

FORMULAIC CONSTRUCTIONS IN TRADITIONAL AND
NON-TRADITIONAL WEDDING VOWS

Millions of weddings are held every year in the world. Fabulous attire, flowers, cakes, guests, which may be very alike or very different from each other, but one component is guaranteed to be typical of each: a ceremony that unites the couple as husband and wife. Couples may be so engaged in planning wedding events that they may overlook the ritual that joins the bride and groom, whereas the exchange of vows is the core of the wedding celebration.

During the Middle Ages several forms of socially acceptable union between man and woman were recognized in Western European cultures. For the twentieth-century society *marriage* is the sole *legally* recognized union, whereas the medieval society held concubinage. The main difference between concubinage and marriage was thought to be the social status of the woman in relation to the man. While through marriage people desired to maintain or improve the social standing of the family, concubinage, in contrast, fulfilled the desire of the individual for companionship. The formal agreement for entering into such a union was the result of certain rites, much like marriage. (Duby 1983:44)

As soon as the Church stood to ground that marriage should be fixed by nothing more than mutual consent, it established guidelines for Christian marriage rites. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 declared it obligatory for a marriage to be blessed and witnessed by a priest. Moreover, the Council also stated that banns be published (i.e. that the couple's intention to marry be announced in the parishes in which they resided). (Ennen 1989:105)

Hincmar, the Archbishop of Rheims (845-882), put forward the four conditions and its three elements making a legitimate marriage: 1) the partners had to be of equal and free rank and must give their consent, 2) the woman must be given by her father and dowered, 3) the marriage must be honoured publicly, 4) the union was completed by sexual consummation. (Duby *ibid* p.34) The three elements forming the marriage rites were sacrament, mutual consent and sexual union. (Gies & Gies 1987:97) It shows that Hincmar recognizes both the Roman tradition which requires *consent*, and the Germanic tradition which requires *cohabitation*.

In the middle of the sixteenth century the problem of clandestine marriage was increasing. One can read in the analyses of court books from Ely, Canterbury, and York conducted by Michael Sheehan and Richard Helmholz in the 1970's, that 38 of 41 cases heard in Canterbury between 1411-1420 included marriages not contracted in church. (Brooke 1989:251) This problem made the

Church finally determine its stance on marriage and put an end to the chaos started since the twelfth century, that the mutual consent was enough to create a legal union. In 1563 there was issued the Tametsi decree, which stated that for a marriage to be recognized by the Church:

1. the partners must give their consent
2. the priest must say a formula, like "*I join you together in matrimony*", ratifying the marriage. (Searle 1992:14)

In comparison with Hincmar, the twelfth-century Camaldolese monk, Gratian considered that consent was enough for the marriage to be legitimate. (Gies & Gies *ibid* p.137) Physical consummation completed the marriage, but was not extremely necessary to form a legally binding union. This was a return to the Roman philosophy of marriage and meant one thing: the spoken willingness of each partner to take the other as spouse was the *mere* necessary thing to make a marriage settlement. Other trappings were not necessary, such as parental consent, the presence of witnesses. "When the man says, '*I receive you as mine, so that you become my wife and I your husband*', and when the woman makes the same declaration... when they do and say this according to existing custom and are in agreement, it is then that I say they are married... whether by chance they have made it, as they should not, alone, apart, in secret, and with no witnesses present, yet... they are well and truly married". (Duby *ibid* p.181)

Peter Lombard added a new level of confusion by differentiating between vows exchanged in the future tense and vows exchanged in the present tense. A future tense vow was used in betrothal; it was a promise to marry at some point in the future. A present tense vow meant that "this very moment" the couple agreed to be husband and wife. (Gies & Gies *ibid* p. 139) So if a man said to the woman, "*I will take you as my wife*" and she was responded in the same way, the couple was not married, but if the man said to the woman "*I do take you as my wife*" and she responded in the same way, then the couple was married. Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) attempted to find a solution by affirming the present tense consent as vital while declaring the future tense consent to be legally binding when followed by cohabitation. (Gies & Gies *ibid* p.139-140) But, of course, this didn't clear up the confusion begotten by Gratian and Lombard.

A vow is a solemn, unconditional promise, made in the presence of witnesses. If a promise, in general, can include things that will be said or done, and/or things that will not be said or done in the real sense of the word, the same can't be said about a wedding/marriage vow. The wedding vow unites the man and woman. And in the vow confirming this union things are promised which are needed to create a firm family, and, naturally, things are promised not to be done which will harm it.

There are basically three different ways to exchange wedding vows: question and answer, responsive and custom vows. Traditionally all of them have

the Groom say his words first, followed in turn by the Bride. In some cases the couple may choose to say them in unison to each other.

As the texts of marriage vows can have different histories of their creation, considerably various word-stocks, and be associated with particular bases, wedding vows fall into two big types: traditional – non-traditional and denominational – nondenominational; and miscellaneous¹ types: religious, customized, romantic, intercultural, interfaith. This work will only focus on traditional and non-traditional wedding vows.

Traditional vows are question and answer and responsive vows. The first type of traditional vows, question and answer vow, is for the minister to ask a question of the groom, and then the bride, to which each responds, “*I do*”. The most basic form would be like this: (Minister) “*Do you, (name), take (name), to be your (wife/husband)?*” (Groom/Bride response) “*I do*”.² The second type of traditional vows, responsive vow, is for the priest to say a certain number of sentences, each of which is repeated by the groom, and then in turn by the bride. Here is a sample: *I take you, (name), to be my (wife/husband); to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part*.

The couples who are short of time to prepare their vows and those who consider themselves not romantic enough to prepare a touching text prefer question and answer vows. It is because uttering the formula “*I do*” is easily and quickly done. This is the advantage of the question and answer traditional vow. But if something important, like confirming the union of the man and woman is done without thinking it over beforehand, it may seem not serious and not preferred by many couples. Question and answer vows are commonly used by judges at a courthouse wedding. Responsive vows also have their advantages and disadvantages. Compared with question and answer vows, responsive vows are more serious. The couples repeat the formulas uttered by the minister himself; formulas which the couples already used in the fourteenth-century in their wedding vows. Here the disadvantage is that the couples cannot write down their own individual vows being unable to express their feelings and intentions to each other.

The main difference between question and answer and responsive vows lies in the quantity of the formulas used in them, which thoroughly condition the factor if the wedding vow is really an entity of promises. The formula “*I do*” is a short answer to the minister’s question. Yes, uttering “*I do*” the man agrees to wed the woman, but this formula, as a type of vow, doesn’t touch upon anything except wishing to take the woman to be his wife. Whereas a marriage vow

¹ Miscellaneous – diverse, various

² Any bride or groom shouldn’t say “*I do*” until he/she really understands the question. There are a lot of young people who recite the marriage vows without paying attention to what they are saying.

should touch upon a number of things, which are necessary for making a conjugal bond. The formula *to have and to hold* touches upon possession; the formula *from this day forward* denotes the starting point of the possession; the formulas *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health* are the expression of conditions of marital life; the formula *to love and to cherish* touches upon love; and the formula *till death do us part* denotes indissolubility of the marriage bond. This comes to prove that the formula "I do" is solely a short positive answer to the priest's question "Do you, (name), take (name), to be your (wife/husband)?" And the text full of formulaic expressions like *to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part* is a stock of intentions to the future joint life.

The similarity lies in the use of the same formulas present in the question of the priest addressed to the couple and in the text uttered by the priest and repeated by the couple. In reality, the formula "I take you, (name), to be my (wife/husband)" is a long assertive respond to the priest's question "Do you, (name), take (name), to be your (wife/husband)?" And this conditions the use of the same formula. At last a traditional vow can be expressed in just one formulaic sentence: "I, so and so, take thee, so and so, to be my lawfully wedded husband/wife before God." It involves three formulaic expressions: a) *I, so and so, take thee*, b) *to be my lawfully wedded husband/wife*, c) *before God*, and they entirely touch upon one thing, that is, lawfully wedding a person

Non-traditional vows include custom and renewal vows. Custom vows may encompass the couple's favorite love poems, stories, or songs. The couples may write down their favorite passages from religious literature³ and select passages that are appropriate for their relationship or feelings. The custom vow is actually a verbal "love letter" from one person to the other. Most couples write them out and read them during the ceremony. And there are some who learn them by heart. A peculiarity of the custom vow is that the words in the text are a "strictly personal statement of love and commitment" that the bride and groom read to each other prior to the formal exchange of wedding vows. Two samples of the custom vow will be presented below. 1. "(Name), our miracle lies in the path we have chosen together. I enter into this marriage with you, knowing that the true magic of love is not to avoid changes, but to navigate them successfully. Let us commit to the miracle of making each day work together. Respecting each other, we commit to live our lives together for all the days to come. I ask you to share this world with me, for good and ill. Be my partner, and I will be yours." 2. "(Name), you have filled my world with meaning. You have made me so happy and more fulfilled as a person. Thank you for taking me as I am; loving me and welcoming me into your heart. I promise to always love you, respect you as an

³ Readings from the Bible

individual, and to be faithful to you forever. Today I choose you to be my partner, and commit myself to you for the rest of my life."

If we study carefully these two examples of the custom vow, we shall see that formulaic expressions typical of marriage vows in general do not form them. *We commit to live our lives together and for good and ill* are the two formulaic expressions we meet in the first example. In the second one they are more than two: *I promise to always love you, respect you, to be faithful to you, I choose you to be my partner, and commit myself to you*. Besides, the few number of the formulaic expressions, the above-mentioned examples attract the reader's attention being extremely individual and unique in expressing love and commitment to each other. The uniqueness and individuality of both examples are expressed especially in miscellaneous collocations, like *our miracle lies in the path...*, *the true magic of love, to navigate them successfully, commit to the miracle of making each day work together, to share this world with me, fill my world with meaning, welcome me into your heart*. So, their being non-traditional is explained first by their being strictly personal, and, second, the small quantity of formulaic expressions.

A type of custom vow is the one, which includes a love poem. The couples choose their favorite love poems and convert them into a wedding vow. It is clear here that in such poem-vows the reader cannot come across any formulaic expressions which are met in non poem-vows. Even if there are some, they should be the most widely spread. In the following example, which is a poem by Robert Burns, entitled *A Red, Red Rose*, those formulas are *I will love* and *my love*. Doug and Julie's Wedding Poem

O, my love's like a red, red rose,	Till a' the sea gang dry, my dear,
That's newly sprung in June;	And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
O, my love's like the melody	I will love thee still, my dear,
That's sweetly played in tune.	While the sands o' life shall run.
As far art thou, my bonnie lass,	And fare thee weel, my only love,
So deep in love am I:	And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will love thee still my dear,	And I will come again my love,
Till a' the sea gang dry.	Tho' it were ten thousand mile.

The second type of custom vow is the song-vow. There may be people who may not be shy and may sing it. And there may be couples who may recite it like a poem. In this example as well, we come across the formulaic expression touching upon love in the forms *I love you* and *I was born to love you*. Faith's poem-song to Scott "*Guess I was born to*"

Guess I was born to love you.
Guess I was born to lose you.

Guess I was born to let you go.
I liked you then I love you now,
With all that's past I don't see how.
There's empty streets, there's no light's on.
I have seen the darkness, where's the dawn.
Guess I was born to love you.
Guess I was born to lose you.
Guess I was born to let you go.

The third type of custom vow is the letter-vow.⁴ The letter-vow is an opportunity for the man and woman to put their deepest thoughts and feelings for each other into words. Letter-vows are specially for making an apology for the wrong thing(s) done, making a promise not to do the same any more, being given one more chance to be together and proving that love still exists. The only formula present in the underlying two samples of letter-vow is *I love you*. They are two simple 'apology stories' and promises of love, care and devotion without major wrongs. In the first one, Nicole apologizes for lying and wants to show that her love is not a passing feeling making a pledge to love Eric forever. In the second, Peter apologizes to his Jennifer for being rude and uncaring and makes his pledge of love, presenting her probably with a ring as a token of his love.⁵

1. Nicole's letter to Eric

Dear Eric,
I hope you will take the time to read these words. It would have been futile to try and say them to you because right now you don't want to look at me, so it will be easier on the both of us, so here it goes. You are so wonderful and caring. I know that I have upset you, but I know we can get past this. We began something very special and I don't want to lose it. Please, forgive me for lying to you; I can't believe I am going to lose you because of one stupid lie. Can't you find it in your heart to forgive me and forget? I pray you can because I love you and this isn't just a passing feeling. I think I could love you forever and I hope that maybe you love me too. Anyway, that's the truth, so now I guess the next move is yours. I'll be waiting to hear from you.
All my Love, Nicole

2. Peter's letter to Jennifer

Dear Jennifer,
Oh, my darling Jennifer on our first wedding anniversary. I know things aren't great between us right now. You are angry and hurt and you have every right to be, that's why I am leaving Salem tonight. But, I want you to have this to prove my love for you and when you wear it, I hope you'll think of me. I know one day you will forgive me and give me another chance. I can't exist without you Jennifer, you are my world, my life and I love you so very much. Peter

⁴ Letter-vows can be called indirectly pledged vows or indirect vows. The request to forgive and the request to love again are clearly expressed in the letters, and the reader has no need to grasp anything between the lines. But the vow is not directly pledged and/or the requests are not directly addressed to the hearer, but the reader.

⁵ It is probably a ring, as, firstly, Peter says, 'when you wear it', and secondly, this is a way of taking a pledge, and at the end of this kind of process there usually takes place an exchange of rings as a symbol of love.

Non-traditional vows also include humor vows. But we cannot strictly say that they are “purely” non-traditional, as both renewal and humor vows include aspects typical of traditional wedding vows. By saying aspects we mean the use of formulas present in traditional vows, that is, traditional formulas. Humor vows, like poem, song and letter ones, cannot apparently be widely used. Humor vows are chiefly preferred by those who are big humor lovers and desire to share their humorous side even in their wedding vows. It is just impossible to find one who may think over writing a completely humor vow. Every person, appearing on the threshold of marriage, becomes more serious realizing the burden of responsibilities h/she is near to shoulder. Besides attaching importance to the material items making the wedding ceremony gorgeous, the bride and groom understand that they must find themselves in a process of exceptional importance and seriousness; that is, preparing a wedding vow. And pledging a vow is the statement of all promises that should be kept during their life together. This comes to prove that to sound extremely funny and humorous is just not preferable, especially that in vast majority of places the texts of marriage vows are checked beforehand by the minister. So, there arises a question: how are humor vows created and how are the couples able to joke and make their guests laugh? If the couple is not getting married in a religious setting, they may feel free to add their own embellishments, loving words, funny promises and inside jokes. The couple could use the traditional vows, but include any humorous lines. Instead of “*I promise to always love, respect and honor you*”, there may be “*I promise to always make your “favorite banana milkshake”, “I promise to take the trash out”, or “I vow to split the difference on the thermostat”, etc.* Naturally, being half traditional, these vows should include formulas, such as *I promise, I vow*, but compared with renewal vows (shown below) these formulas are few in number. The underlying vows may be called custom-humor vows. The coming two examples including jokes completely lack any formulas. The lack of formulas is motivated as in such type of pledges the couples do not intend verbalize fidelity, conformity to the laws of the church, what they are willing to promise, and that this commitment is for a lifetime. 1. “*It only took one night to get stuck on you, and now my wish came true, you big hunka hunka hunka burning love! I thought you were nothing but a hound dog, crying all the time, but now I know you're my teddy bear because tigers play too rough and lions ain't the kind you love enough. So kiss me quick and love me tender for I can't help falling in love with you.*” 2. “*It took a hard headed woman to make me king of the whole wide world. I thought you were the devil in disguise but you turned out to be my puppet on a string. I used to live in a hotel down the end of lonely street but now it's viva las vegas because I need your love tonight.*”

Studying the underlying samples of renewal⁶ vows we shall easily find out that renewal ceremonies are for any married couple who wish to celebrate their relationship by renewing their marriage vows. A renewal ceremony offers couples the opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to each other in a formal and meaningful ceremony. The couples may wish to be alone, or they may decide to renew their marriage promises in front of their family and friends. After several years of union, couples stand in front of the priest renewing their marriage vows. Even in such cases the mutual love, faith and commitment are visible to the congregation. Of course, the appearance of an old couple makes both the minister and the congregation ponder the reasons the marriage lasted so long. Firstly, it is a question of luck in the choice of a mate. But it is not only marrying the right partner, it is also being the right partner. Secondly, marriages grounded within a covenant relationship with God are more likely to enjoy the promises of mutuality, respect and harmony than marriages where promises are simply made between the bride and the groom. Couples who worship together and whose lives are shaped by the Gospel are more likely to enjoy the blessings of marriage than those who don't. Obviously, there are exceptions, but as a general rule, Christ-centered marriages last.

Renewal vows attract attention by a great deal of use of the past tense. It is because the past doings are fixed in many renewal vows, especially the wrong ones, which have been the cause of offence to the partner. Renewal vows are pledged, firstly, to "fresh" the commitment of love and fidelity, secondly, to thank God in the presence of relatives and friends for having such an indispensable partner, and thirdly, to show that the partner is sorry for doing wrong things and is eager to "pull himself/herself together". The lexis of renewal vows is many-sided, that is, both widely spread formulas and miscellaneous collocations are present. Typical formulas are used as we come across such formulas both in traditional and non-traditional vows. The use of miscellaneous collocations is argued by the presentation of the partner's past life, which is too personal. Two examples of renewal vows will be presented below. 1. *"My dearest _____, it was 25 years ago that we first pledged our commitment to one another, but it seems like just yesterday that I was standing across from my beautiful bride/handsome groom. We have been through a lot together – laughter and tears, joy and sorrow – and through all those items, I can honestly say, I loved you every step of the way. Today, I want to renew those vows and again pledge my love and life to you. I promise to be there for you in sickness and health, in middle and old age, in good and bad days. Whether you feel thin, fat beautiful, ugly, fit and trim, or out of shape I will always think that you are perfect – perfect for me. I am here to be your supporter, your confidant, and your best friend. You are my (nickname or other). I have been blessed for the last*

⁶ Renewal – the act of making a contract, etc. valid for a further period of time after it has finished.

25 years and am thrilled that I get to spend the rest of my life with you. I love you."

The pledge of love expressed in the same formula is both in the past and in the present; *I loved you* and *I love you*. The formula *I loved you* touches upon love existing 25 years ago, and the formula *I love you* touches upon love existing now and expectedly tomorrow. Formulas like *pledge (our) commitment*, *pledge (my) love (to you)*, *pledge (my) life (to you)*, *promise to be there, in sickness and health, in middle and old age, in good and bad days, through laughter and tears, joy and sorrow* touch upon fidelity in all conditions of life. In this example we also come across miscellaneous collocations like *beautiful bride*, *handsome groom*, *feel thin/fat/beautiful/ugly/fit*, *best friend* the choice of which is individual and only depends on the speaker. 2. "_____, in the past I have taken you for granted. I have put others before you. I have ~~done~~ things I am not proud of. And I have often been wrong. On the other hand, I have always loved you and stood beside you. I am here today to move forward with a renewed commitment to you, our love, and our lives together. I pledge that from this day forward you will be my number one priority. I promise to be there for you in all that life brings our way. It is because of you that I am here today and I vow to give you all that I am and all that I have for the rest of our lives together. This is my solemn vow."

The evident difference between this and the above example lies in the use of the formula, *this is my solemn vow*. This is a formula used in vast majority of wedding vows. The first part of this renewal vow is expressed in the past; including the formula *I love you* in *I have always loved you* form, again touching upon love existing in the past. The second part is expressed in the present; including the formulas *I pledge*, *I vow* and *I promise* and *a renewed commitment*. The use of miscellaneous collocations like *take you for granted*, *my number one priority* touch upon the attitudes to the partner in the past and future.

Where do the lines separating a traditional vow from a non-traditional one cross? Doesn't the use of a great deal of formulaic expressions mean that non-traditional vows cannot be unequivocally considered non-traditional? In fact, the above-made analysis proves that no kind of non-traditional vow exists without certain formulaic sentences or expressions used in traditional vows. Accordingly, non-traditional vows can be defined as undoubtedly based on traditional vows with a certain word-stock expressing individuality.

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