On speaker commitment and speaker involvement. Evidence from evidentials in Spanish talk-in-interaction☆

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Abstract

In this paper I raise the question of how the concepts of speaker commitment and speaker involvement can be applied to evidential expressions. I therefore explore the distinction between commitment and non-commitment as a binary opposition (cf. Katriel and Dascal, 1989; Kissine, 2008) and show that a choice for a binary opposition leads to a clear differentiation of epistemic and evidential markers. Speaker involvement is different from speaker commitment, in that it is gradable. This notion will be relevant at both a propositional and an interactional level of analysis. At the propositional level, I claim that speaker involvement refers to the speaker's processing of the evidential qualification when presenting a state of affairs. At the interactional level, speaker involvement will be shown to play a role in the online planning of the flow of discourse. In my corpus analysis of the Spanish evidential adverbials *al parecer* 'apparently' and *por lo visto* 'seemingly', I will argue that the coparticipant's reply to evidentially qualified propositions is an important methodological tool to examine speaker involvement. Moreover, the monitoring of the evidential dimension in interaction will shed new light on non-commitment (cf. Déchaine et al., 2017).
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Keywords: Speaker commitment; Speaker involvement; Speaker hearer interaction; Spanish

1. Introduction

In the literature, the notion of commitment is used in different ways and is applied to several domains of language. Speaker commitment often refers to the commitment to a propositional content (Verstraete, 2001) or to the truth of an asserted proposition, and, hence, involves mental presentations about states-of-affairs and the beliefs that surround these propositions. From a linguistic point of view, speakers express that they are committed to the claim they make (overtly). Yet, speakers can also be committed to presuppositions and thoughts (covertly). In talk-in-interaction speakers are, in one way or another, also committed to the consistency of the flow of discourse, to the interaction with their coparticipants as well as to their well-being or to their face (face-saving strategies). The analysis of commitment to the

proposition and the analysis of the sequential organization of the discourse go hand in hand, indeed. Finally, speaker commitment can also be understood as commitment to a future course of action (intentions or obligations). In this paper, I will argue that speaker commitment to the propositional content covers a specific set of epistemic and evidential expressions. When it comes to studying talk-in-interaction, the notion of speaker commitment has to be complemented with the notion of speaker involvement with special attention to the hearer/coparticipant.

A focus on interaction must be combined with attention to presuppositions and beliefs, in that interaction engages in building up a shared basis for understanding what is being said. Importantly, the interaction between speech participants obeys to the constraint of consistency. In Gunlogson's (2008:109) words: ''making a discourse commitment to φ sets up a future for the discourse where taking a position inconsistent with φ is not to be expected'' (see also Hamblin, 1971; Stalnaker, 1978). This means that speech participants are heavily involved in adding content (propositions, beliefs) to what other participants are saying. The coparticipant's replies to the speaker's assessments can be seen as discourse commitments and form an important tool to uncover the speaker's stance. In this paper, I will not use the term of ''discourse commitment'', but will instead focus on speaker involvement in interaction.

The focus of the analysis of commitment and involvement is on evidentiality, a functional category that refers to the mode of access to the knowledge presented. Since evidentiality belongs to the broader domain of epistemicity, epistemic modals will also be addressed. The paper is mainly theoretical, but has also a descriptive part at the end. In the theoretical first half, the question of non-commitment vs commitment will be reviewed so as to apply the distinction to epistemic modality and evidentiality (Sections 2 and 3). In the second half, I will examine how the discourse dynamics between speech participants can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of speaker involvement and evidentiality in talk-in-interaction (Sections 4 and 5). By conducting an analysis of *por lo visto* 'seemingly' and *al parecer* 'apparently', I will show that the role of the coparticipant in involvement attribution cannot be overlooked. Thus, a more refined view of the speaker-hearer dynamics can shed new light to previous commitment accounts of evidentiality and epistemic modality.

2. The commitment – non-commitment distinction

De Brabanter and Dendale (2008) offer a detailed overview of the status of commitment in language. They differentiate between three big areas of application: (i) speech act theory, (ii) modality and (iii) formal models of dialogue. Although the focus of this paper is on the domain of modality, more specifically evidentiality and epistemic modality, the insights from speech act theory and formal models of dialogue can help us delimit the function of commitment in qualificational categories as epistemic modality (this section) and evidentiality (next section).

In speech act theory, commitment refers to the strength with which an assertive speech act is made. A classic example is the use of the English verb *to promise*, as in (1), which, due to its strong illocutionary force, is said to bear strong speaker commitment (cf. Searle, 1969:58; Verhagen, 2000:200–202), whereas other expressions, such as *I think*, witness a lower degree of commitment.

(1) a. I hereby promise that I will come to see you. (Searle, 1969:58)
     b. Speaker A: Do you think John will be coming to the party? Speaker B: Well - he promised.
         (Verhagen, 2000:200–202)
     c. Speaker A: Is Peter coming to the party? Speaker B. Sure, he promised. (Verhagen, 2000:200–202)

By contrast, Katriel and Dascal (1989) argue that speaker commitment is not gradable: i.e. a speaker is either committed to a proposition in that (s)he endorses the truth of that proposition or (s)he is not. The different degrees of illocutionary force are then accounted for in terms of speaker involvement. Their claim is an interesting path the explore, given the fact that the different degrees of commitment are often difficult to underpin, but one has to avoid that the question of commitment vs non-commitment boils down to displacing the problem (to speaker involvement).

Katriel and Dascal (1989) do not clarify the borders between commitment and non-commitment. In what follows, I will first detect the clear cases of non-commitment and then explore whether absence of commitment holds for epistemic possibility, as claimed by Kissine (2008). My claim will be that performative epistemic markers cannot be devoid of commitment. In Section 3, I will then examine whether a similar approach can be followed to study the domain of evidentiality.

Speaker commitment is prototypically correlated with declarative sentences, e.g. (2), whereas non-commitment is prototypically found in questions, in that the latter cannot assert any propositional content, as in (3). The protasis of the conditional does not convey speaker commitment either, since it formulates a possible world, as in (4).

(2) I know him.
(3) Do you know him?
(4) If you know him, can you tell me?