

# Prayers as forms of speech act modification in Saudi Hijazi Arabic

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## Abstract

Prayers (God invocations) are fixed religious terms that are highly frequent and multifunctional in casual and formal conversations among native speakers of Arabic. Examples such as *'Inshallah'* (God Willing) and *'Jazak Allah kbair'* (may Allah reward you) are specific to Arabic in a way that makes them difficult to translate into other languages (Shammas, 2005). Muslim societies, even the ones whose first language is not Arabic, use them in their everyday speech. They are also found to be used by non-Muslim native Arabic speakers, suggesting that such phrases are widely used among Arabs regardless of their religious affiliations (Clift & Helani, 2010). Such expressions were identified by different names in the literature; examples include “Allah lexicon” (Morrow, 2006), “God-wishes” (Ferguson, 1983), “Arabic God-phrases” (Welji, 2012), and “religious formulas” (Migdadi & Badarneh, 2013). They will be referred to as prayers in this paper. In addition to their typical function as religious expressions, prayers have been demonstrated in pragmatic studies (Al-Khalifa, 2024; Alqahtani, 2024; Al-Rojaie, 2021; Al-Saeedi, 2019) to be strategically employed as linguistic tactics to achieve politeness. Drawing its theoretical background from Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962), this study aims to determine whether these prayers are used in some or all of the speech act types created by Searle (1969). These are classified as “Assertives” (e.g., statements, conclusions, claims, reports); “Directives” (e.g., requests, commands, suggestions, giving advice); “Commissives” (e.g., promises, offers, vows, guarantees); “Expressives” (e.g., thanks, apologies, congratulations, compliments, praises, curses); and “Declarations” (e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”). The study will also investigate the main pragmatic functions/illocutionary roles of prayers within various speech act sets in the speech of Arabic native speakers, particularly in Saudi Hijazi Arabic.

Keywords: Speech acts, prayers, Saudi, Arabic, politeness

## Methodology

The study used a mixed-method approach, combining data from discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and naturally occurring conversations among Saudi Hijazi Arabic speakers in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. A total of 180 participants, balanced by gender and age, contributed to the study. Instances of prayers embedded in speech acts were identified and analysed to determine their type according to Searle’s classification, their pragmatic functions, and the speech act type in which prayers most frequently occurred.

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## Data results

Table 1. Prayers in Saudi Hijazi Arabic.

	Expression in (Hijazi Arabic)	Translation	Speech Act Type	Pragmatic / Illocutionary Role
1	السلام عليكم / وعليكم السلام	Peace be upon you / And upon you be peace	Expressive 220	Expressing social attitude/ritualised greeting/positive politeness/solidarity
2	الله يوفقك	May God grant you success	Expressive 139	Expressing wishes/positive politeness/ equivalent to “Good Luck”
3	في أمان الله	In God’s protection	Expressive 57	Expressing positive politeness/ entrusting listener to God/ending a conversation
4	الله يسهل الأمور	May God make things easy	Expressive 1	Expressing uncertainty and doubt but wishing and hoping for the best
5	الله يسعدك / الله بخليك / لا يهينك	May God make you happy/ preserve you /not humiliate you	Expressive 267	Expressing polite appeal to H after a request in the imperative form/ often replace “please” /usually come after a directive (request) to soften it
6	أعوذ بالله	I seek refuge in God	Expressive 31	Expressing disapproval and contempt
7	الله يقرئك	May God disgust you	Expressive 1	Expressing insult and disgust
8	الله يقطع شكلك	May God cut off your looks	Expressive 1	Expressing joking and playfulness/teasing H using humour
9	قول والله	Say, by God	Directive 1	Requesting H to confirm and strengthen truth claim by using God’s name
10	سبحان الله / بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم	Glory be to God / In the name of God, most Merciful, most Gracious	Expressive 14	Expressing being surprised/ showing astonishment

11	جزاك الله خيرا	May God reward you (with good)	Expressive 76	Expressing Gratitude/ Religious thank you/ appreciation/positive politeness
12	الحمد لله والله ما في صديق زيك	Praise be to God, by God there's no friend like you	Expressive 1	Expressing gratitude / Appreciation for H's friendship/positive politeness
13	والله	By God	Assertive 198	Adding "wallah" reinforces the assertive by expressing the speaker's commitment to the truth of what they say, similar to saying "I swear" in English.
14	الله أكبر عليهم	God is greater (than them)	Expressive 10	Expressing disdain/ complaint/anger/ injustice/condemnation
15	ما شاء الله عليك / ما شاء الله بسم الله عليك	What God has willed/God's name on you	Expressive 92	Expressing compliment/ balances praise with protection from envy (evil eye)
16	الله يذكرها بالخير	May God remember her with good	Expressive 1	Expressing positive politeness/showing blessing for someone absent
17	إن شاء الله (affirmative use) بإذن الله	God willing/ I promise you by God's permission	Commissive 426	Promising/agreeing and guaranteeing H to do something/affirmation/commitment to a future action
18	الله الله روعة	Repeating God's name	Expressive 1	Expressing amazement/ praise/positive politeness

## Conclusion

Analysis of the data in Table 1 revealed 1,534 total occurrences of prayers, which were distributed across four of Searle's five speech act types. This distribution was predominantly characterized by Expressives (909 occurrences), Commissives (426 occurrences), and Assertives (198 occurrences), with a minimal presence of Directives (1 occurrence). There were no representations of "Declarations" in the data. This pattern suggests that the Saudi Hijazi prayers' main pragmatic function is overwhelmingly centred on the performance of socio-emotional and volitional acts. These acts encompass a broad range of interactional strategies, including: positive attitudes (such as expressing solidarity,

thanks, promises, compliments, praise, affirmation, care, respect, and love), mitigation (of the force of direct requests), protective actions (seeking refuge from the evil eye), and the expression of diverse emotions (including wishes, hopes, sympathy, consolation, disgust, contempt, humour, anger, and injustice). The central pragmatic function of these prayers, when viewed through the lens of politeness theory, is to act primarily as positive politeness markers. This is achieved by demonstrating solidarity, claiming common ground with the hearer, and building rapport, rather than serving as negative politeness markers.

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