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Functional-Semantic Characteristics of Lexical and Stylistic Devices Expressing Commissive Speech Acts in English

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ABSTRACT

Commissive speech acts, wherein speakers commit to future actions are a vital category of illocutionary acts in English, encompassing promises, offers, refusals, threats, pledges, vows and related utterances. This article examines the functional-semantic characteristics of the lexical and stylistic devices used to express commissives across diverse English discourse types (formal, informal, political, literary, and everyday contexts). The study synthesizes established speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and recent pragmatic research to classify commissive acts and identify how specific words, grammatical constructions, and stylistic strategies realize these commitments. Examples from corpora, authentic usage, and literature illustrate how English speakers use performative verbs (e.g. promise, swear), modal constructions (e.g. will, shall), and pragmatic formulas (e.g. polite refusals, conditional threats) to achieve different communicative effects. The analysis highlights that choice of lexical means (such as explicit performative verbs vs. implicit modal statements) and style (formal vs. colloquial tone, direct vs. indirect expression) carries functional significance – signaling degrees of sincerity, politeness, or force – and varies with discourse context. In formal and political discourse, speakers often employ explicit pledges and high-commitment modal verbs to persuade or establish credibility, whereas everyday informal exchanges rely more on implicit promises, casual offers, or mitigated refusals. Literary texts creatively deploy commissives to develop character relationships and plot, using stylistic

embellishment or dialogue to convey promises and threats. Overall, commissive speech acts in English are expressed through a rich repertoire of lexical-stylistic devices whose semantic nuances and pragmatic functions are closely tied to context and communicative intent.

Keywords: commissive speech acts, promises, offers, refusals, performative verbs, discourse pragmatics, speech act theory, lexical devices, stylistic variation, English.

INTRODUCTION

Language allows speakers not only to describe reality but also to perform actions through words. Commissive speech acts are a prime example: they involve committing the speaker to some future course of action, thereby creating an obligation or pledge by utterance. Classic instances of commissives include promising, offering, refusing, threatening, vowing, and related acts where the speaker's words bind them to do (or not do) something [1]. For example, when someone says "I promise I will help you tomorrow," they are not merely stating a fact but actively taking on a commitment to perform a future action. Because commissives directly engage the speaker's intentions and obligations, they are fundamental to social interaction – enabling agreements, assurances, contracts, and other forward-looking interpersonal moves.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of a speech act originates from J. L. Austin's work *How to do Things with Words* (1962), which demonstrated that utterances can perform actions rather than merely describe states of affairs. Austin introduced the idea of illocutionary acts – the intended actions performed by speaking (such as promising, ordering, or apologizing) – and identified "commissives" as one class of action, exemplified by verbs like "promise" or "undertake." Building on Austin, John Searle refined the classification of illocutionary acts. Searle's taxonomy (1975; 1976) famously delineated five basic categories of illocutionary

acts: assertives (representatives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations [2; 3]. In Searle's definition, the commissive point is achieved when speakers commit themselves to some future action [4]. In other words, a commissive illocution has the essential function of obligating the speaker to do something in the future, aligning words to the world by making the world fit the words (often termed a "world-to-word" direction of fit in semantics [1].

Different scholars have enumerated commissive subtypes in slightly varying ways. For instance, Cutting (2002) lists promising, offering, threatening, refusing, and vowing as common types [6]. Other sources include pledges, guarantees, or swearing oaths in the category [1]. Searle himself analyzed promising in detail as a prototypical commissive in his early work, and later classifications by Searle and colleagues explicitly mention promise, vow, refusal, pledge, commitment, and offer among commissive speech acts [7]. Despite differences in labeling, the unifying feature is the speaker's intentional commitment. Table 1 summarizes key commissive types:

- **Promise**: commits speaker to do something (often beneficial to listener).
- **Offer**: commits speaker to do something contingent on listener's acceptance.
- **Refusal**: commits speaker to not do something (often declining a prior invitation or request).
- **Threat**: commits speaker to do something harmful if conditions aren't met.
- **Vow**: a sincere, often formal promise (may invoke higher authority or personal honor).
- **Pledge/guarantee**: a promise stressing certainty or obligation (common in official or commercial contexts).
- **Swear (oath)**: a performative act of promising typically invoking an institution or moral code (legal swearing in, etc.

From a semantic and pragmatic perspective, commissive acts carry certain conditions and implications. Searle (1969, 1979) outlined felicity conditions for promising: for example, the

promise should refer to a future act of the speaker, the hearer would prefer the speaker do it (or at least not mind), the speaker is able to do it, and the speaker genuinely intends to carry it out (sincerity condition). A breach of these conditions (as in insincere promises or promises of impossible actions) undermines the act's effectiveness. Similarly, offers typically imply that the action is optional and meant to benefit the hearer, while threats imply the action is under the speaker's control and negative for the hearer. Refusals inherently face the challenge of politeness since they reject someone else's proposition, requiring careful phrasing to maintain social harmony.

LEXICAL AND STYLISTIC DEVICES IN COMMISSIVE ACTS

Commissive intentions can be signaled explicitly or implicitly through language. Lexical devices refer to the choice of words and phrases – notably performative verbs and other commitment-related expressions – whereas stylistic devices refer to how those words are delivered or structured (level of directness, tone, formality, etc.). In English, a rich assortment of lexical and grammatical forms can perform commissives:

- **Performative verbs**: English has specific verbs that name the speech act and can thus perform it when used in the first person present tense. For example: promise, swear, guarantee, vow, pledge, assure, agree, offer, refuse, threaten, etc. An explicit performative formula like "I promise to do X…" or "We hereby pledge…" overtly signals the illocutionary force [8]. Using such verbs is a clear lexical strategy to ensure the commitment is understood. Searle noted that "I promise…" is an illocutionary force indicating device which makes the act of promising explicit [9].
- **Modal auxiliaries expressing futurity or willingness**: Often, English speakers commit to actions without using a performative verb, instead relying on modal verbs, especially "will." For example, "I'll send you the report tomorrow" is typically understood as a promise/commitment even though

the word “promise” wasn’t spoken. The modal “will” (especially in first person I/we will) strongly indicates the speaker’s intention for a future act and thus commonly functions as a commissive marker [10]. In formal registers, “shall” can also appear (e.g. “I shall do my utmost to assist”), imparting a slightly more solemn or emphatic tone of commitment. Modal “can/could” and “would” like to often figure in offers (e.g. “I can help with that if you need,” “Would you like me to…?”) as ways to propose action gently. Even must or have to can work for self-imposed commitments (e.g. “I must ensure this never happens again,” expressing a strong resolution).

- **Semi-modals and other constructions**: Aside from the core modals, English uses phrases like “be going to” for planned future actions (“I’m going to make sure everything is ready” – which can serve as a promise/assurance). There are also idiomatic commitment phrases: “I give you my word,” “You have my word,” “Cross my heart,” etc., which explicitly convey a promise in a stylistically colored way. For offers, imperatives like “Let me [do X]” (“Let me grab you a drink”) or suggestions “How about I [do X]?” also function as commissive proposals despite not containing a modal – they invite the hearer’s acceptance of the speaker’s future action.
- **Negative forms for refusals**: A refusal is often realized with expressions of inability or unwillingness: “I can’t do X,” “I won’t be able to X,” “I’m afraid I cannot X.” Here lexical choices like “can’t,” “won’t,” “unable,” “refuse” or an outright “No” indicate the speaker’s commitment not to undertake the action. Often refusals are softened with introductory phrases (apologies, regrets) which we will discuss under stylistic devices.

Stylistic and pragmatic devices influence how the propositional content is delivered, affecting the force and politeness of the commissive act:

- **Direct vs. indirect strategies**: A commissive can be made directly – e.g. “I promise I will do it” (very explicit) or “No, I

will not do that" for a direct refusal – or indirectly/hintingly. Indirect commissives rely on context for interpretation. For example, an offer might be indirect: "I'm going to the kitchen – [implied offer:] do you need anything?"; a refusal might be hinted: "Umm, it's going to be difficult for me to make it" (implying the speaker is declining). Indirectness can be used to be polite or to soften the impact, especially for refusals and threats (which are face-threatening acts for the listener). In a request refusal, saying "I have a prior commitment" indirectly communicates "I won't do what you ask" without a blunt "no." Indirect promises are less common (since commitment usually benefits the hearer), but sometimes a speaker might imply a promise by simply stating a future action emphatically ("You'll get your money back, don't worry," effectively a promise).

- **Politeness strategies**: According to politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), commissives can threaten face – particularly the negative face of the speaker (for promises/offers obligate oneself) or the hearer (threats or refusals go against the hearer's desires). Thus, speakers often incorporate politeness strategies. For offers, a common strategy is to minimize pressure: using questions ("Would you like…?"), giving options, or hedging commitment ("I can try to… if you'd like") so the hearer doesn't feel forced to accept. For refusals, strategies include apologies ("I'm sorry…"), reasons/excuses ("…but I have another appointment"), and softening words to mitigate the rejection [11; 12]. In fact, studies of English refusals show frequent use of indirect refusal formulas: e.g. thanking for the offer before declining, expressing regret, or suggesting alternatives [11; 13]. These stylistic additions maintain civility. By contrast, threats and strong promises may deliberately avoid politeness to convey firmness – e.g. a threat might omit politeness entirely for intimidation ("Stop that or else!") or frame itself as a conditional warning to sound less bald ("If you don't stop, there will be consequences" [5]).
- **Formal vs. informal tone**: Stylistic variation also manifests in the level of formality. In formal contexts, commissives

often use more elaborate or ritualized language: "I hereby pledge…"; "We shall ensure that…"; "It is my solemn vow that…" Such phrasing elevates the speech act, lending it authority or gravity. In contrast, informal everyday promises or offers use colloquial contractions and casual tone: "Sure, I'll do it," "No worries, I got this," "Yeah, count on me." Even the absence of the pronoun ("Got it, will do that right away") can indicate an offhand, friendly promise. Informal refusals might be very brief "Nah, I can't" or softened with laughter or discourse markers "Uhh, I don't think I can, sorry." The stylistic choice must suit the relationship and setting; using an overly formal "I give you my word of honor" in a casual setting could come off as melodramatic or sarcastic, while a too-casual "Nope, not gonna do that" in a formal meeting would seem disrespectful.

There are some common lexical and structural devices for English commissives and their typical usage:

- **Performative verb + that-clause or infinitive**: e.g. "I promise that…", "We guarantee that…" – Very explicit, formal or earnest commitment.
- **Modal will/shall + verb**: e.g. "I will finish the job by Friday." – Default way to promise/pledge; shall adds formality or determination.
- **Modal can/could or semi-modal would like to (in interrogative)**: e.g. "Can I help you with that?", "Would you like me to…?" – Polite offers.
- **Imperative offer**: e.g. "Let me help you with that." – Friendly, direct offer of assistance.
- **Negative modal (won't/can't) or explicit refusal verb**: e.g. "I won't be able to attend", "I refuse to cooperate." – Direct refusal or strong unwillingness (the latter is quite forceful; more polite speakers prefer the former).
- **Conditional threat formula**: "If you don't X, I will Y." – Standard structure for threats, where Y is the threatened action [5].

- **Intensifiers or emphatics**: Words like absolutely, definitely, surely, honestly can bolster a promise ("I will definitely pay you back") to convey sincerity and certainty. Conversely, downtoners (hedges) might appear in cautious commitments ("I'll do my best to…") when the speaker wants to avoid full obligation.
- **Politeness adjuncts**: "I'm sorry, but…," "I appreciate the offer, however…," etc., around a refusal to mitigate face-threat; "please" in offers ("Please, let me do that for you") to stress goodwill.

These lexical and stylistic choices are not random; they fulfill functional needs – whether it's making the commitment crystal-clear, adjusting the degree of obligation, or maintaining interpersonal harmony. The next sections will explore how these devices manifest in real usage across different discourse types, illustrating the functional-semantic interplay in context.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Formal contexts (such as official ceremonies, legal documents, business agreements, or public commitments by officials) demand a high degree of clarity and often a sense of gravity. Accordingly, commissive speech acts in formal English tend to use explicit, performative language and a solemn or authoritative tone.

In formal settings, speakers often leave nothing to implication – they explicitly signal the promise or pledge. For example, in many oath-taking ceremonies, one might declare: "I swear (or I do solemnly swear) that I will faithfully execute the office…" This sentence, used in oaths of office, contains the performative verb swear (a vow) and adverbs like solemnly to underscore sincerity and formality. The presence of "I will" further cements the future commitment. Another example: "We hereby pledge to abide by the terms of the treaty." The word "hereby" is a formal indicator that the utterance itself enacts something, and pledge is a formal synonym of promise. Such

explicit devices serve a functional role – they leave no doubt about the illocutionary act being performed (the speaker is binding themselves) [11]. They also carry semantic weight: pledge and vow connote a strong, possibly irrevocable commitment, more so than a casual promise.

Legal and bureaucratic language often prefers certain modal verbs and set phrases. For instance, contracts and regulations frequently use "shall" to denote obligations ("The contractor shall deliver the goods by June 1"). Here "shall" is not merely predicting the future but creating a binding commitment in legal terms. Similarly, "will" is used in documents like 'Terms of Service' (e.g. "Party A will provide support for one year"), effectively as a promise/guarantee. These usages illustrate how a modal verb in a formal register becomes a tool for strong commitment. The functional aspect is critical: a contract must unambiguously specify each party's commitments, hence the rigid wording. Even in less technical formal contexts, like organizational promises, one might find phrasing such as "We commit ourselves to ensuring equal opportunity for all employees." The explicit commit verb and the inclusive ourselves highlight the collective, formal nature of the pledge, aiming to inspire trust and accountability.

In ceremonial commissives (marriage vows, pledges of allegiance, etc.), stylistic devices often include archaic or elevated diction which, while not common in everyday talk, serve to mark the speech act as especially sincere and binding. For example, traditional wedding vows: "I take thee to be my lawfully wedded wife/husband… and I pledge thee my troth." The word "troth" (meaning truth or fidelity) is archaic, but its presence in vows adds a ritualistic solemnity. The function here is symbolic – it elevates the promise to a near-sacred status. Likewise, phrases like "on my honor" or "so help me God" appended to oaths are stylistic choices that invoke moral or divine witness to the promise, strengthening the perceived commitment.

It is less common to encounter refusals in ceremonial contexts (since ceremonies are typically about making commitments, not rejecting them), but formal refusals do occur

in diplomacy or official correspondence. When an official must decline an offer or invitation in writing, the language is carefully chosen: "The Minister regrets that he must decline your invitation due to prior commitments." Here we see a very polite refusal: the performative decline is used, but mitigated by regrets and justification (prior commitments). The stylistic politeness is necessary to maintain professionalism and diplomatic courtesy. Even though this is a refusal (commissive to not attend), it's phrased in formal register to soften the blow. Functionally, such phrasing protects relationships and face: it shows respect despite the negative response.

Political promises and pledges: Political discourse can be considered formal (when delivered in speeches or written in manifestos) and often commissive-rich. Politicians make campaign promises and policy pledges to persuade the public. Research shows that in campaign speeches, politicians use commissives strategically as persuasive tools [14]. For instance, they might say, "We will create more jobs." "I pledge to lower taxes," or "Mark my words: I will not sign any bill that raises middle-class taxes." Notably, explicit performatives like pledge or strong assertions like "mark my words" (an idiom meaning take this as a firm promise) are employed to strengthen credibility. Politicians sometimes avoid saying "I promise," perhaps due to skepticism associated with "promises" – instead preferring "we will" statements which sound like confident future facts. These are implicit promises – functionally equivalent to promises but framed as statements of intended reality. Semantically, saying "we will do X" in a manifesto has the illocutionary force of a commitment (the electorate understands it as a promise), but syntactically it looks like a declarative about the future. This stylistic choice can make the commitment seem more concrete and less contingent.

In political and formal contexts, breaking a commissive (failing to follow through on a promise or pledge) can have serious consequences for credibility. Therefore, formal commissives often come with carefully delineated scope and conditions. For example, a diplomatic threat might be worded conditionally: "If the aggressor does not withdraw, we will be

forced to enact sanctions." The phrasing will be forced to implies reluctance – a stylistic nuance that frames the threatened action as regrettable but necessary, which can be diplomatically important. It softens the aggression of the threat by implying the speaker is not eager to do it, but will commit to it if required. This again shows how even in formal warnings (threats), stylistic phrasing can adjust the tone while keeping the commissive content.

In everyday casual conversation, commissive speech acts are ubiquitous – friends make plans ("I'll call you later"), coworkers volunteer for tasks ("I can take care of that"), people decline offers ("Nah, I'm good, thanks"), etc. The lexical and stylistic devices in informal contexts differ from formal ones in being more implicit, succinct, and often coded with politeness or humor to suit social rapport. Let us consider how promises, offers, and refusals typically appear in daily English usage.

The majority of everyday promises are made without the ceremonious "I promise…". Instead, "I will" (usually contracted to "I'll") is the go-to device. For example: "Don't worry, I'll help you move this weekend." The speaker doesn't say "I promise to help you" because in friendly context "I'll help you" already carries the commitment force. The brevity and implicitness are part of informal style – overt performatives can sound overly stiff or as if one doubts the other's trust. If a friend were to say "I promise I'll help," it might actually arise if their reliability was in question or they really want to emphasize sincerity (perhaps because they failed to help before). Otherwise, simply stating the future action with will suffices. This is supported by corpus observations that "I'll + [verb]" is one of the most common grammatical forms to realize commissives in everyday English [10]. The functional reason is efficiency and assumed trust: among close relations, one assumes the speaker's word is as good as a promise, without needing the word "promise."

Everyday speech also has its own idiomatic expressions for promises. Phrases like "I got you" (meaning I have you covered), "Scout's honor," "Cross my heart (and hope to die)," or even a simple "Promise!" at the end of a statement (like "I'll do it, promise!") add a colloquial flavor. These are stylistic devices that

can carry emphatic or playful tone. For instance, “Cross my heart” is a somewhat childish or humorous way to assure honesty, often said with a gesture. It functions as a promise with a lighter tone. The semantics of such phrases often invoke cultural scripts of honesty (Scouts, childhood pacts) to reinforce the commitment. In usage, someone might say: “I won’t tell anyone, cross my heart.” It’s an informal but earnest vow of secrecy.

When offering something informally, speakers rarely use the word offer. Instead, they tend to use questions or suggestions: “Do you want a soda?”, “Can I get you anything?”, “How about I drive you home?” These interrogative or suggestive forms are polite and also less presumptive, giving the other person freedom to decline. Even statements like “I can give you a ride” or “I could watch your dog for you” are common – here “I can/I could” implies willingness to commit. Notably, these forms double as expressions of ability, which softens the force: “I can do X” doesn’t force X on the hearer, it just states capability and indirectly a willingness (the hearer can accept or not). Linguistically, this is an indirect commissive: the speaker is implicitly committing to action if the hearer wants it. Such phrasing is prevalent because it aligns with the politeness principle of not sounding too eager or obligating the hearer. For instance, saying “Let me help you with that” is a relatively direct offer (using an imperative form “let me”) but in context it’s seen as friendly. Meanwhile, “Want me to help?” is even more tentative. In casual contexts, people often use “I can…” plus a question intonation – “I can lend you some money, if you like?” [13]. The tag “if you like” keeps the offer gentle. Thus stylistically, everyday offers skew towards questions, suggestions, and first-person ability statements rather than explicit “I offer to…”

Refusals in friendly conversation can be delicate, since one might not want to hurt the other’s feelings or appear rude. Common strategies include:

- **Apologetic or regretful tone**: “I’m sorry, I can’t make it tonight.” Starting with “I’m sorry” softens the refusal by acknowledging the imposition.

- **Excuses or explanations**: "I can't come to the party because I have an early meeting tomorrow." Providing a reason shows that it's not arbitrary; it paints the refusal as unavoidable, not a personal rejection.
- **Alternatives or partial commitments**: "I can't join you for lunch, but I could meet up later in the day." This lessens the refusal by offering another option.
- **Formulaic polite phrases**: "Thanks for the invite, but I'll pass this time." This response thanks the requester (showing appreciation) before declining ("pass" is a mild term for decline).
- **Downtoners and hedges**: sometimes refusals are phrased so indirectly that the word no is never said, leaving it to implication. For example, A: "Come out with us!" B: "Uhh, I have a lot of work to do… maybe next time." Here B hasn't directly said no, but the implication is clear. The hesitation sound "Uhh", plus an excuse and a future hope (maybe next time) all signal a polite refusal.

In everyday chat among peers, a blunt "No, I refuse" would sound extraordinarily stiff or rude. People do say "Nope" or "No, I can't" directly if the situation permits (close friends can be direct with each other). But often even close friends cushion refusals with "sorry" or humor. E.g., "Hey, can you help me move this weekend?" – "Ha, no way man! I just did heavy lifting yesterday – I'm dead. Maybe next time." While the initial "no way" is direct, it's accompanied by a light tone and an explanatory joke about being "dead" tired, which keeps it jocular rather than hostile. Functionally, this maintains camaraderie while still committing to not help.

It's interesting that refusal is considered a commissive in many pragmatic analyses because the refuser is committing to not performing the other's proposed action [19]. As one study notes, "Refusals are also classified as commissives as they involve the speaker's unwillingness to perform a particular action" [19]. The same study emphasizes that refusals are usually reactive speech acts (responses to something) and can be

delivered directly or indirectly [20]. In our everyday context, we clearly see that indirectness is a favored strategy to maintain politeness (a key functional requirement in friendly settings).

In informal discourse, tone of voice, stress, and even non-verbal cues (smiles, sighs) often carry part of the meaning. For example, "Yeah, sure, I'll do it." These words could be a genuine cheerful promise or a reluctant, sarcastic acquiescence, depending on tone. The lexical content alone (affirmative + will future) suggests a commitment, but the stylistic delivery confirms whether it's heartfelt. In writing or text messaging, people might add an emoji or "lol" to clarify tone when promising or refusing casually, because the risk of misunderstanding commitment is there. A straight "I'll do it" in text might come off as curt, so one might write "I'll do it, no worries! 👍" to convey friendliness in an everyday context.

Additionally, everyday commissives often occur in dialogues where the expectation of commitment is low-stakes. If someone casually says "I'll see you around," it's a very light commitment (often just a way to say goodbye rather than a real plan). This is a nuance: not every utterance with "I will" is a serious promise; context tells us the difference between a genuine commitment and a polite formula. "I'll see you later" between colleagues might or might not mean they intend to meet later; it can simply be a friendly parting phrase with no obligation attached.

Humor and weakening of commitments: Sometimes, speakers intentionally downplay a promise to avoid pressure. For example, "I'll try to fix it, but no promises." The phrase "no promises" explicitly negates the commissive force – a meta-communicative way to say "don't hold me to this." This is common when someone is willing to attempt something but not fully confident. It shows how in casual talk, people negotiate the strength of a commissive. Similarly, "I promise I'll do it – cross my fingers!" The idioms "no promises" or "cross my fingers" (which actually implies hoping it'll work, or sometimes jokingly indicating one's promise might not be solid) are ways to keep things light and avoid creating a firm obligation. Functionally,

they help the speaker not over-commit while still being cooperative.

Literary works (novels, plays, films) and other creative writings provide a rich field for commissive speech acts, both in dialogue and narration. Authors use promises, vows, threats, and refusals to develop characters, advance plots, and illustrate social settings. In literature, commissive language can be more stylized or dramatic than in real life, serving artistic purposes. Let's explore how lexical and stylistic choices for commissives operate in literary and fictional discourse.

One way writers use commissives is to reveal character traits. A solemn vow made by a character can signal their honor, determination, or sometimes naivety. For example, in many classic adventure stories, a hero might proclaim: "I swear I will avenge my father's death." This kind of line not only propels the plot (setting a goal) but also characterizes the speaker as driven and perhaps bound by a personal code. The choice of "I swear" instead of "I'll" is significant; swear elevates the promise to an oath, implying deep emotion or moral weight. Similarly, Shakespeare's plays are full of vows and oaths (e.g., "By heaven, I will…!") that today might sound formal, but in context they intensify the character's resolve.

Literary dialogues set in historical periods often mimic the politeness levels and idioms of those times. For instance, in a Regency-era novel (early 19th century English setting), a refusal might be phrased very decorously: "I am exceedingly obliged by your offer, sir, but I fear I must decline." Here the character uses an elaborate courtesy (exceedingly obliged) before the commissive decline. The lexical choice of decline instead of refuse or can't reflects the era's formality. The function is both to remain true to the social norms of the setting and to show the character's grace or perhaps concealed feelings (maybe they'd actually like to accept, but propriety forces a refusal). In contrast, a gritty modern crime novel might feature a brusque refusal: "Not a chance in hell I'm doing that." The harsh idiom not a chance in hell and omission of polite markers suit a tough character and a tense mood. Thus, authors choose commissive phrasing to fit the setting and tone.

In literature, what a character doesn't say outright can be as important as what they do. Indirect commissives can create subtext. For example, consider a scene where Character A asks Character B for help. B replies, "Ask me again tomorrow." On the surface, that's not a yes or no, but it might function as a polite refusal for now – with a hint that maybe later they'll comply. The reader senses B's hesitation. The function of such a line in storytelling can be to create suspense or indicate an internal conflict: B can't commit now due to some reason that may be revealed later. In drama, playwrights often exploit indirectness; a classic example is when a character avoids promising something to create doubt about their loyalty. Their non-committal language (like changing the topic or giving a vague "I'll do what I can") might signal to the audience that this promise is shaky or insincere, even if other characters on stage are convinced.

Promises and threats frequently serve as plot devices. A promise can set a quest or obligation in motion – think of a detective promising to solve a case, or a lover promising to return from war. Whether the promise is kept or broken becomes a point of tension. If an important promise is broken in a story, it often leads to conflict or tragedy, highlighting the weight of commissive acts. For instance, in Game of Thrones, vows and oaths (like the Night's Watch oath) are central; characters who break them face dire consequences, reflecting a fictional cultural emphasis on promises.

A villain's threat ("I will destroy everything you love") sets stakes. Authors might give villains very curt, strong threats to emphasize menace, whereas a hero's counter-threat might be more measured or righteous. Lexically, villainous threats may include brutal or florid language ("I shall not rest until I see you beg for mercy"), depending on the style. These choices feed into the semantic aura around characters (villains relish threats, heroes might reluctantly make them).

Sometimes it's not dialogue but narration that conveys a commissive. For example, an author might write: "Jonathan silently promised himself that he would never return to that cursed place." This internal promise isn't spoken aloud, but it's a commissive thought. The lexical cue promised himself clearly

marks it. The function here is introspective – it tells the reader about Jonathan's state of mind and sets an expectation (will he keep that self-promise or end up breaking it for some reason?). The narration thereby uses a commissive to foreshadow possible future developments or inner conflict.

In first-person narrated stories, narrators might make promises to the reader, or to other implied figures. For instance, "I'll spare you the details of what happened next" – here the narrator is pseudo-commissive, promising brevity or withholding gore, as a stylistic way to jump in time or maintain tone.

Literary scenes often highlight social dynamics through how characters accept or refuse proposals – marriage proposals being a famous example [14]. How a refusal is phrased reveals not just personal feelings but the constraints of society. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Darcy first proposes (rather arrogantly) and Elizabeth Bennet refuses, she does so with formal politeness but clear intent: "…I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than to decline them." This sentence is loaded: sensible of the honour (polite flattery) + impossible…to do otherwise (a firm, almost hyperbolic refusal). The contrast between politeness and firmness is dramatic and tells us volumes about her character and the era's etiquette. A modern character in a similar situation might simply say, "I'm sorry, I can't accept." The literary style of Austin's time required more flourishes. Writers pay attention to these details to make dialogues authentic and engaging.

Literature can amplify commissives beyond what we normally say. Hyperbole might appear in vows: "I will move heaven and earth to make you happy." No one literally can move heaven and earth, but as a romantic promise, it signifies utmost devotion. The lexical choice of that idiom conveys a deep emotional commitment. In poetry or lyrical prose, one might find metaphorical commissives: "My soul shall be yours until the stars cease to shine." Figuratively, it's a pledge of eternal love. These stylistic embellishments serve aesthetic and emotive functions – making the promise more memorable and poignant to the reader.

Stage directions and subtext in threats: In scripts, a threat might come with a stage direction indicating tone or action, e.g., "(advancing on him) If you ever touch my family again, I will kill you." The language is direct, but in performance, how the actor delivers it (shouting, coldly, trembling) adds layers. The script might not explicitly say the tone, but good dialogue is written to suggest it. In a novel, an author might describe the way it's said: "she whispered the threat in a terrifyingly calm voice." Such descriptions underscore the style in which the commissive is delivered, influencing how the reader perceives the severity or creepiness of the threat.

Different genres have different conventions. In fantasy or historical epics, formal archaic speech is common, so characters uttering grand oaths ("By my sword, I shall see this done.") feel natural. In a contemporary realist novel, that would feel out of place; instead we expect more naturalistic dialogue. Genre also affects politeness norms – a mafia movie might have very direct, profanity-laden threats as part of its realism, whereas a Victorian novel wouldn't.

A noteworthy study on commissives in film dialogue (the "Enola Holmes" and "Little Women" analysis) found that in those films set in the 19th century, characters tended to express promises, threats, and refusals in literal and direct ways, without much figurative language or indirectness. This was observed as aligning with that era's straightforward conversational style in the contexts portrayed (or perhaps simply the scriptwriter's choice). Additionally, it found social factors influenced the style: age, social status, and setting shaped how the characters performed commissives [13]. For instance, younger characters might use slightly more modern or blunt language, while older or higher-status characters stick to formalities. This matches what we'd expect in literature as well: authors give different voices to characters based on these factors, and the commitments they make will reflect their social standing (a servant would promise differently to a master than a master to a servant, etc.).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the expression of commissive speech acts in English is a nuanced interplay between words and context. Lexical choices like performative verbs and modals give us the skeleton of commitment, while stylistic modulation fleshes it out to suit the occasion. By examining commissives across formal declarations, daily chatter, political oratory, and literary dialogue, we see the adaptability of English in encoding the same fundamental act (committing to future action) in countless ways.

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