



Contemporary Sociopolitical Functions of the “*Allahu Akbar*” Ritual Speech Act in Today’s Muslim Communities: A Focus on the Iranian Society

Mohamad Ghazanfari^{1a}, Atena Attaran^{2a}, Mohammad Zabetipour^{3a}

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Abstract

As an Islamo-Arabic utterance, throughout the history of Islam, “*Allahu Akbar*” has been widely used as one of the most influential religious slogans since the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE. However, during the last four decades, it has gained a fairly global reputation thanks to various functions it has pragmatically come to serve in different social settings. Recently, it has been particularly assigned a world-wide notoriety due to the terrorist acts by extremist Islamist factions. This study aimed at identifying the social, political, and religious contexts in which contemporary Muslims recite “*Allahu Akbar*” with various pragmatic meanings in mind, making a special distinction between ordinary, peaceful contexts of use and violent contexts, where, in the latter, it is mostly heard from the mouths of extremist factions like ISIS, who, as well, associate themselves with Islam. We have, finally, identified eleven pragmatic functions the utterance serves in today’s Islamic societies, with a special focus on the Iranian context.

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¹ Associate Professor, Email: mghazanfari@um.ac.ir (Corresponding Author)
Tel: +98-915-5721223

² PhD Candidate, Email: atena.attaran@stu.um.ac.ir

³ PhD Candidate, Email: m.zabetipour@gmail.com

^a Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

1. Introduction

Originally an Islamic utterance in Arabic, “*Allahu Akbar*” is nowadays frequently heard over domestic and/or satellite TV channels or read about in the news stories on the Internet by many people at almost any corner of the globe. However, during the last four decades or so – at least for some people who are not well acquainted with Islamic doctrine – it seems to have become more associated with violence, terrorism, extremism, and bloodshed rather than with peaceful spirituality, heavenly religious teachings, and divine providence. Thus, it seems that quite an innocuous expression, an everyday phrase has been tarnished by violent attacks (Nagourney, 2017). No doubt, such a widespread notoriety is mainly attributable to terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists, by terrorists like ISIS and Al Qaeda and their sympathizers, who represent a tiny fraction of Muslims (see, e.g., Ali, 2017), or by the so-called *jihadist salafis*, a fundamentalist branch of Sunni Islam, who

recognize only their own selective interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadiths (the collections of reports on the words, deeds and practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the second most authoritative source of Islamic scripture) as legitimate sources of scripture, law, personal and social behavior. (Wignell, Tan, & O’Halloran, 2016, p. 4)

The members of such extremist factions “are aggressively militant and believe that they have an obligation to conduct a military campaign against all who they regard as enemies of Islam” (Wignell et al., 2016, p. 4). They claim to be the righteous defenders of true Islam, assuming the right to label even other Muslims who do not obey them as non-believers or apostates who are liable to be punished by death – hence, justifying the mass killings of innocent people (see, e.g., Kepel, 2002). True representative followers of such extremist factions are the terrorists who shout “*Allahu Akbar*” while ramming a vehicle into innocent crowds, opening fire on crowds attending a concert, blowing themselves up and killing or wounding innocent people nearby, or attacking people in a shopping mall with an open knife in hand (see, e.g., “Two Fatally Stabbed”, 2016). The result of such terrorist acts has been

spreading more Islamophobia throughout the world, creating a horrifying image of Islam as an oppressive and violent religion (see, e.g., Jackson, 2010; Powell, 2011). It seems that Islamophobia and associating some Islamic slogans with terrorism have become so widespread and notorious that some Muslims are afraid or ashamed of speaking out their religion publicly in some Western countries, so that a mother at a US airport was overheard telling her son to secretly pray without citing the phrase ‘*Allahu Akbar*’ loudly (see Zakaria, 2016). Or recently the mayor of Venice, Italy, declared, “We will shoot anyone who shouts ‘*Allahu Akbar*’ in St. Mark’s Square” (“Mayor of Venice”, 2017). It seems that some non-Muslims have come to the notion that “*Allahu Akbar*” is just a battle cry uttered by someone who is about to perform *jihadist* operations by blowing himself up among an innocent crowd.

However, despite being associated with violent extremism, or terrorist Islamic factions, historical evidence suggests that the utterance was hardly synonymous with violent, radical actions from the viewpoint of early believers, and even non-believers, in Islam. Numerous evidential facts may be raised in support of such a claim. Firstly, since the very beginning days of Islam in the seventh century CE, Muslim *muezzins* have repeatedly cried “*Allahu Akbar*” from the tower of mosques five times daily to call people to join congregational prayers. Secondly, the utterance is articulated as a familiar refrain (i.e., a frequently repeated phrase) by Muslims several times while praying, almost with every change of body posture, regardless of whether the prayer is performed collectively or individually. Thirdly, the utterance has frequently been used by Muslims in several other contexts which might not have anything to do with its ritualistic or religious functions whatsoever, as we discuss it below.

This study has aimed to investigate various uses and pragmatic functions of the speech act “*Allahu Akbar*” in different contexts among two major groups of Muslims: Arabic native speakers and Persian native speakers. Although it is the researchers’ contention that the social, religious or pragmatic functions we have identified for the utterance under investigation may be applicable to approximately any Islamic community regardless of their indigenous

language or culture, we admit that our study might still fall short of being a comprehensive investigation embracing all the pragmatic functions the utterance might assume in various cultural or social contexts throughout the Islamic world.

In what follows, we start with a historical background of the utterance since the advent of Islam about 14 centuries ago. Then, we discuss the theoretical grounding of the study, followed by a description of the methodology applied, and identifying various contexts in which the speech act in question is nowadays articulated within contemporary Islamic communities.

2. Theoretical Framework

Etymologically, “*Allahu Akbar*” (literally meaning “God is greater”) consists of two Arabic words: *Allah* (literally, ‘God’) and *Akbar* (comparative adjective, derived from *kabeer*, meaning ‘great’). According to Islamic culture and theology, the very verbal act of reciting “*Allahu Akbar*” is labeled as “*takbeer*”, meaning “praising” or “glorifying” God. As to the meaning the utterance conveys, Ibn al-Qayyim (2002) clarifies:

“*Allahu Akbar*” literally means, “Allah is Greater”, with the comparative mode. Yet, this does not mean that He . . . is not the Greatest, nor does it mean that there is anything that is put in comparison with Him. This is because when the Muslim says it, he means He is “Greater” than anything else, which, consequently, means He is the Greatest (p. 463)

From a historical perspective, as it was briefly mentioned above, “*Allahu Akbar*”, as an Islamic ritual motto, has been uttered by Muslims since the advent of Islam, recited loudly four times in the very beginning of each call for the five daily prayers by *muezzins* from the tower of the *minarets*. However, it has been uttered in non-ritualistic contexts as well, assuming indeed new meanings and pragmatic functions especially during recent decades, at the same time that it has, of course, retained its original religious connotations.

According to the history of Islam, in addition to being regarded as a ritual slogan, it was perhaps uttered for the first time in a non-religious

context by the holy Prophet himself, during the hard time when Medina was under siege by the idol-worshippers of Mecca in the fifth year of Hegira (626 CE). While Muslims were day and night busy digging a deep wide channel, or moat, round the town to be filled with water to prevent the enemy from entering the town, the Prophet himself, having joined his men in digging up the moat, lifted a pick and struck the ground. As soon as the pick touched the ground, there was an eye-catching flash of light in the dark, the astonishing light being repeated with the following hits of the ground. Immediately, the Prophet recited loudly “*Allahu Akbar*” three times, and the companions around him also repeated “*Allahu Akbar*” (see Al-Tabari, 1879; Tabari, 1974). The Prophet then told his men that with each flash of light he was inspired that his followers were going to seize one part of the world in the east and west.

After the first quarter of the 7th century, as history tells us (see, for instance, Tabari, 1974), early Muslims would recite the utterance in several other occasions and contexts other than religious situations, mostly during the religious wars against non-believers (i.e., pagans or apostates, as they came to be known in the Islamic theology).

In the modern era, especially, since the second half of the 20th century, the Islamic world has witnessed several social and political upheavals and revolutions. The yelling of ‘*takbeer*’ has also been frequently heard during such sociopolitical movements throughout the Islamic world (e.g., during the last decade, in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, etc.).

However, Iranian protesters and demonstrators in defiance of the Shah's regime in 1979 were perhaps the first to apply “*Allahu Akbar*” for sociopolitical purposes, yelling rhyming slogans like “*Allahu Akbar; Khomeini rahbar*” (God is greater; Khomeini is the leader) while taking to the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities and towns. They did not even fail to shout “*Allahu Akbar*” under the strict martial law on the rooftops in the dark of night, a political strategy which was repeated during demonstrations and protests following the controversial presidential elections in 2009.

During the recent uprisings in the Arab world, which came to be known as “the Arab Spring”,

the utterance “*Allahu Akbar*” was also frequently heard being shouted by Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis, Tunisians, and Bahrainis while demonstrating against the ruling regimes.

The utterance has also been recently heard to be frequently used by violent, extremist Muslim groups like those associated with Al-Qaeda or the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and Sham” (ISIS) or *DAESH*, the Arabic abbreviation of “*Dawlat al-Islamiyah fil-Iraq wa al-Sham*” (Wignell et al., 2016, p. 1).

However, it is worth noting that such extremist factions’ ideological and theological beliefs are totally different from the true nature of Islam, as they, indeed, represent “only a tiny proportion of the world’s Muslims” (Wignell et al., 2016, p. 4), constituting “only 3% of the world’s Muslim population” (Rashid, 2015, p. 23).

As far as the theoretical grounding is concerned, this study draws on two theoretical approaches: John Austin’s (1962) speech act theory, in particular the three-fold distinction he made with respect to the sense or force of the utterances, *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution* (see also Thomas, 1995; Mey, 2001); and Michael Halliday’s (e.g., 1978, 1985, 1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly his theory of metafunctions, which proposes that all languages, as well as other semiotic systems, are organized around three kinds of meaning: the *ideational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *textual*. As Halliday has explained:

These components, called ‘metafunctions’ in the terminology of the current theory, are the manifestations in the linguistic system of the two very general purposes which underlie all uses of language: (i) to understand the environment (ideational), and (ii) to act on others in it (interpersonal). Combined with these is a third metafunctional component, the ‘textual’, which breathes relevance into the other two. (Halliday, 1985, p. xiii)

The reason we have drawn on Halliday’s functional grammar is that it readily yields itself to analytic purposes and, indeed, allows the researchers to analyze any text sensibly. As to the objective of constructing a functional grammar, Halliday (1985, p. xv) has clarified,

“the aim has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis; one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English”. Moreover, elsewhere—that is, in the preface to the second edition of his work – Halliday (1994, p. ix) has confirmed that “the systemic functional model has been widely used in the analysis of discourse”.

As to the speech act theory, Austin (1962) in his posthumous work *How to Do Things with Words* maintained that people not only use language to make statements about the world, but also they use it to perform actions which may change or influence the world in some way. The theory of speech act, indeed, focuses on the intended actions of the speakers and the way hearers come to an understanding of the intended meaning from what is said. Austin’s speech act theory “was further developed and codified by the American philosopher, John R. Searle, who had studied under Austin in the fifties, and subsequently became the main proponent and defender of the former’s ideas” (Mey, 2001, pp. 92-3). Searle (1969) defined speech acts as “the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication” (p. 16). Based on Austin’s philosophy, “a statement not only describes a situation or states some facts, but also performs a certain kind of action by itself” (Masaki, 2004, p. 28). Therefore, to quote Jacob L. Mey (2001), “speech acts are verbal actions happening in the world. Uttering a speech act, I do something with my words: I perform an *activity* that (at least intentionally) brings about a change in the existing state of affairs” (p. 95; emphasis in original). In Nazzari’s words (2005), the speech act theory “accounts for the number of ways speakers or writers can potentially perform a set of actions in saying or writing something” (p. 256).

Austin (1962) identifies three different levels of action or meaning: He labels the act of saying something, or the actual words articulated, as a *locutionary act*, “the act of simply uttering a sentence from a language” (Parker & Riley, 2005, p. 13); or, put simply, “the activity we engage in when we say something, for example: It’s cold in here” (Mey, 2001, p. 95).

Austin calls the act of doing something, or the intention behind the words, an *illocutionary act*, for instance, requesting, apologizing, declaring,

and so on. Searle (1976) has enumerated five basic kinds of illocutionary acts: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. The illocution is actually the social function of what is said which may be different in various situations and contexts. Austin (1962) labels the effect or the consequence of what is said a *perlocutionary act*, which is actually the effect of the illocution on the hearer. In his own words, a perlocutionary act is “the achieving of certain effects by saying something” (p. 120).

Moreover, in terms of what has been suggested by some contemporary scholars (e.g., Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Widdowson, 2007), the utterance “*Allahu Akbar*”, when employed in a certain context as an actual use of language to serve a communicative purpose, “to get a message across, to express ideas and beliefs, to explain something, to get other people to do certain things or to think in a certain way, and so on” (Widdowson, 2007, p. 6) may be regarded as a *text*, as a linguistic unified whole, which may convey different underlying discourses as well.

Although Bloch (1989, as cited in Keane, 1997) has argued that ritual language suppresses affairs relevant to this world in favor of the otherworldly, it “need not serve only one function”, due to the fact that “texts can move across contexts” or “existing ritual forms can take on new functions and meanings” (Keane, 1997, p. 64). To put it another way, a given text, or a certain “locution”, in Austin’s words, could have a different “illocutionary force” when placed in a different context of situation — hence, assuming a new pragmatic function and serving a different meaning. As, for instance, Thomas (1995) has illustrated:

The utterance ‘*What time is it*’ could, depending on the context of utterance, mean any of the following:

The speaker wants the hearer to tell the time;

The speaker is annoyed because the hearer is late;

The speaker thinks it is time the hearer went home. (p. 50)

In the realm of religious speech acts, few studies (e.g., Ghazanfari & Kermanshahi, 2012; Pishghadam & Kermanshahi, 2012; Nazzal,

2005) have so far been conducted to investigate, in particular, the social and pragmatic functions some ritual speech acts serve in the Muslim community. More specifically, Nazzal (2005) investigated the functions of the Quranic verse “*Insha’Allah*” (literally, “if God intends”) among Muslim Arabic speakers, while the functions of the same speech act were investigated among Muslim Persian speakers by Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (2012); and, finally, the functions served by ‘*ya Allah*’ (literally, “Oh, God”) in the Iranian interactions were extensively studied by Ghazanfari and Kermanshahi (2012). According to Nazzal (2005), “Muslims have a tendency to use certain communicative practices to either mitigate their commitments to carry out future actions or to express their perception of the social world that they are trying to make sense of” (p. 255). Moreover, Pishghadam and Kermanshahi (2012) found eight functions for the speech act ‘*Insha Allah*’ among the Persian speakers: to empower the speaker, to be fatalistic, to display religious identity, to wish, to curse someone, to encourage someone to do something, to evade the answer, and to postpone the answer.

Additionally, Ghazanfari and Kermanshahi (2012) investigated the functions of ‘*ya Allah*’ in the Iranian social interactions, classifying them under two broad categories of ‘asking for permission’ and ‘calling for an action’.

3. Methodology

3.1. Procedure of Data Collection

Although the process of data collection started in July 2015 and lasted for about 6 months as the first round of data collection, the investigation could not be completed for some reasons. We started the second phase of data collection in the last two months of 2016 and carried on until almost mid-2018. The corpus was mainly collected by identifying and transcribing the speech act in question from a few online video clips taken from the websites of some news agencies or satellite TV channels, newspaper websites, and even through personal observations. That is, in a few cases, when common people were heard or observed by one of the researchers uttering the speech act during their actual verbal interactions, or the speech act under investigation was heard during a TV broadcast, it was immediately noted down. It

should be mentioned that in collecting the data about the pragmatic uses of the utterance “*Allahu Akbar*” we could not rely on merely live data, like those cases in which people are heard uttering the phrase. Practically, such a procedure, in addition to having its own limitations in scope, can be extremely time-consuming. Therefore, we had to resort to online public social media like newspaper websites and TV channels. Moreover, what we had in mind, as far as the design of the study is concerned, was tracing a historical record of the utterance under investigation at least during the last four decades in the Islamic world, where the world has witnessed too many political and social developments, perhaps under the influence of the Iranian revolution in 1979. That is why some of our data may look to be outdated.

The process of data collection was carried on to the point of saturation, that is, up to the point where the researchers came to the conclusion that, in terms of the social or religious functions the speech act of “*Allahu Akbar*” serves in Muslim communities, no more functions could be added to the previous instances already recorded. During the last phase of data collection, more than one hundred and twenty more instances of the use of the speech act were found from the websites of newspapers. The material in the Persian newspapers were subsequently translated into English by the researchers.

In summary, in the end, we came up with a corpus consisting of about 480 written instances and more than 30 video clips containing various uses of “*Allahu Akbar*”. From among the collected data, merely a number of examples which seemed to be more representative of the pragmatic functions the utterance can potentially serve were picked out and included in the text to be analyzed qualitatively. To ensure the reliability and validity of the analyses, two experts, one coming from the field of theology and Quranic sciences and another from the field of sociolinguistics, examined the accumulated data and finally confirmed only those instances on which they could come to an agreement with respect to the various pragmatic functions the speech act in question could serve in different contexts to be included in the text.

3.2. Procedure of Data Analysis

After the extracted instances of the use of “*Allahu Akbar*” were collected from various sources, they were categorized in terms of the illocutionary forces (that is, the pragmatic meanings) they conveyed in each context on the basis of John Austin’s (1962) three-fold distinction. No doubt, it is the contextual evidence which determines the pragmatic function each utterance serves in a given setting. To quote Mey (1998), “it is the context that gives words their proper meaning”, or to put it more clearly, “words and phrases only mean something when they are placed in their proper context” (p. 4).

Therefore, as the utterance under investigation may assume different pragmatic roles depending on the context of situation in which it takes place, different labels have been suggested for such different pragmatic functions the utterance may serve, although in some cases the newly-assumed meaning may seem to go far away from the original lexical meaning of the utterance.

4. Results

In the following section, we have first categorized various pragmatic functions served by the speech act in question by giving a label to each function in terms of the pragmatic meaning it assumes in each setting or “context of situation” (cf. Malinowski, 1932, 1935, as cited in Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Then, we present a brief account of at least one actual event in which the utterance “*Allahu Akbar*” has been contextualized, thus having assumed a certain illocutionary force.

Finally, below each of the pragmatic categories, we elaborate on the relevant pragmatic function by adding more explanations, justifications, and necessary discussions.

4.1. To Raise Public Objection

4.1.1. Turkish people chanting ‘*Allahu Akbar*’

Turkish people took to the streets in Istanbul, getting together in mosques and public squares, chanting “Allahu Akbar” to raise public objection against the military coup in their

country. (“Turkish People Chanting ‘Allahu Akbar’”, 2016)

4.1.2. Shiites chanting ‘Allahu Akbar’ in Medina

After a well-known Shiite clergy was arrested by Saudi security forces, several angry Shiites gathered in the Prophet’s Mosque (*Masjid al-Nabi*), Medina, showed their protest by chanting “*Allahu Akbar*”. The uprising led to declaring a curfew in the city by the government. (“Shiites Chanting ‘Allahu Akbar’ in Medina”, 2012)

During recent decades, it has been a common practice among Muslims to show their political or social objections by uttering “*Allahu Akbar*” publicly. In such a context, in terms of Halliday’s SFL, no doubt the *interpersonal* function of the utterance is emphasized. Such a sociopolitical use of the utterance apparently was first introduced, as it was mentioned earlier, during the demonstrations held against the Shah’s regime in 1979 in Iran, mostly due to the religious nature of that uprising which was, specifically, led by a spiritual leader, a clergyman.

4.2. To Reveal Anger/Hatred

4.2.1. Hundreds March for Palestinian Cause in The Hague

Chanting “*Allahu Akbar*” (*God is great*) and “1, 2, 3, 4, Israel is no more”, the group urged an end to what they termed the “holocaust in Gaza” and what they perceive to be Western support for Israel. (“Hundreds March for Palestinian Cause in The Hague”, 2009)

4.2.2. Stabbing at US Airport is An Act of Terror, FBI Confirms

Fifty-year-old Amor Ftouhi, who carried out the “lone-wolf” attack had entered the US on June 16, FBI special investigator David Gelios told the media. According to Gelios, Ftouhi yelled “*Allahu Akbar*”, or “Allah is the greatest”, before he attacked Officer Jeff Neville with a 30 cm knife at the Bishop International Airport in Flint. Neville’s condition was reported to be “satisfactory” after surgery. (“Stabbing at US Airport is an Act of Terror”, 2017)

4.2.3. An Arab Muslim and Israeli Officer at the Center of a Storm

Ms. Samri, an Arab woman in the Israeli police force, said that as she approached a checkpoint in the West Bank, a Palestinian woman tried to ignite a gas balloon in her car, describing the woman as a terrorist, noting that the woman had cried “*Allahu Akbar*”. (“An Arab, Muslim, and Israeli Officer at the Center of a Storm”, 2015)

One of the most-frequently occurring functions of “*Allahu Akbar*”, nowadays, among Muslims is to express one’s anger. In various situations, even when they are dealing with the daily chores of life, when flying into a rage, they may produce the utterance with an angry tone to unveil their wrath.

In most political demonstrations on certain occasions in Iran, mostly directed by government officials, especially after the participants are provoked by an emotive, political speech, the agitated demonstrators reveal their anger by unanimously shouting “*Allahu Akbar*”. (Notice, for example, what happens on the last Friday of each *Ramadhan*, the so-called ‘Quds day’, when fasting Muslims take to the streets, chanting “*Allahu Akbar*” and other political slogans against Israel and some Western countries.)

4.3. To Call for Revenge

4.3.1. Charlie Hebdo Attack

Twelve people were killed when two masked gunmen opened fire in the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* at 11.30 on Wednesday morning – nine journalists, a building maintenance worker and two police officers. During the attack witnesses described hearing the attackers shout “*Allahu Akbar*” and “We have avenged the prophet”. (“Charlie Hebdo Attack”, 2015)

4.3.2. Russian Ambassador to Turkey Shot Dead by Police Officer in Ankara Gallery

The Russian ambassador to Turkey has been shot dead by a police officer who shouted “Don’t forget Aleppo” as he pulled the trigger. Andrei Karlov was attacked at the opening of an art exhibition in Ankara by a man believed

to be an off-duty Turkish police officer, who pulled out a gun, shouted “Allahu Akbar” and fired at least eight shots. (“Russian Ambassador to Turkey Shot Dead”, 2016)

In the instances like the ones above, people who utter the phrase “*Allahu Akbar*” in such contexts, indeed, intend to convey a message of vengeance to their opponents – hence, emphasizing the interpersonal function of the utterance. To reinforce that message or to make it more influential, however, they take recourse to religious language to stimulate especially those people who share their religious attitudes and beliefs to rise for supporting them.

4.4. To Show Joy and Gratitude

4.4.1. In Tripoli, Blaring Horns and Shouts of Joy

After the news — at that point, still unconfirmed — broke that Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi had been killed. We heard the sounds of different firearms exploding around us as people celebrated. The streets were packed, and the air was electric with the energy of victory that sprang from the sound of cars’ horns and shouts of joy and “Allahu Akbar” coming from the throats of men, women and children. (“Updates on the Death of Muammar el-Qaddafi”, 2011)

In the context above, people of Libya, at the same time that they reveal their exaltation of the downfall of the dictator, they acknowledge the glory and grandeur of God by shouting “*Allahu Akbar*”, implying that he is the one whose will is executed in the occurrence of any upheaval.

4.5. To Declare One’s Approval and Support

4.5.1. Abdullah Campaigning in Afghan Vote Hunt

He performs a walkabout as if starring in a Hollywood Western, with more than 1,000 over-excited supporters thronging in his wake, decked out in tribal dress, fatigues and football strips.

“We will finish this government. We will finish corruption”, he shouts, stabbing the air with an accusatory finger, hailed by jubilant cries of “Allah Akbar!” (“Abdullah Campaign King in Afghan Vote Hunt”, 2009)

4.5.2. Erdogan Attacking Seculars

Mr. Erdogan began his speech at the rally by reciting verses from the Quran, bringing tears to the eyes of many supporters. He challenged secular Turks who are uncomfortable with his government by saying, “We will not give way to those who speak out against our call to prayer”, and the audience responded with shouts of “Allahu Akbar” — God is great. (“Turkey’s Elections Will Test Power of the President”, 2015)

In fact, such occasions of seeking public approval have frequently been occurring in Iran since the Iranian revolution in 1979, which led to the Shah’s overthrow. It seems that the strategy has been adopted in other Islamic countries, where masses of common people approve of political or religious figures’ stances by shouts of “*Allahu Akbar*” as a sign of support. Once more, the interpersonal metafunction of the utterance is fully operative in such contexts.

4.6. To Exclaim Bewilderment

4.6.1. Encounter with the Commander of the Battalion

Quoting the memoirs of a voluntary Iranian militant during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), *The Vatan-e Emrouz*, an Iranian daily, wrote:

It was the night we were supposed to have an offensive against Iraqi forces. Everybody was waiting for the Commander of the Battalion to order the attack. I could hear people around me talking about him. I wished I could see him. I wondered how he would look like. Indeed, I imagined him as a monster, perhaps a stout man in a splendid uniform, surrounded by security men. Suddenly, one of my co-battalions cried: “The Commander!” I turned around and saw a humble man with a khaki uniform, carrying a shovel on his shoulder like a gardener. I could not help murmuring, “Allahu Akbar! Is it the Commander, Haj Morteza?” (“Memories of War 20”, 2017).

4.6.2. Earthquake in Southern Khorasan, Destroying Several Villages

In the spring of 1997, one day after a huge quake had destroyed several villages in

Southern Khorasan, Iran, I was on a bus together with about 20 local people who had volunteered to travel to the quake-stricken area to help the survivors. As we arrived into a village almost completely devastated by the quake, with modern concrete walls and ceilings wholly having collapsed and been leveled, some of my co-travelers, noting such huge devastation, suddenly yelled “Allahu Akbar”. (Personal observation by one of the authors, May 1997)

As the situations above indicate, in the contexts where people are strikingly astonished, they tend to utter “*Allahu Akbar*” to express their amazement. In the case of huge natural events, where indeed the inability of human beings against the extraordinary power of the Mother Nature is revealed, religious people tend to acknowledge that God, the Supreme Being, is the most powerful, the only unrivalled being, the one who can do anything He wishes to. The utterance is usually uttered when some natural event beyond human imagination occurs -- for instance, when a huge tsunami, flood, or quake occurs somewhere on the globe with vast destructions. Although we do know that such events are the effect of Nature’s agency, ordinary religious people usually attribute them to the will of God and express their bewilderment by uttering “*Allahu Akbar*”.

4.7. To Celebrate Achievement/Success

4.7.1. People Shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’ on Rooftops

On the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, exactly at 9:00 PM, Iranian people, mounting the rooftops of their houses and apartments, unanimously started shouting “Allahu Akbar” to celebrate the victory of their own revolution on February 11, 1979. (“Allahu Akbar’ Resonating in Iran”, 2016)

4.7.2. Military Personnel Unanimously Shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’

Iranian military forces, in celebration of the so-called “The Guards’ Day”, declared that they had successfully launched the production line of high-precision surface-to-air missiles (the so-called “SAM” weapon). During a military drill, the news of which later broadcasted on the state TV, as soon as the new weapon was launched, the group of military personnel

present on the scene unanimously shouted “Allahu Akbar” three times to celebrate their military achievement. (“Military Personnel Shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’”, 2017)

4.7.3. Iranian Forces Shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’

During the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq also there were occasions during which the Iranian forces could win the upper hand by managing, for instance, to strike one of the enemy’s military vehicles or warplanes, drive the enemy backward, or occupy a territory, and the like. In such situations, the Iranian forces could be heard shouting “Allahu Akbar” repeatedly to show their exaltation of such achievements. One can watch such scenes in the historical documentary ‘ravayat-e fat-h’ [The Narrative of the Triumph]. (“Iranian Forces Shout ‘Allahu Akbar’”, 2017)

As an alternative interpretation, one may consider such a verbal behavior solely from a religious perspective. That is, in such a context, the people seem to view the situation in a much farther horizon, where despite the strong opposition of human rivals, despite too many obstacles on the way, it is the will of God that guarantees their success. Hence, they tend to underscore God’s providence by shouting “*Allahu Akbar*”.

4.8. To Boost Self-Agitation/Intimidation of the Enemy

4.8.1. Iranian Militants Attacking Iraqi Trenches Shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’

One of the Iranian state TV channels, in a documentary TV program entitled as “ravayat-e fat-h” [The Narrative of the Triumph] showed that during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988), whenever Iranian forces launched an offensive against the enemy, it was the ordinary practice to use human waves by swarming into the enemy’s territory. To agitate the militants more and more or to boost their morale to invade the enemy’s positions, and, at the same time, to intimidate the enemy forces or weaken their morale, Iranian militants loudly and repeatedly chanted “Allahu Akbar” unanimously as they attacked the Iraqi forces’ trenches. (“Iranian Militants Attacking Iraqi Trenches”, 2017)

Nowadays, of course, such states of extreme agitation may be observed among extremist Islamic factions. Shouts of violent *takbeer* have frequently been heard from the mouths of *jihadist* extremists believing in so-called apocalyptic Islam, who intend to give their words and actions an air of sacredness and divinity, while being involved in terrorist attacks throughout the world.

4.9. To Raise One's Own and One's Advocates' Morale

4.9.1. Islamic Militants Yelling 'Allahu Akbar'

In an Iranian TV serial entitled "moamma-ye shah" [The Mystery of the Shah], on political events which occurred during the reign of the Shah, members of an Islamic revolutionary group were arrested in a house by the police and immediately taken to police vehicles parked in the street nearby while people were witnessing the event. Meanwhile, the leader of the revolutionary group yelled "Allahu Akbar", followed by other members' chanting "Allahu Akbar" in unison several times. (Varzi, 2017).

By such a verbal behavior they seemed to intend to boost their own and their supporters' morale to continue with their campaign against the Shah's regime, to ensure the believers that 'it is not the end of the story', that 'everything is subject to change under God's providence'.

4.9.2. Captured ISIS Insurgents Shouting 'Allahu Akbar'

In a video on YouTube, a couple of ISIS (DAESH) insurgent snipers, while busy targeting victims from Iraqi troops, were caught from behind and disarmed by some Iraqi forces. As the Iraqi soldiers were busy tying their hands on the back, the two insurgents, who seemingly had lost any hope of release and felt themselves so close to captivity in the enemy's hands or even being put to death, repeatedly recited "Allahu Akbar". ("Captured ISIS Insurgents Shouting 'Allahu Akbar'", 2017)

As apparently God-fearing people and strong believers in God's will, they seemed to have intended to show that they had not lost their hope totally, being still hopeful that there might be some favor on the part of "Allah", that

although they had been captured by the enemy, their cause was over there, and that under God's providence everything might suddenly change – hence, at least sending a signal of morale raising to other members of the faction to carry on their struggle.

Once more, it is evident that, in terms of Halliday's SFL, it is the *interpersonal* metafunction of the text which is highlighted in such a context of situation, since, by verbalizing their message that way, the speakers not only attempted to give a kind of divine air to their utterance, but also intended to address the community to be impressed through a heavenly message.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine various pragmatic functions served by the Islamo-Arabic utterance "Allahu Akbar" among the two Muslim communities speaking either Arabic or Persian as their native tongue. As it was already pointed out, in Widdowson's words, "a text can be defined as an actual use of language", clarifying further that "we identify a piece of language as a text as soon as we recognize that it has been produced for a communicative purpose" (2007, p. 4). Bearing such a definition in mind, we can undoubtedly recognize "Allahu Akbar" as a text, or, to quote Widdowson (2004, p. 6), as a "very short text". As it has been clarified by Widdowson (2007), while some texts "have an obvious utility function, ... others are meant to serve a range of different social purposes: to give information, express a point of view, shape opinion, provide entertainment, and so on" (p. 6). By the analysis of the social situations and contexts in which "Allahu Akbar" as a text has been employed, we found out that the speech act in question can serve nine different pragmatic functions in the Islamic communities under investigation.

The question that is likely, however, to come into one's mind might be concerned with the fact that how such a wide range of pragmatic functions or communicative purposes may be identified by hearers/readers of the "text" when they encounter it in a certain context. The answer is that it is the context of situation which determines the pragmatic purpose, or 'the illocutionary force', a certain text may assume in different situations or under various

contextual circumstances (cf. Mey, 1998). Some shared knowledge or some degree of convergence between intention and interpretation is, of course, required in order to be able to interpret any encoded utterance, or “locution”, in Austin’s words, in different contexts.

Moreover, as an alternative interpretation for some of the instances of “*Allahu Akbar*” glossed above, in a broader perspective, one may look for metaphysical accounts related to religious beliefs in order to explain why people turn to religious language.

Firstly, religious believers regard religious language as sacred and, hence, superior to ordinary language thanks to its association with God or invisible metaphysical divine beings. Despite sharing some similar linguistic features with other registers, religious language, believed to be descended through revelation on God’s messengers, is preferred over ordinary language by religious people (cf. Naeem et al., 2014).

Secondly, according to Charles Peirce’s theory of assertion, “to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth” (as cited in Scott, 2013, p. 195). The commitment of the speaker to the truth of an expressed proposition has been emphasized by various scholars, including Searle (1969, 1979) and Brandom (1994), where he maintains that “in asserting something, one is obliged to offer some justification of what one has asserted if it is disputed” (as cited in Scott, 2013, p. 195). In summary, one should take responsibility for the truth of a proposition one states.

However, as far as religious language is concerned, the theory of assertion does not seem to be applicable to propositions asserted by religious believers, since religious propositions are merely expressions of belief. To put it another way, religious discourse need not comply with the justification norm as other types of discourse do. In Scott’s words, “Religious people do typically put forward a proposition that is taken to be true” (2013, p. 199). Scott further argues that a religious believer regards his/her religious claim to be a matter of faith, for which no evidence is needed, if challenged of the truth of the claim. “Someone who makes a religious claim”, Scott

elaborates, “is not thereby obliged to have supporting reasons at their disposal to withdraw their claim in the face of contrary arguments” (2013, p. 198). Thus, religious propositions ought to be regarded merely as believers’ attitudes of devotion, reverence, love, and so forth. They typically express religious people’s beliefs and attitudes, representing the world the way religious believers perceive it.

Therefore, in the light of such an account, one may conclude that one of the reasons behind people’s preference to turn to religious language can be the fact that religious discourse does not seem to commit itself to meeting likely challenges related to its truth or falsity. Indeed, the truth of religious claims have to be taken for granted, because they are given an air of divinity and sacredness, as propositions that are associated with metaphysical heavenly beings.

Thirdly, Muslims consider God – or “Allah”, as it is known in the Islamic culture – as a superior being who witnesses our actions all the time and, indeed, is in total control of whatever human beings do in this world. They recognize “Allah” as the only powerful being in the entire universe, who is able to control everything and whose authority is executed over whatever exists in this universe. Commitment to such beliefs, as it was discussed earlier, is a matter of faith and cannot be challenged. In most cases, when they utter “*Allahu Akbar*” in various situations, with different pragmatic functions, at the same time, they intend to acknowledge the Creator’s unsurpassed authority, to admit His unrivalled will, and to confirm His unlimited ability to do whatever He wishes to.

Finally, the last point worth noting down is the fact that the researchers do not claim that the entire instances or contexts of situations, as listed above, can be applicable to all Islamic communities. The reason is that, like any other utterance or speech act, some of pragmatic functions (or illocutionary values) of “*Allahu Akbar*” might be culture-bound or language-specific. Therefore, such uses of the speech act, no doubt, can be restricted to a certain social context or culture but inapplicable to any other social community. That is why the researchers suggest that further studies by other investigators are required, so that a more holistic image of the sociopragmatic functions of the utterance in question may be presented.

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