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Speech Acts In Religious Discourse And Their Pragmatic Functions

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Abstract: This article analyzes speech acts in religious discourse and their pragmatic functions based on a linguopragmatic approach. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of scholars such as J. Austin, J. Searle, G. Leech, and T. van Dijk, the study reveals the characteristics of the realization of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in religious speech. Through illustrative examples, the moral-philosophical, normative, emotive, appellative, and identificational functions of speech acts in religious discourse are examined, and their communicative significance in strengthening faith and shaping religious consciousness is substantiated.

Introduction: According to its methodological status, speech act theory, which has developed into a distinct field within anthropocentric theory, is a phenomenon formed on the basis of a philosophical view of language, and its core essence is closely related to speech phenomena. In essence, the issues addressed by speech act theory lie at the center of a number of relatively new branches of linguistics, such as psycholinguistics, pragmalinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, communicative syntax, rhetoric, and semiotics.

One of the promising directions in the study of speech is linguistic pragmatics, which examines speech activity from the perspective of identifying the interrelationship between the use of linguistic units and the communicative goals of speakers. From this perspective, the forms of speech etiquette that express verbal interaction between individuals constitute the object of study of linguopragmatics. The development of this field in the second half of the twentieth century is closely associated with the formation of speech act theory during this period as a linguo-philosophical doctrine.

The introduction of the concept of the speech act into linguistics was grounded in the views of the American scholar and founder of pragmatics, C. S. Peirce, who regarded language as a logical-philosophical category. A speech act is considered a purposeful speech action carried out in accordance with the principles and rules of verbal behavior accepted within a particular society. It is evident that a speech act is a purposeful communicative action carried out in accordance with linguistic behavioral norms and encompasses three components: the speaker (addresser), the listener (addressee), and the speech situation. A speech act arises when an individual communicates through words or expresses the intention to perform an action via speech. The issues related to speech acts and the means of shaping speech initially appear in the linguistic concepts of scholars such as W. Humboldt, S. Ball, S. Kartsevsky, L. P. Yakubinsky, K. L. Bulsra, E. Benveniste, M. M. Bakhtin, and others.

The first systematically developed theory of speech acts was formulated by L. Wittgenstein, who proposed the idea that speech serves various purposes and must be analyzed inseparably from its speaker. He explained this concept using the notion of "language games." Representatives of the linguistic philosophy school, including J. Austin and J. R. Searle, further developed these foundations by building on the ideas of L. Wittgenstein, C. S. Peirce, and his most prominent follower in semiotics, C. Morris, thus formulating the

theory of pragmatic functions. Their research interprets language as a form of action.

For a long time, the speech act has been considered a unit of pragmatic analysis. Within this theory, the object of study is the speech act itself—that is, the purposeful verbal action performed by a speaker addressing a listener in a specific communicative context in accordance with the accepted principles and norms of verbal behavior. The foundations of this theory were developed by the English

philosopher J. Austin and American scholars J. Searle and G. Gris. They were the first to emphasize that stating an idea is not merely the transmission of information but can also perform a variety of actions, such as congratulating, persuading, warning, and more.

Finally, in the mid-1950s, J. Austin formulated relatively complete criteria for speech acts. According to him, a unit of communication—a sentence or text—is not merely a message but can perform speech actions such as questioning, explaining, warning, describing, expressing gratitude, or regret. Austin elaborates on his ideas regarding speech acts in his work "How to Do Things with Words." At the beginning of the 20th century, the study of speech development primarily focused on the role of linguistic units in the communication process, examining language as a system of potential signs intended mainly for storing and transmitting information. Speech was regarded as a purely individual verbal creation with specific communicative and stylistic orientations across various domains of human activity. For instance, expressions such as "I name it," "I apologize," "I congratulate you," "I advise you to do this" do not convey any propositional content but merely indicate the performance of a certain action or express a promise, apology, or recommendation for carrying out that action.

According to Austin, in the English language there are over a thousand types of verbs that convey actions such as asserting, describing, warning, reminding, explaining, commanding, questioning, criticizing, apologizing, approving, greeting, promising, and expressing regret. Austin's contribution to speech act theory lies in his view of speech not as a conventional combination of generally recognized signs constructed according to certain phonetic, semantic, and syntactic rules to reflect situational reality, but as a product of the individual. He posits that the creation of words depends directly on the speaker—the subject producing the speech—emphasizing the role of personal qualities in the emergence of language.

Austin also stresses the central role of both the speaker and the listener in communication, asserting that the purpose of speech is not merely to transmit

factual information but to interpret it. He explains that a sentence does not simply "describe" the state of things or make a statement about a fact; rather, expressions used by people serve a variety of entirely different functions. As Austin states: "We can issue commands, apologize, make promises, speculate, warn someone, blame, greet—in short, we can perform various actions through language." Previously, language was considered to serve merely as a means of describing reality, while speech could only influence reality indirectly. According to Austin's theory, language not only describes reality but also performs actions, with intentionality and conditionality being recognized as fundamental characteristics of a speech act. Drawing on the famous ancient maxim of Solon, "A word is a deed," John Austin states: "The utterance of certain words in particular circumstances is equivalent to performing an action."

A speech act consists of three components: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. The locutionary act refers to the actual act of saying something—the utterance of a statement. The illocutionary act is the statement made with the intention of affecting the addressee; at this stage, the speaker's communicative intent is realized. The perlocutionary act represents the effect achieved as a result of performing the speech act; it is one of the levels of speech, whose outcome depends on the addressee. In some scholarly sources, the structure of speech acts is divided into four components: the act of speaking or pronouncing words—the locutionary act; the propositional content expressed through the utterance—the propositional or propositional act; the speaker's communicative intent or purpose—the illocutionary act; and the effect of the utterance on the listener—the perlocutionary act. Slightly different views on the structure of the speech act are found in J. Searle's works. He introduces a fourth component—the propositional act—into the scientific discourse on speech acts. Searle distinguished twelve parameters of speech acts and developed their classification.

He aimed to identify the rules governing speech acts and to describe the mechanisms by which a speaker's intention is conveyed to the listener during communication. Searle argued that the primary purpose of language is not to describe objects of reality but to perform purposeful actions. Consequently, he sought to answer the question, "What is meaning?" and ultimately concluded that a sentence or utterance performs an action. This was an important step in the functional approach to analyzing linguistic phenomena and enabled linguists to consider statements not in terms of truth or falsehood, but in terms of intention

and agreement.

Searle critically examined Austin's ideas on illocutionary acts and argued that this classification had not been fully completed. Building on the views of Austin and Searle, J. L. Leech developed a classification of speech actions from the perspective of the politeness principle. As a criterion, he distinguished the moral-ethical dimension of speech acts, highlighting the degree of politeness in their performance. Many scholars have criticized existing classifications of speech acts for their abstract nature, detachment from real social contexts, and failure to account for numerous relevant parameters. Consequently, while noting the various difficulties that arise when analyzing the interactive processes of speech, several researchers have emphasized that this theory requires not merely modification but a fundamental reconstruction. Among these scholars are T. A. Van Dijk, J. Leech, S. Levinson, J. Mey, I. A. Bezmenova, and V. I. Gerasimov.

One such scholar, D. Frank, explains why speech act theory is insufficient as the primary conceptual framework for constructing a pragmatic theory of oral communication.

Nevertheless, the analysis of speech acts continues to be a pressing issue within the field of pragmatics. I. A. Bezmenova and V. I. Gerasimov, building on existing theories of speech acts, examine the ritualized forms of greetings. T. A. Van Dijk was among the first to attempt to describe the interconnection of speech acts. He emphasizes that the coherence of speech is a necessary condition for communication and stresses that the outcomes of preceding speech acts must create essential conditions for subsequent ones. He considers the reason for the interconnection of speech acts in the communication process to lie in the fact that communication is formed on the basis of linguistic units, and that the occurrence of such connected propositions and illocutions constitutes an essential requirement. He also explains that in the sequence of speech acts, the illocutionary content occupies a central position. T. A. Van Dijk refers to this phenomenon as the "macro speech act." Another linguist who criticized the concept of the speech act is J. Mey. According to him, the classical theory of speech acts focuses primarily on identifying types of speech acts and establishing "rules." He notes: "The concept of a speech act presupposes stable 'formulas' of communication reinforced by speech etiquette; however, not all speech actions conform to stereotypes. Within the dynamics of interpersonal interactions, there exist communicative goals for which it is not possible to identify a specific speech act within a given classification." It is impossible to discuss the

role of speech act theory within pragmalinguistics without addressing both its recognition as a theory that demonstrates and substantiates the systemic properties of speech phenomena and its existing shortcomings. The limitations of this theory have been consistently noted by researchers. In 1980, at a conference held in Urbino, the German linguist Dorothea Frank presented a lecture titled "Seven Sins of Pragmatics." She aimed to demonstrate that speech act theory does not provide a sufficiently robust methodological framework for constructing a pragmatic theory of oral communication. I would like to briefly highlight some of the seven "sins" she identified.

The first limitation is related to the separation of a speech act from the general flow of discourse, as it remains unclear what precisely constitutes the isolated unit—whether it is a single sentence or a sequence of sentences. Moreover, a single unit of speech—the sentence—may simultaneously encompass multiple acts, such as locution, reference, and predication.

The second limitation of speech act theory lies in its inability to fully account for interactive actions in communication. The classification and labeling of speech acts based on performative expressions somewhat restricts the scope of analysis, leaving smaller units used by interlocutors—such as idioms or parenthetical remarks—unexamined.

The third and perhaps greatest "sin," according to Frank, is that speech act theory does not align with the principle of interaction, which underlies the analysis of the system of verbal communication. I fully agree with this view. Communication presupposes the reciprocal activity of participants—the communicants. Isolated speech acts, however, remain one-sided, reflecting only the action performed by the speaker. Yet the meaning of speech units is co-constructed; without this collaboration, mutual understanding and successful communication would be impossible.

The fourth limitation arises directly from the third. Because speech acts are not analyzed within the framework of interaction, the isolated units remain static. As a result, the dynamic nature and strategic structure of communication are neglected. Considering communicative units as completed processes is inadequate because communication is an ongoing, fluid activity in which the goals and reflections of the participants are constantly evolving.

The next three limitations concern the treatment of the communicative environment or context. Advocates of speech act theory tend to approach context not as a fundamental source of meaning and content, but as a secondary concept, functioning merely as a "saving anchor." Such an approach leaves unresolved the

relationship between semantic and pragmatic meaning. While it is important to note that the linguistic content of a proposition is not its sole foundation, the integration of propositional and illocutionary meaning into a single coherent structure remains unaddressed. Without resolving this, it is impossible to fully understand or illuminate the essence of linguistic meaning. Linguistic analysis should not merely identify the existence of a phenomenon, but also describe its features, clarify its characteristics, and explain its function.

Every uttered sentence is not merely a conveyance of information, but also the performance of an action. Speech acts are generally divided as follows:

Type of Speech Act

Description

Locutionary act

Simple utterance (conveying information)

Illocutionary act

Expressing intention through speech (commands, requests, giving advice)

Perlocutionary act

Exerting influence on the listener (persuasion, warning, encouragement)

Speech Acts in Religious Discourse

a) Locutionary acts: conveying religious knowledge, such as reciting Qur'anic verses or narrating Hadiths.

Example: "Allah is forgiving."

b) Illocutionary acts: commands and instructions—perform prayers, consume lawful (halal) food. Invitations (da'wah) to Islam or to goodness, and supplications (du'a), asking or pleading to Allah.

Examples: "Perform the prayer." – a command act. "May Allah guide you." – a supplication act.

c) Perlocutionary acts: encouragement, urging repentance, reinforcing faith.

Example: Tears appearing in the eyes of a listener during a sermon—this is a perlocutionary effect.

Pragmatic Functions of Speech Acts in Religious Discourse

Function Type   Description

Ethical-philosophical

Promoting values such as goodness, patience, and forgiveness

Normative-regulative

Defining halal and haram, conveying religious rules and laws

Emotive (affective)

Influencing emotional state, strengthening faith

Appellative (regulatory)

Inviting specific actions (prayers, charity)

Identificational

Helping individuals understand themselves through religion

Analysis through Examples

Text (Utterance)   Type of Speech Act Pragmatic Function

"Allah loves his servants."   Locutionary Ethical-philosophical

"Do not commit adultery."   Illocutionary Normative-regulative

"O Allah, forgive us!"   Illocutionary Emotive / Appellative

"Paradise is for the righteous."   Locutionary Identificational / Emotive

"Be patient, this too shall pass."   Perlocutionary Encouraging (emotive)

Speech acts in religious discourse are not merely informative; they perform multiple functions: strengthening faith, providing moral education, and encouraging religious practices. Through these acts, speakers influence listeners, nurture them spiritually, and foster religious consciousness in society.

Applications and Perspectives:

Linguistics and Pragmatics: Analysis of speech acts reveals context and speaker intention, such as how commands, requests, and promises produce social effects.

Analytical Approaches: Based on Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1979), speeches, sermons, and dialogue texts can be analyzed.

Religious Contexts: Expressions of speech acts vary in Qur'anic oaths, Muslim and Christian sermons, and ritual phrases.

The semantic and lexical structures of speech acts are fully understood only in the context of discourse or textual meaning. Clearly, speech acts emerge from the interactional relationships between speakers within a discourse or text. Therefore, speech acts are a product of the communicative process and must be studied as contextual phenomena. Since communicants vary, the process of communication differs as well. This explains why speech acts may appear in the forms of promises, commands, messages, warnings, gratitude, requests, threats, etc. Similarly, religious oaths manifest a variety of speech acts because they arise from the interaction of communicants with differing social statuses in a particular communicative situation.

In modern linguistics, language is increasingly viewed not merely as a logical system but also as a form of social activity. Speech act theory fills this gap. For instance, a statement on social media like "We will no longer remain silent" might be formally evaluated as a simple declaration. However, from the perspective of speech act theory, this statement carries an illocutionary force calling for social action and a perlocutionary effect aimed at mobilizing public attention. Thus, speech acts represent an effective approach that extends beyond the narrow scope of linguistics and can be applied across multiple fields.

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