

## Article

# Allah, Allah, Allah: The Role of God in the Arab Version of The Voice

Jan Jaap De Ruiter<sup>1</sup> and Mona Farrag Attwa<sup>1,2,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Tilburg University, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands; Jj.deRuiter@tilburguniversity.edu<sup>2</sup> Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA

\* Correspondence: mona.attwa@colorado.edu

**Abstract:** This article discusses Arabic expressions referring to God, such as *inshallah*, *mashallah*, and *alhamdulillah* in the 2014 season of the Arab version of the talent show *The Voice*. It discusses the question to what extent these expressions are used by the various actors in the show, in particular its four jury members and three presenters, and it tries to explain why they use them and to what purpose. The analysis is set against the background of the question what the relationship is between ‘language’ (in this case, the various varieties of Arabic) and ‘religion’ (in this case, Christianity and Islam). The analysis yielded nearly 40 Arabic expressions referring to God (*Allah* or *Rabb* (Lord)) that together showed up more than 600 times in the 10 episodes of the show that were the object of analysis. The conclusion is that the expressions indeed have ‘religious’ roots but that 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. This conclusion goes well with observations made in earlier research on the questions at stake.

**Keywords:** expressions referring to God; varieties of Arabic; Arabic talent shows; language and religion



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## 1. Introduction

The originally Dutch show *The Voice*, created in 2010 by media tycoon John de Mol, in which contestant singers perform before a jury sitting in chairs with their backs toward the candidates, is broadcast in the Arab world as well. The Arab variety of this show, in Arabic *Ahla Sot* (‘Sweetest Voice’), premiered on 14 September 2012. It differs in no aspect from the original Dutch format except of course that the language of communication is Arabic, both in its dialectal and standard varieties, and the different actors, contestants, jury members, audience, etc. are mostly Arabs. The show is broadcast from Lebanon by the Saudi channel MBC. When it was announced that MBC was to broadcast the show, Maarten Meijs, Managing Director of Talpa Distribution, the owner of the format, said: ‘In the Western world, *The Voice* is recognized as a new generation in its genre. We trust the same will happen in the MENA region (i.e., the Middle East and North Africa), regardless of cultural differences, as all people love music and have their one unique language to discuss who and what they like the most [on line source].’ Meijs states that there are cultural differences and that all people have their unique language to express themselves, and that is exactly what we see in *The Arab Voice*. Since the format may be the same and the structure of the show may be determined into the smallest detail, the fact remains that *The Arab Voice* has its own flavor and that the actors in the show, be they contestants, jury members, presenters, or the audience express their versions of Arabic language and Arab culture. As described in Attwa (2019), *The Arab Voice* is one of the most popular talent shows in the Arab world.

An interesting question is to see how the different Arab participants in the show create their specific variety of it. In Arab cultures, the references to God in conversations and written texts are numerous. The phrase *inshallah* (‘If God wants it’) is well known all over the world, and there are other similar expressions as well. Now, if an Arab uses these terms,

he or she could do that from a religious conviction, but the use of it has also become a cultural phenomenon, a habit as it were. It is difficult to tell if someone really believes that God wants things to happen or not, or that he or she refers to God while being perfectly convinced that something is going to happen or not, independent of the will of God.

When listening to the conversations that take place in the show between contestants, jury members, people in the blue room, and with the audience, one observes that references to God and similar references are part and parcel of the communication taking place. In these communication settings, we hear words of praise such as *Allah*, *Allah!* and *mashallah* ('What God has willed (happens)'), thanking God, *alhamdulillah* ('praise be to God'), or wishing a future of certainty, *inshallah*.

In our present contribution we analyze the use of references to God in the show taking place between contestants and the four members of the jury and the three presenters of the show. In our analysis, we focus on the second edition of the show, broadcast in 2014, which was composed of three stages that ran over fourteen weekly episodes: the blind auditions (five episodes), the battle rounds (three episodes), and the live performances (six episodes). We focus in particular on the four members of the jury and the three presenters of the show. We explicitly make use of the gloss 'references to God' and not 'religious references', as that would imply that the use of such references is inspired by the religious convictions of the users. As the literature section below will show as well, we simply cannot draw that conclusion, which should be presented after our analysis of the data in any case.

We first made a statistical analysis of the relevant references or expressions, i.e., what expressions are used and how many times, and these serve as the basis of further analysis. As said before, the focus is on the four members of the jury: Kadim Al Sahir, Iraqi composer-musician, singer, and poet; Sherine Abdelwahab, Egyptian pop star and actress; Saber Rebaï, Tunisian composer and musician, and Asi el Helani, Lebanese singer. We also pay attention to the presenter, Egyptian actor Mohammed Kareem, and the Lebanese presenters Aimée and Nadine. The four contestants who made it to the end show are the following: Iraqi Sattar Saad (team Kadim), Egyptian Wahm (team Sherine), Iraqi Simour Jalal (team Saber), and Syrian Hala Al-Qussayr (team Asi). Sattar Saad, in Kadim Al Sahir's team, would eventually win. Since the four finalists in the end made relatively modestly use of references to God, they are not part of the analysis. The explanation is simple: they sing more than they speak.

The data on which this article is built came from a PhD project on the ways in which participants in *The Arab Voice*, edition 2014, communicate with each other given the fact that they speak Arabic dialects that can differ considerably from each other. Numerous communication instances are analyzed, focusing on diverse sociolinguistic aspects of the communication. In the present contribution, we focus on the use of references to God in the show, which is a subject that is not tackled in the thesis ([Attwa, forthcoming](#)) and therefore unique for this paper.

This article is structured as follows. After this introductory text, Section 2 presents a literature overview of the subject and discusses the Arabic language and religion. Section 3 has an outline of the methodology, which is followed by two sections discussing the statistical results of the study, Sections 4 and 5; these also include a content analysis of the expressions. The article ends with conclusions and a discussion in Section 6.

## 2. Arabic and Religion

In this section, we present a necessarily limited overview of studies going into the relationship between language and religion, focusing on Arabic and Islam. We are very much aware that there are large Christian communities in the Arab world as well, but fact is that most of the Arabs identify themselves as Muslims, be that in different measures of religiosity (cf. [de Ruiter 2004](#)). This article is not the place to discuss issues of the measure of religiosity of Arabs or Muslims, but it can safely be stated that this measure is diverse, i.e., from orthodox to very liberal, and there is even a recent tendency of 'atheism' in the Arab world ([Lipka 2017](#)).

There are different angles to look at the relationship between language and religion. Versteegh (2014, 2020) goes into this issue for major languages spoken by Muslim people, Arabic and Persian in particular. After an elaborate discussion of this question, Versteegh reaches the simple conclusion that ‘the language they (i.e., Muslim) use . . . is not made Islamic by the fact that it is used by Muslims, any more than a taxi becomes Islamic by the fact that the driver is a Muslim’ (ibid. p. 21). There is just no evidence that a language can have an all-permeating religious label. Languages are in the first place practical tools of communication in everyday life, and there are also ‘liturgical’ languages.

Germanos and Miller (2014) discuss the question of whether ‘religious affiliation is a key factor of language variation in Arabic-speaking countries’. In an elaborate analysis of the speech situation in the Middle East and North Africa, the authors focus on speech use and acts of Muslim and Jewish speakers of Arabic in particular, in past and present, and it turns out they have a hard time distinguishing this factor as an independent variable. For example, they state that ‘the boundaries between North African Jewish and Muslim varieties appear extremely fluid’, and authors such as Marcel Cohen, David Cohen, or Simon Lévy do not agree with the idea of one North African Judeo-Arabic variety. At the very local level, they point out both divergence and also many similarities between Muslim and Jewish lects/varieties (ibid. p. 88). They conclude that ‘religious affiliation alone is not and has not been a key factor of major differentiations in the MENA area, it is always linked with other social factors (ibid. p. 96).’ However, there is another important observation, which is expressed in the following words: ‘Nevertheless, even a tiny sociolinguistic observation (such as salutations and terms of address) will often be enough to identify a speaker as Muslim, Jew, or Christian in the same way that he will also be identified as urban or rural, as coming from such and such region, as belonging to lower or middle-class etc.’ (ibid. p. 96).

Bassiouny (2017) makes it clear that in public discourse, the ideological assumption that in Egypt, there is no linguistic variation based on religion, which is emphasized and in some cases spelled out with phonological examples. Through stance-taking processes that involve structural resources and discourse resources, public discourse offers a holistic, neutralized concept of religion. For example, ‘there is usually neutral mention of God, mention of local areas that reference religion, relating religion to other social variables, and rare direct mention of Christianity and Islam as different belief systems’ (ibid. p. 59). Or: ‘To recap: through linguistic resources public discourse highlights, in more than one way, that Christians and Muslims in Egypt belong to the same ethnic group, share the same community, habits and history. Language can be used as a resource to provide a stance that positions individuals as belonging or not belonging to a group’ (ibid. p. 59).

Alsohaibani (2017) studied ‘the influence of religion on speech acts performance’, focusing on 72 speakers of the Arabic Qassimi dialect that falls under the label of Najdi dialects, spoken in the central and north central areas of Saudi Arabia (ibid. p. 127). By role play and interviews, he triggered a limited numbers of speakers to use religious expressions, asking them afterwards why they used them. Focusing on the actual use of the religious expression *assalam*, in *assalamu alaykum* (‘peace be upon you’), Alsohaibani concludes that ‘religiosity makes it crucial for interlocutors to employ *assalam* as part of the greeting act’, and ‘religious motivations are apparent in the speech of the interlocutors, and in combination with the religious denotations and connotations implied, they have granted *assalam* religious characteristics, as both a religious greeting and a greeting denoting a shared religion (Islam) (ibid. p. 295)’. A similar conclusion is expressed in the following quote: ‘Religion proved crucial in underlining how the interlocutors perform speech acts intending to achieve pragmatic and sociopragmatic functions’. ‘This’, the author claims, ‘is evidenced by the correlation between the prevailing use of the phrase *ma sha allah* and the multiple theological resources that specifically recommend it (ibid. p. 298). Nearly half (44%) of the participants used the expression *mashallah*. Alsohaibani states that the ‘phrase infers that each accomplishment or possession must always be ascribed to the divine will and power, and therefore the use of this phrase recognizes this will and power,

invoking it to preserve and protect the disappearance of accomplishments and possessions' (ibid. p. 282). The study of Alsohaibani is one of the few that administers interviews with speakers of Arabic asking them after their motivation to use religious expressions. Quite a few speakers do indicate that they are inspired by religious convictions and feelings to do so.

Two studies related to the elaborate one by Alsohaibani, and preceding it, are by [Stanford and Wehba \(1986\)](#) and [Farghal \(1995\)](#), both discussing the use of the expression *inshallah*. Stanford and Wehba discuss its context in Alexandria, Egypt, and Farghal discusses its pragmatics in Jordanian Arabic. If there is one thing that both studies have in common, it is that both state that the source of the expression is a religious one. Farghal states that 'these expressions (he also mentions the expression *inradallah* and *biznillah*, which have the same meaning) are meant to acknowledge the might of God as well as to express deference to him' (p. 255), while [Stanford and Wehba \(1986\)](#) state that 'the native Arabic speaker learns the expression very early in his childhood, and it is learned in the context of religious truth. In other words, God's truth is present in the context of expression use in the deepest, most religious sense, so it means that truth is present in the social encounter' (ibid. p. 102). Still, both studies, the latter one more so than the first one, show that the expression has become part and parcel of daily talk, and it has acquired several pragmatic uses, drifting them in a certain way away from its original purely religious sense. It has become, as [Farghal \(1995\)](#) states, a 'pragmatically multi-purpose expression' and in his article, he distinguishes between the directive use of it, where the speaker tries to get 'the interlocutor to do something such as questioning and requesting/ordering' (ibid. p. 257); the commissive use of it, making 'the addressor do something such as promising, offering and threatening' (p. 261); and the expressive use, which is defined as 'those utterances that are meant to express a psychological state such as thanking and apologizing (ibid. p. 263), which proves the opening statement of the study that the expression is pragmatically multifunctional. [Stanford and Wehba \(1986\)](#) stick to the religious use of the expression, basing themselves on the opinions of 55 persons from all walks of Alexandrian society who stress the importance of this meaning. Interesting though is the case of a Bedouin woman who gave a second meaning apart from the religious meaning, namely: 'Maybe it is used as a curse'. The authors wrote: 'And after having said that, she interrupted herself and suddenly said "May God forgive me"' (ibid. p. 101). This example clearly illustrates as well that the expression has multiple meanings but it is also clear that the basic meaning remains religious. It is, as [Farghal \(1995\)](#) states in the last sentence of his article, 'a religion-shaded illocution' (ibid. p. 268).

[Cohen-Mor \(2001\)](#) in her publication on fate in the Arab world as reflected in modern Arabic literature states that expressions such as *inshallah* and *alhamdulillah* are part and parcel of Arab culture. She refers to the study by [Piamenta \(1979\)](#), who discusses these expressions. Piamenta regards them as basically inspired by religion, but he also concludes 'that these formulae constitute popular Islamic constructions of "reality" and "danger," elicited by socioemotional situations and shared by all speakers of Arabic ([Piamenta 1979](#) in [Cohen-Mor 2001](#), p. 55). Religion is the basis, but the terms have become part of Arab daily culture.

According to Salameh's review ([Salameh 2020](#)), a central debate over language and identity has been going on in Lebanon since the mid-19th century. Among other things, he refers to the ideology of 'phoenicianism': the quest for a Christian, Lebanese pre-Arab identity. The supporters of this ideology saw themselves 'and their Phoenician ancestors as exemplars of humanism, at once skilled traders, intrepid mariners, subtle disseminators of knowledge, gifted cultural intermediaries, and fluid congenital polyglots straddling multiple traditions, multiple languages, and multiple cultural legacies' (ibid. p. 111). This idea of a specific humanist pre-Islamic and pre-Arab Lebanese identity still resonates in the mindset of Lebanese Christians in particular. In a slightly crooked way, this ideology speaks of a particular Lebanese language, which is a 'language that already existed, and that the Phoenician language and its Syriac iterations were already living presences, transmuted

into the modern spoken Lebanese vernacular' (ibid. p. 116). Whatever the status of the current Lebanese vernacular may be, it is obvious that Lebanon as a country is characterized by a complex identity where non-Arab and non-Muslim variables play a role.

Kraidy (2010), discussing in his book the role of shows such as *The Arab Voice* and their relation to the political context of the Arab world, thinks that the idea that Islam dominates the socio-cultural and political life of the Arab world is a mere cliché. He points out the counter debates that work against these programs by including factors other than religious determinism. He argues that there is even an emerging new-liberal discourse that plays an important role in the Arab public sphere. The Arab world is more than just 'God'; it is also influenced by the forces of globalization and the worldwide new liberal discourse.

### 3. Questions and Procedures

Based on the foregoing, this article discusses the following research questions:

- 1 Which expressions referring to God are used in *The Arab Voice* 2014 edition; what are their frequencies and who uses what expression and how many times?

For this first question, we first made an analysis of all relevant references by all participants, members of the jury, presenters, and contestants in a number of episodes of the 2014 shows that were analyzed for the general study. After this first analysis, we present data for the four members of the jury and the three presenters.

The second question is formulated as follows:

- 2 How can we interpret the use of these expressions in the Arab version of *The Voice*?

In the light of the literature discussed in the preceding section, we pass to an interpretation of the use of the relevant references in the show. We explain them in the narrative contexts that they are used in, relating them at the same time to earlier studies and interpretations. In what follows, we explain how we operationalised the execution of the research to obtain data based on which we can answer both research questions.

This analysis is based on the transcription of ten episodes of the total of 14 episodes of *The Arab Voice* in the 2014 season. It concerns shows 1, 2, and 3 of the blind auditions (totaling five episodes); all three battle rounds, i.e., episodes 6, 7, and 8, and from the live shows, episodes 9, 10, 11, and 14 (14 being the last one in the series). The decision not to analyze all episodes was meant to narrow down the scope of the analysis, especially as the excluded four episodes were found not to add any different data. The ten episodes are representative of the three phases of the show, as the first three episodes of each phase are included. Equal representation of the three phases aims to reflect any different dynamics in the communication that may occur based on the different phases of the program. The final episode is included as well, since it is the culmination of the show.

The transliteration focuses on the so-called communication instances in each show, taking place between contestants and presenters in the blue room or between contestants and the four jury members. The definition of a communication instance is relatively easy in the context of the shows. It is those conversations that take place between at least two people in the show. It can be between two contestants or between family members, but most communication takes place between members of the jury and the contestants and among themselves (Attwa 2019). The communication instances always had a clear beginning and end. Table 1 gives an overview of the number of communication instances per show.

The communication instances were transliterated in the transliteration program Clan, and these transliterations were further analyzed on the presence of references related to God; in most cases, this meant that the name of *Allah* or *rabb* ('Lord') was mentioned in expressions such as *inshallah*, *mashallah*, *wallahi* ('By God'), and *ya rabb* ('Oh Lord'). The results of the analysis are presented in the next section.

**Table 1.** The different kinds of shows and the numbers of communication instances.

Episode 1 Blind auditions	13
Episode 2 Blind auditions	13
Episode 3 Blind auditions	12
Episode 6 The Battles	8
Episode 7 The Battles	8
Episode 8 The Battles	8
Episode 9 Live Show	27
Episode 10 Live Show	27
Episode 11 Live Show	26
Episode 14 Live Show	24
Total	166

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General Results

Table 2 gives an overview of the expressions and the number of times they were found in the corpus of all shows analyzed, by all participants in the show: contestants, members of the jury, and presenters. For a total of 613 times, references of a religious nature were made. The table presents the factual expressions, the number of times they were used, and their translation. The table below presents a full account of all references of a religious nature, including the ‘subcategories’. The table presents the expressions in a transliteration mode. In the text, we write the words in an adapted English mode, considering the small measures of variation that might occur—for example, the realization of ‘e’ or ‘i’ in *yekun/yikun* (‘he is’) or ‘q’ or hamza in *yuwafaqak* or *yuwafa’ak* (‘may he make you succeed’).

**Table 2.** References in *The Arab Voice* 2014.

Expression	<i>n</i>	Translation
alhamdulillah	53	Praise be to God
Allah	92	God
Allah yehdik	2	May God give you guidance
Allah yikun fi ‘unkum/ak/	9	May God be of help to you
Allah yi’tik essehha	1	May God give you health
Allah yibarak fik	4	May God bless you
Allah yirhamhu/ha	4	God have mercy on him/her
Allah yisallimak	1	May God keep you safe
Allah yikhallik(u)	25	May God keep you
Allah yiwafaqak/ku(m)	27	May God make you succeed
amin (ya rabb)	3	Amen (oh Lord)
ana battakal ‘ala allah subhana wa ta‘ala	1	I depend on God, glorified and exalted be He.
biznillah	9	With God’s permission
bismillah (irrahman irrahim)	3	In the name of God ((the merciful and benevolent)
haram	8	Poor thing! Shame!
inshallah	122	If God wants it
ittawfiq min rabb al‘alamin	1	Success from the Lord of the worlds
la ilaha illa allah	1	There is no God but God
mashallah	68	What great things God has willed
rabbena ma‘aku	2	May our Lord be with you (plural)
rabbena ma‘ana	2	May our Lord be with us
rabbena yikhallik	5	May our Lord keep you
arrabb yikhallik	2	May the Lord let you
rabbena yikrimna	1	May our Lord be benevolent on us
rabbena yikun fi ‘unak	1	May our Lord be of help to you
rabbena yustur	1	May God protect
rabbi ma‘ak	1	May my Lord be with you
rabbi	3	My Lord

Table 2. Cont.

Expression	<i>n</i>	Translation
rabbena yuwafa'ak	12	May our Lord make you succeed
ya rabb	42	Oh Lord
tabarak allah	2	God be blessed
walla(h)	29	By God
wallahi	33	By God
wallahi al'azim	6	By God the great
wannabi	1	By the prophet
ya subhan allah	1	Oh God who is praised
Total	613	

The expression that is most used is *inshallah* with 122 times (20%), which is followed by *Allah*, 92 times (15%), expressions where *arrabb* is mentioned: 77 times (13%), then expressions in which Allah is the subject, such as *allah yikhallik* ('May God keep you'), 73 times (12%), and *mashallah* with 68 times (11%). *Alhamdulillah* counts 53 times being used (9%). The other smaller categories count 149 instances (20%). Remarkable are the explicit Islamic expressions *bismillah arrahman arrahim* ('in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate') (3 times) and *la ilaha illa allah* ('There is no God but God (Allah)') (1 time). In virtually all expressions, the name of God, Allah, is mentioned.

While executing the actual analysis, we were confronted with the fact that members of the jury and presenters, and others, also express their feelings of whatever kind with expressions that do not refer to God or have a religious connotation, such as the Italian loan *bravo*, which is well known in European languages as well, and the verb *ahsant* ('you did well', in singular masculine (*ahsant*), feminine (*ahsanti*), and plural (*ahsantu*)), meaning 'you have done well'. The verb *ahsana* is a typical Standard Arabic verb used, for example, in education when a teacher tells a pupil that 'he did well'. Basically, it is not a dialectal expression, and it is used in the whole Arab world. We registered *bravo* 50 times and the verb *ahsant* 101. In many cases, these expressions were used in combination with expressions such as: 'Mashallah! Ahsant!'. The use of *bravo* goes with similar expressions such as *ok*, *good luck*, *hi*, *wow*, *compliment*, *please*, and *sorry*, which are mostly used to express agreement, good luck, greetings, excitement, etiquette, request, and apology, respectively. We will come back to *bravo* and *ahsant* when discussing the jury members' and presenters' use of expressions in Section 4.2.

The following section presents the results of the use of expressions by the four members of the jury and the three presenters.

#### 4.2. Expressions Used by the Members of the Jury and Presenters

In this section, we focus on the use of expressions by the four members of the jury and the three presenters: seven persons in total. Each section presents a table with expressions used by the informant and the number of times he or she uses them, which is followed by a short bio of the person and a description of how the given member of the jury or presenter presents himself or herself in the show. We do this so that the reader gets an idea of the personality of the person in question and to come to a better understanding of why this specific person uses these expressions and the frequency with which he or she uses them. We realize that such an interpretation must be done with maximum cautiousness, in order to keep the interpretation as objective as possible. We present the data for the four members of the jury following the order they sit in their chairs from left to right: Kadim, Sherine, Saber, and Asi. These data are followed by the tables for the three presenters, Kareem, Nadine, and Aimée. The expressions of the four members of the jury and the presenters total 61% of the expressions: Kareem has 99 utterances (16%), Saber 76 (12%), Kadim 79 (13%), Sherine 65 (11%), Asi 30 (5%), Nadine 18 (3%), and Aimée 7 (1%); the remaining 39% mostly came from the contestants. The tables on the members of the jury

and the three presenters contain all expressions they used as well as the numbers of times they used the expressions *bravo* and *ahsant*.

#### 4.2.1. Member of the Jury Kadim

Kadim al Sahir (1957), also called ‘The Caesar of Arab Singing’, is the oldest member of the jury and a Muslim by birth. He is of Iraqi origin and a composer and poet. He is very well known in the Arab world as a singer, and he sold more than 100 million copies of his albums. He has his own orchestra in his shows. Apart from pop songs, he sings ballads, which are based on the traditions of Classical Arabic songs and poems. He shows a serious and wise posture which, to many, hides his shyness and tenderness. He can be taken as the most romantic and sensitive of the four judges, mainly thanks to his romantic songs in Classical Arabic, many of them written by the late Syrian ‘Poet of Women’, Nizaar Kabbaany (1923–1998). He is the least talkative and the most diplomatic one, who shies away from telling a negative opinion to the contestants.

There is lots of *Allah* and *mashallah* in the use of Kadim’s expressions, as shown in Table 3. The expressions Kadim uses most is *mashallah* with 32 times out of 78 in total. Still, Kadim uses the expression *ahsant* even more; with 48 times, he scores the highest frequency from among the members of the jury and the presenters. This goes for his use of *bravo* as well.

**Table 3.** Member of jury Kadim.

Expression	<i>n</i>
Allah	14
allah yekun fi ‘unak	1
allah yibarak fik	2
allah yikhallik	1
allah yiwafa’kum	3
allah yuwafaqik	6
allah yuwafiqha	2
haram	1
inshallah	7
mashallah	32
tabarak allah	1
walla	1
wallah	5
wallahi	2
Total	78
<b>Other expressions</b>	
ahsant	48
bravo	19
Total	67

#### 4.2.2. Member of the Jury Sherine

One of the most beautiful and powerful voices in Egypt and the Arab World is that of Sherine Abdelwahab (1980), who is Muslim by birth. She is also perceived as a typical Egyptian who has a high sense of humor and sarcasm. Sherine comes from a modest background, and she did not finish her education. She is known for her spontaneous comments that went so far as to cause her some trouble with the Egyptian authorities and the audience. This non-conformity has gained Sherine even more popularity in the Arab world. Her fans forgive her as they see her behavior as coming from ignorance and not malice. Likewise, in the show, Sherine maintains the same personality. As presented in one of the instances mentioned below in Section 5, she flirted with Kadim. That incident stirred comments on social media as being inappropriate. In another episode with Kareem, she changed her mind about flirting with him. When jokingly asked why, she said because people misinterpret her comments so she would not do it again.

The expressions Sherine uses most according to Table 4 are *inshallah* (11 times) and—a variety of—*wallahi* (13 times), which can be considered a popular expression in Egyptian Arabic. She refers less to Allah directly (seven times) than the other members of the jury. She hardly says *bravo* but to a bit larger extent *ahsant*.

**Table 4.** Member of jury Sherine.

Expression	<i>n</i>
alhamdulillah	5
allah	4
allah yibarak fik	1
allah yikhallik	1
allah yirhamha	1
amin ya rabb	1
biznillah	2
bismillah	1
bismillah irrahman irrahim	2
haram	2
inshallah	11
la ilaha illa allah	1
mashallah	2
ohh my God	2
rabbena	2
rabbena ma <sup>c</sup> aku	2
rabbena yuwafa <sup>c</sup> ak	4
rabbena ma <sup>c</sup> ana	1
rabbi	1
wallah	1
wallahi	9
wallahi al <sup>c</sup> azim	1
wallahi wallahi	2
ya rabb	3
Total	62
<b>Other expressions</b>	
ahsant	13
bravo	2
Total	15

#### 4.2.3. Member of the Jury Saber

Saber Rebai (1967), Muslim by birth, is a singer and composer who was born in the Tunisian city of Sfax. He plays the violin as well. He is from Yemeni origin and toured in Europe and the United States. He is the only judge from the Western side of the Arab world, the so-called Maghreb. Saber Rebai has positioned himself well midway between Classical Arab singing and pop music. His given title *The Prince of Classical Arab Singing* stresses his young age (at the time) and his ability to connect with older and younger generations of the Arab audience. His character on the show reflects that middle way as well. He positions himself between the wise and experienced and the playful joyful young man.

Table 5 shows that Saber refers relatively much to *Allah*, God, or *arrab*, the Lord, in his religious expressions: 29 out of 83 times. He uses the expression *ahsant* a lot; it covers more than half of the expressions referring to God he uses (44 versus 76 times).

#### 4.2.4. Member of the Jury Asi

Asi el Helani (1970), Muslim by birth, is a Lebanese singer. He debuted as a singer at the age of 17 and since then released more than 12 albums. He studied at the Higher Institute of Music in Lebanon and is active in fund raising for charity goals. As the winner of the first season of *The Arab Voice* and the only Lebanese judge, it feels as though Asi presents himself as the host of the show. This appears in the number of times he refers

to himself as the (former) winner, wearing a T-shirt that has the logo of the show, and the comments he gives when there is an attack on the Lebanese army, welcoming people and so on. In addition to this, Asi humorously presents himself as the Don Juan of the show, giving himself liberty to flirt with the girls and the presenters, and yet, he appears to abstain from too nonsensical humor.

**Table 5.** Member of the jury Saber.

Expression	<i>n</i>
alhamdulillah	3
Allah	17
allah yekun fi <sup>c</sup> unak	1
allah yikun fi <sup>c</sup> uni	1
allah yuwafaqik	3
amin	1
bismillah irrahman irrahim	1
haram	1
inshallah	12
Mashallah	8
rabbaniya	1
rabbenah	1
rabbenah yikrimna	1
rabbi ma <sup>c</sup> ak	1
rabbi yuwafaqu	1
rabbi yuwafiqik	1
walla	1
wallah	7
wallahi	4
wallahi al <sup>c</sup> azim	4
ya allah	2
ya rabb	1
ya rabbi	3
Total	76
<b>Other expressions</b>	
ahsant	44
bravo	7
Total	51

Asi does not show a specific behavior when it comes to using expressions referring to God, except that he uses them the least of the jury members. Table 6 shows that the category Asi uses mostly is *inshallah* with six out of 30 times. Asi uses the expressions *bravo* and *ahsant* as scarcely, you might say, as the expressions referring to God.

#### 4.2.5. Presenter Kareem

Born in 1980 to a family of politicians and physicians, Mohammed Kareem, Muslim by birth, finished his high school in the United States. Following in the footsteps of his family, Kareem joined the Faculty of Medicine at Ain Shams University in Cairo. Later, Kareem started a career as a model and achieved wide success: he was awarded the BEST Model Award in 1999. In order to sharpen his artistic talents, he returned to the United States in 2005 in order to study acting in Hollywood. His films were shown and sold out in the Diaspora and Tribeca Film Festivals in New York and in the Los Angeles Film Festival and the Arab Film Festival in California. Kareem hosted *The Arab Voice* for its first two seasons from 2012 until 2014.

**Table 6.** Member of the jury Asi.

Expression	<i>n</i>
allah	5
allah yirhamu	3
allah yiwafa'kum	1
allah yuwafaqik	3
bismillah	1
inshallah	6
mashallah	3
rabbena yikhallik	1
wallah	1
wallahi	2
wallahi al'azim	1
ya rabb	3
Total	30
<b>Other expressions</b>	
ahsant	7
bravo	4
	11

Kareem stands at the top of using the expressions with 99 times as shown in Table 7. Thirty-six times, he refers to *Allah* only or uses expressions in which Allah is the subject, such as in *Allah yehdik*. Fifteen times, he says *inshallah*, and 16 times, he says *mashallah*. Especially after the performance of a song, he cannot stop mentioning the name of God, and it is intriguing to find out why he does so. His use of the other expressions is scarce with *ahsant* used only six times.

**Table 7.** Presenter Kareem.

Expression	<i>n</i>
alHamdulillah	7
allah	25
allah yehdik	2
allah yekun fi 'unkum	3
allah yekun fi 'unak	3
allah yikhallik	3
amin ya rabb	1
biznillah	3
bismillah	1
haram 'alayk	1
inshallah	15
mashallah	16
rabbena yikhallik	1
rabbena yikun fi 'unak	2
rabbena yuwafa'ak	4
rabbena yuwafa'ku	1
rabbena yustur	1
wannabi	1
wallahi	5
ya rabb	2
ya rabbi	1
ya subhana allah	1
Total	99
<b>Other expressions</b>	
ahsant	6
bravo	-
Total	6

#### 4.2.6. Presenter Aimée

Aimée Sayah, born Christian, was born in 1987 in Jbeil, Lebanon. She obtained a graduate degree in Media Studies and she also studied Communication at the Lebanese American University. In 2014, she joined Mohammed Kareem as a main presenter of *The Arab Voice*, starting from the live shows in episode 9. Her Facebook page identifies her as a TV host, actress, and journalist. She hardly uses expressions referring to God in the shows as becomes clear from Table 8. Extrapolated over the 10 shows investigated in this study, she would come to a score of 18 references, hypothetically speaking. She was not caught on one occasion of using *bravo* or *ahsant*.

**Table 8.** Presenter Aimée.

Expression	<i>n</i>
allah	3
inshallah	2
wallah	1
Total	7
Other expressions	-

#### 4.2.7. Presenter Nadine

Nadine Wilson Njeim, Christian by birth, was born in Beirut in 1988. She studied Business Administration, International Trade, and International Affairs at the American University of Lebanon. She was named Miss Lebanon in 2007 and she represented Lebanon in Miss World 2007 in China and Miss Universe 2007 in Mexico. She was the social media host in the first two seasons of *The Arab Voice*. She also has a small experience in acting, where she played secondary roles in two soap operas in 2012 and 2014. Nadine only showed up at the ninth show, and for that reason, her share in the conversation is lower than that of the jury members and Kareem, who were all present from the beginning of the season. The references she used were recorded in episodes 9, 10, 11, and 14; thus, four out of the ten were analyzed. As can be seen from Table 9, she used 18 expressions, and would that be extrapolated over the 10 shows, she would have hypothetically come to a score of around 45 references, between Asi's 30 and Sherine's 62. She does not use expressions such as *bravo* and *ahsant*.

**Table 9.** Presenter Nadine.

Expression	<i>n</i>
alhamdulillah	2
allah	7
allah yikhallik	1
inshallah	6
rabbi	1
ya rabb	1
Total	18
Other expressions	-

### 5. Analysis of the Expressions

In this section, we present telling examples of some, not all—due to a lack of space—of the expressions mentioned in Table 2. We do so based on content analysis. Table 2 mentions nearly 40 types of expressions, but they can all be traced back to a limited number of categories of meaning. The examples of these expressions of feelings not only serve to give the reader an idea of their use and context; they also match the use of these expressions by the four members of the jury and the three presenters, data on which were presented in the preceding section. Table 10 presents the functional categories of the expressions.

**Table 10.** Functions of the various expressions.

Expression	Function
Allah mashallah rabbenah ya subhan allah	Expressing surprise, praise and admiration
Allah yehdik	Humourously urging an action
Allah yikun fi ʿunkum/ak; Allah yiʿtik alʿafiya; biznillah inshallah	Expressing a wish
alhamdulillah	Expressing thanks to God
bismillah (irrahman irrahim)	Embarking on a new activity
Allah yibarak fik Allah yisallimak tabarak Allah	Expressing a blessing
Allah yirhamhu/ha	Giving respect and prayers to the deceased.
Allah yikhallik	Expressing of giving thanks
Allah yiwafaqak	Wishing somebody good luck
Amin (ya rabb)	Confirmation of a wish
ana battakal ʿala allah subhana wa taʿala	Expressing dependence on God
haram	Feeling sorry for a situation.
ittawfiq min rabb alʿalamin	Wishing somebody success
la ilaha illa allah	Expressing surprise, shock, or disappointment
walla(h)(i) (alʿazim)	Expressing confirmation
wannabi	An act of beseeching

In what follows, we present examples of the context in which several expressions are used. Due to space constraints, we must limit ourselves to the most frequent and telling ones. Some of the examples include several expressions that fulfill the different functions mentioned in Table 10. In our presentation, we follow the main category of meaning while highlighting the expression we want to focus on in the example. It is also noteworthy that some expressions, such as expressions of shock and disappointment and urging a certain behavior, are used in a humorous sarcastic fashion. We present the examples in a direct translation into English for the convenience of most of the readers, maintaining the relevant expressions in a simplified Arabic transliteration (the original communication instances will be published in the final publication of this research ([Attwa, forthcoming](#)), but they can also be requested from the authors of this article). Each example is followed by a brief explanation of the communication instance and the functions of the expressions in the example. Per expression, the specific communication instance is mentioned.

### 5.1. Expressions of Praise and Admiration

- Expression *Allah* (show 14; ci 11): Presenter Kareem refers multiple times to *Allah*, such as in the following exchange he has with Sherine:  
Kareem: *Allah*, Sherine. *Allah* for your feelings. *Allah* for your voice. *Allah*, *allah*.  
Sherine: Thank you!  
Kareem: To whom do you say: 'I am all yours'?  
Sherine: 'I am all yours'; I say it to the audience.  
Kareem: *Allah!*, you were directing your talk to here (me), then it turned this way suddenly!  
Sherine: No, I am done. They would start rumors on us. I have learnt my lesson.  
Kareem: You have learnt the lesson!

Sherine: By the way, they found Abdel Halim's Jacket.

Kareem: Really, *wallahi*, they found it? Where did they find it? So, I have nothing to do with this matter.

In this instance, Sherine was singing live on stage. After she had finished her performance, Kareem expressed admiration and praise for Sherine's singing by using the word *Allah* repeatedly. He praised and was amazed by her, her voice, and her feelings. Kareem asked Sherine if she was performing her song *I am all yours* for a special person. At the beginning of her response, Sherine's body language was directed toward Kareem, but then she changed direction to the audience. In response to this change, Kareem expressed surprise by using the expression *Allah* again. There is a difference in stress and intonation between the use of the expression *Allah* for praise and for surprise. In the case of praise, it has the stress on the first syllable with a high-rise intonation, in the case of surprise it has the stress on the last syllable with a question intonation. To clarify Kareem's surprise, Sherine alluded to a the above mentioned incident on the show when she flirted with Kadim with the resulting reviews from the audience being very bad. That is why she said, 'I have learnt the lesson' and why she did not want to flirt with Kareem again. Then, Sherine followed up on a joke she made in a previous episode of the show. She made fun of a jacket that Kareem put on because it was old style. The jacket was similar to the style of Abdel Halim Hafez, the famous Egyptian singer who passed away in the 1970s. In her joke, she said that one of Halim's jackets was missing and they were looking for it, implying that Kareem had taken the jacket from Halim's closet. In this instance, she followed up saying the jacket had been found. In response, Kareem used the expression *wallahi* to ask for confirmation proving that the search for the jacket had indeed ended.

- Expression *Mashallah* (show 11; ci 24): Kareem praises contestant Ahmed Husayn for his performance:

Kareem: Ahmed Husayn, you performed like honey. Do you see the audience? *Mashallah*, how about all that, oh Caesar? *Mashallah*, what a voice you have. *Mashallah*.

Kadim: I believe Doctor Iman. In fact, in the first place, I thank you ... What a devotion you have for those whom you call your children. *Ahsanti* (you did well). *Mashallah*.

In this example, Kareem repeated the expression *mashallah* twice to contestant Ahmed Hussein after his superb performance. Then, he addressed Kadim to praise the voices he had on his team. In his response, Kadim gave thanks to the vocal trainer, Dr. Iman. Then, he used the expression *mashallah* again to praise Ahmed.

- Expression *bismillah* (*mashallah*) (show 9; ci 9): After the contestant Alaa gave his performance, Kareem entered the stage, praising him. He said he was out of words:

Kareem: Alaa, *wallahi*, I don't know what to say to you. *Bismillah mashallah*. I bet millions of people are now watching and encouraging you for sure. Well done!

Then, Kareem shifted the conversation to Sherine. Kareem gave affirmation to his feelings of admiration by using the expression *wallahi*. Then, he mentioned that by now, for sure, Alaa had had lots of fans watching him. He accompanied this information by the expression *bismillah mashallah*. Although each of these expressions has its own meaning, when combined, they express admiration or mention a good fortune that a person enjoys. Many Arabs believe in the bad eye. Therefore, in order to protect a person from the evil eye or to imply that people do not feel a grudge or envy about another person's good fortune, they mention expressions such as *bismillah mashallah*.

## 5.2. Expressions of Wishes

- Expression *biznillah* (show 7; ci 4): There was a conversation between contestant Rabie and jury members Sherine and Saber. Rabie thanks Saber for all that he has done for him, while Sherine shows some scorn because Rabie is expected to leave the

competition. Then, Kareem ends the exchange thanking Rabie and wishing him good luck, with the permission of God:

Saber: Pray to give them guidance. *Ya rabb*. I hope they would press [interrupted].

Kareem: We would like to thank you very much and we wish you success, *biznillah*.

Saber was expecting that one of the coaches would steal Rabie to join his team. So, jokingly urging them to press the buzz button, he asked everybody to pray to God to give them guidance to choose Rabie and keep him in the competition. The humor is implied in that the way in which they behave is not the proper way to behave; hence, he is joking about that. Meanwhile, Kareem thanked Rabie for his participation in the show, and he wished him success *biznillah*. This expression is synonym to *inshallah* although less common in the data. Using God's will after the wish confirms it and gives assurance to the listener that it will come true since it is expected that God will indeed grant the wish.

- Expression *inshallah* (show 11; ci 14): Presenter Aimée asked Sherine about the comments she was receiving about her style and clothing:

Aimée: Sherine, how are the comments on your fabulous looks in *The Voice*?

[You had one look] in white, red, and black. Tell us.

Sherine: *Alhamdulillah*. Because I am in a country where all the people have good taste, I had to dress up nicely. I do not have a stylist; I dress up according to my taste.

Aimée: You have a great taste, Sherine. Each time (interrupted) . . .

Sherine: You are the great one, *wallahi*. I am happy you have joined us this year. *Inshallah* you will be with us next year.

Aimée: *Inshallah*. I would be happy, Sherine.

Sherine started her response with *alhamdulillah* to imply that she was satisfied with the good comments she was receiving. Then, she praised Lebanon saying she had to dress well, because she was in a country where people had good taste. Aimée complimented her on her great taste. Sherine replied with the compliment that Aimée is great too, adding *wallahi* to confirm that she is sincere in her praise to Aimée. Then, Sherine added that she wished Aimée would join the following season of *The Voice*. To that Aimée replied with *inshallah* to express her wish to join the show as well.

- Expression *Rabbena* (show 10; ci 7): The following excerpt contains many references, but in this section, we focus on the use of the expression *rabbena*.

Kareem: *Allah yikun fi ʿunkum* [May God help you all]. I just want to know what each one of you is thinking right now. Tell me, Mahmoud, what are you thinking of now?

Mahmoud: I am surely confused and scared. *inshallah kheir ya rabb inshallah* [God's willing things will be good, oh Lord, God's willing.]

Kareem: *Inshallah kheir* [God's willing things will be good]. Mohammed, what are you thinking of? What is on your mind now?

MDHL: I am thinking that I will continue the program. I must continue.

Kareem. *Inshallah, rabbena yiwafa'ak* [May God give you success]. Son of the Nile, what's up? What are you thinking of now?

Nile: Good, perfect, *Alhamdulillah*, I am thinking of, there are around a thousand scenarios on my mind now.

Kareem: A thousand scenarios on your mind now?

Nile: But I am sure that everyone is supporting me, and I have reached everyone watching me in Sudan and the Emirates.

Kareem: Yes, *mashallah*, Twitter, *mashallah*, is running, all, all of you, *mashallah*. Wahm, what are you thinking of now?

Wahm, I am thinking of my country, all of the Arab Homeland, and of winning.

Kareem: *Rabbena yiwafa'ku gamiʿan inshallah* [May God give you all success, God's willing].

The various expressions in this section are used in a context of expressing wishes. All four contestants were waiting for the results, and each one was wishing to win or be the

best. As the norm of the culture and ideology, one must trust that whatever God wills is the best for you. With trust and praying to God, one hopes that one's wishes will come true. That was the reason that Kareem replied with a wish of success from God, that Mahmoud was wishing for the best, and that Nile was thanking God for what he had accomplished so far.

### 5.3. Expressions of Confirmation

- Expression *walla(h)* (show 9; ci 11): After Rabie's good performance, Kareem is reminding Saber that Rabie was on his team but Asi stole him into his team. So, Saber says that it was good that Rabie stayed in the show and he addressed Rabie saying:  
Saber: You are inside my heart, *wallah*. I'd die for you, *wallahi al'azim*. I love you so much, I love your voice, and you are a decent person. You are so close to the heart and excellent on stage. You are a king on the stage, *wallah* [by God].

Saber is confirming that his feelings for Rabie are sincere by using the expression *wallah* and *wallahi al'azim*.

- Expression *Wallahi* (show 10; ci 7: The expression *wallah* has a variant *wallahi*. In the following example, Sherine used *wallahi* for the same purpose—namely, to confirm that what she was saying was sincere and honest.  
Sherine: Ok, I am, seriously, I might be, I told you. I am very nervous today because I wanted the three of them. I wished I could keep three voices, but I must choose two. I *wallahi*, *we rabbena*. If I had had a production company, I would have produced a song for anyone who leaves here [the competition].

Sherine is swearing to confirm what she is saying that she would produce for them. In this example, Sherine adds the expression *we rabbena*, which has the same meaning here as *wallahi*. With this use, she asserts her confirmation even further.

### 5.4. Expressions Urging an Action

- Expression *Allah yehdik* (show 9; ci 4): In the ninth show, a choice must be made between four contestants. Kareem gives the closed envelope with the results to Saber, who will open it. Kareem urges Saber to sit, saying, 'Sit; may Allah guide you', after which he will open the envelope.

Kareem: *inshallah kheir* [By God's will, things would be good].

...

Saber: Here you go.

Kareem: Sit, *allah yehdik*.

Saber: Here you go, mister.

Kareem: Sit, *allah yehdik*.

Saber: Here you go, mister.

Kareem: As his habit, Asi El-Hellany does not leave people alone. Asi, we have here four [people], *haram 'alayk* [shame on] you, with their nerves wrecked, sit in your seat, it is *haram 'alayk* [shame on you], sit in your seat.

This is one of the moments where the judges receive a card that includes the name of the contestant who won the votes of the audience. The instance started with Kareem expressing hope that things would be good for the contestants using the expression *inshallah kheir*. Then, a lady entered with the envelope and handed it to Saber. Asi, the Lebanese judge, stood up and ran after the girl in a flirtatious, funny way. Laughingly, Kareem addressed him asking him to sit back in his seat and saying: 'Sit, *allah yehdik*'. This is a humorous expression used here for mischievous behavior. He repeated it twice surrounded by an atmosphere of laughter. In his begging for Asi to sit, Kareem used the expression *haram 'alayk*. In everyday life, this expression is used to ask persons to reconsider their actions because their behavior causes trouble to other people. The expression can be used seriously or humorously. In this instance, Kareem uses it humorously with Asi to ask him

to reconsider, since the four contestants are feeling nervous waiting for the results. He is making them more nervous by playing around and not letting them hear the results. In Arabic, the use of these expressions is funny and humorous. They imply the mischievous naughty character that Asi impersonates in the show.

### 5.5. Expressions of Giving Thanks

- Expression *Allah yikhallik* (show 9; ci 2): The Tunisian contestant Aida and presenter Nadine were reading messages from the fans on social media. One fan from Tunisia told Aida that she was expecting a baby girl and everybody urged her to name the newborn after the contestant: Aida. In response, Aida thanked her and prayed to God to grant the fan good health. She expressed hope that God would give a baby girl whose voice would be more beautiful than hers. Nadine seconded the wish by repeating *inshallah* and by asking God to accept the prayer. Then, she added another wish for the fan that God would keep her kids safe:

Aida: I tell her merci, Zahra! *ye<sup>c</sup> tik essehha* [May god give you health]. *inshallah* [God willing] you will have a girl whose voice is more beautiful than mine. Nadine: *inshallah ya rabb! allah yekhalli lek weladik* [May God keep your kids safe].

This example shows different ways of giving thanks. Although both Nadine and Aida started with the French loan word *merci*, they shifted to praying for the expecting mum and her baby. The logic behind this approach is ‘to give back more than what you have been given’. So, when the fan expressed her admiration for Aida by considering naming her baby after her, Aida reciprocated this by praying to God to give her health, wishing the baby would have an even more beautiful voice than hers. To be more generous with reciprocating the interaction from the fan, Nadine seconded the wish with *inshallah* and prayed that God would keep the kids safe for the mum.

Prayers for good health and the safety of the kids are a common part of the culture. Health and kids are considered a blessing from God. Children are God’s gift and part of a person’s wealth and sense of pride. Therefore, by showering the fan with these prayers, Aida and Nadine express their warm appreciation for her engagement with the program and her positive message to Aida.

### 5.6. Expressions of Embarking on a New Activity

- Expression *Bismillah irrahman irrahim* (show 10; ci 7): Jury member Sherine used this expression twice in episode 10.1.7, which was one of the live shows where she must open an envelope to see which candidate out of four has made it to the next round. The conversation where the instances took place ran as follows:

Kareem: *Alhamdulillah*. This is now perfect!

...

Sherine: *bismillah irrahman irrahim*.

In this instance, Sherine was about to open the envelope that had the name in it of the contestant who won the audience vote. Then, Asi stood up from his seat and went to spook Sherine, who got really scared. Kareem commented that she was already scared, and by Asi scaring her more, she would not be able to say a word. The incident caused laughter and Kareem, jokingly, commented that spooking Sherine had increased her anxiety level to the maximum. In the joke, Kareem used the expression *alhamdulillah*. The joke implied in using this expression is that, humorously, the highest level of anxiety had been reached and the spook worked out on Sherine.

As part of the Arab culture, the expression *alhamdulillah* is used in good and bad times. The culture is that people thank God for all His offerings because, even though a situation might seem bad, there may be known or unknown positive sides to a misfortune. In this incident, Kareem, sarcastically, used the expression to imply the misfortune that Sherine is passing through. Then, Kareem asked Asi to sit down and Sherine to take a breath. Sherine, who seemed tense about the moment for announcing the selection, did not respond to the

exchange between Asi and Kareem. She did take a deep breath, and getting herself ready to open the envelope, she used the expression: *bismillah irrahman irrahim*. This expression is used before embarking on a new activity. That is why Sherine used it before opening the envelope. After a small exchange between her and Kareem, and before announcing the name of the winner, she repeated the expression. Saber used the same expression for the same reason in a similar instance: before opening the envelope to announce the name of the winner.

### 5.7. Expressions of Surprise, Shock, and Disappointment

- Expression *La ilaha illa allah* (show 11; ci 12):

Jury member Sherine uses the first part of the Islamic creed *la ilaha illa allah* (the whole creed adds 'wa-Muhammad rasul allah ('And Mohammed is His prophet')) after the extensive praise that Saber directs at her candidate Wahm. In this instance, Kareem asked Saber to give his opinion on the three contestants' performance in Sherine's team. Part of the request was to help Sherine choose from among the contestants. However, Saber gave a long speech to express his opinion on each of the contestants, yet he did not make a choice that would help Sherine. In response to this, somehow, shock, Sherine used the expression *allah* (11,12,3): Jury member Sherine uses the first part of the Islamic creed *la ilaha illa allah*.

She used the expression sarcastically and humorously to imply the disappointment she felt after waiting for the very long speech to finish, yet she did not get the help she was expecting. The expression is usually used in response to receiving bad or shocking news. The expression highlights the ideology that against all odds and strange things in life, there is only one truth that holds: that there is only one God. This is the prime belief of Muslims. Therefore, culturally, the expression is used in these situations to imply submission to God's working and that everything is questionable and changing in life except for the one truth of the only God. The humorous effect comes from taking the expression that is used in bad and shocking situations and applying it to Saber not providing the expected help to Sherine. Therefore, she suggests that the gravity of her disappointment and shock equals the odds in what life can bring and makes us remember that there is only one absolute truth, there being only one God.

### 5.8. Expressions of Beseeching

- Expression *wannabi* (show 11; ci 7): Kareem, as mentioned above, uses many glosses referring to God. In this scene, he refers, for the one and only time, to the prophet Mohammed by saying *wannabi* 'by the prophet'. The context is as follows:

Kareem: Ok, *wannabi* [by the prophet] Do not cry; otherwise, we would all cry now.

Contestant Wahm did a performance and Kareem and Sherine are discussing it. Sherine compliments Wahm for her performance. She says that Wahm is able to make people cry as Sherine herself cried because of the way Wahm performed the song *Yesterday* and then Kareem tells Sherine 'by the Prophet' not to cry because if she does, 'we will all cry now'.

## 6. Conclusions and Discussion

The analysis showed that the 10 shows and 166 communication instances produced 613 expressions referring, in one way or another, to God. Furthermore, there were the 151 other expressions *ahsant(i/u)* and *bravo*. It is difficult to tell whether that is a lot or not, but in fact, that question is less relevant when we focus on the context. In the Arab version of *The Voice*, a worldwide show in a very Western style broadcast by a Saudi TV station in relatively liberal Lebanon, the name of God is mentioned many times in all kinds of expressions. Put this way, there is certain wonderment: How can it be that in such a context, God plays such a dominant role? What does it say? In trying to interpret the data and give an answer to research question 2, we must first pinpoint the fact that we cannot ask members of the jury and presenters about their motivation to use these expressions.

It would be pure speculation if we focused on an intention we just cannot establish, and therefore, it seems more logical to try to interpret the data as they are and how they are used by the various persons in combination with insights from earlier research.

Looking at the results of the analysis from the statistical perspective, we see a divide in the jury between Saber, Kadim, and Sherine on the one hand and Asi on the other, the last one using these expressions much less than his three colleagues. When it comes to the *ahsant* and *bravo* expressions, we see that Kadim and Saber are the champions, while Asi and Sherine make scarce use of them. Kareem as a presenter is abundant in his use of expressions referring to God; he uses them the most out of the seven persons that we investigated. The two female presenters side with Asi when it comes to their scarce use of both kinds of expressions. What strikes us further is the generally low numbers of use of the expressions by Asi, Aimée, and Nadine. Does this have to do with the fact that they are all Lebanese, and Aimée and Nadine are Christians? Are the Lebanese more neutral in their language when it comes to referring to God because their country is religiously so divided, a country that has gone through a devastating religious and ethnic civil war (1975–1990), which taught them not to present themselves as belonging to this or that party, in particular in the media? Are Christians more cautious than Muslims in this respect? Still, the three are thrifty when it comes to using neutral expressions of admiration such as *bravo* or *ahsant* as well. Does this have to do with a Lebanese mentality to be more restricted in expressing feelings than others? When we look at Kadim, Iraqi by origin, we see that he is very abundant in his praise and admiration, which is a characteristic that Saber shares with him. Both are also the top users of the *ahsant* and *bravo* expressions. Now, *ahsant* is, as indicated above, a typically Classical Arabic expression, and therefore, it comes as no surprise that Kadim and Saber, both in their professional life expressing themselves in songs and texts and poetry in this language, use these expressions much more than Egyptian singer Sherine, who has a modest background and who sings in Egyptian dialect only.

When we look at the specific functions of the expressions as described and illustrated by examples in Section 5, it becomes clear that virtually all expressions have all kind of functions, from bewilderment to astonishment and anxiety, but that purely religious functions could not be attested (except for one expression “I depend on Allah, exalted and glorified be He”) . All references to God were in the service of the show, in the service to find *Ahla Sot*, the most beautiful voice.

Based on the above considerations concerning the use of the relevant expressions of the jury members and presenters, we come to the following considerations. It seems that the characters of each of the seven, their classical background (Kadim, Saber), popular or showbiz background (Sherine, Kareem), and ethnicity, i.e., Lebanese (Asi, Aimée, and Nadine) or non-Lebanese, origin play a role in their use of the many expressions. Drawing conclusions as to the question of whether their use of the expressions referring to God is inspired by religious convictions is impossible, as we just do not know what triggers them to use them. However, from our analysis, we tend to explain the use of these expressions in the diverse functional ways we described in Section 5.

However it may be, one thing is clear: the use of expressions referring to God, Allah, in the broadest sense of the word is still alive and kicking in the Arabic speaking world. The studies of [Alsohaibani \(2017\)](#), [Farghal \(1995\)](#), [Stanford and Wehba \(1986\)](#), and [Piamenta \(1979\)](#) on the use of religious expressions produced the same findings when it comes to the frequency of this kind of expressions in the daily speech of speakers of Arabic, be they from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or Egypt. They use them a lot, and expressions such as *inshallah* and *mashallah* are among the most numerous. When asked after the motivation of the speakers in these studies for their use of these expressions, the variables ‘religion’ or ‘faith’ immutably popped up. Native speakers relate these expressions to religious convictions, but that does not mean that they are strict orthodox believers. They also indicate that these expressions are part and parcel of their daily speech and that they use them in an automated way. The present analysis proves that even in a worldly show such as *The Arab Voice*, the same mechanisms play a role. The world is undergoing processes of globalization,

surely, and the Arab world is no exception to that rule, but in the latter case, God remains aboard, even, or maybe especially, in a glitter and glamour show such as *The Voice*.

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