Are you committed? A pragmatic model of commitment

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Abstract
The notion of commitment is widely used in various areas of linguistic enquiry: enunciation theory (Ducrot 1984, 1989; Coltiero et al. 2009), linguistic polyphony Nølke et al. 2004; Birkelund et al. 2009), speech-act theory (Austin 1975; Searle 1979; Lyons 1977, 1995), formal modelling of dialogue/argumentation (Hamblin 1970; Beyssade & Marandin 2006) studies on modality and evidentiality (Papafragou 2000, 2006; Ifantidou 2001) and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Ifantidou 2001; Papafragou 2000, 2006; Morency et al. 2008; Moeschler 2014). Even though this notion has been extensively discussed, no unified account has ever been provided and the concept remains extremely fuzzy.

We propose an alternative account of the notion of commitment by focusing on commitment assignment processes in a hearer-oriented perspective (Morency et al. 2008). Our aim is to present a new pragmatic model with clear predictions within a relevance-theoretic framework (Sperber & Wilson 1995) and in the light of recent studies on epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010; Mascaro & Sperber 2009; Mazzarella 2013; inter alia). We posit that commitment depends on the strength of the contextual assumptions determined by a given utterance. Strength is defined as a function of the certainty of the information conveyed by the utterance and of the reliability of its source. We distinguish four kinds of commitment:

**Speaker commitment** is the assumptions’ degree of strength in the speaker’s cognitive environment, which is defined in relevance theory as the set of contextual assumptions entertained by an individual.

**Communicated commitment** refers to the speaker’s ways of presenting the piece of information with more or less certainty and reliability.

**Attributed commitment** corresponds to the hearer’s assessment of the certainty and reliability communicated by the speaker’s utterance, based on available linguistic cues and contextual assumptions.

**Hearer commitment** refers to the degree of strength assigned to this same piece of information as it gets integrated in the hearer’s cognitive environment.

This hearer-oriented approach focuses on the two last kinds of commitment: **attributed commitment** and **hearer commitment**. We argue these processes depend on three main factors: i) linguistic triggers; ii) the source of information and iii) the importance (salience) of the communicated assumption in the hearer’s cognitive environment.

First, we will show that certain linguistic triggers (such as modals and evidentials, among others) give an indication regarding the degree of certainty and reliability (i.e. strength) assigned by the speaker to his/her utterance.

Second, we posit that in order to decide whether to integrate a piece of information in his/her cognitive environment, the hearer’s hypotheses regarding the source of information must be taken into account. We show that these hypotheses are likely to influence attributed commitment as well as the integration of the piece of information in the hearer’s cognitive environment.

Third, we contend that the source of information overrides linguistics cues during strength assignment. Indeed, as Mazzarella (2013: 32) puts it, if the source is detected as unreliable by some epistemic vigilance mechanisms, the hearer will question the believability of the information.

Finally, we claim that the notion of salience is fundamental to an account of attributed commitment and hearer commitment. The greater – in terms of salience – the impact on the hearer’s cognitive environment is (e.g. adding a new piece of information of great concern to the hearer or contradicting and erasing an already held assumption), the more carefully the
processes of attributed commitment and hearer commitment will be handled (as predicted by the epistemic vigilance model of Sperber et al. 2010).

References


