

# THE CONFLICT PROMISES/THREATENS TO ESCALATE INTO WAR

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## 1. Introduction

As has been shown by Verhagen (1991, 1992), promise and threaten can be used epistemically, as in Tomorrow promises to be a fine day: "Promise is construed here as an evaluation (on the part of the conceptualizer) of the applicability of the predicate 'to be a fine day'. That is, promise does not provide any information about the subject independent of the rest of the sentence" (Verhagen 1991) (put another way, we could say that promise and threaten have become subject-to-subject raising verbs). Verhagen discusses sentences like The incident threatened to destroy his chances, and shows that the equivalents of epistemic promise/threaten in Dutch (beloven/ dreigen) require OV (subordinate) word order in the complement, whereas their epistemic counterparts require VO (main clause/coordinate order). He assumes that both verbs are identical except with respect to the evaluation, and that both arose from earlier illocutionary uses.

My primary purpose here is to show that the verbs are not identical and that the epistemic meanings did not arise directly from illocutionary uses of these verbs. I will also briefly suggest that promise and threaten show evidence of some changes typical of those associated with grammaticalization.

Promise and threaten are usually thought of as commissive verbs. For example, the only difference between threaten and other commissives like promise, vow, pledge, guarantee, according to Palmer (1986:115), "seems to be in what the hearer wants". However, while promise can be used performatively, threaten cannot (Searle 1979). In a comment that anticipates speech act theory by some three hundred years, Hobbes noted: "though the promise of good, bind the promiser; yet threats, that is to say, promises of evil, bind them not" (1651, Leviathan, p.456). We may add that promises must be communicated, but threats and warnings need not (Sperber and Wilson 1986:145).

The epistemic meanings of both promise and threaten are non-illocutionary. In this respect, the development of promise and threaten is quite different from that of insist or suggest, which show a change from directive to assertive (epistemic) illocutionary

meaning, as in I insist that Kim go vs. I insist that Kim goes (Traugott 1989). What is the path to the non-illocutionary meanings of promise and threaten?

I will first give a brief sketch of threaten, since this is the older verb, and then go on to promise.

## 2. Threaten: a historical sketch

Threaten has persisted from Old English (OE) on in the sense of "intend to inflict something negative on someone" (the OE form is usually þreatian; the OED cites it through the beginning of the twentieth century; þreatnian (with -n) was rare till Middle English. It occurs intransitively (unergatively), and with nominal object complements, with non-finite to-complements, and with finite that-complements.

From OE till the 19th century there was a meaning "force, torment", which will not concern us here, except to note that the forcing can be verbal or non-verbal as in (1):

- (1) þu ðreast and bregst þa ðeoda þe us ðreatigað  
 you harass and terrify the nations that us threaten  
 (850-950 Paris Psalter p.15 [HCET])

Stage 1. The first stage of relevance to us is the use from OE on of threaten in the sense "signal intention of inflicting something negative" (often, but not always illocutionary). ((2-3) have nominal objects, (4-5) have non-finite complements, and (6) has a finite complement):

- (2) On wuda wildeor wordum þreatast  
 In woods wild-beasts words-Dat rebuke-2sg  
 'You rebuke the wild beasts in the woods with words'  
 (c 1000 Ags, Ps (Th) lxvii. 27 [OED])
- (3) Mid word he þretneþ mucche & lute deþ in dede  
 With words he threatens mucche & little does in deed  
 (1297 R. Glouc. (Rolls) 9383 [HCET])
- (4) wyrde...ðe oft ðreatað ða yflan to witnianne  
 fate:Dat...that often threatens the evil-ones to punish  
 (c.880 Boethius 40) [HCET]
- (5) for which they are both confined in separate prisons and are threatened to be treated with rigour  
 (1760 Knox [ARCHER])
- (6) and to threaten her that I will have her hanged  
 (1593, Gifford, Witches B1V [HCET])

Stage 2 involves the development in the 16th century of an epistemic meaning characterized in the OED as "portend, presage", with nominal object complements only. This is a non-intentional, non-commissive use. In (7-10) the subject is construed as the source of the threat, i.e., it is an argument of the predicate.

- (7) This fire was the more terrible, by reasone it was in a conspicuous place, and threatned danger unto many, and was alltogether unapproacheable for remedy  
(bef. 1627 John Hayward Annals of the 1st 4 yrs of Elizabeth's Reign p.87 [HCET])
- (8) the house of STUART is an inconvenience of a much deeper dye, and would threaten us with much more dismal consequences  
(c. 1650 Hume: ESSAY Pt. 2 E. 15 p. 478)
- (9) The Turks retake Belgrade by storme putting all to the sword, & repassing the bridge at Esseck, with the successe of Tekely, threaten a reverse of their hitherto unprosperousnesse, & this, as too apparent by the tretchery of the Jesuites  
(bef. 1689-90 John Evelyn, Diary, p. 932 [HCET])
- (10) The croupous symptoms had appeared early and gone on rapidly so that suffocation was threatened.  
(1864 Spen [ARCHER])

Stage 3 involves the development in the 18th century of non-intentional epistemic uses with non-finite complements. Syntactically, this can be regarded as the shift from control to raising verb status. The syntactic subject is no longer the source of the threat. Rather the speaker views the proposition as likely, and evaluates it negatively:

- (11) I am sometimes frightened with the dangers that threaten to diminish it [my estate]  
(1780 Mirror No.81 [OED])
- (Note the presumed equivalence of the passive typical of raising verbs: My estate threatened to be diminished by the dangers; contrast the presumed non-equivalence of She threatened to turn him out of doors, He threatened to be turned out of doors.) More recent examples are:
- (12) ...the prevailing scarcity of corn, an evil that threatens to increase in consequence of the late inclement weather  
(1802 Joh2 [ARCHER])

- (13) a confrontation with Iraqi aggressors that threatens to escalate into war  
(1991, UPI)
- (14) the hapless, aggrieved house-husband threatens to become as rigid and unexamined a comic invention as the grotesquely intrusive mother-in-law once was  
(1992 Independent [HECTOR])

The development of raising threaten, and, to anticipate, promise, cannot be reduced to a generalization to inanimate subjects; if it were, (14) and the hypothetical utterance in (15) would not be ambiguous:

- (15) Marianne threatens/promises to be a good President.

### 3. Promise: a historical sketch

Promise etymologically is derived from the past participle of Lat. pro-mittere "send forward".

Stage 1. Promise was borrowed into early 15th century English from French as an illocutionary and performative verb meaning "give verbal assurance of". It is future-oriented; and it implies that what is assured is advantageous to the persons being assured. It can be intransitive (unergative). Example (16) has a nominal complement, (17-18) have non-finite complements, and (19) has a finite complement.

- (16) and there asked hym a gyffte that he promysed her when she gaff hym the swerde  
(bef. 1470 Works of Thomas Malory p.48 [HCET])
- (17) And promysed Kyng Herowde without delay  
To come ageyn by hym--this is no nay  
(c.1500 Digby Plays p.97 [HCET])
- (18) his pardon was granted him, and a lettar written to him from my counsel, in wiche he was promised to be considered and holpen  
(1550 Edward VI Diary Vol.2 p.476 [HCET])
- (19) And I beseech your Grace to promise to his Highnes for mee that I will not onely fill my pocketts with papers...  
(1570-1640 Official Letters 2 p. 156-7 [HCET])

Stage 2 involves the development in the later 15th century of an illocutionary (and performative) epistemic use of the verb. This is assertive, unlike any of the other uses of threaten and promise with sentential complements. It is present- (NOT future-)

oriented. Many examples occur in parenthetical clauses, but others occur with zero-that complements, as in (22):

(20) He losythe sore hys tyme here, I promyse yow  
(1469 Paston Lett II.349 [OED])

(21) Out on it, says the king, that is the foulest, for hee is durty up to the elbows. I, sayes Will; but then he washes him cleane againe, and eats his meate cleanly enough, I promise thee

(1608 Robert Armin, Nest of Ninnies p.45) [HCET]

(22) I promise thee nourse I favour her  
(1566 Udall, Roister Doister [HCET])

Stage 3, starting in the 16th century, involves nominal complements only. This use is epistemic, but unlike Stage 2, it is non-illocutionary, non-volitional, and future-oriented. It means "give pre-indication of NP":

(23) "Yf any man all this can gett, shall he haue the greatest felicitie, shall he fynde her in these [honor, glory, pleasure] that we haue shewed you, promise more than they giue?"

(1593 Queen Elizabeth, Trans of Boethius p.57 [HCET])

(24) the Title of this Paper promising some Experiments about the Production of Electricity, I must not omit to recite...  
(1675-6 Boyle, Electricity and Magnetism p. 20-1 [HCET])

(25) As the morning promised a fair day we set out  
(1784 Muhl [ARCHER])

(26) The largest gathering ever of world leaders this weekend promises tactical headaches, gridlock nightmares and a whopping overtime bill for the Big Apple's police department

(1991 UPI)

Stage 4. By the early 18th century non-finite complements appear with epistemic, non-illocutionary promise. The data suggest that at first promise in these constructions means much the same as give promise of, hold promise for, etc., and that complements are limited to inchoative ("become") events. This is the "give pre-indication that S" sense:

(27) He promised to be stout when he grew up  
(1722 Defoe [OED])

(28) As poor Jane promises to be pretty, she may be married off my hands

(1832 Bulw [ARCHER])

- (29) Congressmen on both sides of the aisle, backed by Bush, revived what promises to be a divisive drive for a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning  
(1991 UPI)

Note that the subject seems to have at least some semantic relation to the verb: there is "something about" the baby that suggests he will grow to be strong (27), something about Jane that suggests she will grow to be beautiful (28); there is something about the drive that promises to be divisive (29). However, the judgements are not entirely clear, and one cannot use passive tests here.

At Stage 5, which starts in the late 18th century, the "give pre-indication that" sense is used to introduce complements with non-inchoative copulas and action verbs. The argument relationship of the subject to the predicate is either demoted or non-existent, in other words, the syntactic subject-to-subject raising structure is more prominent:

- (30) The Capitol promised to be a large and handsome building, judging from the part about two thirds already above ground  
(1795 Twin [ARCHER])
- (31) the Pet Shop Boy's tour promises to be orchestrated with an imagination and attention to detail that makes most of their competitors look positively pedestrian  
(1992 Guardian [HECTOR])
- (32) Today promises to be hectic in the markets  
(1992 Independent [HECTOR])
- (33) The issue of Frank's homosexuality promises to play a prominent role in the forthcoming House battle over the level of severity of the sanctions  
(1991 UPI)

The development of epistemic promise provides further evidence that an absolute distinction between control and raising verbs cannot be maintained (as suggested already in Dowty 1985)--the distinctions between Stages 4 and 5 are simply too fine-grained. The examples also show further evidence of increased subjectification over time, in other words, meanings (or at least modal-type meanings) become increasingly based in speaker point of view (cf. the change from motion verb to future (e.g. be going to), temporal to concessive (e.g. while) and the

development of scalar and stance particles (such as even, let alone, precisely) (for a summary, see Traugott 1992).

#### 4. Summary of the changes

The changes sketched so far are summarized in Table I. All stages, once started, continue in existence.

<u>THREATEN</u>		<u>PROMISE</u>	
OE	1) +Illoc -E +F +Cont +OBJ/+NFC		
LME		1) +Illoc -E +F +Cont +OBJ/+NFC	
ENE	2) -Illoc +E +F +OBJ	2) +Illoc +E -F +Cont -NFC	
EPDE	3) -Illoc +E +F -Cont +NFC	3) -Illoc +E +F +OBJ	
PDE		4) -Illoc +E +F ?Cont+NFC[+inc]	
		5) -Illoc +E +F -Cont +NFC	

Legend:

OE = Old English (650-1125)

LME = Late Middle Eng (1400-1470)

ENE = Early New Eng (1470-1710)

EPDE = Early Present-Day Eng (1710-1800)

PDE = Present-Day Eng (1800-)

Illoc = illocutionary verb

E = epistemic

F = future-oriented

Cont = control verb

Inc = inchoative

+OBJ = object nominal comp

+NFC = non-finite comp clause

-NFC = finite comp clause

TABLE I: HISTORY OF THREATEN AND PROMISE

The crucial step in the development of the epistemic constructions appears to have been the development of the "pre-indication/portend" sense with non-sentential complements (Stage (2) for threaten, Stage (3) for promise). In the case of promise, the development of the assertive sense (Stage 2) seems to have been coincidental to the development of the raising verb sense since threaten did not undergo such a change. Note also that the assertive has no constraint on the predicate, other than a general pragmatic one of making sense in the world, whereas promise in

the raising sense requires the complement to be inchoative at first).

The particulars of change outlined here do not support easy assumptions about syntactic reanalysis from a control to a raising verb, but rather suggest a fine-grained path of semantic change via loss of intentionality (first in the environment of non-sentential complements). The semantic changes involved are entirely consistent with two well-known changes: a) the shift from deontic (or at least non-epistemic) meaning to epistemic meaning, as evidenced by the English modals (e.g. the must of obligation) (Bybee and Pagliuca 1985, Sweetser 1990), directive speech act verbs (e.g. insist that X do Y) (Traugott 1989), manner adverbs (e.g. probably, precisely) (Hanson 1987); b) the shift to greater subjectivity mentioned above. These fine-grained semantic changes precede and motivate (but do not cause) the syntactic changes.

#### 5. Evidence for grammaticalization

Given the evidence so far, we might conclude that the two verbs have simply become subject-to-subject raising verbs like appear, seem, tend, be likely, and so forth. But there is evidence that they are losing their main verb characteristics and show incipient grammaticalization. Grammaticalization is the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and once grammatical then come to serve even more grammatical functions (Hopper and Traugott 1993). Loss of categoriality, initially semantically, and then syntactically, is a prime criterion for grammaticalization.

Like other raising verbs, e.g. seem, and modals, raising promise (and sometimes threaten) cannot coocur with progressive aspect.

(34) a. Marianne is promising to be a good president  
(locutionary)

b. Marianne promises to be a good president (epistemic)

Since the subjects of subject-to-subject raising verbs have no semantic argument relationship to them, and in general do not allow progressives, it may be that all subject-to-subject raising verbs are potentially seeds for grammaticalization.

Be that as it may, epistemic promise and threaten differ from other full lexical raising verbs like seem, appear, in that they

occur with epistemic modals only, while full lexical verbs occur with both root and epistemic modal auxiliaries. Thus (35-7) are ambiguous:

- (35) She must appear to be a good attorney
  - i) so that we can expose them (a Portia-like situation; root)
  - ii) or she would not have been so successful (E)
- (36) The confrontation may appear to escalate into war
  - i) so that we can persuade Bill to declare war (root)
  - ii) but it's not doing so (E)
- (37) She must promise/threaten to be a good attorney (control only)
  - i) the law requires it
  - ii) everyone is so scared of her

However, in the raising verb meaning, the modal auxiliaries are understood as epistemic only:

- (38) Marianne must promise to be a good President
  - or the voters wouldn't have supported her so overwhelmingly (something a Martian might conclude; E)
- (39) The house-husband may threaten to become a stereotype
  - i) but we'll put an end to that
  - ii) \*I'll permit that

Where an auxiliary modal precedes another modal or a quasi-modal, the first must be epistemic (Shepherd 1981):

- (40) a. She may have to/need to visit her uncle
- b. You might ought to tie that tree from the other side  
(Butters 1973:277)

The restriction on cooccurrence with modals suggests that promise and threaten are losing even more categorial properties than other subject-to-subject raising verbs such as appear, seem, tend, etc. Loss of categoriality, initially semantically, and then syntactically, is a prime criterion for grammaticalization. It appears that promise and threaten in their epistemic senses are potential additions to the growing list of examples of grammaticalization in progress in English (see Thompson and Mulac 1991 on the development of epistemic parenthetical I think, Romaine and Lange 1991 on the development of like as a marker of indirect speech and thought).

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## CORPORA

The computerized corpora used for this study are: a) for the earlier periods (750-1710) Diachronic Part of the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts (abbreviated HCET), courtesy of Matti Rissanen and Merja Kytö; b) for the later periods (1650-1990) A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers (ARCHER), courtesy of Douglas Biber and Edward Finegan; c) for contemporary English the HECTOR Corpus, part of the Oxford Corpus of British English, courtesy of Susan Atkins, and a corpus of 1991 United Press International (UPI) press releases, courtesy of Academic Text Services at Stanford University.

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