Pragmatic and semantic commitment when using quotative markers, with application to French *dire* and *genre*

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**Abstract**

Utterers make commitments, for example when they produce Direct Discourse reports. Do the words chosen to frame a quotation affect those commitments, as has been argued by several authors (e.g. Romaine and Lange, 1991; Buchstaller, 2014)? In particular, do users of ‘old’ and ‘new’ quotatives (e.g. *dire* and *genre*) make different commitments vis-à-vis the object of their report, the degree of faithfulness of that report, the depiction of additional nonverbal aspects? Within a framework rooted in Clark and Gerrig’s (1990) theory of quotations as demonstrations, and on the basis of diverse data sources, this paper shows that the commitments which are inherent in the act of quotation take precedence over those that result from the choice of a quotative expression.

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1. Introduction

The literature on quotatives primarily assumes that the commitments associated with the production of Direct Discourse (henceforth *DD*) essentially depend on which quotative is used to frame the DD. The commitments in question are said to concern (i) the existence of an utterance that is reported, (ii) the truth of that utterance, (iii) the reproduction of attendant non-verbal behavior. Much less attention is paid to a general theory of quotation, and to any commitments that it might entail.

In this paper, I attempt to show that any commitments triggered by particular quotatives should be evaluated against the background of a general theory of quotation. I argue for a ‘depiction’ theory (based on Clark and Gerrig, 1990) which predicts that quoters, in particular speakers that produce DD, are strictly committed only to the depiction of selected context-dependent aspects of the behavior that the quotation targets. To investigate whether quotative-triggered commitments are constrained by this general commitment, I conduct a small-scale corpus study of some French quotatives, with special focus on traditional *dire* and innovative *genre*. This study allows me to test several claims drawn from the literature on quotatives. The results are then contextualized within the framework of the depiction theory of quotation. While this investigation also sheds light on the use of new quotatives in French, it does not pretend to provide a definitive characterization of these, a task that would require a much larger-scale corpus study.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 sketches the views on commitment relevant to the present study. Sections 3 and 4 look at those commitments (or suspensions of commitments) that the literature associates with DD or with the use...
2. A brief characterization of commitment

There are several ways of conceiving of the role of ‘commitment’ in the study of language, depending notably on one’s views on (i) who/what brings about the commitment, (ii) who is supposed to fulfill the commitment, (iii) what one is committed to, (iv) whether commitment is an all-or-nothing or graded affair.

For present purposes, the most relevant issue is (i). The two dominant views are that commitments result, first, from using certain linguistic units (lexemes, constructions), and, second, from performing communicative acts.1 These views are not mutually exclusive, and both will prove relevant in what follows.

Consider the examples below. The person who utters (1) appears to be committed to the proposition that the measure in question is totally unrealistic. This we infer just from the utterer’s use of se rendre compte que (“realize that”), a presupposition trigger. As regards (2), an explicit promise, it automatically commits the utterer to being a good student in future. The form of the illocutionary act is immaterial. Had the utterer of (2) produced (3) openly as a promise, she would have been equally committed to being a good student.

(1) Malheureusement, ils ne se rendent pas compte que cette mesure est totalement irréaliste. (Internet)

‘Unfortunately, they do not realize that this measure is totally unrealistic’

(2) Je promets que je serai une bon [sic] étudiante. (Internet)

‘I promise that I’ll be a good student’

(3) Je serai une bonne étudiante.

At least at an initial glance, then, it seems that commitment can be either semantic or pragmatic. In the context of the present paper, these two possibilities yield two different predictions: (i) if a commitment is semantic in nature, i.e. if it conventionally results from the utterance of a particular lexical item, then it should emerge whenever the item is produced, whatever the details of the context of utterance. If, on the other hand, a commitment is pragmatic, i.e. linked to a particular action of the utterer’s, its identification will be sensitive to the details of the context, notably the utterer’s intentions, because one and the same action can be performed using a variety of forms. In Sections 3 and 4, I consider how the two views can be put to good use in the present study.

Regarding issue (ii) — the question of who incurs commitment — I adopt the predominant view that it is the utterer who does. With illocutionary acts like questions and directives, it is relevant to ask if commitment affects the addressee as well (see Beyssade and Marandin, 2009). However, the data at the center of the present study do not require any such extension.

Issue (iii) is the question what sort of thing an utterer commits herself to when she incurs a commitment. Different authors consider different possibilities, but the two that come up most often are: propositions and actions. Consider examples (1) and (2) again. The utterer of (1) is committed to the truth of two propositions. The first is the asserted proposition about the referent of ils, and the utterer is committed to it as a result of her asserting (1). The second is the presupposition ‘this measure is totally unrealistic’, which results from her using se rendre compte que. This can be contrasted with (2), whose utterance commits the utterer to a future action: doing what it takes to be a good student.

Issue (iv) is whether commitment is graded or all-or-nothing. Again both standpoints exist, and they need not be incompatible. Many accounts of epistemic modality typically suggest that modal expressions serve the purpose of indicating degree of commitment to what one is saying (e.g. Palmer, 1986: 51). As regards illocutionary acts, speech-act theory accommodates both absolute and graded commitments. Searle (1979: 12) states that any assertion commits its utterer “to the truth of the expressed proposition” (such is the illocutionary point of an assertion), but that this commitment comes in varying degrees (that is a function of the illocutionary force of the assertion).

A last point concerns how a researcher can identify the presence of a commitment. Probably the best clue is the fact that utterers who incur a commitment lay themselves open to a challenge (Green, 2015). Thus, the utterer of (1) can be rebuked if either the presupposition or the asserted proposition turns out false, i.e. if the targeted measure is not totally unrealistic, or if the referent of ils did not realize the total impracticability of the measure. The addressee of (2) can, at a later stage, complain to the utterer that she failed to keep her promise, i.e. did not try hard enough to be a good student.

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1 The first view is associated, notably, with theories of modality (see Lyons, 1977: 797; de Haan, 1999). The second view is endorsed typically by speech-act theorists (see Toulmin, 1958; Searle, 1979; Lyons, 1977: 734; Green, 2015).
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