

# A LEXICAL CONSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH TO ILLOCUTION: THE CASE OF PROMISES\*

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## ABSTRACT

The present contribution studies the cognitive motivation and linguistic realization of illocutionary meaning. The theoretical framework is the Lexical Constructional Model propounded by Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal and Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza. Illocutionary constructions are the result of the interplay between cognitive construal operations and general social conventions defined in the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model (Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi; Baicchi and Ruiz de Mendoza). In this study I examine the conceptual grounding of constructions carrying out promising values. I argue that the realization of promises is based on linguistic mechanisms capable of instantiating relevant parts of promise constructions.

**KEY WORDS:** Illocutionary meaning, illocutionary constructions, Lexical-Constructional Model, promising, conventionalization, Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model.

## RESUMEN

El presente artículo estudia la motivación cognitiva y la realización lingüística del significado ilocutivo. El marco teórico es el Modelo Léxico Construccional (MLC), diseñado por Ruiz de Mendoza y Mairal y Mairal y Ruiz de Mendoza. Las construcciones ilocutivas surgen de la interacción entre operaciones cognitivas de perspectivización y convenciones sociales generalizadas definidas en el Modelo Cognitivo de Coste-Beneficio (Ruiz de Mendoza y Baicchi; Baicchi y Ruiz de Mendoza). En este estudio se examina la base conceptual de construcciones ilocutivas con valores de prometer. Se defiende que la realización de las promesas está basada en mecanismos lingüísticos capaces de activar partes relevantes de la base semántica de ciertas construcciones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** ilocución, construcciones ilocutivas, Modelo Léxico Construccional, promesas, convencionalización, Modelo Cognitivo de Coste-Beneficio.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since Austin's and Searle's development of speech act theory, the study of illocutionary phenomena has deserved the attention of a considerable number of researchers within diverse frameworks. The most significant contributions to the field





are represented by functional grammar theories and inferential accounts. Functional approaches (Dik; Halliday and Matthiessen), on the one hand, attempt to incorporate illocution within the study of grammar. Inferential theories (Bach and Harnish; Leech), on the other hand, concentrate on the inferential processes involved in illocutionary interpretation. However, despite the useful insights in these accounts, they fail to provide a fully-fledged view on illocution. Recent cognitive studies offer some solutions to the shortcomings of traditional theories of speech acts. Within Cognitive Linguistics, illocution has been treated as a matter of metonymic operations that apply to cognitive models of a situational kind (Panther and Thornburg). The development of cognitive studies has also supplied evidence of the existence of conventional speech acts, that is, linguistic configurations that have been specialized to convey specific illocutionary values (Panther and Thornburg; Pérez Hernández; Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza; Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi). Such insights have paved the way for the incorporation of illocutionary phenomena into a principled model of meaning construction called the Lexical Constructional Model or LCM (Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal; Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza). The LCM is primarily concerned with the development of a comprehensive theory of meaning construction that accounts for all facets of the process. The model is structured on four levels, which refer to argument structure representations (level 1), implicated and explicated meaning captured by low-level situational cognitive models (level 2), implicated and explicated illocutionary meaning (level 3) and discourse structure and relations (level 4). Meaning derivation takes place at the four levels on the basis of conventionalized constructions and inferential activity. Representations from any level can be incorporated into higher levels as licensed by a number of cognitive and pragmatic constraints. The LCM approach is based on a methodological assumption that has to do with the ubiquity of cognitive processes. Following this assumption, the LCM attempts to discover to what extent each level of linguistic enquiry makes use of the same, or at least comparable, cognitive processes. The application of the hypothesis has endowed the LCM with high degrees of descriptive and explanatory adequacy. Within the scope of the LCM, the present study examines the realizational potential of constructions conveying promises. On the basis of data drawn from the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, I offer a systematic description of the most common conventional realizations of constructions used for the expression of promising and I determine the relationship between their form and meaning components. The analysis of the data will ultimately prove the LCM to be an explanatorily adequate model to account for illocutionary phenomena. The layout of the rest of the present paper is the following. Section 2 gives an outline of the main assumptions of the LCM approach to illocution. Section 3 focuses on the study of constructions for promising, showing how their illocutionary value is fully motivated and constrained. Section 4 provides a summary of the main conclusions of this research and outlines some future prospects.

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## 2. THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES: THE LEXICAL CONSTRUCTIONAL MODEL APPROACH TO ILLOCUTION

In the LCM, inferred illocutionary meaning is regarded as the result of affording metonymic access to high-level situational cognitive models by means of activating one relevant part in them. These models, which are constructed on the basis of generalizations over different cases of everyday social interaction—such as the many situations in which people ask other people to do things—can be contrasted with low-level cognitive models, such as taking a taxi or going to a restaurant, which invoke specific situations (see also Ruiz de Mendoza). While the access to low-level models results in the derivation of implicated meaning or implicatures, the activation of high-level models produces illocutionary meaning which can become conventionalized and thus acquire constructional status (Ruiz de Mendoza and González), i.e. a stable form-meaning relationship of the kind postulated by Goldberg and Langacker. For example, the interpretation of the sentence “What’s the dog doing in the kitchen?” at level 2 exploits a low-level model about a dog’s behavior problems. The same sentence at level 3 activates high-level knowledge about people’s reactions in undesired situations. Thus, if some state of affairs is presented as negative to us, we often expect other people to change it within their range of abilities. The result is the conventionalization of the sequence to express a complaint or to ask for remedial action. High-level situational cognitive models capture a number of cultural generalizations that are also part of our knowledge of the world. Such generalizations carry different types of pragmatic information like power, politeness, optionality and cost-benefit variables (Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza). These generalizations are realized through the use of lexico-grammatical devices with a given instantiation potential.

Illocutionary constructions are thus characterized as linguistic resources capable of activating relevant parts of the semantic makeup of an illocutionary category in connection with the context of situation. The degree of explicitness in the production of a speech act depends either on the speaker’s communicative intention or on the availability of contextual information. For example, for the utterance “My milk is cold” to be interpreted as an indirect request, it must be clear from the context that the speaker likes having his milk warm (cf. “My milk is cold and that’s not how I want it”). Contextual information contributes to increasing the degree of informativeness of the message and enables us to derive the implicit part by means of an inferential schema (Panther and Thornburg). Let us now discuss the illocutionary category of promising to illustrate the interplay between low-level models (i.e. non-generic structures) and high-level models (i.e. generic structures). We derive the generic structure of promising from multiple cases of everyday interaction where people undertake to act to other people’s benefit. Some possible low-level models of promising may be the following:

- (1) A person has a wish. This person makes someone else aware of his wish. The second person undertakes to act to the first person’s benefit.



- (2) A person appears to have a wish. Another person has the ability to satisfy the first person's wish. The second person undertakes to act to the first person's benefit.
- (3) A person pretends not to wish something. Another person is deceived and is moved to undertake to act to the first person's benefit.
- (4) A person wishes something from someone in a position of authority. The second person is moved to undertake to act to the first person's benefit.

These low-level models of promising have generic structure in common that is used by speakers to construct a high-level situational model:

- (6) A person appears to have a wish. Another person has the ability to satisfy the first person's wish. The second person makes it manifest to the first person that he will act to the first person's benefit. The second person is expected to act accordingly.

This generic structure attains linguistic expression through a number of "realization procedures," which are sets of entrenched linguistic devices that have the ability to instantiate relevant parts of the cognitive model above (Ruiz de Mendoza; Pérez Hernández; Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi; Baicchi and Ruiz de Mendoza). The realization procedures for the generic structure of promising are exemplified in the utterances below:

- (7) "I shall buy you a diamond ring."
- (8) "I am going to quit drinking."
- (9) "Those letters will be returned."
- (10) "I shall make sure you get a car."

These utterances, which instantiate different variables of the above conceptual representation, qualify as promises in the appropriate context. Utterances (7) and (8) activate the speaker's undertaking to satisfy a desire of the addressee's. The use of a first person singular subject and of the present continuous or the "shall" form of the future simple tense is frequent in the realization of promises. In example (7), it is clear that the action that will be carried out is beneficial for the addressee. This is only implied in example (8), where the interpretation of the utterance as a promise requires contextual information pointing to the addressee as the beneficiary of the action specified in the predication. The utterance in (9) activates the result of the promised action. The value of this type of realization as a promise depends on the speaker's control over the state of affairs that he is describing. Utterance (10) instantiates the speaker's assurance that an action will be carried out to the addressee's benefit. Although the speaker does not undertake to carry out the action himself, it is implicit that he will do something to ensure that the action takes place. In all, these realization procedures have become largely entrenched for the expression of promises. Their high degree of codification is motivated by their ability to instantiate relevant variables of the generic structure of this illocutionary category.



The description of the generic structure of promising allows us to derive abstract knowledge related to illocutionary expression. By generalizing over descriptions of generic structures, Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi define the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model as capturing the relevant information of high-level cognitive models related to illocution. The first formulation of this model, propounded by Ruiz de Mendoza as the “Politeness Convention” in an attempt to develop Leech’s well-known cost-benefit pragmatic scale, stipulates that people are culturally bound to help other people provided that they have the ability to do so. In later formulations of the model proposed by Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza and Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi, the convention is articulated as a complex cognitive model. In its more recent version, the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model is defined as a high-level cultural model couched in terms of relevance-theoretic analytical tools such as the concept of mutual manifestness put forward by Sperber and Wilson. According to these authors, a state of affairs is manifest to a person if the person is capable of making a conceptual representation of it. Thus, in constructing a message, speakers trust their addressees will be able to make a mental representation of what they communicate that will be enough to achieve their communicative purposes. In this view, the utterance “I am alone” functions as a request to the extent that it is capable of making it manifest to the addressee that there is a negative situation affecting the speaker. Let us reproduce the “Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model as postulated by Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi (111–112):

- (a) If it is manifest to A that a particular state of affairs is not beneficial to B, and if A has the capacity to change that state of affairs, then A should do so.
- (b) If it is manifest to A that a potential state of affairs is not beneficial to B, then A is not expected to bring it about.
- (c) If it is manifest to A that a potential state of affairs is beneficial to B, then A is expected to bring it about provided he has the capacity to do so.
- (d) If it is manifest to A that it is not manifest to B that a potential state of affairs is (regarded as) beneficial for A, A is expected to make this manifest to B.
- (e) If it is manifest to A that it is not manifest to B that a potential state of affairs is beneficial for B, A is expected to make this manifest to B.
- (f) If it is manifest to A that a state of affairs is beneficial to B and B has brought it about, A should feel pleased about it and make this feeling manifest to B.
- (g) If it is manifest to B that A has changed a state of affairs to B’s benefit, B should feel grateful about A’s action and make this feeling manifest to B.
- (h) If it is manifest to A that A has not acted as directed by parts (a), (b), and (c) of the “cost-benefit” model, A should feel regretful about this situation and make this feeling manifest to B.
- (i) If it is manifest to B that A has not acted as directed by parts (a), (b), and (c) of the “cost-benefit” model and A has made his regret manifest to B, B should feel forgiveness for A’s inaction and make it manifest to A.
- (j) If it is manifest to A and B that a particular state of affairs is not beneficial to B but A has no power to change it to B’s benefit, A should still feel sympathy for B over the non-beneficial state of affairs and make this manifest to B.



- (k) If it is manifest to A that A is responsible for a certain state of affairs to be to A's benefit, A may feel proud about this situation and make it manifest to B.

The LCM incorporates the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model into its description of level-3 activity. The authors postulate an inferential path based on the metonymic access to relevant parts of the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model to derive speech act values. For example, an utterance like “You should quit smoking” can be used as a piece of advice through the activation of part (e) of the Cost-Benefit-Cognitive Model. The rationale behind the interpretation of this utterance as a piece of advice is the following:

- (a) At level 2 of meaning construction, a “should”-declarative construction presupposes what is the best thing for the addressee, so the addressee must be involved in a negative state of affairs.
- (b) At level 3 of meaning construction, expressing obligation to carry out an action activates part (e) of the Cost-Benefit-Cognitive Model, according to which the specified state of affairs is beneficial for the addressee.

The LCM further argues that reasoning schemas like the one above can become entrenched for one or more speakers. If the same entrenchment process is shared by a significant number of speakers, linguistic expressions become (socio-culturally) conventionalized and are then regularly associated with specific forms of illocutionary meaning.

### 3. THE REALIZATION OF PROMISES

The amount of research so far devoted to this illocutionary type is scarce. The first few studies of promises were conducted by Searle in the early times of speech act theory. Subsequent studies of promising—which slightly differ from Searle's—have been carried out by Leech, Wierzbicka and Pérez Hernández. According to Searle, a promise is a commitment on the part of the speaker to carry out a future action. This feature of promises is called the “propositional content” condition. There are other conditions: the addressee should want the speaker to do so (“preparatory condition”); the speaker should have an actual intention to perform the action (“sincerity condition”); as a whole, the utterance puts the speaker under the obligation to carry out the action described in the predication (“essential condition”). Leech's approach accepts the relevance of both the propositional content condition and the sincerity condition for the expression of promises, but ignores the essential condition and gives a different formulation of the sincerity condition. For Leech, the realization of promises presupposes that the action will be beneficial for the addressee, from which follows that the addressee will want to get the action performed. However, he argues that this is not a necessary precondition for the performance of promises. Wierzbicka's account differs from both Searle's and Leech's in the dimension of obligation that is proper of promises. For Searle, the obligation that a promise

imposes on the speaker is the purpose of the act. In contrast, Wierzbicka contends that the obligation undertaken by the speaker is a way of achieving the aim of promising (i.e. by convincing the addressee that the speaker will perform the act). Pérez Hernández agrees with Wierzbicka to a large extent and puts forward the idea that the kind of obligation associated with promising results from the interplay between the expectations aroused in the addressee by the promise and the principles of social interaction. Pérez Hernández's account of promises is the only one which complies with the requirements of a cognitively adequate study of illocution. Further, Pérez Hernández's analysis in terms of cognitive models and realization procedures offers an adequate methodology for a corpus-based study of illocution that cannot be ignored. For these reasons, her proposal has been taken into account in the present research. Thus, her work has been crucial in order to determine the parameters needed for the description of the semantic makeup of promises that has been formulated in the previous section. Pérez Hernández's approach has also provided us with the necessary analytical technique for the description of the realization procedures for the act of promising. This research aims at describing the constructional realizations of promises based on the activation of the parameters defined in the generic structure. I attempt to complete Pérez Hernández's work by specifying the motivation and constraints of the constructions used to perform promises.

As discussed in previous section, the LCM regards illocutionary constructions as conventionalized strings that afford access to relevant parts of a high-level cognitive model. The semantic pole of the illocutionary constructions used in the expression of promises is structured in the form of a generic structure that has been formulated as deriving from diverse cases of everyday interaction. The essentials of the cultural conventions underlying the high-level knowledge associated to illocutionary expression have been captured by the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model. The subdomains of the model that apply in the interpretation of promises read as follows:

“If it is manifest to A that a particular state of affairs is not beneficial to B, and if A has the capacity to change that state of affairs, then A should do so.”

“If it is manifest to A that a potential state of affairs is beneficial to B, then A is expected to bring it about provided he has the capacity to do so.”

Promises are thus based on the addressee's expectation that the speaker has become aware that there is a state of affairs such that if it comes about, it will benefit the addressee. Then the speaker is expected to bring it about and assures the addressee that he will meet the addressee's expectations. Much in the same way, promises arise from the addressee's expectation that the speaker will not bring about a state of affairs that is harmful for the addressee. In such a case, the speaker assures the addressee that he will not bring it about. In sum, acts of promising convey the speaker's assurance that he will comply with the addressee's rightful expectations.

Regarding the formal pole of constructions performing promises, this research takes into account an array of linguistic devices such as sentence type, lexical items and grammatical properties. All examples in the corpus are based the declarative sentence form. The absolute preference of promises for the use of declarative



constructions may be found in the incompatibility of both imperative and interrogative sentences with the realization of promises (Risselada; Pérez Hernández). The performance of this speech act thus depends on the declarative form, which is the most underspecified of the three sentence types. A number of lexico-grammatical resources such as first person subjects, verbs of commitment, beneficiary satellites and the like, however, may work to further strengthen the coded promising value of some declarative constructions. Let us explore how different mechanisms specify the declarative sentence type by pointing to different variables of the generic structure for promising:

(11) “I Promise  $X_{VP}$ ”

I promise to love you and stay with you forever. (BNC FR6 2042)

This construction activates the full generic structure for promises through the explicit use of the performative verb. The corpus contains a significant number of examples realized by means of explicit performative constructions. The reason may be found in one of the meaning conditions of promising, which is the speaker's need to make manifest his intention to bring about a beneficial state of affairs for the addressee. The use of the performative verb in the fixed part of the construction enables the speaker to make his commitment more explicit. The modifiable part can be realized by a verb in the infinitive or in the indicative mood.

(12) “I Assure  $X_{VP}$ ”

My dear ma'am, I assure you I don't look for matrimony. (BNC HGV 5040)

Although much less explicit than the previous one, this realization is another type of performative construction used for promises. The verb used in this realization aims to give the addressee confidence in bringing about a state of affairs. The use of a second person object “you” points to the addressee as the beneficiary of the promised action.

(13) “I Guarantee  $X_{VP}$ ”

You know, you drink this once a day, I guarantee you'll lose weight. (COCA 2007)

This construction is a further type of realization that makes use of the performative verb. The emphasis of the verb used on this occasion is on the speaker's assuming responsibility for the realization of the action that is the object of the addressee's desire. Even though the speaker is not explicitly presented as the agent of the action, the construction conveys the implicit idea that he will make sure that the action takes place in favor of the addressee. In any case, the promise reading of this type of realization is produced almost effortlessly.

(14) “I Can Promise  $X_{VP}$ /Can Assure  $X_{VP}$ / I Can Guarantee  $X_{VP}$ ”

I can promise some heated discussions. (BNC K4T 9427)

I can assure you that my family and I are not in that group. (COCA 2008)

I can guarantee hours of fun. (BNC C9J 2575)



Constructions expressing the speaker's undertaking frequently make use of the oblique modal verb "can" (see Ruiz de Mendoza and Pérez Hernández). By using the "can" form, these realizations instantiate part (a) of the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model, according to which we have to make other people aware of what is beneficial for them if we have the capacity to do so. This in turn affords access to part (d) of the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model, which gives rise to the value of the construction as a promise. This inferential process is based on the metonymy POTENTIALITY FOR ACTUALITY, which links an expression of potentiality with the actuality of a future action. In the construction, the explicitation of the speaker's capacity to take a course of action stands for his actual course of action. On the whole, this sequence produces a fairly straightforward reading as a promise, which can be cancelled out contextually.

(15) "I Will  $X_{vp}$ "

I will get that money back, plus I will make a profit. (COCA 1990)

The use of a first person subject plus a future simple tense manages to instantiate the full generic structure of promising by presenting the speaker as the agent of a future action. In order to convey a promising value, the verb used in the modifiable part of the construction needs to be pointing to an action that is beneficial for the addressee (for example, the utterance "I will kill you," which denotes an action that is clearly negative for the addressee, shades off into a threat). The force of this construction may be subject to changes through the use of different realization procedures such as the ones specified below.

(16) "I Promise I Will  $X_{vp}$ /I Assure I Will  $X_{vp}$ /I Guarantee I Will  $X_{vp}$ "

I promise I will not open the door to any strange men. (Bnc Cec 208)

I assure you I will strive to be of more worth to the Gold Dragon Hung. (Bnc Hjd 2682)

I guarantee I will make you men. (COCA 1998)

The force of the previous construction can be increased by making use of a verb of commitment. Verbs of this type instantiate the full generic structure for promising and facilitate the interpretation of an utterance as an instance of this illocutionary type. The high level of explicitness of these constructions makes them highly specified means for the realization of promises. Consider now example (17):

(17) "I Will Definitely  $X_{vp}$ /I Will Certainly  $X_{vp}$ "

I will definitely support the motion to ban them in the city. (Coca 1990)

I will certainly keep you informed about the corpus project. (BNC AP1 1131)

Another way of expressing forceful promises is through the use of adverbs of certainty. Constructions of this type are motivated by the metonymy A COMMITMENT TO PERFORM AN ACTION FOR THE ACTUAL PERFORMANCE OF THE ACTION. Such realizations point to the actuality of the future state of affairs by indicating that the speaker is committed to bringing it about. The reason-



ing schema applying in these realizations is the same as the one behind the “I Will  $X_{VP}$ ” construction. Generally, the “I Will  $X_{VP}$ ” construction counts as a promise if the speaker is committed to doing “ $X_{VP}$ ” That is to say, the promising value of the “I Will  $X_{VP}$ ” construction is based on a reasoning process whereby the speaker commits himself to doing “ $X_{VP}$  so  $X_{VP}$ ” will come about. Stating the first part of the schema affords metonymic access to the whole of it. Adverbs of certainty simply reinforce the speaker’s commitment and so the metonymy is the same. Once again, the interpretation of these constructions as promises depends on the benefits that the action involves for the addressee. Let us now discuss (18):

- (18) “I Will Try  $X_{VP}$ /I Will Probably  $X_{VP}$ ”  
I will try to be back by six o’ clock. (Bnc Ac7 858)  
I will probably leave tomorrow. (COCA 1998)

Again, these expressions are variants of the “I Will  $X_{VP}$ ” construction and follow the same basic reasoning schema. The use of adverbs of possibility indicates that the speaker is uncertain about his ability to perform the action he wants to perform. Still, the speaker’s commitment to carrying out the action stands for the actual performance of the action provided that he has the ability to do so. The use of adverbs of possibility thus increases the degrees of mitigation of these promises. This type of mitigation may be due to a desire on the part of the speaker to increase his optionality if he is uncertain about his capacity to fulfill his promise. The use of mitigators in these expressions nonetheless suggests the idea that the speaker is willing to do his best to satisfy the addressee, which is the motivating factor of promises. Contrast the previous examples with (19):

- (19) “I Will Make Sure  $X_{VP}$ ”  
Elect me and I will make sure that there will be no massive rise in prices, there will be no inflation, there will be plenty of goods. (COCA 1990)

This type of realization instantiates the commitment part of the generic structure we formulated above. By indicating that he is going to verify that a state of affairs is brought about to the addressee’s benefit, the speaker undertakes to do something for the addressee. The role of the speaker’s involvement in the action to be carried out is implicit and derivable from contextual information. Finally, consider (20):

- (20) “There Will Be  $X_{NP}$ ”  
There will be no discrimination here. (COCA 1990)

This construction points to the result of the promised action. The promising value of this realization is nonetheless largely dependent on contextual factors. In order to communicate a promise, the speaker must have control over the state of affairs that he is describing. The degrees of codification of this construction can be increased by combining it with other configurations, such as the “I Will Make Sure  $X_{VP}$ ” construction discussed above for example (19) above.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present research is the first case study within the LCM of the constructions associated with a specific illocutionary category. This analysis of illocutionary constructions makes use of an explanatorily adequate framework to understand the semantic and pragmatic behavior of illocution that makes it possible to account for how illocutionary meaning imposes different degrees of codification on its production and understanding. The LCM proposes a constructional account of non-inferential illocutionary meaning where constructions contain fixed and modifiable elements. Illocutionary constructions are regarded as the result from the interplay between construal operations and general principles of interaction stipulated in the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model. This study explores the theoretical implications of the LCM based on a large number of instances of the act of promising drawn from electronic corpora. After describing the high-level cognitive model of the act of promising, I have determined the constructional realizations which activate the variables of the high-level model. I have evidenced that these constructions are used in the expression of promises in a different way depending on their degree of instantiation potential for each of the variables that make up the high-level model. I have thus shown that the nature of these illocutionary constructions may range from full codification, as is the case of explicit performative realizations, to high levels of conventionalization that create interpretative shortcuts between an expressions and its meaning. These facts point to a constructional approach to the study of illocution, although further research is necessary to determine the full validity of this description of promises.

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