The Pragmatic Functions of the Idiomatic Expression Yalla in Jordanian Spoken Arabic

Прагматичні функції ідіоматичного виразу Yalla у йорданському розмовному арабському мовленні

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ABSTRACT
Purpose. The study reported here aims to identify and classify the pragmatic functions of the frequently used idiomatic expression Yalla, literally ‘let’s’, in Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA).
Method. The data were collected from 145 university students (males and females) enrolled in different specialisms at two higher education institutions, viz., the University of Jordan and Jadara University. All participants are native speakers of Jordanian Spoken Arabic; their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. They were divided
into three groups; 14 participants gave the data in the mini questionnaire stage which was used to guide and inform proper data collection, 86 completed the extended data collection questionnaire and 45 undertook the acceptability agreement/judgment task. **Results.** The study reveals that Yalla conveys 23 pragmatic functions: showing approval/acceptance, signaling the start of an action, spreading enthusiasm, suggesting, commanding/ordering someone, expediting/urging, expressing surrender or submission, announcing the onset of a new stage, requesting approval, rest assuring, prompting someone to act in line with an established routine, advising coupled with warning, asking for patience/calming someone down, encouraging/cheering, drawing attention, reminding, wishing, stimulating, underestimating the importance of a complaint, ridiculing/mocking, expressing comfort, showing emphasis in addition to showing anger and boredom. **Conclusions.** The study concludes that the functions of the idiomatic expression Yalla are not equally frequent; nor are they equally acceptable by the Jordanian youth. This is evident in the results of the acceptability judgment task undertaken by the participants, an indication that some of them are more deeply entrenched in the Jordanian youth community than others. The study suggests that future research may investigate the pragmatic functions of Yalla in social contexts and situations other than those examined in this study. It may also involve older age groups as Yalla is more likely to be age sensitive; education level may also turn out to impact the use of this idiomatic expression. Furthermore, as the focus of this study is on Jordanian Spoken Arabic, future research may target the pragmatic functions of Yalla in other Arabic spoken varieties, e.g., Egyptian, Syrian and Saudi, among others. **Key words:** idiomatic expressions, Jordanian spoken Arabic, pragmatic functions, Yalla. 

**Introduction**

The idiomatic expression Yalla in Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA) has evolved from the word ʔal.la ‘God’ through two changes, namely, the deletion of the onset and nucleus of the first syllable in addition to the replacement of the deleted elements with the vocative ja ‘oh’. The paper aims at identifying and classifying the pragmatic functions of Yalla, literally ‘let’s’. In fact, these functions are under researched despite the frequent use of this expression in informal conversations in JSA. Stubbs (1985) expresses his surprise that some linguistic items, which are rich with information, are under-researched for the mere fact that they are only spoken and thus calls for more attention to them. Apparently, Yalla is just an example of such items. It is attested in daily life on TV, in radio talks, at work, in education institutions, in social media, while driving and even when speaking to ourselves.
The regularity of the occurrence of *Yalla* as a culture-bound expression in everyday speech has motivated the researchers to devote a whole study to it with a view to giving it full recognition in addition to unveiling its pragmatic functions in different social situations. In this context, Aitchison (quoted in Kanakri & Harahsheh, 2013) posits:

“Recognizing a word depends on two points, the first is the person’s knowledge of the language. The second relates to the surrounding context of the uttered word in a certain situation” (ibid.: 59).

Moutaouakil (1989) posits that pragmatic functions are associated with constituents in accordance with given situational conditions. Davis (1991) highlights the role of context in meaning; he believes that a sentence presupposes a class of context in which the sentence could be felicitously uttered. Thus, knowing the pragmatic functions of an expression could be observed when placing the expression in many situations, each of which containing a dissimilar context. Alotaibi (2021) highlights the significance of pragmatic awareness by alluding to a widely shared view that semantics and pragmatics work in tandem to ensure a full description of meaning. Similarly, Farghal (1995) states that pragmatics is concerned with one’s ability to use language meaningfully. It focuses on the person’s ability to derive meaning from specific kinds of speech situations, i.e. to recognize what the speaker is referring to, and to relate new information to given information. Further, Crystal (1997) states that the inclusive grouping of meaning and pragmatic functions is made because of the difficulty that theorists have in making a sharp distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

Fraser (1990) defines discourse markers as “a class of lexical expressions that signal a relationship between the interpretation of the segment they introduce, S2, and the prior segment, S1. They have a core meaning which is procedural, not conceptual and their more specific interpretation is ‘negotiated’ by the context both linguistic and conceptual” (p. 387). Yule (2000: 128) also takes context into account. He provides a somewhat general definition. Context is the physical environment in which a word is used. Stede and Schmitz (2000: 125) report that discourse markers seem to be innocent little words that contribute little to the propositional information conveyed. Taylor I. and Taylor M. (2008) identify context as the situational or linguistic elements in either the preceding or following sentences. They also highlight
the paralinguistic features that accompany the linguistic utterance. These paralinguistic features are identified as gestures, gazes, facial expressions and intonation. Interestingly, context plays a significant role in understanding the pragmatic functions of an utterance. It also disambiguates meaning and contributes to understanding the actual meaning of a pragmatic expression. Dash (2008: 21) focuses on the immediate linguistic environment in which a particular word occurs. This implies that understanding the context of a certain utterance is an important task in comprehension. In a similar vein, Wolvengrey (2011) argues that understanding the pragmatic functions of discourse markers also allows us to account for a large number of extra-clausal constituents, i.e. an expression can form huge number of utterances. In the same vein, Fareh, Jarad and Yagi (2020) posit that discourse markers “… are frequently used in communication to guide the listener or reader in the direction of a conversation …” (p. 87) as to which pragmatic function to convey.

Sometimes discourse markers are referred to as gap fillers. Al-Rousan (2015) cites *oh* and *well* as examples and investigates their pragmatic functions. The idiomatic expression *Yalla* may also be used as a gap filler in particular situations. Discourse markers are one example of pragmatic devices that are often used in conversation interaction. They have a significant interaction role in discourse as they show relationships between the interlocutors, namely, the addressor and the addressee. Kanakri and Harahsheh (2013: 60) clarify that discourse markers may result in several discourse functions within different contexts. They posit that a discourse marker can be defined from both structural and functional perspectives. The former indicates that discourse expressions are short elements of language that may be derivations from other words. Moreover, each of these expressions signals how the speaker intends the basic message that follows. Yet, the discourse would still be sensible without such expressions.

Idiomatic expressions in JSA are the focus of many studies. Farghal (1995) examines the pragmatics of *ʔinfa: ʔallah* in Jordanian Arabic. He reports that one of its pragmatic functions is to mark prohibition despite its literal meaning ‘if God permits’. Kanakri and Harahsheh (2013) investigate the pragmatic functions of a common expression in JSA, viz., *ʕa:di* ‘normal’. They suggest that it can be used to ask for permission, and to express disapproval. Further, Harahsheh
and Kanakri (2013) studied the expression *tajjib* ‘okay, fine and good’ and its cognate *tabb*. They conclude that the *tajjib* and its cognate *tabb* can convey different pragmatic functions in JSA such as giving permission and requesting patience.

Acting as his own informant, Jaradat (2014) devotes half a page of his study on *ʔalla:h* “God’ related expressions to highlighting the pragmatic functions of *Yalla*. He proposes that it is mainly used to urge, command and confirm ‘yes, ok’. What is worth noting here is that these findings were not subjected to any form of validation to safeguard against bias.

Mehawesh and Jaradat (2015) indicate that *ʔinʃa: ʔallah* has many non-literal meanings, all of which flout Grice’s maxim of quality, whereby the speaker does not mean what the words literally convey. Nonetheless, the addressee or the hearer can figure out the message intended by the speaker. The researchers conclude that the various non-literal meanings of *ʔinʃa: ʔallah* serve irony, a typical means for flouting the maxim of quality. It also conveys threatening, wonder, prohibition, and wishing.

Al-Rousan (2015) investigates the pragmatic functions of *maʕ nafsak* ‘with yourself’ in Saudi Arabic. The study reveals that *maʕ nafsak* can serve many pragmatic functions such as objection and refusal, annoyance and unwillingness. Al-Ghoweri (2016) tackles the expression *aʤallakom Allah* ‘May God elevate you’ in JSA. She reports that Jordanians use this expression when they talk about animals, impure places and reprehensible situations. The paper argues that *aʤallakom Allah* is used as a politeness strategy when Jordanians talk about topics that are socially tabooed in order for the speaker to save face before the addressee.

Hamdan and Abu Rumman (2020) examine the pragmatic functions of the JSA expression *Yahummalali*. The study reveals that this expression has eleven established pragmatic functions, which include expressing dismayed disapproval, fear, condemnation, disappointment, mitigating exaggerated claims, wishing, expressing sadness, regret, dissatisfaction, shock and making threats. The study also reveals that *Yahummalali* has eight emerging pragmatic functions, e.g. expressing jealousy, desperation, surprise, and sarcasm.

The novelty of this paper stems from the fact that only a few studies have addressed the pragmatic functions of idiomatic expressions.
in Arabic varieties, particularly JSA. However, none of them has made Yalla its main or even minor focus. Thus, this study is meant to fill this research gap in the literature.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the study methodology while section 3 presents the findings which are discussed in section 4. Conclusions and recommendation are provided in section 5.

Data Collection and Participants

Participants

On the basis of availability and convenience, a sample of 145 students enrolled in different specialisms at the University of Jordan and Jadara University were selected to serve as subjects. All were native speakers of JSA; their ages ranged from 18 to 22 with a mean age of 20.3 years. What motivated the researchers to choose their sample from this age range was their repeated observation of the frequent use of Yalla by university students. The subjects were divided into three groups; 14 participants gave the data in the mini questionnaire stage, 86 completed the extended data collection questionnaire and 45 undertook the acceptability agreement/judgment task as detailed below. All participants gave their informed consent to take part in the task by signing a short form prepared for this purpose.

Mini Questionnaire

The first group of subjects (n=14) took part in a mini questionnaire task which was used to guide and inform proper data collection. This questionnaire was distributed individually to Jordanian participants on campus. It consisted of two parts. The first was spared for bio data, e.g., gender, age and specialization while the second introduced participants to Yalla as a JSA expression. The second part also provided two illustrative examples of its use, each conveying a specific pragmatic function in a separate scenario: (1) calling (requesting attendance), and (2) expressing surrender. This was meant to refresh subjects’ knowledge of Yalla in context. Then the subjects were requested to produce, on the basis of their subconscious storage of casual conversations with their peers, as many Yalla-based scenarios as they could, identifying the pragmatic function of Yalla in each. The two illustrative scenarios
offered to the subjects were written in JSA but transliterated and translated into English below for the reader’s convenience.

(1) Calling (Requesting attendance)
[Context]. The mother is in the kitchen preparing food. The rest of family members are busy around the house. The food is ready; she says:

A. يَلَّ عَالَوَا الْغَدَا جَاهِزَ
jalla taʕa:lu Ɂilɣada dʒa:hiz
‘Come on everyone! Lunch is ready’.

The daughter replies:

B. هَيْنَا جَاهِينَ
hajna dʒa:ji:n
‘We’re coming’

(2) Expressing surrender
[Context]. Two students failed the same exam for the second time. A says to B:

A. هَأْيِ مَشْ أَوْلَى مَرَّةٍ بَنْرَسَبَ فِيهَا بِهَا الْأَمْتَحَانَ
Ha:j miʃ Ɂawwal marra bnursub fi:ha biha:d ilɁimtiːha:n
‘This is not the first time that we fail this exam’

B. يَلَّ شُو بَدِنَا نَعَمَلُ بِنَعِيدُ الْمَادَةَ
jalla ʃu: bidna niʕmal. binʕi:d lmaːddi
‘Never mind. What else can we do? We’ll redo the course’

The scenarios and functions proposed by the participants were subjected to a validation process for face and content validity by a panel of three jurors from the University of Jordan. They were professors of linguistics whose native language is JSA. The jurors suggested some amendments that were taken into consideration when the researchers built the extended data collection questionnaire. Consequently, the researchers moved to the next stage using the resulting document that consisted of 10 *Yalla*-based scenarios, each conveying a different pragmatic function, henceforth the extended data collection questionnaire.

**Extended Data Collection Questionnaire**
The extended data collection questionnaire was completed by 86 subjects selected from the same two universities mentioned above, using the same selection criteria. This task was meant to help
the researchers learn more about the situations/contexts in which *Yalla* can be used and the possible pragmatic functions it may convey. In addition to the researchers, two research assistants helped collect the data. They were second year students in Management Information Systems from Jadara University. They were trained on how to use the questionnaire for data collection. The procedure was as follows.

The participants were asked individually if they would spare some time to help fill in the questionnaire. If a participant showed acceptance, the researchers and/or the assistants would request them to sign the informed consent form and then proceed to the questionnaire. The procedures were similar to the ones used in the mini questionnaire; participants were first requested to provide their bio data in the first part. Then they were introduced to *Yalla* and the ten illustrative scenarios, each with its specific pragmatic function. Finally, the subjects were requested to produce, on the basis of their storage of casual conversations with their peers, as many as they could of *Yalla*-based scenarios, identifying the pragmatic function of *Yalla* in each. The questionnaire was generally completed in twenty minutes.

A detailed analysis of the proposed scenarios and functions was undertaken. To move on to the next step, one scenario was selected for each function. The list of functions and scenarios was presented to the same panel of jurors to validate. The panel accepted most of the functions and scenarios and suggested four more. Additionally, they suggested renaming few functions and making slight amendments to some scenario contexts. The jurors’ recommendations were taken into consideration, and thus a new refined list of scenarios and functions was produced. It contained 23 scenarios, each employing a different pragmatic function of *Yalla*.

**Acceptability Judgment Task**

In the course of further validation of the preliminary product of the 86 subjects and the jurors described above, the researchers sought to test the acceptability of the 23 scenarios and pragmatic functions of *Yalla* by a third group of subjects (n=45) selected from the same population using a 5-point Likert scale. The subjects were asked to read each scenario along with its proposed pragmatic function (in Arabic) and make a choice: strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree. If a subject disagreed, was uncertain or strongly disagreed with
a given function, s/he was given the opportunity to suggest a new one in a sixth empty column. Table 1 below illustrates an example of the items included in the validation/acceptability judgment task (translated into English for the reader’s convenience).

Table 1
An Example of the Validation Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad and Ali are taking lunch at a restaurant.</td>
<td>Showing approval/acceptance</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After they had finished their meals, Ahmad asked Ali:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you want to drink tea?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Table 2 presents the pragmatic functions of Yalla in JSA that were agreed by more than 50 per cent of the subjects. It also highlights the number and percentage of subjects who accepted each.

Table 2
The Pragmatic Functions of ‘Yalla’ and the Numbers and Percentages of Participants who Accepted Each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Pragmatic function</th>
<th>Acceptability judgment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Showing approval/acceptance</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Signaling the start of an action</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Spreading enthusiasm</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suggesting</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Commanding/Ordering someone</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Expediting/Urging</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Expressing surrender or submission</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>№</td>
<td>Pragmatic Function</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Announcing the onset of a new stage</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Requesting approval</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rest assuring</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Prompting someone to act in line with an established routine</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Advising coupled with warning</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Asking for patience/Calming someone down</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Encouraging/Cheering</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Drawing attention</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Reminding</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Wishing</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Stimulating</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Underestimating the importance of a complaint</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ridiculing/Mocking</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Expressing comfort</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Showing emphasis</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Showing anger and boredom</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Below is a descending presentation of each pragmatic function in its context followed by an illustrative example. Each example will appear in Arabic script, IPA transcription (with an underline for emphasis) and an English gloss.

(1) **Showing Approval/Acceptance**

[Context] Ahmad and Ali are taking lunch at a restaurant. After they had finished their meals, the following conversation took place:

أحمد: تشرب شاي؟
Ahmad: tiʃrab ʃa:j
‘Do you want to drink tea?’ (Rising intonation)

علي: يلّ، ليش
Ali: jalla, leʃ la
‘That’s fine, why not’.

Apparently, approval or acceptance here are both indicated by leʃ la ‘why not’. The use of *Yalla* may be viewed as a presequence that intensifies a positive response to the suggestion made by the addressee. A similar function was also noted by Jaradat (2014), which he named *ok* and *yes*. 
(2) **Signaling the Start of an Action**

[Context] Two workers, Salim and Khalid are carpenters; they have just finished making a wooden table. Each held on one edge to carry it and place it near the window. This is their conversation while carrying the table:

Salim: *jalla ʔirrrfaʕ*

‘Yalla, lift up’

Khalid: *jalla*

‘Okay, start’

As is clear, *Yalla* has signaled the start of lifting. Salim’s signal is meant to notify Khalid, who also responded with *Yalla* to start the lifting task simultaneously.

(3) **Spreading Enthusiasm**

[Context] At a sport club, and during the Acrobatics session, the coach is training the trainees on a two-step movement, i.e. lifting the leg up and lowering it down and thus she addressed the trainees in aloud voice:

*jalla, maʕ baʕa wa:ħad, tne:n, wah tne:n*

‘Yalla, we all together. One, two. One, two …’

*Yalla* may also be used at the sports club when a trainer wants the trainees to be more active exercising. In this sense, the use of *Yalla* may help the trainer spread enthusiasm and energy among the trainees.

(4) **Suggesting**

[Context] Sarah and Suzan are sisters. At the weekend, they frequently do the same works such as watching TV and buying their weekly needs. Yet, at one weekend, Sarah told Suzan:

Sarah: *kul marra bitmur ʔil ʕu ʔiʃi wala bniʕmal ʔiʃi*

‘Each time the weekend passes without doing anything’
سوزان: خلینا نفكر باشی جدید، بیشی
Suzan: xali:na nfakir bi ʔi ʃi dʒdi:d ʔi ʃi bissali.
‘Let’s think of something that is new, something entertaining’

سارة: يلا نطلع نتغدا
Sarah: jalla nitlaʕ nityadda
‘Yalla, let’s go out for lunch’

(5) Commanding/Ordering Someone

[Context] Jamal and Salim used to buy household stuff for their parents. Jamal was paying at the cash box while his younger brother was playing and having fun instead of helping him; Jamal stared at him and shouted:

جمال: شو بتسوّي؟ عبي الكياس بدنا نخلّص اليوم
Jamal: ʃu: bitsawwi? jalla ʃabbi likja:s bidna nxalliʃ ʔil-jo:m
‘What are you doing? Go fill the goods in the bags. We want to finish today’

سالم: طيب ماشي ماشي
Salim: ʃajjib ma:ʃi ma:ʃi
‘Alright, ok’

Yalla seems to be employed when a speaker is ordering someone to do something. This function is in line with Jaradat (2014), who gave it two labels, viz., imperative and imperative go. He considered them as two separate functions when, in fact, both can be amalgamated.

(6) Expediting/Urging

[Context] Bassam and Ahmad are in the car waiting for the green traffic light. The sign turned green but Bassam, the driver, was not paying attention. Then Ahmad said loud:

یالا امشي يا زلمه، مش شايف الإشارة صارت خضرا
jalla ʔimʃi ja: zalami miʃ ja:jif ʔil ʔiʃa:ra sa:rat xaːdra!
‘Yalla move o man. Can’t you see the green light!’

Yalla is used to expedite and/or urge the recipient to move right away. This function was also mentioned in Jaradat (2014) but as two separate functions: urging and fast.
(7) Expressing Surrender or Submission
[Context] Ali is a university student. At the end of the term, his result in one course was failure. He stared at the mark list and thought a little then spoke to himself:

يلَّ خيرها بغيرها
jalla xe:rha biɣe:rha
‘Yalla, it will be made up for’

As is clear, the speaker seems uncomfortable with regard to his result. There is nothing he could do about it. Hence, he used Yalla to intensify his surrender and submission.

(8) Announcing the Onset of a New Stage
[Context] In a tug-of-war contest between two teams of children, the announcer hailed for the beginning of the 8th stage of contest right away:

يلَّ بدنا نشوف مين يلي رح يفوز. الفريق الأحمر يلي عدود أربع نقاط ولَّ الفريق الأخضر يلي عدود ثلاث نقاط
‘Yalla, we will see who is going to win. The red team who got four points or the green team who got three points’

Yalla is used her to announce the onset of a new stage in the contest of tug-of-war.

(9) Requesting Approval
[Context] A janitor stands at the main entrance of a cinema; he shuts the gate every evening following a signal received from the manager to ban anybody access after the number is complete. One day the janitor said while eyeing inquiringly the halls’ manager to give him the signal to shut the gate or wait:

البوُّاب: يلَّ؟ ولا لسا؟
Janitor: jalla? willa lissa?
‘Shall I proceed? Or not yet?’

المدير: لا لسا
The manager: la: lissa
‘Not yet’.
It seems that the speaker and the receiver only can understand their conversation as they both allude to an agreed arrangement outside the immediate text (i.e. exophoric reference). The speaker used *Yalla* as a shortcut to obtain approval from the receiver.

(10) **Rest Assuring**

[Context] Kamal is taking out his car from the garage in reverse, and his parent is signaling to him saying:

إكسر يمين يمين، عدل، يلّ طالعة

?iksir jamî:n jamî:n, ʕaddil, jalla ?alʕa

‘Turn right, right, adjust *Yalla* clear’

Here *Yalla* is used with the expression ʔa:lʕa ‘clear’ to rest assure the receiver that he may continue reversing and that the way is clear. Thus, *Yalla* functions as an assuring mitigator.

(11) **Prompting Someone to Act in Line with an Established Routine**

[Context] At a small company where the number of employees is limited and by virtue of their number they are tied together by friendship outside the circle of work including the manager. Often, they meet outside work and sometimes without arrangement. One day, two of them and the manger met to have coffee at a café. Then the manager called Majid (an employee) who was at home, trying to prompt him to join the group:

المدير: يلّ تعال هينا بالمقهى نفسه

Manager: jalla taʕa:l hajna bil maqha nafsu

‘*Yalla*, come along we are at the same café’

هيني جاي

Majid: hajni dʒa:j

‘I’m coming’

(12) **Advising Coupled with Warning**

[Context] Ahmad at a mobile store; he wanted to buy a new set and had a certain model in mind. Yet, the seller recommended another model but Ahmad was not convinced. The seller said:
The Pragmatic Functions of the Idiomatic Expression Yalla...

Yalla is used to intensify advice and warning. Actually, warning is indicated by the phrase ‘you are free’.

(13) Asking for Patience/Calming Someone Down

[Context] Father came out from the airport building but didn’t find his son waiting for him though this had been coordinated the day before. Father called his son and said:

الأب: وينك؟ انا تعبان إلي زمان بستنى
Dad: we:nak, Ɂana taʕba:n, Ɂili zama:n bastanna
‘Where are you, my son? I have been waiting for a long time?’

الابن: يلّ يلّ عشر دقائق و يكون عندك
Son: jalla jalla ʕaʃar daga:jig w baku:n ʕindak
‘Wait, I’ll be there in ten minutes’.

Yalla in its reduplication form is used here as a signal by the speaker to show that little time is needed to accomplish the task. The son seems to be on his way to the airport. He is requesting some more patience until he arrives.

(14) Encouraging/Cheering

[Context] In a contest between the Orthodox club and the Ahli club, the Orthodox club advanced 10 points over the Ahli club, and the audience of the Ahli started shouting:

jalla jalla ja Ɂahli
‘Yalla, Yalla, O Ahli’ (with drums)

The use of Yalla by club fans to encourage and cheer their team players to proceed and score a goal is quite common. However, the use of Yalla here is very peculiar as it has been reduplicated. It seems that the use of a single Yalla does not serve the encouraging and cheering
purpose. However, some subjects reported in the acceptability judgment task that the two *Yallas* were also heard but they were separated from each other with the combination of the vocative particle *ja* and the targeted noun phrase *ʔahli* as in: jalla ja ʔahli jalla.

(15) **Drawing Attention**

[Context] A company of friends are sitting on campus talking about the weather, and suddenly Ali stood up and was ready to go as he had an appointment; he said raising his hand:

علي: يلّا يا جماعة، سلام
Ali: jalla ja dʒama:ʕa sala:m
‘*Yalla* o guys, bye’

الأصدقاء: وين؟ لسه بكر
Friends: we:n? lissa bakki:r
Company: ‘Where to? Still early’

علي: اتأخرت والله، لا يُمل
Ali: ɁitɁaxxarit walla la: jummal
‘I’m late, I swear, I’ll miss you’

Ali wants to leave, thus, he employs *Yalla* at the beginning to draw his friends’ attention. Then he conveys the rest of the message.

(16) **Reminding**

[Context] University students in a dorm. Every Friday they go at 8:00 pm to take dinner at their preferred restaurant. It is 7:30 pm now and they have to move as the restaurant is 25 minutes away from their place. Bilal was the first who got ready; he sat in the lobby and started reminding his company:

بلل: يلّااا، يلّ، جاهزين؟
Bilal: jalla jalla dʒa:hzi:n
‘*Yalla yalla*, are you ready?’

أحد الأصدقاء: أنا مش ناسي
A friend: Ɂana miʃ na:si
‘I didn’t forget’
(17) Wishing
[Context] Leila has two sons, one in the secondary school and the other at university. They walked out in the morning to sit the exams for which they prepared very well. Leila sighed to her husband:

\[
\text{يَلَّا الله يَعْفُوْهُمْ يَا رَبّ، وَمَا يَضِيعُّهُمْ تَعَبّ وَيَجْبِيْوَا أَعْلَىّ الْعَلَمَاتّ}
\]

\[
\text{Yalla, Ɂalla jwafiɁhum ja:rab w ma jøajjiʃ lhum taʃab widʒi:bu aʃla Ɂalamaːt}
\]

‘\text{Yalla. May God help them, and their effort not wasted out and obtain the highest marks’}

\text{Yalla} seems to have been employed to reinforce wishing.

(18) Stimulating
[Context] Bassam looked for an important file but he could not find it. He had a meeting in half an hour, so he started rubbing his head, searching for the file everywhere in his office saying to himself:

\[
\text{يَلَّا يا بَسَامَ، يَلَّ اتِّمِكْ وَايُو، وِيِن هَاطِيِت الْمَلَفّ}
\]

\[
\text{jalla ja bassaːm jalla tøakkar weːnu, weːn hatteːt il-malaf}
\]

‘\text{(Rubbing his head) O Bassam, Yalla try to remember its whereabouts, where I put the file’}

The speaker was in great haste; he used \text{Yalla} to reinforce his rubbing of his head and self-talk to stimulate his brains in hope he would recall where he kept the file.

(19) Underestimating the Importance of a Complaint
[Context] An employee in a plant complained to his superior about the level of work pressure assigned to him and the following dialogue ran between them:

\[
\text{المَوْظِف: مَنِ الصَّبْحِ وَكُلُّ الْشَّغلّ عَلَى رَاسِي، حَتَّى اسْتَرِخْتُ مَا أَخْتَنُهَا}
\]

\[
\text{Employee: min Ɂiʃʃubuħ w kul Ɂiʃʃuɣul Ɂa:si, hatta Ɂistiraːhti ma Ɂaxadtha}
\]

‘\text{Since morning I have shouldered all the work even I missed my break time’}

\[
\text{المَسْئُول: يَلَّا يَلَّا، طَوُّب جَمْعَت الْطَلَبَيْت؟}
\]

\[
\text{The manager: jalla jalla taʃjib dʒammaːʃt Ɂitalabijjaːt}
\]

‘\text{Don’t make a fuss. Did you collect the orders?’}

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It seems that the manager used *Yalla* here to underestimate the importance of the worker’s complaint as if telling him/her to stop complaining and attend to work.

(20) **Ridiculing/Mocking**

[Context] Ali is playing with his toys; his older brother, Rami, who is five years older, came in and snatched his toy. Ali became sad and asked his brother, Rami, to give it back to him twice but to no avail. Then Ali cried and his brother said to him:

Ramī: jalla ʕajji ṭuːh ŋiʃki ŋannī mɪlt lɪzɣaːr
‘Yalla, cry and go complain against me like a baby’

Ali: Ɂasɿlā mɑː rah Ɂaʃajjiɿt
‘In fact I won’t cry’.

Ridiculing and mocking are common in casual conversations, specifically, between siblings. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) refer to this technique as a goal state. While the speaker makes his plan to prevent his brother from complaining to his parents, he employs *Yalla* followed by the ridiculing sentence. The listener retreats from the action to probably not to confirm that he was behaving like young children.

As is clear, *Yalla* may also preface a mockery to empower the idea.

(21) **Expressing Comfort**

[Context] Employees of a company were in a meeting. One of them lost his temper as the argument escalated. For some reason, he had to leave, then, an attendee at the meeting hall whispered to his fellow:

Attendance (1): jalla xliʃna minnu
‘*Yalla* we got rid of him’

Attendance (2): ʃaːjif walla jannanna
‘You see, I swear, he drove us mad.

Apparently, when the bad-tempered person left, the attendees felt comfortable; one of them voiced his relief using *Yalla* and the other echoed this relief.
(22) Showing Emphasis

[Context] Ahmad and Bilal own a restaurant where they used to meet and talk about work affairs every morning. They go out to purchase the restaurant's needs in the first week of each month. The following conversation took place:

أحمد: لازمنا نشتري أغراض للمطعم
Ahmad: la:zimna niʃtari ?ayra:d lil matʕam
‘We should buy materials for the restaurant’

بلل: أها يلّ ما لازم نتأخر
Bilal: Ɂaha jalla ma la:zim nitɁxxar
‘Yes. Yalla, we shouldn’t be late’

It seems that the use of Yalla after Ɂaha ‘yes’ echoes the urgency of the needed supply and adds further emphasis to the task.

(23) Showing Anger and Boredom

[Context] Two small brothers were fighting one another at home and causing disorder and problems. Father, who was around, stepped in, agitated, and shouted:

يلّ من هون، عبيّتو البيت صياح، زهقتوني
jalla min ho:n, ʕabbe:tu Ɂilbe:t sjaː h, zahhagu:ni
‘Grr! (Yalla) Go out. You filled the house with shouts; I'm bored of your problems’

Fights often happen between siblings at home. The quarrel began to displease the father who stepped in to show his anger with the help of Yalla, and then to dismiss them out.

Discussion

Using Levinson’s (1983) framework, the researchers were able to identify 23 pragmatic functions of Yalla. The closest earlier study to ours was Jaradat (2014). However, Yalla was not its main focus. Further, some of the functions it proposed were given hasty and rather vague labels, e.g., imperative go, its ok, fast and yes.

Analysis of data revealed that Yalla is pragmatically multifunctional in JSA since it conveyed a host of functions. Table 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of the proposed pragmatic functions (i.e. 21 out
of 23) were agreed by more than 70 per cent of the participants. Only two were agreed by a relatively low percentage of subjects (i.e., 62%). These functions were: (1) showing emphasis, and (2) showing anger and boredom.

As is clear, none of the proposed functions was accepted by less than 50 per cent. Further, none of the participants suggested an alternative function to the one/ones suggested by the researchers, an implication that they are almost exhaustive. These results motivate a claim that the idiomatic expression *Yalla* is a well-established discourse marker in Jordanian Spoken Arabic. Jaradat (2014), who used his own intuition and thus was his own informant, was able to identify eight functions only. Apparently, the use of a large set of data collected from the relevant participants explains the greater number of functions identified by this study compared with Jaradat (2014).

The four most frequent pragmatic functions of *Yalla* were agreed by more than 82 per cent of the subjects; they were (1) showing approval/acceptance, (2) suggesting, (3) signaling the start of an action, and (4) spreading enthusiasm. These functions were associated with different daily life settings. The first situation was at a restaurant when Ahmad asked Ali whether he wanted to drink tea, Ali prefaced his response with *Yalla* to express his acceptance of Ahmad’s offer. The second was at the weekend when Sarah used *Yalla* to reinforce her suggestion to go out for lunch. The third was in the carpentry workshop where Salim, who was holding the table from one side, used *Yalla* to signal to Khaled the start of the lifting action just before they lifted it simultaneously. The fourth was at the gym when the trainer used *Yalla* to spread energy and enthusiasm amongst the trainees. On the other hand, the four least frequent pragmatic functions of *Yalla* were accepted by 62 to 71 per cent of the participants; they were (1) ridiculing/mocking, (2) expressing comfort, (3) showing emphasis, and (4) showing anger and boredom. These functions were associated with the following daily life settings, respectively: at home where Rami, who is five years older than his brother Ali, used *Yalla* to mock Ali when he was about to cry as a result of his attitude towards him. The second was at the company when the bad-tempered person left the meeting, the attendees felt comfortable. One of them voiced his relief using *Yalla*. The third was at the restaurant where Bilal used *Yalla* to echo the urgency of the needed
supply and added further emphasis to the task when his business partner Ahmad suggested so. The fourth situation was in the house where two little brothers were fighting one another. The displeased father, who stepped in to show his anger, used Yalla to express his anger and boredom and to dismiss them. Why some functions were viewed more acceptable than others has to await further research.

The relatively low acceptability rate of some pragmatic functions might be attributed to the belief that these functions are not currently well recognized or established in Jordanian Arabic as it is generally used by university students. In this regard, further research may show that the pragmatic functions of Yalla as proposed in this study are age sensitive and thus more popular among the youth.

While highlighting the pragmatic functions of another idiomatic expression in Jordanian Arabic, i.e. Yahummalali, Hamdan and Abu Rumman (2020) argued that the use of Yahummalali as a discourse marker intensified the meaning conveyed by the adjacent linguistic text. Similarly, our analysis demonstrated that Yalla was also used to intensify the meaning conveyed by the adjacent text. For instance, in (1) when Ahmad asked Ali if he wanted to drink tea, Ali used Yalla to express his acceptance by saying jalla leʃ la. Put differently, Yalla was used as a presequence that intensified a positive response to the suggestion made by the recipient.

On the other hand, the context plays a significant role in understanding the pragmatic functions of Yalla, particularly when it is used with a minimal text. For example, in (19) when the employee in the plant complained to his superior about the level of work pressure assigned to him, the latter quickly replied with the words Yalla Yalla. With this limited text and context, there is little likelihood to know why the manager gave this hasty and probably unjustified reply. It seems that the repetitive use of Yalla reflected the superior’s impatience with the worker, and thus led us to speculate that the manager’s use of Yalla was meant to underestimate the importance of the complaint. It is also worth mentioning that the meaning of Yalla may be related to the meaning of the preceding component. For example, in (22) when Ahmad told Bilal that ‘they should buy materials for the restaurant’, the latter replied ‘Yes. Yalla, we shouldn’t be late’. Put it differently, Yalla after ‘yes’ echoes the urgency of the needed supply. This goes in
line with Fraser (1999), who asserted that a pragmatic expression does not (necessarily) have a meaning and that one may relate the meaning of the preceding element to the following one.

A final word. We exerted lots of efforts to elicit, label and validate the set of Yalla pragmatic functions. However, we still feel that the proposed functions may not be unequivocally agreed neither by speakers of Jordanian Arabic nor by specialist colleagues. A portion of subjectivity has definitely crept into the analysis and subsequent interpretation and labeling. A unanimous agreement in this regard is not really possible. In fact, each time the suggested functions are examined, some other names/labels may appear equally tempting. This research temptation is quite natural and fully appreciated. It cannot be suppressed but through a margin of readers’ and assessors’ tolerance.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper identified 23 pragmatic functions of the idiomatic expression *Yalla* in Jordanian Spoken Arabic. However, these functions were not equally frequent. This was evident in the results of the acceptability judgment task, an indication that some of them are more deeply entrenched in the Jordanian youth community than others.

Future research may reveal further frequent pragmatic functions that may be associated with other settings since *Yalla* is considered as one of the well-established expressions that Jordanians use in a large number of settings which were not examined in the present study, such as songs, social media, TV programs and novels. Further, since this study focused on Jordanian Spoken Arabic, future research may reveal similar and/or different pragmatic functions of *Yalla* in other Arabic spoken varieties, e.g., Egyptian, Syrian and Saudi, among others.

Since the data of this study came from one particular age group, i.e., university students, without focus on gender differentiation, future research may investigate the use of *Yalla* by other age groups; it may also examine if gender has a role to play in determining the type and/or frequency of *Yalla*-based pragmatic functions within and across different age groups.
References


АНОТАЦІЯ

Мета. Виявити і класифікувати прагматичні функції ідіоматичного виразу Yalla, який часто використовується, в буквальному значенні “давай”, в йорданському розмовному арабському мовленні (JSA).

Метод. Дані були зібрані у 145 студентів університету (чоловіків та жінок), які навчаються на різних спеціальностях у двох вищих навчальних закладах – Йорданському університеті та Університеті Джадара. Усі учасники є носіями йорданської розмовної арабської мови; їхній вік варіювався від 18 до 22 років. Вони були поділені на три групи; 14 учасників надали дані на етапі міні-анкети, яка використовувалася для керівництва та інформування при зборі даних, 86 учасників заповнили розширену анкету для збору даних, а 45 учасників виконали завдання з оцінки прийнятності.

Результати. Дослідження показало, що Yalla передає 23 прагматичні функції, як-от: демонстрування схвалення/прийняття, сигнал про початок дії, ентузіазм, пропозиція, командування/наказ, заклик, вираження підпорядкування, оголошення про початок нового етапу, прохання про схвалення, завіршення у спокої, спонукання когось діяти відповідно до встановленого порядку, порада у поєднанні з попередженням, прохання про терпіння/заспокоєння, заохочення/підбадьорення, привернення уваги, побажання, стимулювання, недооцінка важливості скарги, висміювання/знущання, вираження комфорту, демонстрування акценту як додаток до демонстрації згіву та нудьги.

Висновки. Функції ідіоматичного виразу Yalla не є однаково рівнозначними; вони також не є однаково прийнятними для йорданської молоді. Про це свідчать результати завдання на оцінку прийнятності ідіоматичного виразу Yalla учасниками експерименту. Деякі значення ідіоматичних виразів більш глибоко вкорінилися в мовленні молоді Йорданії, ніж інші. Передбачається, що майбутні дослідження можуть вивчати прагматичні функції Yalla у соціальних контекстах та ситуаціях, відмінних від тих, що розглядалися у цьому дослідженні. Новітні дослідження можуть охоплювати старші вікові групи, оскільки Yalla, найімовірніше, чутлива до віку; рівень освіти також може вплинути на використання цього ідіоматичного висловлювання. Крім того, оскільки в центрі уваги цього дослідження знаходиться йорданське розмовне арабське мовлення, майбутні дослідження можуть бути спрямовані на вивчення прагматичних функцій Yalla в інших різновидах арабського розмовного мовлення, наприклад, єгипетського, сирійського, саудівського та ін.

Ключові слова: ідіоматичні вирази, йорданське розмовне арабське мовлення, прагматичні функції, Yalla.