

Are you committed?

A pragmatic model of commitment

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Abstract

The notion of commitment is widely used in the linguistic domain. Even though this notion has been extensively discussed, no unified account has ever been provided.

I propose an alternative account of the notion of commitment by focusing on commitment assignment processes in a hearer-oriented perspective. My aim is to present a new pragmatic model with clear predictions within a relevance-theoretic framework. I 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 its source's reliability.

My hearer-oriented approach focuses on attributed commitment and hearer commitment. I argue that these two processes depend on three main factors: i) linguistic triggers; ii) the source of information and iii) the importance of the communicated assumption in the hearer's cognitive environment. One of this model's goals is to explain how individuals can store pieces of information in their cognitive environment at various degrees of strength.

1 Introduction

The notion of commitment is widely used in various areas of linguistic enquiry, such as enunciation theory (Ducrot 1984, 1989; Coltier et al. 2009; Dendale & Coltier 2011; Marnette 2005; *inter alia*), linguistic polyphony (e.g. Nølke 1994; Nølke et al. 2004; Birkelund et al. 2009), speech-act theory (Austin 1975 [1962]; Searle 1979; Lyons 1977, 1995; Katriel & Dascal 1989; Brabanter & Dendale 2008; *inter alia*), formal modelling of dialogue/argumentation (Hamblin 1970; Beyssade & Marandin 2009), studies on modality and evidentiality (Papafragou 2000a,b, 2006; Chafe & Nichols 1986; Ifantidou 2001) and relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995; Ifantidou 2001; Morency et al. 2008; Saussure & Oswald 2008, 2009; Moeschler 2013). From a terminological perspective, this notion has been named differently depending on the domains in which it appears: *prise en charge* or *endorsement* in the domain of enunciation, *responsibility* within the linguistic polyphony framework or more generally *commitment*. Even though commitment has been extensively discussed, no general survey has been provided (cf. Dendale & Coltier 2011:8).

I begin this contribution by briefly surveying the different accounts of commitment in relevance theory. After having highlighted a few remaining questions and offered a few suggestions, I present an alternative hearer-oriented account of the notion of commitment grounded within a relevance-theoretic framework and borrowing from studies on epistemic vigilance. Epistemic vigilance along with the notion of strength are then briefly introduced. Finally, I propose a typology of commitment and four predictions which are meant to be experimentally tested in the foreseeable future.

2 Relevance theory and commitment

Relevance theory, as theorized by Sperber & Wilson (1995), does not explicitly give an account of commitment. However, two main approaches for this notion arose in the subsequent research: on the one hand, indirect approaches address commitment in studies regarding assertion (Jary 2010, 2011), epistemic modality (Papafragou 2000a, 2006) or evidentiality (Ifantidou 2001). On the other hand, direct approaches explicitly theorize commitment either from a hearer-oriented (Morency et al. 2008) or a speaker-oriented perspective (Moeschler 2013).

2.1 Indirect approaches

2.1.1 Assertion

Assertions are generally recognized as the strongest linguistic manifestation of commitment. Indeed, according to Lyons (1977:808-809), there is no epistemically stronger statement than a categorical assertion: producing an assertion implies full epistemic commitment (Lyons 1995:331). In the same vein, Nølke (1994:84) considers that the assertion is “auto-evidential” and therefore reliable *per se*. An assertion with no explicit mention of the source of information and no explicit qualification of the speaker’s commitment to its factuality indicates that the speaker presents herself as having a full epistemic warrant for what she asserts. If the speaker decides to specify her source of information, she reduces her commitment.

From a relevance-theoretic perspective, the assertion is used to represent some state of affairs in the real world and is therefore used descriptively. Within this framework, descriptive use implies commitment (Sperber & Wilson 1995:227, 247). In his relevance-theoretic approach of assertion, Jary (2011) introduces the term “assertoric commitment” which is defined as “the commitment to act in accordance with one’s assertions and the inferential consequences of those when they are combined one’s prior assertoric commitments [sic]” (p. 277). In other words, a speaker who makes an assertion takes on a certain commitment so that her subsequent verbal and non-verbal behaviour is constrained by her assertion.

When the speaker uses linguistic markers such as *to think, to discover, to be convinced that*, etc., she indicates that the relevance of the utterance lies elsewhere, that she avoids taking “assertoric responsibility” or commitment. This assertoric responsibility is only undertaken for the higher-order proposition expressed by the main clause (Jary 2011:283) as in (1):

- (1) I think I saw John today.

In (1), according to Jary (2011:283-284), the speaker avoids taking assertoric responsibility for she is committed to the fact that she thinks she saw John but not to the fact that she saw John. In other words, the speaker only takes assertoric responsibility for the content of the main-clause proposition when she chooses to present it as relevant in its own right to the hearer.

2.1.2 Modality and evidentiality

Linguists generally agree that if the speaker chooses to introduce a modal or evidential expression in her utterance, she limits her commitment by either communicating that she does not have all the information required to produce an assertion, or by communicating that she does not want to commit to all the contextual effects the assertion could convey.

Epistemic modality Even though the notion of speaker commitment is generally used to account for a broad range of modal expressions such as deontic, epistemic, evidential expressions and discourse markers (Cornillie & Delbecque 2008:38), the notion of commitment plays a crucial role in the extensive literature on epistemic modality (Lyons 1977; Palmer 1986; Coates 1983; Nuyts 2001; Papafragou 2006; Pietrandrea 2008; *inter alia*). However, although the notion of commitment is highly relevant and widely used in this domain, it is hardly ever addressed or theorized. Pietrandrea claims that “only a vague representation of the notion can be inferred” (2008:222).

Studies on modality construe the term “commitment” as referring to the attitudinal counterpart of epistemic modality (Pietrandrea 2008:221), which refers to knowledge and beliefs, as op-

posed to facts (Traugott & Dasher 2007:106). Commitment is commonly defined as the speaker's attitude towards the truth of some propositional content (Brabanter & Dendale 2008:6). According to Pietrandrea (2008:222), commitment is thus perceived as a mental state, a truth-value judgement already established in the speaker's mind before utterance production. Within this framework, linguistic markers indicating epistemic modality express the degree of speaker commitment. Commitment is therefore conceived of as a graded notion: a speaker can be either weakly or strongly committed to what she communicates. Nuyts (2006:6) interprets epistemic modality as a scale going from the absolute certainty that the state of affairs expressed is not real to the absolute certainty that it is real. As mentioned earlier, epistemic modals are often considered as having a weakening effect on the claim to truth and therefore are construed as not committing the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed.

Within a relevance-theoretic framework, linguistic markers indicating epistemic modality are often taken to express the degree of speaker commitment as well. This kind of commitment is defined as a "subscription to truth" (Papafragou 2000b:529) and as the expression of the speaker's propositional attitude, which includes "the strength of her belief in, certainty about or commitment to the truth of her assertion" (Wilson 1994:24).

Papafragou's (2006) account captures the intuition that certain epistemic modal interpretations are subjective, i.e. that they indicate speaker commitment to a base proposition. However, she concludes that "this is taken to be an intuition not about truth conditions but about the type of epistemic agent providing the background assumptions for epistemic modality" (p. 1700). Papafragou therefore situates the notion of commitment at the truth-conditional propositional content of the utterance and links it to a group of reference.

Evidentiality The notion of commitment is extensively discussed in the evidentiality domain as well. It is generally acknowledged that evidentials have two functions: on the one hand, they indicate the source of knowledge and on the other hand, they convey the speaker's degree of certainty about what she communicates (Ifantidou 2001:5). In the former case, evidentials specify if the knowledge was acquired by perceptual evidence, hearsay, inference or memory whereas in the latter case, the speaker indicates her degree of certainty by using propositional attitude and parenthetical expressions, adverbials or epistemic modals.

Evidential expressions are generally understood as indicating the different degrees of commitment the speaker has towards a communicated content (Ifantidou 2001; Papafragou 2000a; Marín-Arrese 2007; *inter alia*). Within this domain, commitment is defined as "the speaker appraisal of the knowledge used and the hearer's interpretation of its reliability" (Cornillie & Delbecque 2008:39) and is construed as a graded notion computed on the basis of the 'proximity' of the evidence.

Evidentials are construed as having a limiting effect with respect to actual evidence, even in the case of the strongest markers such as *I am sure that P*. The evidential marker may be strong but it will nonetheless never be as strong as a categorical assertion (Hassler 2010:243-244). When information is not considered factual, speakers seem indeed to place the information on a reliability scale by marking it with an evidential expression (Chafe & Nichols 1986:271). According to Hassler (2010:243-244), if the proposition is really evident, it does not require the speaker to mark her proposition as evident. So, according to the literature, if the speaker decides to embed her utterance under a modal or evidential expression, she chooses to linguistically mark it as weaker: this marking indicates her reservation about the truth of what she communicates and her wish to distance herself from her utterance (Coates 1983:236).

Within relevance theory, [Ifantidou \(2001\)](#) specifically addresses evidentiality in relation to commitment. According to her, relevance can only be achieved by modifying already existing assumptions either by strengthening them, contradicting and eliminating them or combining with them to yield contextual implications. However, an assumption with no strength, for instance a totally unevidenced assumption (such as a groundless speculation), cannot achieve relevance. If a speaker aims at optimal relevance, she must produce an utterance relevant enough to be worth processing, therefore an utterance strong enough (i.e. evidenced enough) to achieve the intended effects. In the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, the hearer has to recover the intended interpretation together with the intended attitude (speaker commitment) towards the communicated proposition. Commitment is therefore recovered through the process of enrichment, by satisfying the hearer's expectation of relevance ([Ifantidou 2001:196-197](#)). Assumptions about the degree of speaker commitment are therefore constrained by consideration of optimal relevance: i.e. the first assumption leading to an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is the one the hearer should choose ([Ifantidou 2001:120](#)). If no linguistic guidance is provided, then the hearer will rely on pragmatic inference to recover the intended degree of commitment. Just as [Papafragou \(2006\)](#) does with epistemic modals, [Ifantidou \(2001\)](#) situates evidential expressions at the explicature level, i.e. the propositional content of the utterance.

2.2 Direct approaches

Recently, certain authors explicitly theorized the notion of commitment within a relevance-theoretic perspective. [Morency et al. \(2008\)](#), [Saussure & Oswald \(2008, 2009\)](#) as well as [Moeschler \(2013\)](#) account for the notion of commitment from radically different points of view.

In his speaker-oriented account of commitment, Moeschler locates speaker commitment and propositional attitude in the category of higher-level explicatures, which are defined in relevance theory as "speech act descriptions or propositional-attitude reports that the speaker intends to make manifest to the hearer" ([Closs Traugott 2003:660](#)). The hearer therefore accesses speaker commitment by retrieving the higher-level explicatures of her utterance. According to [Moeschler \(2013:3\)](#), they "are good cues of speaker's intentions". He claims that entailments, presuppositions, explicatures and implicatures give access to the speaker's perspective and that entailments and presuppositions, because of their semantic nature, mirror sounder commitment than explicatures and implicatures which are of a pragmatic nature.

[Morency et al. \(2008\)](#) as well as [Saussure & Oswald \(2008, 2009\)](#) opt for an account of the process of "commitment attribution", which is explicitly hearer-oriented. This perspective aims to avoid the main problems related to the speaker-oriented notion of commitment, i.e. its definition in terms of belief and truth and the inscrutability of the phenomenon. Indeed, according to them, speaker commitment cannot be observed directly except when conceived of as hypotheses psychologically entertained by a hearer. The process of commitment attribution is dependent on the interpretative process, as accounted for by relevance theory. Hearers therefore assess commitment on the grounds of explicature and implicature processing. This notion is defined as "the speaker's endorsement of a set of representations she cannot retract because she *communicated* them" ([Morency et al. 2008:205](#)). Hence, to assess commitment on the grounds of explicit contents corresponds to an assumption with a high degree of certainty. On the contrary, if commitment is attributed on the grounds of implicit contents, it cannot be safe and certain in virtue of all the inferential work involved in the interpretative process. Commitment attribution is a graded process since it is considered stronger in the case of explicatures than in the

case of implicatures. Though this account does not envisage the possibility of not attributing commitment, the speaker can deny having communicated an assumption but only in the case of implicatures.

2.3 Limitations

Except from Morency et al.'s (2008) construal of commitment, most of the accounts are focused on the speaker's perspective and define this notion in terms of truth and beliefs, which are inaccessible as such. Moreover, theoreticians do not agree on several crucial points such as: who is committed? What are we committed to? Is non-commitment an option and is commitment a graded notion?

Before presenting my model of commitment, I would like to make a few suggestions regarding these remaining questions. Contrary to what enunciation theory or polyphonic approaches advocate, I claim that the speaker is the entity who is committed to assumptions in her cognitive environment, which is defined in relevance theory as the set of contextual assumptions entertained by an individual (Sperber & Wilson 1995). Moreover, non-commitment is an option in the case of an assumption conveying no strength (i.e. an uncertain and unreliable piece of information). Finally, I posit that commitment is a graded notion since an assumption can be conceived of as more or less strong.

3 A new perspective

I propose a relevance-based approach to the notion of commitment that borrows from studies on epistemic vigilance (Mascaro & Sperber 2009; Sperber et al. 2010; *inter alia*). Following Morency et al. (2008) as well as Saussure & Oswald (2008, 2009), I choose to focus on the hearer's perspective since I agree that speaker commitment remains essentially inscrutable. However, I cannot claim that hearer commitment is observable as such either. Therefore, my approach focuses on the interpreted utterances, construed as metarepresentations of the speaker's thoughts which are, thus interpreted, arguably more directly susceptible to experimental observation. These utterances obviously do not always represent the speaker's "real" commitment but only what the utterance allows the hearer to reconstruct as her commitment.

Morency et al.'s (2008) as well as Saussure & Oswald's (2008; 2009) accounts open a new and interesting object of enquiry: commitment from the hearer's perspective. This can be developed further by investigating and defining the process of commitment attribution and its impact on information integration in the hearer's cognitive environment. Therefore, one of my model's goals is to explain how attributed commitment influence the way individuals store assumptions in their cognitive environment (i.e. hearer commitment, cf. below).

My approach focusses primarily on the explicit aspect of communication, in line with researchers who situate commitment either at the explicature or at the higher-level explicature level (Ifantidou 2001; Papafragou 2006; Moeschler 2013). Commitment is therefore assumed to combine coded and contextual information. The relevance-theoretic notion of explicature (Sperber & Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Blakemore 1992; *inter alia*) is a hearer-oriented phenomenon in that it concerns the hearer's interpretation of the speaker's utterance.

Within a relevance-theoretic framework – which is an inferential, information-oriented account of communication – human beings are designed to add "more information, information that is more accurate, more easily retrievable, and more developed in areas of greater concern to the individual" (Sperber & Wilson 1995:47). One main reason humans have for communicating

is therefore to modify and extend their cognitive environment. In such a framework, commitment is assumed to be the output of explicatures that meta-represent the relative strength of the information conveyed by the utterance both in the hearer's representation of the speaker's cognitive environment and in the hearer's cognitive environment itself.

Attributed commitment is based on the relevance-theoretic interpretative procedure (Morency et al. 2008; Saussure & Oswald 2008, 2009; Ifantidou 2001:196-197). Indeed, the hearer recovers the intended interpretation together with the intended attitude the speaker has towards her utterance. Propositional attitude information is accessed through the process of enrichment, by satisfying the hearer's expectation of relevance (Wilson 1994; Sperber & Wilson 1995; Ifantidou 2001; *inter alia*). The hearer will choose the first and most accessible assumption which yields contextual effects without extra efforts. This satisfactory interpretation will give indications regarding the speaker's communicated commitment and will be the basis on which the hearer will attribute commitment and determine his own commitment. Therefore I posit that the two hearer-oriented commitment processes (cf. below) will be constrained by expectations of relevance as well as by the demands of the addressee's epistemic vigilance.

3.1 Epistemic vigilance

Sperber et al. (2010) postulate the emergence of a suite of cognitive mechanisms called "epistemic vigilance" which is defined as "an ability aimed at filtering out misinformation from communicated contents" (Mascaro & Sperber 2009:370). Mazzarella (2013:30) describes it as "alertness to the reliability of the source of information and to the believability of its content". This filter helps the hearer to recognize misinformation (be it intended or not) and manipulation. It is certainly not flawless but is active whenever a hearer has to process a given piece of information.

Epistemic vigilance is one of the mechanisms governing the move from understanding to believing (Wilson 2012:32). According to Mazzarella (2013:30), the interaction between the relevance-guided comprehension procedure and the mechanisms of epistemic vigilance has been recognised. Indeed, Sperber et al. (2010:376) claim that "comprehension, the search for relevance, and epistemic assessment are interconnected aspects of a single overall process whose goal is to make the best of communicated information". Sperber et al. (2010) as well as Wilson (2012) posit that epistemic vigilance can bear on two different dimensions of an utterance: on the one hand, what to believe (i.e. the content) and on the other hand, whom to believe (i.e. the source of information).

When epistemic vigilance is directed at the propositional content, it presupposes evaluating the internal consistency of the speaker's utterance (Sperber et al. 2010:375). Wilson (2012:32) claims that the role of evidential and modal expressions is "to display the communicator's competence, benevolence and trustworthiness to the hearer". The speaker uses strong evidentials and epistemic modals to communicate that her information is well-evidenced. By providing sound information, the speaker demonstrates her reliability. Indeed, evidential and epistemic modal expressions perfectly meet the demand of the individual's epistemic vigilance. Speakers dispose of what Marín-Arrese (2011:790) calls "epistemic positioning strategies" which influence the addressee's exercise of epistemic vigilance. The use of a categorical assertion or evidential as well as modal expressions may lead the addressee to accept more easily a proposition as true (Hart 2011:752). The literature clearly shows that certain linguistic indicators such as the ones mentioned earlier are linguistic devices helping the speaker to persuade her audience and the hearer to defend himself against misinformation.

The addressee does not only verify the coherence and accuracy of the piece of information,

he does as well consider the source of information it is stemming from. There is obviously a complex interplay between the source and the content expressed by an utterance (Bergstrom 2012). Nevertheless, the reliability of the communicated information depends massively on the speaker's or reported speaker's reliability. The source therefore influences the acceptance or rejection of a piece of information. Indeed, if the hearer thinks that the speaker is trustworthy, he will expect her to provide and share accurate information (Sperber et al. 2010:369-370). Reliability is defined in terms of competence and benevolence. The former notion is however highly contextual since a speaker can be perfectly competent in one domain but not in another. The literature points to the conclusion that hearers tend to integrate and believe information stemming from competent and honest speakers (Sperber et al. 2010:374).

3.2 The relevance-theoretic notion of strength

The notion of strength is crucial to the present account of commitment. Indeed, according to relevance theory, the speaker can express a propositional content with more or less confidence or convey that the information she provides is more or less probable. This is what Sperber & Wilson (1995:75) metaphorically call the strength of an assumption. Papafragou (2000a:70) construes it as

the cognitive counterpart of the philosophical notion of subjective probability: i.e. a non-representational property which captures the degree of confirmation/support assigned to any given stored assumption and is determined by the assumption's initial formation and subsequent involvement in various cognitive processes.

Different degrees of certainty and reliability can thus be represented in the hearer's cognitive environment through higher-level explicatures. Commitment is taken to be a function of both these parameters – certainty and reliability – and to correspond to varying degrees of strength assigned to the assumptions communicated by the speaker's utterance in the hearer's cognitive environment.

The notion of certainty relates to the content of an utterance. Indeed, the speaker can express more or less certainty via linguistic markers such as categorical assertions, epistemic modals or evidentials (Ifantidou 2001; Papafragou 2000a,b; Hart 2011; Marín-Arrese 2011; Oswald 2011; Saussure 2011; Wilson 2012; *inter alia*). In fact, Ifantidou (2001:139) equates degrees of strength with degrees of commitment. Even though Aikhenvald (2004:186, quoted by Wilson 2012:24) claims that evidentials “are not part of linguistic encoding of probability and possibility (or “epistemic modalities” which reflect the degree of certainty the speaker has)”, I posit, in line with Ifantidou's (2001) taxonomy of evidentials, that some of them such as certain parentheticals (e.g. *I think, I know*, etc.) and adverbials (e.g. *probably, certainly*, etc.) can perfectly express the speaker's certainty about what she conveys. The linguistic cues mentioned above influence the process of commitment attribution.

The notion of reliability concerns both the propositional content and the source of information. On the one hand, the reliability of the propositional content can be expressed by evidentials indicating the source of knowledge, such as direct/indirect perception, inference, memory or hearsay. On the other hand, the reliability of the source of information depends on the speaker's competence and her benevolence as well as on her trustworthiness, credibility, expertise and reputation (Sperber & Wilson 1995; Flanagan et al. 2003; Clément 2006, 2008; Sundar 2008; Sperber et al. 2010; Bergstrom 2012; *inter alia*). Moreover, Wilson (2012:32) suggests that

a reliable speaker must possess genuine information and intend to share it with her audience. In the case of information integration, these elements of communication have to be checked by the individual's epistemic vigilance.

3.3 Commitment typology

As mentioned earlier, the notion of commitment has been mainly treated from the speaker's perspective. However, commitment is a complex process in which speaker commitment is only one aspect. The notion of commitment can therefore be used to account for utterance comprehension phenomena and information integration as well.

The initial level of commitment (speaker commitment) is a property of the speaker's mental representation at the time of utterance production. Sperber & Wilson (1995) describe it as the strength of an assumption in the speaker's cognitive environment. Speaker commitment is at the heart of what psycholinguists refer to as the "black-box" and is therefore inscrutable as such. If we take into account all the stages of human communication, this first type of commitment only represents one aspect of the phenomenon.

Indeed, to make her commitment explicit, i.e. to convey more or less certainty and reliability, the speaker has several linguistic choices at her disposal. Linguistic markers indicating commitment are varied: they encompass prosodic effects (an interrogative tone weakens the commitment conveyed by the utterance even though it is presented as an assertion), syntactic effects (an assertive conveys strong communicated commitment whereas an interrogative does not), modal effects (John must be home > John might be home), lexical effects (to know that p > to affirm that p > to think that p > to imagine that p), adverbial effects (certainly > maybe) or evidential effects (I saw that John is home > I guess that John is home > People say that John is home). I therefore distinguish a second level of commitment, i.e. the speaker's communicated commitment in her utterance. Obviously, no unequivocal principle exists to assess how speaker commitment is translated into communicated commitment.

When the hearer interprets the speaker's utterance, one of his tasks is to assess the speaker's strength of commitment regarding this same utterance. This process requires the hearer's interpretation of linguistic markers as well as of the relevant contextual assumptions. It gives rise to a third type of commitment, that is, attributed commitment, corresponding to the utterance mental representation (as well as the representation of the speaker) in the hearer's cognitive environment. This kind of commitment is hearer-oriented in the sense that it is the result of the hearer's inferential work.

Once the utterance and the level of communicated commitment are interpreted, one more aspect of commitment needs to be distinguished. Indeed, the hearer's interpretive process triggered contextual assumptions and these are assigned a certain degree of strength in his cognitive environment. In other words, and within a relevance-theoretic framework, the hearer is committed, to a certain extent, to each contextual effect generated by utterance interpretation. This fourth type of commitment (hearer commitment) is triggered by utterance interpretation.

My proposition for a typology of the notion of commitment can be summarized as follows:

- i. 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.
- ii. Communicated commitment refers to the speaker's ways of presenting the piece of information with more or less certainty and reliability.

- iii. 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.
- iv. 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 typology is built on two oppositions: on the one hand, between speaker and hearer and on the other hand, between mental representation and linguistic markers (which are obviously not always a reflection of each other in the case of uncooperative communication). The speaker's choices of linguistic markers are speaker-oriented whereas attributed commitment derived by the hearer is hearer-oriented. Thus, attributed commitment is dependent on contextual assumptions which cannot be linked to the speaker's communicative intentions.

3.4 Predictions

According to the present model of commitment, individuals store information as assumptions at a certain degree of strength. Linguistic cues are determinant in the process of attributed commitment but the source of information considerably influences hearer commitment as well. Once linguistic cues and source(s) have been checked, the hearer assigns a certain degree of strength to the integrated assumption through a higher-order explicature. At another level, in the case of highly salient (i.e. important) pieces of information, hearer commitment will be stronger than in the case of non-salient information. From an experimental perspective, the theoretical claims made above translate into four predictions which regard respectively linguistic cues, the source of information, the interaction between both linguistic cues and source of information and the salience of the piece of information.

3.4.1 Linguistic cues influence the processes of strength assignment in the hearer's cognitive environment.

The first prediction is based on the fairly simple idea that certain linguistic cues (such as bare assertions, epistemic modals and evidential expressions) give an indication concerning the degree of certainty and reliability of an utterance. Hence, *ceteris paribus*, the more certainty and reliability the piece of information communicates, the more likely the hearer is to attribute a strong commitment to the speaker. He will then be more inclined to integrate this piece of information in his cognitive environment with a high degree of strength. Example (2a-d) illustrates this claim:

- (2) Mary says:
- a. "I don't know if John is coming tonight."
 - b. "I guess John is coming tonight."
 - c. "I am sure that John is coming tonight."
 - d. "John is coming tonight."

The hearer will be more inclined to integrate (2c) and (2d) in his cognitive environment, given the certainty and reliability conveyed by the propositional attitude marker "I am sure" in (2c) and the assertion in (2d) than (2b) which is considerably weaker. (2a) does not convey commitment since the speaker communicates that she does not possess the information "John is coming tonight" in her cognitive environment.

3.4.2 The source of information influences strength assignment in the hearer's cognitive environment

The second prediction concerns the hearer's assumptions regarding the source of information. I predict that in order to decide whether to integrate a piece of information in his cognitive environment, the hearer's hypotheses concerning the speaker or the reported speaker must be taken into account. Indeed, these hypotheses are likely to influence hearer commitment. Let us imagine that both a reliable source and an unreliable one produce the same assertion. At the level of attributed commitment, the hearer will attribute the same degree of commitment to both speakers, since, according to the literature, they both presented their utterance in the strongest way possible, i.e. in the form of an assertion. However, the hearer will be more likely to integrate with a high degree of strength the piece of information stemming from the reliable source than the one conveyed by the unreliable source.

3.4.3 The source of information overrides linguistic cues during strength assignment.

The third prediction looks at the interaction between linguistic cues and source of information. I predict that the evaluation of the source of information will override linguistic cues assessment during the process of hearer commitment. As [Mazzarella \(2013:32\)](#) puts it, if the source is detected as unreliable by some epistemic vigilance mechanisms, then the hearer will question the believability of the information. Therefore, the source becomes crucial at the hearer commitment level when pieces of information convey more or less degrees of commitment via linguistic cues. However, in the case of what [Sperber et al. \(2010\)](#) refer to as intrinsically acceptable or unacceptable piece of information, the source does not play a role in the process of hearer commitment. Let us take a few examples:

- (3) Peter (reliable): "Eat the green berries, they are edible."
- (4) John (unreliable): "Eat the green berries, they are edible."

In the case of (3) and (4), the sources are crucial in the hearer commitment process. Indeed, (3) is likely to be integrated with a high degree of strength in the hearer's cognitive environment, whereas (4) will not. However, in (5) and (6), the source does not play a role in strength assignment processes since the content is respectively intrinsically unacceptable and acceptable:

- (5) Peter (reliable): "2+2=5."
- (6) John (unreliable): "2+2=4."

The source of information will nevertheless override linguistic cues assessment during the process of hearer commitment, in the following scenario:

- (7) Peter (reliable): "I think Mary was robbed."
- (8) John (unreliable): "Mary was robbed."

If the two utterances had to be compared in the same context, (7) would be likely to be integrated in the hearer's cognitive environment, despite the weakening propositional attitude marker "I think" whereas (8) would be rejected on the basis on the unreliability of its source, despite its assertion status.

3.4.4 The salience of information influences the process of strength assignment in the hearer's cognitive environment.

Finally, the fourth prediction focuses on the salience of the communicated assumptions in the hearer's cognitive environment. The notion of salience can be defined in terms of the importance of the networks activated during information processing. Thus, the greater – in terms of salience – the impact on the hearer's cognitive environment (e.g. adding a new piece of information of great concern to the hearer, strengthening, weakening or contradicting and erasing an already and strongly held assumption), the stronger hearer commitment will be. If the information is perceived as non-salient, it will not trigger a high degree of hearer commitment and perhaps will not trigger any hearer commitment. Processes of attributed commitment and hearer commitment will virtually be carried with greater concern and more consciously in (10) than in (9):

(9) “You have a cold.”

(10) “You have a mortal disease.”

Example (10) involves more important networks in the hearer's cognitive environment than (9). Once (10) has been checked and integrated, hearer commitment is likely to be strong and hence, this piece of information is likely to be highly accessible.

4 Conclusion

Commitment is a key aspect of communication and while it has not been researched directly in modern pragmatic theories, it touches on general interpretative phenomena which are assumed to affect every single utterance. A general survey of the notion of commitment has not been provided (cf. [Dendale & Coltier 2011:8](#)), nor an account of commitment in terms of strength. Although relevance theory makes claims about the notion of strength in an individual's cognitive environment, it does not explain how this process is conducted.

The proposed model, therefore, combines two central interests of current pragmatic research by systematically addressing the notion of commitment and by making testable hypotheses regarding the strength of assumptions in the hearer's cognitive environment. The main objectives of this research are the following: to provide a typology of commitment and its linguistic markers, to account for how individuals store assumptions in their cognitive environment, to offer testable predictions in an experimental paradigm, and to test the validity of the proposed pragmatic model.

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