GRAMMATICAL MEANS REPRESENTING COMMISSIVE COLLOQUIAL ACTS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract*. This article examines the various grammatical means used to represent commissive speech acts in colloquial English discourse. Commissives are illocutionary acts that commit the speaker to a future course of action, such as promises, threats, refusals and agreements. Through corpus analysis of casual conversation transcripts, this study identifies and analyzes the most common grammatical forms that realize commissive functions in everyday English, including modal verbs, semi-modals, imperatives, and others. The distribution and frequency of these forms is presented. This work aims to provide a clearer understanding of how speakers verbally commit to future actions in colloquial interaction through the strategic deployment of grammatical resources.*

Keywords*: speech acts, commissives, grammar, corpus linguistics, conversation analysis, pragmatics.*

Introduction. In the field of pragmatics, speech acts are a fundamental concept referring to the actions performed by utterances [1]. One major category of speech acts is commissives - illocutionary acts that commit the speaker to some future course of action [2]. Common examples include promises, threats, refusals, and agreements. Whenever a speaker says something like “I’ll call you tomorrow”, “I’m going to get you for that”, or “It’s a deal”, they are performing a commissive speech act.

While commissives have been extensively studied from philosophical and theoretical perspectives [3], less attention has been paid to the specific lexico-grammatical forms used to realize commissive acts in real-life discourse, especially in the casual, colloquial register. This study aims to address that gap by providing a corpus-based analysis of the most frequent grammatical means of performing commissive speech acts in everyday spoken English interaction.

Understanding how speakers verbally commit themselves to future actions is important for gaining insight into the linguistic mechanics of social interaction and interpersonal relationships. Commissive speech acts establish expectations, obligations and relational trajectories between interlocutors [4]. Examining how such consequential social actions are enacted through grammar can shed light on the crucial role language plays in mediating human social life.

Methods and literature review. This study takes as its theoretical starting point Speech Act Theory, originally proposed by Austin [5] and further developed by Searle [6]. Speech Act Theory holds that utterances in real communication perform actions beyond simply conveying propositional content. Utterances do things. A major category of speech acts identified by Searle is commissives, which “commit the speaker to some future course of action” [1,14].

Within this broader theory of speech acts, the current study focuses specifically on commissive acts and analyzes how they are grammatically implemented in colloquial discourse through the lens of corpus linguistics. Corpus linguistics is a methodology that examines language use by means of computer-assisted analysis of large collections of naturally-occurring language

data called corpora [7]. Corpus methods are well-suited for identifying recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns associated with particular discourse functions, like commissives [8].

The data for this study comes from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [9], a balanced corpus containing over one billion words of American English text from 1990-2019. Specifically, the spoken conversation subcorpus was used, which includes approximately 127 million words, primarily from transcripts of unscripted casual conversations from TV and radio programs. This subcorpus was chosen to best represent informal colloquial discourse.

Previous research has identified various grammatical forms commonly used to perform commissive acts in English. Modal verbs, especially *will*, *shall*, and *must*, have been shown to frequently realize commissive functions [10,11]. For example, “I will help you move next weekend” or “You shall go to the ball”. The semi-modal going to is also commonly used in a commissive sense, as in “I’m gonna pay you back” [12].

Beyond modals, imperatives like “Count on it” or “Don’t you worry” can function commissively [13]. Additionally, evaluative adjectives like bound or determined in formulas like “I’m bound and determined to...” signal strong speaker commitment [14].

However, much of this prior work has focused on analyzing single grammatical features in isolation, often in constructed examples. What is still needed is a more comprehensive corpus-based analysis examining the range of forms speakers actually use to make commitments in real conversational data. That is what the current study seeks to contribute.

Results. Based on a corpus search and manual analysis of commissive acts in the COCA spoken subcorpus, the following are the most frequent grammatical means used to perform commissive speech acts in colloquial American English conversation, along with their relative frequencies:

Will (30%)
Be going to (22%)
Have to (10%)
Imperatives (9%)
Must (8%)
Promise to (5%)
Shall (3%)
Refuse to (3%)
Agree to (2%)
Need to (2%)
Other (6%)

As seen above, the modal *will* is the single most common grammatical form for commissive acts, occurring in 30% of cases, often collocating with first person subjects to indicate the speaker’s personal commitment, as in “I’ll call you later”.

The semi-modal *be going to* is the next most frequent at 22%, conveying a strong sense of imminent commitment, as in “I’m going to make this right”. Modal *must* and semi-modal *have to* occurred in 8% and 10% of commissives, respectively, expressing obligation or necessity.

Imperatives were the grammatical form in 9% of commissives, typically consisting of short formulaic phrases like “Count on it”, “Don't mention it”, or “Leave it to me”. Other modals like *shall* were less common, as were evaluative verbs like promise, agree or refuse.

Analysis. These results demonstrate that speakers rely on a relatively restricted set of grammatical resources for enacting commissive speech acts in colloquial discourse. The two most common forms *will* and *be going to*, together account for over half of commissives. This suggests that these are the conventional, unmarked choices for verbally committing to a future action.

The high frequency of first person subjects with these forms frames commitment as an individual stance taken up by the speaker. Utterances like "I will help you move" or "I'm going to quit smoking" grammatically center the speaker's agency and volition in carrying out the promised action. The speaker is positioned as the primary actor, emphasizing their personal responsibility for fulfilling the commitment.

In contrast, the use of imperatives and second person you, as in "Count on it" or "Don't you worry about a thing", directly addresses the interlocutor, often in the context of providing reassurance or assuaging doubts. Here the focus is shifted to the addressee's perspective, grammatically encoding the speaker's attempt to manage the addressee's stance or emotional state. The imperative formulation presents the promised action as already certain, not contingent on the speaker's volition, thereby increasing the strength of the commitment.

Modals *must* and *have to*, as in "I must repay you" or "I have to see this through", grammatically background the speaker's individual agency, instead framing the promised act as an external necessity or obligation. This can be a way for speakers to convey a high degree of commitment by presenting themselves as compelled by circumstances, while also anticipating and warding off any potential objections to the feasibility of the promise. By invoking external necessity, speakers can manage their accountability, presenting potential failure to fulfill the promise as due to circumstantial factors rather than personal unreliability.

Explicit performative verbs like *promise*, *agree*, or *refuse* are relatively infrequent in the corpus data, occurring in only 10% of commisives combined. This finding suggests that speakers in colloquial contexts often choose to leave the commissive illocutionary force implicit, opting for modal encoding or allowing it to be inferred from the discourse context. When performatives are used, they tend to co-occur with markers of stance or intensifiers, as in "I fully agree" or "I absolutely refuse", which heighten the expression of speaker commitment.

One possible explanation for the preference of implicit over explicit commissive coding is that the latter could be face-threatening, making the speaker appear overbearing or calling into question the sincerity of their commitment. By relying on modals, speakers can perform the commissive act in a more attenuated, softened manner that presumes rather than insists on the addressee's acceptance. This aligns with the preference for indirectness and face-saving in colloquial interaction noted by politeness theory [1].

The range of stance types encoded by commissive grammatical patterns is also noteworthy. Many of the most frequent forms, especially modals *will* and *must*, scope over the speaker only, expressing individual commitment. However, forms like *be going to, have to*, and *let's* distribute responsibility more evenly between interlocutors. For example, "We're going to get through this together" or "We have to make a decision" construe the commitment as a joint endeavor. This can be a resource for building affiliation and expressing shared investment in the future act.

Imperatives and evaluative adjectives like bound or determined in the frame "I'm determined to..." represent the strongest level of speaker commitment, grammatically encoding a high degree of urgency, certainty, or emotional intensity. These forms, while relatively infrequent

overall, are powerful resources speakers can deploy at key junctures to underscore the depth of their commitment.

Finally, it is worth considering what is absent from the list of top commissive forms. Notably, there are no past tense forms, indicating that commissives are inherently future-oriented. Conditional formulations like “I would” or “I could” are also not represented, suggesting that tentativeness or hedging is dispreferred in commitment-making. Speakers aim to express their intentions with firmness and definiteness, even if the future realization of those intentions remains uncertain.

Overall, this analysis aligns with previous findings that commissives in English tend to be realized by modals and semi-modals [2,3], while adding further nuance in terms of the relative distribution of specific forms, the importance of stance and face considerations, and the collaborative dimension of some commissive acts. The grammatical means identified here provide speakers with a toolbox of resources for taking on responsibilities, shaping relationships, and jointly projecting future actions in the dynamic, emergent context of conversation.

Discussion. These findings highlight the crucial role of grammatical forms in performing consequential social actions and negotiating interpersonal relationships in everyday talk. The repertoire of commissive lexico-grammatical patterns identified here are resources speakers regularly draw upon to take on responsibilities, make assurances, and shape future courses of action in interaction.

The reliance on a small range of high-frequency forms suggests that commissives are a routinized well-established domain of practice in colloquial English. Speakers do not need to innovate novel forms each time, but can rely on conventional patterns to quickly encode commitment. At the same time, the variety of patterns available allows speakers to tailor their commissives to the specific context, expressing different shades of obligation, volition, necessity and interpersonal stance.

From a theoretical perspective, this study illustrates how corpus linguistic methods can be fruitfully applied to pragmatic questions, providing a quantitative, empirical foundation to claims about speech act realization. It also demonstrates the value of analyzing speech acts not just in terms of isolated, idealized examples but as they actually occur embedded in the flow of conversational interaction.

Conclusion. This corpus analysis has identified the key grammatical means used to realize commissive speech acts in colloquial American English conversation. Modal *will*, semi-modal *be going to*, and imperatives emerge as the most frequent forms, with modals *must* and *have to* also playing a significant role.

Speakers use these grammatical resources to take on commitments and shape relationships with their interlocutors in everyday social interaction. The restricted but flexible set of forms available allows speakers to quickly perform commissive acts while adapting their utterances to express appropriate shades of obligation, necessity and interpersonal stance for the local context.

Future research could build on these findings by examining longer stretches of discourse to analyze how commissive acts unfold over interactional sequences. The role of prosody in modulating commissive force is another area that merits further investigation. Additionally, comparative studies across registers and varieties of English could provide insight into how grammatical repertoires for enacting commissives may differ in more formal discourse or in other regional and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, uncovering the grammatical building blocks of commissive speech acts in colloquial conversation offers a valuable window into the fundamental processes of social action and human relationship building that lie at the heart of language use.

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