



A linguistic journey into the world of commitments

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What are we talking about?

I promise to phone you this evening.

I will send out the report tomorrow.

I am going to work on this today.

I can be reached on my mobile phone.

I will be out of the office on Monday.



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Commissives ‘commit the speaker to a certain course of action’. They are ‘an **obligation** or declaring of an **intention**’.

Typical examples: promising, intending, betting. [Austin]

Searle gives as examples promising, **offering**, and vowing. Again, they ‘commit the speaker to a future course of action’.



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Again, they ‘commit the speaker to a future course of action’.

Is that all there is to say?

What do commitments *really* do?



- ▶ What do commitments look like, linguistically?
- ▶ Can we update or expand their definition?
- ▶ What is their range of functions?

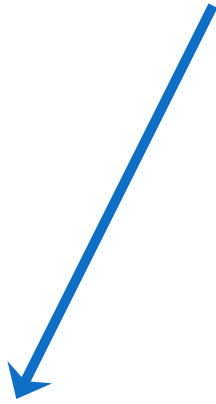
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- ▶ What do commitments look like?
 - ▶ Can we update or expand their definition?
 - ▶ What is their range of functions?

 - ▶ **Why?**
 - ▶ To develop tools (e.g. taggers for corpus analysis)
 - ▶ To further research on email communication and pragmatics
 - ▶ To gain insights into the language used in this domain

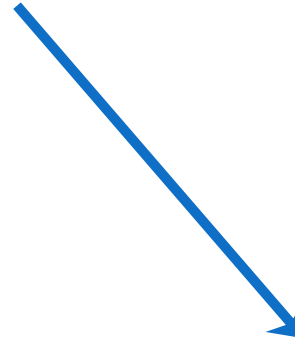


PRoBE: the PRagmatics of Business English

What do speech acts look like?



to a computer

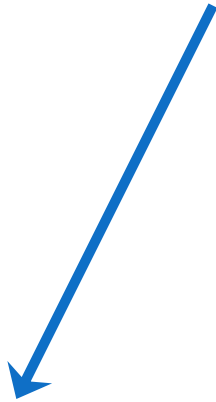


to a person

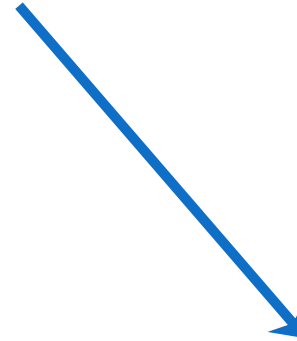


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PRoBE: the PRagmatics of Business English

-
- ▶ The task: annotate the Enron email corpus for speech acts

 - ▶ 7 categories:
 - ▶ Direct request (DR) \approx directive
 - ▶ Question-request (QR) \approx directive
 - ▶ Open question (QQ) \approx ??
 - ▶ First person commitment (FPC) \approx commissive
 - ▶ First person expression of feeling (FPF) \approx expressive
 - ▶ First person other (FPO) \approx representative
 - ▶ Other statements (OT) \approx representative

 - ▶ currently have about 20,700 annotated speech acts – 10.5% commitments
 - ▶ agreement \sim 71% - kappa 0.78



A typical workplace email:

OK folks , here it is.

Sorry for the delay,

but those pesky questions ended up being more detailed than anticipated.

Please take a quick look and let me know if there are any comments --

more ambiguities than usual in this one.

I'll await comments and finalize this evening.



A typical workplace email:

OK folks , here it is. → **3rd person statement**

Sorry for the delay, → **expression of feeling**

but those pesky questions ended up being more detailed than anticipated. → **3rd pers. statement**

Please take a quick look and let me know if there are any comments -- → **direct requests**

more ambiguities than usual in this one. → **3rd pers. st.**

I'll await comments and finalize this evening. → **commit.**



I promise to phone you this evening.

I will send out the report tomorrow.

I am going to work on this today.

I can be reached on my mobile phone.

I will be out of the office on Monday.



Analysing commitments

Corpus and sentence level descriptions

Multi-level analysis:

- ▶ Vocabulary and phrases/n-grams
- ▶ Grammar and part of speech behaviour
- ▶ Syntactic structures
- ▶ Use of proper nouns
- ▶ Discourse sequences

Tools:

- ▶ WordSmith, SketchEngine, etc.
 - ▶ Part-of-speech tagging, parsing, etc.
 - ▶ Speech act descriptor
-



Top 30 bigrams

- ▶ IWILL
- ▶ WILL BE
- ▶ IAM
- ▶ WEWILL
- ▶ ICAN
- ▶ INTHE
- ▶ ONTHE
- ▶ TOYOU
- ▶ OFTHE
- ▶ TOTHE
- ▶ GOINGTO
- ▶ ANDI
- ▶ IFYOU
- ▶ AT #
- ▶ WECAN
- ▶ TRYTO
- ▶ WEARE
- ▶ WILLHAVE
- ▶ AMGOING
- ▶ SOONAS
- ▶ BEIN
- ▶ HAPPYTO
- ▶ WILLTRY
- ▶ LETYOU
- ▶ YOUA
- ▶ YOUKNOW
- ▶ WILLFORWARD
- ▶ WILLGET
- ▶ WILLLET
- ▶ SEEYOU

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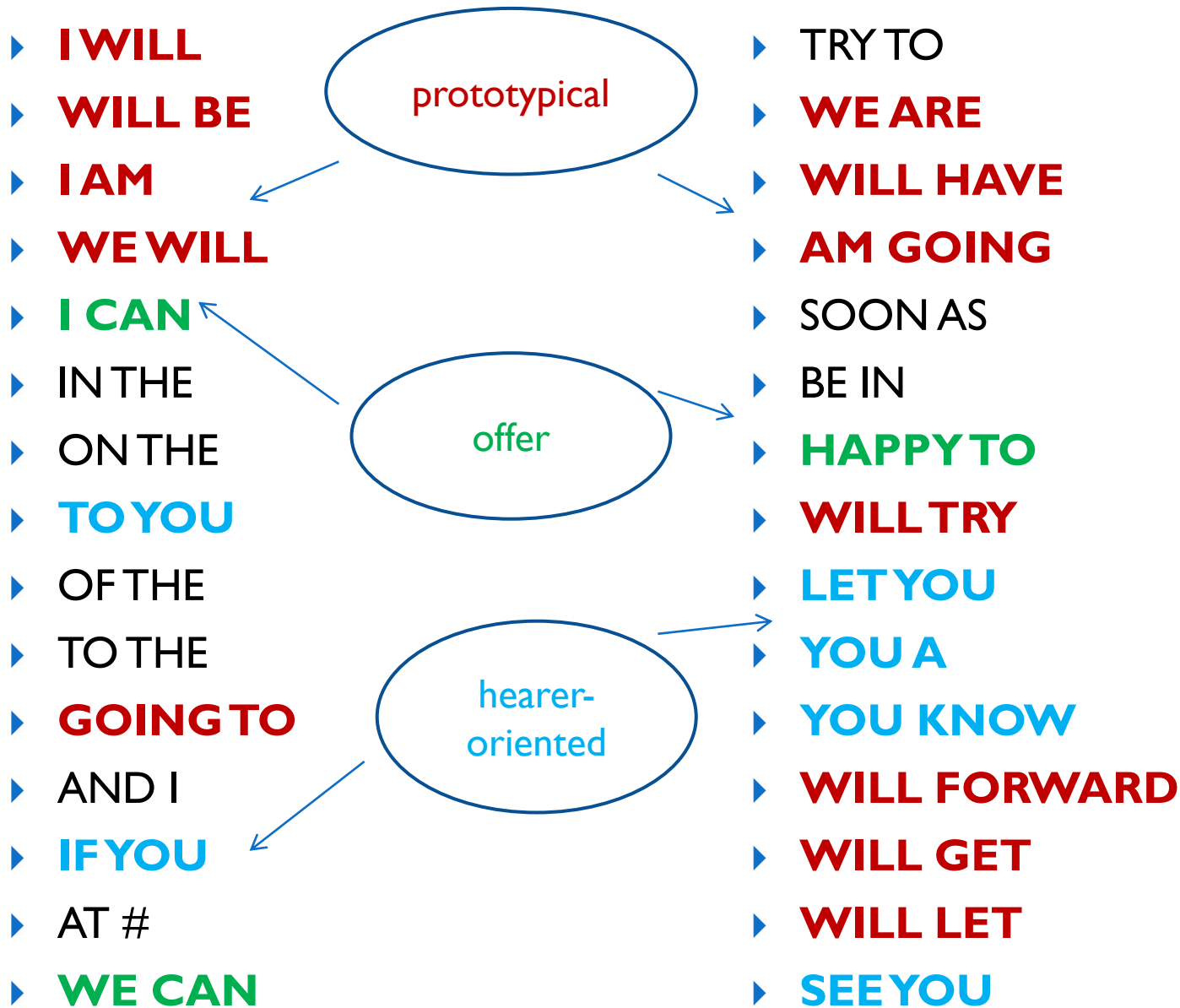
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Top 30 bigrams



The prototypical (?) class – I will

▶ Action:

- ▶ I will send out a real legislative report tomorrow.
- ▶ We'll get the first one out Monday.
- ▶ I am going to work on this today and hope to e-mail it out by 9am tomorrow.
- ▶ Basic pattern: I [will/am going to] + verb + time expression – ‘timestamp’ adds accountability
- ▶ Hard vs. soft – with or without timestamp – usually hard

▶ Information :

- ▶ I am out of town the following week.
- ▶ I will be out of the office on Friday.
- ▶ I will be in at 7 a.m. tomorrow.
- ▶ Basic pattern: I [am/will be] + location + time expression
- ▶ No tangible action is promised – only presence/absence (consequences for colleagues?)
- ▶ Still a commitment?
 - ▶ Our guidelines say: “statements in which the speaker is undertaking to do something”
 - ▶ Austin/Searle: declaring an intention, committing to a future course of action

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- ▶ Social/phatic role:

- ▶ I’ll let you know when I figure it out.

- ▶ We’ll work it out.

- ▶ I will give you a call to follow up after the trip.

- ▶ Basic pattern: often with other clauses, no time expression or only vague ones (‘after the trip’)

- ▶ Social function: keep communication open, maintain working relations, reassure attention is being given

The 'offer' class – I can

- ▶ Direct offer of action:
 - ▶ I am happy to check this out.
 - ▶ I am happy to give you a ride.
 - ▶ I can call and get the address.
 - ▶ I can follow up with details.
- ▶ Weaker than a promise – show willingness, but not entering into an obligation (though context-dependent)
- ▶ No time expression → soft commitment

- ▶ Information about presence/absence:
 - ▶ I can be reached at this number.
 - ▶ I can make time for the meeting.
 - ▶ I can do any of these dates.
- ▶ No time expression → soft commitment



The hearer-centred class – you, you, you

- ▶ Communication and transmission of information:
 - ▶ get back to you
 - ▶ send to you / forward to you
 - ▶ call you/give you a call
 - ▶ keep you posted / let you know
- ▶ Both hard and soft
- ▶ Action and social role

- ▶ Politeness function:
 - ▶ If you agree, I'm going to assign low priority to the issues.
 - ▶ We can talk about it if you are interested.
 - ▶ I can make the reservations if you want.
- ▶ Incidental to the commitment – show of politeness and awareness of hearer's needs
- ▶ Part of soft commitments or offers of action – conditional on hearer
 - ▶ Or just stock phrase?

An expanded theory of commitments



- ▶ Requirements:

- ▶ intentionality
- ▶ fulfilment – hence *I am away this week* vs. *I am Italian*.

- ▶ Functions:

- ▶ Concrete actions
- ▶ Exchange information
- ▶ Phatic communion for good working/social relations



An expanded theory of commitments

- ▶ ~~I will class (prototypical)~~
- ▶ ~~I can class (offer)~~
- ▶ ~~You class (hearer-centred)~~

	SOFT	HARD
ACTION	I can call and get the address. I can make the reservations if you want.	I will email the report at 9.
INFORMATION	I can do any of these dates.	I'll be in at 7am tomorrow.
SOCIAL	I'll let you know when I figure it out. I'll keep you posted.	-----



Still to come...

Several aspects of the analysis are yet to be addressed:

- ▶ Parts of speech, such as adjectives and adverbs
- ▶ More about time expressions: *today* is more frequent than *tomorrow*, and everything happens on *Monday* and *Friday*
- ▶ Discourse structure – two main types
 - ▶ Embedded within statements
 - ▶ Following a question-request



To conclude

- ▶ 'I promise' is quite rare
 - ▶ 'There can be tensions between speech act classifications and taxonomies which were developed on the basis of invented examples, and the analysis of speech acts in corpus data'.


(O'Keeffe, Clancy, and Adolphs 2011)

- ▶ A corpus-based study of commitments has shown a different approach to the taxonomy
- ▶ This will be expanded and applied to other categories



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Statement or commitment?

We will indicate that the utilities are hesitant to enter into these contracts.

We continue to consider every option available to us.

We are taking steps to be prepared to isolate the TMS system.

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- ▶ Discourse structure – two main types
 - ▶ Embedded within statements:

As soon as I've completed the performance reviews, **I'll give a full report.** Bottom line: His message is a very good one. His delivery could use a tad spicing up, however. Unfortunately, when I was free, he was in meetings, and vice versa. So we never got to sit down and chat. **I'll fill you in more soon.**
 - ▶ Following a question-request:

Could one of you print out the case? If not, don't sweat it, **I'll email him.** Sorry for any hassle. **I'll soften the expropriation language.**



Analysing commitments

- ▶ speech act descriptor/tagger → sentence level descriptions: syntax, lexicon, pronouns, punctuation...

I'll get a compiled answer out later today.

- ▶ Punctuation: .
- ▶ Subject: pronoun, first person
- ▶ First word: *I*
- ▶ Last word: *today*
- ▶ Object: noun (*answer*)
- ▶ Modal: yes, *'ll*
- ▶ Complex structure: I + modal + infinitive
- ▶ Named entity: date (*today*)



Analysing commitments

- ▶ Large number of instances concerned with the transmission of information and documents, in particular with the verbs **send**, **attach**, and **forward**
 - ▶ *I am sending copies of this draft.*
 - ▶ *I am attaching a list of participants.*
- ▶ Are these commitments?
 - ▶ Self-fulfilling not forward-looking but taking place at the same time as they are being uttered
 - ▶ Is forward-lookingness a necessary requirement for inclusion in this class?
 - ▶ From other aspects, they fit the criteria: intentionality, action that can be verified, clear outcome.

