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Pragmatic Functions Underlying the Use of *Inshallah* ‘God Willing’ in Kuwaiti Arabic

Seham Al-Abdullah 

Language Centre, College of Business Studies, the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training,
Al-Ardiya 92400, Kuwait

ABSTRACT

This study adopts a pragmatic approach to analyze the functions of the religious expression *inshallah* (‘God willing’) in Kuwaiti Arabic. It employs politeness theory to explore its role as a politeness strategy. Data were collected from recordings of naturally occurring conversations and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that *inshallah* is a versatile communicative strategy, serving various functions, including conveying respect, gratitude, sarcasm, challenge, surprise, disapproval, warning, and promises. These diverse communicative functions suggest that speakers of Kuwaiti Arabic ascribe new meanings to the expression that extend beyond its literal interpretation. Furthermore, the analysis highlights its positive sociocultural functions, revealing its role as a strategy of positive politeness across various contexts. Despite its function as a face-enhancing strategy, *inshallah* also operates as a face-threatening act. This study contributes to the literature on the functions of *inshallah* across various Arabic dialects. It also contributes to politeness theory, as many instances of *inshallah* can be analyzed through this theoretical framework. However, while the theory accounts for the use of *inshallah* in expressing solidarity and fostering social bonding, its conventional framework inadequately addresses the application of what is typically recognized as a face-enhancing strategy when it is employed in a manner that threatens face. The data presented in this study challenge the assertion made by the theory regarding the inherent nature of illocutionary acts. Consequently, a significant implication of this research is that politeness theory necessitates revision to adequately incorporate these findings. The study advocates for an emphasis on context in the interpretation of linguistic items.

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Seham Al-Abdullah, Language Centre, College of Business Studies, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Al-Ardiya 92400, Kuwait; Email: bashah66@hotmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 August 2025 | Revised: 27 August 2025 | Accepted: 4 September 2025 | Published Online: 22 October 2025
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11642>

CITATION

Al-Abdullah, S., 2025. Pragmatic Functions Underlying the Use of *Inshallah* ‘God Willing’ in Kuwaiti Arabic. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(11): 851–866. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i11.11642>

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Keywords: Face-threatening Acts; Inshallah; Politeness Theory; Pragmatic Functions; Speech Acts

1. Introduction

The religious expression *inshallah* ‘God willing’ is extensively used in Arabic. According to Morrow^[1], expressions associated with *Allah* ‘God’, such as *inshallah*, are prevalent in everyday conversations within Arab communities and Muslim cultures. He asserts that the expression *inshallah* significantly influences the linguistic behaviour of Arabic speakers and Muslims. Numerous studies have explored its usage among Arabic speakers, offering insights into how it operates in daily interactions across various Arabic dialects, including Levantine Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, and Saudi Arabic^[2–5]. These studies have identified notable shifts in its literal meaning and demonstrated the diverse socio-pragmatic functions it serves in everyday interactions. As Farghal^[6] observes, the expression has veered from its original meaning and acquired a broad range of illocutionary acts, thus evolving into a pragmatically versatile expression. Furthermore, several researchers have examined its usage as a politeness strategy, contributing to speech acts such as expressions of gratitude and persuasion, thereby fostering positive interpersonal and social interactions^[2,7–9]. However, the way *inshallah* operates in Kuwaiti Arabic (henceforth, KA) remains largely underexplored. This study aims to provide insights into the usage of *inshallah* in KA and its various functions in everyday conversation. It also draws on Politeness Theory, specifically Brown and Levinson’s^[10] model, and suggests necessary revisions to accommodate the findings. The study proposes that the theory needs to incorporate contextual factors in interpreting linguistic forms.

1.1. Research Aim and Question

This study investigates the pragmatic functions of the religious expression *inshallah* in KA. It posits that the expression is not merely an invocation to *Allah*, lacking in meaning or communicative intent. Rather, each usage serves a purpose that reflects the distinct motivations of the speakers, fulfilling various pragmatic functions. These functions can only be comprehended by examining the specific situations and contexts in which the expression is employed.

Thus, the following research question is formulated to investigate the pragmatics of *inshallah* in actual usage:

RQ: What pragmatic functions underlie the use of the religious expression *inshallah* among speakers of Kuwaiti Arabic?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The religious expression *inshallah* represents a significant area of linguistic investigation for several reasons. Firstly, despite being a subject of scholarly investigation since the early 1980s^[4,8], empirical research into its usage remains limited. Our understanding of this feature of everyday conversation, especially among KA speakers, is insufficient. To my knowledge, no attempts have been made to investigate its usage in KA. Researchers may overlook that it represents a form of linguistically driven behaviour influenced by cultural and religious factors, despite recognizing its frequent use in conversation. Secondly, all languages and dialects encompass words and expressions that reflect the cultural and social values of their speakers. Investigating their usage will illuminate the underlying influence of sociocultural beliefs on language use across various social and contextual settings. According to Alsohaibani^[7], language and religion are influential components of culture that interact with and influence each other. Therefore, it is essential to explore the use of the expression to comprehend the impact of culture and religion on everyday language use. Thirdly, it is important to recognise that findings from previous studies cannot be generalized to other sociocultural contexts due to the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and sociocultural backgrounds of Muslims that shape their language use. Different cultures have unique beliefs and values, which are reflected in their language use and communication styles. Wolfson^[11] observes that each culture has its own conventions, rules, and communication patterns. These cultural norms must be understood within a broader framework that reflects the underlying values of society. Communicative acts involve adhering to culture-specific restrictions that dictate how individuals express themselves and under what circumstances^[12]. Thus, KA speakers may use and interpret this expression differently, reflecting their

sociocultural context.

Furthermore, the extent to which *inshallah* functions as a politeness strategy can vary significantly, as politeness is culture-specific despite having universal characteristics^[13,14]. According to Shammass^[15], politeness is contingent upon the pertinent social values within a given speech community and can only be understood within its cultural and social context. Accordingly, KA speakers may approach politeness differently and employ unique strategies to express it. Thus, while *inshallah* is commonly associated with Muslim culture, KA speakers may attribute different meanings to it and have distinct motivations for its usage based on their unique social and cultural heritage. Consequently, the functions of this expression may vary within the Kuwaiti context.

Thus, given the limited research available within the Kuwaiti context, this study investigates the use of the religious expression *inshallah* in KA. The primary objective is to identify the functions that this expression serves in everyday social interactions, examining how it operates despite its religious association. The study explores the communicative meanings that KA speakers attribute to *inshallah* and their motivations for its use. The significance of the research lies in providing insights into how interlocutors use, interpret, and negotiate the meanings of this linguistic behaviour within their sociocultural context. A pragmatic approach is adopted to identify the functions of *inshallah*. Furthermore, the analysis elucidates how *inshallah* operates as a politeness strategy, facilitating an understanding of its socio-pragmatic meanings beyond its semantic value. The study contributes valuable data to Politeness Theory and the existing literature concerning the use of *inshallah* in everyday conversation, particularly within the context of KA.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Inshallah*

The expression *inshallah* is rooted in Islamic doctrine. It signifies that events are contingent upon God's will, acknowledging His omnipotence and submission to it^[6]. Welji^[16] notes that the expression reflects an acceptance of human limitations in predicting the future, recognizing that only God possesses complete knowledge. She argues that the expression has a performative force, thereby distinguishing it as a performative utterance rather than a constative one. By

employing it, the speaker invokes God's assistance to facilitate future actions, functioning as a conditional phrase that embodies the belief that events transpire solely by God's will and that fate resides within His dominion. Ferguson^[8] characterizes *inshallah* as a politeness formula, while Farghal^[6] observes that it is frequently appended to statements to pledge the realization of speech acts, such as promises, according to God's will. Connotatively, it reveals the speaker's good intentions and willingness to undertake speech acts, grounded in the belief that God is the ultimate authority over all matters, particularly those considered positive.

However, the religious invocative meaning of *inshallah* has shifted significantly from its semantic import. According to Morrow^[1], *inshallah* exerts a considerable influence on the linguistic behaviour of Arabic speakers and Muslims. Examining the various contexts in which it is used, researchers argue that *inshallah* holds new meanings in everyday interactions, serving multiple functions and communicative goals. Farghal^[6] claims that *inshallah* has experienced various pragmatic changes in Arabic dialects, resulting in its non-literal usage and interpretation. This claim is supported by empirical studies exploring its usage in several Arabic dialects. For instance, Al-Rojaie^[2] investigated the use of *inshallah* in natural social interactions within Najdi Arabic and demonstrated that it serves various purposes. In addition to its literal meaning as an invocation to God, the expression conveys respect and appreciation, seeks persuasion, and offers compliments. Al-Rojaie^[2] argues that it also acts as a marker of positive politeness through which speakers establish common ground and solidarity with the listener. In another study, Mehawesh and Jaradat^[5] found that *inshallah* serves different functions in Jordanian Arabic. Their data revealed that it is used to express approval, such as responding positively to a request. While these usages can be seen as face-enhancing strategies, the study also revealed instances where the expression is used as a face-threatening act (henceforth, FTA), such as wishing the listener dead or issuing a warning. Mehawesh and Jaradat^[5] concluded that the expression has acquired non-literal meanings alongside its conventional meaning. In a pioneering study, Clift and Helani^[3] used conversation analysis to examine twelve hours of naturally occurring conversations in Syrian Arabic. They found that *inshallah* is used to secure possible sequences of talk, terminate

topics, and shift to new ones. This usage emerged as a recurring feature in their data. In an investigation of the use of religious expressions in daily conversations among Saudi Arabic speakers, Alsohaibani^[7] found that *inshallah* plays a significant role in performing various speech acts, including greetings, responding to greetings, expressing gratitude, offering compliments, and responding to compliments. The expression contributed to the positive facework of these speech acts. Alsohaibani^[7] emphasizes the importance of context in interpreting the functions of *inshallah*, arguing that various social and cultural values and beliefs, including religious considerations, govern its usage. He indicates that while expressing gratitude is a universal phenomenon, its realization and function differ across speech communities due to sociocultural influences. For instance, the participants used the speech act of thanking coupled with the invocative expression to demonstrate gratitude and indicate their indebtedness in response to a favour from the listener, thereby highlighting the cultural belief in the positivity of invocations and their benefits to the listener. In this sense, the expression can be perceived as a positive politeness strategy that functions as a form of repayment for the favour received. Studies have also demonstrated other functions that the expression serves in different contexts, such as communicating threat, irony, wonder, prohibition, and agreement^[5,17].

2.2. Politeness and Context

Politeness theory has faced substantial criticism in the past few decades. Nevertheless, it continues to be influential in analyzing speech acts. The concept of face is fundamental to Politeness Theory, particularly in Brown and Levinson's^[10] approach. They define face as the public self-image individuals claim in interaction. Face is conceptualized in terms of wants, which they assume to be universal. It consists of positive face (the desire for approval, admiration, and appreciation) and negative face (individuals' desire for autonomy). Within this approach to politeness, any illocutionary acts that impinge upon the addressee's face — such as criticism, ridicule, disagreement, or challenges — have the potential to threaten face. They refer to some illocutionary acts that 'intrinsically' threaten either component of the addressee's face. Those acts are referred to as FTAs.

Brown and Levinson's^[10] approach to politeness views interpersonal communication as situations where the speaker

aims to promote social harmony by avoiding threats to the hearer's face. The underlying assumption is that politeness minimizes confrontation, while impoliteness reflects a lack of it. They argue that politeness involves concern for the addressee's face. Everyone has face wants. Polite individuals, therefore, generally cooperate to satisfy each other's face wants by using specific strategies to mitigate the threat of 'intrinsic' FTAs. The theory identifies various politeness strategies based on the type of face threatened. For example, jokes, offers, promises, sympathy, and approval demonstrate the speaker's good intentions in satisfying the positive face wants of the addressee. These strategies aim to establish common ground and solidarity. Negative politeness strategies include, for instance, apologizing and being indirect. In this sense, *inshallah* — the subject of this study — can be considered a positive politeness strategy, serving as a face-enhancing strategy due to its inherent meaning of expressing good intentions and willingness.

It is important to note that Brown and Levinson^[10], in their approach to politeness, do not consider non-Western perspectives, yet they assert the universality of face wants. Drawing on data from non-Western cultures, researchers claim that Brown and Levinson's framework does not legitimize many culturally specific manifestations of linguistic politeness^[18–20]. In contrast to Brown and Levinson's perspective, it is argued that politeness is a matter of cultural relevance^[21,22]. For instance, what is deemed polite in one cultural context may be considered impolite in another. This suggests that cultures differ in their norms of social appropriateness, which are influenced by their unique social values and beliefs. Language undoubtedly reflects these cultural norms and values. According to Leech^[23], what is regarded as polite in Western contexts is not necessarily applicable to all languages and cultures.

Moreover, Brown and Levinson^[10] argue that some speech acts are 'intrinsically' face-threatening while others are face-enhancing. However, this view neglects the diverse functions of linguistic forms in social interactions. Recent approaches to politeness — and those to impoliteness — take a more interactional stance, emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting linguistic forms. Scholars contend that no linguistic expression in the abstract is intrinsically polite or impolite; rather, politeness is a contextual judgment^[24–27]. Pragmatic (contextual) factors operating in any setting that

contribute to the communication context involve meaning negotiation in interaction. This highlights the importance of the speaker's intention, the hearer's interpretation, and meaning negotiation in a given context. For example, while Brown and Levinson^[10] treat joking as a positive politeness strategy that generates common perspectives with the addressee, researchers like Zajdman^[28] suggest it can pose an FTA if the hearer finds it inappropriate or lacks a sense of humour. In such situations, joking may pose FTAs to both interactants. Schnurr et al.'s^[14] study of joking among two ethnic groups in New Zealand shows that while joking can foster solidarity in one cultural context, it may be seen as face-threatening in another. Thus, politeness varies across social contexts and cultures, with Watts^[29] noting that it is negotiable and context-dependent.

This study investigates the functions of *inshallah* through the lens of Brown and Levinson's^[10] politeness theory. Conventionally, this expression is viewed as a positive politeness strategy. It serves as a face-enhancing act that signifies cooperation and promotes harmonious relationships through its semantic implications, thereby reducing the likelihood of potential conflict. However, I argue that the expression can also be employed and perceived as an FTA, contingent upon the context of its usage. Certain instances of its application by speakers of KA may be interpreted as FTAs, rendering them impolite. The study adopts a pragmatic, contextual approach to analyze the functions of *inshallah* and the diverse communicative objectives associated with its usage and interpretation. My position is that politeness is a contextual judgment that involves considering how interlocutors interpret and negotiate the meaning of *inshallah* in a given context. As aptly stated by Olmen et al.^[30], the concept of politeness is contingent upon context. Furthermore, the study considers the sociocultural context of language use. In other words, when interpreting the functions of *inshallah*, consideration is given to the sociocultural backgrounds of the interactants who operate within specific sociocultural settings when making decisions about language use.

3. Methodology

This study employed naturally occurring conversational data and semi-structured interviews with participants.

The triangulation of these two data collection methods — specifically, audio recordings of conversations and interviews — enhances the comprehension of the linguistic behaviour under investigation, yielding robust findings. As noted by Tashakkori et al.^[31], data collected through one method can illustrate and elaborate on data obtained from other sources. For instance, interview data can provide insights into naturally occurring conversations, thereby deepening the conclusions regarding the motivations behind specific linguistic behaviours. Therefore, triangulation aims to illuminate various aspects of the same phenomenon. The use of mixed methods further enhances the validity of the results. As Hoang and Nguyen^[32] emphasize, when multiple methods are used to investigate the same phenomenon and their outcomes corroborate one another, the validity of the findings is strengthened.

In this study, naturally occurring conversations provided naturalistic data in which the expression *inshallah* was used in real-life situations, grounded in the premise that natural speech reflects actual practices of such linguistic behaviour in authentic settings. According to Golato^[33], naturally occurring data are essential in pragmatics research that focuses on spoken language, as such data capture spontaneous language use and facilitate the analysis of targeted expressions within their immediate communication context and situational settings.

Conversely, the interviews constituted a critical qualitative follow-up to the participants' conversations, allowing them to articulate their reasons and motivations for using *inshallah*, which I may not have initially considered as a researcher. This integration of emic and etic perspectives fostered a more thorough analysis and interpretation of the data. The application of these two ethnographic techniques also enriched the conclusions drawn from the analysis. They allowed for a nuanced examination of how and why the participants employed *inshallah* in their conversations, both from my perspective as a researcher situated within the same cultural context, and from the participants' perspectives as "insiders"^[32] — that is, using their own terms and concepts to interpret and negotiate their linguistic behaviour within their social settings. Furthermore, the interviews provided crucial background information and supplementary insights that significantly enhanced the reliability of data interpretation.

3.1. Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected from conversations involving 31 native speakers of KA, comprising 14 men and 17 women, with ages ranging from 25 to 55 years. As a researcher, I did not exert control over social variables, specifically the gender and age of the participants. However, these variables are not pertinent to the study, as it does not explore gender or age differences or similarities in the use of the expression. Therefore, I argue that these social variables do not potentially influence the results.

The social distance among the participants varied, encompassing relationships from relatives to friends and acquaintances. The data collection and recording process was conducted over a period of two months. The conversations occurred in various settings, including cafés, social gatherings, and the homes of some participants. The participants organized and handled the audio recordings.

I contacted friends, family members, and acquaintances to explain the purpose of the study. I described the study as focusing on specific linguistic aspects of the Kuwaiti dialect without providing details to avoid participant bias, which could lead individuals to alter or tailor their linguistic practices. Thus, the participants were not misled. This approach is consistent with the guidelines established by the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL), which permit researchers to withhold the specific objective of the study, provided that the general purpose is conveyed. Brito^[34] contends that participants' awareness of the study's objectives may lead them to alter their behaviours, thereby potentially influencing the research outcomes. Therefore, it was necessary to withhold the specific objective of the study to avoid invalidating its results.

Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be used in the presentation of the results to safeguard their identities, as well as those of other individuals or locations mentioned in their conversations. Furthermore, I informed the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants volunteered for the study, consenting to the recording of their conversations and to participating in interviews. Following BAAL guidelines, they reviewed and signed the informed consent, which was presented to them in Arabic, their native language. They acknowledged their agreement to the research procedure and the use of this material for academic purposes.

Since the participants handled the recordings, I did not have direct control over them, resulting in 8 hours and 24 minutes of naturally occurring conversations being recorded. After transcribing the conversational data, I conducted interviews with the participants. However, not all speakers were interviewed; only those who participated in conversations that included *inshallah* were selected. Consequently, 12 participants were interviewed. Due to the limited number of participants, it remains uncertain whether additional speakers of KA associate meanings with *inshallah* beyond those explored in this study.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to be general and open-ended, enabling participants to elaborate freely on their conversations without limiting the depth and scope of their responses.

The questions were as follows:

1. Why did you use *inshallah* in this specific context? What was your intended purpose?
2. How did you interpret the intended meaning of *inshallah* in your interlocutor's speech?

The first question was directed at the speakers who used the expression, while the second was posed to their addressees. This approach aimed to explore how interactants negotiated and interpreted the meanings associated with *inshallah* within the specific contexts of its usage.

3.2. Data Transcribing and Translating

This study used simple conventions to transcribe the conversational data (see **Appendix A**). Since the primary objective is to investigate the pragmatic functions of *inshallah*, detailed conventions that reflect prosodic features are not pertinent to this research. The data were transcribed in their original language, and relevant extracts were translated into English for illustrative purposes in the analysis section.

In translating the relevant extracts, this study employed a sense-for-sense translation approach, prioritizing the overall meaning and intent of the source language over a literal, word-for-word translation. This approach emphasizes naturalness and cultural appropriateness in the target language rather than strict adherence to the grammatical structure of the source language^[7]. It permits the adaptation of sentences and phrases to ensure that target readers grasp the core meaning, resulting in a clear and natural translation.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study employed a pragmatic approach to identify and analyze the functions of *inshallah* and to explore the communicative goals and meanings that participants associate with its usage and interpretation. This approach considered various factors, including setting, topic, speaker-listener relationships, speakers' intentions and motivations, and listeners' interpretations. A comprehensive list of each instance was compiled following a thorough review of the recordings. An initial function — such as sarcasm — was assigned to each instance based on my perspective as a researcher and the context in which the expression was used. However, identifying the function of each usage presented challenges due to the unclear quality of certain recordings. Furthermore, ascertaining the speakers' motivations in some instances proved to be difficult. Nevertheless, the interviews helped clarify these ambiguous cases, as I sought to understand participants' motivations for employing the expression and the meanings they associated with it. Consequently, my interview questions, which were designed to reflect this objective, encouraged elaboration, allowing for comparison with the initially assigned functions. Both emic

and etic perspectives were integrated into the analysis.

4. Findings

This section demonstrates the various functions of *inshallah*. Data analysis reveals that it serves multiple purposes, including expressing respect, gratitude, sarcasm, challenge, surprise, disapproval, warning, and promise. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the positive sociocultural roles that this expression serves. In exploring its pragmatic functions, this study also illustrates how *inshallah* is employed by the participants within the context of Brown and Levinson's^[10] theory of politeness. While the expression's literal use as an invocation to God is prevalent in the data, this study does not address that usage, as it has been extensively covered in previous research^[2].

Although substantial data are available, this article focuses on a limited selection of prototypical examples of the speech act under examination. The chosen participants, topics, and interactions represent the larger sample.

Table 1 displays the functions and summarizes the findings:

Table 1. Functions of *inshallah*.

Functions		Politeness Strategy
extract (1)	respect, gratitude → solidarity, social bonding	positive → face-enhancing
extract (2)	sarcasm, challenge → social conflict, disharmony	negative → face-threatening
extract (3)	surprise, disapproval	
extract (4)	warning	negative → face-threatening
extract (5)	promising	negative → face-threatening
extract (6)	promising → solidarity, social bonding	positive → face-enhancing

The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the functions.

4.1. Respect and Gratitude

Extract (1) involves a mother and her daughter, who is visiting along with her children. During the daughter's prior visit, the mother noted that her grandson's hair was long and unkempt.

The mother had previously requested that her daughter cut her son's hair, emphasizing that boys should have short hair, unlike girls. The daughter's use of *inshallah* serves to reassure her mother that her wishes are respected and attended to, hoping she will approve the new haircut. During

the interview, the daughter indicated that her intention in using *inshallah* was to convey a positive attitude, particularly respect, as her mother expects esteem and appreciation from her family. She expressed that she would do anything to satisfy her parents because, both socially and from an Islamic perspective, she should obey and treat them well. According to the daughter, social and Islamic values emphasize such practices that strengthen family bonds and foster cordiality and compassion among family members. Given its positive connotation, *inshallah* reflects this attitude. The performative aspect of this usage functions as a respectful utterance, operating as a face-enhancing strategy according to Politeness Theory, aiming to satisfy the mother's positive face

wants. Respect for elderly individuals, particularly parents, holds significant social value in Kuwaiti society. This practice strengthens family bonds and sets a positive example for younger generations to emulate. The mother acknowledges and appreciates this communicative attitude. To express her

gratitude, she similarly uses *inshallah*, responding positively by invoking God to bless and protect her daughter, thereby enhancing her daughter's positive face, given that invocative utterances referring to God's attributes are highly valued in Muslim cultures.

- (1) Mother: *ha gaşşetay şa 'ar wildiç*
so did you cut your son's hair
- Daughter: *ii gaşşeeta adri şa 'rah kan t̥wiil kint wayid maşğuulah awaddii l̥hallaq inshallah*
ilgşşal yidiida tarziiç
yes I did I know his hair was long I was too busy to take him to the barber *inshallah*
his new haircut satisfies you
- Mother: *inshallah allah yibarik fiic wo yaħmiiç*
inshallah god bless you and protect you

Following Brown and Levinson's^[10] model, the expression *inshallah* in this context acknowledges the mother's positive face needs, demonstrating a concern for her face wants and ensuring that her wishes are duly considered. Using *inshallah* has also encouraged the mother to respond positively, thus addressing her daughter's positive face needs. This interaction exemplifies how the interlocutors cooperate in maintaining each other's face. As Brown and Levinson^[10] note, individuals cooperate in maintaining their faces during social interactions. To the extent that the expression func-

tions as a mutual face-enhancing strategy, it can be argued that it contributes to sustaining and strengthening solidarity and social bonding among individuals. Given its role as a face-enhancing strategy, this usage aligns with the conventional function of the expression.

4.2. Sarcasm and Challenge

In Extract (2), Fahad expresses his satisfaction with his new car, highlighting its impressive engine speed:

- (2) Fahad: *essayyrah toħfah fanniyah wala makiinatha essayyrah 'iṭiir tuquul şaruuk*
the car is a piece of art not to mention its engine the car flies like a rocket
- Bader: *wallah binşuuf inshallah arahnik biķiib zannik bitşuuf*
oh yeh we'll see *inshallah* I bet you you'll be disappointed you'll see
- Fahad: *inshallah inshallah binşuuf 'ittiħadda aw 'idik 'iṭṭig sayyartik 'aşra şifir*
inshallah inshallah we'll see wanna take a challenge I promise it will beat your car

With extensive experience in the automotive field, Bader uses *inshallah* to deride Fahad for his poor and inconsiderate choice of vehicles. As Bader mentioned in the interview, he previously owned the same car that Fahad purchased but experienced significant engine difficulties. Consequently, he believes that Fahad has made an unwise decision due to his lack of automotive experience. Therefore, rather than expressing approval or admiration for his friend's new vehicle, as one might typically anticipate, Bader uses *inshallah* to ridicule his thoughtless actions and make fun of his new car. This usage of *inshallah* can thus be interpreted as

an FTA intended to attack Fahad's positive face.

Although embarrassed by such an aggressive response, Fahad does not accept Bader's scorn. He argues back and challenges Bader by proposing a car race to demonstrate that he is mistaken about the vehicle. He similarly uses *inshallah* to emphasize his perspective regarding his car and to express his disapproval. The repeated use of *inshallah*, I argue, serves as an intensifier, highlighting Fahad's insistence in challenging Bader and proving that he is misguided about the car. The use of *inshallah* as such can also be categorized as an FTA: Fahad sought to regain his face by attacking Bader's

face after feeling undermined by this social interaction. Feeling offended, Fahad attempted to defend his own face by challenging Bader's assertions. As Brown and Levinson^[10] note, individuals are expected to defend their own faces when threatened; in doing so, they may threaten the faces of others. The interlocutors' usage of *inshallah* can be interpreted as a manifestation of intentional impoliteness. According to Culpeper's^[24] notion, impoliteness is a communicative strategy intended to attack face, consequently engendering social conflict and disharmony. Intentionality constitutes a critical dimension of Culpeper's framework, wherein the speaker deliberately conveys an FTA, and/or the addressee perceives this act as intentionally face-attacking. This aligns with the dynamics observed in the preceding extract.

Brown and Levinson^[10] categorize acts of ridicule, disagreement, and challenge as linguistic behaviours that threaten the hearer's positive face, which is evident in this context. Nonetheless, the interlocutors used a conventional politeness strategy to express their objectives. The expression *inshallah* is typically perceived as a positive politeness strategy, functioning as a face-enhancing act due to its inherent implication of good intentions. However, within this particular social interaction, it is used as an FTA. This usage can be characterized as a "non-conventional" FTA^[24]. Specifically, the interlocutors use *inshallah* in an exceptional manner to intensify the impact of their mutual disapproval: Bader employs it to ridicule Fahad, while Fahad uses it to confront Bader in an effort to redress his face loss. Consequently, *inshallah* – typically regarded as a face-enhancing positive strategy – is employed in this context as an FTA. This usage contradicts the assertion made by Brown and Levinson^[10] that certain illocutionary acts are intrinsically face-enhancing.

However, the interlocutors' employment of a conventional politeness strategy to cause face damage may be in-

terpreted as mock politeness. Culpeper^[35] uses the term mock politeness to describe instances in which an FTA is performed through a politeness strategy that is patently insincere, i.e., insincere politeness, which bears a resemblance to Brown and Levinson's^[10] concept of off-record politeness. Such usage also aligns closely with Leech's^[36] Irony Principle, which posits that if one is compelled to inflict offence, it should be executed in a manner that does not explicitly contravene the Politeness Principle, thereby enabling the addressee to infer the offensive nature of the remark indirectly through implicature, as exemplified in the previous interaction. According to Leech^[36], it is a "friendly way of being offensive." Mock politeness, as such, can be considered a form of impoliteness.

As with this study, employing conventional politeness formulas as FTAs has been observed in various languages. For example, Aijmer^[37] illustrated how adolescents in London employ apology expressions, such as *forgive me*, *pardon*, and *sorry*, in an ironic or insincere manner to attack the addressee's face. Aijmer^[37] contends that apology expressions are not inherently sarcastic or ironic, which is similarly true for *inshallah*. Nevertheless, these expressions may be perceived as such when the context indicates insincerity or when the speaker adopts a sarcastic tone that undermines the anticipated polite interpretation. Furthermore, Ghezzi and Molinelli^[38] have similarly demonstrated that Italian speakers use *scusa* 'excuse me' and its variants in an ironic fashion to perform FTAs, particularly in instances of challenge and sarcasm.

4.3. Surprise and Disapproval

In Extract (3), Mariam recounts to her friend her experience of choosing a name for her first newborn baby during her pregnancy:

- (3) Mariam: *gilt haq 'ammi bu rayli abi asammi wildi feeşal gal la' ma tigdiriin 'itsammiina feesal ma simahli*
I told my father-in-law I want to name my son Faisal he said no you can't name him Faisal he didn't allow me
- Sara: *wo leeş inşallah mu şoğlah*
and why is that *inshallah* it's none of his business

- Mariam: *bu rayli 'ismah feesal ma yabi ay aḥad bil'aaylah yišiil nafs ilisim mu maqbuul 'ib 'aaylathum mu lmafruuz aḥad tani yišiil nafs isim čibiir il'aylah*
my father-in-law's name is Faisal he doesn't want any other member of the family to carry the same name it's not acceptable in their family no one should have the same name as the head of the family
- Sara: *bas inti leeš inšallah ma kaḍeetay ray raylič haḍi šaḡlah beeniç wo beenah leeš kaḍeetay*
ray bu raylič hu šaku
but why didn't you inshallah take the opinion of your husband it's a matter between you and him why did you take the opinion of your father-in-law what is it to him
- Mariam: *hu čibiir il'aylah*
he's the head of the family

Mariam indicated that her father-in-law rejected the name Faisal for the baby. Believing that the decision regarding the child's name should reside exclusively with the parents, Sara employed the expression *inshallah* to express her astonishment at the attitude displayed by her friend's father-in-law, particularly his refusal to endorse a name favoured by the mother. The interrogative question incorporating *inshallah* in her initial response was intended to convey her surprise. Her subsequent reaction, in which she posed another question incorporating *inshallah*, reflects her disapproval of her friend's behaviour — specifically, the decision to consult her father-in-law rather than her husband — and her overall astonishment at the situation. Thus, in this context, *inshallah* signifies both surprise and disapproval.

The questions incorporating *inshallah* can be classified as non-canonical questions. Trotzke and Czipionka^[39]

characterize such questions as expressions of surprise-disapproval. Munaro and Obenauer^[40] initially examined these speech acts, noting that they do not seek information. Instead, they communicate the speaker's attitude, which ranges from mild surprise to strong disapproval. These configurations indicate a violation of the speaker's expectations and can be classified as exclamations at the level of illocutionary force. The questions incorporating *inshallah* in the previous extract exemplify surprise-disapproval questions, wherein the speaker does not seek information but articulates her attitude regarding the situation.

4.4. Warning

In the following extract, a father is speaking to his 14-year-old daughter. Earlier that day, he observed her at a shopping centre wearing a very short skirt:

- (4) Father: *inšallah ma šuufiç laabsah diik ittannuurah 'ksir 'rgobtič 'eeb 'aleeč*
inshallah I don't see you again wearing that skirt I'll break your neck shame on you

As a conservative, the father does not allow his daughters to wear attire he deems disrespectful and inappropriate. He expressed during the interview that such clothing contradicts the family's conservative social and traditional values. Accordingly, he consistently encourages his daughters to uphold these values. Upon noticing one of his daughters wearing a skirt that he deemed unacceptable, he felt compelled to warn her against wearing such a shameful garment in the future. In this context, *inshallah* serves as a warning particle. The expression conveys the essence of the warning.

Without it, the utterance would lose its warning content and could be interpreted as a negative statement, contradicting the remainder of the utterance, wherein the speaker outlines the potential consequences for his daughter if she does not adhere to his instructions and respect his decisions. Thus, it can be argued that the speaker's choice to use *inshallah* reflects his intention: to warn the hearer.

Following Politeness Theory, such usage can be classified as an FTA, whereby the speaker impinges on his daughter's negative face, that is, her desire for autonomy in her

clothing choices. By stating that the hearer should follow some action to change their unacceptable behaviour, the warning threatens the hearer's negative face or their wish not to be intruded upon. However, the unconventional nature of such an FTA is not anticipated by Brown and Levinson's^[10] model, as the speaker in this context employs a conventional linguistic politeness strategy, specifically *inshallah*, to

threaten the hearer's negative face. As with Extract (2), such usage contradicts their assertion that certain illocutionary acts are intrinsically face-enhancing.

4.5. Promising

In the following extract, a daughter directs her question to her father:

- (5) Daughter: *mu gilt bitwaddiini lmaḥal*
 didn't you say you'll take me to the shop
- Father: *inšallah ana ma abi aruuḥ bas mu muškilah*
inshallah I don't want to go there but fine

The father reassures his daughter that he will take her to the shop, as she had requested earlier. He employs *inshallah* to signify his promise. Although promises can be articulated in KA without the inclusion of *inshallah*, as exemplified by the statement *I promise to take you to the shop*, the father opts for this non-conventional utterance to commit himself to future action. Thus, *inshallah* can be conceptualized as a performative commissive. Similar to the phrase *I promise*, *inshallah* imposes an obligation on the speaker to perform a particular action. However, in contrast to *I promise*, which signifies a direct commitment, *inshallah* is situated within a theological framework that attributes ultimate authority to God, introducing a degree of distance between the speaker and the commitment made^[16]. To illustrate, in this context, *inshallah* signals a promise while simultaneously providing a rationale for the father should the promised action remain unfulfilled. Whether this lack of follow-through stems from an insincere use of *inshallah* or unforeseen circumstances obstructing the desired outcome, the use of *inshallah* mitigates potential criticism regarding the speaker's commitment. In line with Austin's^[41] theory of speech acts, which posits that insincere performatives may be performed 'in bad faith' yet are not considered false or void, *inshallah* acknowledges a commitment while remaining susceptible to insincerity.

However, having promised his daughter, *inshallah*, as it may seem, represents a positive politeness strategy, reflecting the father's attentiveness to his daughter's needs and his good intentions to satisfy her positive face wants. Nevertheless, the latter part of his statement suggests a lack of genuine desire to fulfil this promise, as he explicitly expresses his unwillingness to go to the store. Thus, *inshallah* functions as an FTA to the daughter's positive face rather than as an act of positive politeness. By committing to such a promise, *inshallah* simultaneously threatens the father's negative face or his desire for autonomy. This usage aligns with Brown and Levinson's^[10] theory, which suggests that 'unwilling promises' offend both the speaker's negative face and the addressee's positive face when the speaker's reluctance is explicitly stated. Nevertheless, using a typically recognized face-enhancing strategy as an FTA diverges from Brown and Levinson's^[10] assertion that certain illocutionary acts are inherently face-enhancing.

Unlike the preceding extract, in which *inshallah* constituted an FTA to the hearer's positive face, the following extract exemplifies the expression functioning as a face-enhancing strategy employed in a promising context. In this instance, a wife informs her husband about a necklace she saw earlier in a jewelry shop:

- (6) Wife: *kaanat toḥfah fanniyah sa'alt 'an issi 'ir kaanat ḡaalyah idḡahab waṣil a 'la mustawa*
yimkin laazim šway aḡeṭ fluus 'ala ḡamb min ma 'aası iššahar ilyay
 it was a piece of art I asked about the price but it was expensive gold price is at its highest maybe I should save some of my next month's salary
- Husband: *'iḡabič šiḡ inšallah bikuun 'indič baačir lat ḡaatiin abiič tkuuniin mistaansa*

did you really like it *inshallah* you'll have it tomorrow don't worry I want you to be happy

Aware of his wife's admiration for the necklace, yet cognizant of her financial constraints, the husband was motivated to please her. He employed the expression *inshallah* to assure her of his intention to purchase the necklace, signifying his promise and commitment to acquiring it for her. By fulfilling his wife's desire for the necklace, the expression *inshallah* can be categorized as a face-enhancing act, demonstrating the speaker's good intentions in addressing his wife's positive face needs. According to Brown and Levinson^[10], promises are speech acts that reflect a cooperative dynamic between interlocutors, as both the speaker and the hearer share common desires; in this context, the husband assists his wife in obtaining the necklace she desires.

Furthermore, *inshallah* can be interpreted as an expression of solidarity, where the husband demonstrates genuine concern for his wife's positive face wants. He reported that, according to Kuwaiti sociocultural norms, it is essential to support one's wife, both financially and emotionally. This support strengthens familial emotional bonds and enhances marital satisfaction. Therefore, his promise, as he further stated, is sincere, and his commitment to purchasing the necklace does not cause him distress. On the contrary, it brings him joy and satisfaction, allowing him to communicate that his wants are aligned with hers, thus pleasing her. Accordingly, it can be argued that *inshallah* serves as an expression of solidarity and social bonding, signifying concern for the positive face wants of the addressee while also being self-satisfying, as it aligns with the speaker's own positive face wants. According to Brown and Levinson^[10], this usage cultivates intimacy between interlocutors, implying a sharing of wants and common desires.

Serving as a face-enhancing strategy, Farghal^[6] describes such usage of *inshallah* as a commissive speech act, wherein the expression functions as a commissive mitigator in promise-making situations, thereby redressing the strength of the resulting illocutions. Farghal^[6] contends that employing *inshallah* to perform the speech act of promising enhances the sociocultural acceptability of the promise, owing to the expression's profound religious connotations and significance. Given its function as an act of face enhancement in the previous extract, this usage can be argued to align with its conventional function.

5. Discussion

5.1. Functions of *Inshallah*

In this study, the religious expression *inshallah* was demonstrated to perform various functions, including expressing respect, gratitude, sarcasm, challenge, surprise, disapproval, warning, and making a promise. These functions reflect the underlying motivations of KA speakers when using the expression. Furthermore, the analysis uncovered additional characteristics of *inshallah* that facilitate the achievement of other communicative and social functions. Specifically, due to its positive connotative significance, *inshallah* possesses a distinct force and potency that enables it to sustain and enhance solidarity and social bonds among interlocutors. This is exemplified by instances in which the speakers employed the expression to convey sincere promises and express respect and gratitude within their social interactions.

The various communicative and social functions of *inshallah* in KA illustrate its high and strategic versatility. As also demonstrated by researchers exploring its communicative functions in other Arabic dialects, such as Najdi Arabic and Jordanian Arabic^[2,5], *inshallah* within the KA context is multi-functional, serving a variety of communicative intents across different social contexts. For instance, in Extract (1), it is used to convey gratitude, while in Extract (3), it serves to communicate surprise. In Extract (4), it functions as a warning; in Extract (6), it acts as a marker of solidarity and social bonding. Additionally, the expression can perform multiple functions simultaneously, as illustrated in Extract (2), where the speaker employs it to express disapproval while simultaneously challenging the interlocutor. Similarly, in Extract (1), it expresses respect while also maintaining social bonds. Thus, the expression retains the capacity to fulfil and convey a range of communicative and social functions, underscoring its significance as a linguistic practice that offers a potent pragmatic resource for its users, applicable in various contexts and yielding diverse effects. As Alsohaibani^[7] asserts, the expression *inshallah* constitutes a highly versatile communication strategy.

Certain usages of *inshallah* reflect the sociocultural values inherent in Kuwaiti society, which diverge in specific aspects from those identified in prior research. For instance,

sociocultural norms necessitate the demonstration of respect for elderly individuals, particularly parents. Consequently, individuals are expected and encouraged to exhibit polite linguistic behaviour when addressing the elderly. The employment of *inshallah* as a marker of respect, as illustrated in Extract (1), embodies these sociocultural values. Similarly, in Extract (6), the husband employs *inshallah* to signal his support for his wife, adhering to sociocultural norms that promote familial bonds. These usages suggest that speakers of KA attribute a positive evaluation to this form of linguistic behaviour, considering it polite and in line with the anticipated sociocultural values.

The diverse communicative and social functions explored in this study imply that KA speakers ascribe new meanings to the expression *inshallah*, extending beyond its literal interpretation. Evidently, KA speakers have redefined the meaning traditionally associated with this expression. As Coupland^[42] asserts, speakers are not confined to merely recycling pre-existing symbolic meanings; they can creatively use the linguistic resources at their disposal to generate new meanings from established ones. Nevertheless, these newly constructed meanings can be discerned only within the pragmatic contexts in which the expression is employed. Context is a crucial factor in identifying the meanings that speakers associate with linguistic forms, that is, how such a speech act is used and interpreted. According to Culpeper^[24], the interpretation of utterances should be related to their pragmatic contexts.

5.2. Politeness Theory and *Inshallah*

The religious expression *inshallah* signifies social values and cultural beliefs concerning goodwill. Traditionally, it is regarded as a formula for positive politeness through which speakers articulate their good intentions to facilitate a future action by invoking divine will, grounded in the belief that God is responsible for favourable outcomes. The data presented in this study suggest that *inshallah* serves as a face-enhancing strategy. Within the context of KA speakers, *inshallah* fulfils various positive roles, including serving as a strategy for positive politeness. The use of *inshallah* effectively addresses the face needs of the interlocutors, thereby contributing to the establishment and maintenance of solidarity and social bonds among speakers. In contexts involving promise-making, where the speaker is genuinely committed,

inshallah mitigates the potential negative impact of such a speech act, illustrating a cooperative dynamic between interlocutors and fostering rapport and intimacy. Similarly, when respect for the addressee is intended, the expression is mutually employed to uphold the interlocutors' face wants, thus enhancing their social bonds. Given its function as a face-enhancement strategy, such usages align with the conventional function of the expression. These usages reveal that the religious expression *inshallah* plays a significant role in the linguistic practices of KA speakers. Its positive effect extends beyond its illocutionary force to encompass its perlocutionary effects, specifically its beneficial influence on the addressees who respond positively to its usage. The positive effect of *inshallah* is rooted in its theological significance, reflecting the religious beliefs of KA speakers. These beliefs contribute to the social functions and the positive framework of the speech act. Brown and Levinson^[10] treat linguistic behaviours that address the face needs of interlocutors as strategies of positive politeness, which stress their solidarity and social bonding. In many ways, *inshallah* was a positive politeness strategy, given its conventional connotation. Consequently, it can be argued that its usage as a strategy of positive politeness aligns with Brown and Levinson's^[10] theory, which posits that certain illocutionary acts are intrinsically face-enhancing, specifically in that the expression, by its nature, aligns with the face wants of the interlocutors.

Yet, the data presented in this study suggest that the expression frequently serves as an FTA. One of the objectives of this research is to elucidate how interlocutors use and interpret the meanings of *inshallah* within their social contexts. Therefore, the study adopted an interactional perspective, emphasizing the significance of the speaker's perceived intention and the hearer's interpretation within a given context, particularly regarding how interlocutors negotiate and derive meaning from the expression. A pragmatic data analysis indicates that interlocutors employ this conventional polite formula, *inshallah*, as an FTA. The expression is often associated with warning, ridicule, challenge, disapproval, and unwilling promises. Such usage can be interpreted as a manifestation of intentional impoliteness, wherein interlocutors deliberately employ a polite communicative strategy as a face attack^[24]. Accordingly, it can be argued that while Brown and Levinson's^[10] model of politeness can explain the

use of *inshallah* as a positive politeness strategy, its conventional form does not adequately account for the application of what is typically recognized as a face-enhancing strategy when it is employed as an FTA. This usage diverges from the assertion made by Brown and Levinson^[10] that certain illocutionary acts are inherently face-enhancing. Consequently, their theory necessitates revision to adequately accommodate these findings. Thus, this study proposes that their model of politeness needs to emphasize contextual factors in the interpretation of linguistic items. In alignment with the perspectives of other scholars^[25,27], I argue that context plays a crucial role in interpreting linguistic forms. As Culpeper^[24] emphasizes, speech acts are not inherently face-enhancing or face-threatening; they cannot be classified as polite or impolite without consideration of context. Instead, their meanings are contingent upon substantial interpretive work within specific contexts. Similarly, Leech^[43] has refuted the notion of the intrinsic nature of speech acts, asserting that no utterance can be classified as polite outside of its contextual framework.

6. Conclusions

This study has made a significant contribution to the body of literature investigating the functions of *inshallah* across various Arabic dialects by providing empirical data from the context of KA. The usages presented in this study, such as the expression of respect and support for family members, reflect the sociocultural values intrinsic to Kuwaiti society. Accordingly, the study has offered insights into the sociocultural beliefs influencing language usage. Additionally, it contributes to Politeness Theory. Brown and Levinson's^[10] theory of politeness has provided researchers with substantial opportunities to critically examine the phenomenon of politeness as a fundamental component of human verbal communication and social interaction^[44]. The pragmatic analysis conducted in this study yields findings that can be interpreted through the lens of their theory. The participants' use of *inshallah* as a positive politeness strategy aligns with its conventional function and supports Brown and Levinson's^[10] assertion that certain illocutionary acts are inherently face-enhancing. Nevertheless, Brown and Levinson^[10] did not foresee the non-conventional usage of *inshallah* as an FTA, which contradicts their view on the intrinsic nature of speech acts. Consequently, the non-Western data presented

in this study challenge their assumption concerning the universality of their theory. As a result, the findings of this research pose a significant challenge to this model of politeness. Therefore, a key implication of this study is that Brown and Levinson's^[10] model of politeness requires revision to adequately accommodate such findings.

This study involved a limited sample size of 31 participants. The study would have been enhanced by including a larger sample, which would provide more comprehensive data. Although this restricted number may impose certain constraints on the findings, particularly concerning the identified functions of *inshallah*, future research could benefit from a larger sample. This expansion could facilitate the exploration of additional meanings and functions that KA speakers may attribute to the use and interpretation of this expression. Given that this study focuses on exploring the functions of *inshallah*, an additional avenue for future research could involve investigating whether other religious expressions, such as *mashallah* ('what God wishes'), function similarly or differently in the speech of KA speakers, especially since such expressions were prevalent within the data. However, examining these expressions was beyond the scope of the present study.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was signed and obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the author's commitment to safeguarding the privacy and identities of the participants. Data transcripts may be obtained for academic purposes from the corresponding author, subject to reasonable justification.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the participants who voluntarily contributed to this study. Their willingness to allow the recording of their conversations within their social contexts and to engage in interviews represents a significant form of cooperation. I acknowledge that the success of this study is intrinsically linked to the contributions of these participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Letter Key: Convention symbols used for KA words.

Convention Symbol	KA Symbol	IPA
ʾ	ء	ʔ
b	ب	b
t	ت	t
t̤	ث	θ
g̤	ج	dʒ
h	ح	h
k̤	خ	x
d	د	d
d̤	ذ	ð
r	ر	r
z	ز	z
s	س	s
ʃ	ش	ʃ
ʧ	تش	tʃ
s̤	ص	s̤
t̤	ط	t̤
z̤	ظ	ð̤
ʿ	ع	ʿ
g̤	غ	ɣ
g	گ	g
f	ف	f
q	ق	q
k	ك	k
l	ل	l
m	م	m
n	ن	n
h	ه	h
w	و	w
y	ي	y

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