Space embedding and epistemic stance: A Mental-space approach to *I promise* and *I guarantee* constructions

Iksoo Kwon
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, kwoniks@hufs.ac.kr

Humans are uniquely capable of conjecturing about mental spaces that are not indexically accessible at the speech time. The ability to conceptually accommodate such information entails (at least) two domains: a base SPEECH-ACT domain where the speaker converses with the addressee(s) by means of such an utterance, and a CONTENT domain where the content of the utterance takes place. This multilayered conceptual structure may well be reified in complex sentences containing so-called world-creating predicates (McCawley, 1993) such as, in English, *think*, *believe*, *regret*, and *promise.*

Among the various multilayered constructions of world-creating predicates, this study conducts a comparative investigation of two English constructions, *I promise* (*you*) + X and *I guarantee* (*you*) + X constructions, whose construal revolves around the speaker's commitment to making a situation happen and/or to vouching for the validity of the embedded clause X.

(1)   a. *I promise we'll come right back. Please stay with us*.
            b. *Once we've made an arrest, I guarantee I'll get you that answer*.
(2)   a. *… And I did my best to get it in at 14 minutes. I promise I tried*.
            b. *I guarantee I had more fun than you guys did*.

In the examples in (1), the lower clause situation (i.e., *we'll come right back* in (1a) and *I'll get you that answer* in (1b)) has not taken place, but in the speaker's belief space it will take place, particularly because the speaker commits him/herself to making it happen. In (1a), for example, the speaker, the show host, has knowledge of the upcoming schedule, and is thus sure that he will make the focal situation happen. However, as shown in (2), they are also employed in past-tense situations, both of which carry epistemic modal meaning that the speaker vouches for the factual validity of the lower clause information.

This study investigates how the two constructions are used epistemically, especially in its colloquial uses, and how the different conceptual structures underlying the construals of the commissive and the epistemic modal senses of the constructions can be modeled within Mental-spaces theory (Fauconnier, 1997). By modeling the conceptual structures by means of space-embedding and profiling (Langacker, 1991), this paper contends that the speaker's commitment to the occurrence of the focal situation is necessarily involved in the default conceptualization of *I promise* constructions, but not of the other. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the MST framework transparently captures the functional difference in these conceptual structures, which relies on whether the situation (SIT) explicitly described in the embedded clause accommodates an imperfective situation (the speaker's (S) commitment to continue to talk about the subject matter (SBJM) in (1a)) or an unprofiled situation where the addressee (H) realizes the perfective content (CONT) as fact (the speaker's epistemic stance in (2)) (Kwon 2021). This study also focuses on constructional cues in complex-clause utterances of the form *I promise/ guarantee* X: whether or not the subject of the embedded clause X is congruent with 'I' in the main clause and whether the tense of X is past or non-past. In analyzing their spoken tokens from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), three types of construals were identified: commissive, epistemic modal, or both. While the *I promise* construction can have any of the three, the *I guarantee* construction never has the commissive construal alone. The frequency data indicate that the distinctive conceptual structures motivate their functional distributions
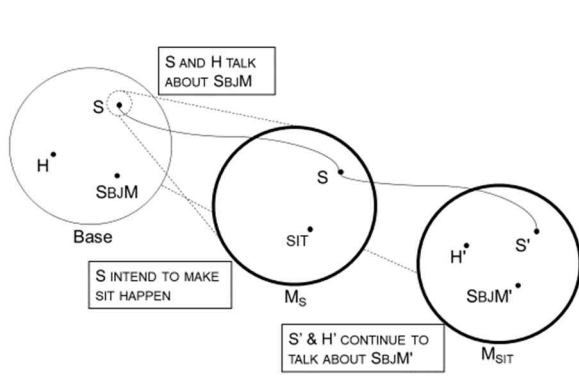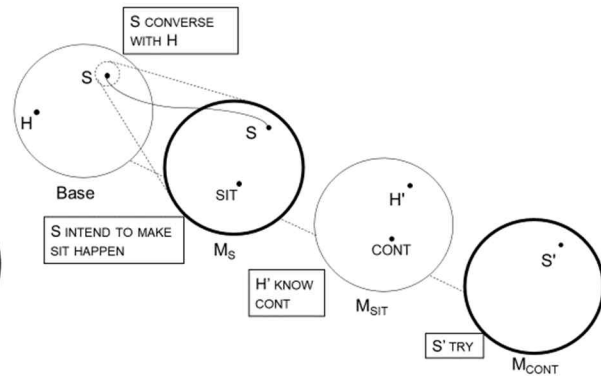
Fig. 1: Representation of (1a)

Fig. 2. Representation of (2a)

References

Fauconnier, Gilles. 1997. *Mappings in Thought and Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kwon, Iksoo. 2021. Between COMMITMENT and CERTAINTY: A cognitive semantic approach to an I promise construction in English. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 19(1): 51-79. https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.00076.kwo.

Langacker, Ronald. 1991. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. II*: Descriptive Application. California: Stanford University Press.

McCawley, James D. 1993. *Everything that Linguists have Always Wanted to Know about Logic but were Ashamed to Ask*. 2nd edn. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.