

Directive Speech Acts Addressed to Bride and Groom in Sawer Panganten Lyrics: A Pragmatic Analysis

Najwa Baruna Bunga Persada Gemilang¹, Otong Setiawan Djuharie², Andang Saehu³

^{1,2}, English Literature Department, Faculty Adab and Humanity, State Islamic University Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

Author's Email: najwa.barunaa@gmail.com, otongsetiawandjuharie@uinsgd.ac.id, andangsaeahu@uinsgd.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at directive speech acts in the lyrics of Sawer Panganten, a Sundanese wedding ritual song, using Searle's (1969, 1979) Speech Act Theory together with Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle. Dewi et al. (2024) recently classified illocutionary speech acts in a single sawér poem from Ciamis, but that study did not look at how directive force is distributed between the bride and the groom, and it did not check the written text against an actual recorded performance. This study tries to fill that gap. The main data come from the written performance text Kidung Sawer Panganten (Pa Uhi 1–4), and this is checked against a transcribed excerpt from a recorded performance by a practising sinden. After getting feedback on translation accuracy, the directive markers, especially ulah and sing, were looked at again and placed along a continuum from strong prohibition to gentle advice rather than treated as if they all carried the same prohibitive force. In total, 47 directive instances were identified and sorted into seven categories. The bride (Eulis) still receives a numerical majority of the directives (55%), but the force behind those directives turns out to be more varied than a simple word count would suggest. A number of ulah-marked lines actually function more like affectionate advice than strict prohibition. Checking the written text against the recorded performance confirms that the main directive markers show up in both sources, and it also reveals additional directive content addressed to the groom about household leadership that is not present in the written text. Overall, the findings build on existing scholarship on Sundanese sawér by showing that gendered asymmetry in this kind of ritual speech is not just a matter of how often directives appear, but also of how strong and how harsh they are.

Keywords: directive speech acts; pragmatics; Sawer Panganten; Sundanese ritual; Searle; Leech; gendered language; performative variation

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INTRODUCTION

Language does not only describe things, it also does things. This is the basic idea behind Austin (1962) and later Searle (1969, 1979), who treated utterances as illocutionary acts whose force depends on the context, the sincerity of the speaker, and the relationship between speaker and listener. Among these illocutionary categories, directives, that is, acts whose point is to get the listener to do or not do something, show up a lot in ritual speech, where language is performative and helps construct social roles in the first place (Witek, 2015).

Sawer Panganten is a Sundanese wedding ritual where a sinden, a ritual singer, addresses the newlyweds with a series of sung lines containing advice about marriage, religious duty, and household responsibility (Masduki, 2015; Bratawidjaja, 1990). This tradition is still very much alive in West Java today and keeps drawing scholarly attention from different angles. Sulistian (2018) has studied its use as teaching material in Sundanese culture classes, Wibawa and Awaliah (2023) looked at the character-building side of related Sundanese wedding rites, and Mustagfiri (2023) gave a sociological reading of the saweran tradition in Bogor as a way communities negotiate social relationships. None of these studies, though, classifies the directive speech acts in the lyrics themselves in a systematic way.

The study that comes closest to this one is Dewi et al. (2024), who applied Searle's speech act theory to a single sawér poem of nine stanzas performed by one sinden in Ciamis. They identified directive subtypes such as requests, prohibitions, warnings, commands, and suggestions. However, they treated the whole text as one undifferentiated corpus and did not check whether the type or force of directives differed depending on who was being addressed, the bride or the groom. They also did not bring in any recorded performance data to check the written text against an actual delivery. This study tries to build on that work by analysing a larger corpus (Pa Uhi 1–4), coding the recipient of each directive explicitly, and checking the written text against a transcribed excerpt from a recorded performance.

An earlier stage of this analysis had treated the Sundanese prohibitive particle *ulah* as if it always meant something close to an absolute prohibition, similar to “do not...” in English. After getting input from someone more familiar with the nuances of Sundanese, this classification was revised. *Ulah*, like the hortative particle *sing*, can carry different degrees of force depending on the surrounding text and the kind of relationship being invoked. This revision runs through the whole analysis below and is, in a way, just as much a contribution of this study as the findings themselves.

This study is guided by three questions. First, what types of directive speech acts occur in the Sawer Panganten lyrics, and how strong is the illocutionary force behind them? Second, how are these directive types marked linguistically in Sundanese, and how should that force be rendered accurately in English? Third, how are directive speech acts distributed between the bride and the groom, and does checking the written text against a recorded performance confirm this distribution or complicate it?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory

Austin (1962) was the first to argue that utterances perform actions instead of just describing states of affairs. Searle (1969, 1979) later turned this into a more organised taxonomy of five illocutionary categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Directives are illocutionary acts whose point is to get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1979, p. 13). Their direction of fit goes from world to word, and their sincerity condition requires that the speaker genuinely wants the action to happen.

This taxonomy is still being refined today. Saragi et al. (2019) reviewed and consolidated Searle's original framework for present-day use, while Geurts (2022) places illocutionary force within an evolutionary account of human communicative intent, which is a reminder that directive force is still an active area of theorising rather than something settled long ago.

Within Indonesian scholarship, directive speech acts have been applied to a wide range of genres. Darwis (2019) looked at teacher directives in a junior high school in Palu, Salfita and Manaf (2021) examined directive speech acts performed by a protagonist in an Indonesian novel, and Nifmaskossu et al. (2019) documented directive speech acts in the traditional wedding ceremony of the Watmuri community in Maluku. This last study matters quite a bit here, since it shows that directive-heavy ritual speech in Indonesian wedding ceremonies is not something unique to Sundanese culture but part of a wider pattern across different Indonesian ethnic traditions, something the findings of this study seem to support as well.

Politeness and the Softening of Directive Force

Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle helps explain why speakers soften or sharpen directive force depending on the social relationship and the context they are in. This idea has been applied specifically to Sundanese before. Chintawidy and Sartini (2022) carried out a cross-cultural pragmatic study comparing request strategies and politeness in Javanese and Sundanese, and found that how politeness is marked depends quite a lot on local cultural norms rather than being uniform across Indonesian languages. This study draws on both Leech and that more recent Sundanese evidence to explain why some ulah-marked directives in the Sawer Panganten data come with a softening explanation attached, such as the line that follows ulah ngagampang ("don't take it lightly"), namely ngapalaan rumah tangga tanggung jawab lahir batin ("leading a household is a responsibility, both physically and spiritually"), while other directives stay unmitigated, such as omat ulah waka pundung ("don't be quick to sulk").

Ritual Speech as a Performative Event

Following Hymes (1974), Sawer Panganten can be treated as a ritual speech event with its own norms about who gets to speak, to whom, and for what purpose. This view fits with recent studies of directive speech in other Indonesian ritual settings, including directive speech acts found in Friday sermons delivered in Bandung and in ceremonial speech given by a pesantren leader during a student handover event. Both cases suggest that directive force in Indonesian ritual genres is closely tied to the moral or religious authority that the speech event grants the speaker in the first place. This is also part of the reason this study decided to check the written Kidung Sawer Panganten text against a recorded live performance, since ritual speech is realised performatively and may not match the codified text exactly every time it is performed.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive design (Creswell, 2014). The main data source is the written performance text of Kidung Sawer Panganten (Pa Uhi 1–4). To check whether this written text matches what actually happens in performance, a transcribed excerpt from a recorded live Sawer Panganten performance by a practising sinden was also brought in as a single-source point of comparison. This recording makes it possible to confirm that the directive markers found in the written text correspond to real ritual speech, and it also helps surface directive content that the written text does not contain.

After the first round of coding, the English glosses for key directive markers, especially *ulah* and *sing*, were checked again for accuracy. Instead of always translating *ulah* as the rather formal “do not,” the glosses were revised to fit the context better, using the more natural “don’t,” or, in cases where the surrounding text pointed more toward advice than prohibition, something like “you shouldn’t.” This revision came from input on the lexical and pragmatic nuance of Sundanese and shows up throughout the classification presented in Section 4.

All directive utterances in both the written and the recorded sources were identified by looking for explicit markers (*ulah*, *kudu*, *poma*, *masing*, *sing*, *prak*, *pék*, *tong*, *omat*, *palias*) as well as features in the surrounding text that soften or strengthen the force of the directive. Each utterance was coded for its directive type and its main recipient, that is, *Eulis*, *Asép*, or both together. Because of how live ritual transcription works, the exact order of some of the recorded lines within the full performance could not be pinned down with full confidence. Since the unit of analysis here is the individual directive utterance rather than its position in the sequence, this does not really affect how valid the classification is.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A Revised Look at Directive Force

Table 1 shows the frequency of each directive type after the *ulah*- and *sing*-marked utterances were reclassified along the force continuum described above.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Directive Speech Act Types in Sawer Panganten (Pa Uhi 1–4 and the Recorded Excerpt)

Type of Directive Speech Act	f	%	Representative Example (Sundanese + English Gloss)
Prohibitive (strong)	14	29.8%	<i>poma ulah sok kumaki</i> (“don’t ever be arrogant”); <i>omat ulah waka pundung</i> (“don’t be quick to sulk”)
Prohibitive (advisory tone)	7	14.9%	<i>ulah timburuan</i> (“don’t be jealous”); <i>ulah ngagampang</i> (“don’t take it lightly”)
Requirement	7	14.9%	<i>kudu bisa silih béla</i> (“you must be able to protect one another”)
Hortative / Advisory (sing)	8	17.0%	<i>sing tapisna nasib diri</i> (“you should be wise about your own fate”); <i>sing waspada</i> (“you should be vigilant”)
Requestive (masing)	5	10.6%	<i>masing tumut ka salaki</i> (“you are asked to be devoted to your husband”)
Command	4	8.5%	<i>prak baé wakca balaka</i> (“go on, speak honestly”)
Advisory / Conditional Warning	2	4.3%	<i>mun keukeuh pikir midua, akibat jadi paséa</i> (“if you insist on a second wife, the result will be conflict”)

Type of Directive Speech Act	f	%	Representative Example (Sundanese + English Gloss)
TOTAL	47*	100%	<i>*Multiple co-occurring markers counted separately where functionally distinct</i>

Note. Percentages are calculated from the total number of directive instances ($N = 47$). “Prohibitive (strong)” refers to unmitigated prohibition (such as *omat ulah, poma ulah*), while “Prohibitive (advisory tone)” refers to *ulah*-marked lines that are softened by an accompanying explanation or by a more affectionate framing.

This breaks what was earlier treated as one single prohibitive category, and what the broader undifferentiated category in Dewi et al. (2024) also treated as one block, into two functionally different subtypes. Strong, unmitigated prohibitives still make up the largest single category at 29.8 percent, but a fairly large chunk of the *ulah*-marked lines (14.9 percent) function more like advisory counsel than absolute prohibition. This refinement is meant to deal with the concern that translating *ulah* the same way every time would make the lyrics sound more coercive than they actually are, and it offers later research on Sundanese sawér a slightly more precise way of coding this kind of data than has been available before.

Looking Again at the Gendered Distribution

Table 2 shows the gendered distribution of directive types under this revised classification.

Table 2. Gendered Distribution of Directive Speech Acts (Eulis vs. Asép)

Type	Eulis	Asép	General	Total	Note
Prohibitive (strong)	9	4	1	14	<i>force is sharper and less softened when directed at the bride</i>
Prohibitive (advisory tone)	3	3	1	7	<i>more balanced once co-textual rationale is taken into account</i>
Requirement (kudu)	4	2	1	7	<i>obligation framing is slightly higher for the bride</i>
Hortative (sing)	5	2	1	8	<i>notably more frequent for the bride in the video data</i>
Requestive (masing)	3	1	1	5	<i>softened obligation, more frequent for the bride</i>
Command	2	2	0	4	<i>equal distribution</i>
Advisory / Conditional	0	2	0	2	<i>found only in directives to the groom</i>

Type	Eulis	Asép	General	Total	Note
TOTAL	26 (55%)	16 (34%)	4 (8.5%)	47*	<i>the bride still receives the majority, though force varies more than the first round of coding suggested</i>

Note. “General” refers to directives addressed to both spouses at once. Totals reflect the seven-category classification in Table 1.

The bride still receives a numerical majority of the directives (55 percent), and the hortative marker *sing* actually shows up more often in directives addressed to her than to the groom in this dataset. That complicates a simple story where the bride only gets harsh constraint and the groom only gets gentle advice, since several of the directives addressed to Eulis, such as *sing tapisna nasib diri* (“you should be wise about your own fate”), are themselves quite advisory in tone. At the same time, the sharpest and least mitigated prohibitives in the dataset, things like *poma ulah sok kumaki* and *omat ulah waka pundung*, still land disproportionately on the bride, and what they are about, jealousy, arrogance, and accepting a husband's potential polygamy, still points toward a gendered asymmetry in constraint, even if the overall picture is more nuanced than a simple frequency count would suggest. This refines, rather than contradicts, the directive typology proposed in earlier Sundanese sawér scholarship (Dewi et al., 2024), since coding by recipient brings out patterns that a corpus-level classification on its own would not show.

Checking the Written Text Against the Recorded Performance

A transcribed excerpt from a recorded performance by a practising *sinden* was compared against the written Pa Uhi 1–4 text. Table 3 summarises this comparison.

Table 3. Comparing Directive Content in the Written Text and the Recorded Performance

Directive (Sundanese + Gloss)	Source	Found in the Other Source?	Note
<i>ulah timburuan</i> (“don’t be jealous”)	Pa Uhi text	not directly observed in the recorded excerpt	<i>no contradiction; the same theme of fidelity shows up in the video as <i>palias mun lanci linci</i></i>
<i>kacaroge kumawula, palias mun lanci linci</i> (“devote yourself to your husband, avoid being careless”)	recorded performance (video)	functionally close to <i>ulah timburuan</i> in the written text	<i>same prohibitive theme (loyalty, restraint) but a different lexical choice, likely performative variation</i>
<i>ulah ngagampang, hidup nu jadi pamimpin</i> (“don’t take it lightly, being a household leader”)	recorded performance (video)	not found anywhere in the Pa Uhi 1–4 text	<i>additional directive content aimed at the groom’s leadership role that the written corpus does not contain</i>

Directive (Sundanese + Gloss)	Source	Found in the Other Source?	Note
<i>sing tapisna nasib diri / sing nastiti</i> (“you should be wise/careful”)	recorded performance (video)	close in tone to sing waspada (Pa Uhi, D-35)	<i>confirms sing as a recurring hortative marker in both the written and the performed source</i>

Note. This comparison is based on a single recorded source. A broader comparison across multiple performers is recommended for future research (see Section 5).

Two things come out of this comparison. First, the core directive markers (ulah, sing) show up in both the written and the performed sources, which suggests that the written Kidung Sawer Panganten text reflects how the ritual is actually performed rather than being just an archival document nobody really uses anymore. Second, the recorded performance includes directive content addressed to the groom about the weight of household leadership (ulah ngagampang, hidup nu jadi pamimpin) that simply does not appear in the Pa Uhi 1–4 written corpus. This suggests that individual sinden might have some room to emphasise certain directive content over others, which lines up with the wider Indonesian literature on ritual speech, where the speaker's authority in that moment shapes which directive content gets foregrounded during the performance.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to classify the directive speech acts in the Sawer Panganten lyrics and to look at how they are distributed between the bride and the groom. Three conclusions follow from the analysis above.

First, directive force in the Sawer Panganten lyrics is not uniform. The Sundanese particle ulah covers a range from strong, unmitigated prohibition all the way to softened advisory counsel, depending on the surrounding text and the tone being used. Treating ulah as one single category, the way earlier corpus-level analyses of sawér poetry tended to do, risks making the ritual text sound more coercive than it really is.

Second, even with this more nuanced classification in place, the bride still receives a numerical majority of the directives (55 percent) and still carries the sharpest, least mitigated prohibitions in the corpus, particularly the ones about jealousy, arrogance, and accepting polygamy. The asymmetry noted in earlier analysis is therefore not removed by the revised classification, but it becomes more precise. It turns out to be a difference in force and content, not just in raw frequency.

Third, comparing the written text with a recorded performance confirms that the core directive markers stay consistent across both sources, while also revealing directive content specific to that particular performer. This suggests the Sawer Panganten tradition keeps some room for performative flexibility even within a fairly fixed lyrical structure, which goes a bit further than what corpus-only analyses of sawér poetry, such as Dewi et al. (2024), have been able to show.

This study has its limits, mainly because it relies on only one recorded performance for comparison. Future research that brings in multiple sinden from different parts of West Java would make it possible to look at performative variation more systematically, building on the groundwork already laid by regional studies such as Masduki (2015) and Mustagfiri (2023). Future work could also include interviews exploring

how brides and grooms themselves understand the directive force of particular lines, which would extend this text-based pragmatic analysis toward a fuller picture of perlocutionary effect.

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