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## THE CHURCH SERVICE AS AN INSTITUTIONAL SPEECH EVENT

### Abstract

This paper explores the church service as a formal institutionalized speech event through a sociolinguistic lens, focusing on its structural, functional, and communicative components. A church service, particularly in the Christian tradition, represents a complex ritualized form of group communication, where verbal and nonverbal behavior follows highly predictable patterns and is governed by established norms and constraints. Within this context, special attention is given to the speech event of Confirmation, which is one of the most significant pastoral acts. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that such a service consists of a sequence of interrelated micro-events and speech acts, including hymns, prayers, benedictions, sermons, readings, and ritual responses. The study identifies key components such as participants, setting, message form and content, interactional rules, and sociocultural factors shaping communicative behavior.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the key scientists writing in this domain, the paper emphasizes the relevance of communicative competence, religious knowledge, social awareness, and interactional skills in understanding how members of a church community perform and interpret speech acts within a liturgical setting. The communicative behavior of communicants is contrasted with that of marginal outsiders or visitors, highlighting how access to shared cultural and linguistic codes influences the ability to participate meaningfully in the service. The study also underlines the role of enculturation, shared schemata, and ritual repetition in maintaining the cohesion and continuity of the religious group. By deconstructing the Confirmation rite as a microcosm of church discourse, this paper illustrates how institutional rituals serve both spiritual and social functions, reinforcing group identity and belief systems through language.

**Keywords:** communication, religious discourse, interaction, speech event, interactional frame, church service, communicants.

### Анотація

Сучасна лінгвістика охоплює як теоретичні, так і практичні дослідження різних рівнів мовної системи. Серед інтерпретаційних підходів особливу увагу приділено дискурсивному аналізу, у межах якого виокремлюється новий погляд на мовленнєву комунікацію співрозмовників і їхню вербальну й невербальну взаємодію. Інтерактивна діяльність потрапляє у фокус інтересів дискурс-аналітиків, зосереджених на вивченні типів дискурсу, видів мовленнєвої діяльності, які номінуються суспільством більш прийнятною категорією мовленнєвих подій. У пропонованій статті розглянуто мовленнєву подію церковної служби, яку описано з позицій лінгвістичної антропології, етнографії та етнометодології спілкування. Церковна служба тут розуміється як категорійна одиниця, що має впізнавальні межі початку й кінця, складається з низки фіксованих компонентів, об'єднаних єдиною темою, метою і результатами події, та номінується назвами пропозиціональної семантики.

Описано мовленнєву подію церковної служби як соціолінгвістичний феномен, метою якого є дослідити особливості мовленнєвої поведінки причасників, тобто оцерковлених вірян, та звичайних парафіян в інституціональному контексті. Аналіз спирається на категорії, що застосовуються у вивченні мовленнєвих подій: ролі учасників, налаштування (сетинг), форму і зміст повідомлень, правила взаємодії, соціальні норми. Інституціоналізована релігійна служба – важлива типова риса комунікативної ситуації як складника соціальної системи групи людей, які регулярно відвідують церковну службу і знають, як себе поводити і що говорити впродовж служби. У статті конкретно й докладно розглянуто складники церковної служби, послідовність мовленнєвих актів з боку

причасників і звичайних парафіян, а також ритуалізованість і передбачуваність вербальної й невербальної поведінки в цьому контексті.

**Ключові слова:** комунікація, релігійний дискурс, інтеракція, мовленнєва подія, компоненти мовленнєвої події, інтеракційний фрейм, церковна служба.

**Introduction.** A great many theoretical and practical studies have been carried out on different levels of language. Against the background of various interpretative approaches, special attention is focused on discourse analysis. It is within the framework of discourse analysis that a new insight into the verbal interaction has been undertaken. Discourse analysts have become more and more interested in interactional parent-child, doctor-patient, teacher-student discourse, everyday talks, verbal duelling among black youth and other types of discourse (Dijk, 1998). Types of discourse, or to use another terminology, that is activity types (Levinson, 2005), are actually speech events into which communication in the society tends to be categorized. Speech events here are used in the sense suggested and widely discussed by Hymes (1972) in his papers on the ethnography of communication. Our main assumptions here are that speech events have well recognizable boundaries, different norms of communicators' behaviour appropriate for each kind and special names in the system of language lexicon.

Communication is a multifaceted speech activity which is of great concern of foreign and home scholars interested in social speech behaviour, socio-rhetorical forms, speech events and genres as ideological carriers. The **topicality** of the research of the types of speech activity is of prime importance nowadays as it raises innumerable problems pertaining to their definition, ideational differences, functional properties, and discursive peculiarities. The **aim of this study** is to investigate one of the social activities, namely a speech event of the church service from an anthropological, pragmalinguistic and discursive perspective. Thus, the church service is the **object** of the study whereas its **subject-matter** is the institutionalized features viewed functionally and interactionally. **Methodologically**, this research is a continuation of the previous research of the types of social activities. **Methods** of anthropological and discursive analyses were used to find out the specificity of man, especially of varieties of language closely associated with the setting / scene, behavioral and cultural characteristics, distribution, religious customs, social relationships within the society. The **empirical material** of the research was collected while visually observing church ceremonies in Washington National Cathedral, Mount Saint Alban, Washington, D.C.

**Results and discussion.** To analyze a speech event, one must deal with discrete linguistic units, or types of speech activities. These compulsory units, according to Hymes (1972, p. 51), are *situation* and *speech event*, each of which is characterized by the constituent factors and functions of speech. He also terms a *speech event* as “an *act of speech*”, but it is quite different from a *speech act* in its traditional understanding in pragmatics as originated by Austin (2002). Communication situations represent an open list of everyday encounters and other innumerable contexts within which speech events take place. According to van Dijk, a speech event is not just people who use language to communicate beliefs, ideas or emotions, doing this “as part of more complex social events, for instance in such specific situations as encounter with friends, a phone call, a lesson in the classroom, a job interview, during a visit to a doctor, or when writing or reading a news report” (1998, p. 2). He emphasizes that participants beyond using language are *doing* something: they interact (ibid.). Thus, the interactional aspect of discourse is the most prominent feature of a speech event. Speech events are differentiated by features specific to each event as well as by their combinability and their distributional dependence on each other in relation to events in the outside world. To such speech events we attribute “inauguration lecture”, “opening

address”, “solemn oath”, “chat”, “bargaining”, “church service”, etc. They are labelled by special names in language lexicon. Others include descriptive words like “heart-to-heart talk”, “talk man-to-man”, “sales talk”, “woman’s talk”, “bull session”, “polite conversation”, “family conflicts”. Some events may be nominated by different language means – not exclusively nouns, but also verbs and word combinations. Interesting is the question about language means that can terminate a speech event or any bit within it.

Hymes (1972) and Saville-Troike (1995) suggested eight components of a speech event which he expressed in the refined acronym of SPEAKING, where each letter accordingly means: (1) Setting (physical circumstances), or otherwise Scene (subjective definition of an occasion); (2) Participants (speaker / sender / addressor / bearer / receiver / audience / addressee) ; (3) Effects / Ends (purposes, goals, outcomes); (4) Act sequences (message form and content); (5) Key (tone, manner); (6) Instrumentalities (verbal, nonverbal, physical channel; forms of speech drawn from community repertoire); (7) Norms of interpretation and interaction (interpretation of norms within cultural belief system, specific properties attached to speaking); (8) Genre (textual categories).

Normally, the components of the speech event are not exchangeable as to their location in the abbreviated form. Many scholars attribute these components to the notion of genre. According to the researchers (Bhatia, 1993; Eggins & Martin, 1998, p. 230; Iedema, 1997; Longacre, 2014; Martin, 1993, p. 141; Swales, 1991), the notion of genre to some extent possesses similar to speech event features, but actually, as we can see in the term SPEAKING, genre is one of the components of a speech event, last but not least, and it is in the hypero-hyponymic relations being a type of speech event. Traditionally, genres are closely related to registers of discourse marked by availability of specific language units, technical or non-technical terms, being heavier or more formal, factual or more chatty, accessible, and opinionated, providing the description of the linguistic patterns (words and structures), which create different effects (Eggins & Martin, 1998, p. 231). One speech event may be distinguished by different genres depending on the degree of discourse formality of the language used (for example, the use of standard unabbreviated syntax, frequent use of embedding, action verbs, lexically dense noun phrases, nominalized elevated vocabulary, idioms, intensifying or minimizing adverbs, etc.), the amount of attitude / evaluation expressed by the discourse producer and the background knowledge drawn on the content. “Except for *ideational* and *interpersonal* meanings, *textual* meanings say something about how the discourse is organized as a speech event” (ibid., p. 233).

A more detailed description of a speech event is manifested by Saville-Troike, Hymes’ follower, though in her terms a *speech event* receives the name of a *communicative event*: “The communicative event is the basic unit for descriptive purposes. A single event is defined by a unified set of components throughout, beginning with the *same* general purpose of communication, the *same* general topic, and involving the *same* participants, generally using the *same* language variety, maintaining the *same* tone or key and the *same* rules of interaction, in the *same* setting. An event terminates whenever there is a change in the major participants, their role-relationships, or the focus of attention. If there is no change in major participants and setting, the boundary between events is often marked by a period of silence and perhaps change of body position” (Saville-Troike, 1995, p. 27).

Classes of speech events are primarily in the focus of anthropological and ethnographical investigations and other related linguistic studies – pragmalinguistics (Birdwhistell, 2017; Blakar, 2007; Gregersen, 2007), discourse studies (van Dijk, 1998; Eggins & Martin, 1998; Sandig & Selting, 1998), conversational analysis (Levinson, 2005, pp. 284-364; Sacks, 1992). Each of the mentioned linguistic fields explores speech events from its own perspective, i.e. functioning of speech acts and their sequences within the event, its interactional frames and

cognitive scenarios, a series of related events that form a pattern, with one event causing the next, historical changes of events in the process of their development, emergence of new events and their nomination by names of propositional semantics, recognizable boundaries between types of the speech event, designation by labels that exist in the language lexicon, availability of nonverbal means of communication, and other parameters influencing the effects of speech events.

Since a speech event is a bounded entity of some kind, recognizing beginnings and endings is essential for their identification (Saville-Troike, 1995, p. 136). For example, let us take an institutional speech event of church service that is of our interest here and a prayer as one of the types of the church service. Its beginning and ending are marked by the ritual phrase “Let us pray and Amen”. In addition, there may be changes in the tone of voice, rhythm of speech, gaze direction, or communicants’ (here communicant as a religious term of a church member is contrasted to a communicator in its traditional meaning of interlocutor) body position in relation to one another, and between one speech event and the next, or a period of silence in between.

The church service as a formal institutional ritual event with clearly defined boundaries may differ from informal ones because there is a high degree of predictability in verbal and nonverbal behaviour, and it is an event which recurs in the similar form and frequency, which is spatially organized and has behavioral prescriptions and taboos (Saville-Troike, p.137, 141). The participation of communicants in group activities over a period of time is often necessary for much important information to emerge, and for necessary trusting relationships to develop between members of the congregation of the church who receive Holy Communion and celebrate this sacrament. They strictly abide by the rules and decisions of the church never breaking them or eliciting reactions. It is very important to behave appropriately during the church service when everyone knows what to do, share the same linguistic background and competence as the members of the community both with open-ended and closed-ended questions. The temporary outsiders interested in the church service as a ceremonial event are marginal to the community. They can be merely communicators.

This paper discusses a speech event of the church service as a sociolinguistic phenomenon which **aims** to examine particular ways of communicants’ and other parishioners’ speech behaviour in the institutionalized context in terms of categories pertaining to speech events mentioned above. An institutionalized religious service is an important and typical feature of a communicative situation established as part of a social system of the group of people who regularly attend church services and know how to perform. It is of interest that nowadays the church service has become an institutionalized religion of contemporary youth culture, American in particular, when young people prefer participation in the church service to other social activities offered on Sunday.

Among the clergy the church event is formally referred to as the Pastoral Office. More often than not, pastoral duties and activities of the clergy in the Christian church relate to the general secular needs of people rather than just their spiritual or religious needs. This event best provides an interactional and cognitive frame via which participants orient to and interpret communication actions.

The interactional frame of a macro church service event includes the following discrete micro events, which might be called genre activities. They are:

1. Call for worship
2. Reading of scriptures
3. Prayer
4. Announcements

5. Sermon
6. Benediction/Act of blessing
7. Confirmation
8. Confession
9. Repentance

The four points here, Announcements, Confirmation, Confession and Repentance, are additional micro events in the macro church service event. They may occur outside the fixed arrangement of activities in a religious service. Announcements may occur when some important visitors to the church are being introduced. In this case the procedure of common church ceremony is interrupted, thus creating a discontinuous situation. After the announcement was made the minister / the priest signals the resumption of the event. The event of the Confession is the formal process by which a person tells God (in the face of a priest) about his/her sins and asks for forgiveness. Spiritually, Repentance is close to Confession. It is a formal word along with other technical terms in religion to show somebody's sorrow and regret for something bad done in the past. Both Confession and Repentance may create a discontinuous situation and are difficult to interpret as far as they are secret for onlookers and analysts. The speech event named Confirmation is a special case of religious activities and is generally assumed as a church ceremony of being formally accepted as a member of a Christian church.

Based on the assumptions by Gumperz (1984), any cooperative endeavors (to which church services can be attributed as such), are revealed in the process of interaction itself, and the format of the process is dynamic rather than static. This fully pertains to a church service in which a priest and communicants actively interact, the latter actually reiterating in chorus the priest's verses, solemn words and vows either once or several times. In this way the communicants owe absolute allegiance and support for the conveyed meaning of the pronounced utterances. Communicants as people who received communion in the Christian church know when and what to say at certain moments of interaction. They strictly obey the procedure of the service according to which they base their responses as shown in the following fragment:

The Bishop: *Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

People: *And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.*

Social awareness, religious knowledge, and interaction skills of the communicants are the three factors which are of crucial importance being exploited in the course of the church service. They are constraints that communicants must have to behave properly. Let us consider what is meant by these three factors in turn.

First comes social awareness. The notion of social awareness captures understanding of a new membership status one enjoys in "separation" from the family ties and "transition" to holy aggregation membership. This being "in fellowship" is primarily evidenced by sharing psychological atmosphere, that is common beliefs and values which have social significance, togetherness and sameness, high emotional cooperation and solidarity. This is well signalled by the ceremonial seriousness and by the absence of acts like laughter, giggling, joking, and roaming gaze (cf. Werner & Raith, 1982, p. 13). The second factor is religious knowledge. It implies the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and their context-bound interpretations. The third factor is that of interaction skills. The component of interaction skills refers to (a) perception of salient features in communicative situations, (b) selection and interpretation of forms appropriate to specific situations, roles, and relationships (rules for the use of speech), (c) discourse organization and processes, (d) norms of interaction and interpretation, (e) strategies for achieving goals (Saville-Troike, 1995, p. 24). Practically, all the components make up a

communicative competence. It implies techniques of speech behaviour within the frame of a certain micro event. All together these factors add to how to behave to be accepted appropriately during the service.

No less important is linguistic and cultural knowledge of the participants of the event. It is exhibited in the use of verbal and nonverbal elements of speech behaviour, in their arrangement in particular speech event and range of possible pattern variants. Cultural knowledge, according to Saville-Troike (1995), captures (a) social structure, (b) values and attitudes, (c) cognitive maps / schemata, and (d) enculturation processes (transmission of knowledge and skills).

Communicative behaviour of the participants of speech events from the point of view of their similarities and differences have constraints which participants must observe to behave appropriately. To find out features that make these speech events alike or different from one another, we have to consider how such components as social awareness, linguistic and cultural knowledge of the participants in perceiving the event, as well as their interaction skills are exploited in the course of the event.

To start with, let us analyze such speech event as **Confirmation**, the most significant of all pastoral speech events performed in the church. Doing this we shall restrict ourselves mainly to the framework of speech event constituent analysis. Here we assume that Confirmation is a speech event which is constituted by a sequence of discrete speech acts, all performed according to the scenario of this religious activity. We give them in the way they follow one another. They are the following:

**1. Singing a hymn (psalm or anthem).** Communicants sing it in order to praise God or the saints.

**2. Benediction Blessing.** (The people standing, the Bishop says):

Bishop: *Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

People: *And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.*

The Bishop may say otherwise depending on when the event takes place.

In place of the above, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost the Bishop says:

Bishop: *Alleluia. Christ is risen.*

To this people respond: *The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

In Lent and other penitential occasions, he pronounces:

Bishop: *Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins.*

People: *His mercy endures for ever.*

The Bishop and the people go on with benediction:

Bishop: *There is one Body and one Spirit;*

People: *There is one hope in God's call to us;*

Bishop: *One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism;*

People: *One God and Father of all.*

Bishop: *The Lord be with you.*

People: *And also with you.*

Bishop: *Let us pray.*

**3. The Collect of the Day** – a short prayer, also said at the principal service on Sunday or any other feast.

**4. The Lessons.** That is the Scripture Reading event. A citation giving chapter and verse may be added. After each Reading the Reader may say: *Here ends the Reading.*

(Silence may follow.)

**5. Silence.** It occurs in case when it is apparently longer than a transition marker (a pause in the sequence of acts). This absence of speech can be so long that it may be considered as the formal exponent of a separate subevent "holy silence" (Werner & Raith, 1982, p. 82).

6. **The Sermon.** That is a homily on a religious or moral subject that is given as part of a church service.

7. **Presentation and Examination of the Candidates.** The Candidates are interrogated in order to get some information from them concerning their religious beliefs.

8. **The Commitment.** The Baptismal Covenant.

9. **The Prayers for the Candidates.** The petitions to God are pronounced to keep them safe in the faith and communion of the holy Church, to grant them health and love to others in the power of the Spirit and to bring them to peace and glory.

10. **Thanksgiving.** Thanks to God are extended.

11. **The laying on of hands.** The Bishop lays hands upon each Candidate saying: *Strengthen, O Lord, your servant N. with your Holy Spirit; empower him for your service; and sustain him all the days of his life. Amen.*

12. **The Peace exchange.** The concluding prayer is said and farewell formulas are exchanged:

Bishop: *The peace of the Lord be always with you.*

People: *And also with you.*

13. **The Offertory of the Eucharist.** The celebration of the Eucharist during which Eucharist bread and wine are offered to God; music that accompanies the Offertory; alms and money can be collected at this time.

14. **\*Announcements.** It is possible for the event of Announcements to occur outside the rigid schema of activities in the religious service of Confirmation. Here the introduction of important visitors can be made, or announcements of blessing of a forthcoming marriage, etc.

15. **\*Congratulatory.** Expressions of pleasure and good wishes on the Communion fellowship.

The asterisk used before Announcements and Congratulations means that they are not compulsory components of the speech event of **Confirmation**. This activity is also outside the rigid schema of the Confirmation speech event, though highly expectable and even obligatory within the general configuration of this religious service. Congratulations are extended after the event has been over; this micro event is not ritualized.

As we can see, the speech event of Confirmation is a very significant religious ceremony confirming a baptized person at the age of discretion as a member of the Christian Church, and is performed within the relatively rigid institutionalized context of the church service. The range of possible pattern variants concerns mostly act sequence of such micro speech events as prayers, benedictions, and praise which may differ in score and place during the ceremony of Confirmation. Possible variants in message content may depend on temporal setting of the event, in particular on the time of Lent or any other penitential occasion, as well as on the time from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost.

Our next approach to the analysis of the Confirmation speech event is componential. The components that are salient here are the type of the microevent, topic, purpose or function, setting, key, participants, message form and message content, act sequence, rules for interaction. As is seen, the type of the event of the institutionalized ritualized church service comes first. The topic is reflected in the name of the event, i.e. of Confirmation. The purpose or function are presented as comments.

In the course of Christian development, those baptized at an early age are expected, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and to receive the laying on of hands by the bishop (Bjerg, 2007).

Those baptized as adults, unless baptized with laying on of hands by a bishop, are also expected to make a public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities

of their Baptism in the presence of a bishop and to receive the laying on of hands. From the moment of commitment and pronounced vows the persons are no longer candidates and become mature church communion (communicants) who will seek and serve the Christian church.

**Conclusions.** In conclusion, the analysis of the church service, particularly the Confirmation rite, as a speech event reveals the highly structured, institutionalized, and ritualized nature of religious communication. The study demonstrates that church services consist of a sequence of discrete but interrelated micro-events, each with clearly defined speech acts, functions, and interactional norms.

Confirmation, in particular, illustrates how participants' social awareness, religious knowledge, interaction skills, and cultural competence are essential for appropriate participation. The ritual relies on shared linguistic forms, scripted responses, and solemn performative acts that reaffirm communal values and individual commitments to faith. Variability in content, such as seasonal liturgical variations, demonstrates the dynamic yet rule-governed nature of this speech event.

By applying a speech event constituent analysis and componential approach, this paper highlights the communicative complexity underlying what might appear to be a routine religious ceremony. Such analyses not only illuminate the linguistic and cultural knowledge required for successful participation but also underscore the role of speech events in maintaining social cohesion, transmitting beliefs, and reinforcing institutional authority within religious communities.

The **further study** of speech events within linguistic theory may serve the basis for various levels of analysis which will provide a better understanding of what segments of language are considered basic functional units in communication.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence tools or materials were used in the manuscript.

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