

A PROMISE IS A PROMISE: ON SPEECH ACTS OF COMMITMENT IN ENGLISH

RAYMOND HICKEY

University of Bonn

Speech acts of commitment have been recognized since the early days of speech act theory as being a well-defined subset (Austin, 1962: 157ff.) and have been the object of attention, at least in the formal sense of specifying preconditions and contexts for their occurrence and success (Searle, 1969: 57ff.).¹ Commitment is a quite wide-ranging phenomenon and the narrower act of promising should be seen in this broader context. Furthermore its expression can take on a variety of linguistic manifestations. It is these facts which have led to the present article. What I wish to treat then are the following: (i) the nature of verbal commitment, the form it takes as a speech act and the specific manifestations of it in English, (ii) an analysis of the felicity conditions under which these acts can be successful and (iii) the relation of speech acts of commitment to other types of speech acts. I will not of course manage to handle these three areas as a sequence of three separate phenomena. Indeed this would, if it were possible, be a distortion of reality for these areas are not self-enclosed but co-occur, that is the manifestation of a speech act of commitment (as any other type for that matter) is dependent on a variety of linguistic factors and extra-linguistic accompanying circumstances which co-occur and interact simultaneously.

The core of the speech acts to be looked at here are formed by a performative verb with perlocutionary force. Thus they are different from a sentence such as

(1) *I reckon it's going to snow before long.*

¹ Searle adopts the characterization of commissives proposed by Austin (Searle, 1979: 14) though he subtracts several of the verbs which the latter qualifies as commissives.

which even when uttered in the presence of a hearer still represents only the expression of an opinion² and would not normally be taken as intending to have a given effect on the hearer³. Those performative verbs that represent commitment of one kind or another are relatively few in comparison with those of assertion, for example⁴. But commitment may be expressed in many indirect ways. Let me first of all define the notion of commitment before continuing to look at its linguistic manifestation in English. Commitment is basically the binding of oneself to a certain course of action. This binding is usually of a moral nature, that is one sees it as one's moral responsibility to fulfill that to which one has committed oneself. It can however also be a legal responsibility.

Commitment is furthermore something which is given verbally. This also implies a hearer, as no commitments are made as monologues under normal circumstances. Thus there is a second, passive partner to the commitment. But he is only verbally passive: the hearer's role is essential because a commitment is made to a person or persons. And if the hearer does not understand, hear or most importantly accept the commitment made, then it is taken as invalid. In other words, one needs the hearer's consent. This immediately marks off commitment, and speech acts which express it, from other types of verbal activity which may be encoded in speech acts. In an act of assertion, for example, such as

(2) *I confess I'm not interested in speech acts.*

the success of the act is by no means dependent on the reaction of the hearer, if for instance one is not believed. This applies to other acts which although being closer to those of commitment nonetheless differ in the role of the hearer. Such a case is an act of suggesting as in

(3) *I'd advise you not to make fun of the Irish.*

where the act is successful on its being understood.⁵

² In conventional terminology it is constative. On this and its complementary 'performative', see Austin (1971).

³ Apart from that of conveying information which I do not regard as perlocutionary unless it is linked up with some further element such as intimidation, warning, etc.

⁴ Compare Fraser's list for assertives with that for commissives which has only sixteen verbs as opposed to the sixty three for the first class (Fraser, 1975: 190-193).

⁵ This is of course a simplification of the conditions for success. In cases of advice the speech act seems to involve not only obtaining information but also an additional element of accepting or rejecting it as a directive for future behaviour. This idea of acceptance links it with commissives which are characterized by an acceptance of a commitment. The perlocutionary effect in both cases is getting the hearer to accept the content of the advice or commitment. On speech acts of advice, see Wunderlich (1976: 280-286).

When looking at acts of commitment one sees that the consent of the hearer, which is an integral part of them, is important so that the speaker may achieve his purpose. One might imagine that the speaker can best achieve his purpose if he is independent of the hearer but this is not necessarily so. The reason why can be seen in the motivation for performing a speech act of commitment. One can ascertain that such speech acts have a perlocutionary effect on the hearer and reflexively the recognition of success for the speaker on perceiving this effect.

Having hopefully clarified what is meant by commitment one can now move to an examination of how it is actually manifested.

To begin with, take the most straightforward example of commitment, that with the verb 'promise'. Superficially it provides the simplest kind of speech act of commitment and its actual manifestation allows of little variation, there being no precise synonyms for it. Those quasi-synonyms which do exist all express commitment of a varying kind. In what respect they vary will be examined presently. But first of all the direct promise. Searle (1969: 57ff.) specifies nine conditions for the success of a speech act of promising. These conditions are necessary and understandable for a promise. They apply, however, to a 'simple and idealized case' (1969: 57) as Searle himself readily states. It is remarkable that in the relevant section 'How to promise: a complicated way' he does not give any actual examples but expresses himself quite abstractly. The conditions he presents refer to abstract promises if I may so call them; on turning to concrete promises as found in common conversation one sees that the conditions are more involved still, as they rely also on extra-linguistic knowledge, shared knowledge or world knowledge which is common to both speaker and hearer. Even in straightforward cases such as

(4) *I promise not to forget your birthday.*

when said in a neutral context rests on the common assumption of the partners to the conversation that it is desirable to remember the other's birthday. This type of promise is incidentally different from others which superficially may appear similar. I choose to call it prophylactic commitment. Its function is to put the hearer at rest with regard to a state which normally should not occur (that of forgetting someone's birthday) but which may do so.

Note that the general evaluation of the action to which one commits oneself is significant here. To say

(5) *I promise to forget your birthday.*

would, when uttered, be more likely to cause confusion rather than anything else. Instead of assuming a deliberate provocation with (5) the hearer is more liable to suspect irony. Although one can achieve a positive perlocutionary effect with a commitment such as (4) it does not necessarily follow that one

can achieve its contrary by simply negating the sentence as (5) shows. This is in part due to the nature of the verb used. 'Forget' has a negative connotation and even where the act of forgetting is desirable, i.e. the potential object for commitment, one tends not to find this verb but a negated verb with positive connotations as in

(6) *I promise not to remember that unsavoury incident.*

To return to (4) for a moment. There the significance of shared knowledge as an extra-linguistic source for the success of the speech act was mentioned. This shared knowledge may represent something which is distinctly desirable or just acceptable within a set of norms. A case of the latter would be

(7) *I promise not to speak for more than an hour.*

Here one must know that there is a time limit which (i) may have been set ad hoc or (ii) represents a general limit exceeding which would run the risk of overtaxing one's hearers. On the other hand the sentence

(8) *I promise not to speak for more than ten minutes.*

would be found in the context of a lecture somewhat odd. It can only be expected as a commitment speech act if one knows that one should not speak for longer. This state of affairs is covered to some extent by Searle's fourth condition for a successful promise (1969: 58), namely that the hearer wants the speaker to perform a certain action, in this case that of not speaking for more than ten minutes. Incidentally I find the term 'want' used by Searle not entirely appropriate for all cases. (7) is successful as one promises to do what is expected of one, i.e. not speak for more than an hour. Here the commitment is offered in terms of the conventions which speaker and hearer both know to obtain in a given situation. In this as in most but not necessarily all situations one can take it that convention coincides with the personal desire of the hearer or hearers. But how does one handle a case such as

(9) *I promise not to bore you with my lecture.*

This is not in fact a commitment speech act at all. For a successful speech act one must, among other things, be in the position to realize what one promises. But what one 'promises' in (9) is to produce a certain effect in the hearer, that is, of not being bored; however, it is outside the power of the speaker to guarantee such an effect. I would like to call such cases optatives; they express the wish to produce a certain effect in the hearer or hearers.

Optatives are double-edged. They on the one hand bind the speaker to a certain course of action and on the other convey to the hearer the information that the speaker has so bound himself. What differentiates them from commitments is that the proposition of the speech acts is something which cannot

be realized by the speaker but is dependent on a subjective reaction of the hearer.

The question of the hearer's reaction to the speaker's utterance is important in other cases as well which then lead to the speech act not being successful. (7) is successful because the speaker has it in his power to do what he promises. Now take a sentence like

(10) *She promised to stop fishing for compliments.*

One can say that (10) may have been successful just as (7) can be for the reason I have given. But it may be unsuccessful from the point of view of the hearer if he, while recognizing the honest intention of the speaker (this fulfills Searle's eighth condition (1969: 60)), is nonetheless of the opinion that because of the speaker's nature nothing will come of the intention. To talk here of a successful speech act requires some qualification: it may be successful from the point of view of the speaker but not from that of the hearer. In fact such defective speech acts are a constant feature of normal conversation. In this and other cases the back-firing of the speech act is due to the hearer's judgment of the intention expressed, a factor not normally subsumed under the felicity conditions for commitment speech acts.

In the light of this one can perhaps rejudge (9) and say that it is successful from the point of view of the hearer also in that he recognizes the intention of the speaker to make a certain effort whereas this is doubtful in (10). There remains all the same a qualitative difference between such speech acts which show a commitment which the speaker has in his power to realize (these would also include (10)) and those where the commitment is to make an attempt to reach a certain aim, e.g. (9).

So far my examples have been with the verb 'promise' which is only one of the set of verbs alluded to at the outset which can be used to express commitment. What I would like to do now is to deal with the other verbs of this set and comment on the manner in which the commitment they express varies from verb to verb. To start with, there are verbs which may express commitment only when used in combination with an appropriate noun. These are 'accept' and 'assume'. Their use is found in

(11) *He agreed to accept responsibility for the trip.*

(12) *He assumed responsibility for the organization.*

Although used with the same noun the verbs of (11) and (12) are not identical. 'Accept' implies that one does not want the responsibility but all the same resigns oneself to it, whereas 'assume' implies drawing the responsibility on oneself voluntarily. The nature of the speech act represented in (11) and (12) is determined by the noun 'responsibility' which commits the speaker to a

future course of action and also obliges him to answer for difficulties which may arise. The action referred to with the noun 'responsibility' must of course not have taken place. After all one commits oneself to something which has not occurred yet. This allows one to reject as an act of commitment the following sentence

(13) *He accepted responsibility for the accident.*

where one has the notion of answering for something but not that of commitment.

With the verb 'assure' there is another nuance. Consider the sentence

(14) *I assure you I'll be there in time.*

the special force of this verb derives from the appeal which the speaker makes to his own reputation for upholding commitments. This is usually an effective way of committing oneself as the hearer, unless he has been repeatedly disappointed, accepts the commitment readily. One has of course the more explicit paraphrase of the context of (14)

(15) *I give you my word that I'll be there on time.*

English makes a distinction at this point which other languages do not necessarily make, namely that between verbal commitment and financial commitment. This has been lexicalised in the verbs 'assure' as above for verbal commitment and 'insure' for financial commitment as in

(16) *The firm insured the violinist's hands for £ 100,000.*

Note that here as opposed to (14) above an explicit mention of the commitment is made. In a verbal commitment with 'assure' one does not specify what one shall do if one fails to keep one's word. In fact nothing is intended to be specified, this being the actual difference between the two verbs. One simply loses credibility in the eyes of the hearer.

A further verb which belongs to this group is 'ensure'. Its use is seen in

(17) *Can you ensure that I get my false teeth back?*

Here appeal is made to a hearer to commit himself to a certain action or the completion of an action. In this respect 'ensure' is like 'insure' in that one specifies to the hearer the commitment which one has accepted. It lacks of course the suggestion of a formal contract implied in the second verb.

The remaining verbs I would like to deal with fall into four groups of two. Each of the groups is separated from the other on the grounds of some additional aspect which it does not share with the others.

The first group is 'offer' and 'volunteer'. Here there is no commitment so much as the mention of its possibility. It is independent of the hearer

and his reaction to it is irrelevant. He may accept or reject the offer. Thus in the two sentences

(18) *May I offer you a lift into town?*

(19) *I volunteered to give a pint of blood.*

one only has the readiness for commitment. If the offer is accepted by the speaker the commitment comes into effect.

The next group 'dedicate' and 'undertake' are reflexive in nature. As opposed to 'offer' and 'volunteer' where the commitment becomes binding with the wish of the hearer for it to be so, with these two verbs the independent decision to commit oneself is expressed.

(20) *He dedicated his life to breeding frogs.*

(21) *She undertook to save the linguist's soul.*

It can be seen to what extent English has codified the roles of speaker and hearer, or rather speaker and others, into the semantic features of verbs and has separate lexicalized forms for these. For if one looks at (20) and (21) more closely one can see that the second of the two sentences implies that the commitment is suggested to the agent by another party. In fact this is what constitutes the difference between 'dedicate' and 'undertake'. It can perhaps be seen more clearly in a sentence such as

(22) *She undertook to find the criminal.*

With the next group, 'swear' and 'vow', one moves into the area of institutionalized behaviour. Here there is a commitment specified by an external agent, usually the state or some social or religious body and the expression of commitment is connected with a non-linguistic ritual such as raising one's right hand, laying it on the Bible, etc. Again English has lexicalized the distinction, institutionalized-non-institutionalized, the latter being represented by the simple verb 'promise'. Notice that I do not use the word conventionalized here as this in the literature on speech acts usually implies linguistic conventions such as standard expression, fixed collocations and the like.⁶ With regard to the two verbs themselves one does have a minor difference in that 'vow' does not occur so often as a finite verb in present-day English as in the form of a verb phrase with 'take' or some such support verb.

(23) *I hereby swear to uphold the laws of the state.*

(24) *He took a vow of obedience on entering the order.*

(24)a Less usual: *He vowed obedience on entering the order.*

⁶ For a treatment of convention see Strawson (1971 [1964]) and for examples of fixed expressions (1971: 26) for instance.

The difference between (23) and (24) is simply that between making a commitment and taking one on oneself. The adverb 'hereby' in (23) is incidentally an example of a linguistic convention, i.e. it normally occurs in collocation with verbs of commitment particularly when these have a socially institutionalized character. A further aspect of these verbs is that both imply the notion of automatic legal consequences if the commitment is not upheld. These are usually less serious when a vow is contravened, as the word 'vow' is commonly used for societies, orders, groups on a level below that of the state.

The last group, which contains the verbs 'guarantee' and 'pledge', is distinguished by the suggestion of retribution for the person to whom the commitment is made should the speaker default in his undertaking.

(25) *The salesman guaranteed that the washing machine was in order.*

(26) *He pledged to support his wife and children.*

With (26) one could perhaps maintain that retribution is not suggested and that it is similar to a sentence with 'vow' which represents a solemn promise only. This may just be true of the verb 'pledge' but as a noun its function is different.

(27) *He offered the broker his wife's jewels as a pledge.*

In (27) the noun 'pledge' is synonymous with 'pawn' which also functions as a verb with the meaning of offering security that a commitment will be met. The reverse side of the coin, so to speak, is represented by the noun 'guarantee', it being a binding offer of substantial (usually financial) retribution should that which is expected not be realized.

Let me now move to a consideration of non-commissive verbs. Speaking with Austin (1962 : 157) I use the term commissive to indicate a verb which expresses commitment. However this can also be expressed by verbs which are not normally associated with this type of speech act. In these latter cases non-commissive verbs are used in speech acts which are propositionally commitments. Consider

(28) *I'll give up smoking after my final examinations.*

This sentence has the illocutionary force of a promise. It contains a verb which indicates the intention of the speaker to behave in a certain way. But (28) is different from

(29) *I intend developing a taste for soft-boiled eggs.*

which is merely optative. The first sentence involves a hearer as a recipient and registerer of the intention of the speaker; furthermore the speaker says he will do something as opposed to wanting to do something. But there is more to it than this. The speaker also assumes in (28) that the hearer has the

necessary information to interpret it as a promise, i.e. he knows that the speaker smokes, that he is taking his final examinations at some stage in the future and that to stop smoking is accepted as being beneficial. This last fact is usually specified as being necessary. This is only partially true. The thing which is promised does not have to be generally regarded as desirable but merely by the parties to the conversation in which the speech act occurs. For example

(30) *I'll give up pork sausages after my final examinations.*

can be interpreted optimally as a promise when both the parties to the speech act are vegetarians.

It is common to specify also that a promise can only refer to the future. This is naturally true but one may have, in reported speech, instances where the performative verb of the speech act is in the past. As long as the outcome of the intention expressed is unknown then the futurity condition is satisfied. On the subject of tense note that those commitment speech acts without a commissive verb such as 'promise', 'swear', etc. must contain a form of the verb 'say' if they occur in reported speech; thus (29) would become (29)a.

(29)a *She said she'd give up smoking after her final examinations.*

In this it becomes clear that commitment speech acts rely first and foremost on verbal assurance, that is saying that one will do something.

At this stage one can look at how speech acts of commitment function as elements of conversation. For this end I will begin by examining the set of conversational maxims offered by Grice (1975) and (1978) and then see how they apply to the material at hand.⁷ The overriding principle which Grice sees for a conversation is the co-operative principle (1975 : 45) which determines that each contribution to the conversation is appropriate in scope, time and in terms of the general direction of the exchange.

Subordinate to the co-operative principle are four conversation maxims (1975 : 47), namely

- (30) (i) Quantity: make your contribution as informative as required (and do not make it more so)
 (ii) Quality: do not say what you believe is false or lack evidence for
 (iii) Relation: be relevant
 (iv) Manner: avoid obscurity of expression/ambiguity; be brief and orderly

⁷ For further considerations of conversational postulates see Gordan and Lakoff (1975) and Morgan (1977).

Now if one considers for a moment the means discussed already for offering commitment it will be seen that they, apart from denoting different types, also express relative strength of commitment. This involves maxim (iii) and to a lesser extent (i). The use of specific formulaic expressions allows one to achieve a graded perlocutionary effect. In this respect they are conventionalized both in the context in which they occur and the manifestation they have. To show what I mean one may first of all ask why a commitment speech act should be uttered at all. The key to this lies in what I have touched upon above, viz. the desirability of that which is promised. This then leads one to the sub-group which I have labelled commitment speech acts of retribution and which form good illustrative material for the relative strength of commitment. If the speaker has offended or disappointed the hearer, then this precedent determines the formalization of this speech act. The degree of commitment is dependent on how the speaker judges the severity of the precedent. Consider the following cases in which there is an extra-linguistic context, a verbal precedent, i.e. usually the previous statement of the opposite party, and a commitment which is a (verbal) reaction to this:

- (31) Context: Two strangers sharing a hotel room
 Precedent: *How dare you use my toothpaste!*
 Commitment: *It won't happen again.*
- (32) Context: Two people dancing together
 Precedent: *Ow! you've stepped on my toe!*
 Commitment: *Sorry, it won't happen again.*
- (33) Context: Husband and wife at the breakfast table
 Precedent: *You've put sugar in my tea!*
 Commitment: *Okay, it won't happen again.*

To evaluate the commitment offered in (31) to (33) one can use Grice's relevancy maxim. This is, as he himself admits (1975: 46), difficult to define accurately and here one can maintain that it is fulfilled when the commitment made is directly connected with the precedent. That is so in all our sample sentences. Considering now the quality maxim one ascertains that the commitments all convey the necessary information, namely that a promise is being made. But over and beyond that the relation of each commitment to the context it is embedded in is important: what is decisive is the appropriateness of the commitment. Looked at from this angle they are all seen to differ.

In (31) the impersonal construction expresses casual commitment and simultaneously the speaker's view that the hearer has exaggerated in his reaction.

With (32) the personal commitment after the expression of apology is appropriate, whereas in (33) the promise seems to violate a sincerity condition, i.e. it suggests a simple wish to silence the partner rather than as a promise

not to repeat the offending action. The reason for this lies in the motivation for the speech act. As it arises from the speaker having offended the hearer then it should also be coupled to a speech act of apology:

(33)a *Okay, I'm sorry, it won't happen again.*

Here the interpretation of one speech act (that of commitment) on the part of the hearer is dependent on its co-occurrence with another (that of apology). Note that the apology is independent of the commitment, however.

(33)b *Okay, I'm sorry.*

is appropriate and acceptable. But the commitment may be thought necessary if the precedent has occurred before and depends on additional extra-linguistic factors such as the likelihood of the situation occurring again.

The range of verbs at the disposal of the speaker enables him in fact to manipulate the speech act to deliberately obstruct it being successful. If (33) is re-arranged to get

(33)c *Okay, I swear it won't happen again.*

one can justifiably infer sarcasm as the intensity of the terms used are out of proportion to the precedent. An appropriacy condition specifies the degree of intensity with which the commitment should be expressed. The speaker in (33)c has deliberately flouted this condition to attain his goal of being sarcastic. Now sarcasm may be regarded as the advancing and simultaneous negation of a proposition. The negation of course is indirect. On a literal level a proposition is advanced. But from the context one can compare one's expectation of a verbal reaction with what one is actually presenting. If there is a serious discrepancy between these, then one may assume the speaker to be sarcastic. This applies to various speech acts not only those of commitment.

Lastly one should refer to commitments which occur as indirect speech acts (Searle (1975), esp. p. 77ff. and more generally Bach and Harnish, 1979: 173ff.). To show what is meant consider

(34) *That's the last time I'll ask you to dinner.*

Here the assertion which the sentence represents is the secondary illocutionary act. The primary one is one of negative commitment. Note that there is a distinction between negative commitment and a warning (Wunderlich, 1976: 277ff.) although they may both look similar and be expressed with the same verb. The sentence

(35) *I promise I'll never ask you to dinner again.*

expresses the same proposition as (34). It denotes a commitment on the part of the speaker. However, in the two sentences

(36) *I promise you you'll fail if you don't improve your English.*

(37) *I promise you you'll catch cold if you don't wear an overcoat.*

a warning is contained, the status of which qua speech act is unaffected by the fact that in the first, as opposed to the second, the interpretation that the speaker has it in his power to implement the substance of the warning is possible.

REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. 1971. "Performative-constative". In Searle (ed.). 1971. 13–22.
- Bach, K. and R. Harnish (1979). *Linguistic communication and speech acts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Cole, P. (ed.) 1978. *Pragmatics (Syntax and semantics 9)*. New York: Academic Press.
- Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds). 1975. *Speech acts (Syntax and semantics 3)*. New York: Academic Press.
- Fraser, B. 1975. "Hedged performatives", In Cole and Morgan (eds.) 1975.
- Grice, P. 1975. "Logic and conversation". In Cole and Morgan (eds). 1975. 41–58.
- Grice, P. 1978. "Further notes on logic and conversation". In Cole (ed.). 1978. 113–127.
- Morgan, J. 1977. "Conversational postulates revisited". *Language* 53. 277–284.
- Searle, J. 1969. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. 1975. "Indirect speech acts". In Cole and Morgan (eds). 1975. 59–82.
- Searle, J. 1979. *Expression and meaning. Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. (ed.) 1971. *The philosophy of language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. 1964. (repr. 1971). "Intention and convention in speech acts", In Searle (ed.). 1971. 23–38.
- Wunderlich, D. 1976. *Studien zur Sprechakttheorie*. Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp.