Pragmatic Factors in Making and Understanding Promises

Read: Gibbs & Delanney 1987
Felicity Conditions on Promises  
(Searle 1965, 1969)

1. The speaker’s utterance counts as an undertaking of an obligation to do what he or she has promised because it is conventionally recognized as a promise given the use of the words “I promise.”
   - Obligation felicity condition

2. The speaker believes that the hearer would prefer him to do what he has promised rather than not to do it. This rule distinguishes promises from threats.
   - Hearer Preference felicity condition

3. It is not obvious to either the speaker or the hearer that the speaker would do what he has promised in the ordinary course of events.
   - Nonevident felicity condition
Philosophical Controversies

• The utterance may only reaffirm a previously existing obligation and, as such, does not *by itself* create an obligation; rather, admits one deriving from another source. (Ardal, 1968; Atiyah 1981)

• A speaker who has carried out some action repeatedly in the past can promise to do it even it is obvious to all concerned that he or she will continue to do it and it is actually expected. (Atiyah 1981)

• There may be some circumstances in which the hearer would prefer the speaker *not* to do the action mentioned, and yet the hearer views the utterance as a promise and not simply as a threat. (Carter, 1972-73, Peetz, 1977)
Point of Experiments

• Do people have tacit knowledge, similar to Searle’s felicity conditions, which affects their linguistic behavior in making and understanding promises?

• What are the sentence forms people actually use in making promises?
  – Do the surface forms influence their interpretation?
  – Do people have to say, “I promise”?
  – What is a taxonomy of such forms?
Experiment 1A

• Task:
  – Read a scenario, write down what you would say in such a scenario, and rate this utterance as to the degree to which it constituted a promise.

• Scenarios varied:
  – All felicity conditions met
  – Violation of Obligation
  – Violation of Hearer Preference
  – Violation of Nonevident
• Normal condition
  – It’s Thursday morning and you notice that there are very few groceries in the house and it’s your turn to shop. As you are leaving to go to school, you want to tell your roommate that you will do the shopping that afternoon. So you say to your roommate ____________.

• Violation of Obligation condition
  – It’s Thursday morning and you notice that there are very few groceries in the house. One of your roommates says that you should do the shopping on the way home from school. You want to tell her that you’ll do it even though your saying so does not make you feel obligated to do it since it is not one of your household chores. So even though you don’t feel obligated to do the shopping you say to her ________________.

• Violation of Hearer Preference condition
  – It’s Thursday morning and you notice that there are very few groceries in the house. You decide to go shopping that afternoon. Your roommate tells you that she would rather that you not do it alone since she doesn’t trust your judgment on what to buy and how much to spend. Despite the fact that she prefers you not do the shopping, you want to tell her that you will do the shopping by yourself on the way home from school. You say to her ____________.

• Violation of Nonevident condition
  – It’s Thursday morning and you notice that there are very few groceries in the house. You usually do the shopping for the household every Thursday on the way home from school. In fact everyone knows you do this every Thursday and they even expect you to. As you leave that morning you want to tell your roommate that you intend to do the shopping that afternoon despite the fact that this is normal procedure for you. So you say to her ________________.
• Subjects
  – 25

• Stimuli and design
  – 10 scenarios, 4 conditions each
  – 5 students rated them as to meeting or violating felicity conditions, revised accordingly.
  – Total of 40 stories, grouped into four sets of ten, plus four additional Normal stories
  – Each subject saw 12 stories: 6 Felicity Violations, 6 Normal.

• Procedure
  – Subjects would read booklet with 12 stories, imagine themselves as protagonist and write down what they would say.
  – Then they were asked to reread each scenario and rate their written responses, on a scale of 1 to 7, as to whether they constituted promises (1 being absolutely sure it is not a promise, 7 being absolutely sure it is a promise).
### Proportion of Utterances Generated for Each Sentence Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>Example Sentence</th>
<th>% Generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future Act</td>
<td>“I’ll take out the garbage”</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance + Future Act</td>
<td>“I’ll take out the garbage, for sure.”</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact</td>
<td>“I don’t mind taking out the garbage when it is my turn.”</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact + Future Act</td>
<td>“I don’t mind taking out the garbage when it is my turn. I’ll do it today.”</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance Alone</td>
<td>“Don’t worry about the garbage, really.”</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other 8 Response Types</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mean Promise Rating for Each Sentence Type in Each Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Obligation</th>
<th>Hearer Preference</th>
<th>Nonevident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future Act</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>5.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance + Future Act</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact + Future Act</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance Alone</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other 8 sentence types</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Statistical Results

• The utterances in the Normal contexts were given significantly higher ratings than those in the Violation conditions (p < .05).

• Subjects gave lowest ratings to No-Obligation condition (p < .05).

• Subjects gave lower ratings to Hearer Preference condition than to Normal (p < .10).

• Violations of the Nonevident condition did not affect promise ratings.
Experiment 1B

• New subjects gave promise ratings to utterances generated by subjects in Experiment 1A.

• Results were statistically identical.
Experiment 2

• Gave subjects 20 Normal contexts followed by an utterance from the 10 most frequent sentence types that more or less constituted a promise.

• Following each story were 4 questions, which subjects rated on a 7-point scale:
  – Did the last sentence constitute a promise?
  – Is the speaker obligated to fulfill the promise?
  – Does the speaker of the last sentence believe the hearer wants him to do the action?
  – Is the speaker going to do the action only because he said he would?
• Subjects gave higher promise ratings to Explicit Promise + Future Act (6.66) and Future Act (6.20) statements. Lowest ratings were to Statements of Fact (3.93) and Requests to Promise (3.83).
  – Verifies propositional content condition

• It was assumed that subjects’ numerical responses to the questions regarding the three felicity conditions reflect the relative importance of each of the felicity conditions in making promises.
  – NH: Why should we assume this?
    – Hearer-preference question was rated highest (6.15)
    – Nonevident question was rated lowest (4.05)
    – Obligation question was intermediate (5.15)
# Mean Ratings for Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Promise</th>
<th>Obligation</th>
<th>Hearer Preference</th>
<th>Nonevident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future Act</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance + Future Act</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Act + Statement of Fact</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance Alone</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If-Then Guarantee</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request to Promise + Future Act</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request to Promise</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance + Statement of Fact</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit Promise + Future Act</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>4.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experiment 3

- Subjects read stories that varied in their degree of obligation (Obligation) and in terms of whether the obligation already existed or was brought about solely by the speaker’s utterance (Nonevident).
- Subjects also read stories depicting different states of Hearer Preference.
- The subjects’ task was to read each story and then rate the degree to which the last utterance in each story constituted a promise.
- **NH:** For sample stories, see handout.
• Set 1:
  – 4 types of stories:
    • Obligation and the normal course of events
    • Obligation and not the normal course of events
    • No obligation and the normal course of events
    • No obligation and not the normal course of events
  – 4 utterance types (2 each) (types with highest promise rating in Exp. 2):
    • Future Act
    • Explicit Promise + Future Act
    • Reassurance + Future Act
    • Statement of Fact + Future Act

• Set 2:
  – 4 types of stories:
    • H cares that S does A
    • H doesn’t care that S does A
    • H prefers S not to A
    • A has negative consequences for H
  – 4 utterance types
• Stories were rated and revised.
• 40 subjects.
• Each booklet contained 8 stories from Set 1 (2 of each of 4 story types) and 8 stories from Set 2 (2 of each of 4 story types).
• An equal number of subjects saw the four types of stories in each of the 8 contexts for the two sets.
• Subjects were told to imagine themselves as the protagonist in each story and to rate the last utterance on a scale of 1 to 7 as to whether it constituted a promise (1 being “absolutely not a promise” and 7 being “absolutely sure it is a promise”).
• Instructions emphasized that the subjects consider each utterance in the specific context portrayed in the story.
Mean Ratings for Sentence Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>Obligation/Nonevident</th>
<th>Hearer Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future Action</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit Promise + Future Act</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassurance + Future Act</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Fact + Future Act</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explicit promise > others (p < .01)
Mean Ratings for Obligation/Nonevident Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Context</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes-obligation &amp; normal course of events</td>
<td>6.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes-obligation &amp; not normal course of events</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-obligation &amp; normal course of events</td>
<td>5.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-obligation &amp; not normal course of events</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes-obligation > No-obligation (p < .0001)
Normal course of events > not normal course of events (p < .025)
Mean Ratings for Hearer Preference Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of context</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hearer prefers speaker do action</td>
<td>6.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearer doesn’t care if speaker does action</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearer prefers speaker not do action</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative consequences for hearer</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H prefers S do A > others (p < .01)  
Negative consequences for H < others (p < .01)
General Discussion

• There are many sentence forms that people can use to make promises.
• Good empirical support for Searle’s felicity conditions, except for the Nonevident condition.
  – Promises depend crucially on the belief that the action is desired by the addressee.
  – One of the main functions of verbal promises is to remind the addressee of the existence of some prior obligation and, in some cases, to specify when an action is to be performed.