
Don't say inshallah, just say yes or no. Semantics, pragmatics and patterns of avoidance with inshallah in German

Semra Kızılkaya

Universität Bielefeld

semra.kizilkaya@uni-bielefeld.de

This paper explores the multifunctionality of the unverbated phrase *inshallah* ('God willing' in Arabic), focusing on its semantic and pragmatic characterization as well as social indexicality. In particular, it investigates the emergence of a negative modal interpretation of *inshallah* as a strategy of linguistic avoidance and the social meaning associated with it.

Being a multipurpose expression, *inshallah* has been borrowed into German through language contact and has an emblematic function associated with multiethnolects. It can serve predominantly as a modal adverbial (*inshallah* p implicating neither p, nor $\neg$ p) (1) or as a discourse marker (2), conveying speaker-attitudinal, discourse structuring or politeness-related functions.

- (1) *Wir kommen inshallah zu eurer Hochzeit.*
'We'll inshallah ($\approx$ hopefully) come to your wedding.'
- (2) *Inshallah – du hast es erfasst!!*
'Inshallah ($\approx$ finally) – you got it!!'

In commissive speech acts, it mitigates the speaker's commitment, minimizing the face threat for both interlocutors (Brown & Levinson 1987). Through pragmatic implicature, it can acquire a negative modal reading (*inshallah* p implicates $\neg$ p), functioning as a polite way of saying "no" (Locher & Watts 2005). This illustrates avoidance as a strategy of indirectness and constitutes a third-order indexical, ironic function commonly attributed in humorous contexts on social media (3).

- (3) "YOU SAID YOU WOULD COME!" I said inshallah



<<https://imgflip.com/i/72kz27>> [3.11.2025]

The data come from the Cross-Topic German Twitter Archive, comprising a near-complete collection of all German-language tweets from 2018-2023 (Nguyen et al. 2022). It draws on a sample of $n = 1.476$ attestations in the corpus (absolute frequency $n = 174.977$), enriched by a qualitative

sample of metapragmatic comments including other online social media platforms.

References: • Brown, P. & S. C. Levinson (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. • Locher, M. A. & R. J. Watts (2005). Politeness Theory and Relational Work. *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture* 1(1), 9–33. • Nguyen, H. L., Tsolak, D., Karmann, A., Knauff, S. & S. Kühne (2022). Efficient and Reliable Geocoding of German Twitter Data to Enable Spatial Data Linkage to Official Statistics and Other Data Sources. *Frontiers in Sociology* 7. 910111.