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EXPLICITNESS, IMPLICITNESS AND COMMITMENT ATTRIBUTION: A COGNITIVE PRAGMATIC APPROACH*

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Abstract

This paper proposes a cognitive-pragmatic alternative to the traditional, speech-act-theoretic, account of the notion of commitment. The perspective adopted here questions the relevance of addressing actual commitment as a speaker category and shifts the focus of the discussion from properties of speaker commitment to processes of *commitment attribution*. Using a relevance-theoretic framework, it will be suggested that inferring commitment in ordinary, cooperative, communication is part of the processes by which hearers derive speaker meaning, and that the degree of reliability that a hearer may expect to attain in attributing commitment to a speaker correlates with the degree of certainty associated to the derivation of explicatures and implicatures from an utterance.

1. Introduction

Most available accounts of the concept of commitment emphasise its relationship to truth and responsibility. Following Hamblin's (1971) line, this perspective holds that an individual is said to commit to a proposition *P* when he considers that *P* is true. Some discourse-analytic approaches, such as the Scandinavian theory of linguistic polyphony (the ScaPoLine, as developed by Nølke, Fløttum & Norén 2004), formulate a similar view by conflating commitment and responsibility, that is, by positing commitment/responsibility as an "enunciative link" (Norén 1999: 97) between the discursive being (or speech instance manifested in the utterance) and the point of view expressed. On a very general level, Katriel & Dascal (1989: 286) define commitment as "what the speaker can be said to have 'taken for granted' in making his or her utterance". As far as the scope of commitment is concerned, this general definition leaves room for the speaker to be able to commit to different things, ranging from beliefs and psychological states to illocutionary forces, indirectly conveyed meanings and even rules governing the interaction (in line with Goffman's principle of *facework*).

These approaches share the conception of commitment as an attitude – or a mental state – of the speaker's, and accordingly envisage it as a proper *speaker*

category; inasmuch as it denotes a specific individual's mental state, *actual* commitment can therefore be said to belong to the speaker's "intimate" cognition. Beyssade & Marandin (2006) take a different path by construing commitment as a dialogic attitude, but also consider commitment to scope over different elements, such as propositions, questions, outcomes and facts, thus extending Hamblin's (1971) restricted view that speakers only commit to propositions. While we agree with this body of research's idea that speaker commitment cannot be reduced to propositional commitment, we contend that an alternative and fruitful way to account for the way commitment is dealt with in ordinary, cooperative, conversation, is to examine the processes by which hearers are able to attribute commitment to speakers; in the end, it indeed boils down to them to establish whether the speaker is committed or not for the purposes of the communicative exchange, and we will accordingly sketch out a cognitive-pragmatic model of the processes by which hearers are led to attribute speaker commitment. We will thus not focus on commitment as a *speaker category* (i.e. a concept denoting a speaker's mental state), since ours is an account of *commitment attribution*, which is to be found at the hearer's end of communication.

Section 2 develops two aspects of the canonical speech-act-theoretic account of commitment. The first is its scope: even if at first glance it could be said that commitment applies to different types of objects of communication, as ventured above, we will defend a moderately reductionist approach, suggesting that commitment attribution, in communication, ultimately concerns *mental representations* (propositional contents, intentions, representations about beliefs, etc.). The second aspect of the traditional account of commitment we will challenge through our account of commitment attribution is the traditional focus, for explanatory purposes, on the conception of commitment as a speaker's mental state.

Section 3 deals with the criteria one could tentatively invoke when establishing whether speakers can be taken to have committed to the communicated representation. We will call in the explicit/implicit distinction and argue that when commitment is inferred on the basis of explicit information, a criterion of non-retractability provides hearers with a good ground for safely attributing commitment. When it comes to attributing commitment on the grounds of implicit information, however, we will see that non-retractability does not make much sense. Instead, we suggest that commitment *denial* would be the only safe option for a hearer to consider that a speaker has *not* committed to the proposition expressed (provided he explicitly questions the speaker about it or provided the speaker herself makes this clear). The main difficulty with implicatures is that commitment attribution can never constitute a safe bet, since the responsibility for part of the information required to derive speaker meaning falls to the hearer. This is the gist of our discussion; we claim there is no infallible means of safely attributing commitment to an implicitly conveyed

representation, notwithstanding the fact that hearers very frequently do take their chances and infer commitment on insecure grounds. This will lead us to defend the idea that the output representation of commitment attribution is a degree-sensitive belief.

Our discussion of commitment attribution will make use of the notion of *resemblance* (cf. Wilson 2000) and involve examples of both direct and indirect speech.

2. Commitment attribution as an output of pragmatic inference

2.1 *Two pragmatic perspectives on commitment*

We see two main ways of addressing the issue of speaker commitment. One stems from Speech act theory, and extends to a relatively homogeneous paradigm of approaches envisaging communication as a particular type of human action or behaviour. Under this view, commitment relates to what people do and the way they do it in interaction, and is accessible through linguistic traces in discourse. Under this perspective, the way a content is presented constrains speaker commitment. Take for instance (1) and (2):

- (1) Laszlo is rich.
- (2) Is Laszlo rich?

(1) and (2) express the same propositional content, roughly that an individual referred to as Laszlo has the property of being rich. The difference lies in the fact that in (1) the speaker can be taken to believe that Laszlo is rich, whereas in (2) she communicates that she doesn't know whether this is the case or not, and that this is in fact the point of her question. In other words, in (1) the speaker can be taken to commit to the truth of the asserted propositional content, but not in (2).

However, as noted by Katriel & Dascal (1989) and Beyssade & Marandin (2006),¹ the scope of commitment is not reducible to matters of propositional truth. If individuals who perform an assertion can be said to commit to the truth of its propositional content, they can also be taken to commit to the fact that they have performed an assertion; it would therefore be expected that they can also commit to having performed other speech acts. In this sense, we could say that, once she formulates a question, a speaker can *ipso facto* be taken to commit to having performed a question, even if she did not commit to the propositional content in doing so. This suggests that commitment is not exclusively a matter of propositional content: people can also be taken to commit to having performed such and such a speech act (i.e. the illocution), to its content, and/or both. According to Katriel & Dascal (1989: 277), commitment to an illocutionary act is not optional; they thus conceive of commitment as an

“absolute” concept (i.e. a “yes-or-no” notion), rather than a “degree” concept in that the performance of a speech act necessarily entails commitment to having performed an illocutionary act (once a speaker has issued a speech act, she becomes committed to the fact that she has performed it).

When it comes to assessing commitment to a propositional content, Katriel & Dascal (1989) acknowledge that it is more complex, since some speech acts typically do express this type of commitment (e.g. assertions), while some do not (e.g. questions), and others express a somehow weaker commitment (e.g. assertions about questionable assumptions, as in “I think Laszlo is coming, but I cannot guarantee it”, where the speaker conveys some – although not maximal – degree of commitment to the proposition “Laszlo is coming”). Katriel & Dascal (1989) suggest that the way out of this rather problematic situation is to grasp commitment to propositional content through the notion of *involvement*, by applying the degree component associated to the notion of involvement to describe situations where the speaker’s attitude towards the propositional content can be variable.²

While speakers can be taken to commit to having performed a speech act by virtue of their communicative behaviour (in that a speaker’s ostensive utterance is an indication that she intends to communicate something, which in turn could be an indication that she is committed to what Sperber and Wilson call the *communicative intention*), it is the hearer’s responsibility to figure out which illocutionary force the speaker has committed to. In other words, we agree with the idea that commitment to an illocutionary force is always present and that it is not optional. However, this does not tell us much about the nature or the type of commitment one is likely to attribute to a speaker. We will argue that the identification of commitment is a process which cannot be dissociated from processes of meaning construction.

If commitment can indeed reasonably be taken to scope over propositional contents, beliefs, intentions, illocutionary forces and so on, we suggest that it does not necessarily mean that the account of commitment should be different for each of these objects. We defend a moderately reductionist approach stating that speakers commit to *mental representations*, which allows one to do away with unnecessary complexity for an account of commitment attribution, in that all of these components, which can be part of the assumptions a hearer makes about what the speaker intends to communicate, are mental representations. We thus make no distinction between commitment to an illocutionary force and commitment to a content. Inasmuch as we postulate that both of these components of *meaning* are mental representations (albeit about different objects), we will assume that the mechanisms that lead to the recognition of one or the other are the same.

Globally, on the speech-act-theoretic view, commitment relates to what a speaker can be expected to comply with when uttering a proposition. It should be noted that the focus here is set on the speaker’s production and the expected

consequences and implications of her performance. If a speaker performs a speech act such as a promise, she will become committed to the promise in the eyes of the hearer (even when the speaker is being insincere, as long as the hearer thinks she is being cooperative), but it is also expected that she act accordingly in order to satisfy it. The speech-act-theoretic account of commitment thus focuses mainly on speaker behaviour in terms of the consequences involved in the performance of a speech act, both on a propositional and praxeological level.

An alternative approach to commitment comes from the neo- and post-Gricean accounts of the explicit/implicit distinction; oversimplifying things (for now), we could say that perspectives such as Bach's (1999) and Sperber & Wilson's (1995) lead to the idea that the speaker can be taken to (fully) commit herself only to explicit contents³ (but the discussion on how to discriminate explicit vs. implicit contents has not yet reached a clear consensus). Cognitive pragmatics in particular (Sperber & Wilson 1995) focuses on utterance interpretation relatively to its implications in context. The core of this type of approach lies in the assumption that meaning is calculated inferentially and that what we communicate is semantically underspecified so that the interpretation of an utterance requires pragmatic enrichment in order to capture its actual *meaning*, which includes context-sensitive components of explicit meaning (the *explicatures*) and implicit meaning (the *implicatures*). This assumption in turn supposes that making sense of an utterance rests on the attribution of certain intentions to the speaker; namely, in the Sperber-Wilson tradition, an *informative intention* (of conveying a content to someone) and a *communicative intention* (of making the informative intention manifest). The focus is set here on the hearer and on the cognitive mechanisms by which communicative stimuli are processed. These cognitive operations range from semantic or logically necessary entailments to the derivation of implicit assumptions. The account develops a model of different parallel-running cognitive operations an individual performs when deriving full speaker meaning, which we summarise as follows:⁴

- The hearer derives the logical form of the stimulus, which is a syntactically and semantically structured sequence of concepts that supplies a sort of template for further processing.
- A propositional form and other explicatures are derived, mainly through disambiguation and enrichment of the logical form.
- Conceptual representations are processed together with retrievable contextual information, in order to produce implicatures and derive a speaker's full-fledged intentional meaning.

Furthermore, for this approach, the path the mind will take in processing information is the one that best fits the ratio between the effort required and the anticipated effect, as stated by the "principle of relevance". The relevance

engine thus provides a tool allowing us to make assumptions on why and how a particular interpretation is obtained. This idea applied to communication leads to the following assumptions: the less effort a representation requires to be derived, the more it is likely to be relevant, and therefore the more it is likely to match the speaker's intentional meaning. Likewise, the more contextual effects a representation produces with regard to the cognitive environment, the more it is likely to be relevant, and therefore, the more it will be likely to match the speaker's intentional meaning. Both options converge in the idea that the representation with the best ratio between cognitive effort and contextual effect is the one which can be taken to correspond best to the speaker's original intention.

We postulate that the assumptions about speaker commitment are derived on the basis of a contextualized communicative stimulus. In line with Sperber and Wilson (1995), we assume that the procedure followed in order to derive it involves deductive non-demonstrative reasoning. It is trivial today to say that humans do not exclusively use logical devices when they process information; we see every day that we are frequently keen to bypass certain logical rules and to privilege varieties of plausible reasoning and fallacies, without it being a serious problem for successful information processing. Non-demonstrative reasoning does not provide proofs, but confirmations, reinforcements or weakenings of assumptions, i.e. of any piece of information available to the hearer at any moment. Nonetheless, information processing is not random; the human mind can reasonably be taken to follow certain procedures to deal with stimuli of different kinds, according to inferential mechanisms such as deduction, involving premises and conclusions, yet without the necessity of formal proofs, to the extent that simple confirmations can make up for the requisites of successful communication.⁵

Commitment refers to the way the content and performance of an utterance are endorsed by the speaker. But taken as such, that is, as a speaker's mental state, it does not allow for a definite description, for the speaker's *actual* mental states regarding the utterance always remain somehow private and thus cannot be accessed directly.⁶ Therefore, we assume that what is relevant for the account is not so much what the speaker is actually committed to, but what her contribution allows the hearer to infer about her commitment (be it actual or not, which is altogether another question). The rationale behind our account of *commitment attribution*, therefore, is that what is *communicated* is crucial, not so much what is actually there, in the speaker's mind. That is why we distinguish, as far as the account of commitment *in communication* is concerned, between an account of commitment and an account of commitment attribution. Furthermore, our focus will be on the *belief* a hearer will form about what he infers the speaker has committed to in making her utterance; in turn, we contend that (i) this belief will prove useful for determining what the speaker actually intended to communicate, and (ii) that, as such, the belief may be subjected to

different degrees of certainty, which resonates with the intuition that sometimes hearers may entertain with variable degrees of strength the belief that a speaker has committed to a given content in making her utterance.

Our research aims at explaining how hearers make assumptions about speaker commitment on their own, even if commitment is not made explicit – or literal – by the speaker. In other words, we take commitment attribution to be an inferential process and accordingly assume that assessing a speaker's commitment to what she has communicated involves the same mechanisms as the derivation of any aspect of speaker meaning.

2.2 *Inferring commitment is a pragmatic process*

In ordinary communication, people may either attribute commitment to others quite straightforwardly (as when they attribute a commitment from an assertion), or on insecure grounds (in particular when they infer through implicature processing that the speaker is committed to manifesting a representation). We will investigate the conditions under which speaker commitment can be safely or unsafely attributed, suggesting that commitment attribution will be subjected to variable degrees of certainty, depending on the component of meaning it is inferred from (namely, depending on the locus of commitment, either at the explicit or the implicit level). The advantage of an account of constituents of meaning (see 2.1 above) as envisaged in the relevance-theoretic model lies in the possibility of situating inferences on commitment either at the explicature or the implicature level, as we will show in the next section.

We take inferences on commitment to be derived pragmatically, that is, on the basis of the utterance itself and the context invoked by it. By *pragmatically derived*, we mean that the derivation of both explicit and implicit content is a pragmatic process (see Carston 2001 and 2002 for elaborations on this). In particular, while it could be thought that the derivation of explicit content is merely a semantic process, Carston (2001) recalls Perry (1986) in arguing that some utterance components are left unsaid; these are compulsory in order to make sense of the utterance and work out its truth conditions, and have nonetheless to be retrieved pragmatically – i.e. with recourse to the context. Take for instance (3), from Carston (2001: 3):

- (3) X: How is Mary feeling after her first year at university?
Y: She didn't get enough units and can't continue.

The explicature (i.e. the development of a logical form into a propositional form that captures the speaker's intended explicit meaning) a hearer can derive from Y's utterance must be pragmatically enriched starting from the encoded meaning. Indeed, in order to make sense of the utterance on the explicit level, one needs to assign a referent to the pronoun *she*, develop the specific meaning of *get* and *units* (since here they are used in a particular, narrow, sense), specify

the use of *continue* (i.e. continue her studies) and establish the causal link between the two terms of the conjunction *and*. None of these operations can be performed without contextualizing the utterance, and it is in this respect that the mechanisms used to perform this type of operation are already pragmatic. Carston's assumption is that all this information, though not explicitly contained in the linguistic form, falls under the heading of explicitness, because without it, the utterance would not be successfully interpreted. Moreover, the literature on these constituents of meaning often suggests that they must be considered as part of the explicit meaning since the speaker can be taken to *commit herself* to the full-fledged proposition they belong to, inasmuch as she cannot cancel these contents or deny having produced them without yielding some kind of contradiction. This is a very complex issue on which we will focus shortly, for it is highly relevant when compared to the defeasibility of implicatures, which can prompt the hearer to *weakly* attribute commitment, contrarily to the strength with which a hearer may attribute commitment on the basis of explicit contents.

3. Non-retractability vs. denial: the explicit/implicit distinction

In the Gricean tradition, it is usually considered that explicit content is obtained by the saturation of semantic variables. Post-Gricean approaches (e.g. Relevance Theory) assume that explicit content corresponds to the developments of the logical form of an utterance (i.e. its explicatures), which are contents the speaker cannot retract. Here we will consider that explicit meaning is the content which the hearer believes to a maximal degree that the speaker has communicated; accordingly, we will consider that implicit meaning, in addition to not constituting a development of the logical form, corresponds to the content which the hearer believes to a lower than maximal extent that the speaker has communicated. As far as implicatures are concerned, this degree may turn out to be very high, or very low. It is for instance very high in typical indirect speech acts (e.g. in indirect requests such as "Can you pass the salt?"), since the speaker, who is aware of the context, the conversational conventions and the situation of speech, cannot reasonably be suspected of not having anticipated the inference to be drawn by the hearer. The same could be said to hold for any highly relevant implicature, or any implicature drawn with recourse to very salient contextual premises. Yet, in cases where the contextual premises are less salient, and/or cases where the implicature turns out to be less relevant, the belief the hearer forms about the speaker's having committed to that content will be entertained with less strength – which is why misunderstandings or the need for confirmation may arise. The very nature of this distinction between explicit and implicit content in our view is significantly influential on the processes by which hearers attribute commitment in ordinary communication.

Let us start by examining some properties of the explicit/implicit nature of these constituents of meaning. The issue of speaker retractability, briefly evoked

above with respect to explicatures, constitutes an interesting cue for an account of commitment attribution: an intuitive – though simplistic – idea would be to consider that speakers can only be taken to commit to contents they have *explicitly* conveyed, on the basis that they would be hard-pressed to retract the explicit content of something they uttered, while they could at first glance be able to retract a representation they have implicitly communicated.⁷ Under this view, commitment would characterize that which speakers cannot retract, and, more precisely, commitment would be conceived of as the speaker's endorsement of a set of representations she cannot retract because she *communicated* them. In what follows we discuss the extent to which the nature of constituents of meaning on which hearers base their inferences influences commitment attribution.

3.1 *Explicatures and commitment*

Following the idea that explicit commitments are easy to spot and safely attributable to a speaker on the grounds of the explicatures yielded by her utterance, we can posit that when a speaker communicates a content *P* in the form of an assertion, she *ipso facto* communicates her commitment to *P*; otherwise this would yield a logical inconsistency. To take an example, if a speaker tries to retract the commitment attached to her assertion that “Laszlo is German”, she would somehow turn out to assert something like (4), if we understand retraction as a way for a speaker to make it clear that she did not mean *P*:

- (4) ? Laszlo is German but I'm not telling you that it is true that Laszlo is German.⁸

If a speaker retracted a commitment that was “legitimately” inferred by the hearer (since it was explicitly communicated – that is, a commitment that was intrinsically attached to the explicatures derivable from the utterance), this would yield interpretive problems. It would support the idea that commitments inferred from explicit information constitute “safe bets” for hearers, since (i) the speaker would experience some kind of difficulty in retracting them, and (ii) the assumptions called for in order to interpret the message are prompted by explicatures, *and thus fall under the speaker's responsibility*. As explicatures are intimately linked to linguistic form, any speaker commitment a hearer derives from them could therefore safely be taken to be endorsed by the speaker. This is particularly significant, since it entails that the speaker who meant these explicatures to go through cannot, under cooperative and ordinary circumstances, help but being held liable to having committed to them.⁹

Commitment attribution on the basis of explicature processing seems safe; a speaker may indeed be liable for the explicit contents she encodes in her utterance. This idea can be grasped through the notion of “representation by

resemblance” (Wilson 2000: 142): the hearer’s understanding of the speaker’s informative intention (including assumptions about commitment to the communicated representation) can be explained by his establishing a resemblance between intended content – from the speaker’s perspective – and derived content – from the perspective of the addressee. In other words, when a hearer grasps the explicit meaning of an utterance, he derives a representation (in terms of the explicatures he is able to draw) that sufficiently resembles the representation the speaker intended to communicate (in terms of the explicatures she may associate to her utterance). This resemblance bears a relatively high degree of likelihood as far as explicatures are concerned, since it is drawn from explicitly encoded information.

For successful communication to occur, of course, it is crucial for a hearer to entertain as safely as possible hypotheses regarding what the speaker intends to make manifest with her utterance. There are cases however for which the safeness or reliability of hypotheses about what one can take the speaker to have meant is not only relevant for understanding but also for evaluating whether a particular piece of information has to be converted into a belief entertained with a certain degree of strength. We think that this is an important aspect of reported speech and thought, and we suggest that prefatory verbs introducing the reported content exhibit semantic constraints on, precisely, commitment attribution. Observing this in more detail, we will suggest some hypotheses regarding how embedded contents (i.e. reported contents) can be extracted from the embedding clause in order to be evaluated as pieces of possibly relevant information in themselves. However, the reliability of reported information does not, we argue, depend on the grammatical type of report (direct / indirect).

One may in effect wonder if the process by which hearers establish a resemblance between the speaker’s representations and those they derive from the speaker’s utterance when they attribute commitment from explicature processing is as straightforward in configurations of speech where access to the speaker’s representation is by definition indirect (as, e.g., in reported speech). Such cases are particularly complex, if only because the hearer has to deal with two speech instances, the original speaker (henceforth OS) and the reporting speaker (henceforth RS), and because the relationship between OS’s intended meaning and the hearer’s derived meaning is mediated by RS’s report. We would like to examine this particular issue, focusing for now on cases where the hearer makes assumptions about OS’s commitment on the grounds of explicature processing.¹⁰

We postulate, in line with Saussure (2006) that, in reported speech, RS’s utterance (which contains a preface and a proposition *P* attributable to OS) is a metarepresentation (as per Sperber 2000) of OS’s original utterance. In such a metarepresentation, RS provides a representation of another representation, attributed to OS, but it is RS’s choice (i) to represent that particular representation, (ii) to choose its linguistic form and (iii) to give hints about

whether the embedded representation was originally communicated with the same wording or not. This last point has a major impact, we claim, on the reliability of the reported content, which in turn affects commitment attribution to OS.

Reported speech can be anything ranging from a faithful report (i.e., an utterance yielding a representation which bears a very high degree of resemblance to what OS actually communicated) to a risky interpretation, and this is reflected notably by the preface type RS uses to relay OS's original utterance.

The simplest of all configurations of information relaying encompasses utterances which explicitly convey that what is communicated (either in its form or in its content) is a faithful report of OS's communication. In this sense, we consider that direct reported speech as in (5) and some instances of indirect reported speech, as in (6), are both able to inform the hearer that the representation communicated in RS's utterance resembles the representation OS intended to communicate in the first place:

(5) Laszlo said: "I'll come".

(6) Laszlo said, word for word, that he would/will come.

When processing (5) and (6), the hearer is led to infer (unless otherwise prompted by contextual information) that OS actually said *P*, because it is explicitly encoded (i.e. it is part of the explicatures of RS's utterance) that RS is faithfully reporting or relaying the information. The original lexical choices are presented in (6) as having been explicitly kept, allowing for some variation regarding tense sequence and personal pronouns. With respect to commitment attribution, the hearer infers that Laszlo is strongly committed to *P*, simply because, through (5) and (6), Laszlo is presented as having explicitly stated the propositional content embedded in *P*. As a consequence, RS communicates that she entertains as a true belief the proposition "Laszlo himself is committed to coming". This should come as no surprise, considering the oddness of (7):

(7) ? In my opinion, Laszlo said he would come.

For (7) to make sense would require a very specific context where the issue at stake is not so much Laszlo's commitment to coming, but rather establishing what it is exactly that Laszlo said. Yet in any other context, this would seem odd since the expression *in my opinion* precisely communicates that what we are dealing with is a speaker's interpretation (and not a report). Therefore, (7) somehow reveals an incompatibility between expressions communicating that RS is providing her own interpretation and the semantics of *say that P*, which prompts for a resemblance between the explicatures of RS's utterance and those of OS's original utterance. In turn, this would tend to support the idea that *say*

that *P* semantically encodes that we are dealing with a report, or, in relevance parlance, that this information is part of the explicatures of *say that P*, licensing at the same time inferences about a high degree of explicature resemblance between Laszlo's *P* and RS's *P*.

Now, in indirect speech reports such as (8) – in a context where someone relays what Laszlo has answered when asked if he intended to come – we are led to infer that *P* is the result of the reporting speaker's processing of explicatures, even when there is no direct quote, or no explicit evidence of a 100% faithful report. (9) to (12) below are various utterances that Laszlo may have actually produced which could correspond to the report in (8):

- (8) Laszlo said he would come.
- (9) "I'll come".
- (10) "I'll be there".
- (11) "You can count on me".
- (12) "Yes".

In (8), the hearer is led to infer that OS said *P* or at least that OS communicated a representation which resembles the representation conveyed in *P*, and more precisely that the explicatures derivable from *P* (embedded in RS's utterance), resemble¹¹ the explicatures derivable from OS's actual utterance. In this respect, it does not really matter what exactly Laszlo said for the hearer to assess his commitment to coming, given that *say* encodes that Laszlo's *P* and RS's *P* share the same explicatures. In fact, Laszlo could very well have explicitly formulated (9), (10), (11) or (12) in the first place; it has no incidence on the nature of the relayed proposition, because the relevant explicatures yielded by these utterances are equivalent. We postulate that this information is supplied by the semantics of *say*, to the extent that it communicates a high degree of resemblance (i.e. a similar amount of relevant information) between the explicatures associated to OS's original utterance and those associated to *P*. This, we suggest, leads the hearer to attribute to OS strong commitment to *P*, since under normal, cooperative, circumstances if one says *P*, one communicates that *P* is entertained as a true belief, i.e. a belief to which one can reasonably taken to commit.

However, we notice that if (11) was the original utterance produced by Laszlo, one would think that the assumption "Laszlo will come", reported by the speaker, is an implicature. This calls for two important remarks. The first is that we assume that RS explicitly communicates that the representation communicated in her report is faithful to OS's, despite the fact that it may actually not be so with 100% reliability. In other words, what counts here for us is that RS commits herself to the fact that *P* was communicated with a high degree of explicitness (this assumption resulting from the semantics of *say*). The second remark is that here we don't have an implicature *stricto sensu* but an

explicature. Deriving “I’ll come” on the basis of (11), or from (12) or (10), does not require accessing an implicit premise (totally independent, as such, from the proposition expressed). In all three cases, semantically-driven meaning completion takes place. In (12), the pro-utterance straightforwardly embeds the propositional content of the question. In (10), it is the anaphoric saturation of *there* that provides the information equivalent to “I’ll come”: *I’ll come* requires the unarticulated constituent *to place X* to be pragmatically added when developing a full-fledged propositional content on the basis of the logical form.¹² With (11), similar processing occurs, since semantically, as a type, this form requires a complement (you can count on me *to/for x*, and in the particular context where Laszlo is asked “Will you come?”, *for x* would translate as *for coming/for being there*); Carston (2001) has argued quite convincingly that these types of pragmatic enrichment yield explicatures, not implicatures.

In sum, we observe that there is no significant difference between direct and indirect reported speech with prefaces signalling faithful reports as to the way the hearer attributes commitment to OS, since the inferences he is likely to draw are based in both cases on the preface’s prompting for explicature resemblance.

In this section we have first considered how commitment attribution can unfold when based on explicature processing on behalf of the hearer. Constrained by a problematic retraction, speakers cannot cancel explicit contents, once they have been uttered, without this resulting in some kind of inconsistency or without provoking the hearer’s reassessment of commitment attribution. In the case of reported speech, be it direct or indirect, and provided the hearer assumes RS to be cooperative, as long as RS encodes in the preface that what follows can be taken as faithfully reporting OS’s original utterance (i.e. as long as the explicatures derivable from *P* are presented as resembling the explicatures derivable from OS’s original utterance, this assumption in turn being supplied by the semantics of the preface), the hearer can *safely* interpret that OS is committed to *P*. This is the conclusion to which a hearer is likely to be led, provided the explicatures yielded by the speaker’s lexical choice in relaying the information (e.g. with verbs such as *say*, *certify*, *declare*, etc.) convey a high degree of reliability concerning *P*,¹³ and as long as the context does not interfere with the process of explicature derivation outlined here.

So far we have examined how commitment attribution is likely to take place when it hinges on the explicatures associated to an utterance. We have seen, quite predictably, that commitment can safely be attributed to the speaker on these bases, since her potential retraction would be difficult to manage. This, we argued, is also the case in speech reports, either direct or indirect, as long as RS is being cooperative, and as long as she can be taken to provide a representation that resembles the representation OS communicated in the first place – a type of information usually prompted by the preface she chooses. The question we will explore next is the extent to which the criterion of non-retractability can (or

cannot) also be used to attribute commitment in cases where the latter scopes over implicit material.

3.2 *Implicatures and commitment*

It could be assumed that speakers cannot be taken to commit to implicit contents on the grounds that implicatures are defeasible and that, in addition, it is the hearer who is himself responsible for some of the assumptions mobilized in deriving the implicature. This assumption may nevertheless prove overly radical because it leads to apparently counter-intuitive consequences. For instance, if one says *Can you pass the salt?*, even if this request is implicated, hence not explicit, it is plausible to assume that the speaker committed to it in uttering the question. This observation stems from the difficulty of figuring out a situation where a speaker, provided all the contextual conditions are met for the indirect speech act to take place, denies her commitment by saying that she didn't actually mean to request the salt, given the conventional usage of certain indirect requests. Still, the fact remains that she can deny having intended the implicature to go through *without causing an inconsistency*, for example if, for some reason, she indeed only wanted to evoke the addressee's physical ability to pass the salt. Under normal circumstances, however, hearers do attribute commitment on the basis of implicit contents, whenever they infer that these are part of speaker meaning (i.e., whenever they infer that these were intended); in fact, requests are frequently expressed this way, as suggested by examples about passing objects. The issue is therefore to find a way of accounting for this possibility.

A discussion should be undertaken at this point, regarding the operability of the non-retractability criterion in an account of commitment. While in cases of commitment attribution derived on the grounds of explicature processing non-retractability seems to work, given that the speaker has no reasonable way of denying the correctness of the explicatures the hearer derived from her utterance, things are not as straightforward in cases where hearers attribute commitment on the basis of implicature processing. The reason for this is that one cannot retract what one has not done, and as a consequence, one cannot publicly retract intentions one has not made publicly manifest. A classical claim was that implicatures are contents which one can retract. Yet, it's uneasy to evaluate whether an implicature, if indeed intended, was not made publicly manifest, since otherwise the speaker would not have achieved her goal of communicating it. In Burton-Roberts's terms, "EITHER the speaker intended by her utterance to implicate that *P* – and therefore did – in which case she cannot undo (or 'cancel') that, OR she did not so intend, in which case there is no implicature to cancel in the first place" (2006: 7; author's emphasis), and "What was intended was intended – end of story" (2006: 1). Indeed, it would appear quite contradictory for one to be able to retract something one did not do or did not intend to do. It would therefore be safer, as concerns commitment attribution

on the basis of implicature processing, to speak of *denial* rather than retraction (or, as Burton-Roberts (2006: 5) terms it, albeit in relation to explicatures, *clarification*).¹⁴ This does not mean that speakers can deny having committed to just any aspect of meaning;¹⁵ rather, it suggests that speakers can deny having endorsed implicit contents, by communicating to the hearer that he was somehow wrong in inferring an implicature which was never intended in the first place. A major difference, thus, between commitment attribution drawn from explicatures and commitment attribution drawn from implicatures is one we find in Capone's (forth.) concluding remark, namely that, "[w]hile it makes sense to say that potential implicatures leave an 'out' for the speaker, it is not very reasonable to say that explicatures give the speaker an 'out'". He adds, convincingly in our sense, that "[t]he purpose of committing oneself to a proposition is to leave no room for disagreement as to what the speaker actually means". The hearer's proper derivation of explicatures, insofar as they are attached to the linguistic form, is not likely to be questioned by the speaker (unless she acknowledges that her utterance was ill-formulated and that it did not convey what she actually meant); the hearer's proper derivation of implicatures, conversely, can reasonably be questioned by the speaker. We claim that this is by virtue of the fact that some of the assumptions mobilized in its computation fall under the hearer's responsibility, not under the speaker's. More precisely, these are the assumptions which are not *communicated* by the utterance.

Let us take a series of examples to consider commitment attribution with respect to implicit information:

- (13) Laszlo: "The garbage can is full again".
- (14) a. Laszlo: "The garbage can is full again".
 - b. Lucinda: "I'm busy; I cannot take it out now".
 - c. Laszlo: "I was just pointing out that it's full".
- (15) Laszlo: "The garbage can is full again. But don't worry, I'll take it out".

(13) allows for an implicit request to be derived. If the hearer understands it as such, proceeds to taking out the garbage, and moreover if Laszlo does not prevent him from doing so, then we can say that Laszlo indeed implicated the request, and therefore he can safely be held liable to having committed to it. This is a straightforward example illustrating the possibility of (correctly) attributing speaker commitment on the basis of implicitly conveyed information (as evoked above with implicit requests). Now in (14c), Laszlo communicates that Lucinda's interpretation in (14b) does not correspond to what he meant in (14a), that is, that Lucinda's derivation of the implicature was inappropriate. In other words, in (14c), Laszlo is not retracting his actual commitment: he is pointing out that Lucinda wrongly attributed to him a somewhat "post hoc" commitment, by making it clear that his utterance was not a request.

Accordingly, he makes clear that there was no commitment in the first place. This shows that there are also cases of *commitment misattribution* on the basis of implicature processing.¹⁶

Now, even if (14) seems to indicate that Laszlo did not commit to the implicature Lucinda derived, it does not mean that commitment cannot be attributed as a possible output of implicature processing: it merely shows that the communicative situation in (14) is distinct from one where commitment to the implicature would be legitimately inferable (e.g. (13)). The contrast between (13) and (14) moreover suggests, as far as inferences on commitment are concerned, that misattribution of intended implicit meanings entails misattribution of commitment. This, in turn, is an indication that (i) commitment attribution is intimately linked with figuring out speaker meaning, and (ii) commitment attribution is trickier when drawn from implicit meanings, since the very nature of implicature processing involves a somewhat variable degree of certainty. This is why we take commitment attribution resulting from implicitly communicated representations to be different, in terms of the degree of certainty associated with the inference, from commitment attribution resulting from explicitly communicated information.

The relevant observation we think emerges from (14) that speakers can deny having endorsed implicit contents. This should come as no surprise, considering that implicatures are defeasible. An implicature calls for contextual assumptions to be selected as premises for reasoning; but it is the hearer who is responsible for invoking the appropriate hypotheses, and in this sense there is always a degree of uncertainty (a hearer can never obtain formal proofs that the assumptions he considers in processing implicatures correspond to those the speaker has mobilized herself, unless he asks her, *a posteriori*). So it is by virtue of the defeasibility of implicatures that speakers are absolved of responsibility, with the consequence that hearers processing implicatures cannot seek to obtain a 100% guarantee that speakers are actually committed to the representation they derive: with implicatures, the hearer retrieves a propositional premise from the context at his own risk, not just an unarticulated constituent or a variable saturation (as with explicatures). After all, hearers may always invoke assumptions which the speaker did not intend to be invoked. This is why hearers may well misattribute commitments (as in example (14)).

In example (15) above, Laszlo manifests a state of affairs (“the garbage can is full”), and immediately cancels the potential implicature by anticipating the hearer’s possible reaction to the utterance, communicating at the same time, somehow metalinguistically, that the utterance is not meant to formulate a request. Does this entail that Laszlo denies *ipso facto* having committed to the request? This is quite unclear, since all (15) shows is that Laszlo, *in the end*, is not committed to having requested that the hearer take the garbage out, although he is still committed to wanting the garbage out of his home. But nothing in (15) allows us to establish whether Laszlo was originally committed to implicitly

asking the hearer to take the garbage out. What we can say, though, is that Laszlo managed to prevent the hearer from believing that the utterance, in the end, was meant to perform a request. Example (15) thus illustrates that speakers do have intuitions about the way hearers attribute commitment, to the extent that they can anticipate these processes and facilitate the hearer's task if they feel there is a need to do so.

In light of these examples, it seems consequently more precise to assume that implicit contents are contents about which speakers do not *overtly* communicate their commitment, thus leaving it up to the hearer to evaluate whether his inference on speaker commitment is accurate. Attributing commitment via implicature processing is a highly contextual endeavour. This is where we assume the degree component of commitment attribution to lie: if based on implicature processing, commitment attribution will be highly context-dependent, and *ipso facto*, degree-sensitive. If the hearer considers that his selection of contextual assumptions is appropriate, he will trust his judgement that the speaker is committed to the implicature as a consequence of his judgement that what he inferred was indeed the intended implicature; if he is relatively unsure as to the accuracy of his contextual selection, he may actually assign a lower degree of certainty to his belief that the speaker is committed to the implicature he derived. Now, as far as *actual* speaker commitment is concerned, it turns out to be very difficult to be categorical: a hearer may be 100% confident that he correctly derived the implicature and still be wrong about speaker commitment (after all, misunderstandings are always possible and do happen in ordinary communication); it is in this respect that misattribution of implicated content leads to misattribution of speaker commitment. What our model addresses, however, is the degree to which a hearer will end up entertaining the belief that the speaker is committed to the implicature, regardless of whether the speaker is actually committed or not.

These considerations are easily translatable in terms of representation by resemblance: as long as the hearer takes his interpretation to resemble the speaker's intended representation, he will consider that he has successfully interpreted speaker meaning. This holds both for explicatures and implicatures. The difference between them lies in the idea that the epistemic status of commitment attribution is stronger when commitment is attributed on the basis of explicature processing and weaker when attributed on the basis of implicature processing. We suggest that the degree of certainty of the latter correlates to the degree of certainty the hearer associates to the implicature he derived, which itself correlates to the degree of certainty the hearer associates with the contextual assumption he entertains with less strength.

If we turn now to issues of commitment attribution on the basis of implicature resemblance in reported speech in order to assess whether this particularly complex speech configuration complies with the account outlined above, we posit that in such cases RS presents *P* as her own interpretation, thus

leading the hearer to infer that *P* is the result of implicature processing, by RS, of OS's original utterance. The hearer is thus led to infer that *P*, being an implicature, resembles one or several of the implicatures derivable from OS's original utterance, since there is no direct access to the original utterance's explicatures. Take for instance:

(16) Laszlo implied/hinted that he would come.

In saying *implied that P*, RS indicates that she is not dealing with the explicatures of OS's original utterance, with the result that the hearer infers that RS's utterance is an interpretation and not a faithful report. The hearer's inability to access OS's original utterance denies the possibility of checking for faithful explicatures. In other words, in cases like this the hearer is directed to focus on implicature processing rather than explicature processing. The lexical semantics of *imply* conveys *explicitly* that what is communicated by *P* is the result of RS's pragmatic processing of implicatures (i.e. an interpretation, as opposed to a report).

An important consequence of such cases, for the hearer, is that he cannot access the original intentional meaning, as *P* is given as an interpretation already processed by RS. This has another predictable consequence: the information derived by the hearer will necessarily be subjected to a certain degree of uncertainty (*viz.* OS's actual position towards *P*), since it is based on non-demonstrative deductive reasoning by RS, which is already subjected to a certain degree of uncertainty. Simply said, it is possible that RS misprocessed the original stimulus; this possibility is qualitatively higher in such cases than in cases where the prefatory expression communicates the explicitness of the original content.¹⁷ This may have strong consequences in reports on sensitive issues, where the hearer seeks to obtain the highest degree of reliability in establishing what OS explicitly said.

RS can also present her own interpretation with certain modifiers, such as in (17):

(17) Laszlo said he would come, but he said it implicitly.

These markers can modify verbs like *say*, *claim* or *deny* so that they present *P* not as a report, but as the result of an interpretation.¹⁸ In this respect, these markers function equivalently to verbs like *imply*, *hint* or *mean*. The interesting point about example (17) is that the explicit modifier (*implicitly*) reveals a "loose use" of *said* (i.e., here, the meaning of *say* must be pragmatically accommodated in order not to be inconsistent with the second clause).

In examples (16) and (17) the preface explicitly conveys implicitness in the way Laszlo's original utterance is relayed by RS. With such utterances, the hearer cannot directly – and thus cannot safely – infer Laszlo's commitment to

the content of RS's utterance. Based on the inference that RS is committed to her own *interpretation* of Laszlo's original intended meaning, what the hearer can safely interpret is that RS attributed to Laszlo a commitment relying on her own processing of implicatures she drew from Laszlo's utterance; in this sense, she is herself (i.e. RS) responsible for the interpretation she then communicates to the hearer. Since direct access to the actual original utterance and its explicatures is impossible, it follows that Laszlo cannot be held liable for the content of *P*, as (re)presented by RS, and in turn that he may, if relevant and possible, be able to deny his commitment to *P*. Still, what is important in (16) and (17) is that RS presents her interpretation of Laszlo's original utterance, and communicates that in her opinion, he committed to coming, whatever his actual utterance – and his actual commitment – may have been.

Now this is not to say that hearers may not attribute commitment to OS via RS's interpretation of OS's original utterance; rather, it means that there is no way of *safely* attributing commitment to OS via RS's interpretation of OS's original utterance, which in turn calls for an additional constraint, namely the hearer's degree of trust in RS. In such cases, either we eliminate the risk by refusing to trust RS, and accept that we will know nothing about OS's mental states, or we decide to trust RS's interpretation, considering that if no contextual information contradicts it, the relayed information is correct and that what RS believes about OS's mental state regarding *P* corresponds to OS's actual mental state about *P*, notwithstanding the possibility that this information may prove wrong.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, our discussion of commitment attribution in standard, cooperative, communication has led us to the following conclusions:

- i. Commitment attribution is part of meaning construction, in that hearers assess commitment on the grounds of explicature and implicature processing.
- ii. If commitment, taken as a speaker category, is an absolute notion, *commitment attribution* is a degree-sensitive notion: while commitment derived from explicit content corresponds to a belief associated with a high degree of certainty, its attribution on the basis of implicit content cannot, by virtue of the riskiness of implicature derivation, be safe, thus allowing one to situate inferences on commitment on a scale.
- iii. The explicit/implicit distinction proves useful in assessing the degree of reliability with which a hearer will consider that a speaker is committed; however, the account is restricted to what the hearer may infer, while *actual* speaker commitment, taken as a speaker's mental state, remains private.

Our discussion of reported speech highlighted that when relaying commitment, reporting speakers are responsible, via the preface they choose, for communicating the way they inferred the original speaker's commitment. In light of the examples discussed, we suggest that the perspective on commitment attribution outlined in this paper also holds for reported speech, with the reservation that the hearer's assessment of original speaker commitment will have to incorporate assumptions about the reporting speaker's observance of rational and cooperative standards of communication. Accordingly, the lexical choices a reporting speaker makes in relaying someone else's message may also constrain commitment attribution on the hearer's part.

To conclude, we'd like to stress that our account of commitment in ordinary communication crucially focuses on *what hearers consider that speakers have communicated*, for we assume that language users assess each other's commitments the same way they calculate meaning. In that respect, the outlined model should be taken as a contribution to the broader body of research which deals with how people know about other people's mental states in and through communication.

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Notes

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¹ Cf. Introduction.

² Katriel & Dascal's (1989) distinction between commitment and involvement states that the latter expresses the speaker's attitude towards the proposition, or "mode of participation" (Katriel & Dascal 1989: 276). While commitment to having performed a speech act is always there, speaker involvement may vary: "the 'stronger' an illocutionary point, the more the speaker is 'involved' in achieving its aim; the stronger a sincerity condition, the more the speaker is 'involved' in expressing the relevant psychological state represented in that condition." (1989: 278). This is a way of explaining for instance why a command carries stronger speaker involvement than a request, even if, in both cases, the speaker commits to having performed these speech acts.

³ See section 3 for an elaboration.

⁴ This sequential presentation has been adopted for clarity purposes. By no means do we suggest that the derivation of speaker meaning is a sequential process, to the extent that the derivation of implicatures may influence that of explicatures. As Carston (2002: 143) notes, "the important point is that the reasoning need not progress step by step from premises to conclusions. For instance, a particular conclusion, or type of conclusion, might be expected on the basis of considerations of relevance and, via a backwards inference process, premises constructed (explicatures and implicatures) which will make for a sound inference to the conclusion."

⁵ For a discussion of non-demonstrative inference, see Sperber & Wilson (1995: 65-117).

⁶ After all, the possibility that the speaker may simply be lying is always there, which makes access to *actual* speaker commitment problematic: private thoughts, as such, are not scrutable.

⁷ It could be assumed that it is precisely because the speaker cannot be taken as having committed to an implicature that these are defeasible. See below, section 3.2, for a discussion of retractability and commitment.

⁸ It should briefly be noted that a simple contradictory sentence would not have told us anything clear about speaker commitment and retractability, since contradictory utterances are usually automatically enriched pragmatically (an utterance like “Laszlo is German and/but he’s not German” is typically pragmatically accommodated in such a way that Laszlo’s “Germanness” is not inconsistent with some implications of his being non-German in a certain respect). However, (4) here cannot be taken as a simple contradiction, because the second part of the utterance contains metalinguistic information about the speaker’s uttering of the first part, and not about its propositional content. So we would have something of the form “*P* is true but it is not the case that I am saying that *P* is true”, which is different from “*P* is true but *P* is not true”, which in turn could be a reason why enrichment is rendered difficult in (4).

⁹ There are however problems with such a clear-cut distinction between explicitness related to non-retractability and implicitness related to retractability, which are a serious concern for several recent papers. We elaborate on this further down.

¹⁰ Let us state here that the following discussion holds for cases of standard cooperative communication, where the hearer straightforwardly assumes that the speaker (here RS) is observing Gricean conversational conventions such as cooperativeness and adequacy of her contribution to the shared goals of the exchange.

¹¹ Wilson (2000: 142-146) argues that quotation need not be a case of identity between source and quote, but rather a matter of resemblance between them, in that it is sufficient for both representations to share certain metalinguistic or interpretive properties. We suggest this is the case in direct reported speech and in instances of indirect reported speech which are modified to convey this, as in (6) above.

¹² The complement to *place X* is not a syntactic requisite but rather a pragmatic one, since *come* is syntactically autonomous, contrarily to, for instance, transitive verbs which require a complement. This, we assume, grants the complement’s introduction in (12) a pragmatic status and is thus a case of (pragmatic) enrichment.

¹³ Reliability is not the only aspect of the communicated content conveyed by the preface; it may also communicate RS’s attitude about the represented propositional content. Obviously, among the lexical nuances between different verb types like *declare that P* and *certify that P* – which should ideally be systematically studied in this respect – there are elements that directly concern RS’s viewpoint on *P* and, possibly on OS. With *declare that P* and *certify that P*, one can speculate that if the latter seems somehow stronger than the former, it is because with *declare*, RS’s attitude may be something like “OS is highly committed to *P*” probably because we usually take declarations to be public and somehow “official”; with *certify*, RS’s attitude may be something like “OS is highly committed to *P* because she has committed to *P* legally”. In other words, *certify* marks a socially stronger commitment than *declare*, which could explain why, without surprise, Vinzerich (2007) notes that there is no redundancy in an example like *The doctor declared and certified that P*. In any case, we assume that the kind of evidentiality expressed about the fact that the original utterance is *explicitly reported as reliable* is similar.

¹⁴ Retracting a commitment in principle would suppose that such a commitment has been made effective or manifest. This is the reason why we differentiate retractability from denial: a speaker may retract something he can be held liable for, but he denies something the hearer

inferred. In other words, retractability cannot concern anything but one's own actions, while denial can concern what others can infer about one's own actions.

¹⁵ It would be more difficult for speakers to deny explicatures since they are less context-dependent, and therefore the risk of misunderstandings is lower with explicatures than with implicatures.

¹⁶ Which we take to be a natural consequence of the inherent degree of risk associated to the derivation of implicatures (see below).

¹⁷ We'd like to add two remarks here.

1) Throughout this paper, we consider cases of standard communication, where participants take each other to be rational and cooperative. Therefore, our account of commitment attribution, particularly in reported speech, assumes that the hearer considers RS to be reliable in reporting what OS originally communicated. Thus we assume under these conditions that RS's choice of verbal preface constitutes a clear indication, for the hearer, about the nature of what RS is relaying (report/interpretation).

2) One could nevertheless still question whether the verbal preface is a reliable indication of the explicitness/implicitness with which the original message was communicated to RS. Our position amounts to considering that RS is responsible for the lexical choices she makes, and furthermore that, under cooperative circumstances, she is aware that these choices will orient the hearer's interpretation. In this case, we take it that RS would not have used *imply* if she intended to relay what OS actually said (in terms of the explicatures associated to OS's original utterance). In addition, we suggest that when a reporting speaker uses *say*, she *legitimately* prompts the hearer to process explicature resemblance between her report and OS's original utterance. If such is not the case, for instance if it turns out that RS's use of *say* is loosened, and provided contextual cues are not sufficiently salient to point to the loosening, we expect the hearer to be somehow misled and to ask for clarifications if required.

¹⁸ A Google search with the keywords *implicitly said* returned more than a thousand hits. One example in particular (found at <http://www.enotalone.com/forum/showthread.php?t=168457>) shows that language users are sensitive to the distinction between *explicitly say* and *implicitly say*:

- a. You say that you know she still has strong feelings for him but how do you know that? Has she explicitly or implicitly said so?

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