Review of Dániel Z. Kádár. 2024. *Ritual and Language.* Cambridge. New York: Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by Fariz ALNIZAR [iD] [✉]

Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia
✉fariz@unusia.ac.id

Dániel Z. Kádár's *Ritual and Language* aims to build a comprehensive framework for understanding ritual, drawing deeply from the principles of pragmatics. Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics, emerged in response to the understanding that language is not just a set of static rules and structures, but a dynamic tool employed by speakers to achieve various communicative objectives. The field gained significant traction through the foundational work of language philosophers John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969), who highlighted the importance of analyzing language based on its practical functions and its impact on social interactions. Kádár's new book continues the exploration of ritual in language and communication, building upon his previous work (2017).

The term 'ritual' carries a myriad of connotations and interpretations, spanning diverse cultural, social, and linguistic contexts. From ceremonial rites to everyday social norms, rituals encompass a wide spectrum of practices that serve distinct functions within societies. Anthropological inquiries into ritual have yielded multifaceted definitions, reflecting its intricate role in shaping cultural identities, maintaining social cohesion, and expressing collective values. Within the realm of linguistic pragmatics, 'ritual' takes on additional layers of complexity. It encompasses not only formalized ceremonies and religious observances but also the performative aspects of language use in everyday interactions. Scholars influenced by sociological perspectives, particularly the insights of Erving Goffman (1967), have delved into the nuances of ritualistic behavior, distinguishing between various types of rituals based on their social functions and symbolic meanings.

For instance, Goffman delineates between presentational rituals, where individuals make specific attestations to others, and avoidance rituals, which entail expressions of deference or respect. These distinctions highlight the intricacies of ritualized communication and its role in shaping interpersonal dynamics and social hierarchies.

Furthermore, the meaning of 'ritual' can vary significantly across languages and individual speakers. While there may be overarching similarities in how rituals are conceptualized and enacted across cultures, each linguistic community may have its unique rituals and conventions that reflect its cultural values and norms.

Despite its ubiquity, defining 'ritual poses inherent challenges for linguists and social scientists alike. A simplistic definition might describe ritual as communal language use aimed at reinforcing social structures. However, such a definition fails to capture the full complexity of ritualistic practices and their multifaceted functions within societies.

In summary, this book seeks to navigate the intricate terrain of ritual through a pragmatic lens, acknowledging its diverse manifestations and significance across different cultural and linguistic contexts. By elucidating the pragmatic dimensions of ritual, the aim is to provide scholars and researchers with a nuanced understanding of this fundamental aspect of human social interaction.

The book is structured into three parts, each focusing on different aspects of ritual and language.

Part I consists of three chapters, introducing readers to the basics of ritual and language. Chapter 2 discusses the pragmatic perspective of ritual, highlighting its significance in understanding language use across various contexts. It emphasizes Goffman's concept of 'interaction ritual' and outlines the pragmatic features of the ritual language. Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate how this perspective applies to studying complex interactional rituals, such as mediated aggression and public communication protocols.

Part II explores phenomena observed in interactionally complex rituals, including mimesis, (self-)displaying behavior, and liminality. Chapter 5 delves into 'performative mimesis,' where participants mimic predetermined interactional scripts, exemplified by Chinese university military training. Chapter 6 examines (self-)displaying behavior in rituals, illustrated through historical Chinese letters showcasing competitive self-displaying. Chapter 7 discusses liminality, emphasizing its temporal nature and its significance in rituals like workplace dismissal.

Part III focuses on methodological approaches to studying ritual pragmatics. Chapters 8 and 9 propose methodologies for analyzing expressions and speech acts associated with rituals, using contrastive pragmatic analysis and finite typologies. Chapter 8 explores the relationship between expressions and ritual speech acts, exemplified by apologies in Chinese and English. Chapter 9 advocates for studying existing speech act typologies to analyze ritual phenomena, demonstrated through admonishing in ancient Chinese texts. The second methodological approach,

presented in Chapters 10 and 11, breaks down complex rituals into replicable pragmatic units of analysis. Chapter 10 addresses broad ritual phenomena like self-denigration in Chinese rituals, advocating for considering its use across various interpersonal scenarios. Chapter 11 proposes a discourse-analytic approach to studying erratic ritual behavior, exemplified by ritual bargaining in Chinese markets. Finally, Chapter 12 summarizes the book's contents and suggests future research directions. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive exploration of ritual and language from pragmatic perspectives, offering insights into diverse ritual phenomena and methodological approaches for their study.

"Ritual and Language" by Dániel Z. Kádár presents a comprehensive exploration of ritual from a pragmatic perspective, aiming to provide a nuanced framework for understanding the intricate interplay between language use and ritualistic practices. While the book offers valuable insights into this complex subject matter, it also exhibits certain strengths and weaknesses.

One of the key strengths of Kádár's work lies in its interdisciplinary approach. By drawing on insights from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, the book offers a holistic perspective on ritual, acknowledging its multifaceted nature and diverse manifestations across different cultural contexts. This interdisciplinary approach enriches the analysis, allowing readers to appreciate the complexity of ritualistic phenomena from various angles.

Furthermore, Kádár's meticulous examination of ritual through the lens of pragmatics contributes to the advancement of scholarly understanding in this field. The book not only elucidates the pragmatic functions of ritual language but also offers methodological frameworks for studying ritualistic practices systematically. This pragmatic anchoring enhances the rigor and replicability of research in the domain of ritual studies, paving the way for further inquiry and exploration.

Moreover, "Ritual and Language" provides valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between language and social structures. By highlighting the role of ritual in reproducing and reinforcing social norms, the book sheds light on the intricate mechanisms through which language shapes collective identities and maintains social cohesion. This sociolinguistic perspective adds depth to the analysis, elucidating the broader societal implications of ritualistic practices.

However, despite its strengths, the book also exhibits certain limitations. One notable weakness is its dense and specialized terminology, which may pose challenges for readers unfamiliar with the field of pragmatics or ritual studies. The complex theoretical framework and technical jargon employed throughout the book could potentially alienate non-specialist readers, limiting its accessibility and reach.

Additionally, while Kádár offers insightful case studies and examples to illustrate his theoretical arguments, the book could benefit from a more diverse range of cultural contexts and empirical data. A broader comparative analysis of ritualistic practices across different linguistic and cultural communities would enhance the book's cross-cultural relevance and applicability.

In conclusion, "Ritual and Language" by Dániel Z. Kádár offers a valuable contribution to the study of ritual from a pragmatic perspective. Its interdisciplinary approach, rigorous theoretical framework, and insightful analysis enrich our understanding of the complex relationship between language and ritual. However, the book could improve its accessibility and empirical breadth to appeal to a wider audience and enhance its scholarly impact.

References

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Bionote:

Fariz ALNIZAR, PhD, is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama University of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia. He is a researcher on language and religious issues. His latest research is on "linguistic violence". He has published several articles, columns and essays in a number of print and online academic journals and national media.
e-mail: fariz@unusia.ac.id
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4085-5057

Сведения об авторе:

Фариз АЛНИЗАР имеет степень PhD, доцент факультета ислама Нусантара в Индонезийском Университете Нахдлатул Улама, Джакарта, Индонезия. Он является исследователем языка и религиозных вопросов. Его новейшие исследования посвящены «языковому насилию». На его счету несколько статей, колонок и эссе, опубликованных в ряде печатных и электронных научных журналов и национальных СМИ.
e-mail: fariz@unusia.ac.id
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4085-5057