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## **Doing Things with Words: A Speech Act Analysis of a Christian Wedding (Pp 51-61)**

**Embugushiki, Ahidjo U.** - Department of English, University of Jos, Nigeria

E-Mail: ahidjoembugushiki@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*Language, as it has come to be seen, is not only used to communicate ideas and feelings: it is also used to do things. This is what is regarded as its performative credentials. The performative potential of language is what is encapsulated in Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) Speech Acts Theory on which this paper is premised. This paper examines the speech acts performed in Christian wedding solemnizations. Appropriate data for the study has been elicited through the audio-visual recording of a Christian wedding. The data obtained has been transcribed and analysed. It has been discovered that the locutionary acts of Christian wedding vows possess a peculiar linguistic structure consisting of declarative and interrogative sentences which are characteristically full of those verbs that can be said to be performatives in the sense that they are 'verbs of actions'. The verbs are preceded by the first person singular subject 'I'. The use of these verbs in this manner adds to the illocutionary force of the vows. The study also reveals that Christian wedding vows are not mere descriptive statements but illocutionary acts (commissives and declarations), the explication of which should be necessarily related to acts of social performance, deducible from the context of situation. The perlocutionary act is deducible from the signing and presentation of marriage certificate.*

## **Introduction**

Man as a social being communicates and interacts with his society using language. Language has been conceived differently by various linguists depending on the function, which they subject it to. Interestingly, even though a single generally accepted standard definition of language is far-fetched, the various existing definitions by different linguists are not contradictory but distinct and complementary in nature and function. Berry Peter (1995:12) observes that “a linguist’s view of what language is, and how language works influences the way in which he describes particular languages.”

The conception of language as a “structured and abstract” system underscores the formalists approach to the study of language. The proponents of formalism (e.g. Chomsky) conceive language as a mental phenomenon consisting of abstract linguistic units and the structural relation between them. This conception of language undermines the communicative and performative potentials of language. Early linguists have conceived language as a “highly structured and abstract” system (Bell 1976:19). Margaret Berry (1975:13) succinctly captures this view thus:

Language is a structured system. It does not just consist of a lot of little atomistic bits which are quite separate from and independent of each other. We not only need to know about individual sounds and individual words; we also need to know all the individual sounds and how the individual words are related to each other to form a structured system of words.

On the contrary, the functionalists’ approach to the study of language views it as a systematic resource for expressing meaning in social context. This view of language as a system of meaning potential implies that its meaning transcends the boundary of a defined set of abstract linguistic units and the relations within them to include its social context. Thus language as a communicative system is concerned with meaning as a function of the interaction of code and context of situation so that the significance of what people say transcends the signification of the words they use to say it to include its meaning in a context of situation. Advancing this argument, Henry Widdowson (2004:45) posits that:

Meaning is a function of the interaction of codes and context so that the significance of what people say

transcends the signification of the words they use to say it.

This view, however, contrasts with the view of earlier linguists who largely, restricted their analyses to function within the linguistic system and some contemporary linguists who view functions as the role a category plays within a sentence.

It is also important to note that language possesses a performative potential. This is because language is not only used to communicate ideas, feelings and opinions, it is also used to do things or perform actions. In underscoring the performative potential of language Ruth Kempson (1977:50) avers that: "...we use language to do things, that describing is only one of the things we do, we also use language to promise, to insult, to agree, to criticize..." Similarly, Searle (1979:23) encapsulates this view thus:

We tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, [and] we express our feelings... attitudes...bring about changes through our utterances.

This performative potential of language is what is encapsulated in the speech act theory. In this paper, a speech acts analysis of selected Christian wedding vows shall be undertaken with a view to describing the illocutionary force of wedding vows as well as its perlocutionary effects.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Austin's series of lectures in 1955, compiled in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) is widely acknowledged as the first presentation of what has come to be called Speech Act Theory. According to Ayo Ogunsiji (2002:209), "One basic tenet of Austin's theory of speech-acts is that language use does not occur in a vacuum. Sentences and utterances are used to perform some acts such as ordering, informing, commanding, condemning, accusing, etc." Austin identifies two types of utterances: performatives and constatives. In relation to the former, he provides that "the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not only be described as, or as 'just', saying something" (1962:5). The performatives are usually characterized by a particular type of verb- a performative verb – that realises a particular action when uttered in a specific context. They may be felicitous or infelicitous (happy or unhappy). The criterion for a happy or

felicitous performative is that the circumstance, in which it is uttered, should be appropriate: certain conditions must obtain. If it is infelicitous, or unhappy, something has gone wrong in the connection between the utterance and the circumstance in which it is uttered.

Constatives, on the other hand, are used to state facts or describe states of affairs, with a truth-value: which can be true or false. According to John Lyons (1977:727), the distinction between constatives and performatives as originally drawn by Austin “rested upon the distinction between saying something and doing something by means of language”.

It is important to observe at this juncture that the dichotomy between so-called constatives and performatives is no longer sustainable. Austin later conceded that there is really no difference between the two because they depend on the setting, the persons engaged in a verbal interaction among others. A constative utterance can be used to perform an action, as much as a so-called ‘performative’ utterance can. This is why Deborah Schiffrin (1994:53) maintains that:

That the constative-performative distinction cannot be maintained because both constatives and performatives involve truth and falsity; both are felicitous or infelicitous in relation to the conditions in which they occur; both are realized through a variety forms that can be rewritten in terms of a performative formula. To put this more generally, we cannot find either contextual or textual conditions that support the constative-performative distinction.

We need to observe here that any sentence form may be used to perform any illocutionary act. Even the uttering of “Hello there” to a lone walker in the night and with the necessary force may be capable of frightening the hearer. Thus, as D. E. Cooper (1973:193) observes, “the perlocutionary effects are not... due to the intrinsic nature of sentences” but the effects of the sentence in a speech situation. For any communication to succeed, the participants in the communicative event must share a body of background knowledge from which they must draw if and when it is relevant to the process of communication in which they are engaged. John Gumperz (1982:2-3) underscores the importance of shared knowledge in conversational involvement and submits that:

A general theory of discourse strategies must therefore

begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained, and then go on to deal with what it is about the nature of conversational inference that makes for cultural, sub-cultural or situational specificity of interpretation.

Furthermore, Austin argues that every time we direct language at some audience, we perform three simultaneous acts: locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. To perform a locutionary act is to say something in what Austin (1962:94) calls “the full normal sense”. It includes:

- i. The phonic act: uttering noises, phones.
- ii. The phatic act: uttering noises as belonging to a certain vocabulary and conforming to a certain grammar, that is, as being part of a certain language. The noises seen from this perspective are called phemes.
- iii. The rhetic act: Using these noises with a certain sense and reference. The noises seen from this perspective are called rhemes.

These three simultaneous acts make up the locutionary act. However, each time one performs a locutionary act, one is also thereby performing some illocutionary act, such as stating, promising, warning etc. If a hearer, through his or her knowledge of the conventions of the language, grasps what one is doing, there is uptake on his or her part of the illocutionary force of the utterance. The effect the illocutionary act has on the hearer is called the perlocutionary act, such as persuading, deterring, surprising, or convincing.

Austin (Lecture 12) suggests that it is possible to distinguish a number of broad classes of speech acts, classified according to their illocutionary force. He lists the following classes:

- i. Verdictives e.g. verdict, estimate, reckoning or appraisal.
- ii. Exersitives e.g. voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning etc.
- iii. Commissives e.g. promising, vowing, etc.
- iv. Behavitives e.g. apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing, and challenging.
- v. Expositives e.g. arguments.

J. R. Searle (1969:21) later developed Austin's speech act theory and proposed a systematic framework by which to incorporate speech acts into linguistic theory. According to this framework the "speech act is the basic unit of communication." What allows the integration of speech act theory into linguistic theory is Searle's "principle of expressibility" (1969:18-21): What can be meant can be said. This principle establishes that it is possible (in theory) for speakers to come to be able to say exactly what they mean either by increasing their knowledge of the language or by enriching the language. Searle is of the view that "there are a series of analytic connections between the notion of speech acts, what the speaker means, what the sentence (or other linguistic element) uttered means, what the speaker intends, what the hearer understands, and what the rules governing the linguistic elements are" (1969:21).

Searle also observes that "speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behaviour" (1969:12). The rules responsible for speech acts, however, are rules of a special type that Searle calls 'constitutive'. In contrast to regulative rules (that regulate independently existing forms of behaviour), constitutive rules "create or define new forms of behaviour" (1969:33).

Like Austin's, Searle's rules and conditions for speech acts draw upon both context and text: they also elevate intentions and other psychological states or conditions enabling a speech act, by assigning them their own types of rule. Like Austin, Searle also classified conditions and rules according to their necessity for the act. But in contrast to Austin, Searle classified different kinds of condition (and rules) according to what aspect of text and context is focused upon in the condition or rule; the different conditions also overlap (partially) with the different components of the speech act.

According to Searle, a speaker typically does four things when saying something; this is because, as Searle rightly points out not all utterances involve referring and predicating (Austin's 'rheme'), which was part of the locutionary act. So the first of Searle's four possible elements of uttering only contains Austin's pheme and rheme, that is, it only includes two of the elements of Austin's locutionary act. Searle calls this act the utterance act: uttering words (morphemes, sentences). The third aspect of the locutionary acts constitutes an element of its own in Searle's scheme, the propositional act: referring and predicating. The other two are illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts.

Searle's (1979[1975a]) categories of illocutionary acts are as follow:

- i. Assertives e.g. stating, suggesting, boasting, complaining, claiming, reporting. This corresponds with Austin's Behavitives.
- ii. and sentencing.
- iii. Directives e.g. ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, and recommending. This category corresponds with Austin's Exersitives.
- iv. Commissives e.g. promising, vowing, offering.
- v. Expressives e.g. thinking, congratulating, pardoning, blaming, condoling, etc.

Declarations e.g. resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, excommunicating, appointing

The speech act theory is relevant to our study because it establishes the fact that there are a series of analytic connections between the notion of speech acts, what the speaker means, what the linguistic element uttered means, what the speaker intends, what the hearer understands, and what the rules governing the linguistic elements are.

### **An Analysis of Christian Wedding Solemnization**

Christian weddings are universally considered by Christians as sacred institutions established and ordained by God. As such, a lot of premium is given to such an institution. Prior to the solemnization of a Christian wedding, the parties involved are oriented and educated on the implications of the contract they are about to enter into; the church also scrutinises the intending couple by subjecting them to interviews in order to ascertain the truism and sincerity of their intentions. In addition, a certified clergy who will be saddled with the task of contracting the marriage is also consulted. It is important to observe that Christian wedding is not just a physical union, but a union of hearts that is ordained by God and beyond human nullification. This is in consonance with the biblical injunction "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ...So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Mathew 19:4-6) Thus, there is a shared understanding among the participants that Christian weddings are contracted with the intention that they will last forever. Wedding vows can be

classified under Austin's and Searle's illocutionary acts called commissives and declarations. In this paper, a wedding sample will be analysed in a bid to establish the fact that wedding vows are not mere descriptive statements but, performative acts.

In the transcribed data, the exchange of vows began with the use of interrogative and declarative sentences. The clergy initiated the discourse by using three interrogative sentences. The groom and the bride responded to the questions using the following declarative sentences, 'Yes, I do' and 'Yes, I will', respectively:

CLERGY: Do you take Grace to be your wedded wife to live together according to God's holy law?

GROOM: Yes, I do

CLERGY: Will you love her, encourage her, protect her in prosperity and adversity?

GROOM: Yes, I will

CLERGY: Will you forsake all other and cleave unto her as long as you all shall live?

GROOM: Yes, I will

These interrogative and declarative sentences constitute the locutionary acts in the sense that they produce meaningful utterances of a certain grammatical order. It is important to assert that the declarative sentences are not mere descriptive statements but illocutionary or performative acts, that is, they are utterances whose saying consists in doing something. The declarative sentences above also consist of full verbs that can be said to be performatives in the sense that they are 'verbs of actions'. Such verbs are 'do' and 'will'. The use of these verbs in this manner adds to the illocutionary force of the wedding vows. The performative verbs are preceded by the first person singular subject 'I'. Notwithstanding the fact that the illocutionary or pragmatic force of the declarative sentences are encapsulated in their semantic structure, the force is to a great extent deducible from the knowledge of the context of situation shared by the parties to the agreement. It is the awareness of these mutual contextual variables and beliefs that makes it possible for all the parties to the marriage contract to deduce that the groom is performing the illocutionary act of vowing or promising.



The exchange of the marital vows proceeds with another declaration by both the groom and the bride thus:

I ask this people present to witness that before God, I, Ahidjo, take you, Grace, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death

It is important to assert here that the declaration above is not descriptive statements, but a vow or promise to God and all the witnesses present at the wedding made by the couple that they will cleave to each other until 'they are parted by death'. This declaration also presupposes that the couple are aware of the fact that Christian weddings, though ordained by God, are not devoid of tribulations and adversities, and they are ready to cleave to each other no matter the circumstances. It is based on the declaration of the couple in the presence of God and the witnesses, as illustrated by the exchange of vows, joining of hands, and by the giving and accepting of rings, that the clergy pronounces them as husband and a wife:

I pronounce them husband and wife in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

The pronouncement by the clergy above belongs to a class of illocutionary acts classified by Searle as declarations. A declaration is an illocution whose "successful performance ...brings about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality". In addition, Searle has observed that such category of speech acts "are performed, normally speaking, by someone who is especially authorised to do so within some institutional framework" (18-19).

As institutional rather than personal acts, they can scarcely be said to involve politeness. Politeness is not relevant to declarations because they do not have an addressee in the sense that applies to personal discourse. The person who makes a declaration uses language as an outward sign that some institutional (social, religious, legal etc) action is performed. It would thus be totally out of place, and would undermine the force of the declaration, if the priest solemnizing a wedding were to hedge his words with politeness; changing "I pronounce them husband and wife in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit' into 'could I pronounce them husband and wife..."

The illocutionary force in the declaration by the clergy transcends the signification of the words used by the clergy to include the context of situation within which the utterance is made. For example, there is a shared knowledge among the parties that the clergy has the authority to solemnize the wedding based on the fact he has been authorised to do so within some religious institutional framework, considering the fact that he is the reverend in charge of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ Nasarawa Gwong, Jos. Any attempt by any individual who has not been authorised and ordained within such religious institutional framework to solemnize the wedding will therefore, render the wedding solemnization null and void, and an exercise in futility. It is obvious from the discussion thus far, that the illocutionary force of an utterance is a product of the “connection between the notion of speech acts, what the speaker means, what the speaker intends, what the hearer understands, and what the rules governing the linguistic elements are”.(Searle 21)

As it would be expected, saying something will often produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the hearer - it is such an act of producing some effects on the hearer that Austin calls the perlocutionary act. The perlocutionary act or effect of the illocutionary acts employed in wedding solemnizations lies in the conviction among all the parties to the contract that a marriage contract has been sealed and concluded, as illustrated by signing and presentation of marriage certificate. The signing of the marriage certificate presupposes that the intended perlocutionary effect has been achieved. If the parties were to be in doubt as to the success or otherwise of the perlocutionary effect intended by the illocutionary acts, it is believed that they would not have signed the wedding certificate.

### **Conclusion**

Language is indispensable to human existence as every facet of human endeavour finds its existence and expression in the use of it. The linguistic choices made by the language users from a range of linguistic possibilities are, to a large extent, conditioned by the communication needs. This implies the existence of certain peculiarities in the use of language by individuals who find themselves in different fields of human endeavours. These peculiarities are often accentuated and conditioned by the context of situation. It is clear from the discussion thus far that Christian wedding vows are not mere descriptive statements but illocutionary acts (commissives and declarations), the explication of which should be necessarily related to acts of social performance, deducible from the context of situation.

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