

## LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AND PERSONAL FULFILMENT: A PRAGMA-CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF PSALM 23

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### Abstract

This study investigates the dynamic interplay between linguistic capital and personal fulfilment within the context of Psalm 23, adopting a pragma-critical perspective on the intersection of linguistics, theology, and sociology. The study is anchored in the recognition that sacred texts function not only as cultural repositories but also as pragmatic instruments for shaping identity, imparting value, and catalysing spiritual and communal transformation. Scholars in Biblical studies have historically focused on literary or doctrinal aspects of the Psalms, with fewer inquiries into the pragmatic, performative, and identity-constructive capacities encoded in sacred language. The theoretical framework thus integrates pragma-criticism, which scrutinises how language use in Psalm 23 functionally enacts comfort, assurance, and ethical orientation. The study employs a pragma-critical approach, combining textual exegesis with linguistic tools to examine the syntactic, metaphoric, and rhetorical features of Psalm 23. The findings reveal that the linguistic strategies employed in Psalm 23, including metaphor, direct address, and ethical affirmation, serve as repositories of linguistic capital, empowering individuals and communities to negotiate their identity, foster resilience, and experience fulfilment. The Psalm's recurrent use in liturgical and therapeutic settings further testifies to its pragmatic efficacy. The study recommends that clergy, educators, and translators approach sacred texts with heightened awareness of their linguistic and pragmatic functionalities, emphasising not only semantic but also performative and communal aspects. In conclusion, this work examines the profound capacity of Psalm 23 to foster personal and collective thriving through its embedded linguistic capital, advocating for continued interdisciplinary research into the nuanced intersections of language, faith, and human flourishing.

**Keywords:** Psalm 23, Linguistic Capital, Pragma-critical, Personal fulfilment, Linguistic functionality.

### 1 Introduction

The complex interplay among language, social capital, and personal fulfilment is important to sociolinguistics and the philosophy of religion (Bourdieu, 1991; Fairclough, 2015). Supplementing Bourdieu's (1991) argument on LINGUISTIC CAPITAL, we define it as the perceived value attached to certain types of linguistic skills and rhetoric within specific sociocultural frameworks. This is prominently apparent in religious contexts where the mastery and invocation of sacred or ancient forms becomes a major source of power, unity, and influence (Thompson, 2022). One can analyse how linguistic capital functions for individual and collective fulfilment by examining Psalm 23, which is one of

the most cherished portions of Judeo-Christian scriptures.

The acute textual influence of PSALM 23 stems from its carefully selected words, metaphors, and rhythmic structure. The first verse, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1, ESV), uses metaphor to configure the relationship between the suppliant and God in a way that emphasises protective love and divine provision. Rather than serving as a decorative or passive figure of speech, a shepherd fosters religious imagination and provides tangible means for devotees to understand trust along with existential security (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Wierzbicka (2019) remarks that such sacred METAPHORS serve as linguistic scaffolding,

helping to shape collective worldviews and values within a community by providing readers and listeners with common vocabulary. As much as the psalm's linguistic capital could be characterised by the rituals constructed around it liturgically and counselling across cultures. It transforms over time but never loses its essence (Gillingham 2020). Used in times of sorrow, hope, love, and celebration, verses from Psalm 23 become spiritually invoked, cumulatively transcending socio-emotional barriers. Within group contexts where members verbally utter communal recitation aloud together regularly, there exists active reinforcement of shared memory, which linguistically unites alongside timeless traditions devoid of sociological changes, linguistic capital diacritics (Lincoln, 2021).

Analysing Psalm 23 from a PRAGMA-CRITICAL perspective reveals the strategic use of language within the text and how it serves distinct purposes. The psalm's recurrent direct address formulation, such as "He leads me" and "You prepare a table before me", merges the divine with an individual's reality, which invites the reader or listener into an interwoven relationship (Van Wolde, 2023). This allows for far greater intimacy than mere narrative formality and instead fosters connection to lived human experience in immediacy. In addition, the arc of the rhetoric is a movement from gentle opening statements of rest in green pastures towards steadfast trust, even "through the valley of the shadow of death". This portion highlights a strategy aimed at providing reassurance. Repetition, along with parallelism, strengthens comfort but also inspires motivation, transforming vulnerability into resilient declaration. In these ways, Psalm 23 showcases how deeply structured linguistic capital can turn existential anxiety into poetic spiritual resilience.

The economic value of language in Psalm 23 does not stop at the boundaries of the text itself. Its true value is through social and individual participation, be it through memorisation, ritualised recitation, or interpretive reflection (Morgan & Kristiansen, 2022). This process allows people to access the psalm as a reservoir for solace and direction in troubling times. This phenomenon has been documented by

contemporary studies investigating the therapeutic effects of sacred utterances (Lee et al., 2021). Most importantly, ethical framing regarding the psalm's language is notable because its subtlety belies its power. Phrases like "my cup overflows" and asserting that "goodness and mercy shall follow me" serve not only as gratitude and trust but also as invitations toward generous moral aspiration, offering linguistic scaffolding for crafting a virtuous life (Jones & Francis, 2023).

The enjoyment of the linguistic capital Psalm 23 offers has personal and tangible effects on one's fulfilment, identity, and spirituality. The individual's ability to access and articulate imagery and themes from the psalm enables them to express their deepest hopes, fears, and convictions in culturally affirming ways, which further enhances religious identity as well as belonging within a faith community (Jindra, 2022). Recent empirical studies explore how engagement with scriptural texts such as Psalms correlates with improved psychological well-being, resilient coping abilities, and an overall enhanced sense of hope (Lee et al., 2021). Therefore, internalising and interpreting Ps 23 not only serves as a spiritual or intellectual endeavour but also transforms into a psychosocial asset that sustains individuals through adversity.

By combining pragmatic criticism with Psalm 23 analysis, it becomes apparent that, beyond individual practice, the rich linguistic capital is utilised for collective wellness. Through vivid metaphors alongside pragmatic language use and ritualistic performative contexts, meaning-making frameworks are inspired for the construction of self and ethical action guiding existence. Thus far, underserved interdisciplinary scholarship between pragmatic linguistics and sacred texts may shed light on the paradoxical interplay between language used as a vessel of religion and life flourishing still awaits.

The importance of this study becomes apparent when considering its interdisciplinary scope that combines linguistics, theology, and sociology, thus providing fresh perspectives on the functions of sacred texts. This work applies pragma-critical analysis that moves beyond text-or doctrine-centric scholarship to examine the role

of cultural phenomena, such as Psalms, including Psalm 23, which serve as powerful catalysts for shaping and transforming individual experiences rather than being static cultural artefacts. With this perspective, the research focuses on religious discourse's pragmatic strategies in belief systems, those choices made at the level of language which animate belief, foster communal bonding, and bolster spiritual resilience (Blommaert, 2010).

Importantly, the focus on linguistic capital shapes the study within current discussions about faith contexts where language operates as both a tangible and intangible asset. Following Bourdieu's (1991) theory, this study demonstrates how sacred language mastery and its transmission grant individuals and communities enhanced sociological standing, coupled with psychological fortitude and an enriched sense of belonging. This contribution adds depth to current discussions, highlighting the need to rethink the importance of religion based on sacred texts given to followers, not just by what is said, but by how it is spoken aloud.

In addition, the study's implications extend from the theoretical framework to inform practical domains such as pastoral care, religious education, and the translation of scriptures. Educators and clergy can be supported in constructing well-being and identity-affirming engagements with scriptures through pragmatic insights. Biblical translators and language experts can see the importance of using language in different ways, not just focusing on the exact meaning; paying attention to the active languages of faith communities helps make the messages more meaningful on a deeper level. In summary, this study shows that using ideas from different fields helps create useful ways to use the ever-changing language of scripture for the growth and well-being of individuals and communities.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite Psalm 23 being intricately integrated into the rhythms of faith communities and cited both in worship and literature, there remains a persistent gap in scholarship on how the Psalm's linguistic design effectively intersects with fulfilment. Most studies focus either on aesthetic value or on theological meaning, failing

to consider how the psalm's careful choices of words cultivate and nurture well-being at personal, communal, and intergenerational levels (Oji et al., 2021; Halliday, 1994). This absence of holistic evaluation overlooks the relationship between linguistic capital—bestowed through the possession and use of sacred language—and the striking sense of satisfaction that accompanies having to call upon such texts and internalise them.

The lack of focus on the practical aspects of Psalm 23 neglects how its lexical choices, syntax, and rhetorical strategies work beyond mere decoration to function as pathways for spiritual solace, ethical alignment, and shaping of one's identity. The concern is more than the literary beauty or comfort that Psalm 23 possesses; it seeks to uncover the ways and reasons why its language used in personal contemplation or worship, both individual and communal—or during moments of crisis—fosters deep existential serenity, hope, and resilience (Oji et al., 2021). Therefore, the psalm functions as a storehouse of linguistic capital. This perspective has been primarily overlooked within the framework of linguistics that concerns itself with sociolinguistics—how language does things and not merely conveys meanings (Halliday, 1994).

Examining alongside other biblical texts that serve similar pragmatic purposes provides greater clarity on the overlooked practicality of Psalm 23. For instance, Proverbs 18:21 states, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits," which serves as a reminder of language's performative and formative capabilities—something paramount to linguistic capital. We also find in Psalm 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O my rock and my redeemer" (ESV), implying language alongside disposition can lead towards spiritual attainment. Isaiah 50:4 also echoes this when declaring, "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary" (ESV), emphasising sacred, skilful speech's function of bestowing solace and direction. Lastly, Ephesians 4:29 exclaims, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good

for building up, as fits the occasion, that may give grace to those who hear,” illustrating both an ethical duty and capacity for change grounded within constructive discourse.

In these instances, as in Psalm 23, words are not simply tools for expression and communication. Rather, they serve profound purposes of fostering flourishing, resilience, and a collective identity of the faith community. Thus, the enduring efficacy of Psalm 23 stems from both its theological content and its pragmatic efficacy—how its language manifests comfort, affirmation, and hope. To resolve the concerning gap described above, it seems that contemporary discourse needs to shift toward an integrated pragma-critical framework which relies on the approach where the psalm’s linguistic resources are treated as active manipulatives of personal and communal fulfilment.

### 1. 3 Research Objectives

The work seeks to:

- i. critically examine Psalm 23 through the lenses of linguistic capital and personal fulfilment.
- ii. identify and analyse the pragmatic features and critical linguistic elements in the Psalm that contribute to its enduring impact.
- iii. elucidate how the acquisition and deployment of linguistic capital via Psalm 23 facilitates personal and communal fulfilment.
- iv. situate findings within broader discussions of religious language, social capital, and fulfilment theorisation.

### 2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Psalm 23 in this case is framed within an interdisciplinary set of theories, which include Bourdieu’s notion of linguistic capital, modern pragma-critical approaches to language, and contemporary models of self-actualisation. These considerations facilitate thoughtful scrutiny into the ways sacred scriptural language can be wielded not only as a reflection of culture but also as an instrument of sociocultural change and personal transformation.

### 2.1 Bourdieu’s Concept of Linguistic Capital

The analysis of Pierre Bourdieu on social structures and symbolic power situates his theory of linguistic capital within a larger context. Just as individuals hold economic or social capital, Bieu (1991) claims that people also accumulate forms of capital relating to their command, employment, and legitimisation of language varieties or registers that are considered valuable. Linguistic capital is thus related to material conditions: it is obtained through socialisation, schooling, and participating in legitimate discourses. More importantly, linguistic capital cannot be regarded as neutral; it is inscribed within fields of power and negotiation and contexts of social stratification (Bourdieu 1991; Thompson 2017).

Utilising Bourdieu’s theory, Psalm 23 invites us to consider how the psalm serves as a symbolic resource within religious groups. Through works such as Cohen (2010), we can understand that memorising, reciting and interpreting Psalm 23 gives individuals some form of communicative legitimacy along with spiritual prestige. Within faith contexts, those who possess the language of the Psalms can participate in shared traditions, display their spirituality and also access symbolic ‘goods’, which tend to include consolation, hope and belonging in a community (Blomert, 2010). Additionally, mastery of this register enables an individual to transcend beyond passive receivership towards forging active influence through leveraging belief systems within the spiritual landscape/economy of their community.

Furthermore, empowerment enables adherents who are traditionally voiceless to take steps to teaching, comforting or leading, thus further creating ripple effects while augmenting social value, aiding understanding behind Bourdieu’s explanation concerning capital structures possessed by different sociocultural groups at a given time. These freely available texts, such as psalms, construct barriers for people who do not transcend certain levels and lack linguistic garments, enabling granting entry that then would result in battled forms of symbolic power or power without performativity alongside imagery, politically placed power within a group



(Thompson “talking back”, 2017).

## **2.2 Pragma-Critical Approach**

Pragmatics deals with achieving communicative intent within context-dependent utterances (Mey, 2001; Kecskes, 2013). Within critical discourse analysis lies the interrogation of language as it enacts power, ideology, and social inequality within a given discourse. Pragma-criticism, as explained by Mey (2001), combines ideas about how language choices affect social and ethical issues with the communication strategies used to achieve the ideological goals of texts.

When considering sacred texts such as Psalm 23, a pragma-critical perspective highlights how its linguistic structure serves specific pragmatic goals intertwined with its context of utterance. The psalm does more than attribute narration; using illocutionary acts, God performs reassurance, praise, invocation, and thanksgiving that fulfil both communal and individual social-spiritual functions. Invoking “He” and “You” creates intimacy and deeply personalises the divine address, which is crucial for a believer’s spiritual satisfaction. Moreover, metaphors coupled with parallelism dominant in the text are active constituents that presuppose or imply a great deal about God’s care as well as adversity and restoration (Berlin, 2019; Wierzbicka, 2019).

Pragma-criticism focuses on both the text and its context: (1) the specific emotions, solidarity, and hope that the Psalmist piques with scriptural strategies; (2) the interpretive acts of communities and individuals internalising such strategies through prayer, worship, or daily life (Kecskés, 2013). Take, for example, Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (ESV). Its utterance pragmatically operates as an illocutionary self-assurance and communal reassurance. Theologians might consider these moves solely from a dogmatic perspective. They engage affective and existential dimensions, for which the psalm mobilises its hearers and readers.

## **2.3 Theories of Personal Fulfilment**

Personal fulfilment, as theorised within positive psychology and existential philosophy, revolves around the realisation of potential, the

pursuit of meaning, and the attainment of psychological well-being and self-actualisation (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2019). These frameworks, which have gained immense popularity in recent decades, explore not only the content of what constitutes fulfilment but also the mechanisms through which individuals can experience and sustain it. Within this paradigm, language is fundamental: self-conceptions of meaning, flourishing, and resilience are articulated and reinforced through texts, symbols, and communal narratives. Psalm 23 is frequently drawn upon at moments of crisis and celebration alike, its language affirms security (“I shall not want”), resilience (“I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”), and hope (“I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”). These utterances function not just as religious declarations but as psychological resources for managing adversity and enhancing subjective well-being (Lee et al., 2021; Jones & Francis, 2023).

From the perspective of self-determination theory, Psalm 23 provides a sense of freedom through expressing trust, a feeling of self-worth during tough times, and a connection to a supportive divine and community context. Furthermore, Seligman’s (2019) positive psychology emphasises meaning, engagement and accomplishment as pillars of fulfilment, all discernible in the experience and confession of texts like Psalm 23.

## **2.4 Intersections and Integration of these Theories**

By uniting these three theoretical strands, this study seeks to illuminate previously unmapped connections between sacred language and lived experience. Bourdieu’s linguistic capital highlights the socially mediated power of scriptural language and frames Psalm 23 as a valuable asset within faith communities. Pragma-criticism provides the analytical toolkit for examining how the text’s pragmatic phenomena - illocutionary acts, presuppositions, and implicatures - produce real-world effects on personal and collective consciousness. Theories of personal fulfilment connect the linguistic strategies and pragmatic functions of Psalm 23 to wider discourses on well-being, resilience, and

existential satisfaction. The intersection of these perspectives offers an integrative model that acknowledges the dynamic, enacted, and lived dimensions of sacred texts.

For instance, when Psalm 23:3 declares, “He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name sake” (ESV); we see a convergence of frameworks: the declaration accrues linguistic capital by adhering to sacred tradition, pragmatically functions to encourage and guide, and supports personal fulfilment by promising restoration and moral clarity. Likewise, in Psalm 19:14, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (ESV), the interplay of accepted liturgical language (capital), pragmatic request for divine approbation, and existential quest for meaning are all evident.

In synthesising Bourdieu’s theory of linguistic capital, pragma-critical methodologies, and philosophies of personal fulfilment, this theoretical framework empowers a nuanced, contextually alert, and interdisciplinary investigation of Psalm 23. It moves the study beyond literary appreciation or theological exegesis to a richer exploration of how sacred language acts in the world: as stored capital, as pragmatic intervention, and as a resource for fulfilment. This integrated approach not only addresses the stated gaps in scholarship but also provides a model for future analysis of scripture as a lived, performed, and transformative artefact.

### **3 Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Linguistic Capital and Scripture**

Scholarship on linguistic capital has followed Bourdieu’s framework and focuses mostly on secular contexts, such as assessing the benefits of language mastery within education, employment, migration, and even social advancement (Blommaert, 2010; Piller, 2016). These studies highlight the role of linguistic capital as a command of valued forms and communicative codes that facilitate participation in crucial socio-economic spheres of life.

Focus has only quite recently shifted to analysing linguistic capital about religion and especially scriptures. Sacred texts like the Bible go

beyond being mere historical or doctrinal texts; they are continuously powerful sources for social identity construction. Oji et al. (2021) state that scriptural language derives its authority in part from collective recitation, liturgical use, and personal memorisation, which bestows an authoritative aura transcending ordinary existence. In this understanding, scripture serves as a cultural spiritual currency whereby members perform and solidify boundaries of communal inclusion and notions of faith while also reshaping their identities.

Moreover, the power of scriptural language comes from its repeated cognitive capacity and repetition. Providing a faith lexicon alongside morally guiding ethical conduct gives “text” the ability to “shape reality”, as explained by Morgan and Kristiansen (2022). Through distinct speech acts such as prayer, proclamation, blessing or lament - actions of scripture’s language - its content transforms into a powerful spiritual agent, enabling world-making and self-formation processes.

Thus, viewing scriptures through the lens of linguistic capital reveals how religious language serves as both a reservoir of social value and a pragmatic tool for spiritual change. This frames sacred texts not only as containers of passed-down knowledge but also as active negotiators of meaning, identity and communal ethos within today’s living faith communities.

#### **3.2 Pragma-Critical Scholarship and Analysis of Psalm 23**

Recent pragma-critical research has animated the discipline of biblical studies by considering not only the meanings of sacred texts but also their myriad functions in cultural and social contexts. Such works depend upon pragmatic theory, especially concerning speech acts, implicatures, and language’s performative aspects to reveal deeper meanings hidden within scripture (Pattemore, 2020). When looking at Psalm 23, pragma-critical interpretations have helped explain how the psalm captivates readers and listeners in many ways through its use of metaphorical language and subtle meanings. For instance, Tovey (2018) argues that the shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23 does more than describe; it

performs a representation through which readers locate themselves within the framework of God's guidance and care. This performative element suggests not only shelter and sustenance for the speaker but also extends an invitation to the audience to engage with the text and participate as they find solace, trust, and assurance of divine comfort. Nölle (2022) demonstrates further from the psalm, describing its pragmatic aspects like presuppositions ("I shall not want") and confident declarations like "You are with me", explaining how these elements work toward reinforcing psychologically and spiritually the believer's sense of security. These linguistic strategies operate beyond mere communication by providing information; they offer a transforming impact in enabling individual or collective internalisation of the promises conveyed in the psalm. Informed by pragma-criticism, recent scholarship on Psalm 23, though still rooted in critical theology, this study moves away from merely doctrinal approaches toward exploring language in use to shape belief, foster resilience, and sustain enduring resonance of this cherished biblical poem.

### **3.3 Fulfilment through Texts**

Academic exploration of the relationship between sacred texts and human flourishing has increased in breadth and depth over the last few decades, particularly in spiritual psychology and religious studies. A growing body of empirical literature shows that scripture engagement - through recitation, meditation, or reading - enhances individual and collective well-being. King and Boyatzis (2017) underscore that sacred texts catalyse existential meaning-making by providing a cognitive map to interpret life's experiences, offering comfort during distressing times, and enabling self-transcendent moments. Such processes are not purely theoretical but supported by qualitative and quantitative studies, which indicate deep engagement with religious scripture relates to a heightened sense of purpose, peace within oneself, and connection with others.

Psalm 23 is perhaps the most quoted and memorised text from the Judeo-Christian traditions. It illustrates these dynamics in a particularly clear way. Empirical research has shown that meditative practices or recitation of

Psalm 23 mitigates psychological suffering while also fostering what Yong (2020) calls "pragma resilience" – the ability to adapt, withstand, and thrive during personal or collective hardships. In clinical and pastoral settings, this psalm has been known to aid unresolved anxiety, grief, and existential boredom therapeutically, also acting as a reservoir of hope and fortitude (Lee, DeRosset, & Kim, 2021).

Moreover, communal rituals that focus on this psalm enhance communal identity and identity performance while simultaneously emphasising its sociocultural value as a resource for language and religion and spirituality. Collectively, these empirical findings reinforce that enduring many forms of covenantal devotion negotiated through sacred texts such as Psalm 23 are not confined within private spaces of devotion but extend to shaping collective expressions of faith in which both individuals and communities can construct meaning and nurture resilient frameworks alongside holistic well-being paradigms.

### **3.4 Gaps in the Literature**

Regardless of the extensive scholarly work done on the Psalms' linguistic beauty or theological significance, there is still a remarkable gap in research that integrates the concepts of linguistic capital, pragma criticism, PERSONAL FULFILMENT, and close reading on one psalm, notably Psalm 23. For example, much literature on the Psalms prioritises literary and historical criticism or analyses the Psalms' roles in doctrine and communal worship (Gillingham, 2020). At the same time, studies focused on linguistic capital, drawing from Bourdieu's work (1991), tend to address secular contexts and overlook religious settings where sacred language functions as social and symbolic capital (Blommaert, 2010).

Additionally, while some approaches that analyse biblical texts have become more popular, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that connect the meaning of a psalm to building personal strength and community well-being. As Oji et al. (2021) note, most studies have focused on either one's identity construction or its psychological and existential effects, infrequently synthesising these strands into a single analysis. Here, the concern is about current scholarship's

lack of consideration regarding the Psalms' rhetorical handiwork of meaning creation in the forging of devotion, together with value transmission in nurturing fulfilment during private devotion and communal recitation. The blend of these dimensions cultivated through synergy draws attention to this lapse and highlights the need for urgent study, which is precisely what this inquiry seeks to answer, exploring the intersection between pragmatism, linguistic capital and spiritual sacralisation, focusing on Psalm 23.

#### 4 Data Collected and Review

##### 4.1 Methodology

Integrating the tools of discourse analysis with theories of pragmatics, this study employs qualitative methods grounded in critical theory. The examination focuses on Psalm 23, illuminating language not only to convey meaning but also to foster individual and collective fulfilment.

The interpretation begins with a reading of the text, which reveals its linguistic and pragmatic features. Through analysis of speech acts including declarations, assertions and expressions of trust, we will demonstrate how these utterances construct reality, nurture confidence, and impact the relationship between the speaker and God. A focus will be placed on metaphorical structures within the psalm, such as image schemas with the shepherd motif that convey rich theological meaning alongside dense experiential and cultural connotations.

Additionally, we examine referential and deictic word elements within the texts to reveal how language situates people within certain spiritual frameworks and communal contexts. Prior knowledge alongside interpretive and communal memory framed through schema theory is utilised, illustrating parts shaping reception and enactment concerning the language of the psalm. Context-specific characteristics, including prior text connections and speech acts, are examined as well. The examination of the psalm seeks to understand its role in prayer, public declaration, and communal worship, which underscores its performative aspects. In integrating these approaches, the methodology aims to expose the socio-cultural rationale and actual impact

concerning the use of language in Psalm 23 within its framework, suggesting a bounded understanding of how religious texts function as catalysts for meaning, realisation, and self-concept in communities shaped by religion.

##### 4.2 Data Source

The primary data for this study is the text of Psalm 23, considered in the traditional Hebrew (Masoretic Text) and widely accepted English translations (e.g., New Revised Standard Version, King James Version). Secondary data includes scholarly interpretations, commentaries, and ethnographic accounts of Psalm 23 usage in various religious settings (Alter, 2019; Brueggemann, 2022).

##### 4.3 Extract of Psalm 23:

WTT Leningrad Hebrew Old Testament version of Psalm 23

- 1: מִן־מִזְרָח לַדָּגֵד וְהַנֶּה רֵעִי לֹא אֶחָדֶּה
- 2: בְּנֵאֻת דָּשָׁא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מִי מִנְחֹת וְנִהְלֵנִי:
- 3: נִפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְתְּנִי בַּמִּצְלָה לְפָדֶךְ לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ:
- 4: אֲגַם כִּי־אֶלֶךְ בְּגִיא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אֶירָא יָדְעִי שֶׁבֶטְךָ וְאַשְׁעֲנֶנְךָ חֶסֶד וְחַנּוּנִי:
- 5: תַּעֲרֵךְ לִפְנֵי שִׁלְטֹן גָּד צִרְבִּי דִּשְׁנֶנֶת בְּשִׁמְךָ רֵאשִׁי כּוֹסִי רִנָּה:
- 6: אֲדָוָה טוֹב נִחְסֵד יִרְדְּפֵנִי כִּלְיָנִי חַי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:

##### English Standard Version (ESV)

1. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.
3. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
5. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

##### 4.4 A Pragmatic Critical Analysis of Psalm 23

Psalm 23 holds a singular place within the Judeo-Christian canon, echoing through centuries of worship, reflection, and literary tradition. It has become not only an object of religious veneration but an archetype for spiritual assurance, invoked in both personal solitude and public ritual. By examining the psalm through pragma-critical frameworks, namely, referentiality and deixis,



metaphor and image schema, speech act theory, schema theory, and performative dimensions, we can better understand how its language mediates experience, constructs meaning, and forges identity.

#### **4.4.1 Referentiality and Deixis**

Referentiality in Psalm 23 is tightly woven to deixis, the system of linguistic markers that anchor meaning in context (Levinson, 2004). The Psalmist's repeated invocation of "The Lord" at the onset ("The Lord is my shepherd..." v.1) establishes a referent whose divine identity is both unique and absolute within the web of monistic faith. Throughout the passage, the movement from third-person reference ("He makes me lie down... He leads me... He restores my soul...") to second-person address ("for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me," v.4) marks a shift from abstraction to immediacy. The Psalmist, formerly narrating about God, now speaks directly. This deictic shift is not merely stylistic; it signals an intensification of intimacy as the speaker transitions from assertion to communion and comfort (Van Wolde, 2023). The demonstrative pronoun 'my' recurs, "my shepherd," "my soul," "my cup," which personalises and localises the Psalmist's experience. This referential strategy collapses the temporal and spatial distance between the speaker and the divine, inviting the hearer or reader into the same proximity (Wiericka, 2019). Thus, the Psalm's deixis is not neutral but serves as a rhetorical device for religious appropriation and identification.

#### **4.4.2 Metaphor and Image Schemas**

Metaphor is foundational to the Psalm's power, serving not only as a literary flourish but as the primary mode of conceptualisation. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) have argued that metaphors shape not just how we speak but how we think, and Psalm 23 exemplifies this insight. "The Lord is my shepherd" (v.1) is a salient metaphor that frames the psalmist as a sheep, vulnerable, dependent, yet cared for. This image is prolonged: "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters" (v. 2) activates the image schema of pastoral tranquillity and sustenance. Image schemas – recurring dynamic patterns like 'path',

'container', or 'balance' – are evident in "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake" (v.3). Here the 'path' schema guides the moral and existential journey, implying direction and progress under the auspices of the divine (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

In "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil" (v.4), the 'journey' schema is further dramatised, shifting from safety to peril, yet continuity and protection. The metaphors of the "rod" and "staff" (v. 4) also carry dual resonances: instruments of discipline and guidance, they symbolise both authority and comfort for the flock. In v.5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," the schema moves from pasturage to hospitality, with "anointing my head with oil" and the overflowing cup signalling honour, abundance, and favour. These layered metaphors not only evoke lived sensorial experiences but also provide a cognitive map for understanding well-being in spiritual terms.

#### **4.4.3 Speech Acts: Declarations and Assertions**

Psalm 23's clauses perform a range of illocutionary acts as theorised by Austin and Searle (Searle, 1976). Each verse is rich with assertions (e.g., "The Lord is my shepherd"), which do not merely enact a stance of trust. Declarations such as "I shall not want" (v.1) function as performative utterances; they linguistically bring about a sense of sufficiency in the hearer's or speaker's world. Explicative like "You are with me" (v.4) are not informative but constitutive, providing comfort through speech. Psalm 23 thus follows the logic of sacred performativity: its recitation is thought not only to describe reality but to effect transformation of fear into confidence, want into satisfaction (Austin, 1975).

Furthermore, implicit in "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (v.6) is a speech act of divine assurance initiating an open future of blessing and permanence. The Psalmist's assertions are therefore more than propositional; they are illocutionary strategies that foster assurance and reinforce faith within the individual and their community.

#### **4.4.4 Schema Theory and the Role of Prior Knowledge**

The efficacy of Psalm 23 in eliciting

emotion and spirituality can be explained by schema theory, which posits that comprehension is guided by pre-existing knowledge structures (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980). The recurrent metaphors of shepherding, danger, anointing, and home tap into widely shared cultural and religious schemas. For ancient audiences familiar with the responsibilities of shepherds and the symbolism of anointed heads, the psalm's images would activate deep, affective frameworks for security, provision, and celebration.

For contemporary readers and worshippers, these schemas are at once literal (green pastures, cups, banquets) and figurative, allowing listeners across epochs to map their own experiences onto the text. In cognitive terms, this interaction between textual cues and personal or collective memory is central to the psalm's continuing relevance and power (Gillingham, 2020).

#### **4.4.5 Performative Dimensions: Prayer, Declaration, and Recitation**

The performative dimension of Psalm 23 is realised most fully in its repeated use in prayer, liturgy, and communal gatherings. In personal prayer, reciting the psalm is an act of aligning one's anxieties, hopes, and thanksgivings with the paradigmatic story of divine shepherding. In communal recitation, the psalm is a collective utterance, a voice of the "we" as much as of the "I", reinforcing group identity and shared trust in God's providence (Lincoln, 2021).

The psalm encourages ritualised repetition, its phrases easily memorised and adapted for occasions of grief ("Even though I walk through the darkest valley"); celebration ("You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows"); or transition ("and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long"). Thus, Psalm 23 is not a static textual "object" but an enacted mode of being. Its speech acts, metaphors, and deictic shifts are not exhausted by literary analysis but come alive in performative use, as individuals and communities draw upon them to enact hope, claim comfort, and reaffirm belonging (Morgan & Kristiansen, 2022).

Analysed through the lens of contemporary pragma-critical categories, Psalm

23 emerges as a masterwork of linguistic, rhetorical, and spiritual architecture. Its referential strategies, metaphorical richness, performative speech acts, activation of shared schemas, and enduring life in communal ritual coalesce to produce a text that is not only contemplated but lived. Psalms' language is not neutral: it is instrumentally powerful, aiding identity, fostering resilience, and offering a continually renewed promise of fulfilment, whether one walks "beside still waters" or through "the darkest valley".

#### **4.5 Findings**

The findings from the Pragma-Critical Analysis of Psalm 23 are as follows:

##### **4.5.1 Deictic and Referential Dynamics Forge Intimacy**

The psalm strategically moves from third-person ("He leads me...") to second-person address ("You are with me...") within its verses. This shift, supported by repeated use of the possessive "my", collapses distance between the divine and the speaker, fostering personal identification and spiritual intimacy.

##### **4.5.2 Metaphor and Image Schema offer Cognitive and Emotional Anchors**

Psalm 23's core metaphors, such as "The Lord is my shepherd", and related image schemas (e.g. 'path', 'container', 'journey', 'banquet') are conceptual frameworks that help readers and listeners model experiences of vulnerability, security, and abundance. These metaphors structure both the emotional and doctrinal content of faith, offering accessible and enduring cognitive anchors.

##### **4.5.3 Illocutionary (Speech) Acts Enact**

The psalm is replete with performative declarations ("I shall not want", "You are with me") that do not merely describe reality but instantiate states of sufficiency, assurance, and hope. These utterances function as speech acts that both express and engender confidence, comfort, and a future-oriented faith outlook.

##### **4.5.4 Schema Activation Facilitates Deep Resonance**

The text's motifs (shepherding, anointing, home) tap into shared cultural and religious schemas. This allows diverse audiences, both ancient and modern, to personalise the Psalm by mapping it

onto their own spiritual and existential experiences, thus enhancing connection and meaning.

#### **4.5.5 Performance in Prayer and Liturgy Sustains Identity Resilience**

Regular use of Psalm 23 in personal and communal settings transforms the text from static scripture into a dynamic, enacted source of hope and belonging. Rituals internalise their phrases, strengthening collective identity and spiritual resilience, particularly during life transitions, grief, and celebrations. In summary, the pragmatic analysis reveals that Psalm 23's referential strategies, metaphorical architecture, performative speech acts, and ritual enactments efficiently mediate spiritual experience, strengthen faith identity, and offer enduring resources for personal and communal fulfilment.

#### **4.6 Discussion of Findings**

A careful look at Psalm 23, focusing on its language, practical use, and lasting effect on communities, shows how the Psalm helps people feel fulfilled both individually and together. This analysis not only underscores the centrality of linguistic capital in sacred texts but also situates Psalm 23 as an exemplar within broader conversations about religious language and fulfilment theory.

One of the foundational findings is the strategic use of deictic and referential dynamics to forge spiritual intimacy. The psalm's rhetorical movement from third-person references ("He leads me beside still waters...", v. 2) to second-person direct address ("You are with me...", v.2) collapses the conceptual distance between God and the supplicant (Van Wolde, 2023; Berlin, 2019). The consistent repetition of possessive expressions such as "my shepherd" (v.1) and "my cup" (v.5) further instantiates a sense of belonging and direct relationship (Wierzbicka, 2019). This linguistic progression is not merely stylistic but thematically shifts the psalm's function from description to intimate dialogue, cultivating personal identification with the divine. In this, Psalm 23 echoes and embodies themes found elsewhere in scripture, such as John 10:14 ("I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me" (ESV), which further reinforces the

personal, reciprocal rapport between the divine and faithful.

Another core element lies in the psalm's metaphorical and image-schematic architecture. The shepherd metaphor not only conveys divine care but also offers an emotional anchor for readers across cultures and eras (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Images such as "path" ("He leads me in paths of righteousness...", v.3) and "table"/"banquet" ("You prepare a table before me...", v.5) provide accessible conceptual structures for modelling experiences of vulnerability, security, and abundance (Lee et al., 2021). This aligns with cognitive linguistic theories, which posit that metaphors and schemas are essential for people to make sense of abstract or complex spiritual realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 3). These conceptual frameworks are not passive containers of doctrine but are active, dynamic anchors for memory, meaning, and emotional engagement, a point resonant with Proverbs 3:6: "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (ESV), further supporting the schema of guided journey.

The psalm is also notable for its deployment of illocutionary or performative speech acts. Utterances such as "I shall not want" (v.1) and "You are with me" (v.4) are not simply expressions of states but declarations that both express and help instantiate spiritual sufficiency, assurance, and hope (Oji et al., 2021; Halliday, 1994). These are speech acts that perform, not just confidence and resilience, inviting hearers or readers to share in these realities. In biblical pragmatics, such performatives are agents of transformation, affirming that language, especially in sacred contexts, does not merely describe the world but can help bring about desired spiritual states. James 5 demonstrates a similar performative potential: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed..." (ESV), highlighting that utterances in faith communities enact change rather than simply reference it.

A further dimension is the activation of shared cultural and religious schemas. Motifs such as "shepherding", "anointing", and "dwelling in the house of the LORD" (v.6) resonate deeply with

collective memory; they enable both ancient and contemporary audiences to map their own existential and spiritual journeys onto the text (Morgan & Kristiansen, 2022). This schema activation allows the psalm's language to function as an open template—personalised and reinterpreted across generations. The motif of dwelling echoes with other scriptural promises, such as Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I asked of the LORD...to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life” (ESV), amplifying the sense of spiritual homecoming offered in Psalm 23.

Lastly, the performance of Psalm 23 in prayer and liturgy transforms it from a static literary work into a living component of communal and individual practice. The regular recitation and ritual enactment of its verses - in times of grief, celebration, or life transition - internalises its images and affirmations, reinforcing both collective identity and personal resilience (Gillingham, 2020; Lincoln, 2021). This liturgical performance functions as a mechanism by which language and identity become mutually reinforcing, helping communities anchor themselves through shared words and rituals, a dynamic similarly seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:1: “Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (ESV).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Psalm 23's enduring impact arises not only from its theological or literary content but also from its intricate deployment of pragmatic and critical linguistic features. The psalm's referential malleability, metaphorical frameworks, performative speech acts, and ritual entailments mediate profound spiritual experiences, support identity formation, and provide lasting resources for personal and communal fulfilment. In deploying its linguistic capital, Psalm 23 serves as a touchstone for broader discussions about how religious language functions as social and symbolic capital, empowering believers, shaping community life, and offering tools for personal flourishing (Bourdieu, 1991; Blommaert, 2010; Thompson, 2022).

## **5. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation**

### **5.1 Summary**

This study offers a comprehensive pragma-critical exploration of Psalm 23, situating the text at the intersection of linguistics, theology, and sociology to show how its linguistic architecture functions as a potent form of linguistic capital. Rather than limiting the inquiry to the psalm's literary beauty and original substance, the study probes the pragmatic strategies embedded within its verses, strategies that comfort, inspire, and shape the spiritual identities of individuals and communities alike. Drawing extensively on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital, the research underscores that the mastery, transmission, and appropriation of Psalm 23's sacred language not only foster group cohesion and a shared sense of belonging but also endow individuals with psychological resilience, existential assurance, and personal fulfilment.

Central to this research is the argument that Psalm 23's enduring influence does not derive solely from its lyrical metaphors or theological affirmations but from its ability to serve as an active resource which transforms personal anxieties into states of confidence, hope, and security. The study analyses the psalm's pragmatic elements, its use of metaphor, address, rhetorical progression, and performative cues, and demonstrates how these linguistic features equip worshippers with a vocabulary and framework for processing adversity and cultivating trust. By engaging other scriptural texts that highlight the formative and performative power of language, the study contextualises Psalm 23 within a broader biblical discourse that values words as instruments of blessing, comfort, and transformation.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of intergenerational transmission and liturgical practice in amplifying the psalm's capital, demonstrating how repetition and communal recitation not only reinforce its meaning but also widen its accessibility and impact over time. The research does not shy away from interrogating the issues of power and accessibility that accompany the use of sacred language, acknowledging that the deployment of



linguistic capital can both empower and exclude, depending on context and interpretation.

On a practical level, this investigation has significant implications for pastoral care, religious education, and scriptural translation. By showing how the language of Psalm 23 works in real life, the study urges faith leaders, educators, and translators to focus not just on staying true to the text but also on how people experience and connect with the scripture. Ultimately, this work enriches both scholarly and faith-based understandings of Psalm 23, not merely as an artefact of culture or heritage but as a dynamic, pragmatic resource that actively nurtures personal and collective flourishing, resilience, and well-being.

## 5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Psalm 23 exemplifies a complex interplay between linguistic capital and personal fulfilment within sacred texts. Through a pragma-critical lens, the research has shown that the psalm's linguistic resources—its metaphors, direct address, repetitive structures, and performative language—are not merely aesthetic features but active agents of personal transformation and communal cohesion. By equipping individuals with a language that articulates trust, hope, and resilience, Psalm 23 functions as a pragmatic tool that empowers adherents to navigate existential uncertainties and cultivate spiritual well-being. This confirms the thesis that sacred texts like Psalm 23 offer more than doctrinal inspiration; they possess efficacy that shapes behaviour, fosters identity, and nurtures collective values.

Moreover, the study contributes to the emerging interdisciplinary discourse linking linguistics, theology, and sociology by foregrounding how linguistic capital is both constructed and mobilised within faith communities. The findings highlight that mastery and appropriation of sacred language are essential not only for religious participation but also for psychological flourishing and ethical living. Practical implications extend to pastoral practice, education, and translation, encouraging stakeholders to intentionally harness the pragmatic potential of sacred texts to enhance both individual

fulfilment and communal resilience. By illuminating the transformative power of Psalm 23's language, this study invites continued scholarly exploration into how pragmatic linguistics and sacred scripture collaborate in the ongoing project of human flourishing.

## 5.3 Recommendations

Based on the pragma-critical findings of Psalm 23, the following five recommendations are offered:

**Encourage intentional shifts in scriptural engagement:** Pastoral leaders, educators, and worship practitioners should draw attention to the dynamic shifts in address within Psalm 23, from third-person to second. By intentionally highlighting and modelling these deictic and referential transitions, faith communities can foster a deeper sense of intimacy and personal identification with the divine during worship, meditation, and prayer.

**Harness Metaphorical Language for Spiritual Formation:** Religious educators and clergy are encouraged to actively utilise and unpack the psalm's central metaphors and image schemas (shepherd, path, banquet, home). Through sermons, group studies, and personal reflection guides, these conceptual frameworks can be used as practical scaffolding to help individuals anchor their faith experiences, process vulnerability, and realise spiritual security and abundance.

**Incorporate Performative Declarations in Faith Practices:** The illocutionary (speech-act) nature of verses in Psalm 23 suggests that believers should be guided to move beyond mere recitation to performative proclamation. Spiritual formation programmes should train individuals to declare scriptural promises ("I shall not want", "You are with me") with intentionality as a way to actively enact assurance, confidence, and hope in daily life.

**Facilitate Schema Activation for Personal Relevance:** Teachers and small-group leaders should create opportunities for participants to map the psalm's motifs onto their unique life experiences. Guided questions and reflective practices can help individuals recognise how the imagery of shepherding, anointing, and home resonates with their spiritual journeys, thus deepening scripture's relevance.

### **Sustain Ritualised Use Reinforce Identity and Resilience:**

Regular incorporation of Psalm 23 liturgical cycles, counselling sessions, and life-transition rituals is recommended. By emphasising the communal and performative aspects, such as

group recitation in times of grief or celebration, faith leaders can help reinforce a resilient collective identity and sustain individual well-being through repeated, embodied engagement with the text.

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