

Beyond speaker intent: Polyphony in political promising

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Abstract

Speech act theory has traditionally held that promising depends on the intent of the speaker: a promise exists only when a speaker expresses sincere intention to act in the future. But just as words do not appear from a neutral position but echo from the mouths of other speakers (Bakhtin 1981), political promises arise not from transparently expressed intention but from shared understandings.

Building on work by Jane Hill (2001), Alessandro Duranti (1994), and others, I examine a category of 'metaphorical promises' in political discourse. As in promising, individuals are obliged, as a result of discourse, to undertake various actions. Unlike canonical speech acts, however, metaphorical promises are not monologically produced by the obliged politician. They are dialogic and polyphonic, created by multiple speakers, hearers, and referees across multiple occasions.

To illustrate this concept, I analyze a discourse jointly produced by George W. Bush, his Republican and Democratic rivals, and news media surrounding support for AmeriCorps in 2001-03. Bush called for more volunteers, but did not push for increased funding for the program, while other political actors did. Media attributed a general promise to support AmeriCorps to Bush. When AmeriCorps lost funding critics, including rival politicians, accused Bush of breaking 'his' promise.

1. George W. Bush, State of the Union address 2002

USA Freedom Corps will expand and improve the good efforts of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to recruit more than 200,000 new volunteers. And America needs citizens to extend the compassion of our country to every part of the world, so we will renew the promise of the Peace Corps, double its volunteers over the next five years and ask it to join a new effort to encourage development and education and opportunity in the Islamic world.

2. Critics label Bush's failure to provide money a “broken promise”

Betraying his oft-repeated promise to expand opportunities for meaningful national service, President Bush has not lifted a finger to secure the extra money needed to avoid devastating cuts to AmeriCorps, the federal government's flagship domestic volunteer program. [*New York Times* 17 July 2002, *emphasis added*]

The only thing my husband asked President Bush was to take care of AmeriCorps and national service. So far, *that promise* made and even mentioned in the State of the Union *has not been fulfilled*. [Senator Hillary Clinton, in Milbank 2003]

This is calculated conservatism, and they calculate just as much as they can get away with. You can dress it all up, but at the end of the day *he broke his promise*. It's not much more complicated than that. [Congressman George Miller, in Bumiller 2003]

3. Canonical promises versus metaphorical promising

In a canonical promise, as viewed in speech act theory, a speaker S makes an utterance (a *locutionary act*) promising to do some action A for the hearer H. This creates an obligation for the speaker to act.

In a metaphorical promise, the expectation and the obligation for action exist, but there is no single locutionary act. Instead, the promise results from a complex discourse.

	canonical promise	metaphorical promise
locutionary act	"I promise that A" "I can do A for you" etc.	<i>complex discourse by multiple speakers</i>
illocutionary act	S promise H that S does A	H expects that S does A
perlocutionary act	S is obliged to do A	S is obliged to do A

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