

PRAGMATIC ACTS IN SELECTED CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC MARRIAGE SOLEMNIZATIONS IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explores the spoken acts in both Christian and Islamic marriage solemnizations in north-central Nigeria. Using pragmatic act theory proposed by Mey (2006) 'pragmeme' as a theoretical basis, the aim of the study is to examine the performance of marriage solemnizations in the two major religions in north-central Nigeria. The data for the study were purposively elicited from six audio-video recordings sourced from family and friends who reside in north-central Nigeria: three from Christian marriages and three from Islamic marriages. All transcribed data were analysed using qualitative analysis methods. The findings reveal that irrespective of the speech acts involved in marriage solemnizations, the context of acting (pract) carries more weight than the spoken act itself. The study concretizes Mey's stance that the negotiation of meaning is from the 'outside in' and not from the 'inside out' because meaning negotiation is derived more from the environment in which the interactants find their affordances rather than just the speech acts of their utterances.

Key Words: Pragmatic Acts, Pragmeme, Allopract, Marriage solemnization.

Introduction

The theory of pragmatic act gives language users the license to use language in diverse alternative ways (even in social situations such as marriage solemnizations) so long as the exactness of what is being contracted is known by the language participants. Mey's submission that "pragmatics studies language as it is used by people, for their own purposes and within their own respective limitations and affordances" (207) is germane to this study. Mey avers that "pragmatic acts do not necessarily include acts of speech" (213). That is, there may be no use of language that could count as particular illocutionary acts. The pragmatic acts theory is a response to some complexities and inadequacies not well accounted for in the speech act theory. This is why the study explores the possibility of accounting for an organized social institution such as marriage solemnization that has societal laid down procedures (especially the spoken act) using pragmatic act theory as against the speech act theory. The paper therefore argues in favour of pragmatic act in that the situational set up context of acting in marriage solemnizations carries more weight than the spoken acts themselves. The aim of the study is to examine the marriage solemnizations of the two major religions in north-central Nigeria using the theory of pragmatic act.

Methodology

Data for the study were elicited from six audio-video recordings sourced from family and friends because they reside in north-central Nigeria and the marriages were solemnized as well in north-central Nigeria: three from Christian marriages and three from Islamic marriages. The transcribed Christian marriage solemnization video used for analysis lasted for two hours, twenty three minutes, and thirty one seconds (00:00:01 - 02:23:31), and the transcribed Islamic marriage solemnization lasted for a minute and forty five seconds (00:00:01 -

00:01:45). This explains the brevity of the data for Islamic marriage solemnization. However, the brevity does not render any part void especially since this is the norm and it conforms to the pillars of marriage in Islam. In fact, it is as valid as any other marriage. The videos were played repeatedly while the transcription of data via note-taking was on. The transcribed data from the six audio-video recordings were studied. Due to space constraints, one from each religion was purposively selected for qualitative analysis. The research participants belong to the two religions under study: two Christians and one Muslim. Another Muslim scholar with a good proficiency of Hausa and Arabic was interviewed to confirm the interpretation provided by the Muslim co-researcher since the Islamic marriages were conducted in predominantly Hausa and Arabic. This was also done to justify the validity of the transcribed and translated data. The choice of the scholar's interpretation of data for the study was premeditated to ensure that symbolism and extra-linguistic features of the ceremonies in both faiths are reliably interpreted given that context is an integral part of meaning making in pragmatics.

Theoretic Framework: Pragmatic Act Theory

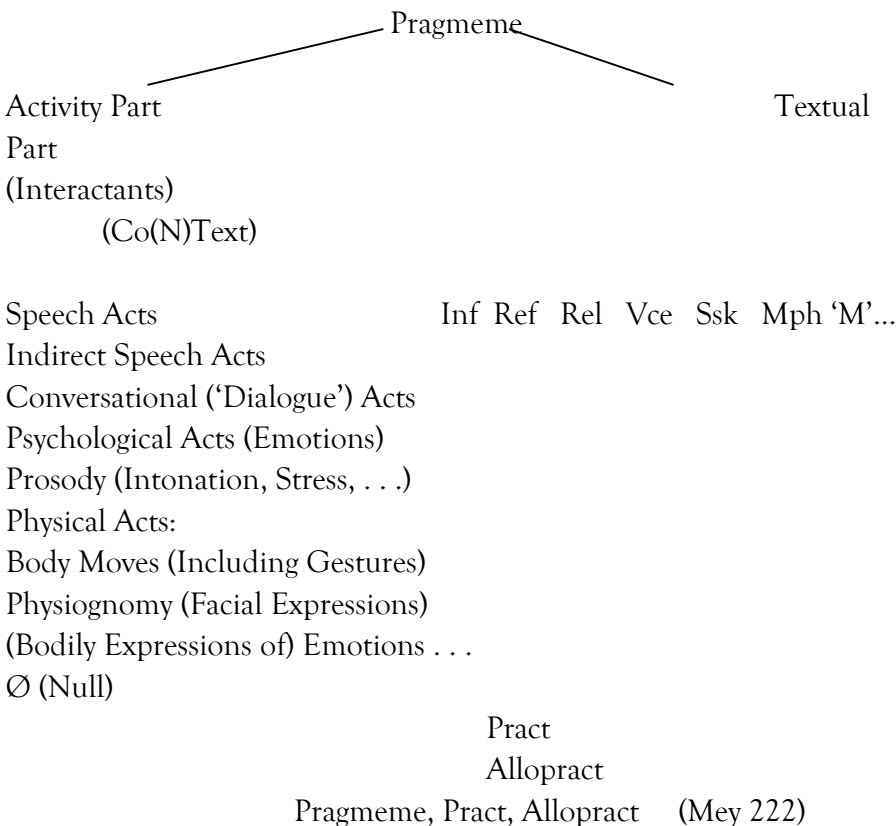
The theory of pragmatic act is well positioned within the ambits of pragmatic theories. The pragmatic act theory describes acts that extend beyond the wordings to encapsulate the circumstances and situations that instantiate the utterance (Mey 216). Thus, all that interactants bring into the discourse including words, body movements, emotions, as well as non-verbal behaviour all translate to pragmatic acts. Mey observes that "while speech acts, when uttered in contexts, are pragmatic acts, pragmatic acts are not speech acts (not even indirect ones)" (216). This implies that pragmatic acts are more encompassing than speech acts given that they are not limited to utterances. Speech acts in context are situated within pragmatic acts. A pract is not a speech

act, but a speech act is a *pract* (Mey 216). Mey stresses that the appropriateness of events in any social speech situation does not lie in the words used alone but rather in the circumstances surrounding the usages of such words. He observes that not only are speech acts situated in a context, but the context itself situates the speech acts, thereby creating them, as it were. Therefore, a typical pragmatic way to look at how people use language is to look at them as performing pragmatic acts.

Mey further recommends a universal situational model in which the emphasis on *pract* “is not on conditions and rules for an individual (or an individual’s) speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype, capable of being executed in the situation; such as a generalized pragmatic act” (221). He calls it a *pragmeme*. Mey uses the term *pragmeme* to refer to the numerous functions a unit of linguistic acting can serve. He observes that it would be unacceptable to describe the said function as just mere speech acts given that the phenomenon being dealt with is much more than just voicing but the actual performing of a societal function of language use – a pragmatic act. Capone defines a *pragmeme* as a speech act – an utterance associated with a goal (5). Its goal is to bring about a certain effect, to transform a circumstance and to change the roles of participants, especially couples within that circumstance or keep the roles the same while conveying other types of special effects. Although Capone suggests that a *pragmeme* is a speech act, it is an action-oriented speech act which is situated, thus making it a pragmatic act. “The instantiated, individual pragmatic acts, the ‘*ipras*’ or *practs*, refer to a particular *pragmeme* as its realizations” (Mey221). According to Mey, since *practs* are realized in concrete situations and situations are distinct from one another, no two *practs* are expected to be the same. Every *pract* is also an *allopract* – a concrete and different realization of a

particular instantiation of a particular pragmeme. In other words, an allopract is an option of a specific pract.

Emike observes that “the knowledge which interactants have of a communicative event as well as the effects of such an event on them in that particular context constitutes a ‘pract’” (20). That is the pragmeme can be realised by an explicit pract of marrying/vowing, as in *I hereby pronounce you husband and wife*. Mey presents a scheme of pragmeme thus:



Mey’s model is divided into two parts: Activity part and Textual part. The activity part includes: the acts of the interactants, i.e. their speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational (dialogue) acts, psychological

acts, prosody, physical acts and even silence (null). These constitute the availability of a range of options that the language users have. Mey's theory is apparently on a pedestal that is higher than previous theories of speech acts since it accounts for not just the verbal aspects of language but also the non-verbal aspects of meaning.

The textual part has its crux on context and co-text and the elements on the textual chain: it is demonstrated via inference, reference, relevance, voice, shared situation knowledge, metaphor and metapragmatic joker. The two parts of the pragmeme are dependent on each other in that the activity part depends on the textual part for its realization and both sides of the pragmeme rely on context for meaning making. Considering "situation bound utterances as pragmemes", Kecskes explains that "pragmemes represent situational prototypes to which there may be several pragmatic access routes (practs)" (2894).

Empirical Review

There are quite a number of studies on marriage solemnizations from the linguistic domain in general and from the pragmatic realm in particular. Some relevant studies are presented so that the gap this study fills is identified and delineated.

Umeh investigated Christian and Court marriages with the aim of determining the efficacy of the 'officiating' texts in sustaining the institution of marriage in a divorce-ridden society. The study adopted the theoretical framework of Speech Acts. The texts were analyzed with the aim of determining the perlocutionary effects they have on the couple. This study is distinct from the current study in that data used is the text for conducting church and court marriages using the speech act as its theoretical basis.

Embugushiki examined the performative potential of language in Christian wedding solemnizations using Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech acts theory. The study found that the locutionary acts of Christian wedding vows possess a peculiar linguistic structure

consisting of declarative and interrogative sentences which are characteristically full of those verbs that can be said to be performatives preceded by the first-person singular subject 'I'. Like Umeh's study, this study is different for the current study because performatives again form the crux of the analysis showing how it does things (like pronouncing marriages) with words.

Ndao investigated traditional marriages in Africa with wedding songs in Saalum communities as the case study. The analysis is done from the view of pragmatic meaning to show the impact of these oral communication characteristics. Pragmatically, the analysis outlined many communicative aspects to convey knowledge, to inherit social and cultural practices, and to educate the young generation, while serving adults as guides. This study again is dissimilar to the current study, because Ndao's work contributes to cultural diversity and traditional apprehension with the pragmatic basis passively inculcated in the analysis itself.

Al-Husseini and Al-Shaibani undertook a cross-cultural and pragmatic study of felicity conditions in same-sex marriage discourse adopting Austin's (1962) Felicity Conditions to examine if conditions of satisfaction are applicable to same-sex marriage in Christian and Islamic cultures. The study found that same-sex marriage in Christianity is totally different from the traditional marriage with regard to the social, religious, and linguistic conventions. This study again is not in
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 leanings.

Unuabonah and Kupolati surveyed the generic structure and pragmatic acts in Yoruba traditional weddings in Southwestern Nigeria using three purposively selected weddings. The research employed the Generic Structure Potential and a modified form of the pragmatic act theory as its theoretical framework. The study showed that the practs of praying, instructing, pleading and counselling are deployed. These practs incorporate psychological and non-verbal acts as well as contextual features such as reference, metaphor, shared situational and cultural knowledge. This study is somewhat similar to the present

research in that the pragmatic act theory forms the basis for analyzing data and drawing conclusions. But this current paper, while using practice too, is however different in its data and approach.

Context of Christian and Islam Marriages in North-Central Nigeria

For Christian marriages, traditional rites are first performed where the bride's hand is sought after in marriage with the 'bride price' paid thereafter to her family. The church is invited to witness all the procedure of the traditional rites. When the bride's price is paid in full, a date for the church wedding is then fixed. Only an ordained Pastor of the church performs this service.

For Islamic marriages, the first step the suitor makes is to seek formal permission from the parent or guardian of the bride. This is called *Khitbah*. Then courtship begins thereafter. This is the period between acceptance of marriage proposal (*khitbah*) and the solemnization of marriage which must be done within the confines of the *Shariah*. The key features legislated in Islam marriages are: **the willing consent of both parties, the consent of the guardian for his ward (usually a daughter) to marry an interested suitor, the presence of two just Muslim witnesses, and the giving of the dowry to the bride by the groom** (Toffar 73).

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Christian Marriage

Pract of Praying

The practice that is prominent in Christian marriage ceremonies is the act of praying which is done at different stages of the event. This is done with the inference and shared situational knowledge of interactants that all human activities are superintended by a supernatural being - God.

Pract of Singing

Singing hymns and songs are integral parts of Christian marriage solemnizations. These acts are performed based on the psychology act and the relevance it has on Christian worship. The shared religious situational knowledge for Christians is that *he who sings, prays* and that *God's heart is moved by worship* through singing. The act of singing is deliberately infused into various segments of Christian marriage solemnizations.

Pract of Declaring Intention, Giving Invitation and Issuing Command (by the Pastor)

Pastor: “We have gathered here for the uniting in Holy Christian Marriage of Dung and Kaneng. We shall listen to their vows to each other before God and this congregation. ... Now Mr Dung and Miss Kaneng have come to be joined in this holy union...We shall witness the promises... Therefore, if anyone knows any reason why they will not be lawfully joined, he or she should now speak or remain silent forever.” Beyond the pract of declaring the intention of the bride and groom to be united in holy marriage, it is observable that the pastor also uses the pract of invitation for anyone who knows any reason why the marriage cannot be contracted to speak immediately. The pastor again uses the pract of commanding. He issues a command that if the person does not ‘speak now’, he must ‘remain silent forever.’

Those to be wedded stand before the Pastor (for the solemnization after the prelude).

A. Pract of Declaring Consent and Making Promises (by the bride and groom)

- a. **Pastor:** “I ask you both as you will answer before God, that if either of you knows any reason why you may not be lawfully joined in marriage, that you now confess it.”
- b. **Groom:** “No, there is no reason.”

c. **Bride:** “No, there is no reason.”

B. Pract of Taking Vows by the Groom

I) a. **Pastor:** “Mr Dung, do you agree to take Miss Kaneng to be your wife to live together in holy matrimony according to God’s law?”

b. **Groom:** “Yes, I do.”

II) a. **Pastor:** “Will you love her, encourage her, cherish her, honour her and protect her in times of prosperity and adversity?”

b. **Groom:** “Yes, I will.”

III) a. **Pastor:** “Will you forsake all others and keep only to her as long as you both shall live?”

b. “Yes, I will.”

In A and B above, the Pastor and the couple take turns in questions and answers session. The conversational act as presented in Mey’s structure is observed in these exchanges. The bride and the groom both declare their consents and make promises.

C. Pract of Taking Vows by the Bride

The same ritual of vow-taking by the groom in B above is repeated for the bride C. After this segment, the Pract of Praying is observed by the Pastor for the couple who made promises to each other.

It is obvious that the exchanges in B also repeated by the bride in C are promises deducible from the setting up which creates the affordances for the pragmatic act and informs the interactants of the type of pract it is without any recourse to the semantic selection and syntactic rules. This shared situation knowledge and inference is seamless because the outcome of the pragmatic acting is not in jeopardy.

D. Pract of Agreeing by Body Moves

At this point, the bride and groom join their right hands as a sign of agreement and repeat their vows after the Pastor. The groom recites the

vow first while holding the bride's right hand and the bride recites same.

I) "I ask these people present to witness that before God, I Dung take you Kaneng to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death."

II) The bride recites the same vow as *I* above in her turn.

Given the context and the underlying goal orientation of the bride and groom, the expected course of action is taken without either of them using a particular speech act verb of promising - *I promise* or *I vow*. There is therefore a dovetailing of the force (background knowledge) and the act in the performing of the pragmatic act. This agrees with Hanks submission that "meaning arises out of the interaction between language and circumstances, rather than being encapsulated in the language itself" (266). This is the "affordances and setting up" Mey's model (218) emphasizes.

E. Pract of Giving and Receiving of Rings

I) The groom takes the ring on the Holy Bible and places it on the fourth finger of the bride's left hand and says: "I give you this ring as a sign that, before God, I have taken you to be my wife in holy marriage."

II) The bride does same in her turn.

F. Pract of Agreeing by Body Moves

The bride and groom join their right hands again to symbolize their consent via the use of Mey's activity part utilizing the option of physical acts. Mey says that "the scene's 'affordances' are also the affordances of our actions... and not only does the scene determine our acting; conversely, our actions determine and reaffirm the existing scene" (218-9). This is evident as what the bride and groom act are further shaped by the context as well as the context reiterating the act.

G. Pract of Warning and Pronouncing

Pastor: “What God has joined, let no one separate. Since Dung and Kaneng have been joined in holy marriage and since before God and these people they have demonstrated this by the exchange of vows, by the joining of hands and by the giving and receiving of rings, I pronounce them husband and wife, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The first part of this segment issues a warning to those who may want to interfere in the marriage though it is not explicitly stated that it is a stern warning. We are able to interpret this as a warning using our understanding from the projection of practs since language use and comprehension must not be from the words expressed by a single, idealized speaker. Rather, interpretation should focus on the interactional situation in which the interlocutors achieve their communicative aims as seen by the cleric’s warning covertly and subtly presented. The second part of this segment however uses the speech act verb ‘pronounce’ to officially wed the couple. Mey’s submission that, “speech acts, when uttered in contexts, are pragmatic acts” (216) is apt for this argument. Thus, speech act cannot be clearly understood except it is situated within the background it is meant to be deciphered.

H. Pract of Body Moves

The groom unveils his wife whom hitherto had a light veil covering her face to symbolize purity and submission. He kisses his bride or hugs her after unveiling her. A special prayer is offered for the couple at this point. And for the first time, they are addressed as husband and wife. Indeed, pragmatic acts involve the entire person in meaning making and not just the speech part of his or her utterances. The unveiling of the bride and the kissing of the bride symbolize acceptance as well as a confirmation that she is the chosen one. This supports Gu’s comment that “perlocution is not a single act performed... nor its effect being caused by an utterance. It involves a transaction” (428) which engages

the interactants, and other dynamics like the bodily expressions of emotions under Mey's model (activity part of pragmeme).

I. Pract of Encouraging – Sermon

The pastor takes the exhortation/sermon. He encourages the husband and wife as well as other guests on right living as couples. In line with the pragmatic acts, this can also be said to involve the exploiting of shared knowledge (religious) held by interactants to perform certain functions with language, which might be to achieve an appeal to emotions via encouragement. This is however done often time simpliciter rather than using specific speech act types with fixed or expected illocutionary forces.

J. Pract of Signing and Presenting the Certificate

This is also symbolic. The signing of the certificate shows acceptance of what has been done and therefore seals the solemnization. The certificate serves as evidence which validates the union. The certificate is presented to the couple amidst photographs to store the memories of the event.

K. Pract of Thanksgiving offering

The couple and their guests bring offerings amidst singing and dancing to show appreciation to God. Afterwards the closing prayer is offered. The thanksgiving offering presented amidst singing and dancing expresses the psychological acts captured in Mey's framework. The smile the couple displays expresses their physiognomy expressions as well as their psychological states. This emotional display symbolizes their gratitude to God for making them find each other and for the success of the just concluded solemnization. These emotions corroborate their speech acts of vowing indicating that they did not wed under duress.

Islamic Marriage

Pract of Seeking Consent

Each person (bride and groom) is simply asked if they will accept the other partner as a spouse. When they answer is in the affirmative, then the guardian's permission is sought. He may be the father or whoever he appoints, or whoever takes his place (if the father has died or is a non-Muslim).

Pract of Declaring Intention (by the Imam)

The marriage is between Aisha Yakubu, the bride and Haruna Bello, the groom. The representative of Aisha is Muhammad Suleiman. The representative of the groom is Ibrahim Sani. The prescribed dowry is paid.

The officiating of the marriage is done without the bride and the groom. The solemnization is done on their behalf by their witnesses or representatives. The absence of the bride and groom symbolizes humility and their respect to the elders.

Pract of Marrying

- A. **Imam (the Covenanter):** "Are you the representative?"
- B. **Groom's Representative:** "I seek refuge with Allah from Satan the accursed in the name of Allah the merciful, the compassionate. Peace be upon the Messenger of Allah. My name is Ibrahim Sani. Haruna Bello sent me to you, to ask the marriage of your daughter, Aisha Yakubu, based on the dowry of fifty thousand naira only, upon the teaching of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)."
- C. **Bride's Representative:** "I seek refuge with Allah from Satan the accursed in the name of Allah the merciful, the compassionate. My name is Muhammad Suleiman. I am the representative of Aisha Yakubu. I marry Aisha Yakubu to Haruna Bello upon the teaching of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) based on the dowry of Fifty thousand Naira only."
- D. **Groom's Representative:** "I accept the marriage for him."

Pract of Praying

E. Imam (the Covenanter): “May Allah bless this marriage abundantly.”

Having completed the solemnization with all the conditions of marriage, the Imam who is the covenanter prays for the couple. This is after the groom’s representative accepts the marriage. The Islamic cleric seeks blessings from Allah for them. Praying is a significant part of Islamic wedding. To seal the marriage, two copies of the marriage contract are signed by all those involved. One copy is kept in the Mosque and the other with the married couple.

The first act of practicing noticed at the commencement of the wedding is in the answer the groom’s representative gives the Imam when he asks him if he is the groom’s representative. The groom’s representative responds by employing a physical act using a gesture. Expectedly, he nods his head and immediately proceeds to the act of solemnization as Islamic marriage solemnization requires. There is no breach in the communication because the groom’s witness maintains the uptake on his part. He recognizes the Imam’s question as an invitation to proceed with the solemnization procedure.

Pam observes that interactants in a civilized society at a given time and place wait for their turn before speaking since everyone cannot talk at the same time (128). Finnegan posits that “participants must tacitly agree on who should speak and when”. He adds that “normally we take turns at holding the floor and do so without overt negation” (293). Levinson raises a palpable observation that “conversation is characterized by turn-taking: one participant, A, talks, stops; another, B, starts, talks, stops; and so we obtain an A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants” (296). Mey’s framework recognizes the conversational (dialogue) act within the pragme scheme. He says that turns occur normally at certain well-defined junctures in conversation; such points are called ‘transition relevant places’ (TRPs) (139). The

practicing becomes effective and successful because turns are maximally maintained. The Islamic wedding shows smooth transition of turns. The data from Christian marriage solemnization also shows maximal adherence to turns.

The pract of praying is utilized in Islamic marriages as well. The groom and the bride's representatives all start with a prayer: "I seek refuge with Allah..." Reference to God is symbolic because God is no doubt acknowledged as Supreme Being in the lives and affairs of humans in Islam. The witnesses introduce themselves in that mode to show their role and exact goals that they are sincerely representing the person(s) (who sent them) with good intentions. The representatives also seek refuge with Allah having found them worthy to serve in that capacity. Only just Muslims who are in right standing with Allah can take the mandate of witnessing. A hooligan cannot serve in this holy venture. The use of parents or elders as witnesses also symbolizes that although marriage is a union of two people, the relationship extends beyond the couple to accommodate their families as in-laws. Having an elder to serve as a representative gives more guarantee or assurance to parties involved that the families are fully in support based on the shared situation knowledge that young people's emotions can be unstable.

The bride's representative who says "I marry Aisha Yakubu to Haruna Bello..." does things with words by utilizing a speech act verb "marry". In like manner, the groom's representative acts by accepting the marriage for the groom: "I accept the marriage for him. "Beyond the words used to contract the union, there is a transaction that involves the speaker and listener as well as other agents and factors. Perlocution is not a single act performed by the speaker but a pragmatic act that engages the whole individual in the communication. The understanding that the individual participants have of the situation, and the effects that the practs have, or may have, in a given context is germane (Mey 221). This acting also confirms Mey's view that "our acting ... is always a situated action ... afforded by a particular situation, on a particular scene (219).

From the foregoing in both the Christian and Islamic marriage solemnizations, no speech act by itself makes any sense. What is glaring is what Mey calls instantiated pragmatic acts (ipras or pract). Therefore, words cannot be isolated and explained in such a way that they capture the human mind and activities. Other psychological acts like emotions and physical acts like body moves combine with the speech acts and context to negotiate meaning. This is seen for example in the exchange of vows, joining of hands and by the giving and receiving of rings in Christian marriages. For Islamic marriages, even the pract of beautification where the bride uses *lele* (henna) and perfume is symbolic. This shows the bride's purity. So, whether a speech act is used, it is immaterial because communication is possible even in silence as captured by Mey's activity part elements (\emptyset NULL).

Conclusion

It is not easy to account for the pragmatic acts of interactants' utterances in Christian and Islamic marriages without making recourse to the sociocultural and religious context of the weddings. This study concretizes the stance that the negotiation of meaning is from the 'outside in' and not from the 'inside out' since the focus is from the environment in which the interactants find their affordances rather than on certain conventional rules. This work concludes that researches solely on speech acts that do not encompass the position of affordances are to a large extent incomplete. The study recommends that further work should be done on meaning negotiation in organized social institutions (such as court marriages, court rulings, swearing in ceremonies, among others) using the theory of pragmatic act in conjunction with other available resources.

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