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“I DECREE AND DECLARE”
A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL PROPHETIC DECLARATIONS IN NSPPD
MORNING PRAYERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the illocutionary structure of prophetic declaration utterances performed by Pastor Jerry Eze during the New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD) morning prayer livestreams on YouTube. Drawing on Searle's (1969, 1979) taxonomy of illocutionary acts and Hancher's (1979) concept of multiple illocutionary force, the study examines how declarative speech acts—whose felicity conditions traditionally depend on institutional co-presence—are constructed and legitimized in a digitally mediated, spatially dispersed environment. Discourse analysis of twelve declaration segments sampled from NSPPD broadcasts (March–April 2026) identifies a recurrent five-phase rhetorical architecture, five strategies for constructing felicity conditions, and a pervasive pattern of simultaneous multi-force utterances directed at two distinct audiences—the human congregation and a posited spiritual realm. The paper argues that digital prophetic declarations constitute a novel speech act genre that exploits livestream affordances to construct distributed institutional authority: a form of illocutionary legitimacy assembled across physical absence rather than presupposed by co-presence.

Keywords: speech act theory, illocutionary force, digital pragmatics, prophetic declarations, NSPPD, felicity conditions, religious discourse

INTRODUCTION

Every weekday morning, millions of viewers across Africa, Europe, North America, and the diaspora watch Pastor Jerry Eze lead the New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD) on YouTube. At a predictable moment in the broadcast, Pastor Eze raises his voice to a distinctive declaratory register: “I decree and declare over your life—wherever you are watching this—that every door closed against you is open now, in the name of Jesus!” Thousands of comments flood the livestream chat simultaneously—“Amen,” “I receive it,” “Fire!”—giving the moment the texture of a collective ritual.

Yet something philosophically strange is occurring. In Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts (Searle, 1969, 1979), Declarations bring about the states of affairs they name rather than merely describing them; paradigm cases include a judge pronouncing a verdict or a priest pronouncing a couple married. What makes such acts succeed—their felicity conditions—is tied to institutional authority and, crucially, the co-presence of relevant parties within a shared institutional context. Pastor Eze's declarations pose a direct challenge to this picture: his “congregation” is dispersed across dozens of time zones, and the institutional framework is a digital platform rather than a physical building. Yet by the testimony of millions of participants, something works. This paper asks: What happens to illocutionary force when a declarative

speech act is performed via livestream to a physically absent, digitally distributed audience? And what linguistic strategies does Pastor Eze deploy to construct the felicity conditions his declarations require?

The inquiry is significant in three respects. It pressure-tests Searle's framework against a context it did not anticipate; it contributes to digital pragmatics, which examines how computer-mediated communication alters classical pragmatic categories (Herring, 2007; Yus, 2011); and it contributes to the linguistic study of African Pentecostalism, a global religious movement whose communicative practices remain under-analyzed despite their cultural reach. The paper proceeds through a review of relevant literature, an outline of the theoretical framework, a description of data and method, presentation of findings, a discussion of theoretical implications, and concluding remarks.

Literature Review

The intellectual foundations of this study lie in the ordinary language philosophy inaugurated by Austin (1962), who argued that a class of utterances—performatives—do not describe pre-existing states of affairs but constitute actions in the moment of utterance. Austin distinguished locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, and introduced the concept of felicity conditions: the criteria that must obtain for a performative to succeed, and whose violation produces an “unhappy” performative, or misfire. Searle (1969) systematized this insight into a five-part taxonomy of illocutionary acts organized by illocutionary point, direction of fit, and sincerity conditions; his later work (Searle, 1979) refined the category of Declarations, emphasizing their unique double direction of fit and grounding their felicity in extra-linguistic institutional facts—only speakers occupying a recognized institutional role can successfully perform Declarations. This institutional grounding has been both productive and contested: critics have argued that institutional authority is itself linguistically constructed rather than simply presupposed, a point with direct relevance to the prophetic declaration context examined here. Hancher (1979) extended this picture by showing that a single utterance can carry multiple, simultaneous illocutionary forces—cooperative, subordinate, or sequential—a framework indispensable for analyzing declarations that operate across multiple audiences at once.

The application of speech act theory to religious language has an independent lineage. Tambiah (1968) argued that ritual utterances are not failed descriptions but constitutive performatives operating within specific cosmological frameworks—an analysis that anticipates the NSPPD context, where declarations are understood to act causally on spiritual reality. Keane (2007) brought semiotic and pragmatic analysis to Protestant language ideologies, showing that beliefs about the efficacy of speech, and about sincerity as an inner intentional state aligned with utterance, are culturally and historically specific rather than universal.

The sociological and theological literature on African Pentecostalism supplies essential context. Kalu (2008) identifies “positive confession” or “word of faith” theology—the belief that verbal declarations of faith have direct causal efficacy—as central to the movement's communicative culture. Ukah (2008) examines the rhetorical construction of pastoral authority in Nigerian Pentecostalism through the concept of “spiritual technology,” the systematic deployment of verbal and ritual practices understood to produce reliable spiritual effects. Quayesi-Amakye (2011) shows how Ghanaian and Nigerian pastors construct themselves as mouthpieces of divine authority, grounding their prophetic function in claimed direct commissioning rather than ecclesiastical ordination—precisely the authorization strategy, here termed Divine Mandate Authorization, most systematically deployed by Pastor Eze. Chinaguh et al. (2025) demonstrate the productive application of speech act analysis to West African political-religious discourse, finding that illocutionary structure encodes ideological stances irreducible to propositional content; their systematic coding approach informs the method adopted here.

A third relevant body of work is digital pragmatics, which investigates how computer-mediated communication (CMC) transforms classical pragmatic categories (Herring, 2007; Yus, 2011). Hutchby

(2001) introduced the concept of technological affordances, arguing that platforms are structured environments that enable and constrain particular interactional possibilities. Licoppe (2004) described “connected presence,” a mode of relational togetherness sustained through continuous, low-intensity digital contact rather than physical co-presence—a concept directly relevant to NSPPD’s daily livestream format. Androutsopoulos (2014) identified a stratified participation framework in social media broadcasting, in which live, archived, and algorithmically recommended audiences are addressed as layered publics.

Taken together, these three literatures leave a gap: speech act theory has rarely been applied to digitally mediated religious performance; African Pentecostalism scholarship has rarely subjected prophetic speech to rigorous illocutionary analysis; and digital pragmatics has largely confined itself to secular contexts. This study is positioned at their intersection.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Searle’s (1969, 1979) taxonomy of illocutionary acts—Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declarations—as its primary analytic lens. Declarations are theoretically distinctive: they bring about correspondence between propositional content and reality simply by being felicitously uttered (Searle, 1979), and their central felicity condition is that the speaker must occupy a position of institutional authority (Searle, 1969). Austin’s (1962) four classical felicity conditions are adopted as coding criteria: a preparatory condition (institutional authority), a sincerity condition (genuine intent), an essential condition (the utterance counts as the act within the relevant institution), and a contextual condition (relevant parties must be present and able to receive the act). It is this fourth, contextual condition that digital mediation most directly disrupts, since the NSPPD “congregation” is neither physically co-present nor synchronously receiving the broadcast.

Hancher’s (1979) concept of multiple illocutionary force is adopted to capture utterances such as “I decree and declare that your enemies fall now,” which can simultaneously function as a Directive to the congregation, a Declaration addressed to the spiritual realm, an Assertive to God, and an Expressive of the speaker’s faith. Digital pragmatics supplies a complementary layer: Androutsopoulos’s (2014) multi-tier participation structure, Hutchby’s (2001) concept of technological affordance, and Licoppe’s (2004) connected presence together explain how audiences interpret and respond to declarations delivered across substantial temporal and spatial discontinuity. Finally, the study draws on Ukah’s (2008) concept of “spiritual technology” and Kalu’s (2008) account of positive confession to situate the analysis within the theological logic of the tradition itself: the pastor is understood not merely to describe spiritual reality but to speak as a mouthpiece for divine authority—a claimed institutional position that supplies the preparatory felicity condition Searle’s framework requires.

METHODOLOGY

The data consist of twelve declaration segments sampled from NSPPD morning livestreams broadcast on the official NSPPD YouTube channel between March 1 and April 30, 2026. Selection criteria required a clearly demarcated “decree and declare” sequence of at least ninety seconds, with variation across days of the week, thematic prayer focus, and broadcast length. The twelve segments range from approximately two to eight minutes, yielding a corpus of roughly forty-seven minutes of spoken discourse spanning themes including business and finances, health and healing, family relationships, career and promotion, spiritual warfare, and financial miracles. Segments were transcribed using a modified version of Jefferson’s (2004) transcription conventions, adapted for an audio-only, religious-discourse context to capture pauses, stress, intonation, pace, and audience-response prompts. A two-pass coding scheme was then applied. In the first pass, each clause or utterance unit was assigned a primary illocutionary category following Searle’s (1969) taxonomy: Assertive, Directive, Commissive, Expressive, or Declaration. In the second pass, each coded unit was further coded for target audience (human congregation, spiritual realm, God, or both), felicity-construction strategy (one of five emergent categories

detailed below), and a multiple-force flag indicating whether more than one illocutionary force was simultaneously present. Coding was conducted iteratively, with categories refined through repeated passes across the corpus until stable, mutually exclusive definitions were reached.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Five-Phase Rhetorical Architecture

Across all twelve segments, a remarkably consistent five-phase structure emerges, constituting the genre grammar of the NSPPD declaration segment. Phase 1, Invocation and Authorization (15–30 seconds), opens every segment with an explicit claim to divine mandate, establishing the preparatory felicity condition: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: I have been sent to declare, to proclaim, to command things to be.” Phase 2, Spatial Transcendence Framing (10–20 seconds), neutralizes physical distance between speaker and audience: “It does not matter where you are watching this from... the word that is going out of my mouth is reaching you RIGHT NOW.” Phase 3, Congregational Fusion, marks a systematic pronoun shift from “I” to “we,” fusing speaker and dispersed audience into a single declaratory subject. Phase 4, the Declaration Cascade (90 seconds–5 minutes), consists of a rhythmically organized series of declarative utterances following the micro-structure [performative verb phrase] + [target state of affairs] + [temporal marker] + [authorization tag]. Phase 5, Congregational Sealing (15–30 seconds), closes each segment with an explicit invitation to confirm receipt: “Now type in that comment box—‘I RECEIVE IT.’ It’s done. Heaven has heard.”

Illocutionary Act Distribution

Table 1 presents the distribution of illocutionary act types across the 487 coded units. Declarations are the single most frequent type (38.4%), consistent with the genre’s self-identification, though they do not constitute a majority—indicating that Declarations are embedded within a scaffolding of other act types. Directives are the second most frequent category (29.3%), reflecting a substantial directive dimension addressed to the congregation. Assertives cluster in the authorization and framing phases, while Commissives are comparatively rare (3.3%), occurring mainly where Pastor Eze makes explicit promises on God’s behalf.

Table 1

Distribution of Illocutionary Act Types Across the 12 Segments

Act Type	Total Coded Units	% of Total	Primary Phase
Declaration (DE)	187	38.4%	Phase 4
Directive (DI)	143	29.3%	Phases 3, 4, 5
Assertive (AS)	89	18.3%	Phases 1, 2, 4
Expressive (EX)	52	10.7%	Phases 1, 5
Commissive (CO)	16	3.3%	Phases 1, 4
Total	487	100%	—

Strategies for Constructing Felicity Conditions

Five distinct strategies for constructing—rather than presupposing—felicity conditions were identified. Divine Mandate Authorization (DMA) grounds authority in direct divine commissioning rather than institutional co-presence, through markers such as “sent,” “anointed,” and “commissioned”: “God

did not send me here to talk to you—He sent me here to DECREE over your life. I am a sent one.” Spatial Transcendence Framing (STF) reframes physical distance as spiritually irrelevant, through geographic enumeration and medium-transcendence claims: “This word is not carried by internet connection—it is carried by the Spirit. The Spirit is not limited by bandwidth.” Pronominal Fusion (PF) is the systematic shift from second-person to first-person plural, linguistically assembling a unified declaratory subject from the pastor’s voice and the congregation’s dispersed presence. Temporal Immediacy Construction (TIC) deploys vivid temporal markers to construct a shared “now” across time-zone displacement: “The moment you touched that ‘play’ button—the anointing was already activated. Time does not matter in the spirit realm.” Audience Response Integration (ARI) treats the YouTube comment box as an essential component of the speech act’s completion: “As you type ‘Amen’—you are not just typing—you are AGREEING. You are DECREETING with me.”

Multiple Illocutionary Force and Dual-Audience Declarations

In 73 of the 187 coded Declarations (39%), the utterance simultaneously carried at least two distinct illocutionary forces directed at two distinct audiences—termed Dual-Audience Declarations (DADs). Analysis reveals a consistent four-layer structure: a Directive to the human congregation, a Declaration to the spiritual realm, an Assertive addressed to both audiences, and a Commissive invoking divine ratification. Table 2 presents the frequency distribution by target combination; the most frequent pattern (41 instances) addresses the spiritual realm primarily while implicating the human congregation secondarily. This finding extends Hancher’s (1979) account of multiple illocutionary force by showing that the multiplicity is not incidental but systematically organized around a dual cosmological audience structure that is constitutive of the genre.

Table 2 *Dual-Audience Declaration Frequency by Target Combination*

Primary Target	Secondary Target	Count	Example
Spiritual realm	Human congregation	41	“I bind that spirit—receive your freedom”
Human congregation	God/Divine	18	“Your blessing is here—thank You Lord”
Human congregation	Spiritual realm	9	“You are healed—sickness, leave now”
God/Divine	Human congregation	5	“Lord, open their eyes—see it today”

DISCUSSION

The central theoretical contribution of this study is the concept of *distributed institutional authority*: a form of institutional authorization for performative speech that is assembled across, rather than presupposed by, a shared physical-institutional context. Searle’s (1969) framework treats the institutional authority enabling Declarations as prior to, and independent of, any particular utterance. In the NSPPD context, this authority is, to a significant degree, constructed in and through discourse itself, via the five strategies identified above. This suggests a revision to Searle’s model: in digitally mediated institutional contexts, the preparatory felicity condition for Declarations may be partly performative, constructed through discourse rather than merely presupposed by it. A related finding concerns uptake. Austin (1962) identified the hearer’s understanding and acknowledgment of a speech act as necessary to its success. In the NSPPD context, the YouTube comment box functions as a digitally mediated uptake mechanism: when Pastor Eze instructs viewers to type “I receive it,” he is not merely inviting a response but constructing the conditions under which his declarations can achieve uptake. This suggests that platform-specific interactive features can be recruited into the illocutionary machinery of speech acts, serving functions analogous to physical co-present response mechanisms.

A deeper challenge to Searle's framework emerges from what might be termed institutional multiplexity: at least three co-active institutional frameworks operate simultaneously in the NSPPD context—the digital platform framework (YouTube's architecture and affordances), the human ecclesial framework (Pentecostal normative structures), and the spiritual-cosmological framework within which declarations are understood to have real effects. Hancher's (1979) concept of multiple illocutionary force is helpful here, but the data point toward a further concept of multiple institutional frames, each generating its own felicity conditions and illocutionary force for the same utterance.

The sincerity condition, too, is reframed by this context. Rather than a private mental state that either does or does not obtain, sincerity in the NSPPD context is itself performed and constructed—through elevated vocal register, emphatic stress, and confident temporal markers. This resonates with Keane's (2007) observation that sincerity is a culturally specific language ideology rather than a universal precondition of felicitous speech, pointing toward a broader theoretical insight: in religious speech act contexts, the sincerity condition may operate quite differently than standard pragmatic theory assumes.

These findings are subject to several limitations. Twelve segments represent a small fraction of NSPPD's output, and longitudinal analysis across a fuller broadcast record would be needed to assess variation over time. The study examines a single speaker; comparative analysis with other African Pentecostal online prayer leaders would test the genre's generalizability. It analyzes only the production side of the discourse; ethnographic audience research would usefully complement the present analysis. Finally, audio-only transcription cannot capture the visual and gestural dimensions that likely also contribute to the construction of illocutionary force.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the illocutionary structure of prophetic declarations in NSPPD morning prayer livestreams, addressing a central puzzle: how the felicity conditions for Declarations are constructed when the audience is physically absent and digitally dispersed. The analysis identifies a five-phase rhetorical architecture (Invocation/Authorization → Spatial Transcendence Framing → Congregational Fusion → Declaration Cascade → Congregational Sealing); five felicity-condition construction strategies (Divine Mandate Authorization, Spatial Transcendence Framing, Pronominal Fusion, Temporal Immediacy Construction, and Audience Response Integration); a pervasive pattern of Dual-Audience Declarations carrying multiple simultaneous illocutionary layers; and the construction of distributed institutional authority assembled through discourse rather than presupposed by physical institutional context.

These findings contribute to speech act theory by showing that felicity conditions are not merely presupposed constraints on performative utterances but can themselves be performatively constructed—a finding with implications beyond the religious domain for any context in which digital mediation disrupts the classical conditions of co-present institutional interaction. They contribute to digital pragmatics by showing how platform-specific affordances are recruited into the illocutionary machinery of speech acts, and to the study of African Pentecostalism by offering a rigorous linguistic account of how one of the world's most influential religious movements constructs collective spiritual authority across the distances of digital globality.

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Appendix A: Complete Coding Scheme Primary Illocutionary Act Categories

AS – Assertive. Utterance commits speaker to truth of proposition. Subtypes: AS-auth (assertive serving authorization function); AS-desc (assertive describing spiritual/material state of affairs).

DI – Directive. Utterance attempts to get hearer to do/believe something. Subtypes: DI-receive (directive to receive declared blessing); DI-respond (directive to produce verbal/typed response); DI-posture (directive to adopt spiritual posture).

CO – Commissive. Utterance commits speaker to future action. Subtypes: CO-divine (commissive invoking divine action); CO-pastor (commissive where pastor pledges prophetic action).

EX – Expressive. Utterance expresses psychological/spiritual state. Subtypes: EX-praise, EX-gratitude, EX-urgency.

DE – Declaration. Utterance brings about a change by representing it as obtaining.

Subtypes: DE-blessing, DE-binding, DE-loosing, DE-decree, DE-prophecy.

Appendix B: Source Videos – YouTube Links

The following are the twelve NSPPD YouTube videos from which declaration segments were sampled. All videos are publicly accessible on the official NSPPD and Pastor Jerry Eze YouTube channels (youtube.com/@NSPPD).