>

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Abstract: *The expressions Insha'Allah ("if God wills") and Masha'Allah ("what God has willed") in Saudi Arabic dialects function both as religious terms and pragmatic expressions. The expressions function beyond their basic meanings because speakers employ them to show politeness and to prevent direct refusal, and to convey ironic messages. The research examines the usage patterns of these expressions among speakers who speak Hijazi and Ghamdi dialects through interviews with 20 participants who make up equal numbers from both groups. The research demonstrates that Insha'Allah functions as a tool to make refusals less harsh, yet Masha'Allah serves to either praise or mock based on the speaker's tone and situational context. The analysis uses Grice's maxims and politeness theory to demonstrate how these expressions demonstrate cultural norms and religious identities in Saudi Arabic discourse, which enhances regional pragmatic understanding.*

Keywords: Pragmatic Functions, Saudi, cultural norms

INTRODUCTION

Through its function as a communication tool, language reflects both cultural values and social norms. The expressions *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* exist deeply within the religious and practical aspects of Saudi Arabians daily life. These two expressions stand out as significant examples in Saudi Arabian dialects. These expressions function beyond their common interpretation as religious markers because they help speakers to avoid commitment while also allowing them to express irony or show deference. Additionally, it is expected that their frequent use reflects both religious reverence and nuanced social interaction, especially within high-context societies like Saudi Arabia.

Research about these expressions mainly focuses on their theological and ritualistic aspects. The current pragmatic scholarship understands these expressions as part of Saudi Arabian's indirect communication strategies, which include politeness markers (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Jarrah & Alghazo,

2023; Meier, 1995). The research examines two dialects: Hijazi and Ghamdi because they represent different linguistic areas with diverse social dynamics. The Hijazi dialect dominates urban areas, including Jeddah and Mecca, but the Ghamdi dialect represents traditional speech patterns found in Al-Baha region.

The research applies Grice's (1990) maxims of conversation and politeness theory (Brown, 1987) as theoretical frameworks to examine the pragmatic functions of these two phrases in everyday speech. Semi-structured interviews form the research methodology to answer the following questions: How do speakers from Hijazi and Ghamdi dialects use *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* pragmatically? The usage patterns of these expressions differ between dialects and specific contexts. The research aims to uncover Saudi sociocultural values through the analysis of these expressions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grice's Maxims and Implicature

Through the Cooperative Principle in Grice (1990), researchers can understand how conversations generate meaning based on the way speakers follow or violate the four maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Exploring the multifaceted landscape of conversational implicature, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle serves as a valuable lens to understand these expressions. The Arabic expression *Insha'Allah* appears to break the Maxim of Quality because speakers sometimes make statements without planning to take action. This violation does not represent deceptive behavior. The practice serves as an approved cultural practice for politeness and avoidance because speakers and listeners understand each other through cultural norms (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Thomas, 2014). Such violations create what Grice called implicatures—unstated but understood meanings.

The connection between spoken words and their intended meaning serves as the basis for pragmatic interpretation. According to Levinson (1983), the core elements of contextual meaning extension include implicature and deixis and presupposition, and speech acts. The Saudi Arabic context requires special pragmatic strategies to understand indirect speech acts such as *Insha'Allah*.

Hall (1976) classifies Arab cultures as high-context societies, where much of the communicative meaning is derived from contextual and nonverbal cues rather than explicit verbal expression. In such cultures, speakers are expected to infer meaning based on shared assumptions and subtle signals. This framework can be used to observe that in Saudi Arabia—a society situated within the broader Arab cultural sphere—implicit communication is often favored over directness. Expressions such as *Insha'Allah* may be interpreted as a polite refusal, particularly when accompanied by nonverbal cues such as hesitation or avoidance of eye contact. These communicative patterns reflect a broader cultural orientation toward indirectness and pragmatic ambiguity (Grundy, 2008), which functions to maintain politeness and social harmony.

Politeness Theory and Indirectness

The politeness theory developed by Brown (1987) demonstrates that speakers employ positive politeness to establish rapport while using negative politeness to minimize the impact of face-threatening acts. In Saudi Arabian culture, the expression *Insha'Allah* operates as a social instrument to

practice negative politeness. Through this expression, speakers can delay their responsibilities while turning down requests without creating social difficulties. Meier (1995) explains that numerous non-Western cultures, including collectivist societies, permit indirectness because it produces superior social harmony than assertive behavior.

These observations match sociolinguistic perspectives, which demonstrate that politeness and indirectness operate both as strategic tools and cultural products. The execution of indirect speech acts varies between communities because their norms determine how people should handle face interactions and status dynamics and appropriate contextual behavior (Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

The Arabic rhetorical tradition, according to Abdul-Raof (2006), uses indirectness and metaphor alongside religious frameworks to construct human relationships. Through their verbal expressions, *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah*, speakers create protective barriers that defend the dignity of themselves and their listeners. These expressions bring significant pragmatic meaning to cultural situations that combine religious understanding with social courtesy and modesty.

Refusals and Pragmatic Transfer

Research on interlanguage pragmatics demonstrates that Arab students of English primarily use *Insha'Allah* as their main method to express refusals. The research conducted by Beebe et al. (1990) and Houck and Gass (2011) demonstrates that Arab learners employ indirect methods from their native language when speaking English, which leads to miscommunication during interactions with people from different cultures. The research conducted by Alghamdi and Alqarni (2019) demonstrates that *Insha'Allah* functions as a typical Saudi refusal strategy to make refusals softer without directly denying requests. According to Juraywi & Abdulaziz (2021), advanced Saudi EFL learners show pragmatic transfer through their use of religious and polite forms when refusing in English, even in non-religious contexts.

In light of the existing literature on pragmatic transfer, particularly in refusal strategies, one can observe a regional pattern among Arab learners. The research by Alrefaee & Al-Ghamdi (2019) found that Yemeni learners displayed refusal patterns which matched those of Saudi learners, thus confirming a regional pattern in Arab pragmatic behavior. Al-Kahtani (2005) supports these findings through his study, which compared Saudi and American refusal methods and proved that Saudis tend to use indirect statements or ambiguous or religious expressions.

Blum-Kulka (1991) notes that learners tend to transfer their native cultural preferences for indirectness and formulaic mitigation to second language settings, particularly in high-context cultures such as those found in the Arab world.

Sarcasm and Ambiguity in Masha'Allah

The traditional use of *Masha'Allah* to show admiration or prevent evil eye has evolved into a different meaning in contemporary Saudi Arabian dialects. According to Jarrah and Alghazo (2023), *Masha'Allah* functions as a sarcastic expression in everyday peer-to-peer interactions. Speakers use their tone and setting to convey irony instead of genuine appreciation when they say *Masha'Allah* after noticing obvious errors or exaggerations.

According to Grundy (2008) pragmatic expression depends on ambiguity because it allows speakers to be polite while expressing hidden criticism through implicit meanings. This concept is particularly obvious in the use of sarcasm and humor stands out most in Hijazi urban dialects because they allow people to disagree without violating social norms of politeness.

Dialectical Uniformity and Cultural Scripts

The research examines two specific dialects of the Arabic language, but *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* expressions show more uniformity than differences between them. The shared cultural and religious scripts between regions explain this phenomenon. These expressions function as verbal indicators that match cultural scripts to enable listeners to understand intended meanings through their knowledge of the situation.

Gudykunst et al. (1988) explain that cultural frameworks determine how people communicate with each other through indirect methods to protect their dignity and achieve social equilibrium. The expressions maintain consistent usage because they represent common communicative standards that exist beyond regional differences.

Upon examining the primary and ancillary details, it becomes clear that cultural-religious norms outweigh linguistic divergence. The religious values of humility and respect, together with indirectness in both dialects, create pragmatic uniformity. Gumperz (1982) states that speech communities use background assumptions together with contextual cues to establish their communicative conventions. Hall (1976) explains that Arab cultures function as high-context societies because they convey meaning through implication rather than direct statements. The pragmatic functions of *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* expressions match cultural expectations, which strengthens the dialectical consistency.

Jarrah and Alghazo (2023) found that Arabic regional speech varieties showed few pragmatic differences because cultural-religious functions played a greater role than linguistic regional differences. The research findings confirm previous studies because these expressions seem to stem from cultural factors more than from dialectical differences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study employs an interpretive approach to explore the pragmatic functions of the religious expressions *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* in spoken Saudi Arabic. This approach is consistent with the principles outlined by Flick (2022), who emphasizes the importance of understanding meaning through participants' subjective experiences and language use in natural contexts. The goal is to understand how these phrases are used not only for religious purposes but also for managing politeness, indirectness, and sarcasm in social communication. The study uses semi-structured interviews analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by Grice's (1990) theory of implicature, Brown's (1987) politeness theory, and Thomas's (2014) interactional pragmatics framework.

In this regard, restricting the focus to Hijazi and Ghamdi enhances internal validity. Focusing on two major dialect groups—Hijazi and Ghamdi—allowed the study to explore how speakers from urban and

rural backgrounds employ these expressions in similar or contrasting ways. This dialectal restriction enhances internal validity while capturing regional variation in pragmatic use.

Participants

The sample comprised 20 adult Saudi participants: 10 native speakers of the Hijazi dialect and 10 of the Ghamdi dialect. Participants were between the ages of 21 and 47 and were balanced for gender (10 males and 10 females). All participants had at least a high school education, and most had some postsecondary experience. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure dialectal clarity and representation. All participants self-identified as frequent users of *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* in daily communication.

The decision to focus on the Hijazi and Ghamdi dialects was both practical and theoretical. These dialects represent a meaningful contrast in terms of urban versus rural linguistic norms, yet they share cultural grounding in Islamic expressions. This allowed for an exploration of both consistency and nuance in pragmatic deployment.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic. Interviews were carried out in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and included 7 core questions about participants' understanding, usage, and contextual variation of the phrases *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah*. Interview questions were piloted and refined to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed and translated into English. Key expressions and quotes used in the findings section were cross-checked for dialectal authenticity and pragmatic clarity. The interviews were designed to elicit concrete examples, including moments of sarcasm, politeness, avoidance, and ambiguity.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify recurring patterns in the use and interpretation of the expressions. This analytical process also aligns with Gray's (2021) framework for extracting the meaning from qualitative data through iterative coding, theme development, and contextual interpretation. Initial coding was performed in the original Arabic, then themes were refined in English during the translation process. Codes included categories such as "polite avoidance," "sarcastic praise," "indirect refusal," "religious framing," and "face-saving."

Particular attention was paid to how the same expression could serve different functions depending on tone, setting, and relationship dynamics. The analysis was then triangulated with insights from the reviewed literature (Al-Juraywi & Abdulaziz, 2021; Brown, 1987; Grice, 1990) to ensure conceptual alignment and depth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research evaluates data from 20 Saudi speakers who use *Insha 'Allah* and *Masha 'Allah* as pragmatic expressions to discuss their language habits and dialects. The data analysis revealed four main themes, including (1) *Insha 'Allah* serves as a polite deferral tool and (2) *Masha 'Allah* functions as a sarcastic term and ambiguous statement, while (3) religious beliefs create identity markers and (4) speakers from both dialects maintain similar pragmatic rules. Each theme follows with supporting quotes from participants and references to the literature.

***Insha 'Allah*: Polite Avoidance and Deferral**

The survey results show that both dialect groups use *Insha 'Allah* to prevent refusing requests or making promises. The speaker breaks the Maxim of Quality to transmit another meaning that the receiver can understand, according to Grice (1990). As Levinson (1983) also notes, implicature arises when speakers rely on contextual clues and background knowledge to communicate meanings that are not clearly stated. The findings match Levinson's (1983) about negative politeness because speakers use indirectness to protect the face of their interlocutor, as Hijazi Participant 3 explained:

Hijazi Participant 3 remarked:

"Sometimes I say 'Insha 'Allah' just to avoid embarrassing the person, even though I know I won't go."

Ghamdi Participant 6 shared:

"If I don't want to say no directly, I use 'Insha 'Allah' and let it go."

The research supports Alghamdi & Alqarni's (2019) findings, which show that Saudi speakers use indirect language and polite expressions to fulfill social duties. *Insha 'Allah* enables speakers to express their indecision without directly refusing the request from the interlocutor. The study of Meier (1995) shows how indirect communication strengthens relationships in communities that follow collectivist principles. This also corresponds with Blum-Kulka's (1991) findings on cross-cultural pragmatics, where indirectness in speech acts; especially refusals, is often used to mitigate imposition and preserve social harmony, particularly in collectivist cultures.

Hijazi Participant 5 added:

"When my manager asks about a project I haven't finished, I say 'Insha 'Allah' because I don't want to explain the delay."

In the same breath, it shows how speakers manage social obligations through culturally encoded language. This reflects a broader sociolinguistic understanding that indirectness is not merely a linguistic strategy but a culturally guided norm. In many speech communities, such expressions signal politeness, face-saving, and mutual respect rather than indecision or ambiguity (Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

In organizational settings, the expression *Insha 'Allah* shields speakers while they handle their responsibilities. The examples demonstrate how speakers utilize this expression to protect themselves and soften their tone according to Hall's (1976) high-context communication

principles. According to Thomas (2014) politeness requires mutual understanding of unspoken meaning, and *Insha'Allah* functions as an effective tool in this context.

***Masha'Allah*: Sarcasm and Double Meaning**

Participants revealed that *Masha'Allah* functions as a sarcastic phrase in addition to its traditional role of showing appreciation and gratitude, especially when younger speakers use it. The dual nature of the phrase matches Grundy's (2008) theory, which states that audio indicators, along with contextual information, can produce major meaning shifts.

Ghamdi Participant 8 stated:

"If someone is an hour late, I say 'Masha'Allah 'alayk!' but he knows I'm being sarcastic."

Hijazi Participant 7 shared:

"When my friend brags too much, I say 'Masha'Allah' but with a tone that clearly signals sarcasm."

The pragmatic ambiguity described by Jarrah & Alghazo (2023) is evident because one phrase can be interpreted as admiring or ironic, or passive in criticism, according to delivery style. The speaker intentionally violates the Maxim of Quality to create an implicature as described in Grice (1990). Consequently, the literature discusses how expressions with religious origins can evolve into pragmatic tools of subtle criticism. The sarcastic application of *Masha'Allah* enables people to use sacred language for social evaluation through polite words..

Ghamdi Participant 10 also noted:

"Even when I enjoy something small, I say 'Masha'Allah' in a funny way, not seriously."

The above answers show that *Masha'Allah* is a religious expression which is not only a prayer but also a linguistic device for showing one's linguistic skills. In agreement with Félix-Brasdefer (2008), this shows that pragmatic competence in Saudi Arabic is a matter of controlling tone, timing, and context.

Religious Framing and Identity

Some participants agreed that these expressions still have religious origins despite their non-literal use. People use it to express solidarity, humility, and to show one's belief and identity. This supports Alrefaee & Al-Ghamdi (2019) in their findings on pragmatic transfer based on deeply-rooted cultural norms.

Hijazi Participant 9 explained:

"If I see a beautiful child, I must say 'Masha'Allah' even if I don't know the parents."

Ghamdi Participant 2 emphasized:

"I can't respond to good news without saying 'Insha'Allah' or 'Masha'Allah'. It's part of our religion."

In summary, it is crucial to affirm that these expressions serve as both religious affirmations and social markers of identity. It is clear that the use of these expressions is connected to two aspects: the community standards and personal faith. This is supported by Gumperz (1982) and Hall (1976), who note that these linguistic routines are part of the “cultural script” that controls social interaction. The religious aspect is retained even in cases where the expressions are used in an informal way or in an ambiguous manner, in the process of identity display and moral alignment. The religious invocation in everyday speech confuses the distinction between the religious and the social use of language, which highlights the expressions' place in Saudi culture.

Dialectal Consistency with Pragmatic Flexibility

A sociolinguistic analysis demonstrates that indirect speech functions according to cultural standards instead of being a simple linguistic device. Expressions in many social communication systems serve to maintain politeness as well as face-saving and mutual respect rather than showing indecision or ambiguity (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* appear in both Hijazi and Ghamdi dialects throughout the study without any changes in their usage despite their unique phonological and lexical characteristics. The speakers in both groups used these expressions to achieve similar pragmatic functions since *Insha'Allah* served to express politeness and defer commitments or soften refusals, whereas *Masha'Allah* conveyed admiration or deflected envy or masked sarcasm. Their functional purposes were independent of dialect since they derive from common social-cultural standards instead of regional linguistic characteristics.

One should highlight that the transition from purely religious invocation to flexible pragmatic use reflects sociolinguistic adaptability. This convergence may stem from deeply embedded cultural values that prioritize harmony and shared religious norms.

Hijazi Participant 4 commented:

"We all use 'Insha'Allah' the same way, but the accent might differ."

Similarly, Ghamdi Participant 1 said:

"The intention is the same, even if the pronunciation varies; 'Masha'Allah' always carries respect."

Effective communication in collectivist high-context cultures depends more on mutual understanding than on clear messages, according to Gudykunst et al. (1988). Jarrah and Alghazo (2023) highlight that the socioreligious functions of *Masha'Allah* expressions surpass dialectal variations because these expressions function as cultural constants that generate layers of politeness and deference and social alignment between speakers. Félix-Brasdefer & Koike (2012) support this finding by stating that culturally embedded pragmatic formulas can stay consistent across linguistically diverse environments because they function as cultural cohesion markers above linguistic conventions.

Overall, the analysis shows Saudi Arabian speakers utilize common pragmatic tools across all dialects. The speakers displayed some minor variations in phonetic and rhythmic speech patterns but maintained identical communicative functions. These religious expressions have developed into socially encoded cues that serve purposes that exceed their original meanings to achieve cultural and interpersonal objectives.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the pragmatic use of *Insha'Allah* and *Masha'Allah* among Saudi speakers from the Hijazi and Ghamdi dialect regions. Through qualitative interviews with 20 participants, the analysis revealed that these expressions serve rich and nuanced communicative functions far beyond their literal religious meanings. They are used to soften refusals, delay commitments, express sarcasm, and reinforce identity. These findings align with the broader literature on politeness theory (Brown, 1987), Gricean maxims (Grice, 1990), and the sociopragmatic functions of formulaic expressions in high-context cultures (Abdul-Raof, 2006; Hall, 1976).

Participants consistently used *Insha'Allah* as a form of polite avoidance, enabling them to refuse or delay actions without causing offense. This reflects both a pragmatic and cultural understanding of indirect speech. Meanwhile, *Masha'Allah* was shown to possess dual functions: admiration and sarcasm—depending on context, tone, and shared background knowledge. The data also confirmed that despite dialectal differences between Hijazi and Ghamdi speakers, there is a unified pragmatic system guiding the use of these expressions.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on Arabic pragmatics by offering dialect-specific insights while maintaining cross-cultural relevance. It confirms that religious phrases can evolve into sophisticated pragmatic tools embedded in both linguistic habit and social expectation. Conversely, certain learners may interpret these expressions differently based on exposure, age, or digital communication norms.

Future research may build on this foundation by comparing additional Saudi dialects (e.g., Najdi or Shargawi) or exploring the perception of these expressions among non-native Arabic speakers. Investigating how these expressions function in written communication or social media contexts may also shed light on their pragmatic transformation in digital spaces.

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Data Availability Statement: Data supporting the findings of this research can be obtained from the author upon request. However, the data are not openly shared due to privacy and ethical considerations.

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