# Employing Speech Act Theory as an Exegetical Tool on the Matthean Beatitudes

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## Abstract

The literary nature of the Beatitudes demonstrates a composition that developed orally. Speech act theory is utilized in understanding the oral features of the text as well as demonstrating what Jesus did in his utterances. The significance of the Beatitudes lies in the authoritative utterances of Jesus. Speech act theory allows for an investigation into the nature of those utterances. This paper recognizes six principles guiding speech act theory on the Beatitudes. A speech act model is presented and applied to the Beatitudes pericope (Matt 5:3-16). The formula is SP+(EE)CH=ACT: analyse the situated performativity of a text, add it to the multiplying nature of existential engagement by the interpreter with the illocutionary force found through the critical horizon of guiding worldviews, and the result is an Acquired Communal Translation for the social body.

It is understood that Matthew intended to compose a pericope in serving as a paradigmatic utterance to guide the Matthean community in its existence and mission in the world. In addition, the paradigm is to be adopted by all Christian communities in their mission to the world.

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# 1. Background to the Study

For centuries, the beauty of the Beatitudes has amazed readers with both its literary and rhythmic quality, as well as its theological significance. It is probably one of the most familiar pericopes, besides the Lord's Prayer, in the New Testament (Matt 5:3-12). The sayings attributed to Jesus by Matthew, formed a purpose for the new community as it struggled in its infancy. This new community Matthew addressed consisted primarily of Jewish Christians at its inception, but incorporated Gentile believers over time (Davies and Allison 1988:33; 133-138; Hagner 1993:lxiv-lxxi; Stanton 1993:124-145; Betz 1995:1-4; Barnett 1999:362; Skarsaune 2002:222-223; France 2007:17-18; Luz 2007:45-55, 84-87).

## 1.1. The Matthean community in an oral environment

Identity clarification was critical at this juncture of the church's beginning. One of the major struggles within the Matthean community related to how much of their Jewish past would be involved in the expression of Christ-cantered worship. With roots in their past, Matthew addressed how the Matthean community reflected those concepts as reflective of God's presence through Jesus, as metaphorically represented in 'salt' and 'light' (Matt 5:14-16). Through literary analysis, the pericope of the Beatitudes demonstrates its affinity toward Jewish themes and Semitic compositional expressions of both its past and of the 1$^{st}$ century. It was through both the literary composition and oral context that Matthew demonstrated a paradigm that the new community had adopted in its realization of purpose and intention in the world (cf. Person 1998:601).

Hence, for the new community, a communal self-definition was implicit, and Matthew offered his model as the ultimate paradigm

(Haber 2008:157). By focusing on the oral quality of both the text and the Christian community, it was revealed how the Beatitudes served as a mirror to its existence. Pragmatically, the new community would have 'repeated, remembered, recovered, and referred' to the Matthean composition, resulting in a 'cultural text' for its members (cf. Assmann 2006:75-76). The process of word composition was a communal and social activity governed by oral performance (cf. Downing 1996:30-34). The literary pericope demonstrates an oral composition and a culture based 'in the art of recitation' (Hearon 2006:9; cf. von Dobschutz 1983:26). Performance criticism has brought attention to the 1st century culture and its fondness for storytelling, which served for entertainment, education, and celebration (Person 1998; Rhoads 2006; Hearon 2009:25-34).

## 1.2. Speech act theory and the contributions of Austin, Searle, Wolterstorff, and Briggs

Speech act theory actually received its due attention after the early death of its founder, JL Austin. The lectures Austin gave in 1955 at Harvard University (published in 1962) catapulting speech act theory to philosophical stature. His student, John Searle, can be credited with the expansion of speech act methodology as a tool for research in communication and philosophy (cf. Searle 1969, 1979). Other disciplines soon followed in employing speech act theory, such as literary theory (cf. Skinner 1970:118-138; Pratt 1977; Petrey 1990) and theology (cf. Patte 1988:85-102; White 1988:1-24; Briggs 2001; Vanhoozer 2001:1-49; Wolterstorff 2001:73-90).

Austin introduced the three levels of understanding utterances (1975:98-103). It should be remembered that Austin's lecture simply introduced the concepts. There have been various adjustments and

modifications by speech act scholars as they have examined and dissected them. Cohen has offered a summary of the Austinian three level distinctions as 'of saying' (locution), 'in saying' (illocution), and 'by saying' (perlocution) (1973:493).

*The locutionary act.* The locutionary act is the act of saying something. With speech or words, the utterance is transmitted. As Austin elaborated, it is 'the utterance of certain noises … the utterance of certain words … the utterance of them with a "certain meaning"' (1975:92-93).

*The illocutionary act.* This is the 'performance of an act in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something' (Austin 1975:99-100). This act involves the significance or force of the utterance (BeDuhn 2002:86). Examples would include promising, blessing, declaring, warning, and the like. These words convey the functionality of the illocutionary act (cf. Wolterstorff 1995:37).

*The perlocutionary act.* A perlocutionary act is the 'consequential effect' of an utterance (Austin 1975:101). This is the response or result of a speech act upon the speaker, hearer, or others. This characteristic of speech act theory has not been as prominent in the discussion of the methodology. However, Holdcroft has pointed to its importance as demonstrating the validity of an utterance, since the utterance would be useless if no possible purpose could result from it being said (1978:100).

Searle's clarification of performatives has advanced speech act theory from Austin's introduction. The key question posed by Searle is 'how does the saying constitute the doing' (2002:88). The central idea surrounding how declarations can be determined as performative is the social context of rules, regulations, and institutions (Searle 1996:111-

112; 2002:104-105). The rules within society operate in such a way, as to dictate if the speech act is performative between speaker and hearer.

Searle contributions to speech act theory are two-fold, and serve as helpful tools for biblical interpretation: 'direction to fit' and construction of reality paradigms. Searle emphasised that 'direction of fit' is one condition guiding every linguistic act (1979:1-29). The direction of fit is the 'world of the utterance', that is, the way propositional content is construed in reality (Searle and Vanderveken 1985:52).

a) The word-to-world direction of fit = (assertives), the illocutionary act fits into the independent state of affairs.
b) The world-to-word direction of fit = (commissives and directives), the world is altered to fit the illocutionary act.
c) The double direction of fit = (declaratives), the world is altered to fit the illocutionary act by representing the world as so altered.
d) The null or empty direction of fit = (expressives), no question of achieving a successful fit of illocutionary act to the world.

The notion of God speaking and communicating to humanity is referred to by Wolterstorff as 'divine discourse' (1995:37-57). In addition, the God who speaks is the God who acts and 'must causally bring about events generative of divine discourse' (Wolterstorff 1995:117). However, Wolterstorff readily admits that the worldviews and convictions about what God would say or not say continue to influence the interpretation of divine discourse (1995:221-222). The interpreter, then, understands the discourse as guided by belief in the intention of the discourse.

Wolterstorff builds his argument of divine discourse on the model of double-discourse appropriation, which is the speech of someone else appropriated by another (1995:52). It compares to a 'me, too' approach in speaking (cf. Gutenson 1998:142-143). In terms of the biblical text, God was the author in the sense that human discourse was appropriated by God as a medium to express the divine discourse (Wolterstorff 1995:54-56, 187-197). The result is that two hermeneutics are involved in understanding the biblical text, namely, interpreting the mediating human discourse, and interpreting the mediated divine discourse (Wolterstorff 1995:183-222).

According to Briggs, speech act theory is a hermeneutical tool for 'self-involvement' within the text (2001:5-17). He suggests that this self-involvement with the text is more a matter of function than logic, since it operates on the posture taken by the interpreter as influenced by the text (2001:8; 2008:98-106). Self-involvement is described as 'the speaking subject invests him or herself in a state of affairs by adopting a stance towards that state of affairs' (Briggs 2001:148).

Speech act theory should not be viewed as a comprehensive criticism for all scriptural texts, but, instead, as a paradigmatic theory in searching for illocutionary acts in various texts (Briggs 2008:94-98). Through speech act theory, those texts that demonstrate 'the transformative effects of illocutionary acts' can best be understood through the 'hermeneutic of self-involvement' whereby the interpreter 'can rightly construe the illocutionary act performed' (Briggs 2008:102-103). Illocutionary force is the actual performance of an act in saying something (Austin 1975:99-100). The importance, then, is not only that something has been said, but in the nature of the actual utterance itself. The 'blessing' utterance, as found in the Beatitudes, would carry the effect of a declaration in any given speech act (cf. Guelich 1976:416-417). Since oral recitation and repetition were first century practices

(Dunn 2007:185), speech act theory can facilitate greater awareness of how the community practiced its core beliefs through an oral exchange. Since interpretation is dependent upon presuppositions, contexts, and semantics, so speech act theory is a methodology that coincides with theology in aiding it by explaining the language events and their importance.

## 2. Principles That Govern Speech Act Theory in the Beatitudes

Through the maze of speech act dialogue, certain principles should be considered as foundational in forming a speech act model. Speech act theory should not be considered as a tool for discovering the meaning or force of sentences alone (cf. Poythress 2008:344-345). What must be considered is the big picture within the speech act, or the total meaning of an utterance (Patte 1988:91). From this study, there are important principles deemed necessary for speech act theory to accommodate itself to biblical hermeneutics.

### 2.1. Intentionality must be considered when examining speech acts within text creation

There would be no text creation without the intention of an author. The very notion of an 'intention-less' text is absurd. All discourse and literary theory has the premise that an author began with a subject he or she wanted an audience to understand (cf. Harris 1988:60). Without the understanding of intentionality on the part of the author, the linguistic unit makes no ultimate sense (cf. Patte 1988:98).

The Beatitudes demonstrate intentionality in both its structure and content. The structure exhibits a tool for mnemonic practice. The

carefully balanced strophes, combined with alliteration and assonance, conveys a text pragmatically and paradigmatically created. The speeches of Jesus were orally transmitted as they were heard and seen among his followers. The reported speech acts were 'as much shaped by agents' and reporters' intentions, perceptions and (re)-interpretations as any speeches and accounts of speech are' (Downing 2000:16). Matthew intended to design a text to be adopted as a definitive paradigm for the existence of the Matthean community.

In this study, the following terms will be used in reference to the poetic structure of a text: hemistich (half the length of a colon), colon (single line of poetry), bicolon (two lines or cola), strophe (verse-unit of cola), and stanza (one or more strophes) (cf. Watson 2005:12-13). This study has found that the Beatitude pericope consists of two stanzas (Matt 5:3-12 and 5:13-16) and five strophes (Matt 5:3-6, 7-10, 11-12, 13, 14-16).

DiLella has also pointed to the symmetrical nature of each hemistich (half colon), demonstrating how Matthew employed words totaling three, five, or seven in each hemistich (1989:237-242). The total word count was seventy-two. The extended Beatitude (5:11-12) contained thirty-five words. Could this have been a mnemonic practice of remembering sections for textual performance (cf. Person 1998:601-609)? By bridging the sections together with chain-link transitions, the flow of material would be achieved (cf. Longenecker 2005:23-50). The chain-link consisted of key words or phrases connecting paragraphs or strophes together.

In the first two strophes of the Beatitudes, the inclusio 'kingdom of heaven' was joined. The term 'righteousness', 'on account of me' and 'good works' served as chain-links joining the units of 5:3-6, 5:7-10, 5:11-12, and 5:13-16 together. The word 'persecution' joined 5:10, with

the subsequent 5:11-12, to demonstrate the relationship of all three strophes together.

## 2.2. The understanding of any speech act originates with contextual considerations

The context of an utterance provides the basis for meaning. Austin alluded to this as 'the total speech act in the total speech situation' (1975:148). Context can be defined as 'the totality of conditions that influence the understanding and generation of linguistic behaviour' (Bunt 2000:81-82) or the 'concentric circles of influence or effect of some state of affairs' (van Dijk 2008:4). Searle referred to the rules governing speech acts as constitutive (1969:12; 1996:111-112). Bunt has clarified the five dimensions of context: linguistic, semantic, cognitive, physical / perceptual, and social (2000:100).

Within the communicative process, the reader must have the understanding that all contextual dimensions influence the speech act. Although a text may not yield suitable information of a particular dimension, one should always be mindful of the totality of dimensions in the overall speech act (cf. Harris 1988:78). What begins to emerge out of such contextual considerations is a point of view by the reader of the text. The reader's point of view is essential for text interpretation.

In the following example, three possible ways of understanding the locution are provided in reference to the particular context (cf. Table 2.1).

| Examples of contextual possibilities |
|---|
| Speaker: 'Do you know how cold it is?' |
| #1 Hearer response: S wants to know the temperature outside (assertive). |
| #2 Hearer response: S is suggesting more clothing for the H (directive). |
| #3 Hearer response: S is belittling H for not appropriately recognising how to dress for the cold (expressive). |
| Speaker: 'The dog is outside' |
| #1 Hearer response: S wants H to bring the dog into the house (directive). |
| #2 Hearer response: S is expressing that the dog is in the cold and hopes H will allow the dog into the house (expressive). |
| #3 Hearer response: S is answering the question of H over the whereabouts of the dog (assertive). |

*Table 1: Examples of contextual possibilities*

The literary context for the Beatitudes was twofold, namely, (a) a description of the repentant community, and (b) the righteousness that characterized the community of Christ followers. The first four Beatitudes depicted repentance from the literary viewpoint of a paradigm shift (cf. Matt 5:3-6). By using 'poor in spirit' as a metonym for the needy, Matthew described the change brought to them by Jesus. The last four Beatitudes described the characteristic righteousness of Jesus in those referred to as 'the persecuted', a metonym for Christ followers (cf. Matt 5:7-10). Matthew followed with a specific application to the Matthean community and its crisis of persecution (cf. Matt 5:11-16).

## 2.3. Speech acts are worldview snapshots

Although the context is vital in comprehending a speech act, the utterance is framed within a worldview. Skinner has pointed to the need of the historian to demonstrate that speaking agents of the past were 'rational as possible' within the framework of their beliefs and worldviews (1988:239-246). Speech act theory can assist the literary model from the concept of point of view (cf. Lotman 1975:339). For the reader, the question is how does the text refer to reality? It is not enough to decipher the linguistic units of discourse.

Matthew embraced a worldview characteristic of the Jewish metanarrative. Without doubt, the Gospel of Matthew was the most Jewish of the gospels (Luz 2007:45-48). By the time Matthew composed his gospel, many Jewish Christians in the new community had been forced out of the synagogues due to messianic claims concerning Jesus (Barnett 1999:362). This caused both social and emotional upheaval. Matthew addressed this situation by using notions reminiscent of their Jewish past, but framing it in a new Christian ideology, namely, temple concepts and covenant promise (Skarsaune 2002:162, 177, 274; France 2008:109). Similar comparison can be demonstrated within the Qumran literature, as the community struggled for legitimacy within Second Temple Judaism (cf. Wilson 2005:55-56).

Within the Beatitudes, conceptions found within the Jewish metanarrative were present. Examples would include the blessing motif as practiced by the Jewish patriarchs. Blessing was also pronounced upon Israel by the temple priests. Another example would be the kingdom of heaven concept that originated with Abraham and elucidated through the Davidic promise and visions of Daniel. Furthermore, the theme of righteousness was depicted as the continuous

need of Israel in its relationship to God. Finally, salt and light were metaphoric of God and sacrifice throughout the Jewish writings.

## 2.4. Speech acts are socially constructed and complementary

A text is written through meaning associated with its social constitution. Social conditions are like thermostats, which make speech acts possible (cf. Briggs 2001:63-67). Speech act theory demonstrates the knowledge that a community is an interpretive one, of both itself and the world in which it operates. The community is strengthened through its language (speech acts), both in addressing its existence in the world and in the world of its own existence (cf. Verhey 2007:22-23). By examining the speech acts of a particular social body, various patterns emerge demonstrating explanation, correction or confirmation among its members. What matters are the utterances a community employs in describing shared reality, not simply the reality itself (cf. Petrey 1990:40-41; Esterhammer 1993:288).

Throughout the Beatitudes, the focus was on the social body of the Matthean community. The grammatical movement, from third person to second person, demonstrates how Matthew utilized fixed tradition for practical purposes. Matthew created a literary construct from the social interaction of the community. Many times social interaction became ritualized for the maintenance of a community (cf. Patrick 1999:11). The Beatitudes functioned as ritualistic blessings for the Matthean community to remain faithful as representatives of Christ, even when persecuted for doing so. To the social body, he gives the imperatives to 'rejoice, be glad, and let your light shine' (cf. Matt 5:12, 16). The world would benefit from the salt and light present in the social body, demonstrating God's goodness.

## 2.5. The role of the hearer in the speech act cannot be diminished

The primary reason for saying something is to communicate an understandable intention (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979:3). This implies that every speech act has a speaker and a hearer. The same can be said for the literary dimension, each text has an author and an audience. Within speech act studies, the primary emphasis has been on the speaker. This is unfortunate since the role of the hearer has been diminished to a reactionary object (Masaki 2004:34-36; cf. Gorman 1999:102-103). By viewing communication from a linear position, emphasis is placed on the speaker controlling the utterance, while the hearer is an object (cf. Figure 2.2).
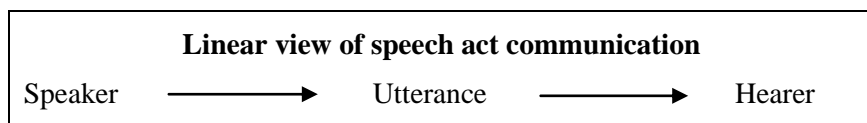
| **Linear view of speech act communication** | | |
|:---|:---:|---:|
| Speaker ⟶ | Utterance ⟶ | Hearer |

*Figure 2.2: Linear view of speech act communication*

A successful illocutionary act always involves reciprocity (cf. Hornsby 1994:198-207). However, the speech act is a portion of the total speech situation, whereby the hearer becomes actively involved because of language and contextual recognition in the network of relationships (Petrey 1990:89; cf. Vanhoozer 2001:23; Skinner 2002:109-115). One should never lose sight of the purpose of an utterance in its 'act': to be interpreted and acted upon accordingly by the hearer (Holdcroft 1978:70-71; Bach and Harnish 1979:17; Landa 1992:98-99; Gu 1993:422; Masaki 2004:35).

One cannot dispute the speaker as the source of an utterance. However, the hearer has responsibility to the utterance and to the speaker in a speech act situation. The hearer becomes the source for interpreting both the speaker and the utterance by sharing common ground if an

illocutionary force is recognized (cf. Kissine 2009:128-134). Both have a bilateral responsibility to the utterance: the speaker in creating and the hearer in understanding. Speakers and authors employ language with 'audience design', imagining to whom they speak (Clark and Carlson 1982:342). A dynamic view of a speech act involves mutual responsibilities and emphasizes the utterance as the object (cf. Figure 2.3).
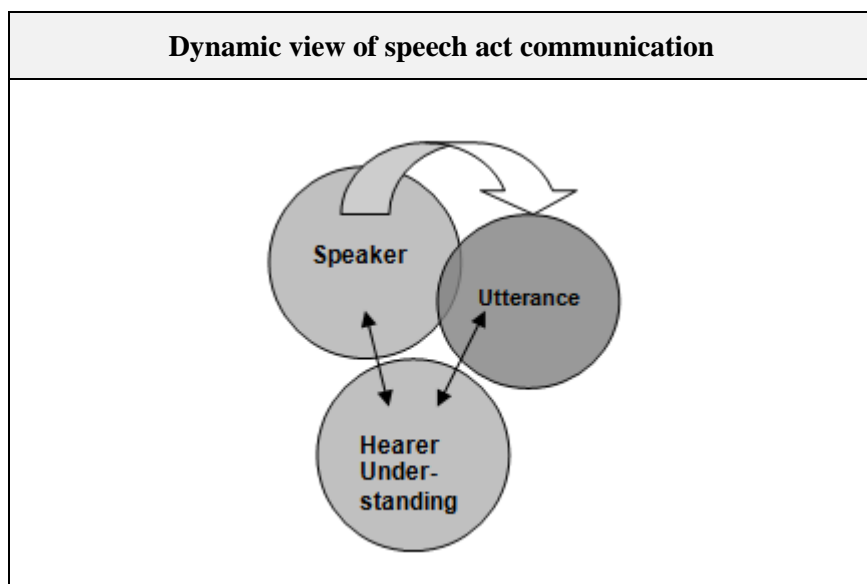


**Dynamic view of speech act communication**

Speaker

Utterance

Hearer Under-standing

*Figure 2.3: Dynamic view of speech act communication*

The dynamic view of speech act communication is vital in recognizing the context of the Beatitudes. The intention of the literary composition by Matthew was to perpetuate the divine utterance on behalf of the hearers within the Matthean community. Matthew portrayed Jesus as the authoritative voice of the blessings, a 'language which authorizes and assigns a role' to the hearer (Thiselton 1992:288). The speech act was the actual state of blessings upon the hearers. Matthew further

elaborated on the blessings with the declaratives 'you are the salt of the earth' and 'you are the light of the world' (cf. Matt 5:14-16).

The backdrop to the Beatitudes was the message of Jesus 'repent, the kingdom of heaven is near', and the calling of the disciples (4:17, 18-25). Theologically, Matthew was describing the paradigm shift of a follower of Jesus. This shift (*metanoia*) was the basis for understanding the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes were descriptive of '*metanoia*' and its implications for Jesus followers (cf. Luz 1995:42-43; 2007:160). The 'shocking effects' of the Beatitudes demonstrated the radical paradigm shift within the new community, especially among the Jewish Christians (Kodjak 1986:42). How did Matthew demonstrate this paradigm shift in the arrangement of the Beatitude pericope (cf. Table 2.4)?
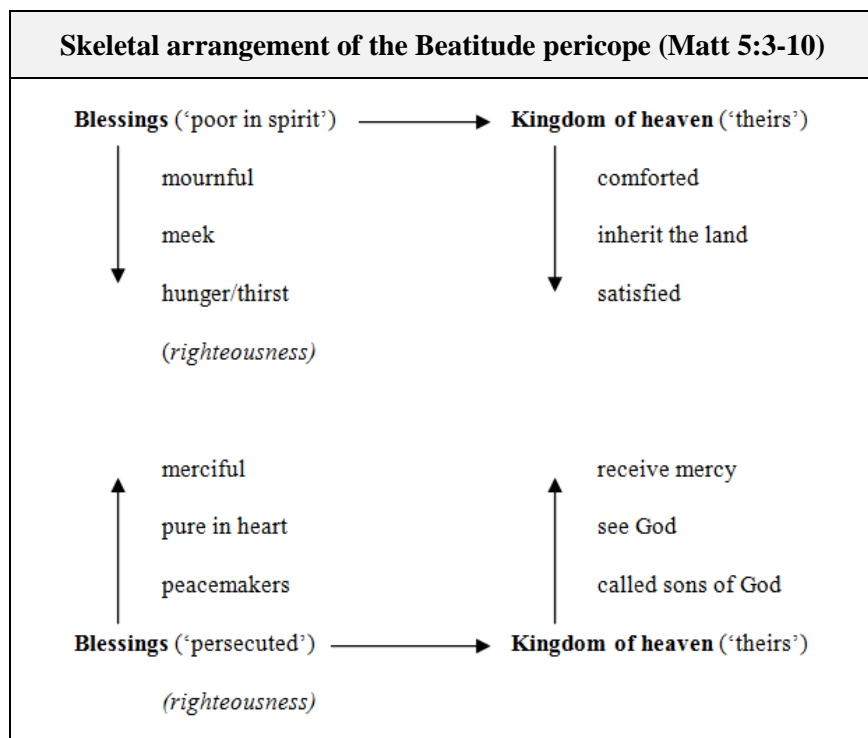
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**Skeletal arrangement of the Beatitude pericope (Matt 5:3-10)**

**Blessings** ('poor in spirit') ⟶ **Kingdom of heaven** ('theirs')

| mournful | comforted |
| meek | inherit the land |
| hunger/thirst | satisfied |

*(righteousness)*

| merciful | receive mercy |
| pure in heart | see God |
| peacemakers | called sons of God |

**Blessings** ('persecuted') ⟶ **Kingdom of heaven** ('theirs')

*(righteousness)*

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*Table 2.4: Skeletal arrangement of the Beatitude pericope*

## 2.6. Perlocutions are open-ended

Speech act theorists have not given as much attention to perlocutions as illocutions. Austin admitted in his 1955 lecture that perlocutions would be the hardest to distinguish from illocutions within his system of thought (1975:110). The definition Austin (1975:101) gave of a perlocution is important in understanding its distinction.

> Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention of purpose of producing them …We shall

call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act or perlocution.

There are four characteristics of perlocutions inferred from this definition by Austin.

*1. Speaking is a consequential act.* The understanding that speaking is consequential does not suggest the intention of the speaker predetermines the response or effect to the speech act (cf. BeDuhn 2002:103). If speaker one wants speaker two to shut the window, and states, 'It is really noisy outside', speaker two may be justified in retrieving earplugs for speaker one. The intention of speaker one was for the window to be shut, but the consequence of speaker one's speech act was earplugs. However, utterance is made with the intention of securing perlocutionary effect (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979:17).

*2. Speech acts generate change.* Perlocutions are communicative interactions between the speaker's speech act and the hearer's response. The potential for change due to a speech act is based on the level of involvement by the hearer (Marcu 2000:1726-1727). Perlocutionary effects cannot be managed or manipulated by the speaker (cf. van Dijk 1977:198). What the speaker controls is the illocutionary force which fosters the commencement of a perlocutionary act.

Although recognition by the hearer is important, it is only the beginning of the full perlocutionary effect. It is possible that perlocutionary effects could continue ad infinitum. The history of exegesis provides examples of changing interpretive communities (perlocutions), to which Maartens has referred to as 'growth rings' (1991:21). Speech act theory brings recognition to the first layer of perlocutionary action, with an understanding that subsequent layers could result (cf. Figure 2.5).
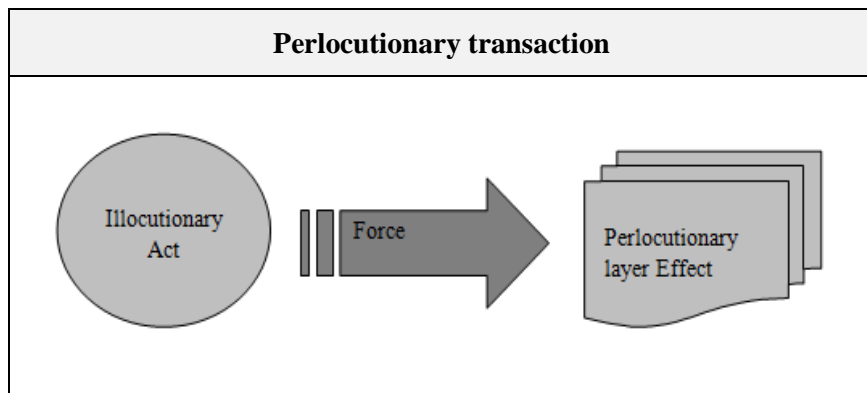
*Figure 2.5: Perlocutionary transaction*

*3. Observing speech act effects clarifies the illocutionary force.* Austin (1975:146) argued that all speech acts involve illocutionary force, also termed performatives. Vanderveken attempted to explain illocutionary force by focusing on the performative verbs in a speech act (1990:19-22). However, Leech (1983:174-175) contended that trying to decipher illocutionary force through the study of verbs is an 'error of grammaticizing'. In addition, Fish has pointed to the response of the hearer as indicator of the illocutionary force (1980:221-222; cf. Masaki 2004:40).

For instance, if a father yells to his son, 'The lake water is really cold', his son may understand it as a warning that swimming would be dangerous, or as a suggestion that he should be adjusted to the water slowly. Other contextual factors would also indicate the force of the illocution: is it summer or winter? On the other hand, is the son recovering from an illness? What must be understood is that the action in an illocutionary utterance constitutes the meaning itself, absent from the perlocutionary consequences (cf. Ray 1973:18). A significant reason for dissent over perlocutions is due to the rhetorical nature of the concept (cf. Landa 1992:99; Gu 1993:428). What can be assumed is

that speech act theory recognizes the perlocutionary act in the speech situation, whereby rhetorical criticism explains its greater significance outside the linguistic construction.

*4. Speech act effects strengthen with communal adaptation.* The perlocutionary act is usually described from the hearer's perspective. However, Austin mentioned the audience, speaker, and 'other persons' in his definition. Perlocutionary effects contribute toward the langue of society as adapted and maintained by a communal consciousness. As perlocutionary effects become embedded within a linguistic community, retrieval through interpretation and ritualism merge as dominant communicative traits (cf. Schaller 1988:415-417; Landa 1992:100-102). By viewing perlocutionary effects diachronically, layers of interpretation, what Landa refers to as 'contention and accumulation', can be demonstrated to exist in those speech acts a community deems significant (1992:102). However, what should remain through the layers of perlocutionary effects is a thread of illocutionary force that provided the commencement for the original perlocutionary act. Understanding both the illocutionary and rhetorical force of an utterance provides the interpretive community the pragmatic rationale for its adaptation of the perlocutionary act (cf. Du Plessis 1991:134-135).

When approaching the Beatitudes, the open-ended nature of perlocutionary effects is significant for succeeding Christian communities. With the illocutionary force being maintained, the Beatitudes serve the Christian community as it did for the Matthean community. The ability for a text to survive outside of its original domain with its continued communicative ability is known as a 'display text' (cf. Pratt 1977:133-151; Lanser 1981:284-286). Display texts are important as speech acts with continuing perlocutionary effects. As linguistic constructions, the text is 'closed', but as performative speech,

it is 'open' (cf. White 1979:172). For the community, 'the display text is its message; to contemplate the message is to receive it' (Lanser 1981:286). In receiving the text, the community adopts not only the meaning, but also the frame itself, allowing for perlocutionary effects.

## 3. Utilizing the Speech Act Model on the Beatitudes

The present study incorporated key concepts from speech act theorists in forming a paradigmatic model of speech act theory. The model derives from principles considered foundational to speech act theory. This model serves as a pragmatic tool used in understanding the text from a speech act perspective.

Speech act theory provides a hermeneutical stance to evaluate what illocutionary forces are operating in a text (cf. Briggs 2008:97). However, speech act theory is not simply a tool for the classification of utterances (texts) by the interpreter (cf. Poythress 2008:344-347). Instead, it is a hermeneutic recognizing the strength of an utterance measured through self-involvement with that utterance (cf. Briggs 2001:294-297). Stated differently, a speech act model should ascertain how transformative effects are achieved through utterance (cf. Briggs 2008:102). In relation to the emerging Christian movement, how did the Matthean community utilize the Beatitudes as speech acts?

The model utilized in this study is represented with the four dimensional acronym: **SP-EE-CH-ACT**. The application of the model is through the formula: **SP+(EE)CH = ACT**. The four dimensions are represented and explained as follows:

a) **SP** - **S**ituated **P**erformativity = participants, event, encoding
b) **EE** - **E**xistential **E**ngagement = current perlocutionary effect
c) **CH** - **C**ritical **H**orizon = meaning utterance and worldview influence
d) **ACT** - **A**cquired **C**ommunal **T**ranslation = utterance repetition

When approaching the Beatitudes with this speech act model, the interpreter examines the context for the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Understanding the original socio-historical and literary context is necessary, before a competent analysis can be performed. However, the biblical text is more than an object for exegetical inquiry. The true speech act is a transaction between both God and humanity. Human reciprocity seeks the transcendent communication so immanently experienced.

## 3.1. Situated performativity: the variables in the speech act context of the Beatitudes

What cannot be dismissed are the two major principles directing speech act theory in its approach toward the Beatitudes, namely, the socio-historical and literary dimensions. The Beatitudes elevated utterance to a position of authority within a social community and for a literary purpose.

*Structure of the Beatitudes*. It is clear that Matthew composed the Beatitudes from a literary structure (repetition, parallelism, alliteration, allusion). The Beatitudes became a display-text for the Christ community, affirming its presence and importance in the world as spoken by Jesus. The structure itself communicated how Jesus' words could help a present crisis. The eight Beatitudes Matthew composed were in the third person. To bring the relevance of the Beatitudes to the

Matthean community, Matthew employed the second person beginning in Matthew 5:11.

*Illocutionary force in the Beatitudes.* Through the Beatitudes, one could conclude that Jesus took a divine illocutionary stance (cf. Ward 2002:309). The blessings of the Beatitudes were not meant to be informative, but, instead, as performative language upon the believing community (cf. Wudel 2000:277). The declarative utterances could be considered as 'double direction of fit', whereby the world altered in the illocutionary act speaks of the world as altered (cf. Searle 1979:1-29). The variables surrounding the Beatitudes demonstrated how the words of Jesus became a compelling force in the Matthean community. One must understand the influence of Isaiah on Matthew to appreciate the illocutionary force in the Beatitudes.

In the Isaianic passages to which Matthew clearly alluded (cf. Is 61 and 62), the restoration of Israel and covenant renewal was described. The theme of 'good news' had been introduced earlier by Isaiah (ch. 40) as descriptive of the realization of liberty. The year of Jubilee was significant for those oppressed in the nation of Israel due to debts and obligations to the powerful (cf. Lev 25). Three characters were introduced by Isaiah: the speaker, the mediator, and Yahweh (cf. Watts 1987:301-305). The importance of this passage to Matthew rested on what the speaker was able to accomplish with his words of blessing (cf. Watts 1987:305; Table 3.1).

**Illocutionary force of utterances in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-16 compared to Isa 61 and 62)**

### 'You are Blessed'(Declarative)

[A time will come when there will be an acknowledgement of the people God has blessed ('state of affairs') = 61:9]

*Having possession of kingdom is a blessing* (vv. 3, 10)

[Isaiah speaks of a time when God will favor his people among the nations because of the everlasting covenant= 61:2, 8, and 11]

*Being divinely comforted is a blessing* (v. 4)

[Metaphorical description of divine comfort is expressed in the phrases, 'crown of beauty', 'oil of gladness' and garment of praise'= 61:3]

*Receiving what is promised is a blessing* (v. 5)

[God's people will experience a time of receiving double in the land for their time of shame and loss= 61:7]

*Being divinely satisfied is a blessing* (v. 6)

[Satisfaction in all God will provide= 62:8]

*Receiving divine mercy is a blessing* (v. 7)

[Experienced in the 'preaching, binding, proclaiming, releasing, and providing'= 61:1-3]

*Experiencing the presence of God is a blessing* (v. 8)

[No longer deserted or desolate but redeemed and 'married' to God= 62:4-5, and 12]

*Being recognized as God's child is a blessing* (v. 9)

[Called by a new name by the nations= 62:2]

*Being divinely rewarded is a blessing* (v. 12)

[God rewards his people with the presence of the Sent One= 61:8; 62:11]

| **'You are Salt'(Rhetorical)** |
|---|
| [The emphasis was on the planting of righteousness among God's people. Could salt be a reference to the fertilizing effect? = 61:3]<br>*No restoration possible for worthless salt* (v. 13a)<br>*Worthless salt used for secondary purpose* (v. 13b) |
| **'You are Light' (Rhetorical)** |
| [Righteousness of God's people must shine like a torch among the nations = 62:1]<br>*Light cannot be hid on a hill* (v. 14)<br>*People don't light lamps to hide the light* (v. 15) |
| **'Rejoice with Gladness' (Imperative)** |
| [The righteousness God provides stimulates rejoicing = 61:10]<br>*Because of me* (v. 11)<br>[The Servant is sent by YHWH to announce blessing upon God's people = 61:1; 62:11] |
| **'Let your Light Shine' (Imperative)** |
| *Shine before humanity* (v. 16a)<br>*Shining demonstrated in good works* (v. 16b)<br>*Shining complements the source of the Christ community* (v. 16c) |

*Table 3.1: Illocutionary force of utterance in the Beatitudes*

*c) Situation Surrounding the Beatitudes*. The Matthean community was facing a crisis of identity along with social and religious legitimacy. The religious milieu was exacerbated after the events of AD 70 and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The question facing the Christ community cantered on the juxtaposition of their identity to Judaism. The Beatitudes exhibit the use of authoritative utterance resulting in an identity confirmation of the social body. Judaism continually appropriated the prophetic promises as encouragement for their

followers during crisis events (cf. Bauckham 2010:55-64). The Matthean community would have been familiar with the Isaianic promises to which Matthew alluded (cf. Table 3.2).

| Isaianic Themes Describing the Matthean Community (Isa 61 and 62) |
| --- |
| *Poor in spirit*: Good news will be given to poor (61:1)<br>*Mournful*: Broken-hearted will be comforted (61:1-2)<br>*Meek*: Shame and disgrace replaced with land promise (61:7)<br>*Righteousness cravings*: Planted like oaks of righteousness (61:3) |
| *Merciful*: Nations will see righteousness and seek for it (62:1-2, 12)<br>*Purity of heart*: Preparation to see Saviour come to his people (62:11)<br>*Peacemakers*: Desire for Jerusalem's prosperity means peace (62:1-9)<br>*Persecuted*: Rebuilding, restoring, and renewing (61:4) |
| *Rejoice*: God has provided the desired righteousness (61:10<br>*Give Glory*: Acknowledge divine blessing on God's people (61:9) |

*Table 3.2: Isaianic themes describing the Matthean community*

The legitimacy of the Matthean community began with Jesus' affirmation of blessing (speaker). Jesus blessed those who were disenfranchised within society (audience). His pronouncement was to all who would repent and follow him (implied audience). Matthew describes the Matthean community (authorial audience) with the language of marginality (cf. Duling 1995:358-387). Jesus' words created a blessed community (cf. Thiselton 1970:440-441). It is vital to understand Jesus' pronouncement as creating the state of affairs for the blessed, not a description of the psychological effect of his audience (cf. Powell 1996:469). Despite the social unrest surrounding the Christ community, Matthew assured the social body that even the conflict was proof of their identity to Jesus (cf. Figure 3.3).
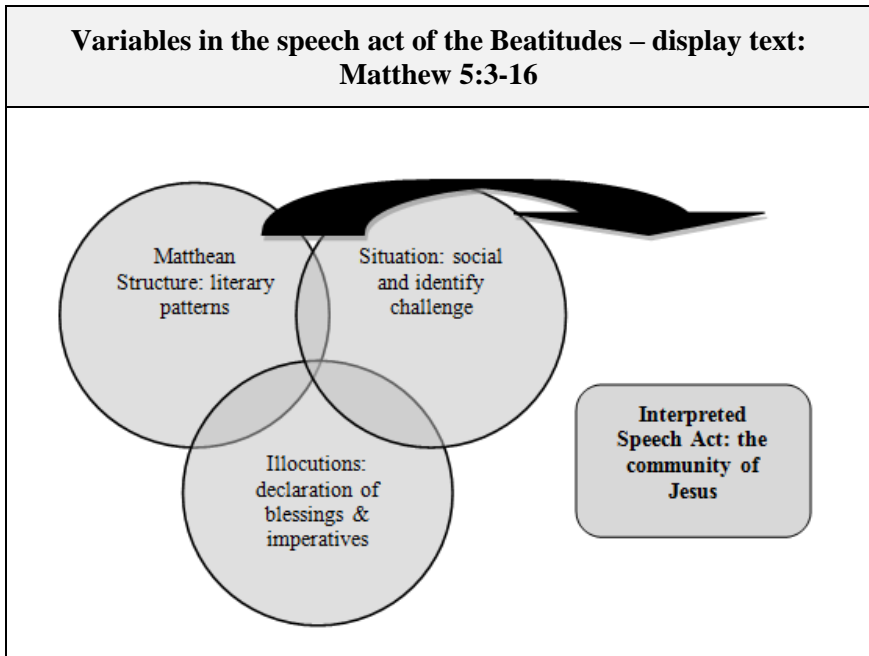
*Figure 3.3: Variables in the speech act of the Beatitudes – display text: Matthew 5:3-16*

Ultimately, the experience of the Beatitudes by the Christian community throughout the centuries demonstrates the strength of its perlocutionary effects (cf. Patte 1988:98). Are there indications that the Matthean community saw the Beatitudes from a performative posture? Could the Beatitudes have been employed for ritualistic purposes by the Christian community?

## 3.2. Existential engagement: the process of experiencing the speech acts of the Beatitudes

Within biblical hermeneutics, the theories of self-involvement by Briggs, and the transforming text by Thiselton, parallel the idea of

perlocutions as transactions (Briggs 2001:147-182; Thiselton 1992:288-298). For Thiselton, participatory language is evident throughout scripture and invites the reader to be engaged, especially through its promises and assertions (1992:31-47, 298-303). This implies that the speech acts of scripture have continual communicative consequences among its participants.

Bering (2003:101-120) has proposed a three-tier explanation for existential reality based on the assumption that humanity has a 'proto-theistic' attribute. This attribute presupposes that experiences in life happen for teleological purposes. The three tiers Bering employs are event, experience, and existence (2003:110-120). Events are interpretations of human intentions. Experience refers to the self as a participant (willing or non-willing) in finding meaning through a purposeful or unexpected event. Existence is the 'progressive product of those experiences imbued with meaning' (Bering 2003:115).

By combining the three-tiered approach of Bering to speech act theory, the text of the past becomes a medium to engage the illocutionary force of the speech act as described in the event. It has a multiplying effect throughout the social body as it bridges the situated performative text ('SP') to the present 'SP+(EE)'. The existential role advocated in this model is more pragmatic than philosophical. The strength of engagement is relative to how a social body measures or values the illocutionary force (cf. Brown 2007:234). As a process, it begins with the utterance consideration (Event), leading to an utterance adaptation (Experience), and finally, a re-illocution by the interpretive community (Existence; cf. Figure 3.4).
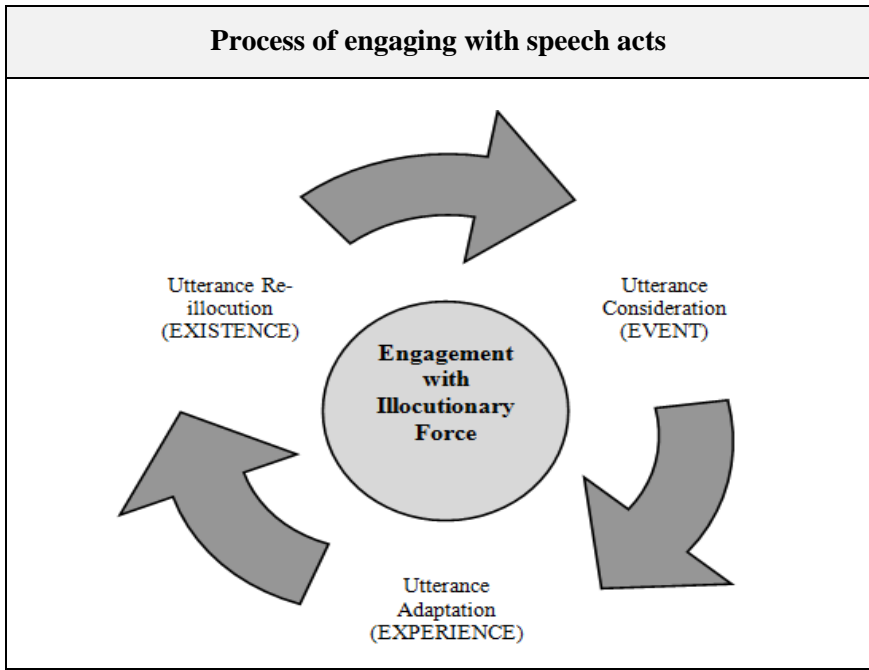
*Figure 3.4: Process of engaging with speech acts*

The act of blessing governs the interpretive engagement. The literary movement from third person (cf. Matt 5:3-10) to second person (cf. Matt 5:11-12) was an important illocutionary act by Matthew. The experience of the Matthean community was equated to the experience of Jesus. By alluding to the Isaianic promises and assimilating them into the Matthean community ('you'), a new perlocutionary effect was achieved, providing identification as those who were recipients of Jesus' pronounced blessings (cf. Matt 5:13-16). Matthew referenced the 'blessed' community as 'salt and light', strong metaphors for the constitution of the social body. It is in these capacities that Matthew could use the imperatival 'rejoice' as the proper response to the force of the previous illocutions (cf. Maartens 1991:15; Figure 3.5).

**Process of Engaging with Speech Acts in the Beatitudes**

Utterance Re-illocution 'rejoice/let light shine' EXISTENCE

Utterance Consideration 'blessing' EVENT

Engagement with Illocutionary Force

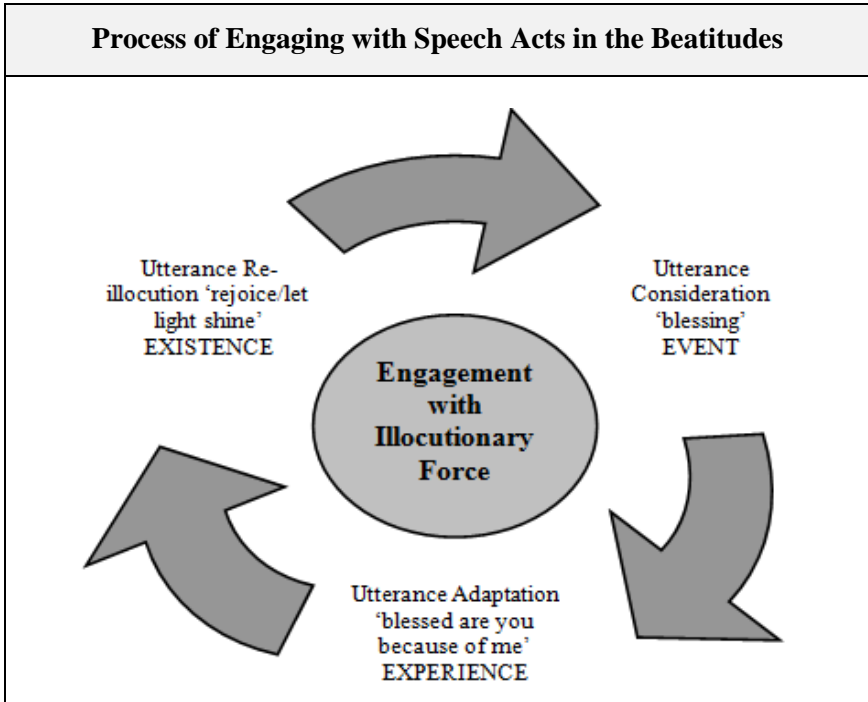Utterance Adaptation 'blessed are you because of me' EXPERIENCE

*Figure 3.5: Process of engaging with speech acts in the Beatitudes*

Ultimately, the authority and meaning of the Beatitudes exists in the recognition of the speaker (Jesus) and the situation (kingdom announcement). This recognition cannot simply be interpreted. The nature of the utterance demands a hearing that is repeatedly conveyed through a transformational experience (Evans 1980:262; cf. Beavis 2006:77). Just as looking at notes on a sheet of music does not produce the sound of an instrument; likewise, describing the illocution of an utterance does not bring the utterance to life. The essence of the blessing is in the experience of the hearer to the utterance (cf. Brawley 2003:147).

## 3.3. Critical horizon: the worldviews surrounding the Beatitudes

Speech act theory discovers the presuppositions governing linguistic usage (cf. Briggs 2001:151). It uncovers the emerging point of view found in the interactions within the text (cf. Lotman 1975:345). Speech act theory emphasizes that words do not merely describe reality; instead, words convey reality as well (Thiselton 1974:284). The 'onlook' (worldview) of an interpretive audience allows it to 'look on x as y' (cf. Evans 1980:10-12). Without understanding the worldview stance of an illocutionary act, no 'uptake' can be achieved (cf. BeDuhn 2002:96).

The Beatitudes were spoken in relation to Jesus' imperative to repent (cf. Matt 4:17). The notion of repentance was demanding of a paradigm shift. The reality Jesus described could only be realized with repentance preceding the acceptance of blessing. This paradigm shift guided Matthew in composing the gospel. The basis for repentance was the announced presence of the kingdom in Jesus.

A clash of worldviews emerged due to the kingdom message as presented by Jesus against deeply, long held religious beliefs. The kingdom announcement was not antagonistic to first century religious beliefs, as much as it was agonistic. The message of Jesus was construed as an attack on the sacred symbols rooted in Second Temple Judaism: temple, Torah, and covenants. The kingdom was not about territory or political power. The significance of the message of Jesus and the Matthean literary composition was its promotion of the new orientation to the kingdom as a transcendent experience (cf. Briggs 2001:276-278). Blessings announced by Jesus were no less than an invitation to enter into a new vista of experience with God.

Matthew used literary means to persuade the Christ community of its accurate understanding of Jesus' message and the need to continue with the kingdom message in the world. The force of the Beatitudes is derived from the repetitive 'blessing' upon the hearer. The spoken act of blessing had a rich Old Testament background. The blessing was not in the magic of the utterance, but in the institution established and practiced throughout Israel's history (cf. Thiselton 1974:294-295; Mitchell 1987). The formula, as described by Thiselton, was the appropriate person in the appropriate situation (1974:294). Ultimately, it was the status of the speaker that gave authority and meaning to the blessing.

The eight Beatitudes were placed as the introduction to the first of five discourses in the Matthean composition. The significant placement of the Beatitudes can be explained as the paradigm shift Matthew advocated for the new community. As a paradigm, the Beatitudes provided the Matthean community the point of view (cf. Lotman 1975:352) for their present identity and hope for future vindication (Maartens 1991:14). The Matthean community could rejoice and continue its mission because it was a community recognizing and responding to the blessings uttered by Jesus as 'an accomplished act' (cf. Mitchell 1987:174; Zamfir 2007:82).

### 3.4. Acquired communal translation: the reiteration of the speech acts with the Beatitudes

In an oral culture, stories and rituals were essential in communicating what was important, becoming 'cultural texts' (cf. Assmann 2006:76-77). Through ritual, the Christian community attempted to adopt the story in relation to their situation, reflecting the values they cherished (cf. Botha 2007:287-290; White 2010:102-103). Understanding the

dynamics of ritual is imperative in studying the early Christian movement (cf. DeMaris 2008). Ritual life was so central and definitive of early Christian communities, that DeMaris insists it was 'not text, not belief, not experience, but ritual' guiding the movement (DeMaris 2008:9-11). Within speech act theory, ritual has a prominent role due to its performative nature. Within ritual observance, there is the 'act' (doing) that transcends the mundane and ordinary. Speech act and ritual studies work in conjunction to demonstrate the facilitation of language by a social body (cf. Grimes 1988:103-122), with speech act theory exploring the 'what' and ritualistic studies exploring the 'how' and, if possible, 'why'.

Smith has used the sport of bear hunting to exemplify rituals (cf. 1982:57-63). Smith identifies four elements involved in the sport of bear hunting that illustrate how ordinary events of life could be considered ritualistic (cf. Table 3.6).

| Bear-hunting motif as ritual |
|:---:|
| **'Preparation'** = focus on area, weapons, and strategy |
| **'Leaving camp'** = going from social order to the woods |
| **'The kill'** = killing of bear, respect for corpse |
| '**Return to camp'** = bearing corpse, celebration, recall |

*Table 3.6: Bear-hunting Motif as Ritual*

This is an important corrective to what Poythress understands as a weakness of speech act theory, a focus on the individual (2008:340). Ritual permits the illocutionary force of utterances to be understood through the existential action of the community (cf. Schaller 1988:416-417). The results of ritual performance are the descriptive voice by the

social body of its identification, and the prescriptive voice to the constituents of the social body for commitment to the utterance (cf. Hellholm 1998:297-298).

The evidence of the Beatitudes suggests they were performative as ritual, whether liturgical, catechistic or ceremonial (cf. Brooke 1989:40; Betz 1995:59-60; Viljoen 2008:214-218). Some scholars have suggested that the declarative nature of *makarios* was reminiscent of known rituals surrounding the theme (Betz 1995:93; Viljoen 2008:208-209). The gospels, as a whole, demonstrate that expressions of the Christian faith were used in liturgical and ritual contexts, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Prayer (cf. Horrell 2002:328).

As a social body, the illocutionary force of the Beatitudes was realized in communal fashion. The religious utterances become the religious acts themselves (Patte 1988:92-93). Even a reading performance could resemble a ceremonial ritual (cf. Horsley 2008:61). The performative nature was an engaging means, whereby confirmation was provided to the Matthean community of its identity and mission in representing Jesus to the world. Literary mediums were employed, not for individual satisfaction, but for social contribution (cf. Botha 1992:210-212). Lanser (1981:293-294) has called for more exploration in how a social body utilizes hypothetical speech acts to form an alternative world with the exhibition of transformative results.

Matthew prepared the reader for the Beatitudes by emphasizing repentance, the authority of Christ, and the importance of following him. As a whole, the eight Beatitudes Matthew crafted was a literary medium to touch the imagination of the Christian community as they 'heard' Jesus pronounce his blessing upon them. For the Matthean community, the 'impact' was the ability to transcend the crisis of

persecution with their alignment to Jesus. The ramifications were a communal joy and understanding of mission in the world.

If the Beatitudes demonstrate a perlocutionary effect that could be categorized as ritual, similar comparison could be made using the motif of a bear hunting ritual supplied by Smith (cf. Figure 3.6). The four elements Smith utilized have been changed to express a more general idea of ritual as it applies to the situation the Matthean community was facing (cf. Figure 3.7).

| Beatitudes as ritual |
|---|
| **'Preparation'** = repentance, follower of Christ |
| **'Sociological imagination'** = illocutionary force of Beatitudes |
| **'Impact'** = perlocutionary force of Beatitudes to situation |
| **'Sociological ramifications'** = imperatives to rejoice and shine |

*Figure 3.7: Beatitudes as ritual*

Performative utterances provide a situation for the speaker and audience to engage in their roles of communication within the world of reality to which the language speaks. It is through the imagination and compliance of the hearer whereby the illocutionary force has successful results (cf. Patrick 1999:193).

## 4. Summary of Findings from the Speech Act Model Employed on the Beatitudes

There is no question that the Gospel of Matthew was the most Jewish of the gospels. The Jewish metanarrative was the foundation for Matthew's composition. He saw the ministry of Jesus through the lens

of a Jewish worldview (cf. Wright 1996:137-144; Wilson 2005:46-47). What resulted was the modification of Matthew's worldview into a paradigm considered as a 'new' perspective compared to the old paradigm guiding Judaism (cf. Matt 13:52). The new perspective was shaped by the story of Jesus in Matthew's composition. Matthew wrote to assure the Christian community that Jesus was the culmination of all the Jewish promises resulting in the true Judaism to be followed (cf. Weren 2005:62; Wilson 2005:55-56).

Matthew utilized the term *makarioi* in explaining what Jesus 'did' in his saying. The central point of the Beatitudes can only be understood in what Jesus did with the 'blessed' utterance. The priests employed *eulogeō* in expressing praise to God and divine blessing upon the people in the temple (cf. Becker 1986:216). Jesus, instead of using a term from priestly performance, adopted *makarioi* to convey the 'state of being' or condition of those in his kingdom. The term *makarioi* was prominent in both wisdom and apocalyptic literature, indicating the positive condition of those who realized divine favour existed in their lives. Kissine (2009:128-134) has argued that illocutionary force is recognized when there is common ground between speaker and audience. What did 'blessed' demonstrate as an illocutionary force?

Firstly, it was descriptive of the life of Jesus and the Christ community. The eight Beatitudes were identification markers of the Christ community and the various ways the kingdom reign was demonstrated (Hannan 2000:52; cf. Guelich 1976:433).

Secondly, it was declarative of the shared reality to which the new community experienced. Contextual change emerges with illocutionary force (Bunt 2000:81). As declarative utterances, Matthew utilized the Beatitudes to advance a rhetorical paradigm associated with Jesus. The rhetorical logic had a threefold implication, namely, (a) the words Jesus

spoke ('blessed') through the Beatitudes brought the new community (*ekklesia*) into existence, (b) the existence of the new community (*ekklesia*) was contingent on the existence of Jesus ('on my account'), and (c) the presence of Jesus continued in the world through the presence ('you are salt/light') of the new community (*ekklesia*).

Thirdly, it was definitive of the purpose and existence of the new community ('let your light shine'). The experience of divine utterance brings assurance of divine presence (cf. Esterhammer 1993:291-292). The Matthean community could continue to be joyful, as long as the presence of Jesus was experienced through the spoken words of the Beatitudes. In understanding its existence through the metaphorical images of salt and light, the Matthean community withstood the insults and rejection it faced as a social body. The ultimate benefit was the acknowledgement by those outside the community that the actions of the community were commensurate to a transcendent God, whose immanent presence was made known through those actions (Matt 5:16). What effect do the Beatitudes have within the Christ community?

## 4.1. A commemorative event

The Beatitudes introduced the authority and presence of Jesus to his followers. The event that Matthew portrayed was derived from a historical occurrence. However, for the new community, historical data is not enough. The event is to be commemorated through repetitious recall of the significant utterances of Jesus. Through recall, the new community uses ritual, performance, or readings to bring attention to the authority by which Jesus spoke. The event is created, not simply through exegetical findings, but through the commitment and attitude of the community to Jesus as the authoritative voice of the text (cf. Evans

1980:251; Holland 2007:335). The new community continues to tell the Jesus story in its present mission to the world.

## 4.2. A communal experience

Those who hear and respond to the Beatitudes have a shared experience of the presence of Jesus that can be identified as kingdom blessing (cf. Lioy 2004:120). Searle (1969:45) has argued that in the illocutionary act, the speaker intends to produce certain effects in the hearers. The Beatitudes pericope was a literary composition serving the ritualistic purpose of experiencing the words of Jesus repeatedly, with the goal of encouraging the new community in its mission to the world (cf. Viljoen 2008:209). The comprehension of the Beatitudes is ultimately experiencing reality on another transcendent plane of existence (Kodjak 1986:70, 212).

The impact of the Beatitudes can best be experienced in the same medium they were created, an oral environment (cf. Hearon 2009:21-35). With performance repetition, the new community adapts the Beatitudes to its contextual need and expectations (cf. Holland 2007:333-338). The Israelite culture of the Old Testament provides a clear example of how meaning was found through collective memory and oral repetitions of sacred stories and important events (cf. Horsley 2008:146-151). Symbols were subjectively employed for experiencing meaning (cf. Deutsch 1990:15). The kingdom announcement by Jesus demands that his followers experience the reality of the utterance (cf. Beavis 2006:77).

## 4.3. A confirmed existence

The purpose of ritual or repetitive performances by the new community is to declare and confirm what is considered as true (cf. Ray 1973:22-

24). Ritual serves not to prove what is true, but to articulate what is true for the social body (cf. Grimes 1988:120). Speech acts are performed for intentional purposes. For the new community, adopting the Beatitudes as paradigmatic utterances yields the result of reaffirmation of both its nature and mission in the world. The Beatitudes are to be experienced as the 'yes' of God through Jesus' utterances (Schweizer 1975:96; cf. Kodjak 1986:211). Reaffirmation is a necessity in light of the all-important existence of the Christ community as the continued presence of Jesus to the world.

It is imperative that the Christian community experience the text and sounds of the Beatitudes. Through creative performances and rituals, the expectations and beliefs of the community confirm the presence of Jesus with his kingdom assurance. The community stands on those declarations as it experiences and demonstrates both a kingdom presence and kingdom prominence in the world. As representative of Jesus, the Christian community must initiate ways to experience the paradigmatic utterance so that the voice of Jesus is always heard.

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