

# ASIATISCHE STUDIEN ÉTUDES ASIATIQUES

ZEITSCHRIFT DER SCHWEIZERISCHEN  
ASIENGESELLSCHAFT  
REVUE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ SUISSE-ASIE

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ISSN 0004-4717 · e-ISSN 2235-5871

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**PUBLISHER** Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin, Germany

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© 2026 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Boston/Berlin, Germany

**TYPESETTING** TNQ Tech Private Limited, Chennai, India

**PRINTING** Franz X. Stückle Druck und Verlag e. K., Ettenheim

Questions about General Product Safety Regulation: [productsafety@degruyterbrill.com](mailto:productsafety@degruyterbrill.com)



Publiziert mit Unterstützung der Schweizerischen Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften.  
Publiée avec le soutien de l'Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales.  
Published with the support of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences.



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## Research Article

Cristiana Bozza\* and Giuliano Mion

# Theophoric Formulae in Spoken Arabic(s). A Trigger for Grammaticalization?

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2025-0043>

Received May 25, 2025; accepted September 30, 2025

**Abstract:** This paper aims at analyzing a series of religious expressions typical of Arabic and related to what some scholars recently called Allāh-Lexicon. By assuming that these items constitute a lexical reflection of the self-representation of the speaker’s cultural identity, we can observe that their contextual extension and frequency of use are so high that they end up pervading deeply all varieties of spoken Arabic not only at the lexical level, but also at the pragmatic level. Is it therefore conceivable that precisely the extension of the context and the increase in frequency of use have also triggered processes of grammatical change?

**Keywords:** Arabic; theophoric formulae; Allāh-Lexicon; grammaticalization

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In Alessandro Bausani’s view,<sup>2</sup> an “Islamic language” is the language of a certain territory that has been deeply influenced graphically, lexically, and even morpho-syntactically by the great cultural languages of the Islamic world, namely Arabic and Persian. All the so-called Islamic languages, both from Asia and Africa, have in fact undergone an impressive number of borrowings from Arabic in particular, related to the religious sphere and beyond. We might define these languages “Arab-centric”,

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1 This paper is the result of a joint research by both authors, who reflected and discussed the whole topic together. However, in more detail, C.B. is responsible for § 3, 4, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 5; G.M. for § 1, 2 and 6. The authors thankfully acknowledge the comments and suggestions made by the anonymous reviewers as well as the support received from the editors of *Asiatische Studien*.

2 Bausani 1981.

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but for A. Bausani they are a sort of *Sprachbund*, as they could almost be conceived as “dialects” of a common (virtual, because in fact nonexistent) literary language, that is, “literary dialects” which share a common culture rather than simply a common religion. In this way, substratum and superstratum are no longer simply linguistic concepts, as they become rather cultural concepts.

As for Arabic, a seminal work by Moshe Piamenta<sup>3</sup> highlighted that religious expressions became over time a fundamental aspect of the vocabulary of this language and how they constitute a sort of self-representation of the speaker’s culture. In addition to this evidence, we can consider also that the interaction between language, culture, and religion conveyed by religious expressions is reflected not only in the lexicon, but also in the pragmatics and sometimes even in the grammar of Arabic.

Now, grammaticalization is an important process of linguistic renewal in which particular lexical items have such a high frequency of use that they trigger structural grammatical changes in a language. From this perspective, the strength of certain cultural elements such as religious expressions, which in conclusion can be seen as elements of self-representation, has triggered processes of grammaticalization in different varieties of Arabic.

This paper deals with a specific subset of religious expressions that we call *theophoric formulae*; in particular, it is devoted to the analysis of some of them, that is YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH,<sup>4</sup> and how they are involved in grammaticalization processes in different Arabic varieties.

## 2 Defining ‘Theophoric Formulae’

‘Theophoric formulae’ are a part of what has been identified in the relevant literature with several labels such as ‘Allāh Lexicon’,<sup>5</sup> ‘Allāh expressions’,<sup>6</sup> ‘Allah-centric expressions’,<sup>7</sup> ‘religious expressions’,<sup>8</sup> ‘religious invocations’,<sup>9</sup> ‘religious formulas’,<sup>10</sup> and so on. We will not dwell on the different conceptualizations that lie behind each

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3 Piamenta 1979.

4 For purpose of convenience, we capitalize the three words when we indicate them as lexemes and adopt the traditional transcription in lower case and italics when we refer to their concrete realization in the different varieties of Arabic.

5 Morrow 2006, Castelton 2006.

6 Jaradat 2014, Al-Saeedi 2019.

7 Farghal 2008.

8 Al-Rojaie 2021.

9 Clift and Helani 2010.

10 Migdadi and Badarneh 2013.

of these terms. Rather, for the sake of convenience, we will use these terms interchangeably, by considering them in a more general and neutral sense as to include a broader spectrum of different items. In fact, basically, these labels are conceived as umbrella terms covering all Arabic phrases and expressions invoking God, explicitly or implicitly, encompassing a rich variety of fixed and crystallized, “idiomatic and stereotyped expressions [...] largely inspired by religion”, as stated by Piamenta (1979: 1). When explicit, the reference to God may also include the proper name Allāh ‘God’ (e.g., *yā alla* ‘Oh (my) God!’, ‘Goodness!’; *(i)sm-alla* and *bi-smi-llāh* ‘[in] the name of God’; *w-alla*, *w-allāhi*, *b-alla*, *b-allāhi*, and *bi-llāh* ‘by God’; in *šā(a)-llā(h)* ‘if God wills’; *mā šā(a)-llāh* ‘God has willed it’; *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* ‘Praise be to God’), his epithet Rabb ‘Lord’ (e.g., *yā rabb(i)* ‘Oh (my) Lord’), or one of the ninety-nine attributes of Him (e.g., *yā salām* ‘O Soundness!’).<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in addition to formulaic phrases and words, the Allāh-Lexicon is characterized by *plasticity and richness*, since speakers can create many other expressions by adding the word Allāh to virtually unlimited number of verbs, in order to serve various functions and to achieve certain conversational purposes, both in formal and informal day-to-day interaction, Al-Saeedi claims, by providing a list of the most frequent of such verbs. These include verbs related to the religious domain, like *forgive*, *glorify*, *bless*, *protect*, but also more neutral verbs such as *write*, *win*, *improve*, *simplify*, and so on.<sup>12</sup> In short, Arabic language appears “saturated with” religious expressions, as Clift and Helani<sup>13</sup> pointed out, which consist of an as yet undetermined number of items.

The history of Arabic religious expressions went hand in hand with the history of Islam. In fact, these formulas, that generally speaking have their roots in all the Semitic traditions, originated concurrently with the emergence of Islam itself, and are an expression and effect of the long-lasting connection between language, religion and culture. As we know, Arabic is a sacred language. In this respect, Reichmuth<sup>14</sup> claims that “[p]erhaps no other linguistic culture ever blended the language of God Himself with that of human thought and culture on a comparable scale”. On the other side, Islam is *a living religion*, in that it is embodied in everyday linguistic expressions of Arabic language, as maintained at the very beginning of the above-mentioned work by Piamenta<sup>15</sup> but also in accordance with the broader opinions expressed by Bausani (1981). And, John Andrew Morrow, interestingly highlighted that “the Allāh Lexicon is a conviction, a living, vibrant body of unique expressions indicative of the vitality of the Islamic faith and the centrality of *al-tawḥīd*, or divine

<sup>11</sup> Piamenta 1979: 7ff.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Saeedi 2019: 147–148.

<sup>13</sup> Clift and Helani 2010: 358.

<sup>14</sup> Reichmuth 2009: 73.

<sup>15</sup> Piamenta 1979: 1.

unity”.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the remembrance of Allāh, i.e. *dīkr*, at every opportunity, entailed, over time, the widespread use of the God-centric expressions.<sup>17</sup>

Besides, these expressions are not used exclusively in the context of religion nor is their use strictly ritualistic, i.e. with their referential meanings, but they have become over time a vital component of Arabic language, and currently are *discourse tools* commonly used in everyday speech.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, these “expressions indeed have ‘religious’ roots but [...] they have at the same time become part and parcel of not necessarily religiously intended speaking styles expressing all kind of feelings, such as astonishment, surprise, disappointment, etc.”,<sup>19</sup> but also for planning, begging or asking someone to do a favor, as expressions of gratitude, greetings, welcoming and invitations.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, religious expressions are self-representation tools of a particular identity as they are shared by all speakers of Arabic, including illiterates and non-Muslim speakers.<sup>21</sup> Lastly, such theocentric expressions are a culture- and language-specific feature of Arabic, which characterizes both Classical/Modern Standard Arabic and Arabic dialects. As noticed by Castelton:

The Allāh Lexicon is a language feature specific to Arabic and one that is utilized extensively in the performance of everyday discourse, both written and verbal, in that language. Consisting of an as yet undetermined number of phrases [...], the Allāh Lexicon derives from reflections on and responses to Allāh’s influence over every aspect of human life and the universe. [...] the various Arabic dialects share a common body of universal Allāh expressions as a core, enriched by a multitude of regional varieties.<sup>22</sup>

Among the expressions that belong to such common core, we found YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH, which we deal with here, and which we refer to as ‘theophoric formulae’. For the purpose of our study, we use ‘theophoric formulae’ as an operational term that covers a subset of the Allāh-Lexicon which—echoing Procházka in his study devoted precisely to the main functions of such items in Moroccan Arabic—denotes:

[S]ome *frequently used* expressions that [explicitly] contain the word ‘God’ [...] are rooted in Classical Arabic but have undergone *significant phonological and semantic developments*. Some of them have *become grammaticalized* and appear in *linguistic constructions remote from their original meanings*.<sup>23</sup>

16 Morrow 2006: 163.

17 See among others Castelton 2006: 73, Morrow 2006: 117, Al-Saeedi 2019: 143, Al-Rojaie 2021: 15.

18 Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989.

19 De Ruyter and Farrag Attwa 2021: 1.

20 Masliyah 1999: 113.

21 Piamenta 1979: 2.

22 Castelton 2006: 110n.

23 Procházka 2012: 383, our emphasis.

To sum up, here, ‘theophoric formulae’ is a working definition referring to some frequently used expressions belonging to the virtually unlimited set of the Allāh-Lexicon, which explicitly contain the word ‘God’, and which became part of—more or less, as we will see below—grammaticalized constructions.

### 3 Methodology

In the following, our attention will be paid to a selection of such defined theophoric formulae that in a number of Arabic dialects, in addition to serve discourse-pragmatic functions, exhibit other functions related to the domains of tense, aspect, and mood/modality (TAM). In particular, we situate our discussion—including the issue of the relationship between these two usages—within the framework of grammaticalization, where grammaticalization is understood in line with Heine and colleagues<sup>24</sup> as follows:

Grammaticalization is the development from lexical to grammatical forms and once the grammatical form has evolved, the development of further grammatical forms. Since the development of grammatical forms takes place in specific contexts and constructions, the study of grammaticalization is also concerned with constructions and contexts, including even larger discourse segments.<sup>25</sup>

As we hinted above, we focus on three items that resulted to be especially productive in this regard, which are: YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH. It is noteworthy that our main concern is to give some considerations on the general aspects that characterize the emergence of such items and that lie behind the development of their twofold functions (that we call here the discourse-pragmatic function and the TAM function) as well.

To this end, we are considering the phenomena at issue as a whole. Hence, first, we are not taking into account the single instances and their specificities, that is the individual cases in the different Arabic dialects. Likewise, variants in gender and number in the case of YALLA (e.g., *ya-llahi.FSG*, *ya-llahu.PL* in Moroccan Arabic),<sup>26</sup> and all the range of collocations of the three forms, are not considered. The data—which are mostly drawn from the existing literature—serve to a more general discussion. For the sake of convenience, we labeled the three items as YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH; each of this label is to be viewed as encompassing the various dialectal variants and cognate forms, which, on the other hand, are retained

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<sup>24</sup> See Narrog and Heine 2021: 1, and also among others Kuteva et al. 2019: 3–7.

<sup>25</sup> Narrog and Heine 2021: 1.

<sup>26</sup> Procházka 2012: 392.

in transcription, with slight adaptations, of the quotations from the different sources we mentioned.

And second, we analyze the processes of development involved in the emergence of the item discussed in order to provide some general considerations related to the grammaticalization of Arabic theophoric formulae. In fact, our main aim is to highlight the most salient common features—in terms of semantics, usage and functions, both prototypical and grammaticalizing—that a specific subset of theophoric formulae in Arabic, namely those implying the construction *particle* [+ ...] + *the proper name of God*, share in their grammaticalization.

## 4 The Grammaticalization of YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH

We start our argument with one aspect that emerges from the above-mentioned definition by Procházka, that is the high frequency of use of theophoric formulae in Arabic. Broadly speaking, the word Allāh is one of the most frequently used content word in Arabic; according to Morrow (2006), it is the most frequent one.<sup>27</sup> And, as for the Allāh-Lexicon, in her sociolinguistic survey on the frequency and use of a selection of such phrases, Castelton noticed that there are a number of pan-Arab expressions—including INŠALLAH and WALLAH (to which we could virtually add YALLA)—that are among the highest frequency forms, commonly used “more than a thousand times per year, or on average of three to five times per day.”<sup>28</sup>

Within the framework of grammaticalization, the frequency of use is strictly related to—or in Heine and colleagues’ view *derivative of*—context extension. Also called ‘context generalization’, or simply ‘extension’, context extension is the process implying that, when grammaticalizing, an item becomes suitable for multiple, varied and more general contexts of use, and develop new meanings and functions.<sup>29</sup> Closely linked to—and for Heine and colleagues, *an immediate consequence of*—context extension is desemanticization (or ‘semantic bleaching’ or ‘semantic generalization’), which led to the full or partial loss of the semantic properties, i.e., the semantic content/meaning, of the source lexeme.<sup>30</sup> In the case of all three items YALLA, INŠALLAH and WALLAH, context extension implied the widespread of their usages out of the religious contexts and settings, with increasing frequency of the extended non-religious meanings, and desemanticization led to the partial or

27 See Farghal 2008: 140.

28 Castelton 2006: 87.

29 See Narrog and Heine 2021: 57.

30 See Narrog and Heine 2021: 67.

total loss of their prototypical referential meaning, that is that related to the religion and act of worship. As a result, these items developed usages which may differ depending on the variety of Arabic as well as the contexts they occur in, in some dialects becoming proper discourse markers.<sup>31</sup>

Context extension and desemanticization, together with decategorialization and erosion constitute the four (sub)processes, or parameters, of grammaticalization. Decategorialization is the loss of morphological and syntactic features characterizing the earlier use of the grammaticalizing item; this led to both internal and external change. Internal decategorialization implies, among other things, the loss of internal morphological boundaries or, in other words, univerbation.<sup>32</sup> In fact, YALLA, INŠALLAH and WALLAH have undergone a change in their morphological structure, in that in each case, an expression of two (or three) words have been merged into a single word. External decategorialization involves in particular the increasing obligatoriness of use, these forms becoming required, hence predictable, in certain (morpho-syntactic) contexts.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence of decategorialization,<sup>34</sup> in certain cases, YALLA, INŠALLAH and WALLAH penetrated the grammar of a number of dialects as adverbs, conjunctions, and (pseudo-)verbs, as we will see below.

The last sub-process of grammaticalization, i.e. erosion, entails the loss of phonetic substance, which does ‘as a rule’ not occur in the initial stage of grammaticalization, and which is not a requirement in grammaticalization.<sup>35</sup> All the forms at issue here, YALLA, INŠALLAH and WALLAH derived from Classical Arabic religious formulas and performed phonological erosion, specifically boundary loss, these items losing the phonetic boundary between the different parts of the grammaticalizing element, i.e. between the particle/word and the word Allāh.<sup>36</sup> Together with the above-mentioned univerbation, boundary loss led to new, invariable words

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31 For instance, all the three items YALLA, INŠALLAH and WALLAH may be used as discourse markers of agreement conveying approval or acceptance in a number of Arabic dialects (see Bozza and Mion forthcoming).

32 See Narrog and Heine 2021: 72–74.

33 See Narrog and Heine 2021: 75–76.

34 In claiming that some linguistic variants of Allāh expressions in Jordanian Arabic “have lost their connection to the original meaning of invocation, while others *have acquired new parts of speech*”, Jaradat (2014: 62, our emphasis) implicitly referred to decategorialization.

35 See Narrog and Heine 2021: 78–79

36 Other phenomena, including the neutralization of original glottal stop in INŠALLAH, the loss of final vowels, and the reduction of original long vowels are features that characterize spoken Arabic in general. In particular, the reduction of the long vowels led to the accent retraction: *yálla*, *inšállah*, *wállah*.

uttered with or without emphasis of the voiced alveolar lateral [l] (as we said in Section 3, we do not consider here the sociolinguistic variation),<sup>37</sup> resulting in:

- a. \*Cl. Ar. *yā llāhu* ‘Oh God!’ > YALLA [*yālla(h)* ~ *yālla* ~ *yalla* ...];
- b. \*Cl. Ar. *ʾin šāʾa llāhu* ‘If God wills’ > INŠALLAH [*inšāllāh* ~ *inšāllah* ~ *nšallāh* ...];
- c. \*Cl. Ar. *wa-llāhi* ‘By God!’ > WALLAH [*wāllāh(i)* ~ *wāllāh* ~ *wullāh* ~ *wəllāh* ~ *walla* ...].

From a phonemic point of view, it must also be remembered that, according to the Classical Arabic rules, the word *Allāh* begins with the so-called *hamzat al-waṣl* that is unstable because etymologically it represents the first element of a definite article.<sup>38</sup>

In the following sections, we look closer at each of these items in order to provide some generalizations.

## 4.1 YALLA

YALLA is originally an invocation for God’s help, meaning ‘Oh God’. It is currently used in many Arabic dialects as an exclamation (‘Oh, goodness!’), and more frequently with interjective-exhortative value, expressing ‘let’s go’, ‘come on’, like in (1.a), often to urge someone to hurry up conveying impatience, not infrequently marking impoliteness (‘quick’, ‘hurry up’), as in (1.b), where it also signals the closure of a conversation. The nuance of impoliteness emerges also when YALLA combined with an imperative, as in (1.c), or a noun, as in (1.d).

### (1.a) Jordanian Arabic (Amman)

*ḥakēt: yalla biḡarrīb min bāb it-taḡyīr!*  
 say.PFV.1SG INTERJ-EXHORT IND-try.IPF.1PL from door DEF-change  
 ‘I said: **come on**, let’s try, just for a change!’ (Mion 2012: 143)

### (1.b) Najdi Arabic

*mmh. yalla Allāh yiwaḡḡak wa*  
 [hesitation] INTERJ-EXHORT God bless.IPF.3MSG.2SG CONJ  
*yussir umūrak*  
 ease.IPF.3MSG things.2SG  
 ‘Mmh, **okay**, may Allah bless you and make things easy for you’ (Al-Rojaie 2021: 7)

<sup>37</sup> In several Arabic dialects, an emphatic *l* (phonetically velarized or pharyngealized) developed a phonemic status and, consequently, minimal pairs such as *wālla* ‘by God!’ ≠ *walla* ‘to turn out’ (Syrian Arabic) can be found. For further information, see Ferguson 1956.

<sup>38</sup> In addition, the expression *yā Allāh* is completely unknown in the Quran where God is addressed to by the term *Allāhumma*.

- (1.c) Egyptian Arabic  
*yalla* *kul*  
**INTERJ-EXHORT** eat.IMP.2SG  
 ‘Come on, eat!’ (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 964)

- (1.d) Tunisian Arabic (Takrouna)  
*ya-llā* *l-farš*  
**INTERJ-EXHORT** to-bed  
 ‘Allons, au lit!’ (Marçais and Guïga 1958, I: 120)

In the latter two cases (1.c) and (1.d), YALLA functions as an ‘intensifier’<sup>39</sup> or ‘enhancer’.<sup>40</sup> This goes also for when it precedes a (bare) imperfective, where is used as a proper hortative verb form ‘let’, as in (2).

- (2) Moroccan Arabic:  
*yallāh,* *nāmsšiw!*  
**HORT** go.IPF.2PL  
 ‘Allez, on y va!’ (Caubet 1993: 91)

This interjective-exhortative use of YALLA is also found in Lebanese Arabic,<sup>41</sup> in Libyan Arabic (Tripoli),<sup>42</sup> in Hassaniya—where, however, *yā-llāh/ya allāh* features only the interjective (‘ô Dieu!’), but not the exhortative value<sup>43</sup>—and in Moroccan Arabic, where the different functions of YALLA do not exhibit any connection to its etymological meaning, and this is an indicator of a high degree of grammaticalization, as foregrounded by Procházka.<sup>44</sup> In Jordanian Arabic, too, YALLA may be used as an interjection/exhortation<sup>45</sup> and, additionally, it is a well-established multi-functional discourse marker with a wide range of pragmatic functions, including showing approval/acceptance, suggesting, signaling the start of an action, and spreading enthusiasm,<sup>46</sup> and which may convey also a number of textual and discourse functions such as indicating the end of a conversation, topic initiation and shift, and turn-taking and -yielding.

Example (2) is also illustrative of the fact that, in addition to expressing interjective-exhortative values, YALLA is grammaticalizing other values and, as a

<sup>39</sup> Procházka 2012: 392.

<sup>40</sup> Farghal 2008: 141.

<sup>41</sup> See Feghali 1928: 88.

<sup>42</sup> See Pereira 2010: 439.

<sup>43</sup> See Taine-Cheikh 2024: 403, 2025: 580.

<sup>44</sup> Procházka 2012: 391.

<sup>45</sup> See Jaradat 2014: 65ff.

<sup>46</sup> See Hamdan and Hammouri 2022.

result, it is used as a proper TAM marker, that is as a hortative verb (as we have just seen), an adverb, and a pseudo-verb.

As far as the adverbial usage of YALLA is concerned, in Moroccan Arabic for instance, it is an adverb of manner, specifically a quantitative-evaluative adverb expressing ‘just’, ‘barely’. Examples (3.a-b) below are drawn from Procházka,<sup>47</sup> according to whom here YALLA is a temporal adverb meaning ‘just now’, ‘right now’, ‘just, in a moment’. Specifically, with a verb at the perfect or a participle YALLA refers to a point in the recent past (3.a); with a verb at the imperfective it refers to an event in the very near future or the immediate present (3.b).

(3.a) Moroccan Arabic

<i>li'anna</i>	<b>ya-<i>lla</i>h</b>	<i>kəmməlt</i>	<i>stāž</i>
because	<b>just</b>	finish.PFV.1SG	training

‘Because I **just** have finished (my) education’ (Procházka 2012: 393)

(3.b) **ya-*lla*h**

<b>just</b>	<i>ka-n-stāži</i>
	IND-training.IPF.1SG

‘I am **just** in the phase of having training’ (Procházka 2012: 393)

Similar values are found in Jordanian Arabic, where YALLA is referred to as an *adverb of frequency* by Jaradat<sup>48</sup> which means ‘barely’ when followed by a verb in the past form or a present participle form (4.a), and ‘continuously’, ‘frequently’ with a verb in the present form (4.b). In Najdi Arabic, YALLA is listed among the modals as a *qualificatory [adverb]* by Ingham,<sup>49</sup> and when it precedes a verb, YALLA “is used for ‘just’ in the sense of ‘barely’ or ‘with difficulty’”<sup>50</sup> as in (4.c). In Iraqi Arabic, too, YALLA expresses ‘just’, ‘just barely’, as in (4.d).

(4.a) Jordanian Arabic

<b>yallah</b>	<i>kaffat-na</i>
<b>barely</b>	suffice.PFV.3FSG-1PL

‘It **barely** sufficed us’ (Jaradat 2014: 66)

(4.b) **yallah**

<b>yallah</b>	<i>yihči</i>	<i>‘ann-ak</i>
<b>frequently</b>	talk.IPF.3MSG	about-2SG

‘He **frequently** talks about you’ (Jaradat 2014: 67)

47 Procházka 2012: 392–393.

48 Jaradat 2014: 66–67.

49 Ingham 2008: 333; 1994: 127.

50 Ingham 1994: 201n.

- (4.c) Najdi Arabic  
*yallah* *tigdar* *tišš* *'ala* *har-rātib*  
**just** can.IPF.2SG live.IPF.2SG on this-salary  
 'You can **only just** survive on this salary' (Ingham 1994: 127; 2008: 333)
- (4.d) Iraqi Arabic  
*ba'adni* **yalla** *bidēt.* *la-tistaʒil*  
 still.yet.1SG **just** start.PFV.1SG NEG-hurry.IPF.2SG  
 'I **just** started. Don't be in a hurry' (Woodhead and Beene 1967: 14)

A different grammaticalizing outcome is that of YALLA in Hassaniya, where it is used, both independently and in construction with a pronoun suffix, as a pseudo-verb expressing mainly necessity, as shown in (5). Here, the modal YALLA is integrated in the morphosyntax of verbs acting as a full-fledged auxiliary, a fact that suggests a high degree of grammaticalization.

- (5) Hassaniya Arabic  
*yāllt-i*<sup>51</sup> *nəštǧal*  
**must.PFV-1SG** work.IPF.1SG  
 'Je **dois/devrais** travailler, **il fau(drai)t que** je travaille' (Taine-Cheikh 2024: 403, and 2025: 580).

## 4.2 INŠALLAH

The second theophoric formula under investigation is INŠALLAH (etym. 'If God wills'), "the hallmark of Arabs" according to Farghal.<sup>52</sup> In addition to being used with its original meaning 'God willing', INŠALLAH is widespread across Arabic dialects with a variety of uses and for various purposes. For instance, in Levantine Arabic, INŠALLAH is deployed as a topic device (topic shifter and/or closer),<sup>53</sup> whereas in Najdi Arabic, it marks the closure of a turn or a conversation.<sup>54</sup> More broadly speaking, these functions are very common in Arabic everyday interaction, as noted by Al-Saeedi (2019). In Jordanian Arabic, the discourse marker INŠALLAH is a pragmatically multi-purpose expression which is used as a directive, commissive and expressive marker, and even as a mitigator of the same values.<sup>55</sup> Still for Jordanian

<sup>51</sup> The *-t-* element cannot be easily explained. Maybe it could be the outcome of a reinterpretation in a morphological sense (*-a > -t*) that allows the intervention of suffixes.

<sup>52</sup> Farghal 1995: 268.

<sup>53</sup> See Clift and Helani 2010.

<sup>54</sup> See Al-Rojaie 2021: 8.

<sup>55</sup> See Farghal 1995.

Arabic, Mehawesh and Jaradat (2015) evidenced a number of non-literal meanings which INŠALLAH may express, that is irony, a threatening, wonder, a positive reply to a yes/ok question about a future event or intention, prohibition, wish.

Beside these specific cases, the common usage related to INŠALLAH in Arabic is that of expressing a wish or hope regarding a given action. Here, INŠALLAH can be used as an interjection or even with a verb as Castelton called a “*de facto* future marker”, or “semantic future marker”,<sup>56</sup> that is a marker that accompanies a verb form expressing plans, dreams and hopes such as in (6.a), not necessarily implying future tense. In some cases, it indicates “an intentional vagueness of one’s own plans”,<sup>57</sup> like in (6.b). This usage is found in several dialects, among which Jordanian Arabic,<sup>58</sup> and Moroccan Arabic, of which Procházka highlights that INŠALLAH “is very frequent and in certain context obligatory” and its actual usage “is very much influenced by extra-linguistic circumstances, above all personal expectations [mainly *desired* vs. *undesired*] and attitudes as well as the degree of uncertainty connected with the future event.”<sup>59,60</sup>

(6.a) Egyptian Arabic

<i>‘inšalla</i>	<i>tzūr-na</i>	<i>qurayyib</i>
INŠALLAH	visit.IPF.2MSG-1PL	soon
‘I hope you’ll visit us soon.’ (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 488)		

(6.b) Iraqi Arabic

<i>tiji</i>	<i>bāčir?</i>	<i>nšalla</i>
come.IPF.2SG	tomorrow	INŠALLAH
‘Are you coming tomorrow? I might.’ (Woodhead and Beene 1967: 13)		

In addition, and strictly related to this optative mood usage, there is the use of INŠALLAH as an evaluative adverb, expressing mostly uncertainty (‘maybe’). According to Castelton, this is a further development of the original usage where “semantic shift from ‘yes, God-willing’ to ‘maybe’ or even ‘no, leave it to Allāh’ may be taking place.”<sup>61</sup> As an adverb of evaluation, INŠALLAH is found in a number of dialects, including Tunisian Arabic (Takrouna),<sup>62</sup> and Saudi, Iraqi, and Libyan Arabic.<sup>63</sup>

56 Castelton 2006: 72 and 85.

57 Woodhead and Beene 1967: 13.

58 E.g., Farghal 1995 called it ‘hope expresser’.

59 Procházka 2012: 389.

60 In this regard, ‘communicative obligatoriness’ is a salient feature of discourse markers: the choice of an item is determined by the communicative intentions of the speaker; if omitted, the communicative content of the utterance may be altered. See Diewald 2010: 25. In fact, Procházka considers that of INŠALLAH in Moroccan Arabic as an instance of discourse marker.

61 Castelton 2006: 85.

62 See Marçais and Guîga 1959, IV: 2121

63 Farghal 1995: 255.

Another TAM usage of INŠALLAH is that of concessive conjunction ‘even if’, noticed in some dialects among which Palestinian Arabic,<sup>64</sup> and Egyptian Arabic (7).

- (7) Egyptian Arabic  
*ištiri-ha*                      *inšalla*    *titkallif*                      *mīt*                      *ginēh*  
 buy.IMP.2SG-3FSG    **even if**    cost.IPF.3FSG    hundred    pound  
 ‘Buy it **even if** it costs a hundred pounds!’ (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 488)

### 4.3 WALLAH

Finally, we deal with WALLAH, which is originally an oath, used in most dialects in both its original meaning to swear by saying ‘[I swear] by God’ (e.g., in Moroccan Arabic, and Takrouna Arabic),<sup>65</sup> and as a marker of emphasis, which is a development of the original semantics of the formula. As an ‘intensification particle’,<sup>66</sup> WALLAH is used alone as an interjection (‘really!’, ‘no way!’), or as a modalizer,<sup>67</sup> specifically as a booster used to put emphasis on or to reinforce what the speaker says (or is about to say). In Moroccan Arabic, this latter value is conveyed when WALLAH is alone or in collocation with the conjunction *ila* or (*h*)*tta*, as shown in (8).<sup>68</sup>

- (8) Moroccan Arabic  
*w-llah*    *ya-mmu*                      *tta*                      *n-žbəd*                      *l-xədm.i*  
**MOD**    voc-mother                      FOC                      grasp.IPF.1SG                      DEF-dagger-1SG  
 ‘**By God**, by his mother, then I will produce my dagger’ (Procházka 2012: 395)

Moreover, in some dialects, WALLAH further developed from the strictly modalizing value to a more abstract value and it is used as a discourse marker conveying functions like turn-taking or of marking hesitation, such as English ‘well’, ‘actually’. For instance, in Egyptian Arabic, WALLAH may serve “as a simple preliminary to further speech”,<sup>69</sup>

64 Piamenta 1979: 7–10.

65 See Moscoso Garcia 2015: 624, and Marçais and Guíga 1958, I: 118, respectively.

66 See Piamenta 1979: 40–42, and also Procházka 2012: 394.

67 Modalizers are interactional discourse markers that work as social and politeness markers; see Bazzanella (2006: 457 and 463n).

68 There are some cognate forms of WALLAH which, in the place of *wa*, involve another particle of making an oath, i.e., *bi* ‘by’, but conveying the same values of marking emphasis. For instance, Jordanian *ballah* (‘by God’) is used to show disagreement (‘never/absolutely not’) or lack of satisfaction with what the previous speaker has just said (‘no way!’); see Jaradat (2014). Likewise, *baŕla* (<*bi-’alla* ‘by God’) in Iraqi Arabic is used to say ‘please’, or as an expression of surprise ‘Really?’ ‘My Gosh!’ ‘Oh come on!’; see (Woodhead and Beene 1967: 13).

69 Reichmuth 2009: 75.

or to “introduce an inferential conclusion”,<sup>70</sup> as shown in example (9). The same holds for Iraqi Arabic, where it is used “as a mere expletive” *well, uh, umm*,<sup>71</sup> and also for Palestinian Arabic, where, in initial position, “*w-alla*, ‘by God’ [is] a dummy word of hesitation when having no clear answer”,<sup>72</sup> whereas “*w-allāhi* [is] ‘well...’ [...] used as a preliminary to further speech when organizing one’s thoughts”.<sup>73,74</sup>

(9) Egyptian Arabic

*wallāhi*    *yafandim*    *illi*    *yigību*    *rabbina*    *kwayyis*  
**DM**        Madam        REL    bring.IPF.3PL    lord-1PL    OK

‘Well, Ma’am, whatever God provides is OK with me’ (Parkinson 2015 [1985]: 87)

In addition to conveying pragmatic functions related to emphasis, in Egyptian and Moroccan Arabic, WALLAH seems to be grammaticalizing as a proper modal adverb meaning ‘really’, ‘certainly’, ‘indeed’, used even in negative contexts expressing ‘certainly [not be]’, as the following two examples (10.a-b) illustrate.

(10.a) Egyptian Arabic

*w-allāhi (or w-alla)*    *ma-na*    *rāyih*  
**really**                    NEG        go.ACT.PTCP.MSG  
 I **most certainly** will not go!’ (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 34)

(10.b) Moroccan Arabic

*w-llāh*    *ma*    *n-nuḍ-u*                    *(h)tta*    *n-fārs-u*    *lā-ḍam*  
**by.God**    NEG    stand.up.IPF.1PL    till    eat.IPF.1PL    DEF-bone.PL  
 ‘We **shall certainly not** stand up until we have eaten even the bones.’  
 (Procházka 2012: 395)

70 Badawi and Hinds 1986: 34.

71 Woodhead and Beene 1967: 14.

72 Piamenta 1979: 8.

73 Piamenta 1979: 8.

74 Variants of this latter are found in other dialects. For instance, in Egyptian Arabic, *wallāhi* as a politeness and power marker (see Mughazy 2003), and similarly in Jordanian Arabic, when co-occurring with the adverb of negation *lā*, *wallāhi* or *walla* (i.e., *lā wallāhi* or *lā walla*) adds a nuance of courtesy (Mion 2012: 170). Broadly speaking, according to some researchers, Arabic theocentric expressions have become general expressions of politeness and are part of a wider system of politeness strategies (see e.g., Morrow 2006; Mughazy 2003), specifically functioning as face-saving devices (see e.g. Al-Rojaie 2021; Migdadi and Badarneh 2013). Moreover, still in Jordanian Arabic, *wallāhi* is a multifunctional discourse marker which is used, inter alia, to introduce an acceptance, an apology, a threat, and a compliment; as a request softener or mitigator; as a marker of elaboration or as a filler marker; as a marker of confirmation.

To sum up, our overview has shown that the current status of the three items we analyzed is the following:

- 1) YALLA: is an interjective-(ex)hortative marker, which has further developed as a quantitative-evaluative adverb; specific outcomes are that of temporal adverb in Moroccan Arabic, and pseudo-verb of modality in Hassaniya Arabic;
- 2) INŠALLAH: is an optative mood marker, with related evaluative adverb usage, and in some dialects a concessive conjunction;
- 3) WALLAH: is a discourse marker of emphasis and, apparently, a grammaticalizing modal adverb.

## 5 General Considerations on the Grammaticalization Processes

Notwithstanding the fact that YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH are more or less grammaticalized depending on the single cases and on the dialect—as we said, is not our concern here—they share some (macro)features characterizing their grammaticalization on the whole.

Our study yields to two general considerations that we shall now discuss by referring to Heine and colleagues' definition of grammaticalization mentioned in Section 3.

The first consideration relates to the fact that grammaticalization is a process not limited to a form, but may involve even larger discourse segments; therefore, it is also concerned with contexts and constructions. In fact, our examined items are grammaticalizing constructions, rather than single items, precisely. This aspect, moreover, emerges from the definition of theophoric formulae by Procházka<sup>75</sup> we quoted at the end of Section 2. In all three cases, the source lexeme of the grammaticalizing construction is an original Classical Arabic formula including a particle and the proper name of God, i.e., Allāh. Specifically, the particles are: the vocative particle *yā* in YALLA (\*Cl. Ar. *yā llāhu*); the conditional particle introducing possible, realis hypothesis *'in* in INŠALLAH (\*Cl. Ar. *'in šā'a llāhu*); and the oath *wa* (*wāw al-qasam*)<sup>76</sup> in WALLAH (\*Cl. Ar. *wa-llāhi*). It follows that, in considering the grammaticalization of these theophoric formulae, we have to take into account the role of the co(n)ext of such constructions, that is the fact that all the constituting elements of the constructions play a role in their grammaticalization so that in all cases: first, both the word Allāh and the given formula are very frequent lexical items across

<sup>75</sup> Procházka 2012: 383.

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. Mughazy 2003: 3.

Arabic. And second, each particle played a role in the grammaticalization of the construction in which it occurs, to the extent that:

- in YALLA, the vocative *yā* fostered the interjective-(ex)hortative values;
- in INŠALLAH, the conditional *ʾin*, together with the volitive verb *šāʾa*,<sup>77</sup> influenced the optative values, including the future ones;
- in WALLAH, the values of emphasis are an extension of the oath *wa-*.

This implies that, at the macro-level of change, these three items experienced only a partial desemanticization: in all cases, the semantic properties of the second constituent of the grammaticalizing construction, i.e. the concept of divinity related to Allāh, is (partially or totally, depending on the case) bleached, whereas the original semantics of the first constituent just mentioned (i.e. those related to the particles) have survived in the grammaticalized form affecting the new values; this latter is a result of persistence.<sup>78</sup> This basically occurred in the development from the lexical meaning of the original formula to the values just mentioned, that is, in primary grammaticalization according to Heine and colleagues' understanding.

And this leads us to the second consideration, which refers precisely to the first part of the above-mentioned definition of grammaticalization, that we will recall here for simplicity: "Grammaticalization is the development from lexical to grammatical forms and once the grammatical form has evolved, the development of further grammatical forms",<sup>79</sup> whereby *the development from lexical to grammatical forms* is primary grammaticalization, and *the development of further grammatical forms* is secondary grammaticalization. In our case, we can assume that both processes of change are involved, to the extent that:

- 1) primary grammaticalization: is the development from the source lexemes, i.e. the given formulas in the respective dialects (which are cognate forms of the original Classical Arabic formulas), to the values ascribed to what we called here, for convenience, the discourse-pragmatic usage. As we have just seen, such change has been fostered by the high frequency of use of these formulas as well as by the persistence of the value of the given particle of the related construction;

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<sup>77</sup> In this regard, interestingly, Marçais and Guïga (1959, IV: 2120) noticed that in Arabic of Takrouna (Tunisia), the verb *šāʾa* 'to want', 'to desire', survived only at the third masculine singular of the perfect, occurring only in fixed formulas like INŠALLAH, precisely. This suggests a high degree of grammaticalization of the verb which would have affected the grammaticalization of the whole construction; it is a point that deserves further investigation.

<sup>78</sup> See Hopper 1991: 22.

<sup>79</sup> Narrog and Heine 2021: 1.

- 2) secondary grammaticalization: is the development from such discourse-pragmatic usage to the TAM-marking usage, that is, to the further grammaticalized values emerged within and across the different dialects; hence, we have instances of ‘continuing grammaticalization’,<sup>80</sup> where the new emerging values apparently tend to be primarily modal.

Ultimately, on the whole, the grammaticalization of YALLA, INŠALLAH, and WALLAH seems to be within and towards the domain of mood/modality. And, at the macro-level, this change was primarily triggered by the particles of the grammaticalizing constructions, which are in some way ‘modal’.

## 6 Conclusions

The present study reveals that, in Arabic, there is a subset of theophoric formulae which apparently play a role in the grammaticalization of TAM markers, especially in the specialization of mood/modality values. This is a fact that should not be underestimated in future research on this topic, and that may also have typological implications. For instance, the *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization* noticed so far as a cross-linguistic pattern the one involving: *GOD* > *INTERJECTION*,<sup>81</sup> not mentioning further developments in this direction. In this regard, our data would supplement this evidence, as the resulting pattern would be: *GOD* > *INTERJECTION* > *MOOD/MODALITY MARKING*.

Therefore, although still preliminary, this study aims at confirming that the impact of theophoric formulae does not deal exclusively with lexicon, but sometimes also with the domain of pragmatics and even that of grammar. The evidence provided in this study is the result of a review of the state-of-the-art, but fresh research that would involve further data from broader areas of the Arabic speaking world is needed.

Also, it would be interesting to widen the scope of the investigation to include other pan-Arab, regional and even idiosyncratic items which have the same pattern consisting of *particle [+ ...]* + *the proper name of God*.

Finally, in addition to Arabic, it is worth noting that some formulas mentioned in this paper are sometimes widespread also among non-Arabic speakers, including both Muslims and non-Muslims who are highly exposed to these phenomena.<sup>82</sup> In the case of Muslim speakers living in non-Arabic speaking countries of Asia and Africa,

<sup>80</sup> See Narrog and Heine 2021: 4.

<sup>81</sup> Kuteva et al. 2019: 219. The case of YALLA outlined in Section 4.1 reflects to some extent this path.

<sup>82</sup> A typical example to explore and investigate is the case of youth language in France.

new formulas could develop under the pressure of the Allāh-Lexicon and it would be interesting to evaluate whether also in other languages, like in Arabic, they trigger processes of linguistic change similar to those highlighted in our study.

Nevertheless, this issue goes far beyond the purpose of this paper, and yet, once again, it cannot but call to mind the concept of “Islamic language” conceived by Bausani (1981).

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