1 Introduction

1.1 Objectives

The aim of this book is to provide a pragmatically anchored framework of ritual. Pragmatics is a field focusing on the study of language use. It started to develop in the mid-twentieth century, and it gained momentum with the work of the language philosophers John Austin and John Searle who proposed to look at language as a means to get things done.[1]

'Ritual' can mean different things to different people, such as ceremonies, religious practices, curses, conventionalised patterns of civility and so on. The study of ritual has its roots in anthropology, and anthropologists provided more than just one definition of ritual.[2] In linguistic pragmatics, the term 'ritual' has also been used in many different ways, including stylised and formalised language,[3] ceremonial and performative aspects of language use,[4] a sense of façade,[5] in-group interactional practices which are often meaningless to group outsiders,[6] and many other aspects of language use. In the pragmatic jargon influenced by sociology in general and the seminal work of the sociologist Erving Goffman in particular (see more in Chapter 2),[7] ritualists[8] also distinguish various types of ritual, such as 'presentational rituals', i.e., rituals through which the individual makes specific attestations to the recipient, versus 'avoidance rituals' through which the speaker expresses deference to the other (Goffman 1967: 57–76). The word 'ritual' and its equivalents also have different meanings across languages, as Chapter 2 will show. Finally, 'ritual' can also mean different things in the language use of an individual. For example, while I define myself as a ritual pragmatician – an assertion which could imply that I somehow apply the word 'ritual' in a more expert way than 'lay' people – I nevertheless often use the expression 'That's only a ritual' in daily interaction to indicate that a particular form of language use is meaningless.

Due to its many meanings and uses, 'ritual' is a difficult phenomenon for the linguist to pin down. A simple working definition for this phenomenon is the following: ritual encompasses communally oriented language use through which social structures reproduce themselves. 'Communal orientation' means that ritual should be viewed as conventionalised language use, which serves

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a social grouping primarily and the individual only secondarily, and which therefore needs to be observed through rights and obligations holding for a particular context.[9] However, this simple definition is already problematic to a certain degree because the 'reproduction' of social structures is not so much a linguistic but rather an anthropological and sociological concept.[10] More importantly, such a definition cannot capture all the facets of ritual in interaction. In spite of such definitional difficulties, ritual phenomena need to be pinned down in pragmatic theory for various reasons:

– As this book will show, ritual is such a primordial and essential part of language use that it simply must be studied if our goal is to understand why people use language by following certain conventionalised patterns.
– Ritual encompasses a wide variety of phenomena of language use, such as politeness, impoliteness, sarcasm, humour and so on, through which language users build up and maintain relationships. Ritual is not an umbrella term for these sociopragmatic[11] phenomena but rather it represents communally oriented language use in which such phenomena manifest themselves in conventionalised and contextually expected forms. As such, ritual is broader than perhaps any other sociopragmatic phenomena, which accords with the fact that from an evolutionary point of view ritual is perhaps the most primordial form of interpersonal pragmatic behaviour, as Bax (2010) has shown in his ground-breaking research.
– Ritual represents the realm of conventionalised and contextually expected language use, and so its study allows the scholar to examine language use in a rigorous and replicable way, beyond idiosyncrasies. While idiosyncratic language use has its own role in ritual, as Chapter 3 will show, ultimately idiosyncratic behaviour which violates the flow of a ritual tends to be sanctioned. The conventionalised nature of ritual also makes it a prime phenomenon to study in contrastive pragmatics (see House & Kádár 2021a). Furthermore, ritual research provides insight into various noteworthy aspects of language use, such as the relationship between language, context and morality.
– Finally, ritual manifests itself in all the three key units of language use, i.e., expressions, speech acts and discourse, as the present book will show. This, in turn, makes the pragmatic study of ritual particularly intriguing and productive from a methodological point of view.

Chapter 2 will describe ritual in more detail, by arguing that instead of simply relying on a working definition like the one provided above, the best practice for the pragmatician is to define ritual primarily through its main characteristics. It is important to note already at this point that ritual language use is not identical with conventionalised language use. While all rituals are conventionalised, they also have many spontaneous elements, as this book will show (see also Mahmood 2001). Further, convention is a much broader

concept than ritual: it encompasses all the recurrent ways through which conveying and interpreting a message is organised (see e.g., Marmor 2009). For example, it is a pragmatic convention to use requests when the speaker wants the recipient to do something for him, it is also a convention to formulate a requestive utterance indirectly in certain interpersonal contexts, and also the interpretation of such a formulation tends to be conventionalised (see the phenomenon of conventionalised implicature). Ritual is something much more specific than this. To stick to the example of the speech act Request, it can be said that certain ritual contexts conventionally require one or more of the participants to formulate requestive utterances in certain conventionalised ways. For instance, in diplomatic protocols the speech act Request needs to be realised in certain ritual ways, in order for the participants to avoid breaching the protocol.[12] Also, a speech act like Request can become such a main constituent of certain rituals, like a religious act, that in turn the whole act will be centred on the particular speech act.[13] Finally, a ritual context may prompt a particular speech act like Request to manifest itself in the form of chains, or by following preset sequential patterns.[14] In summary, ritual and convention are two different pragmatic phenomena, but ultimately convention is always in the focus of the pragmatic study of ritual because all ritual contexts and practices have their conventions as regards how utterances need to be formulated.

While previous pragmatic research has addressed various aspects of ritual language use, to the best of my knowledge no book has been devoted to the comprehensive study of ritual and language for its own sake. Many pragmaticians, including myself, have attempted to capture ritual through the lens of linguistic politeness research – i.e., the study of how language users express that they care about the other – a field which has gained momentum through the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987) (see more in Chapter 2). Because of this, in pragmatic research, ritual has had a somewhat 'subordinated' role to politeness. This book aims to challenge this view. As part of attempting to provide a pragmatic account of ritual language use, I will follow a decidedly bottom–up and corpus-based view on ritual. Such a view is fundamental if one wants to avoid watering down the linguistic pragmatic study of ritual, by talking about cultural and psychological notions like 'sensitivity' and 'values'.[15] While culture studies have their own important role in ritual research, there is so much yet to be said about ritual from a pragmatic point of view that it is simply not advisable to attempt to venture beyond the boundaries of pragmatics in this book.

In filling the above-outlined knowledge gap, this book will propose a ritual view on language use, by arguing that many pragmatic phenomena can be best captured if we look at them through the lens of ritual. This view will be positioned against what I will refer to as the 'politeness perspective'.

As already noted, politeness is a very important pragmatic phenomenon, and the present book is by no means an attempt to criticise the validity of politeness studies. However, politeness has become interpreted in such an overly broad way over the past few years that now the terms 'politeness' and 'impoliteness' tend to describe literally all aspects of interpersonal behaviour. I believe that such a view is problematic, if for nothing else, because it compromises the analytic force of 'politeness' itself. The ritual perspective of language use allows us to disentangle ritual, including ritualised politeness, from non-ritualistic aspects of polite, impolite, humorous, etc. language use, without 'pitting' ritual and politeness against each other.

A further goal of this book is to provide a pragmatically comprehensive overview of ritual. In order to achieve this goal, the book follows a tripartite structure, to cover the following areas:

– Part I focuses on the general pragmatic features of ritual. Here the book will discuss all those pragmatic features which make ritual a founding element of interpersonal interaction, beyond the scope of perhaps any other pragmatic phenomenon. This part of the book will also provide an overview of the conceptual repertoire of the pragmatic study of ritual, and it will also propose a typology through which the pragmatician can examine different uses of ritual. Most importantly, the chapters in this part will show why and how a pragmatic framework of ritual can help us observe many seemingly *ad hoc* and confusing, and other seemingly robotic and uninteresting manifestations of language use in a replicable and meaningful way.
– Part II studies three features which characterise pragmatically complex rituals, including mimesis, (self-)display and liminality. While none of these features are unheard of in pragmatic inquiries, they have been rarely studied jointly in previous pragmatic research. However, as the book will show, they are important to talk about as part of a systematic ritual view on language use, in particular if our goal is to understand why people use language often in seemingly 'unreasonable' ways.
– Finally, in Part III, the present book discusses key methodological issues of the pragmatic study of ritual. Here the main focus is on how one can study interaction rituals in two general methodological routes, and by focusing on the three units of pragmatic analysis, including expressions, speech acts and discourse.

Ultimately, I hope that the present book will invigorate the pragmatic study of ritual. As Chapter 2 will show, while ritual has been on the agenda of pragmaticians since the 1980s, the ritual perspective has remained unduly backgrounded in recent pragmatic inquiries.

1.2   Conventions

In the following, I outline the conventions of this book.

While most technical terms will be introduced when they first occur, there is a small set of basic terms which will be used throughout the book, and which should be introduced right at this point. Perhaps the most important one of these terms is 'ritual frame'. Simply put, ritual frame describes the (often invisible) rights and obligations and the related moral and interactional order which a ritual imposes on the participants. The ritual frame is such an important concept that it will be treated as a foundation of all the methodologies of the pragmatic study of ritual.

Following my joint work with Juliane House, I use the term 'linguaculture' to describe culture manifested through patterns of language use (see House & Kádár 2021a). This term is particularly useful in pragmatic research like the current one, which aims to consider pragmatic issues through the lens of language rather than culture. In the study of certain linguaculturally embedded phenomena, I will refrain from using wording that would attribute them to a particular culture. For example, instead of talking about 'a Chinese rite of passage' it is more productive to talk about 'rites of passage in Chinese'.

I use the technical term 'expression', representing the lowest unit of analysis, instead of 'word'. This is because 'expression' describes a pragmatic unit, which may include forms of varying size. Another central concept is speech act, which is an utterance considered as an action. Typical speech acts are Request and Apologise. Following the convention of Edmondson and House (1981), speech acts are indicated in capital letters, and also I will not use the word 'of' in the designation of speech acts, e.g., I will use 'speech act Apologise' instead of 'speech act of apology'. When a ritual is not analysed from a speech act point of view, I normally do not apply the above convention. For instance, 'public apology' as a phenomenon is referred to in small letters whenever the focus is not exactly on how the speech act Apologise is used in this ritual.

Along with conceptual conventions, the present book follows various ethical conventions. In each naturally occurring example and other data involving participants whose language use I observed, the participants are anonymised. As part of collecting data, the various teams of researchers who contributed collecting data for this book followed the standard ethical procedure of asking the consent of the participants and storing data safely.[16] Also, as an ethical consideration and in the spirit of gender equality, I use both the feminine and the masculine pronouns in the manuscript in a rather arbitrary fashion.

The present book was written for both academics and advanced student readers. To help this latter group of readers, chapters onwards from Chapter 3 include a case study, and also all chapters provide a recommended reading.

Furthermore, I will refrain from overwhelming the reader with technical terms – while using some technical jargon is unavoidable in an academic book of the present scope, I will limit the number of technical terms to the possible lowest number. Finally, this book includes many visualisations of the proposed analytic procedures, in order to make these procedures as accessible as possible.

The reader will note later on that Chinese language plays a prominent role in the case studies of this book. This is partly because I work in a Chinese university as an academic and in this role (and also as a speaker of Chinese myself) I had an opportunity to gain some insight into the fascinating world of rituals in the Chinese linguaculture. More importantly, I believe that while Chinese has gradually gained importance in pragmatic inquiries, still more work needs to be done to promote academic research on Chinese pragmatics. Yet, it is important to repeat at this point that the aim of this book is to present a replicable pragmatic framework of ritual language use, and so rituals in Chinese are merely used as case studies instead of being studied for their own sake.

1.3 Contents

The chapters in this book are organised according to the tripartite structure outlined above. Part I includes three chapters, which introduce the reader to the basics of ritual and language.

Chapter 2 positions ritual in pragmatics. The chapter first provides an overview of previous pragmatic research on ritual and discusses why Goffman's term 'interaction ritual' is particularly useful to describe what ritual is from the pragmatician's point of view. The chapter then considers why ritual offers a powerful perspective through which one can approach and interpret language use across different linguacultures and context types. At that point I outline the aforementioned notion of ritual perspective in more detail. Finally, the chapter defines the key pragmatic features of ritual as elements of a pragmatic approach to ritual and language. Interpreting ritual through this cluster of pragmatic features allows the researcher to venture beyond any single working definition, like the one provided in the present chapter.

Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate how the ritual perspective can be put to practice in the study of interactionally complex rituals. These chapters also show how and why a pragmatic typology of ritual allows one to observe seemingly very different types of pragmatic behaviour – such as mediatised aggression and protocols of public communication – as different manifestations of ritual. The chapters will also point out why it is useful to observe certain phenomena through the lens of ritual rather than politeness and impoliteness. Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which the ritual perspective can help the researcher to

systematically describe seemingly *ad hoc* interactional events, such as medi-
ated ritual aggression.[17] Here the expression 'ritual aggression' is used differ-
ently from behavioural sciences:[18] I interpret it in the sense of Labov (1972) to
describe aggressive language use which follows ritual patterns. Ritual aggres-
sion can be a challenging phenomenon to study for two reasons. Firstly, in-
group ritual aggression often appears to be 'violent' and, more importantly,
'unreasonable' for group outsiders. While all manifestations of ritual aggres-
sion have their own conventions, the pragmatic conventions of in-group ritual
aggression may be very different from what other social groups find normative
and acceptable. For instance, Chapter 2 will touch on intensive ritual cursing,
which is normative for certain ethnic groups but may sound menacing for
members of other groups, often leading to racist stereotypes and prejudices.
A clear advantage of the ritual perspective is that it allows the researcher to
describe the exact pragmatic conventions of such rituals in a rigorous and
replicable way, and on a par with rites of civility, by moving beyond stereotypes
and prejudices. Secondly, other less 'exotic' aggressive interaction rituals –
which do not 'belong' to one particular group but rather 'the whole' of
a society, or at least one of its major subgroups – also often manifest themselves
in forms that one may describe as 'violent' and 'unreasonable'. The ritual
perspective also helps the scholar to capture the pragmatic conventions and
dynamics of these social rituals, which are the focus of Chapter 3. As a case
study, the chapter examines language use before, during and after a 'grudge
match' in a Mixed Martial Arts event, representing a present-day aggressive
ritual which is watched (and participated) by many due to its mediatised nature.

Chapter 4 brings the reader into yet another area where the ritual perspective
can provide a particularly accurate view on language use: the study of social
protocols in public discourse, representing the realm of 'overly' ordinary
language use. The term 'public discourse' includes both monologues and
dialogues that take place in public, often through mediatised events or written
(online) pieces which are available for, or even addressed to, members of the
public. 'Social protocols' describe forms of language use associated with
'politeness' in public discourse specifically, where 'politeness' in the interper-
sonal sense is hardly needed, i.e., such forms at first sight may seem to be
entirely 'superfluous' if not 'redundant'. Because of this, while social protocols
and mediatised public aggression may appear to have little in common, inter-
estingly both of them have an 'unreasonable' element. This sense of unreason-
ableness however dissolves once one looks at such forms of language use
through the ritual perspective. As a case study, Chapter 4 examines the ritual
conventions of social protocols in a corpus of Chinese public announcements
made in the wake of a major crisis.

Part II of this book includes three chapters, which introduce the reader into
those phenomena which one can usually witness when a ritual becomes

interactionally complex: mimesis, (self-)displaying behaviour and liminality. Chapter 5 focuses on the phenomenon of mimesis. All rituals are mimetic because ritual language use triggers replication and reciprocation. However, Chapter 5 will show that in various interactionally complex rituals, including both ceremonies and certain types of institutional discourse, one can observe a specific mimetic phenomenon – 'performative mimesis' – which has not received sufficient attention in the study of language use, and which is worth exploring if one wants to understand why in certain ritual contexts language users play 'roles'. Simply put, the concept of 'performative mimesis' refers to contrived interactional performance whereby the performer sustains mimicking a predated interactional schema, just like an actor in a theatre manages a performance on stage by enacting a role. Performative mimesis is a particularly interesting phenomenon to consider because the participants of a ritual which necessitates such mimetic behaviour follow often invisible and uncodified scripts. Chapter 5 includes a case study which describes performative mimesis in Chinese university military training courses, representing an understudied ritual drawn from the realm of higher education in China.

Chapter 6 investigates the ritual phenomenon of (self-)display. Any instance of ritual language use implies a sense of displaying: the participants of a ritual tend to display their awareness of the rights and obligations and related conventions holding for the context which necessitates the given ritual. For example, by 'properly' greeting someone, one unavoidably displays one's awareness of the convention that the speech act Greet is due in the particular context. However, in certain ritual scenarios, especially if a ritual is competitive, display transforms into self-display, i.e., through following – and often excessively over-doing – the pragmatic conventions of the ritual, one may as much display one's awareness of these conventions and related skills like expressing 'politeness' or 'impoliteness' to the other. Since ritual (self-) displaying behaviour has been only touched on in a limited number of pragmatic studies, Chapter 6 attempts to introduce this phenomenon in a diversified way, by considering how different degrees of self-displaying behaviour can be distinguished from one another. As a case study, I investigate a corpus of historical Chinese letters written by an epistolary expert Gong Weizhai to various recipients, including both 'ordinary' recipients such as patrons, family members, lovers and so on, and fellow epistolary expert friends representing 'professional' recipients. With this latter audience, Gong engaged in a playful self-displaying competition as to who can be 'more' intricately deferential and humorous to the other.

Chapter 7 discusses the phenomenon of liminality from a pragmatic point of view. All interactionally complex rituals take the participants through a threshold to some degree, in that the rights and obligations and related conventions of pragmatic behaviour holding for rituals tend to differ from

their counterparts in 'ordinary' life. For example, the above-mentioned phe-
nomenon of ritual (self-)display in letters can be said to be liminal simply
because outside of the ritual such a phenomenon might not manifest itself in the
same form, or even not occur at all. Yet, such a liminality is temporal rather than
permanent,[19] and it is relevant for the ritualist to study fully-fledged liminal
rituals with a sense of irreversibility. For example, ritual public apologies are
liminal in the fully-fledged sense because the person who realises such ritual
apologies passes a threshold with no return. Liminal rituals come together with
strong metapragmatic awareness: if the frame of the ritual and the related moral
order are violated, both the participants and the observers tend to become
alerted and engage in intensive metapragmatic reflections. Chapter 7 will
present a case study focusing on the liminal rite of workplace dismissal. Such
dismissals represent typical liminal rituals in the very sense of the word: they
change the life of the recipient and as such they are very meaningful and
irreversible. Because of this, perceived 'errors' in the realisation of the rite of
workplace dismissal trigger particularly intensive metapragmatic reflections
and evaluations.

Part III includes four chapters focusing on methodological issues in the
pragmatic study of ritual. As noted above, I propose two major methodological
takes on interaction ritual. In the first one, the analyst sets out to study ritual by
looking at the pragmatic units of expressions and speech acts. In this methodo-
logical take, therefore, one departs from pinning down ritual as a form, i.e.,
either as an expression or a conventionalised realisation of speech act through
which ritual comes to life. Yet, associating ritual with a form of language use
has its problems because expressions and speech acts tend to gain a ritual
pragmatic function in actual ritual frames rather than having a ritual value
per se, and one can only study their ritual function in a rigorous and replicable
way if one considers their conventional use(s) in interaction. Because of this,
both Chapters 8 and 9 propose replicable methodologies by means of which
one can study in a bottom–up way how expressions and speech act relate to
ritual. Chapter 8 considers the relationship between expressions, the smallest
unit of pragmatic analysis, and ritual. The chapter will provide a bottom–up,
corpus-based and replicable approach through which expressions associated
with structurally or functionally ritual speech acts are used to indicate aware-
ness of the different ritual frame. Structurally ritual speech acts include speech
acts like Greet and Leave-Take which occur in ritual phases of an interaction
like Opening and Closing, while functionally ritual speech acts encompass
speech acts like Request and Apologise which tend to be realised in a ritual way
in many contexts. The chapter points out that the relationship between expressions
and interaction ritual can be best captured through a contrastive pragmatic lens
because the contrastive view allows the researcher to consider how strongly
a pragmatically important expression tends to indicate a functionally or structurally

ritual speech act and the related ritual frame when pitted against a comparable expression in another – preferably typologically distant – linguaculture. The chapter provides a case study of Chinese and English expressions associated with the speech act Apologise.

Chapter 9 examines how speech acts associated with ritual can be examined in a replicable way. The chapter makes an argument against 'identifying' new so-called 'ritual speech acts' *ad libitum* because such a procedure shuts the door on studying speech acts through which ritual is realised in a replicable way. Instead, it is a more productive practice to identify and describe one's subject of analysis with the aid of a finite typology of speech acts. The next task is to consider how this speech act is realised in a particular ritual frame. Chapter 9 provides a case study of the ritual phenomenon of 'admonishing' in a corpus of ancient Chinese texts. Admonishing represents a ritual realisation type of the Attitudinal speech act category Suggest (do-x)/(not-to-do-x).

The second methodological take on ritual proposed in Part III provides a solution for the study of interactionally complex ritual phenomena, by systematically breaking them down into replicable pragmatic units of analysis. As noted already, the complexity of a ritual phenomenon can either mean that a phenomenon is too broad to be discussed as a single ritual, i.e., it represents a form of ritual behaviour which spans across many different ritual contexts, or it represents a particular context and related ritual frame which triggers ritual behaviour but cannot be subsumed under a single ritual heading from the pragmatician's point of view. Chapter 10 focuses on the first of these cases: it explores the ritual phenomenon of self-denigration in Chinese. Self-denigration occurs in many different contexts of Chinese ritual practices and ceremonies, and if one attempts to describe its pragmatic features by relying on data drawn from a single context one unavoidably risks oversimplifying it. Rather, in the study of such a ritual phenomenon one should consider how it is used in different interpersonal scenarios with varying power and intimacy and in different phases of an interaction.

Chapter 11 focuses on the second type of difficulty: it proposes a discourse-analytic approach through which seemingly *ad hoc* and erratic interactional ritual behaviour in a single complex ritual frame can be studied in a replicable way. As a case study, the chapter will examine ritual bargaining in Chinese markets. While bargaining is a ritual in the popular sense of the word, it is problematic from the pragmatician's point of view to describe bargaining as a grand ritual, without considering how it can be systematically broken down into recurrent patterns of ritual language use.

Finally, Chapter 12 summarises the contents of the present book and proposes future areas of research.