

## THE LANGUAGE OF THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: AUSTIN AND SEARLE'S MODEL

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### **Abstract**

*Catholic Church has seven sacraments which are administered with words of mouth by appropriate ministers when all the requirements are met. This study is set out to investigate such discourse and linguistic elements that made the administering of the sacraments valid. The data for the exercise were collected from the catechism of the Catholic Church and through unstructured oral interviews with some catholic priests. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969)'s framework of speech acts were adopted in the analysis of the data. Among the findings were that active and functional words otherwise known as performative acts were the essential linguistic elements that authenticate the sacraments without which every other thing is null and void. Other acts such as locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts were evident in the administering of the sacraments. The study concluded that the speech elements and felicitous conditions that validate the sacraments should be well noted.*

### **Introduction**

It has been observed that speech acts affect every aspect of human society like political, social, cultural, religious, and judicial because a lot of studies have been carried out in speech act in some of these areas. However, none has been carried out in the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church to the best of the knowledge of the researchers. It is this vacuum created that motivated the decision of

writing on this topic. The work discusses the seven sacraments of the Church, the Austin (1962) and Searle (1969)'s framework of speech acts, the application of the framework to the sacraments of the church, then, the conclusion.

## **Definition of key Terms**

Sacrament is a sensible sign, instituted by Jesus Christ to signify and produce grace.[1] According to Peschke, (1996) sacraments are symbolic actions composed of words and signs. They are characterized as symbolic actions performed by the Church which express and nourish the faith, give worship to God and sanctify man.[2]

A minister of a sacrament is the person with the full authority to administer the sacrament for it to be effective. Different sacraments have their proper ministers. Without the valid minister, the sacrament will not be effective. A recipient of a sacrament is the person on whom the sacrament must be administered for it to be effective. Matter of a sacrament is the material element of the sacrament or the action of the minister. Form of the sacrament is the words used and signs (system) to be followed in administering a sacrament. [3] Required Intention requires that for any sacrament to be effective, the minister must have the intention of doing what the Church does in the sacrament involved.

## **The Seven Sacraments of the Church**

Roman Catholic teaching holds that there are seven sacraments which Christ instituted and entrusted to the Church. Sacraments are visible rituals that Catholics see as signs of God's presence and effective channels of God's grace to all those who receive them with the proper disposition. The sevenfold list of sacraments is often organized into three groups: initiation (into the Church, the body of Christ), that is, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist; healing sacraments, that is, Penance and the Anointing of the Sick; and sacraments of service: Holy Orders and Matrimony.

For any of these sacraments to be effective, the following requirements must be fulfilled: there must be a valid minister of the sacrament, valid recipient of the sacrament, valid matter and form of the sacrament, and the required intention of the Church.

## **The Sacraments of Christian Initiation**

The sacrament of Christian initiation includes: Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. They lay the foundations of every Christian life. According to Pope Paul VI, the Christians are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation and receive eternal life in the Eucharist.[4]

## **Baptism**

This is the gateway to life of the spirit. It is the foundation for other sacrament.[5] Without baptism, one cannot validly receive any other

sacrament of the Church. The ordinary ministers of baptism are the bishop, priest and deacon. In case of necessity, any person, even someone not baptized can baptize if he/she has the required intention [6] Recipient of the Sacrament is every person not yet baptized [7] Matter of the Sacrament is ordinary water.

The form of the sacrament of baptism is the minister immersing the recipient in water or pouring water on his/her (recipient) head and at the same time saying, "I baptize you, in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit "The effect is that the person baptized is incorporated into the Church, the body of Christ, and made a sharer in the priesthood of Christ.

### **Confirmation**

According to Second Vatican Council, by the sacrament of confirmation, the baptized are more perfectly bound to the Church and enriched with special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence, they are as true witness of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed. [8] The ordinary minister of confirmation is a bishop. A priest can validly confer this sacrament if he has the faculty to do so from the competent authority. [9] Every baptized person not yet confirmed and can receive the sacrament of confirmation. [10] The matter of the sacrament of Confirmation is Holy Chrism (Blessed Oil) and the Laying on of hands by the Bishop or a delegated priest. The form of this sacrament is lying on of hand and anointing the forehead of the recipient with sacred chrism, by the minister at the same time saying:

“*Accipesignaculumdoni Spiritus Sancti*” (Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit). The recipient will respond, “Amen.” The sacrament perfects baptismal grace, it gives Holy Spirit to the recipients, incorporates them more firmly into Christ, strengthen their bond with the Church, and helps them to witness to the Christian faith in words and in action.[\[11\]](#)

### **Eucharist**

This is the sacrament in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered and received, and by which the Church continually lives and grows.[\[12\]](#) According to Second Vatican Council, the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life. The other sacraments are bound up in the Eucharist and are oriented towards it because it contains Christ Himself, our Pasch.[\[13\]](#) The only minister who, in the person of Christ, can bring into being the sacrament of the Eucharist, is a validly ordained Catholic Priest.[\[14\]](#) Any baptized person who is not forbidden by the Church's law may be admitted to the holy Eucharist.[\[15\]](#) The sacrifice of the holy Eucharist must be offered in bread and in wine to which a small quantity of water is to be added. The bread must be wheaten only; and the wine must be natural, made from grapes of the vine.[\[16\]](#) The form of the sacrament of the Eucharist is the imposition of the hands of the minister on the matter and the words of consecration, "This is My Body which will be given up for you. Do this in memory of me. . . . Take this, all of you, and drink from it, this is the cup of my Blood, the Blood of the New and Everlasting Covenant. It will be shed for

you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." **Effect of the Sacrament is that** the bread and wine turn into the body and Blood of Jesus Christ respectively.

### **The Sacraments of Healing**

The sacraments of healing includes: Sacrament of penance and anointing of the sick.

#### **Sacrament of Penance**

This is the sacrament in which the faithful who confesses their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, receive from God through the absolution given by that minister forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins.[\[17\]](#) Only a priest is the minister of the sacrament of penance.[\[18\]](#) The recipient of the sacrament of penance is every baptized person, who after baptism commits mortal or venial sin. The matter of the sacrament of penance is sin committed after baptism, contrition, confession and satisfaction. The form is the words of priestly absolution. The priest extends his hand over the head of the penitent and says, "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his son, has reconciled the world to himself, and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church, may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The penitent responds: Amen. In a short formula, the priest, in the same

manner says, “*absolvete a peccatistuis, in nomine Patris, et filii, et Spiritus Sancti*” (“I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”) The penitent responds, “Amen”.<sup>[19]</sup> The effect of the sacrament of penance on the recipient is reconciliation with God and the Church; followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Anointing of the Sick**

This is the sacrament by which the Church commends to the suffering and glorified Lord the faithful who are ill so that he may support and save them. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic constitution emphasizes the importance of this sacrament.<sup>[21]</sup> Only a priest is the minister of the sacrament of anointing of the sick. Every a baptized faithful who is sick should and is capable of receiving anointing of the sick. The matter of this sacrament is Anointing the sick with Holy Oil (*infirmorum*). The form of the sacrament is Prayer of the Priest over the sick person for the grace of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

The minister anointing the forehead and hands of the recipient, and at the same time saying, “Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.”<sup>[22]</sup> The effects of the sacrament on the recipient are: uniting the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own

good and that of the Church; the forgiveness of the sins of the sick person if he/she was unable to obtain absolution through the sacrament of penance, restoration of health and preparation of the sick for passing over to eternal life.[\[23\]](#)

### **Sacraments of Service**

The sacrament of service include: Sacrament of Holy Orders and Sacrament of Matrimony.

### **Sacrament of Holy Orders**

This is the sacrament by which male Christian faithful are marked with an indelible character and are thus constituted sacred ministers; thereby they are consecrated and deputed so that each according to his own grade, they fulfill, in the person of Christ the head, the office of teaching, sanctifying and ruling, and so they nourish the people of God. The orders are the episcopate, the priesthood and the diaconate.[\[24\]](#)The minister of sacrament of the order is a consecrated bishop.[\[25\]](#)Only a baptized man can validly receive the sacrament of orders. The matter of the sacrament of orders is laying on of hands of the minister on the recipient. The form of the sacrament of orders is the Bishop's specific consecratory prayer asking God for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and His gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained. The sacrament imprints indelible character on the recipient. It configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ's instrument for His Church. By

ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet and king.[26]

### **The Sacrament of Matrimony**

Matrimony is the sacrament by which a baptized man and woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own nature is ordered to the wellbeing of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children.[27] The minister of the sacrament of matrimony is the man and woman intending to exchange their marital vow. However the marriage must take place before a priest or deacon who accepts their marital consent in the name of the Church.[28] The Sacrament of matrimony is received by a baptized man and woman who have not are not under any impediment. The matter of this sacrament is the consummation of marriage. The form of this sacrament consists in a human act by which the partners mutually give themselves to each other saying, “I take you to be my wife.” – “I take you to be my husband.”[29] The consent binds the spouses to each other, and finds its fulfillment in the two becoming one flesh.[30]

### **Austin and Searle's Framework**

Two influential works which have contributed immensely to discourse are Austin's (1962) 'How to do things with words' and Searle (1969)'s 'Speech acts'. Austin and Searle claim that language is used to 'do things' other than just refer to the truth or false condition of particular statements. They observe that there are many

things people say which cannot meet these truth conditions but which are, nevertheless, valid and which do things that go beyond their literal meaning. They argue that in the same way people perform physical acts, they also perform acts by using language. That is, people use language to give orders, to make requests, to give warnings or to give advice. In other words, this is doing things that go beyond the literal meaning of what people say. A central issue which underlies this is the relationship between the literal meaning, or 'propositional content' of what someone says and what the person intends by what he says. Thus, if someone says

(1) 'It is cold in this bus'

He is not only referring to the temperature, he may also be requesting someone to do something, such as closing the glasses. What people say, then, often has both a literal meaning and an illocutionary meaning (or illocutionary force), that is, a meaning which goes beyond what someone, in a literal sense, has said. Thus, there are three kinds of 'act' which occur with every speech event. These are the 'locutionary act', the 'illocutionary act' and the 'perlocutionary act'.

The locutionary act refers to the literal meaning of the actual words (such as 'It's cold' referring to the temperature). The illocutionary act refers to the speaker's intention in uttering the words (such as a request for someone to close the window). The perlocutionary act refers to the effect this utterance has on the thoughts or actions of the other person (such as someone closing the windows).

It is not always easy, however, to identify the illocutionary force of

what someone says as it may also depend on the stage in the discourse, as well as on the social context in which the person is speaking. For example the expression,

(2) 'O.K.' may be an agreement to what someone has just said. It may also be a 'continuer' in a conversation with no indication of agreement, or it may function as a 'pre-closing' signaling that a conversation is about to end. The illocutionary force of what someone says, thus, can really only be determined in relation to what has come before and what follows, rather than in isolation from the overall discourse, (Paltridge, 2006:55). An illocutionary force, further, might be spread over more than one utterance.

It is also not unusual for a speech event to have more than a single illocutionary force. For example,

(3) 'What are you doing tonight' might be both a question and an invitation. The reply could be,

(4) 'I still haven't finished my home work', treating the utterance as both a question and an invitation which one decided not to accept. One may equally reply,

(5) 'Nothing special, what do you feel like doing?'

This might be an answer to the question but this time is accepting the (as yet unspoken) invitation. Indirect speech acts are often difficult for second language learners to recognize as they may not necessarily know that in English, for instance,

(6) 'This room is a real mess' might be a request for someone to help tidy up the room, or an order to tidy up the room.

In Searle's view, the pragmatic use of language is rule-governed. He

proposed a set of criteria for classifying speech acts. The most important of these are – The purpose of the utterance (in the sense of what people want the other person to do), the direction of fit between the words people use and what people want the other person to do, and the amount of belief the speaker has in what he says (Paltridge, 2006).

Thomas (1995) criticizes this notion of constitutive rules and suggests that the notion of 'principle' is perhaps more hopeful to this discourse. She suggests that Searle, in drawing on the notion of rules, was trying to describe communication in a manner that is more appropriate for grammatical, rather than pragmatic descriptions of language. In her view, the pragmatic use of language is constrained by maxims or 'principles' rather than by 'rules'. She claims that it is extremely difficult to devise rules which will satisfactorily account for the complexity of speech act behavior. She then presents five basic differences between rules and principle to support her argument. First is that rules are 'all or nothing' whereas principles can be applied partially. Thus, one can say: extremely clear, fairly clear, or not at all clear, rather than simply 'clearly'. Secondly, rules preclude another whereas a number of principles (rather than rules) might apply at the same time. Thirdly, rules aim at defining a speech act whereas principles describe what people do. Fourthly, whereas rules are definite, principles are 'probabilistic', that is, they describe what is more or less likely to be the case, rather than something which either does or does not apply. Finally, rules are arbitrary, whereas principles are 'motivated'. That is, people

follow them for a reason or purpose, to achieve a particular goal.

Speech act analyses also need to take account of the physical and social contexts of use, as well as the fact that meaning is not based on words alone but involves negotiation and interaction between users of a language. It needs to take account of the different contributions that language users make to the meaning of interaction, (Schmitt, 2002; Paltridge, 2006; Bloor and Bloor, 2007 and Johnstone, 2008). It is worth noting that being able to interpret the locutionary force of an utterance is not, however, all it takes to understand the utterance. It is possible to know exactly what someone says and still not understand it. It means knowing that if a person says,

(7) 'It is cold in here'

might mean that 'someone should close the window'. If you are asked,

(8) 'Could you turn the TV down?'

it may not be a question about your ability, so that answering,

(9) 'I could if I want to',

might not be very friendly. It means recognizing that to say,

(10) 'I do' as a bride or groom in a wedding is a different kind of action than to say,

(11) 'I do', in answer to the question,

(12) 'Does anybody have a pencil?'

Sometimes people do announce their illocutionary intentions, using phrases like,

(13) 'I hereby declare' or

(14) 'I promise' or

(15) 'I baptize you so and so'.

Using one of these verbs in the right context itself 'performs' the action. To say 'I promise' is to make a promise, to say,

(16) 'I order you to be there' is to give an order.

The action of saying,

(17) 'The meeting is adjourned' adjourns the meeting. Verbs such as these are accordingly called performative verbs.

In other contexts, explicit performatives are less common, and people indicate their illocutionary intentions in more indirect ways.

Rather than saying,

(18) 'I promise to call',

one can say,

(19) 'I call'.

Instead of saying,

(20) 'I hereby request that you take out the garbage'

one can say,

(21) 'the garbage'.

In the place of saying,

(22) 'I order you to be home by 9.a.m'

one says,

(23) 'We expect you home by 9. a.m'

Being indirect about illocutionary intentions is often more polite than being explicit, because indirectness gives addressee options for how to interpret utterances. Indirectness is necessarily ambiguous, though, requiring people to guess about what other people's

intentions might be, (Paltridge, 2006). How do people make such guesses? How, for example, do competent users of English know that in the right context,

(24) 'Will you carry my umbrella?'

(25) 'Could you get the phone?'

(26) 'I'd really like to take a break now' and

(27) 'I think we should vacuum the carpet'

could all be interpreted as request for action?

According to the theory of speech acts associated with Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), indirect speech acts are interpreted with reference to the situations in which utterances are made. An utterance can only be successful (or felicitous) as a request when these 'felicity conditions' are in effect. According to Paltridge (2006:58), "Felicitous conditions are those conditions that must be met before a speech 'act' works". The conditions are:

Condition 1: An utterance is a potential request only if the speaker wants something to happen in the future. This means that if people know that a person does not really want one to disappear forever, people do not interpret

(28) 'Oh, get lost' as an actual request.

Condition 2: An utterance is a potential request only if the speaker believes that the requestee is able to perform the action. This means that asking someone with both arms tied together to close the window would seem like a cruel joke rather than a serious request.

Condition 3: An utterance is a potential request only if the speaker is sincere, really intends the request to be interpreted as a request. This

is why it is so difficult to decide whether apparent requests for assistance with suicide should be acceded to because the requestee might be joking.

If interlocutors share such conventions about how contents and speech acts are connected, then a speaker can show that a request is being made simply by alluding to one or another of these contextual conditions. That is, a speaker can make a request by alluding to a desire for future action (condition 1):

(29) 'I wish someone would go get coffee'.

Or a speaker can make a request by alluding to condition 2, the hearer's ability to perform the action:

(30) 'Could you get some coffee'.

Or a speaker can make a request by alluding to his or her sincerity (Condition 3):

(31) 'I'd really love some coffee'.

Because people have conventional ways of being indirect, they are able to be polite, to allow others to save face, (Johnstone, 2008).

### **Application of Austin and Searle's Framework to the Sacraments of the Church**

The application of the framework is evident in the language used in administering the sacraments. The key linguistic features are: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts including performative acts and felicitous conditions. This section will highlight how the above linguistic terminologies are applicable to the sacraments of the church.

4.1.1. In the sacrament of Baptism,

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of Acts</b>
Performative act	I baptize you in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Locutionary act	Pouring of water on the head of the
Illocutionary act	The recipient is baptized
Perlocutionary act	The candidate is incorporated into the church, the body of Christ, and made a sharer in the priesthood of Christ
Felicitous conditions	Must be done by a bishop, priest or deacon. But in case of necessity can be done by any one. The recipient must have the intention to receive the sacrament

4.1.2. In the sacrament of Confirmation, the evident of the framework is as follows:

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of the Acts</b>
Performative act	Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit
Locutionary act	Laying on of hands on the head of the recipient
Illocutionary act	The recipient is confirmed
Perlocutionary act	The sacrament perfects the baptismal grace, it gives Holy Spirit to the recipient, incorporates him more firmly into Christ, and helps him to witness to the Christian faith in words and in action.
Felicitous conditions	It must be done by a bishop or his delegate, and the recipient must be a baptized who is not yet confirmed. It must be done inside the church or an approved place of worship.

4.1.3. In the sacrament of Holy Eucharist

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of the Acts</b>
Performative act	This is My Body.... This is the cup of My Blood....
Locutionary act	Imposition of hands of the minister on the bread and wine
Illocutionary act	The trans-substantiation
Perlocutionary act	The bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Jesus Christ respectively.
Felicitous conditions	This must be done by an ordained priest of the Church and must be done within an approved place of worship. The recipient is any baptized person who is not forbidden by the Church's law and is willing to partake.

4.1.4. Sacrament of Penance

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of Acts</b>
Performative act	I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit
Locutionary act	The priest extends his hand over the head of the penitent
Illocutionary act	The penitent is forgiven of his sins.
Perlocutionary act	The recipient is reconciled with God and the Church; followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation
Felicitous conditions	Must be done by a priest and is received by a baptized person who after baptism committes sins.

#### 4.1.5. Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of the Acts</b>
Performative act	Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.
Locutionary act	Anointing of the forehead and hands of the recipient
Illocutionary act	Prayer of the priest over the sick person for the grace of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.
Perlocutionary act	Uniting the sick person to the passion of Christ, forgiveness of the sins of the sick person, restoration of health and preparation of the sick for eternal life.
Felicitous conditions	Must be done by a priest, and the recipient must be a sick and baptized person.

#### 4.1.6. Sacrament of Holy Orders

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of the Acts</b>
Performative act	Bishop's specific consecratory prayer asking God for the pouring of the Holy Spirit and His gifts proper to the ministry to which the candidate is being ordained.
Locutionary act	Laying of hands by the minister on the recipient
Illocutionary act	The ordination of the priest
Perlocutionary act	The sacrament imprints indelible character on the recipient. By the sacrament one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, head of his Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet and king.
Felicitous conditions	Must be done by a consecrated bishop, and only a baptized unmarried man can validly receive the sacrament

#### 4.1.7. The Sacrament of Matrimony

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Manifestation of the Acts</b>
Performative act	I take you to be my wife; I take you to be my husband.
Locutionary act	Physical joining of the hands of the intended couples
Illocutionary act	The man and the woman are joined as husband and wife.
Perlocutionary act	The consent binds the spouses to each other, and the two become one flesh
Felicitous conditions	The minister is the man and woman intending to exchange their marital vow before a priest with the consent of their parents.

#### **Conclusion**

It is obvious from the research conducted that language in use carries very powerful forces. Through language so many things were performed. Serious issues as the sacraments of the Catholic Church are performed with the power in the words of mouth. The performative acts make things happen. The powers of such words are mainly in verbal communications; for such words if only written do not command performative force attached to them. For such performative words to be effective, the felicitous conditions must be met. The performer of such words must be the rightful and authorized minister, and the recipient must have the intention and required qualities, and the circumstances must be suitable and adequate, otherwise, the acts are null and void.

This exercise was able to identify such performative acts that make

the sacraments of the Church valid. The acts must be administered by the approved persons within an approved context so as to achieve the desired effect which is the perlocutionary act. The perlocutionary act is the most essential of all the acts because it is the force that bears the speaker's intention.

The study then recommends that the Austin and Searle's framework be used in investigating other discourse situations.

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[5] Cf. Council of Florence: DS 1314: *Vitae spiritualis anua*.

[6] Cf. CIC/83 Can.861, CCC. p323

[7] \_\_\_\_\_ Can. 864, CCC. p321

[8] Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) (1964) 11

[9] Can.882

[10] Can.889

[11] CCC. 1316

[12] Can.897

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