Insha'Allah (God's Willing) and its Functions in Persian

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Abstract

This study takes as primary the analysis of the use of the Quranic verse 'insha'allah' in Persian language to come up with the functions it serves in the context of Iran. Based on the findings of the research, there are eight major functions of 'insha'allah' in Persian which are classified under three broad categories of 'Being a Muslim', 'Dealing with emotions', and 'Displaying indirectness'. Moreover, the results obtained from the current study were compared and contrasted to the ones achieved from Arabs' society to bring forward the similarities and differences between Iranian and Arab individuals in employing this Quranic verse.

INTRODUCTION

Since speech acts are inevitable in daily interactions, it is quite essential to scrutinize different types of them and their intercultural similarities and differences. One of the sources of communication failure is rooted in not being familiar with direct and indirect speech acts and how each culture favors one form or the other.

A thought-provoking instance of indirect speech acts is the Quranic verse 'insha'allah' (God's willing) which seems to be applied differently in Islamic cultures. Previously, Nazzal (2005) examined this speech act in an Arabic society and clarified its functions. Since Iranian people are also Mulims, they employ 'insha'allah' too; however, the language Muslims speak in Iran is Persian and not Arabic which might influence the functions 'insha'allah' serves in their culture.

Moreover, since Iranian people have a different culture from those of Arabs regarding the notions of 'emotionalism', 'interdependence', 'hierarchy' and 'high/low context' (clarified in section 6), the impacts of these on this Quranic verse are within the bounds of possibility. Therefore, as Iranian people use 'insha'allah' very often though it is an Arabic word, in this particular study, we delve into the culture of Iran and how Persian speakers resort to the use of this communication strategy.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the fundamental underlying theories closely connected to the communication strategy under study is 'politeness theory'. However, before dealing with 'politeness theory', it is quite essential to scrutinize the notion of 'face' proposed by Goffman (1974). Longcope (1995, p.69) quotes Goffman defining face as a 'positive social value' demanded by people in social interactions. Later in 1978, Brown and Levinson expanded this theory and put forward a universal one called 'politeness theory'; in their theory 'face' was defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987, cited in Longocope, 1995, p.70). They claimed that face is a multi-faceted construct and is of two types, 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Positive face is the predilection in individuals for being approved and admired by others, and negative face is their aversion to imposition (Longocope,

1995). According to Scollon and Scollon (2011, p.65), face is a "negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event". They go further to mention that the interlocutors must have a mutual understanding of the faces they present in communication to be able to decide on a proper language to use and to understand their statuses. Therefore, it is quite essential for individuals to make assumptions about faces before beginning the conversation. Copious studies (e.g. Grainger, Mills & Sibanda, 2008; Haugh, 2008; Terkourafi, 2005) examined the theory of politeness and face in different cultures and concluded that depending on the culture, how 'face' is presented and interpreted would vary; for instance, though in North America and Britain, face seems to be based on 'individualistic assumptions', in East it is rooted in 'collectivism'.

Another notion, which plays a crucial role in total comprehension of the communicative strategy of 'insha'allah', is that of indirect speech acts. Generally, speech acts are divided into two major groups: *direct* and *indirect* speech acts. As Chastain (1988) states, direct speech acts are the ones that convey the intended meaning directly (e.g. "Can I borrow your book?"). In direct speech acts (DSAs), "there is a direct correlation in the utterance type and the function"; therefore, utterances such as "Give me your book please", are direct since "the type and function are related" (Stapleton, 2004, p.17).

Indirect speech acts (ISAs) do not directly express what the speaker means (e.g. "I wonder whether I could borrow your book"). Borrowing something must be done with caution since it might be necessary not only to be familiar with the language but also to know the culture, and have some information regarding the age, gender, or power status of the interlocutor (Cohen & Ishihara, 2005, p.3).

According to Stapleton (2004, p.17), ISAs convey not only the literal meaning of the utterance, but also "the intended force in the speech act". Stapleton goes further to quote Searle (1975) who states, "The speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more." For instance, when the speaker says "Can you open the window?", the literal meaning of the utterance "refers to the ability of the hearer" and the "intended meaning or perlocutionary effect of the utterance" is asking the hearer to open the window (Stapleton, 2004, p.18).

Numerous speech acts are indirect (Cohen, 1996) and they are preferred in social interactions since they are considered as more polite, specially for some certain speech acts such as requests and refusals (Yule, 1996; Richards & Schmidt, 2002), and also in language classrooms as they maintain face in educational settings (Cohen, 1996). In fact, when a speaker applies an indirect speech act, what he/she means may "deviate from what is literally said" (Woods, 2006, p.xii) and the addressees' interpretation is done based on the context in which the utterance is made

(Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Johnstone, 2008). Quite many studies have been carried out on indirect speech acts, such as request and apology (Bulm-kulka & Olshtain, 2011), suggestion (Pishghadam & Sharafadini, 2011), gratitude (Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011), and persuasion (Pishghadam & Rasouli, 2011) and nearly all have shown the existing intercultural differences, which result in communication failure.

'Insha'allah' is also an indirect communication strategy employed in Islamic cultures, which might serve different purposes. Nazzal (2005) thoroughly examined this Quranic verse in an Arabic culture. He observed some naturally occurring conversations in different situations and interpreted the functions 'insha'allah' serves in each one. At the end, he came up with various functions such as "mitigating one's commitment for carrying out a future action or failing to honor one's commitment", "avoiding the effects and adverse consequences of one's specific action on others", and "confirming one's religious, linguistic, and cultural identity" (p.271).

Paucity of research on the communicative strategy of 'insha'allah' and its various functions in different Islamic cultures impelled us to examine this Quranic verse in the context of 'Iran', among Persian speakers. Therefore, in this research, 'insha'allah' would be scrutinized first, and then compared and contrasted with the Arabic society.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study has been carried out with the prime purpose of deeply analyzing the Quranic verse *insha'allah* produced by Muslim Persian speakers to come up with its various functions. Moreover, Iranian and Arab Muslims were compared and contrasted with regard to the application of the Quranic verse *insha'allah* to examine whether the same functions are served through verbalizing the same utterance, i.e. how distinct their intentions are while employing *insha'allah.*

Furthermore, the notion of indirectness is highlighted which is closely connected to the functions this Quranic verse performs. Whether or not culture is influential in individuals being indirect and also the role it plays in the diverse functions of *insha'allah* has also been taken into account in the current research.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out on Persian native speakers living in Iran. About 50 individuals of both genders (male and female), and different age groups (teenager, young, middle-aged) were observed in natural situations. The participants in this study were observed wherever possible, in daily interactions, TV broadcasts, on the street, in shops, in supermarkets, in parties etc. The process of data collection continued until the time that saturation happened (no

new information was added), and then some representative instances of 'insha'allah' were selected from the accumulated data to be analyzed.

The process of data collection started in September 2011, took around 3 month and finished in December 2011. The naturally observed data of this research were recorded first, then transcribed, and later translated into English; afterwards, the dialogues and instances of speech were analyzed qualitatively. To ensure the reliability of the data, two experts in sociolinguistics were asked to examine the classifications made for 'insha'allah'.

4. RESULTS

After scrutinizing Persian speakers in different natural situations, eight major functions of *insha'allah* were found in thebPersian language. For each function, an example is put forward along with the translation of the utterance.

4.1 To Empower the Speaker

Situation:

A person had pledged some people to build them houses and after collecting their money, he had absconded. There is an interview on TV to ask these naive people how they feel about the rook.

…Maa azash shekaiat kardim migan peidash mikonan agar ham nakonan ishallah khoda javabesho mide in pool ha sarmayeie ma boode…

Translation:

We went to the police and they said he would be arrested, if not, God will punish him *insha'allah*, as those were our invested money.

In this situation, the people who have been swindled are so exasperated and at the same time they are impotent. As they are Muslims and believe in God's power, they entrust it to him and believe he will punish the hustler even if he will not be arrested. The word insha'allah is used here to empower the speaker and to make him feel unperturbed as the burden upon his shoulders is shared with God.

4.2 To Be Fatalistic

Situation:

A student who has applied for a university abroad asks an elderly woman to pray for him to be successful.

- Torokhoda vasam doa konin karam dorost beshe beram
- Doa mikonam enshallah har chi salahe beshe age ghesmat bashe miri
  Translation
- Please pray for me and ask God to arrange everything and help me go.
- I pray that inshaallah God makes happen what He believes is good for you; if he wants you will go.

For Muslims, God's will is preferred to their own; i.e., if the outcomes of a situation are not as they wish, they sometimes construe it as God's will and accept it more easily. In this situation, the old woman is in fact teaching the girl to be fatalistic and to believe that we cannot control the events; everything happening around us is of God's volition. Therefore, she, by uttering insha'allah, says God must decide on your future not anybody else.

4.3 To Display Religious Identity

Situation:

A clergyman preaching about the leader of the country and how people should behave towards him.

Insha'allah omidvaram aqayani ke baraye khoda ghadam gozahtand va baraye khoda khedmat mikonand va hich tavaqoe maali nadarand khodavand dar donia va akherat aanche be hazrate Salman va abuzar va meghdad dad be inha enayat konad.

Translation:

The men who take steps for God and are at his service, the ones who do not have financial expectations, Insha'allah God will give them what he has given to his prophet Salman, Abuzar and Meghdad (they would be blessed).

In a theological context, the word insha'allah is often used to display the person's religious identity. That is, what they hope is what God wants or vice versa. In this sermon, the preacher is asking God to bless the righteous as he blesses his prophets since they have acted at his service. In this situation, the religious identity of the speaker is highlighted.

4.4 To Wish

Situation:

Friends congratulating one's marriage to him on his wedding ceremony.

Enshallah saliane sal khoobo khosh dar kenare ham zendegi konid.

Translation:

I wish that you live together happily ever after.

One of the mostly-occurred functions of insha'allah in Persian is to wish somebody something good and beneficial; it is mostly observed in response to a good action performed by the interlocutor. For instance, somebody has helped the person and s/he wishes that God would help him/ her in life. In this situation, some people are offering congratulations to their friend on his marriage ceremony and since he is going to start a new life, they wish he would always be happy and blest through uttering the word insha'allah.

4.5 To Curse Someone

Situation:

A beggar asking for money from a man in a car stopped at the traffic light. The light turns green and the man had not given anything to the beggar so he starts cursing.

Ishallah beri zire kamion…Ishallah tasadof koni bemiri…

Translation:

I wish you would be run over by a truck… I wish you

would have an accident and die…

As already mentioned, insh'allah is used frequently to wish somebody something good; it is also used in a reverse situation, to curse someone. In the example mentioned above, a beggar tries to persuade a person to give him money; however, since the light turns green, he understands there is no more chance and being frustrated of not receiving anything, he starts cursing the addressee by wishing that he would be run over by a truck or would have an accident.

4.6 To Encourage Somebody to Do Something

Situation:

An agent of a charity institution, knocking on the door of each house, trying to collect some money for the poor who are about to get married.

Ma az tarafe moaseseie kheirie komak haie mardom ro jam mikonim ta baraaie no arus ha jahizie tahie konim, agar mitunid komaki bokonid khoda kheiretoon bede enshalla mogheie azune

Translation:

We are agents of a charity institution and we're raising money from people to prepare dowry for newly-wed brides, if you can help, God will bless you Insha'allah since it's the time of Azan (A call by somebody for saying prayers).

The first point to be clarified is that Muslims say prayers when Azan is recited and they believe if you have a wish or want to ask God for something, the time of Azan is the proper time. Secondly, in Iran and some other countries, it is a custom that the bride (or her family) buy(s) dowry (the necessary stuff for living) at the time of marriage and give them to the couple as a gift. For impecunious families; however, the charitable people take this responsibility.

In the above-mentioned situation, an agent of a charity tries to encourage people to give some money by reminding that it is the time of Azan and they will be blessed if they help the poor.

4.7 To Evade the Answer

Situation:

Family members of a patient asking a doctor nervously about his health and the doctor evading the answer.

- Aghaie doctor, halesh khoob mishe? Omidi hast?
- Enshalla…omidetun be khoda bashe

Translation:

- Doctor, is he going to be okay? Is there any hope?
- Enshaallah… trust in God

Sometimes it is not appropriate to give someone a definite answer through which you would break bad news and would hurt his/ her feelings. Persian speakers evade the answer in these situations through saying insh'allah and nothing more. In fact, they answer the question by evading any direct response. In the above-mentioned example, the patient's family asks the doctor apprehensively whether he would be healed or not. As it might be difficult to say NO to them and the doctor might not be sure about what comes next, he evades the answer and says "insha'allah, trust in God".

4.8 To Postpone the Answer

Situation:

A wife complaining to her husband about not selling the old car and buying a new one.

- Alan yek sale ke migi mifrooshamesh mifrooshamesh avazesh mikonam pas kei?
- Hamin rooza mifrooshamesh ishallah

Translation:

- It is almost a year that you keep saying you will buy a new car, but when?
- As soon as possible *ishallah*.

Passing the responsibility and its burden to God sometimes happens in Persian language through uttering the word insha'allah. In other words, Persian speakers postpone their answer when they cannot provide a definite one. In this situation, it is obvious that the wife grumbled many times before and the husband promised repeatedly to sell the broken-down car and buy a new one instead. The husband cannot predict a definite time for fulfilling his promise, and therefore, postpones it through saying insh'allah as soon as possible.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to examine various functions of the Quranic verse 'insha'allah' in Persian language, and to compare and contrast Iranian and Arab individuals with regard to the use of this utterance.

Macro analysis of the observed situations provides us with three major categories, and from a micro viewpoint, there exists two or three functions in each category; that is, individuals utter 'insha'allah' in different situations either because of (A) being a Muslim (1- to empower the speaker, 2- to be fatalistic, 3- to display religious identity), (B) dealing with emotion (4- to wish, 5- to curse, 6- to encourage somebody to do something) and (C) showing indirectness (7- to evade the answer, 8- to postpone the answer).

Regarding category (A) and the first three functions, it must be taken into consideration that above all the influential factors, culture is believed to play a major role. In Iran, the dominant system is a 'hierarchical' one, and as Scollon and Scollon (2011) put it, it results in individuals respecting social differences, recognizing where to 'speak up' and where to 'speak down', and accepting themselves as being in different social positions. Besides, as Iranian people are Muslims, they consider 'God' as a superior who observes whatever they do. Therefore, in a situation where they are powerless and cannot exert any control, they empower themselves through yielding everything to God and waiting patiently for the results (1- to empower

the speaker).

Another salient point, which must be clarified about Iranian people, is that 'collectivism' is highlighted in their culture. According to Hofstede (1980, 1991 as cited in Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2011), there are some value dimensions in each culture, which greatly influence the way people behave, one of which is 'individualism-collectivism'. In collective societies, such as Iran, the concept of 'we' is brought to focus which influences the way people communicate resulting in their being emotionally dependent. Besides being collective, Muslims believe that everything happening around them is controlled by God's volition; therefore, in some situations they apply 'insha'allah' to display their 'fatalism' and construe everything as God's will (2- to be fatalistic), or in some theological situations, to accentuate their religious identity (3- to display religious identity).

Taking category (B) and functions 4, 5 and 6 into account, some points on 'emotionalism' must be elucidated. According to Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama and Nisbett (2009), there is a profound difference between Western and Eastern cultures with regard to being dependent and able to express emotions; Eastern people have proved to be more interdependent, holistic, and emotional. Therefore, emotive issues might significantly wield influence on the way people react to some situations in East. To display positive emotions, Iranian individuals might wish something good and beneficial for their interlocutors through uttering 'insha'allah', that is to ask God to give him/her something good such as a happy life, success, etc. (4- to wish). Sometimes it is the reverse and as they are filled with negative emotions, they wish that something obnoxious occurs in that person's life such as being unhappy, losing property, dying etc. (5- to curse). 'Insha'allah' can also be used in some situations to motivate somebody to do something which can be negative or positive depending on the context. Since Muslims have strong beliefs in God and fate, they sometimes try to persuade each other by mentioning the favourable outcomes God would make happen for them (6- to encourage somebody to do something).

Category (c) and the last two functions are closely connected to Hall's categorization of cultures and Bulm-kulka and Olshtain's notion of directness (2011). As Hall (1976, cited in Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2011) states, cultures are categorized as being high-context or low-context. In high-context cultures, people convey information not only through verbalization, but also with the aid of gestures, silence, etc. and that is due to the homogeneity; they do not look for deep background information. In line with what Hall (1976), and Pishghadam and Sharafadini (2011) have also mentioned, Iran is a high-context culture and as a result people often interact implicitly. Displaying indirectness in daily interactions is sometimes accompanied with uttering 'insha'allah'.

Iranian people through applying 'insha'allah' try to beat about the bush when they think their response would hurt someone's feeling or threaten his/her face (7- to evade the answer), or might indirectly convey that they cannot definitely respond to a question and let it be vague by adding 'insha'allah' to their response (8- to postpone the answer). It must be taken into consideration that these two functions are in close relationship with Hofstede's (1980, 1991) second value dimension, 'uncertainty avoidance', too. In Hafstede's ranking of countries, Iran displayed a rather low tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, and therefore vague answers might lead to high levels of stress and anxiety (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, as cited in Samovar, Porter & Stefanin, 2011).

Since Iranian and Arab people are both Muslims, it is expected that some similarities exist between them in their application of the Quranic verse, 'insha'allah'. Examining the functions of 'insha'allah' in Iran and comparing them with those in Arab's society, reported by Nazzal (2005), Iranian and Arab people seem not to share many similarities and are merely somehow alike in two functions, displaying religious identity and avoiding the answer (rejection). This might be due to the fact that Iranian and Arab people though being Muslims, do not speak the same language, and 'insha'allah' though an Arabic word, is employed by Persian speakers which might lead to its different functions in each context.

In this study 'insha'allh' was examined from a linguistic perspective; it is engrossing as well to carry out a study on the psychological impacts of using 'insha'allah' in the same context. Moreover, due to lack of access to other Muslims in different cultures, it was not possible for the researchers to compare Iran with other countries as well. Therefore, it is thoroughly recommended that further research be carried out in this realm.

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