Speech acts in the liturgy
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A schoolboy comes home and throws his hat on the floor and enters the kitchen. His mother says to him, 'How many times have I told you to hang your hat up?'

Consider what the mother says. Grammatically her *sentence* is a question, asking for information. But her *intention* is presumably a request or directive, telling her son to hang up his hat now and to remember next time. If his *uptake* is as she intends and he goes back and hangs his hat up, especially with some sort of apology, she has successfully performed a *speech act*. However, if he responds, 'Oh, about six times', he is probably either being cheeky or is one of that minority of people who have poor communication skills and tend to understand things literally. In the latter case the son's uptake of the mother's utterance is different from her intention.

Speech acts

Philosophers and 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**.[1] This concept may help us in appreciating what happens in the liturgy.

Various kinds of speech acts have been classified. *Representatives* represent a state of affairs, eg 'He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.' Generally true or false, they may be assertions, statements, or descriptions. *Commissives,* such as promises, vows, and threats, commit a speaker to doing something, eg 'I promise to be faithful to you.' *Directives* try to direct someone to carry out an action, such as requests, commands, and invitations, eg 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.' *Expressives* express a speaker's feelings or thoughts, such as greetings, good wishes, regrets, and thanks, eg 'We praise you, we bless you.' *Verdictives* pass verdicts or judgments, eg 'That was a good service!'

Finally **declarations** (which I want to concentrate on particularly) actually bring about a change or state. They are performative; they do or perform what they say, eg 'The Lord bless you and keep you'. Examples are blessings, firings, baptisms, arrests, marrying, and dismissing a case.[2] Declarations are what the Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) has

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[1] Most of the information here about speech acts is from ch 9 of *Language: Its Structure and Use*, Edward Finegan et al, Australian edition 1992, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney. Different authors use varying terminology.
[2] It is worth noting that half these examples of declarations, all from the university Linguistics textbook *Language*, are liturgical.

sometimes called 'performative utterances', after the pioneer in this area, the philosopher John Austin.[3]

As we can see by the opening example above, when someone says or writes something (the utterance), we can distinguish between the grammatical sentence (the *locution*), the intention of the utterance (the *illocution*), and the uptake (the *perlocution*). Every time we utter something we are performing one or more illocutionary acts, ie we have one or more intentions to be put into effect. The speech act is successful when the uptake is the same as the intention. We can also note that for any particular kind of speech act, the grammatical form as well as the words can vary. For example, a performative declaration could 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!').

How then can we as a hearer know the intention of the speaker if the grammatical structure of the sentence doesn't tell us? How do we know we are hearing a performative declaration, and not just say a statement of fact or opinion or a pious wish? The answer is that we recognise the declaration (or any speech act) by the context in which it is spoken. And we interpret the context according to certain customs or conventional usages, certain conditions.

For example, we recognise that a certain utterance is really a blessing and effective because the words are spoken in the liturgy (not say in a play) by an ordained pastor (not just anyone) authorised to take the service (he's not just a chance visitor), said at the appropriate time (not as a quote in the middle of the sermon) with the intention of pronouncing a blessing. Certain conditions are met – and these are accepted usages or customs which can vary in different places and at different times. For most of us the pastor would be known to us as the official pastor, he would be recognisable by his liturgical vestment, he would stand, he would face the congregation, and he would accompany his words with certain gestures and perhaps either sing the words or use a particular tone of voice. We would also recognise the words as part of the liturgy and based on Scripture. In other words, the blessing would be real because of the authority behind the utterance.

A problem is that different people may well have different uptakes of parts of the liturgy, because they come from a variety of backgrounds and have various

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[3] John Austin, 1962, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press. The significance of performative utterances for worship was brought to the attention of the Commission by John Kleinig in the 1990s.

accepted conventions. So, are the context and conditions for various parts of the liturgy always the most appropriate for the latter to be successful speech acts for the majority of the worshippers?

The liturgy

By 'liturgy' here I mean the inherited overall structure or shape of the communion service, not any particular music or wording or fixed number of parts. In a 'doing' of the liturgy we have a gathering of people on a certain occasion in a certain place, activities by pastor and people, music, the visual environment (architecture, furnishings, colour, art etc), and gestures and movements. These all form part of the context for the words.

We also have the level or style of language used, called *register*. Register in speaking and writing can vary according to such aspects as the status of the speaker, the person or people being addressed (eg generation, gender and number), the topics, the settings, and the particular kind of speech act. People often change register in their speaking and writing without consciously thinking about it. A pastor doesn't normally use the same style or register, for example, when chatting to people before a service as when addressing the congregation in the sermon, and both of these usually differ from the register used in a blessing. Registers can vary from being personally involved to being more information-giving, from literary to colloquial, from private to public, from narrative to non-narrative. And each level has its own distinguishing characteristics, such as differing vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and tone of voice. One peculiarity of the liturgy is that, while it is spoken, most of it is also written and repeated week after week.

The divine service could be said to be a series of connected speech acts in orderly progression. For example, the absolution follows the confession of sins, and the distribution follows the words of institution. Such a series of connected speech acts is called a *speech event*. So the liturgy as a whole is a speech event, and so are parts within it, like the sermon and the prayer of the church.

The liturgy includes all the different kinds of speech acts listed above (commissives, declarations etc). And it is worth noting that representatives, statements of information, are probably in a minority; other kinds of speech act are more common. Although words are used in the liturgy, they are most often words that do things other than merely give information. We have promises, directives, commissives and expressives, and especially performative declarations. Most importantly, we believe that *God acts* through the ritual acts of

word and sacrament. So for the service to be effective, it has to be more than a collection of theologically correct statements. Let's have a closer look at a few of its parts.

In the name …

The so-called invocation is a strange locution. It is not even a complete sentence; it has no verb; it's just a phrase. What is its intention? In the past some liturgical teachers understood the invocation to be virtually a prayer, calling on God, as the name *invocation* implies. So the speech act was understood to be a directive, a request addressed to God. But now we understand it to be more a performative declaration. God is declaring and making himself present and putting his *name* (himself) on the people.[4] We are placed under God's banner.[5] It's a bit like an imperial explorer planting the flag and saying, 'In the name of the King'.

If the intention of liturgical experts has not always been consistent, what about the uptake of ordinary worshippers? The words are simple enough, but there's usually no immediate verbal context. So pastors have sometimes added to these words, making them into a complete sentence. But then often the kind of speech act is changed.

Eg **M:** We begin our service in the name …
Now the utterance is probably a representative, a statement about what is happening, not a performative declaration. (It is now also *our* act rather than God's, and it narrows the application to the here and now, just this event.)
or **M:** Let's worship in the name …
Now it's a form of directive, not addressed to God but a challenge or invitation to the people.
or **C:** We (begin our) worship in the name …
Now perhaps it's a commissive, expressing an undertaking by the people.

How then can we try to ensure that the intention (performative declaration) becomes the uptake for most worshippers? The context and appropriate conditions are important. For example, there is the nonverbal context, such as the ongoing liturgical and baptismal teaching; the orientation (facing the congregation, stepping forward); the manner of delivery (looking deliberately at

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[4] cf Numbers 6:27, the Aaronic blessing, where the Lord says, 'So the priests shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.'
[5] cf 'St Patrick's Breastplate', 'I bind unto myself this day the strong name of the Trinity …', eg *Together in Song* 478.

the congregation, slowing down, chanting or speaking deliberately); and gesture (the raised hand, the sign of the cross).

But if it is felt that the intended speech act may still not be successful, we could look at the form of words used. We could use other words that do the same thing, eg as suggested in the *LCA Worship Resources* disk.[6] Or we could add words for clarification.
Eg Welcome – *[pause]* in the name …[7]
or Welcome to all of you – in the name …
or God (himself) is present. Welcome – in the name …
or varied according to the Sunday (eg Advent 1) The Lord is coming soon. So, welcome – in the name …
or Receive the sign of the holy cross. In the name … *(perhaps preceded by an initial sentence)*
In this last suggestion[8] 'the sign of the cross' clearly bases the invocation on baptism. The declaration is introduced with an imperative, which is often used for declarations and makes the declaration more deliberate.

Confession of sins

After the invitation to confess (a directive), the confession is an expressive, expressing our attitude of repentance and confession, and a commissive, indicating an intention and pledge to do better. The questions following are directives, challenging us in faith and action, and our responses are commissives.

Although the general confession is a ritual formula, spoken in unison, it is still personal. The act is both communal and individual. So the register needs to be suitable for unison speaking, with good flow and rhythm, being more spoken language, not literary. It needs to be personal – fairly direct, with some specific details, neither heavy nor casual.

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[6] *LCA Worship Resources,* Commission on Worship, 2002, in the document 'General notes and resources', under 'Liturgy: Opening the service'.
[7] This and the next three examples build on the cultural expectation of a welcome at the beginning of a gathering, but turn it around to emphasise that it is God's congregation here and God's service, rather than ours, and God does the welcoming. These forms would need to be clearly distinguished from any general announcements beforehand, and would probably work best if the invocation is spoken.
[8] From Adam Cooper.

Perhaps the wordings in the Service with Communion and the Alternative Form are rather too literary, at least for most present-day Australians.[9] The sentences are long; there is the long inserted phrase in 'I ask you, for the sake of the holy innocent sufferings and death of your dear Son Jesus Christ, to be …' The language is repetitive and flowery: 'gracious and merciful'; 'so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name'.[10] Dignity and scriptural allusion need to be balanced against directness and perceived relevance.

The general confessions provided are perhaps also too abstract for many; hence the attempt from time to time to elaborate with specific sins – which of course has the danger that they may not apply to all worshippers. Perhaps, at least sometimes, we need some categories briefly listed, for example based on the Ten Commandments or according to the Sunday or season or some current event or concern.

Eg, **C:** Heavenly Father, we confess that we have been sinful from the time of our birth. And each day we have sinned in many ways.
M: Not loving and trusting you with our whole heart … *[pause]*
Not keeping holy your name and your word …
Not honouring people you've placed in authority over us …
Not helping other people in all their needs …
Not being pure …
Not respecting the property of others …
Not upholding people's reputations …
C: Have mercy and forgive us, because of your Son Jesus Christ.

In the questions after the confession, especially the third one where three phrases are piled up, the register could also be a little less literary and more like the spoken word. Perhaps something like 'Do you believe that Christ has made you holy, and do you want to be led by the Holy Spirit to live a holy life?' may work better (and it is closer in pattern to the other two questions).

Absolution

The absolution is a performative declaration. The wording we have makes this clear and the register is generally appropriate, especially the one in the

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[9] Perhaps the wording in the Alternative Form is more suitable in the USA, where most of it comes from and where the conventions of public and religious language are somewhat different from Australia.
[10] In Sing the Feast 2 this is deleted.

Alternative service, which is a little simpler. The authority is given and the act reinforced by orientation and the sign of the cross. But is it possible to get the congregation to look at the pastor instead of remaining with head bowed? Perhaps the congregation could stand for the absolution (after kneeling for the confession?). After all, this is dramatically gospel.

Readings

The words of introduction to the readings are directive – an invitation and challenge to hear and receive. The speech event of the readings as a whole is performative declaration. It's God's word, a means of grace. The *contents* of the readings can be any or all of the kinds of speech acts.

Can the intention of the act of the readings be made clearer? It seems to be often understood and received as a *passive* thing, simply a representative (instruction, statements, description), instead of dynamic and active and interactive (God speaking to and acting on the hearers). Hence perhaps the popular desire for a 'theme'; information can have a theme, but we don't usually talk about the theme of an action or a command or challenge.

Using the correct introductory rubric may help a little: 'The first reading is written in …' rather than 'The lesson comes from / can be found in …' The word 'lesson' can reinforce the idea of a classroom and instruction in factual knowledge; etymologically it simply means 'reading', but it is archaic and suggests a book culture. 'Written in' and 'the reading' in this context are more oral, requiring hearing, and suggest a dynamic performing or presenting and passing on of the authoritative word. Perhaps a formula like the following (similar to what used to be said years ago) may help: 'Hear the word of God written in …' This is a clear directive and statement of authority, and may encourage the congregation to *listen*,[11] which is not always easy to do; our minds tend to wander (rather than wonder), especially when a reading is familiar. The response 'This is the word of the Lord' can also help. But it should be spoken strongly instead of in a half-hearted perfunctory manner.

Standing for the gospel reinforces the intention of the reading of the gospel. A *gospel procession* could also be considered. But normally in Australian society it is probably most effective if done simply, so that it is not seen as pompous empty

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[11] 'Hear the word of the Lord' occurs throughout the OT prophets. Consider Ezekiel 37:1–14; if dead bones can come to life through hearing God's word, what can it achieve in his living redeemed people?

ceremonial. The pastor can pick up the Bible and carry it deliberately down into the nave and read from it there.[12]

The version of Scripture used can also make a difference; it needs to be clear and direct, but dignified, with a good rhythm.[13] How the reading is read can also have an effect on how it is received. It should be read fairly slowly and deliberately, neither boringly nor over-dramatically. It is not the reader's job to 'put meaning into' the reading, but rather to let the active word 'speak out' for itself. Readers should be capable of reading well aloud and understand the intention of the speech act of the readings, and the reading needs careful preparation and practice.

Sermon

The sermon as proclaimed word of God is performative declaration, but the whole speech event can include all kinds of speech acts. On the register continuum from 'personally involved' to 'informational', the sermon is generally more towards the 'personally involved' end than some sermons of years ago. So the register should be appropriate to this: not too literary, more suitable for speaking than writing, somewhat informal. Language of this kind tends to have short simple (even incomplete) sentences, verbs rather than abstract nouns and active rather than passive, sentences ending with prepositions when necessary (eg 'who it's intended for' rather than 'for whom it is intended'), personal pronouns I, we, you, and everyday vocabulary and examples. But some parts will have greater formality, eg directives and performative declarations.

Creed

The liturgical confession of the creed is primarily a commissive; we are declaring our allegiance to the Triune God. The representatives, statements of fact we believe to be true, are conditions supporting our commitment. It is this God, not one of the many other gods of the world, that we intend to follow – the God of 'the forgiveness of sins', who calls us as members of the 'one holy catholic and apostolic church' to live out his love in the world.

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[12] See *LCA Worship Resources*, document 'General notes and resources'.

[13] eg for most Australians, probably the NRSV is too heavy and literary, while *The Message* is too colloquial and American, and has poor rhythm for reading aloud – as well as being a sometimes unreliable paraphrase.

Prayer of the church

The prayer of the church is a speech event containing directives (requests to God), expressives (praise and thanksgiving), some commissives (intentions), and some representatives (items of information) – but preferably not many of the latter. The register needs to be suitable for fairly straightforward speech, rather than literary. For example, 'so (that) we love you' is preferable to the dated 'that we may love you'. But the language should not be colloquial, since the prayer is a communal act, led by Christ as head of the church. It is not an expression of personal feelings, but mainly requests of the church for and on behalf of the world.

Formulae for distribution

The formulae 'Take and eat, this is the body of Christ, given for you' and 'Take and drink, this is the blood of Christ, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins' contain directives followed by performative declarations. The words 'Take and eat/drink' *admit* us to the sacrament; the other words are God's word *announcing and bestowing* Christ's body and blood. The words are straightforward, the form and register are appropriate, and suitable conditions are met: the act normally follows the context of thanksgiving, cosmic adoration, the words of institution, and prayer, and is within the whole liturgical event (perhaps including seasonal prayers and words of invitation)[14]; and the act is performed by or under the direction of the pastor. So the authority for the declaration is clear.

(By contrast, consider the formulae in the worship book that King Friedrich Wilhelm III prepared for the Prussian Protestant churches in the early 1820s, objected to by the Old Lutherans, including Pastors Kavel and Fritzsche: 'Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ says: This is my body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' 'Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ says: This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you; do this in remembrance of me.' These words are of course scriptural and unobjectionable in the right context, but liturgically at this point, in the context of an attempt to unite the Reformed and Lutheran churches and have them worship together, they are not clearly performative declaration. They can easily be taken as merely representative, repeating the historical narrative, and leaving the uptake to the individuals according to their own confessional position.)

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[14] See suggestions in *LCA Worship Resources*, in document 'General notes and resources' and the seasonal documents.

Blessing

The concluding blessing in the divine service is a performative declaration. The actions accompanying it (part of the appropriate conditions) are important to ensure that the uptake of the congregation is as intended: orientation towards the congregation, perhaps moving forward, raising hands, chanting or speaking in a deliberate way, looking at the congregation, and making the sign of the cross.

The subjunctive form of the blessing may be a problem for some people, because the subjunctive is not used in English nowadays as often as it used to be. People who are not familiar with this formula may find it old-fashioned and its intention puzzling. Many performative declarations in everyday life (and some liturgical ones) are put in the indicative form, eg 'This building is now open' (not 'Be open') or 'I declare them to be husband and wife'. Perhaps the blessing could similarly be put in indicative form, eg 'The Lord blesses …' or 'The Lord is blessing …' or 'I declare to you that the Lord is blessing …' On the other hand, unless the conditions are right, indicating the authority, such formulations may be taken as representatives, giving us general information about what God does, rather than actually conveying the blessing here and now. Besides, the appropriate conditions of the blessing include the fact that it's a scriptural quotation and that it's used regularly as a ritual liturgical formula.

But it may help, at least sometimes, to add an introductory directive, eg 'Receive the blessing of the Lord' or 'Go with God's blessing and in his peace'.[15] This could also be prefaced with appropriate words from the day's propers, eg for Advent 1: 'Your salvation is near. Now go with/receive God's blessing. The Lord bless you …'

Concluding remarks

I'd like to make a few summary points:

• Perhaps some of the terminology about speech acts is new to many in our church. But what I've said about what happens in the divine service is not new. We know that God's word is active and effective. If human words actually do things, how much more does God's word. The word of God is at work in us believers (1 Thess 2:13); it is living and active (Heb 4:12); it accomplishes what God purposes (Isa 55:11). This happens in a special way in the divine service,

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[15] From Friedemann Hebart, in his officially approved popularised service order in his Bavarian church, 'Fest im Leben'.

particularly in acts like the invocation, the absolution, the readings and sermon, the distribution and dismissal, and the blessing. Luther emphasises this, eg when he talks about blessings being real and effective (including the absolution).[16] God acts through the words and actions of Christ's body the church.

• I have highlighted just some of the important liturgical elements, especially performative ones where God is acting. Various performative declarations could also make real for us in our daily lives the seasonal events of Christ's coming and incarnation, his suffering and sacrifice, his resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And our praise, prayer, and self-offering responses can be done in all kinds of creative ways – as long as they are real doing and not just talking about it.

• The sign of the cross made by the pastor reinforces the acts of performative declaration. It graphically conveys Christ's authority, his action and name. If people also cross themselves at the same points in the liturgy, they physically appropriate the blessing for themselves.[17]

•All people have and need ritual and speech acts. Liturgical speech acts should speak for themselves, and not be replaced by instruction or explanations. But the acts are not automatic or magic; the right conditions are important, particularly the authority to perform the acts and our faith that we receive what God promises.

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[16] See LW 5, pp 140ff.

[17] Although this ancient Christian act (used and advocated also by Luther) is not used widely in the LCA, I can personally vouch for blessings it brings. Since having finally overcome my hesitancy to cross myself in the service, I find that it helps to bring these acts of God to life for me; at the least, it helps me focus on what is happening.