

ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS BY PRIESTS IN PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN WEDDING BLESSINGS

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Abstract

This study examines the use of speech acts in Protestant Christian wedding blessings delivered by priests, exploring how language functions as a performative tool in sacred ceremonies. Using Austin's and Searle's speech act theories as theoretical frameworks, the research investigates how performative utterances particularly declarations, directives, representatives, and expressives function to create social transformation and spiritual affirmation within the institutional context of Christian marriage. Data were collected from YouTube videos of three different Protestant church ceremonies, representing diverse denominational perspectives: HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan), GPIB (Gereja Protestan di Indonesia bagian Barat), and GPdI (Gereja Pantekosta di Indonesia). The utterances were manually transcribed and systematically analyzed using speech act classification frameworks. The findings reveal that priests function as institutional agents whose performative language not only changes the social and legal status of couples but also reinforces theological truths and community values. The study demonstrates how sacred speech acts are inherently performative, deriving their power from institutional authority, divine legitimacy, and communal acceptance. This research contributes to the understanding of religious discourse and the intersection between language, power, and social transformation in sacred contexts.

Keywords : speech act, wedding blessing, Protestant, performative utterance, declaration, religious discourse

INTRODUCTION

Language in religious ceremonies transcends mere communication; it becomes a powerful instrument of transformation that actively shapes reality. In the context of Christian weddings, the priest's utterances are not simply descriptive statements about marriage but performative acts that declare, bless, bind, and affirm new social and spiritual realities. This phenomenon exemplifies what Austin (1962) identified as the performative nature of language, where speaking is simultaneously doing.

The significance of performative language in religious contexts cannot be overstated. When a priest declares "I pronounce you husband and wife," this utterance does not merely

describe an existing state of affairs but actually brings about the marriage itself. According to Austin's speech act theory, such utterances comprise three interconnected components: the locutionary act (the literal phonetic and semantic content of the utterance), the illocutionary act (the intended social action or force behind the words), and the perlocutionary act (the consequential effects produced in the audience or participants).

These performative dimensions become particularly potent when executed by legitimate institutional authorities within established ritual frameworks. In Protestant Christian weddings, priests serve as sanctioned representatives of both ecclesiastical and, in many jurisdictions, civil authority. Their words carry the weight of centuries-old traditions, theological doctrines, and legal frameworks that recognize religious marriage ceremonies as valid means of establishing marital unions.

Searle's (1979) refined categorization of illocutionary acts provides a more nuanced framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of priestly utterances in wedding ceremonies. While couples primarily engage in commissive acts through their vows and promises, priests predominantly perform declarations that alter social reality, representatives that assert theological truths, directives that guide ritual behavior, and expressives that articulate communal sentiments and divine blessings.

This study seeks to explore how Protestant Christian priests employ these various categories of speech acts during wedding blessing ceremonies, examining not only the linguistic structures of their utterances but also their performative effects within the broader contexts of institutional authority, theological tradition, and community acceptance. By analyzing actual wedding ceremonies from different Protestant denominations, this research aims to illuminate the complex interplay between language, power, and sacred transformation in contemporary Christian marriage practices.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Speech Act Theory

The foundational work of J.L. Austin (1962) in "How to Do Things with Words" revolutionized linguistic understanding by demonstrating that language is not merely descriptive but fundamentally performative. Austin's tripartite analysis of speech acts provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how utterances function in social contexts. The locutionary act encompasses the basic linguistic production of sounds, words, and sentences

with determinate meaning. The illocutionary act represents the specific social action performed through speaking such as promising, warning, declaring, or blessing. The perlocutionary act captures the consequential effects that utterances produce in listeners, including changes in beliefs, emotions, or behaviors.

Austin's distinction between constative utterances (which can be evaluated as true or false) and performative utterances (which are evaluated based on their felicity or success in accomplishing their intended action) is particularly relevant to religious discourse. In wedding ceremonies, statements like "marriage is a sacred institution" function as constatives, while declarations such as "I pronounce you husband and wife" operate as performatives that actively create new social realities.

Building upon Austin's work, John Searle (1969, 1979) developed a more systematic classification of illocutionary acts that has become central to speech act analysis. Searle's taxonomy includes five primary categories: assertives (or representatives) that commit speakers to the truth of propositions; directives that attempt to get hearers to perform actions; commissives that commit speakers to future courses of action; expressives that articulate psychological states regarding particular propositions; and declarations that bring about changes in reality through their successful performance.

Speech Acts in Religious and Ritual Contexts

The application of speech act theory to religious discourse has revealed the unique performative dimensions of sacred language. Rappaport (1999) argues that ritual utterances possess special properties that distinguish them from ordinary speech acts. Religious performatives often invoke transcendent authority, operate within highly codified ceremonial frameworks, and derive their efficacy from collective belief systems rather than individual speaker intentions alone.

Tambiah (1985) emphasizes that ritual language functions through both semantic content and performative force, creating what he terms "constitutive" rather than merely "regulative" effects. In Christian wedding ceremonies, priestly utterances do not simply regulate existing marriages but constitutively create the marital bond itself through the act of blessing and declaration.

Scholars have also examined the role of institutional authority in religious speech acts. Bourdieu (1991) discusses how religious language derives its power from the institutional

position of speakers within established hierarchies of spiritual authority. Priests, as ordained representatives of ecclesiastical institutions, possess what Bourdieu terms "symbolic capital" that authorizes their performative utterances and ensures their social recognition and effectiveness.

Protestant Perspectives on Marriage and Blessing

Protestant theological traditions have developed distinctive approaches to marriage and wedding ceremonies that influence the specific forms of speech acts employed by ministers. Unlike Catholic sacramental theology, which views marriage as one of seven sacraments instituted by Christ, most Protestant denominations understand marriage as a divinely ordained institution that receives ecclesiastical blessing rather than sacramental grace (Witte, 2012).

This theological distinction has practical implications for the language used in Protestant wedding ceremonies. While Catholic priests perform sacramental acts that are believed to channel divine grace through specific formulations, Protestant ministers typically focus on blessing existing commitments, invoking divine favor, and declaring community recognition of the marital union.

Calvin's theology of marriage as a "holy ordinance" established by God for human companionship and procreation has influenced Reformed traditions represented by churches like GPIB. Lutheran perspectives, reflected in HKBP practices, emphasize marriage as a divine institution that serves both civil and spiritual purposes. Pentecostal approaches, exemplified by GPdI traditions, often emphasize the role of divine blessing and spiritual guidance in marital relationships.

Previous Studies on Wedding Discourse

Several scholars have applied speech act analysis to wedding ceremonies across different cultural and religious contexts. Embugushiki (2010) examined speech acts in Christian weddings within African contexts, identifying how traditional and Christian elements combine to create hybrid performative practices. The study highlighted the importance of community participation and cultural adaptation in determining the effectiveness of religious speech acts.

Pinilih (2019) focused specifically on illocutionary acts in Christian marriage vows, analyzing how couples employ commissive speech acts to establish mutual commitments. This

research demonstrated that while vows represent the most obvious commissive acts in wedding ceremonies, the broader ritual context involves complex interactions between different types of speech acts performed by various participants.

International research has also explored comparative dimensions of wedding speech acts. Stiles (1994) examined how different cultural and religious traditions structure the performative aspects of marriage ceremonies, revealing both universal patterns and culture-specific variations in how societies use language to create and recognize marital bonds.

Gaps in Current Research

Despite growing interest in religious speech acts, several gaps remain in current scholarship. Most existing studies focus on marriage vows rather than priestly blessings, leaving the institutional dimensions of wedding discourse underexplored. Additionally, few studies have compared speech act patterns across different Protestant denominations, despite significant theological and liturgical variations that might influence performative language use.

Furthermore, the role of contemporary media and technology in documenting and disseminating religious speech acts has received limited attention. The availability of wedding ceremonies through platforms like YouTube creates new opportunities for linguistic analysis while also raising questions about how mediated contexts might influence the performance and reception of religious speech acts.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on priestly utterances across multiple Protestant traditions, analyzing how denominational differences influence speech act patterns, and utilizing contemporary digital sources to access authentic ceremonial discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method grounded in pragmatic linguistic analysis to examine speech acts in Protestant Christian wedding blessings. The approach combines the analysis of naturally occurring religious discourse with the application of established speech act theories, particularly those developed by Austin and Searle.

Data were obtained from three Protestant wedding ceremonies representing different denominational traditions in Indonesia: the HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) ceremony in Karawang on March 1, 2023; the GPIB (Gereja Protestan di Indonesia bagian Barat) ceremony in Surabaya on December 22, 2024; and the GPdI (Gereja Pantekosta di Indonesia) ceremony in Jakarta on April 8, 2022. These ceremonies were selected based on their

denominational diversity, ritual completeness, and audio-visual clarity. All data were sourced from publicly available YouTube videos documenting full wedding services. The use of publicly accessible video material ensured ethical compliance and provided access to authentic and spontaneous ceremonial discourse.

The researcher transcribed the priestly utterances from the blessing segments of each video, focusing on the moments where the formal declaration of marriage was delivered. While non-verbal cues were noted when relevant, the analysis emphasized the linguistic features of the spoken blessing.

Analytical procedures followed a two-step model. First, each utterance was categorized based on Searle’s classification of illocutionary acts: Representatives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations. Second, the function of each utterance was analyzed in its ceremonial context, considering elements such as theological content, ritual structure, and institutional authority.

To ensure validity and reliability, the classification was grounded in established theory and supported by contextual interpretation. Ambiguities were resolved through close attention to liturgical norms and denominational practices. This consistent application of theory across diverse data sources strengthens the credibility of the findings and offers meaningful insight into the use of language in Christian wedding rituals.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of priestly utterances across three Protestant wedding ceremonies reveals distinct patterns in how institutional religious authority employs performative language to create, validate, and sanctify marital unions. Each denominational tradition demonstrates unique approaches to combining theological assertion, ritual direction, and transformative declaration within the coherent framework of Christian marriage blessing.

HKBP Karawang: Lutheran-Reformed Performative Authority

The HKBP wedding ceremony demonstrates a distinctly systematic approach to building performative authority through graduated speech acts that establish context, invoke divine legitimacy, and culminate in transformative declaration.

Table 1: Speech Act Analysis of Priestly Utterances -- HKBP Karawang (March 1, 2023)

Utterance	Speech Act	Illocutionary Force
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"Saya meminta saudara berjanji dengan berjabat tangan"	Directive	Requesting specific ritual action from couple
"sebagai tanda perjanjian saudara dengan Tuhan"	Representative	Stating theological symbolic meaning of physical gesture
"Saya adalah hamba Allah yang menyampaikan Firman-Nya"	Representative	Establishing speaker's spiritual authority and institutional legitimacy
"Di dalam nama Allah Bapa, Allah Putra dan Roh Kudus"	Representative	Invoking Trinitarian divine authority as foundation for ceremonial action
"Saya menyatakan yang dipersatukan oleh Allah tidak dapat diceraikan oleh manusia"	Declaration	Creating social and spiritual reality of indissoluble marriage bond
"Amin"	Expressive	Spiritual affirmation and ceremonial closure

The HKBP priest's discourse demonstrates sophisticated understanding of how performative authority must be carefully constructed through sequential speech acts. The ceremony begins with a directive that engages the couple in physical ritual ("berjanji dengan berjabat tangan"), immediately followed by a representative utterance that interprets this action within theological framework ("sebagai tanda perjanjian saudara dengan Tuhan"). This pairing of directive and representative acts establishes both the immediate ritual requirement and its spiritual significance.

The priest's self-identification as "hamba Allah yang menyampaikan Firman-Nya" functions as a representative act that explicitly establishes institutional authority. Rather than claiming personal power, the priest positions himself as an intermediary who derives authority from divine commission. This strategic positioning enhances the subsequent declaration's performative force by grounding it in transcendent rather than merely human authority.

The Trinitarian invocation represents a crucial representative act that establishes the theological foundation for the transformative declaration that follows. By naming the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the priest invokes the full divine authority recognized within Christian tradition, creating the sacred context necessary for effective performative action.

The culminating declaration, "Saya menyatakan yang dipersatukan oleh Allah tidak dapat diceraikan oleh manusia," represents the ceremony's most powerful performative moment. This utterance simultaneously accomplishes multiple functions: it declares the couple's new marital status, asserts the divine origin of their union, and establishes the permanent nature of their bond. The passive construction ("yang dipersatukan oleh Allah") emphasizes that the priest serves as announcer rather than creator of the union, attributing the actual unifying action to divine agency.

GPIB Bukit Kasih Surabaya: Reformed Theological Integration

The GPIB ceremony demonstrates sophisticated integration of theological instruction with performative declaration, reflecting Reformed emphasis on doctrinal understanding alongside spiritual transformation.

Table 2: Speech Act Analysis of Priestly Utterances -- GPIB Bukit Kasih Surabaya (December 22, 2024)

Utterance	Speech Act	Illocutionary Force
"Berdasarkan kasih setia Yesus Kristus yang memperkawinkan saudara..."	Representative	Affirming divine love as theological foundation for marital union
"Apa yang telah dipersatukan Allah tidak boleh diceraikan oleh manusia"	Declaration	Asserting divine permanence and indissolubility of marriage bond
"Kenakanlah kasih sebagai pengikat..."	Directive	Urging adoption of love as primary marital virtue and binding principle
"Hendaklah damai sejahtera Kristus memerintah dalam hatimu"	Expressive	Expressing pastoral hope for spiritual peace and divine presence
"Karena untuk itulah kamu dipanggil"	Representative	Declaring divine purpose and calling inherent in marriage relationship
"Amin"	Expressive	Religious affirmation and ceremonial conclusion

The GPIB priest's approach demonstrates particular sophistication in combining doctrinal instruction with performative blessing. The opening representative utterance establishes "kasih setia Yesus Kristus" as both the theological foundation and active agent of

the marriage. This formulation reflects Reformed emphasis on divine initiative in salvation and sanctification, applying soteriological principles to marital theology.

The central declaration, "Apa yang telah dipersatukan Allah tidak boleh diceraikan oleh manusia," employs perfect tense ("telah dipersatukan") to emphasize the completed nature of divine action. This grammatical choice reinforces the theological assertion that God, rather than human ceremony, creates the essential marital bond. The priest's role becomes proclamatory rather than constitutive announcing divine action rather than performing it independently.

The directive "Kenakanlah kasih sebagai pengikat" employs metaphorical language that transforms abstract theological concepts into concrete behavioral guidance. The imperative mood creates obligation while the metaphor of "wearing" love suggests both intentional adoption and visible manifestation of marital virtue. This utterance bridges the gap between ceremonial declaration and practical marital guidance.

The expressive utterance "Hendaklah damai sejahtera Kristus memerintah dalam hatimu" functions as pastoral blessing that extends beyond the immediate ceremony to encompass ongoing marital experience. The subjunctive mood ("hendaklah") expresses hope and prayer rather than command, reflecting appropriate humility regarding human ability to guarantee spiritual outcomes.

GPdI Kramat Jakarta: Pentecostal Emphasis on Spiritual Authority

The GPdI ceremony demonstrates Pentecostal emphasis on direct spiritual authority and explicit acknowledgment of divine sovereignty in marital establishment.

Table 3: Speech Act Analysis of Priestly Utterances - GPdI Kramat Jakarta (April 8, 2022)

Utterance	Speech Act	Illocutionary Force
"Saya meneguhkan saudara berdua sebagai suami-istri"	Declaration	Institutionally confirming and establishing new marital status
"Mulai hari ini dan seterusnya"	Representative	Stating temporal permanence and ongoing nature of marital commitment
"Di dalam nama Ya Allah Bapa, Putra dan Roh Kudus yaitu Tuhan Yesus Kristus"	Representative	Declaring comprehensive Trinitarian spiritual authority for ceremonial action

"Apa yang telah dipersatukan oleh Allah tidak ada seorangpun yang dapat menceraikannya"	Declaration	Emphasizing absolute indissolubility of divinely established union
"Kecuali maut"	Representative	Acknowledging death as the sole legitimate exception to marital permanence
"Amin"	Expressive	Closure and sacred affirmation of completed ceremonial action

The GPdI priest's discourse demonstrates particularly direct approach to performative declaration, beginning immediately with the transformative utterance "Saya meneguhkan saudara berdua sebagai suami-istri." The verb "meneguhkan" (to confirm/establish) explicitly positions the priest as active agent in creating marital status, reflecting Pentecostal comfort with direct spiritual authority and immediate divine action.

The temporal specification "Mulai hari ini dan seterusnya" functions as a representative act that emphasizes the immediate effectiveness and permanent duration of the marital transformation. This utterance addresses potential uncertainty about when the marriage begins, establishing clear temporal boundaries for the new social reality.

The expanded Trinitarian invocation includes the additional phrase "yaitu Tuhan Yesus Kristus," reflecting Pentecostal emphasis on the personal relationship with Jesus Christ alongside formal Trinitarian doctrine. This elaboration strengthens the representative force of divine authority invocation while maintaining theological orthodoxy.

The declaration regarding marital indissolubility employs stronger language than the other ceremonies, stating that "tidak ada seorangpun yang dapat menceraikannya" rather than the more common "tidak boleh diceraikan." This word choice ("dapat" vs. "boleh") shifts emphasis from prohibition to impossibility, suggesting that divine union transcends human capacity for dissolution rather than merely human permission.

The explicit acknowledgment "Kecuali maut" represents a unique representative act that directly addresses the temporal limitations of earthly marriage. While other ceremonies imply this exception, the GPdI priest makes it explicit, demonstrating theological precision regarding the scope of marital permanence.

Several significant patterns emerge when comparing speech act usage across the three Protestant traditions examined. All three ceremonies employ similar structural progressions from authority establishment through directive guidance to transformative declaration, suggesting shared underlying understanding of how performative religious language should function. However, denominational differences create distinct emphases within this common framework. HKBP ceremony demonstrates particular concern with establishing proper authority through systematic invocation of divine legitimacy. GPIB ceremony emphasizes theological instruction and doctrinal foundation alongside performative action. GPdI ceremony prioritizes direct spiritual authority and explicit acknowledgment of divine sovereignty.

These differences reflect broader theological emphases within their respective traditions. Lutheran-Reformed HKBP maintains careful attention to proper ecclesiastical authority and systematic theological foundation. Reformed GPIB emphasizes doctrinal understanding and comprehensive theological integration. Pentecostal GPdI prioritizes immediate spiritual authority and direct divine action.

Despite these denominational variations, all three traditions demonstrate sophisticated understanding of how speech acts function to create social transformation within religious contexts. Their utterances consistently combine multiple illocutionary forces to establish authority, provide guidance, and accomplish transformation through carefully structured performative sequences.

The analysis reveals that Protestant wedding blessings function as complex performative events that combine multiple types of speech acts to accomplish social, spiritual, and institutional transformation. Rather than relying solely on single declarations, priests construct performative authority through sequential utterances that establish context, invoke legitimacy, provide guidance, and accomplish change.

This finding challenges simplified understandings of religious performativity that focus exclusively on formulaic declarations. Instead, the evidence suggests that effective religious speech acts require careful construction of appropriate context, legitimate authority, and shared understanding between speakers and communities.

The denominational variations observed in this study also indicate that while Protestant traditions share fundamental commitments to the performative nature of religious language, they express these commitments through distinct theological emphases and linguistic strategies that reflect their particular doctrinal priorities and ecclesiastical practices.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Protestant priests, through their liturgical language during wedding blessings, perform complex performative functions that extend far beyond simple ceremonial formality. The analysis reveals that priestly utterances function as sophisticated instruments of social, spiritual, and institutional transformation that create new realities while reinforcing existing theological and community values.

The findings indicate that effective religious performativity requires careful orchestration of multiple speech act types working in coordinated sequence. Rather than relying solely on isolated declarations, priests construct performative authority through representative utterances that establish theological foundations, directive utterances that guide ritual participation, expressive utterances that articulate communal sentiments, and declarative utterances that accomplish fundamental transformation of social status.

Denominational differences observed across HKBP, GPIB, and GPdI ceremonies reflect distinct theological priorities while maintaining shared commitment to the performative power of religious language. Lutheran-Reformed traditions emphasize systematic authority establishment, Reformed traditions prioritize doctrinal integration, and Pentecostal traditions stress direct spiritual authority. These variations demonstrate how common performative frameworks can accommodate diverse theological emphases while accomplishing similar transformative goals.

The study also reveals that contemporary Protestant wedding ceremonies successfully maintain the performative effectiveness of traditional religious language within modern contexts. Despite social changes and technological mediation, priestly utterances continue to function as powerful instruments of institutional legitimation and spiritual affirmation that are recognized and accepted by religious communities.

These findings contribute to broader understanding of how religious discourse functions in contemporary society, demonstrating that traditional performative frameworks remain vital and effective when properly grounded in institutional authority, theological legitimacy, and community acceptance. The research also highlights the sophisticated linguistic competence required for effective religious leadership, as priests must skillfully combine multiple speech act types to accomplish complex ceremonial goals.

Future research might explore comparative performativity across different religious traditions, examine the role of contemporary media in documenting and disseminating religious

speech acts, or investigate how changing social attitudes toward marriage influence the performative language used in wedding ceremonies. Such studies would further illuminate the complex relationships between language, authority, and social transformation in religious contexts.

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