

# Social and Religious Functions Performed by the Ritual Speech Act of “*ya Allah*” in Iranian Interactions

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## Abstract

The current study was carried out to investigate the functions of the ritual speech act of ‘*ya Allah*’ (literally meaning ‘O God’) employed by Iranians in social interactions. To this end, sixty-two Persian native speakers of different age groups, ranging from 35 to 85, of both genders were observed in 250 natural situations such as daily interactions, gatherings, public or private places and local TV programs until the saturation point. Their verbal interactions were recorded, transcribed and later analyzed. Moreover, in order to corroborate the representativeness of samples, ten people were interviewed and were asked directly when they utter ‘*ya Allah*’. It was concluded that the speech act may be employed in either religious or non-religious contexts to serve two major functions: to *ask for permission* (to enter a place) or *call for an action*. Moreover, the two major functions of the speech act in question may be broken down into nine minor functions: (1) Declaring one’s entering a house/apartment/orchard, tent or the like to be allowed or welcomed by the owner/insiders; (2) Warning intimate women to observe their *hijab*, when a strange man is to enter; (3) Entering a place in general, especially employed by men; (4) Being late to join community prayers; (5) Greeting someone who has just joined a group; (7) Commencing an action; (8) Asking someone to hurry up and (9) Doing something difficult with the help of others unanimously.

**Keywords:** Speech Act, Ritual Speech Acts, ‘*ya Allah*’, Social Functions, Religious Functions

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## **1. Introduction**

Speaking a language implies more than articulating a number of grammatically and semantically correct sentences. Individuals do not produce utterances in a vacuum; almost any linguistic message presupposes some receiver or receivers on the other end of the line, intending to bring about some changes in the minds and attitudes of the receivers or in the immediate environment, though the change intended might be slight or striking. Due to the fact that, in our daily social interactions, any verbal message produced by a speaker normally calls for an appropriate reaction or response on the part of the receiver, it is of paramount importance to learn about and investigate how different speech acts conveying senses beyond their lexical meanings are rightly understood and appropriately reacted to by interlocutors in their social encounters, a point which further underscores the fact that language is not merely limited to a knowledge of semantics or syntax (Schegloff, 2007). That is almost what pragmatics is concerned with, mostly demanding speakers' communicative competence to exchange messages in a socially appropriate manner rather than their linguistic competence alone. For instance, an offer should be appropriately followed by either an acceptance or polite refusal, a greeting needs to be responded to by another greeting, and so forth (Gisladdottir, Chwilla, Schriefers, & Levinson, 2012).

In nearly all interactions, we interpret what the speakers say based on an inference of what they are likely to have intended to convey to us or how they expect "us to 'take' (or interpret the function of) what they say" (Yule, 1996, p. 132). In Widdowson's words, "you may *deem* me to have said or written something disrespectful, or rude, or ironic, or racially biased, but to do so you have to make assumptions about my intentions, which, in accordance with normal pragmatic practice, can only be partially signaled in the text"

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(Widdowson, 2004, p. 13). Widdowson explains that such assumptions are made on the basis of our conception of the world, our social and individual reality, our values, beliefs, prejudices, or, to put it in one word, on the basis of our *discourse*.

John Austin, who is considered as the ‘father of pragmatics’ (Thomas, 1995), believed that language tells us more than the meaning of its words and phrases (Austin, 1962). Austin “was convinced that we do not just use language to *say* things (to make statements), but to *do* things (perform actions)” (Thomas, 1995, p. 31; emphasis in the original). Such ideas about the nature of ordinary language by Austin marked the birth of the speech act theory.

Different definitions have been provided for ‘Speech Act’ by scholars and researchers:

- Speech act, which might be a single word or several words, is an utterance which serves a communicative purpose; that is, when we say things we actually perform an act (Austin, 1962).
- A speech act is a “functional unit in communication” (Cohen, 1996, p. 384; Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 498).
- Speech act consists of “‘actions’ such as ‘requesting’, ‘commanding’, ‘questioning’ and ‘informing’” (Yule, 1996, p. 132).
- “Speech acts are actions performed through words” (Stapleton, 2004, p. 9).
- Speech acts are “patterned, routinized phrases used regularly to perform a variety of functions” (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005, p. 3).
- “A speech act is an action performed by means of language” (Al-Khatani, 2005, p. 35).
- Speech acts are “functions of language, such as complaining, thanking, apologizing, refusing, requesting and inviting” (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 288).

As it was mentioned earlier, the theory of speech acts, first proposed by Austin in 1962, assumed that when *saying* something, individuals are in fact *doing* something, or in Austin's own words "to consider from the ground up how many senses there are in which to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something and even by saying something we do something" (Austin, 1962, p. 67). That is, individuals perform acts such as making a request, promising, offering or apologizing when they produce the relevant utterances.

As Ballmer and Brennenstuhl (1981, pp. 53-54) state, Austin classified "related and overlapping speech acts" into five groups:

- Verdictives: When a jury, arbitrator or umpire gives a verdict (e.g., assess, value, analyze, grade).
- Exercitives: When power, right or influence is exercised and a decision is made "in favor of or against a certain course of action" (e.g., offer, advise, pardon, withdraw).
- Commissives: When the speaker is committed to a certain course of action (promise, undertake, swear, vow).
- Behabitives: When there is a reaction or an attitude to other people's behavior (e.g., applaud, welcome, congratulate, or criticize).
- Expositives: When our utterances are made plain to "fit into the course of an argument or a conversation" (e.g., correct, revise, mention, remark).

Based on the theory of speech acts, *language act* is the minimal unit of communication of the language, rather than sentences or other expressions; in other words, human language consists of actions (Croft, 1994). According to Austin, there are three types of such acts performed in a language; *Locutionary* acts that deal with vocalizing a sentence, *illocutionary acts* which consider what is intended by the utterance, and *perlocutionary acts* that deal with the

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consequential effects of the utterance on thoughts, feelings or actions of the addressee (Croft, 1994).

Another distinction that Austin made in the field of speech acts is that of direct and indirect ones. The direct speech acts are the ones that convey the intended meaning directly (e.g., *Can I use your cellphone?*). In *direct speech acts* (DSAs), the type of the utterance and the function it serves are directly correlated; therefore, utterances such as 'Give me your cellphone, please', are considered as direct ones (Stapleton, 2004). *Indirect speech acts* (ISAs), on the other hand, do not directly express what the speaker means (e.g., *I wonder whether I could use your cellphone*) (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005).

Exploiting the works of Austin, Searle (1975) classified speech acts into five widely accepted general categories of (a) *representatives* (an assertion of a proposition, e.g., asserting or concluding), (b) *directives* (a request that the addressee do something or perform an action, e.g., requesting or ordering), (c) *commissives* (a commitment by the speaker to perform an action, e.g., promising or threatening), (d) *expressives* (an expression of speaker attitude towards a state of affairs, e.g., thanking or condoling), and (e) *declarations* (a speech act which by virtue of being uttered causes a change in the world, e.g., excommunicating, declaring war, marrying or firing) (Croft, 1994, p. 460; Ellis, 2008, p. 160; Morady Moghaddam, 2012).

The speech act of '*ya Allah*' appears to fall in the category of 'directives' which call for an action on the side of the addressee. '*ya Allah*' is employed by Persian speakers frequently and seems to serve various functions in different contexts of use. Therefore, it seems that an investigation into the role of this frequently used speech act in Iranian social interactions would be worthy by itself and may contribute something new in the field of pragmatics.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

The current research was carried out with the participation of 62 male and female Persian native speakers of different age groups, ranging from 35 to 85, in Mashhad, a city in northeast Iran. As the researchers had decided to observe Persian native speakers in natural situations and the purpose was merely spotting the instances of the use of '*ya Allah*' in any natural communication setting to determine the functions for which the speech act is employed, there seemed to be no need to set limits to the age range or gender of the participants.

### **2.2. Procedure of Data Collection**

The process of data collection started in May 2013, lasted for four months, and ended in August 2013. To explore the situations in which people utter '*yaAlla*', the researchers collected the data through recording people's voices in different contexts.

The participants were observed in 250 natural situations including daily interactions, friendly gatherings, public and private places, and so forth, and were informed in advance that their voices would be recorded for research purposes. When the speech act of '*ya Allah*' was employed by the participants in various contexts and recorded by the researchers, in order to corroborate the representativeness of the samples, ten people from among the participants were also randomly interviewed to talk directly about other contexts where '*ya Alla*'; according to the participants, would be expected to be uttered.

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The process of data collection continued to the point of saturation, that is, when the researchers felt that no additional data was added to the previous information already collected.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

The recorded data were first transcribed, translated into English and later analyzed qualitatively to examine instances where ‘*ya Allah*’ was utilized by speakers in order to come up with the functions performed by the speech act under investigation in Persian.

The recordings were originally conducted merely on the basis of spotting any instances of uttering ‘*ya Allah*’ by the participants in natural interactions. Then, after reviewing the recorded situations, different uses of the speech act under investigation were categorized and labeled in terms of the functions they performed in each setting. Dropping the redundant instances from the data. The collected data was further put under scrutiny to find out whether the participants’ gender or age could play any significant role in the use of the speech act in question or not.

### **3. Results**

After analyzing the collected data, nine major categories of social and/or religious functions performed by the speech act of ‘*ya Allah*’ in Persian were identified. A brief description of each category follows:

#### **(a) *Entering a place***

*Situation:* A plumber rings the doorbell, the landlord opens the door, and they both enter and say ‘*ya Allah*’ one after the other.

Landlord: (In Persian) *salam. khoshoomadin. befarmaeen.*  
(Good afternoon. Welcome. Please come in.)

Plumber: *Salam. Mamnoon. ya Allah!*  
(Hello; thanks. *ya Allah!*)

Landlord: *ya Allah! befarmaeen.*  
(Come in. *ya Allah!*)

Since, according to Islamic teachings, not every man is regarded as every woman's *mahram* (that is, *intimate*, a woman's very close relative male, before whom she is religiously allowed to appear without wearing *hijab*)--except for some immediate family members--when a male stranger wants to enter a place, he should say '*ya Allah*' in a loud voice in order to signal a warning to the women inside to take care of their *hijab*. In the above-mentioned situation, a serviceman is entering someone's house and although the landlord asks him to come in, he utters '*ya Allah*'.

#### **(b) *Arriving late for community prayers***

*Situation:* A man enters a mosque, where the community prayer has already started, with the *Imam* (the praying leader) standing in front of the worshippers. The man intends to join before it is too late.

Latecomer (in a rather loud voice): *ya Allah!*

Muslims sometimes say their prayers individually, but they frequently prefer to say their prayers collectively, in a congregation, the latter form of praying being emphasized by religious teachings. To say their prayers collectively, people go to holy places such as mosques or holy shrines and stand in lines led by a praying leader. As with any other collective ritual, congregation prayers must start and finish all together. If someone is late for a community praying, they often say "*ya Allah*" so loudly that they are heard by the *Imam*



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before standing in line. As the perlocutionary effect, the praying leader deliberately prolongs uttering the *Qur'anic* verses so that the latecomer is able to join before everybody bows to their knees, the reason being that, according to Islamic rites, one cannot join after the community has bowed to their knees and has to wait until the next phase (Rek'at) of praying starts- if, of course, it is not the last Rek'at. By Rek'at we mean major divisions in each praying session. For example, the Morning Prayer consists of two Rek'ats, the Mid-day one of four Rek'ats, and so on.

**(c) *Greeting someone recently arriving***

*Situation:* Two men are sitting in a real estate agency waiting for a third party to join them to sign a contract.

Owner	(In Persian) <i>Az rahnesht kam mikonam age khast.</i> (I can give a discount in the amount of mortgage.)
Renter (entering)	<i>Salam.</i> (Hello).
Real estate agent (standing up)	<i>Ya Allah, salam aleikom.</i> ( <i>Ya Allah</i> , hello to you.)

As a social tradition among Iranians, when an individual, or a group of people, is/are already seated in a place and another individual, or a group of people, enters/enter, those who are seated immediately stand up and at the same time usually say, “ya Allah”, to pay respect to the person/people who enters/enter. The newcomer/newcomers ordinarily bows/bow a little, putting their arms on the chest to pay tribute, inviting everybody to sit down by saying, “befarmaid”, literally meaning, “please be seated”.

**(d) Commencing an action**

*Situation:* Two friends are discussing some business problems and then decide to go and meet another friend.

1<sup>st</sup> man (In Persian) *In ke jush zadan nadare, hala karo be koja resoonde?*

Don't fret. How much of the job has he accomplished?)

2<sup>nd</sup> man *Hichja! Yek divaro kaj zade, bordam neshoonesh dadam agha behesh barkhorde dige nemiad!*

(Just a little! He built a wall and it was lopsided; I showed him the flawed wall, but he took offence and didn't come to work anymore!)

1<sup>st</sup> man *Agha ye Vakili kolli mohandes tu dasto baleshe pasho mirim behesh migim joor mikone vasat.*

(Mr. Vakili knows a lot of civil engineers; let's ask him and he may send one for you).

2<sup>nd</sup> man *Hast alan?*

(Is he available now?)

1<sup>st</sup> man *Are, daftareshe pasho berim, ya Allah.*

(Yes, he's in his office; let's go, *ya Allah*.)

2<sup>nd</sup> man *Ya Allah.*

Since Muslims mostly rely on God in any difficult situation, when they are about to start an action in which they need luck/help, they commence it in the name of God to indirectly ask for his help and supervision. In this situation, the second man is complaining about a work problem and seems to be hopeless; the other man suggests asking for help from a friend. They get ready to leave and say '*ya Allah*'.

**(e) Asking someone to hurry up**

*Situation:* A father is asking his son to get ready for a trip since it is getting late.

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Father (In Persian): *Mage parvazet sa'at e do nist?*  
(Isn't your flight at 2 o'clock?)

Son *Chera.*  
(Yeah, it is.)

Father *Pas pasho dige. sa'at yeke. Diret mishe pasho! Yalla!* [ya Allah!]  
(So come on! It's one o'clock; you'll be late; get ready. Come on.)

Similar to (d), where '*ya Allah*' was uttered to start an action, sometimes in order to encourage another person to start doing something or to ask them to hurry up, a speaker says '*ya Allah*'. In conversational Persian, the term '*ya Allah*' with this function has been reduced to '*yalla*', being almost equal in sense to the English phrasal verb "come on" in similar contexts, and is sometimes used to give orders mostly when the interlocutors are not of the same power status:

<b>Example 1</b>	<b>Teacher to a child</b>
<b>Persian</b>	Chera ashghalato rikhti kenare sat!? Bodo jameshun kon. <i>Yalla!</i>
<b>English</b>	Why did you throw the trash by the bin? Go and clean it up. <i>Come on!</i>
<b>Example 2</b>	<b>Foreman to factory workers</b>
<b>Persian</b>	Chie zolzadin be man? <i>Yalla</i> bargardin sar e karetun.
<b>English</b>	Why are you staring at me? Go back to your work. <i>Come on!</i>

**(f) Declaring one's entering a house/apartment/orchard, tent etc. to be allowed or welcomed by the owner/insiders**

*Situation:* A woman is entering a neighbor's house; the door is already open and tries to ask for permission by calling the landlady.

Neighbor (In Persian) *Mahin khanum?*  
(Dear Mahin?)

- (No answer.)

Neighbor *Kasi khune nist? Ya Allah!*

(Nobody's home? *Ya Allah!*)

Landlady *eh, befarmaeen. Bebakshid tu ye balkon budam; nafahmidam.*

(Oh, come in. Sorry. I was in the balcony and didn't hear you.)

Sometimes '*ya Allah*' is not used for the concern about '*hijab*' and being '*mahram*' (that is, being religiously intimate) and is merely employed to call for a person's attention who is inside or ask for their permission to enter. In this situation, a woman is entering her neighbor's house, and since she does not receive any answer regarding permission, she utters '*ya Allah*' to draw the attention of the landlady.

**(g) *Doing something difficult with the help of others unanimously***

*Situation:* A group of men are about to pick up a heavy pot.

Man (In Persian) *Ye dasti begirin bizahmat.*

(Please give a hand.)

Everyone *Ya Allah.*

(*Ya Allah.*)

When some people need assistance in doing something difficult, especially picking up something heavy, they mostly start it by saying '*ya Allah*' in chorus to bring into alignment everybody's effort to lift the heavy object.

**(h) *Warning intimate women to observe hijab, when a strange man is to enter***

*Situation:* Some immediate family members are sitting around in the hall and, all of a sudden, a man who is not *mahram* (religiously intimate) to the women of the family enters the house, being accompanied with an intimate member of the family. In such a context, the intimate man (in the following context, the husband) utters '*ya Allah*' in a loud voice to signal that he is being accompanied with a non-intimate man.

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Husband (In Persian) *Ya Allah*.

Wife (As a nonverbal response or the perlocutionary effect of the speech act, she immediately wears a *chador* or leaves the hall in order not to be seen by the non-intimate man and may get back after a few minutes wearing her *hijab* to greet the newcomer, if she is supposed to do that, of course.)

## **4. Conclusion**

This study intended to probe into the ritual speech act of '*ya Allah*' in Iranian religious and social interactions and investigate the functions it performs in various contexts. To this end, the speech act in question was scrutinized and elaborated on as employed by Persian speakers in different social contexts.

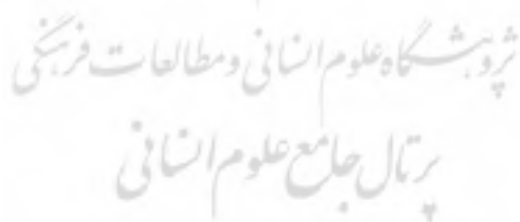
By analyzing the observed situations, where the speech act of '*ya Allah*' has been uttered by the participants of the research, it can be concluded that- despite the religious literal sense of the utterance as well as contrary to the popular understanding of the speech act under investigation- it may serve both religious and nonreligious/social functions in various contexts, as they were described and discussed above in details.

Regarding the religious functions of the utterance, as it was discussed above, we reiterate that categories a) entering a place, and b) arriving late for community prayers, both deal with the primarily ritualistic roles the speech act of '*ya Allah*' can play in situations concerned with religious rituals- that is, either warning women of a stranger male's entering a residing place to indirectly ask them to observe *hijab* or declaring one's joining the community praying, when the worshipper is late.

Taking into account the nonreligious/social functions of the utterance, we pointed out that one may employ '*ya Allah*' to greet somebody who has just arrived and joined a primarily friendly gathering, at the same time that they

stand up or, at least, take a half-standing posture to pay respect to the newcomer. Individuals may also use the speech act to initiate an action; that is, when they are about to do something usually accompanied by other people. Moreover, the utterance may be employed when asking others to hurry up in performing a task, specifically employed by a socially more powerful member- for example, parents addressing their own children, teachers addressing their pupils, foremen addressing workers, and the like.

All the above-mentioned situations may be regarded as social interactions in which a ritual speech act originating from religious beliefs has assumed a social function. The reason why an originally religious utterance can as well assume such social functions may be explained by taking into account the fact that, generally speaking, one cannot draw a borderline between people's religious lives and their social lives, especially in mostly religious communities like that of Iran. The two functions seem to be so intertwined that one cannot tell which is which.



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