Since the 1970s notions like performance, performativeness and performatives have featured quite prominently in various scientific approaches to ritual and liturgy (cf. Tambiah 1979; Werlen 1984; Bell 1997, 72–76). They have an impact on practical-theological theorising about liturgical activities, especially when the focus is on linguistic aspects of liturgy (e.g. Ladrière 1973; Ware 1981; Hug 1985; Schermann 1987; Schaller 1988; Merz 1988). A major source of inspiration for these approaches was J. L. Austin’s linguistic theory. In the 1940s he found that language does not merely consist of statements about reality, but that people could use words to create realities, as in the utterance, “I baptise you…” (cf. De Clerck 1992) or “I herewith declare the meeting open”. He called such utterances performatives. To what extent the term is a fortunate choice remains to be seen. Austin himself eventually abandoned the distinction between constatives and performatives. He increasingly realised that all language is a form of action, hence he looked for a more exact distinction between different kinds of speech acts.

What is known as speech act theory, which grew from this approach, did introduce certain nuances and refinements. Nonetheless there have been many misconceptions and some confusion about the notions of performance, performativeness and performatives in recent times. Habermas (1991, 28), for instance, refers to the ‘performative character of all speech acts’. In this article I will show why it is incorrect and dangerous to regard all linguistic communicative acts, for example in liturgy, as ‘implicit performatives’, since that makes it difficult to explain why liturgy should include so many typical performative speech acts such as ‘we thank God’ and ‘therefore we ask you’. And how does one explain the specific power of the consecration formula in a eucharistic service, whereas it does not contain a single performative speech act? Hence the main purpose of this article is to help clear up actual and possible misconceptions and confusion in liturgical science about the notions of performance, performativeness and performatives.
To this end I draw on J. R. Searle’s philosophical ideas on language as a form of collective activity. I shall use these ideas to develop an analytical instrument for liturgy as a performance, inasmuch as it is conducted via speech acts. In so doing I shall pay special attention to the kind of speech acts that can legitimately be called performatives. On that basis I make some recommendations for liturgical studies as a practical-theological discipline. Hence the cardinal question in this article is: how can an approach to the language of liturgy as a totality of speech act performances help to achieve the goal of liturgical science as a practical-theological discipline more effectively, especially when it comes to liturgical language? The first sub-question is what the language of liturgy entails when viewed as a totality of speech act performances. The second is what (the aim of) liturgical science as a practical-theological discipline can and should be, especially in regard to liturgical language.

In so doing I rely mainly on J. R. Searle’s version of speech act theory, which he bases on his theory of intentionality and, more specifically, his theory of collective action. His key concepts are not performance or performativeness, but action, speech act and performative. This article is built round these three concepts. First I explore what liturgical performance entails as an action, at least in so far as that applies to language as a form of action, and what it implies for liturgical research (section 1). Then I deal in more detail with the various types of speech acts which (may) be performed in liturgy, and on which liturgical science could focus (section 2). I then apply these ideas to the specific type of speech acts that can legitimately be called performatives. Since they are strikingly common in liturgy, they call for special attention from liturgists (section 3). Finally I try to determine the nature and goal of liturgical research into liturgical language in light of the insights from speech act theory (section 4).

1 Liturgical Performance as Action

‘Performance’ in a general sense means putting on stage or executing something. In this sense one can distinguish between performance and competence (ability). In ritual studies and liturgical science the term ‘performance’ often indicates that religious rituals do not serve some extrinsic purpose such as the construction of social identity, but rather that rites and liturgy are collective activities with intrinsic value. That