Liturgical Language – Register and Speech Acts

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Two aspects of language that have received recent attention from linguists are the ideas of **register** and **speech acts**. These have relevance for liturgical use.

REGISTER

1. In the church, people have often talked about two styles of liturgical language, 'formal' and 'informal'. However, the situation is actually much more complex than that. It is possible to classify many different levels of language, often called **registers**.

2. Registers are defined as language varieties or levels associated with different situations of use. (Some writers define 'register' slightly differently, and some use other words such as style, level, or variety to mean much the same thing as is here meant by register.)

3. Register can vary according to the language activities, addressees, topics, and settings. Examples:
Activities: chatting to a friend, leaving a message to a stranger on an answering machine, delivering a sermon, writing a novel, writing a report
Addressees: a close friend, a stranger, the Queen, a child, a person of the opposite sex
Topics: football, theology, law, politics, food
Settings: in a courtroom, with friends in a pub, on a TV panel, giving a child a bath, in a cathedral

4. Register can vary in aspects of language such as vocabulary, pronunciation, meaning, and grammar. Examples:
Vocabulary: intoxicated / under the influence / drunk / plastered / pissed
Pronunciation: 'do you want to?' / ''j'wanna?'
Meaning: Stephen was *stoned* by the angry crowd / the druggie was *stoned* out of his mind
Grammar: the person with whom we went / the person (who) we went with

5. Registers can vary according to the geographical region, occupation, gender, age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status of the speaker or writer. They can be formal or informal, literary or colloquial, written or spoken.

6. Registers have various dimensions. Speech 'texts' (written or spoken) can be plotted on various register continuums, eg from personally involved to informational, and from narrative to non-narrative.

7. The *personally involved* to *informational* continuum

Linguistic features characteristic of personally involved texts:
– first- and second-person pronouns (I, me, we, us; you)
– psychological verbs (think, consider, assume)
– demonstratives (this, that, these)
– emphatics (really, for sure)
– hedges (kind of, more or less, maybe)
– sentence relatives (then he got angry, *which* upset her a lot)

Linguistic features characteristic of informational texts:
– frequent nouns and prepositions
– longer words
– lexical variety
– attributive adjectives (the *tall* tree)

Linguistic texts can be placed at various points along this continuum. For example, phone and face-to-face conversations are at the personally involved end of the scale and official documents at the informational end, with personal letters more towards the middle (but still personally involved), fiction and broadcasts in the middle, and biographies more towards the informational end.

8. The *narrative* to *non-narrative* continuum

Linguistic features characteristic of narrative texts:
– past tense verbs
– third-person pronouns
– non-private verbs (admit, say, write, explain)
– verb phrases with *have* (as in *have seen*)

Linguistic features characteristic of non-narrative texts:
– present tense verbs
– attributive adjectives

Again, linguistic texts can be placed at various points along this continuum. For example, romantic fiction is at the narrative end of the scale and official documents and broadcasts are at the non-narrative end, with face-to-face conversation in the middle and phone conversations more towards the non-narrative end.

9. Similarly, other dimensions can be added, and these can all be combined to create a multidimensional space. Every text can then be placed somewhere in this space according to its register.

10. Some questions to consider: Where do liturgical texts fit in? How about praise and adoration? general prayer? eucharistic prayer? performative declarations like absolution and blessing? (See below.) Probably liturgical texts have been seen as primarily informational and non-narrative, but 'we' and 'you' are used (personally involved characteristics), and there are narrative elements …

11. The (somewhat vague) continuum of formal to informal has often been referred to in respect to liturgy. It may be worth considering other dimensions, eg spoken to written, literary to colloquial, one addressee to large audience, private to public situation, relationship (closeness) of speaker to addressee(s), age/generation of addressee(s). Which linguistic choices, then, are most appropriate? Remember that usually in the liturgy a wide range of people are being addressed and are participating.

SPEECH ACTS

1. Linguists recognise that people *do* things through language, and they do more than just communicate ideas. The actions that are carried out through language are called **speech acts**.

2. This insight has important implications for liturgical language and actions. What the LCA Commission on Worship has sometimes called 'performative utterances' (after the pioneer in this area, John Austin) are here called declarations (see the list immediately below).

3. Various kinds of speech acts can be listed. For example:
Representatives represent a state of affairs, such as assertions, statements, claims, hypotheses, descriptions, and suggestions. These are generally either true of false. Eg 'He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.'
Commissives commit a speaker to a course of action, such as promises, pledges, threats, and vows. Eg 'I promise to be faithful to you.'
Directives are intended to get the addressee to carry out an action, such as commands, requests, challenges, invitations, entreaties, and dares. Eg 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.'
Declarations bring about the state of affairs they name, such as blessings, firings, baptisms, arrests, marrying, and dismissing a case. (It's interesting that half the

examples here, all of which are taken the university Linguistics textbook given as reference below, are liturgical.) Eg 'The Lord bless you and keep you.'
Expressives indicate the speaker's psychological state or attitude, such as greetings, apologies, congratulations, condolences, and thanksgivings. Eg 'We praise you, we bless you.'
Verdictives make assessments or judgments, such as ranking, assessing, appraising, and condoning. These are sometimes called *representational declarations.* Eg 'That was a good service!'

4. In discussing speech acts, the terms *locutions*, *illocutions*, and *perlocutions* are useful.

The *locution* is the utterance act itself, represented by a sentence with a grammatical structure and meaning. Eg 'It's raining.'
The *illocution* is the intention, what the speaker intends to accomplish in making the utterance. Every utterance consists of performing one or more illocutionary acts. Eg, depending on context, the illocutionary force of 'It's raining' may be to inform the hearer, to direct a child to stay indoors, or to give thanks for the end of a drought.
The *perlocution* is the effect of the utterance on the hearer, its 'uptake'. Eg, for 'It's raining', any of the above (or other possibilities).

Consider the speech act 'Can you shut the window?' The locution is a yes/no question about the addressee's ability to close a particular window. The illocution, presumably, is a request for the addressee to shut the window. Successful communication requires the perlocution to be the same as the illocution, whatever the particular locution. (Speech acts like this example have been called 'wimperatives'.)

5. A particular locution can serve different functions (as in the example above, 'It's raining'). We recognise the illocutionary force of a particular utterance by context, and we interpret context by certain conventions called *appropriateness conditions*: the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition.

The *propositional content condition* requires that the words of the sentence be conventionally associated with the speech act intended, eg 'I declare them to be husband and wife'.
The *preparatory condition* requires a conventionally recognised context, eg a genuine wedding ceremony (not a game or a film set).
The *sincerity condition* requires the speaker to be sincere, eg the marriage celebrant must intend the marriage words to effect the marriage.

The *essential condition* requires for example the involved parties to intend by this ceremony and the utterance of the words to create a marriage bond.

6. A question to consider: In the liturgy there are obviously representatives (assertions, statements) and declarations (performative utterances, like absolution and blessing); which parts of the liturgy are other speech acts such as commissives (promises), directives (commands, challenges, invitations), and expressives (greetings, thanksgivings)?

7. Note that an illocution is not necessarily tied to one particular locution. To be more specific, declarations (performative utterances) may have different grammatical forms. They may be indicative (I forgive you all your sins), subjunctive ((May) the Lord bless you), imperative (Go in peace), or even just a phrase (In the name of the Father ...) or a word (an umpire's 'Out!'). Appropriateness conditions have to be satisfied for them to actually be declarations. In the liturgy, are the locutions the best ones, and are the appropriateness conditions met, for the declarations to be successful speech acts?

For example, it seems that in secular life most declarations are in indicative form ('I open this building' / 'I declare this building open', rather than 'May this building be open' or 'Be open!'). Would it help for our blessings to be expressed in indicative form, eg 'The Lord blesses ...' or 'The Lord is blessing ...' or 'I declare to you that the Lord blesses ...', or to be preceded by an imperative: 'Receive the blessing of the Lord'? How about the invocation?

One problem is that the perlocution (the uptake) is quite likely different for informed church-goers than it is for uninformed church-goers and different again for those who have rarely been to church. Appropriate actions (orientation, raised arms, sign of the cross) help reinforce the illocution (the intention), as do instruction and 'inculturation'.

Main reference: *Language: Its Structure and Use*, Edward Finegan et al, Australian edition 1992