A Cognitivist Approach to *I promise* and *I guarantee* Constructions

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Abstract

This paper compares the constructional and functional properties of *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. Taking a usage-based perspective, it analyzes 563 spoken tokens of *I promise* constructions and 398 tokens of *I guarantee* constructions 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. Working within mental-spaces theory, 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. The frequency data indicate that the distinctive conceptual structures motivate their functional distributions.

**Keywords**

*I promise/guarantee* construction – commissive/epistemic modal – comparison – usage-based – mental spaces

1 Introduction

Humans are uniquely capable of conjecturing about concepts or situations that are not indexically accessible at the time. For example, we talk about situations of the past (e.g., *It rained hard yesterday*) or about hypothetical situations that we know will never occur (e.g., *If I were you, I would get some sleep*). The ability to conceptually accommodate such information entails (at least) two domains: a base domain where the speaker converses with the addressee(s) by means of such an utterance, and a domain conjectured by the use of the utterance and 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.* As the two worlds accommodate two situations, there are at least two viewpoints, one of which takes a stance toward the other. For instance, a sentence *I thought that he would become president* indicates that the speaker took a stance toward a hypothetical situation such that the speaker expected that the proposition would hold as true.

Among the various multilayered constructions\(^1\) of world-creating predicates, this study conducts a comparative investigation of two English constructions: *I promise (you) + X* and *I guarantee (you) + X*, where X indicates a lower clause as exemplified in (1).

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\(^1\) The term *construction* here refers to any idiosyncratic form-meaning pairing as in Hilpert (2019[2014]) and Fillmore, Lee-Goldman, and Rhodes (2012).
(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.*

The two constructions seem to be functionally similar. In both examples, 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), the speaker, the show host, has knowledge of the upcoming schedule, and is thus sure that he will make the focal situation happen. The speaker in (1b) also expresses her commitment toward a future course of action, specifically, something that the speaker intends to fulfill once the condition given in the protasis of the utterance (i.e., *once we’ve made an arrest*) is met.

The construals of these predicates, however, differ in some cases. While *promise* in (2a) carries the speaker’s intention of commitment, *guarantee* in (2b) does not necessarily do the same.

(2)  
a. *But they have been so supportive. I want to thank you most importantly, and I promise you that I will work so hard.*
b. *...But I guarantee you in an hour, I will forget them.*

(2a) is an excerpt from a speech given by Donald Trump. Mr. Trump intends to say that he commits himself to working hard in the future and that the situation in focus (him working hard) will take place because of his commitment to its occurrence. In contrast, the speaker in (2b) is not expressing the same kind of commitment but his strong belief as he had already said that he has a tendency to forget things easily. The focal situation has nothing to do with the speaker’s commitment to act, as he cannot control his forgetting.

Considering the irrealis nature of the focal situation X, furthermore, the non-past tense of the lower clause situation seems congruous with the semantic requirements of the predicates. However, as shown in (3), they are also employed in past-tense situations.

(3)  
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 (3a), a guest of TV talk show emphasizes that he tried not to break the time limit. In (3b), the speaker is expressing gratitude to her addressees for hanging out with her. Notice that the lower clause situations (i.e., *I tried in (3a) and I had more fun than you guys did in (3b)*) have already taken place, which is apparently incongruous with the lexical meaning of the predicates. They
nevertheless carry meaning, which is that the speaker vouches for the validity of the lower clause information. This epistemic modal construal emerges when predicates such as *promise* in the main clause combine with a lower clause situation with a certain set of conditions: a first-person subject and the past tense (Kwon, 2021).

As a study on the world-creating predicates that are related to the speaker’s commitment, this paper provides a usage-based comparative investigation of *I promise (you) + X* and *I guarantee (you) + X* constructions (the *I promise* construction and the *I guarantee* construction, henceforth). The spoken data (a total of 127,396,916 words) are from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The comparison of the two constructions is significant, because first, it sheds light on the subtly different meaning of the seemingly equivalent predicates as well as their functional overlap, and second, because it reports that the epistemic uses of the constructions emerge as the cognizer’s epistemic commitment overrides the irrealis situation requirement of the predicates. The epistemic uses of the constructions have not received cognitivist’s thorough attention in the field. Specifically, both constructions can have commissive and epistemic modal readings, and the reading in both cases depends on whether the lower clause contains a first-person subject and/or a past-tense predicate. It further addresses the more frequent co-occurrence of the *I guarantee* construction with conditional protases, discussing the conceptual motivation behind the pattern – whether the speaker’s commitment to the validity of the given situation is involved in the conceptual structure of the construction – which is conceptually intertwined with epistemic judgment. To account for the difference in conceptualization, Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier, 1997) is employed to consider the role of viewpoint interactions between the main and the lower conceptual layers.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides background on world-creating predicates, specifically commissives. Section 3 walks through the procedure of data collection for the two constructions and introduces the patterns accounted for in the data. Section 4 explicates each of the attested patterns in further detail. Section 5 compares the constructional properties of the two constructions, and suggests theoretical implications of the major findings. This chapter’s discussion includes mental space (Fauconnier, 1997) representations...

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2 The spoken subcorpus consists of transcripts of unscripted conversation from more than 150 different TV and radio programs (https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/texts.asp).

3 The notions of *commissive* and of *epistemic modal* here simply indicate the situation where the speaker’s commitment to do a course of action in the future is conveyed, and the situation where the degree of the speaker’s certainty matters, respectively, not necessarily referring to functional categories of an illocutionary type (as in *commissive vs. assertive*) and of a modality type (as in *deontic vs. epistemic modality*).
and frequency analyses for the purpose of clearly discerning the attested patterns of use and their conceptual motivations. Section 6 summarizes the overall discussion.

2 World-creating Predicates

The construal of the predicates promise and guarantee requires multiple conceptual layers. In addition to the domain in which the conversation is taking place, another conceptual domain accommodating what is promised or guaranteed needs to be conjured up. In addition, the complex constructions of I promise (you) + X and I guarantee (you) + X indicate that the matrix clause subject (the speaker) has a stance on what is promised or what is guaranteed in the lower clause X, even though the lower clause situation is not something that can be witnessed firsthand. McCawley (1993) labeled as world-creating this group of predicates with the distinctive characteristic of conjuring an alternative world. For example, the complement of believe refers to a “world of the experiencer’s belief” rather than to the real world (Ibid.: 415).

This particular set of verbs, specifically promise, has received much attention from formal syntacticians, semanticists, and pragmaticists. Generative syntacticians (e.g., Dowty, 1985; inter alia) have focused on its formal properties when it is used in the main clause of a catenative construction (i.e., Equivalent NP deletion or Control): the main clause verb “controls” the arguments of its embedded clause verb so that it determines the interpretation of the embedded clause subject. The construal of the I promise construction has also been briefly mentioned as an instance of a construction involving possible world semantics in the Formal Semantics tradition (Hintikka, 1969; Kratzer, 1981; inter alia). In addition, its function in relation to speech acts has been productively discussed in pragmatics (“performative”; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1989): the verb promise makes explicit reference to what kind of act is being performed (Lyons, 1981), and carries out a commissive speech act by which the speaker expresses his or her attitude of commitment to a future course of action. Verhagen (1996: 795) has exceptionally made a cognitive semantic observation of an epistemic use of promise as in Tomorrow promises to be a fine day as it does not predicate the grammatical subject, but the speaker’s evaluation of the applicability of the phrase to be a fine day (for more details, see Verhagen, 1996; 2000; Kwon, 2021).

However, these discussions have not focused on the commissive/epistemic modal understandings flexibly construed via dynamic interactions between the two conceptual layers. This paper employs Mental-Spaces Theory.
(Fauconnier, 1994; 1997) because the cognitively motivated theory transparently models the conceptual structure underlying the construal patterns of the two constructions without assuming necessarily a clear-cut boundary between what is encoded and what is implied. In fact, the approaches assuming the strict dichotomy between semantics and pragmatics would lack proper theoretical notions to handle this multi-layered phenomenon, where varied degrees of commissive/epistemic modal meanings emerge from the dynamic interactions between viewpoints of main-clause and embedded-clause situations (for the details of the varied-degree examples, see Section 4). Moreover, the predicate guarantee has not received as much attention, although it reveals subtle functional differences from promise along with their general functional similarities.

Kwon (2021) conducted a case study focusing on I promise X constructions, arguing that functional properties, rather than generalizations based on formal patterns, are key to understanding the nature of the uses of the construction. Based on the data collected from the COCA corpus, the study argued that complex-clause utterances of the form I promise X yield an epistemic modal reading as well as the canonical commissive reading. It explored major patterns of the construction sorted by the two major configurations of the embedded clause X: whether its grammatical subject is first person or not, and whether its verb is past tense or not. The results showed that a commissive speech act is more likely to be conveyed when the embedded clause subject is first person than when it is not, while a strongly positive epistemic modal meaning is conveyed whenever the embedded clause is past tense, regardless of the embedded clause subject. The epistemic modal meaning tends to be conveyed when the embedded clause has a non-first-person rather than a first-person subject. Kwon (2021) further demonstrated the differences in the conceptual structures when I promise constructions convey the commissive and the epistemic modal meanings. Let us take a look at the following contrastive pair:

(4) a. I promise we’ll come right back. (=1a)
    b. I promise I tried. (=3a)

The verb promise in (4a) conveys a commissive speech act as it indicates the speaker’s commitment to making the event happen (i.e., the talk show host will resume talking about the current topic right after a commercial break). In contrast, promise in (4b) conveys the speaker’s strongly positive epistemic stance toward the fact that the speaker tried (i.e., the talk show guest insists that he strove not to go over the time limit). Within mental spaces theory (MST; Fauconnier, 1997), these two construals are motivated by the conceptual structures modeled in Figures 1 and 2 (from Kwon [2021: 67–69]).
A mental space is an information packet that is (de)activated or remains (de)activated as discourse unfolds (Fauconnier, 1994; 1997). A mental space is structured by frame (Fillmore, 2006[1982]: 373): a frame is a conceptual scaffolding necessary to understand a concept as the concept makes sense only in the whole structure. As shown in Figure 1 representing (4a), the Base space accommodates all the currently relevant pieces of information behind the use of the utterance. As the utterance is part of a conversational exchange between two interlocutors, the speaker (S) and the addressee (H), and as they address a certain subject matter (SbjM), the Base space accommodates a frame where S and H talk about SbjM (Note that frame structure is represented with small caps in a box in the figure, which is a canonical way of representing the given situation in mental spaces (for more details, see Fauconnier, 1997; Kwon, 2021)). Then, the subject’s mental space (M₅) is built, as the verb promise, a
space builder (Fauconnier, 1997), indicates that the speaker has an intention and commitment to make a certain situation \((s_{1}t)\) take place right after the utterance. What \(s_{1}t\) represents is an alien frame from the perspective of the \(M_{S}\) space’s frame structure, as it refers to the embedded clause content, \emph{we will come right back}. In the space of the focal situation \((M_{S}t)\), the speaker (along with the addressee) will continue to talk about the subject matter. On the other hand, the speaker (\(S\)) in Figure 2 also apparently intends to make a situation \((s_{1}t)\) happen in \(M_{S}\) space. Well, if its frame structure demands that the situation be non-past, how is it possible to have a past tense embedded clause in example (4b)? It is made possible by the bridging space between the \(M_{S}\) space and the mental space accommodating the embedded clause content, which in this case is \emph{I tried}; this is the \(M_{S}t\) space where the addressee (\(H'\)) comes to know the content of the embedded clause (\emph{cont}).

Notice that what the \(M_{S}t\) space accommodates is an irrealis event structure, specifically the one in the speaker’s expectation. Although expectation does not necessarily entail realization, this expectation is construed as highly likely to happen in the given context, because the explicit presence of the speaker in the form of a first-person subject in the embedded clause increases the degree of commitment of the speaker. One is naturally able to express a higher degree of commitment to a situation in which one is directly involved than to a situation in which one is not directly involved. This increased commissive sense and accordingly increased likelihood of the expected situation due to the explicit presence of a first-person subject in the embedded clause is represented by the continuous link from \(S\) in the Base space via \(S\) in the \(M_{S}\) space to \(S'\) in the \(M_{S}t\) space in Figure 1. In contrast, in Figure 2, there is no continuous link from \(S\) in the Base space to \(S'\) in the \(M_{S}t\) space; in this case, it is not necessary for the speaker to be involved in the addressee’s knowing event, so there is no room for \(S'\) in the \(M_{S}t\) space. What appeared in the utterance is not a situation that the speaker intends to make happen, but the realis content that has already taken place to the speaker’s belief. In sum, the conceptual structure of the epistemic modal meaning differs from that of the commissive one in that their construal requires that there be a bridging space,\(^4\) whose

\(^4\) The bridging space as well as the Base space are unprofiled, because they accommodate the invoked information assumed in the context, whereas the two spaces \(M_{S}\) and \(M_{S}t\) are profiled and encoded explicitly by linguistic items. \emph{Profiling} refers to how linguistic expressions highlight particular parts of the conceptual structures they refer to (Langacker, 1991:5). Profiled elements are represented with thicker lines in the figure to selectively mark the relatively more salient pieces of information in the construal (Kwon, 2012).
tense configuration conforms to what is demanded for the frame structure of the \( M_s \) space.\(^5\)

In a nutshell, Kwon (2021) employed the MST framework to transparently capture the functional difference in these conceptual structures, which relies on whether the situation explicitly described in the embedded clause accommodates an imperfective situation (the speaker’s commitment to act) or an unprofiled situation where the addressee realizes the perfective content as fact (the speaker’s epistemic stance). Extending the study of Kwon (2021), this paper conducts a comparative investigation of the *I promise* and the *I guarantee* constructions.

3 Data Collection and Distribution

To collect attested uses of each of the two constructions, the spoken data of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/; accessed September 2020) were searched for *I promise* and *I guarantee*, which yielded a total of 854 tokens of *I promise* constructions and a total of 559 tokens of *I guarantee* constructions.

The focus of this study is to see how the interaction between main and lower clauses in complex constructions with *I promise* and *I guarantee* gives rise to the commissive and/or epistemic modal construals. Therefore, the following types of constructions were removed from the data:

- *I promise (you)/I guarantee (you) + NP* (e.g., *this would be an excellent place to do so because I guarantee you these – these young kids – $ 9,000 vs. $ 21,000 for a kitten*)

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\(^5\) An anonymous reviewer pointed out that the conceptual contiguity between the commissive and the epistemic modal construals of the construction might be viewed as an outstanding case that is metonymically motivated. The authors agree: these are motivated specifically by the Cost-Benefit Cognitive Model (Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera, 2014: 69) and/or by *metonymization* (Paradis, 2011). This particular situational cognitive model is concerned with illocutionary meanings at the speech act level, where linguistic uses are affected by regularized patterns of informational cost or benefit to speaker and addressee. When promises are made, the speaker would believe that a potential state of affairs is beneficial to the addressee, and he or she thus would bring it about. Now, this situational schema is invoked also when assertions are made: as it is beneficial to the addressee for the speaker to vouch for the truth of the conveyed information for him/her, the speaker is expected to make it happen. This results from a metonymic activation, as the epistemic reading is triggered by the conventionalized constructional and/or contextual cues of the source construction. The situational schema shared in both of the construals is, in fact, not different from the MST account here, where the conceptual structure in Figure 1 is invoked in Figure 2.
– I promise (you) + to infinitive (e.g., I promise not to drink until I am 21)
– I promise (you)/I guarantee (you) in wh-cleft form (e.g., That's what I promise)
– I promise (you)/I guarantee (you) in unelaborated responses (i.e., That might work for six months, but I guarantee...)
– Redundant target expressions (e.g. And if we do that, I promise you, I promise you we will build the base to see to it)

The aforementioned types were excluded either because there is no lower finite clause where a viewpoint can anchor or because the token in question is redundant. Also, those containing intervening words such as adverbs between I and the verbs were not considered to conduct focused research. As a result, a total of 563 relevant tokens of the I promise construction and a total of 398 relevant tokens of the I guarantee construction remained for analysis (for an efficient discussion, the overall distributions are provided in the ensuing subsections 3.1 and 3.2, which is followed by discussion of their functional generalizations in Section 5.1).6

Following Kwon’s (2021) method of classifying types of I promise X constructions, this study employed two major parameters to sort the dataset into two sub-sets: 1) whether or not the lower clause X has a first-person subject, and 2) whether or not the lower clause X is past tense. All the instances of the two constructions were tagged for their construals. For the I promise constructions, their construals are commissive, epistemic modal, or both commissive and epistemic modal; for the I guarantee constructions, they are either epistemic.

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6 It is noteworthy that as shown below, the collected data reveal two salient patterns of constructs in general: those where I promise and I guarantee appear at the utterance-initial position and those where they appear at the utterance-final position. It would thus be crucial to consider the prosodic patterns of the examples to fully grasp the construals of the constructions. That is, the main clause construct I promise of the complex clause constructions may receive different intonation patterns depending on whether it appears at the utterance-initial position or at the utterance-final position, and the different patterns might be critical cues signaling correlated meanings. Surely, the exact prosodic patterns of the tokens from text corpora such as COCA would be critical and worth pursuing, although it would be beyond the scope of this study. There are outstanding studies on the peripheral-specific meanings of linguistic expressions in relation to (inter)subjectivity in the construal (Traugott, 2012; inter alia); also there are studies on the prosodic patterns of sentence-initial pronoun-verb combinations where the constructs I think and I believe are shown to convey different prosodic patterns when they function as utterance-initial main clause (with the pronoun accented), and utterance-final/ medial comment clause (so-called parentheticals; with the verb accented) (Dehé and Wichmann, 2010a; 2010b). It calls for further research with special focus on the correlations between their prosodic information and their types of construal as the I promise and I guarantee constructions are not as frequently used as I think and I believe.
modals or both commissives and epistemic modals (i.e. there was no instance of a purely commissive I guarantee construction).

3.1 The I Promise Construction

The 563 relevant tokens of the I promise construction are categorized, as shown in Table 1, into two major types: Type 1 refers to those consisting of I promise or I promise you preceding a finite lower clause (I promise (you) + X [e.g., I promise I’ll never hurt you] or I promise (you), X [e.g., I promise you, we will never put America in this position again]); and Type 2 refers to those where the order of the main and lower clauses is reversed (X, I promise (you) [e.g., We did not make this up, I promise] or X. I promise (you) [e.g., You’ll never hear that phrase again. I promise you]). Assuming that the annotation of commas might not always reflect pauses faithfully in the corpora, the taxonomy that this study employs does not rely on the annotation, but rather on the order of the main and lower clauses.

Type 1 (376 tokens) is more frequent than Type 2 (187 tokens). All tokens of each of the variants are further classified depending on whether the subject in the embedded clause is first person or not. For example, Type 1 includes 217 tokens with a first-person subject and 159 tokens with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause. In addition, the numbers in parentheses in the table indicate the token frequency with a past-tense embedded clause. For example, of the 159 instances of Type 1 with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause, ten have a past-tense situation in the embedded clause. Overall, the embedded clause refers to a past-tense situation in 31 of the 563 tokens. The rest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Construct // token #</th>
<th>Subject in embedded clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I promise (you)(,) + X. epistemic uses</td>
<td>217(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>X. /. I promise (you). epistemic uses</td>
<td>108(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>325(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total epistemic uses</td>
<td>55(18)</td>
<td>223(13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(532 tokens) include all non-past situations and some miscellaneous cases such as semantically vague auxiliary forms (e.g., would, could, etc.).

The table also summarizes semantic information for each construction type. The functional distribution of the constructions is indicated in Table 1 in the rows labeled ‘epistemic uses’. For example, of Type 2, there are 79 tokens of the construction with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause, and 77 of them carry the epistemic modal interpretation. There are a total of 278 tokens with the epistemic modal construal.

### 3.2 The I Guarantee Construction

The 398 relevant tokens of the I guarantee construction are also categorized into the two types: Type 1 includes the constructs such as I guarantee (you) + X (e.g., I guarantee you'll win) or I guarantee (you), X (e.g., I guarantee you, my brother hasn't touched heavy drugs in thirty years); Type 2 includes those such as X, I guarantee (you) (e.g., You see these clips that you play, all through the election season, I guarantee) or X. I guarantee (you) (e.g., We never sat down for a meal for more than 15 minutes. I guarantee you), as shown in Table 2.

As with the I promise construction, the functional distributions of the variants of the I guarantee construction are further categorized by whether the lower clause subject is first person or non-first person. For example, as seen in the table, Type 1 has 53 tokens with a first-person subject and 316 tokens with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause. Again, the numbers in parentheses represent the token frequencies of the constructions with past-tense situations in the embedded clause. For example, 47 of the 316 tokens

### Table 2

The I guarantee construction: Patterns of use and frequency; the numbers in parentheses indicate the token frequency with a past-tense embedded clause.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Construct // token #</th>
<th>Subject in embedded clause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I guarantee (you)(,)+X.</td>
<td>53(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>epistemic uses</td>
<td>32(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>X,. I guarantee (you).</td>
<td>4(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>epistemic uses</td>
<td>1(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>57(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total epistemic uses</td>
<td>33(6)</td>
<td>333(51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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with non-first-person subjects in the embedded clause also have past-tense situations in the embedded clause. Overall, 57 tokens of the total of 398 include past-tense situations in the embedded clause, while the rest have mostly non-past-tense embedded clauses (291 tokens) with a few miscellaneous cases with auxiliaries such as would or could (50 tokens).

The construals of the I guarantee constructional variants and the frequencies are also indicated in the table. For example, regarding Type 2, there are 25 tokens with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause with an epistemic modal construal. Overall, 366 out of the total of 398 tokens convey epistemic modal interpretations. We will come back to these frequency counts in the discussion in Section 5.

4 Qualitative Analyses of Data

This section provides qualitative analyses of the constructional properties and functional distributions of the two constructions. It is assumed that the conceptual structures motivating the four constructional variants are similar. Hence, the discussions provide two representative examples, one with I promise/I guarantee on the left periphery of the utterance and one with I promise/I guarantee on the right periphery (i.e., regardless of the presence or absence of a pause of any length).

4.1 Illustrating the I Promise (You) + X Construction
The I promise construction may have an epistemic interpretation, a commissive interpretation, or both simultaneously, depending on its constructional configuration. This sub-section shows that the crucial difference between the two constructions is that the I promise construction more frequently has a commissive interpretation and a first-person subject in the embedded clause.

4.1.1 When the Embedded Subject is First Person
Let us begin with examples in which the embedded clause subject is first person and the embedded clause tense is non-past. The pair given in (5) both have a commissive interpretation.

(5) a. A Conversation with Newt Gingrich, Fox_Hannity
HANNITY: Let me go through this last question, and I promise I'll let you go home and go to sleep.
b. A Conversation with Larry Johnson, Fox_The O'Reilly Factor

O’REILLY: Joining us now from Washington is Larry Johnson, a Fox News analyst and former directorate of the – of intelligence for the CIA. I'm not going to be mean to you, Mr. Johnson. I promise.

JOHNSON: You’re never mean to anyone, Bill.

O’REILLY: No, I am. Sometimes I get a little testy, I will admit.

(5a) is from a political talk show addressing a US presidential election. At the end of the show, the host (Mr. Hannity) assures his interlocutor that the ensuing question will be the last one, followed by I promise I'll let you go home and go to sleep. Thus, the embedded clause subject is first person (i.e., I) and its tense is non-past. Under this condition, what the verb promise conveys is the speaker’s intention or commitment to make happen a future state of affairs (i.e., letting the guest go home and go to sleep).

In (5b), from another talk show, the host (Mr. O’Reilly) introduces his new guest (Mr. Johnson) and tries to break the ice before the actual discussion by implying that he is not going to ask the interviewee difficult questions. The underlined utterance containing the construction expresses his commitment to make happen the situation, which has not taken place yet (i.e., him not being mean to his guest). Just as in (5a), the presence of the first-person subject and the non-past tense in the embedded clause conveys the speaker’s commitment to make an irrealis situation happen in the future. This construal of commitment is consolidated by the authority of the speaker as a talk show’s host, which is what should enable him to make happen the situation he describes.

Now let us take a look at two examples, in (6), with the same constructional properties but epistemically oriented construals.

(6) a. News about Britney Spears, ABC__ABC News: Good Morning America

(begin video clip)

SPEARS: My situation is unique, but I promise I’m doing what’s best at this moment.

(end video clip)

b. A Conversation of Aaron Brown and Kelley, CNN_Reliable Sources

(begin video clip)

BROWN: But you have no source...

KELLEY: I do have a source, I promise you.

The examples in (6), similar to those in (5), have first-person subjects and non-past verbs in the embedded clauses. However, they illustrate the epistemic use
of *promise* rather than the commissive use. In (6a), from a video on Britney Spears’ Instagram account, the speaker (Spears) responds to rumors about her family and team. Her claim is that she is trying her best despite the difficult situation, and the utterance with *I promise* conveys her strong belief in this claim. The context of (6b) is as follows: a panel of journalists is discussing a rumor that may have national security implications; one interlocutor (Mr. Brown) presumes that another interlocutor (Ms. Kelley) has no source to support a claim she has made; however, Ms. Kelley refutes Mr. Brown’s presumption, conveying her certainty that she actually does have a source.

The instances in (5) and (6) share constructional properties: they all have a first-person subject and a non-past verb in the embedded clause. However, the speakers in (6) express their strongly positive epistemic stance toward the situation of the embedded clause (i.e., *she is doing what is best at that moment*/*she does have a source*). It is worth noting that the two interpretations – commissive and epistemic modal – are not an all-or-nothing proposition; rather, it is a matter of which is more salient in the given context. For example, (6b) conveys, to some degree, the commissive construal as well, as it is clear that the speaker intends to vouch for the validity of her claim in the embedded clause. This study nevertheless considers (6b) an example of the epistemic use of the construction because the speaker’s strongly positive epistemic stance is more salient in the context.

The following examples illustrate the more balanced co-existence of the commissive and epistemic construals.

(7)  

a. A Conversation about War and Terrorism, CNN_Crossfire

McCain: *We must be patient, my friends. We must be patient. We will win. We will prevail. I promise you we will prevail as long as America remains steadfast.*

b. MEET THE PRESS, NBC_Meet the Press with Chuck Todd

Todd: *We’ll be back next week, because if it’s Sunday, it’s Meet the Press. And we’ll still be debating this, I promise you.*

(7a) is from a televised debate about war and terrorism. The speaker (Mr. McCain) argues that America must take strong action against terrorism. The verb *promise* in his utterance has both the commissive and the epistemic modal construals. Considering that he is a politician who is capable of pushing forward military policies, he shows his intention and commitment to make happen the future state of affairs (*winning against terrorism*) by his own actions. At the same time, the utterance conveys the speaker’s strong positive
epistemic stance toward the content of the embedded clause: he predicts with certainty that the future situation (\textit{winning against terrorism}) will come true.

(7b) illustrates another case where both of the construals are available. It is an excerpt from a newscast where the host (Mr. Todd) is trying to wrap up the show. He employs a kind of parenthetical \textit{I promise you} in his closing statement. Considering that the utterance is motivated by the speaker's intention to make happen the future state of affairs (\textit{debating on the same topic next Sunday}), the verb \textit{promise} produces a commissive interpretation. The same utterance also conveys the speaker's strongly positive epistemic stance toward the embedded clause situation, expressing his assurance that a group of people including the speaker will continue to have another debate on the same topic on the following Sunday.

Finally, in (8), the examples have first-person subjects and past-tense verbs in the embedded clauses.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textbf{The Late Late Show, CBS_The Late Late Show with James Corden} \\
\quad \textit{Corden}: \textit{The company in the UK has started selling a product for people in colder climates, and they're calling it a nose warmer. I promise, we did not make this up.}

\item \textbf{The Five, Fox_The Five} \\
\quad \textit{Rivera}: \textit{(So that must have) Improved your dating fortunes?} \\
\quad \textit{Oxenberg}: \textit{No. I was hopeless, I promise you.}
\end{enumerate}

In this study's data, all of the instances with an embedded clause containing a past-tense verb allow only the speaker's strongly positive epistemic modal construal. There is a natural explanation for this distribution: it would be contradictory if a speaker intended or committed him/herself to make a past state of affairs happen in the future. In (8a), from a talk show, the host (Mr. Corden) is talking about a British product that seems impractical. As the embedded clause describes a state of affairs that existed prior to the speech time of the verb \textit{promise} (i.e., the speaker's not having doctored this information), there is no way for the utterance to convey the speaker's intention or commitment to make a certain situation happen in the future. Instead, his utterance indicates a strongly positive epistemic stance toward the focal state of affairs.

In a similar vein, in (8b), also from a talk show, the interlocutors are informally talking about the guest's school days. The guest (Ms. Oxenberg) previously shared that the ratio of boys to girls at her school was five to two. The host (Mr. Rivera) is asking whether that improved her chances for dating. In response, she explains that to the contrary she seldom dated during her school
57 days, making this claim with certainty. In a nutshell, the verb promise in (8) conveys the speakers’ strongly positive epistemic modal sense to convince the addressee that the lower clause information is factual.

4.1.2 When the Embedded Subject Is Not First Person
The other major type of the I promise construction consists of those with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause. This type, in turn, can be further divided depending on whether the lower clause has a past-tense verb or not. To begin with, let us go over the sub-type with non-past tense in the embedded clause.

(9) a. Alexander, IMDB, Open subtitles
    Farrell: Conquer your fear and I promise you you’ll conquer death!

b. An interview with Patricia Arquette, NBC_Today
    Geist: Patricia’s new film Boyhood is unlike anything you’ve ever seen, I promise.

(9a) is an utterance made by an actor (Mr. Farrell) in a historical movie, Alexander (in a scene shown on a talk show). A non-first-person subject and non-past tense are employed in the embedded clause of his utterance, and the verb promise conveys the speaker’s strong belief in a future situation (i.e., the addressees’ conquering death). The speaker’s strong certainty toward the predicted state of affairs is indicated by the embedded clause, which implies that to live with courage and die gloriously in battle is to live forever.

(9b) is an utterance from an interview with an actress (Ms. Arquette), introducing her newly released movie. It contains a non-first-person subject and non-past tense in the embedded clause. The speaker of (9b) also conveys his strong evaluative belief or positive epistemic stance toward the evaluation of the new movie contained in the embedded clause.

It is important to note, however, that even when the embedded subject is not the first person and the tense of the embedded verb is non-past, a commissive interpretation can be produced, as shown in (10).

(10) a. Fox News Channel: The Story with Martha MacCallum
    MacCallum: I’ve got to jump in because we’re out of time. But I promise you, you will get more time tomorrow night and we really look forward to having you all on stage.
b. Conan’s ‘Uphill Climb’ to Late-Night Throne, NPR_Fresh Air

O’BRIEN: I’m the late-night cat. Meow. You’ll never hear that phrase again. I promise. You’ll never again hear the late-night cat. That was a terrible mistake. It’ll never happen again.

The example in (10a) is from a news show. The host (Ms. MacCallum) is trying to wrap up the show due to lack of time, and intervenes in the interlocutors’ conversation by saying that the addressee will be given more time the following day. Although the embedded clause has a non-first-person subject, the utterance still conveys the speaker’s intention to make a certain situation happen. Despite no explicit presence of a first-person subject, this utterance is nevertheless commissive: Ms. MacCallum expresses her intention to make it happen. The invoked authority that the speaker has as a show host facilitates the commissive reading because whether the future course of action will take place or not is substantially affected by the host’s intention and commitment.

The other example, (10b), is from a radio show with Mr. O’Brien, who is himself a talk show host, as the guest. In the sound clip, he pretends to be a cat, saying “meow”. Then, in the following utterance, its embedded clause contains a non-first-person subject and non-past tense, which expresses the speaker’s positive epistemic stance toward the content of the lower clause (the hearer(s) will not hear the phrase again). At the same time, Mr. O’Brien also expresses his strong intention not to repeat the embarrassing action again in the context; the verb promise conveys the speaker’s commitment to make happen the future state of affairs (him never again speaking the phrase “I’m the late-night cat. Meow”). Just as in (10a), the commissive interpretation is retrievable because it is the speaker’s commitment that can determine whether the situation will happen or not.

The last sub-type of the construction with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause contains a past-tense verb in the lower clause, as in (11).

(11) a. A Conversation between Harry Smith and Jennifer Ashton, CBS_The Early Show

LEMIRE: But that—actually, “The Matrix” is a saga, and that was intended to be, you know, an epic thing. But like “Legally Blonde 2, I promise you they did not know they were going to have a sequel prepared when the first one came out.

b. A Conversation about newly released bill, Fox_Hannity

PRICE: Nobody read this bill, Sean, I promise you.
In (11a), the interlocutors are discussing movies with sequels on a TV talk show. The speaker (Ms. Lemire) contrasts “The Matrix” series and the “Legally Blonde” series, saying that the former was produced as “a saga” from the very beginning, while the latter was not. She assures her addressees that the people involved in the first Legally Blonde movie would not have imagined a second episode. Then, she expresses her strong belief that the lower clause information (people who were involved in making “Legally Blonde” did not know they were going to have a sequel) is factual. The verb promise in (11a) thus conveys the speaker’s strongly positive epistemic modal sense toward the embedded clause proposition.

Just as in (11a), a non-first-person subject and the past tense are employed in the embedded clause of (11b). It is an excerpt from a political TV talk show where the participants are discussing a newly released American reflationary bill. The speaker has talked about the need for sufficient time for people to review the bill. In this utterance, he expresses his strong belief that no one could have read it, given the short time available to do so. Because the embedded clause describes a state of affairs prior to the speech time of the verb promise, the utterance cannot convey the commissive construal: it is not a matter of whether the speaker intends to make some future course of action happen. Rather, the speaker manifests his strong epistemic belief toward the proposition in the lower clause (i.e., nobody read the bill), and hence he asserts that it is absolutely true that no one has read it.

4.2 Illustrating the I Guarantee Construction
This section provides qualitative analyses of the functional distributions of the I guarantee construction by looking at representative examples sorted by the salient constructional properties: whether or not the lower clause subject is first person and whether or not its tense is past. Different from the I promise construction, no purely commissive use of the I guarantee construction is attested in our data. When it does express a commissive attitude, it always has an epistemic modal meaning as well.

4.2.1 When the Embedded Subject Is Not First Person
To begin with, the I guarantee construction typically comes with a non-first-person subject in its embedded clause. Let us take a look at the following set of examples in (12).

(12) a. FOX HANNITY 10:00 PM EST
HANNITY: ...do you see a danger of a possible scenario under which a world war can break out?
MCCAIN: I’m not sure about a world war, but the spread of nuclear weapons will take place if Iran acquires them. I guarantee you it will nuclearize the entire Middle East.

b. CBS FACE THE NATION 10:30 AM EST
ROHDE: Whatever caused Bowe Bergdahl to walk off that base – did he desert, did he have a mental breakdown – he will regret this for the rest of his life. I guarantee you.

(12a) is from a talk show where the host (Mr. Hannity) and a politician (Mr. McCain) are talking about international relations. In response to the question asking his view of the potential for a world war, the guest says that Iran gaining nuclear capacity will nuclearize the entire Middle East. With the non-first-person subject it and non-past tense, the speaker expresses his strongly positive epistemic stance, i.e., his certainty, toward the content of the embedded clause. In (12b), the speaker is talking about Bowe Bergdahl, a soldier who walked away from an army post in Afghanistan and was captured by the Taliban in 2009. After five years of captivity he was rescued, and then charged with desertion and misbehavior that endangered the security of his post. The speaker says Bowe Bergdahl will regret his desertion for the rest of his life. In this example, where I guarantee you follows its complement, the construct I guarantee you is again used to emphasize the speaker’s strong belief in the future event depicted in the embedded clause.

In contrast to the examples with non-past embedded clauses in (12), the examples in (13) show the epistemic use of I guarantee with the past tense in their embedded clauses.

(13) a. CBS 60 MINUTES 7:00 PM EST
PELLEY: You believe that your son was in the engine room?
PUSATERE: Oh, most definitely. And until someone could prove me wrong – which would be the black box or any other thing or Richard walking through that door – is that when the ship listed and then capsized, I guarantee you they were injured. They were knocked out.

b. Talk of the Nation 3:00 PM EST NPR
TOTENBERG: Well, one of the grounds the government is using to defend this statute is by saying, now, that it is in essence a tax. But the government – nobody made that argument when they were passing this, I guarantee you. And Judge Hudson didn’t buy that.
In (13a), a journalist (Mr. Pelley) asks an interviewee (Mr. Pusatere) whether he thinks his son, who was on a ship that sank, was in the engine room. The interviewee expresses his strong belief that it was so and that his son must have been injured. Because the embedded clause is in the past tense, the verb guarantee conveys a strongly positive epistemic modal meaning. (13b) is from a news show, where the interlocutors are talking about the requirement for every American to buy health insurance. With I guarantee you located at the right periphery and the fronted past-tense embedded clause, the speaker (Ms. Totenberg) expresses her positive epistemic stance toward the fact that, at the time it was passed, no one had argued that the statute was in essence a tax.

The examples in (12) and (13) show that when the embedded clause of the I guarantee construction involves a non-first-person subject, the verb guarantee typically conveys the speaker’s certainty that the irrealis situation in the embedded clause will take place. However, there are a few less typical cases with a non-first-person subject in the embedded clause in which the speaker’s commitment to a future event is implicitly conveyed as well, which is illustrated in (14).

(14) NPR: All Things Considered
(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)
Sergeant Deeks: I'm going to make you a deal. You give me your loyalty, and I guarantee that each and every one of you will have a chance to be a warrior, to actually do something out here, to be a part of history, instead of reading about it in some book.
(END VIDEO CLIP)

(14) is from a clip from a film by Dan Krauss. As a new commanding officer, the protagonist (Sergeant Deeks) is telling his men that each and every one of them will have a chance to be a warrior and, implicitly, that he will make that happen. Like the examples in (12), the speaker here is expressing his strong epistemic stance toward a future situation as he conveys his strong belief that the focal situation will take place. Moreover, the speaker is also conveying his prospective commitment to making the situation happen: as the one who will train and lead the men, he has the authority to do so. Thus, even though the embedded clause does not contain a first-person subject, the verb guarantee indicates the speaker’s intention to make the situation in question happen through his implicit commitment to it.

4.2.2 When the Embedded Subject is First Person
In the next type, the constructions have embedded clauses with first-person subjects. As mentioned in Section 3.2, there is no pure commissive use of the I
guarantee construction even when it occurs with a first-person subject in the embedded clause. Let us take a look at the examples in (15).

(15)  

a. CNN Tonight 10:00 PM EST  
(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)  
TRUMP: At the end of four years, I guarantee you that I will get over 95 percent of the African-American vote. I promise you.  
(END VIDEO CLIP)  

b. CAFTA Barely Passes, Fox_Hume  
WILSON: That is it for “Special Report.” Stay tuned to FOX News. And join me on “Weekend Live” on Sunday. We’ll have something worth watching, I guarantee you. See you soon.

(15a) contains an excerpt from a video clip from the 2016 US presidential campaign in which Mr. Trump says, “I guarantee you that I will get over 95 percent of the African-American vote.” The subject of the embedded clause is the first person I and its tense is non-past. Similar to the aforementioned examples of the I promise construction, the verb guarantee in this example may indicate the speaker’s commitment to making the event (i.e., his getting over 95 percent of the African-American vote) happen. This is because to obtain a certain amount of votes may or may not be conceptualized as an event that the speaker can control. (15b) is from a television news show where a newscaster (Mr. Wilson) wraps up a section and tells viewers to watch his program on Sunday. With the first-person subject we in the embedded clause, he expresses his prospective commitment that he will provide the viewers with something worth watching.

This specific pattern of the I guarantee construction seems to behave very similarly to the same pattern of the I promise construction. The difference is, however, that even though the embedded clauses have a first-person subject, the speaker’s strongly positive epistemic stance toward the lower clause situation is a key ingredient of the overall construal. In (15a), the speaker (Mr. Trump) expresses, in addition to his prospective commitment, his strong positive epistemic stance toward the utterance I will get over 95 percent of the African-American vote—which may or may not be conceptualized as something that he can control, regardless of his commitment. Similarly, in (15b), while the verb guarantee may be construed as conveying his intention to have something worth watching, the speaker (Mr. Wilson) also expresses his certainty that the embedded clause situation, we’ll have something worth watching, will take place when he follows that clause with I guarantee you.

In (16), finally, the subjects of the embedded clauses are first person and the tense is past. The verb guarantee is used to convey the epistemic modal meaning.
a. McCain Cites Difficult Decisions in History and Iraq,
NPR_Morning
MONTAGNE: ...could you yourself, though, as a very powerful senator and a Republican, could you have done more?
MCCAIN: I think maybe you could always have done more. But I guarantee you, I worked as hard as I could to reverse that failed strategy and called for the strategy that is now winning.

b. CNN_CapGang
SHIELDS: Now is Zell Miller going to be the poster boy for the conservatives?
CARLSON: Yes, right, John Breaux move over. Here's – you know, these...
NOVAK: I was going to say that about John Breaux, I guarantee you.

(16a) is from an interview in which the interlocutors are talking about difficult decisions that have been made throughout history. The host (Ms. Montagne) brings up some hard calls made by the interviewee (Mr. McCain), one of which was his earlier support for the Iraq war, and asks him whether he could have done more than he did to avoid the problems of that war. Mr. McCain says that while one can always do more, he worked as hard as he could to amend the failed strategy they are discussing. In this example with the embedded clause in the past tense, the speaker cannot express his commitment to making the event take place in the future. Rather, the speaker is vouching for the invariable validity of the information that he worked as hard as he could to reverse the failed strategy and call for the winning strategy. (16b) is from a political talk show where a panel is discussing whether to have tax cuts when a huge budget surplus is expected. Despite being a Democrat, Zell Miller had decided to go along with the Republicans to support George W. Bush’s taxation policy. Based on Miller’s political views, the host (Mr. Shields) asks the panel if Miller is going to be a poster boy for the conservatives. As soon as one of the commentators (Ms. Carlson) mentions John Breaux, a former Democratic senator with conservative political views, another commentator (Mr. Novak) cuts her off and says he was going to talk about John Breaux, too. Similar to (16a), the embedded clause is in the past tense with a first-person subject. By adding I guarantee you, Mr. Breaux expresses his strong certainty regarding the situation that has already taken place.

4.2.3 Interim Summary
So far, we have discussed representative examples of each sub-type of the two constructions, focusing on whether their lower clause subject is first person or not, and on whether the lower clause verb is past tense or not. Tables 3 and
summarize their functional distributions (In the tables, COM = commissive; EM = epistemic modal; COM/EM = conveying both commissive and epistemic modal).

Whenever the tense of the embedded clause is past, all the constructional sub-types convey a strongly positive epistemic modal (EM) meaning. Moreover, the commissive and epistemic modal (COM/EM) meanings together or a more salient EM meaning is conveyed when the embedded clause has a non-first-person subject with non-past tense in both constructions. The major difference in the construals of the two constructions is observed when the embedded clause's subject is first person and its tense is non-past: some examples of the *I promise* construction convey a more salient commissive (COM) meaning (indicated in bold in Table 3), whereas no example of the *I guarantee* construction does so. In a nutshell, the *I guarantee* construction always entails the speaker's strongly positive epistemic modal meaning regardless of its embedded clause.

### Table 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promise</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: 1PS</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: non-1PS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-past</td>
<td>COM, EM, COM/EM</td>
<td>EM, COM/EM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>EM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guarantee</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: 1PS</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: non-1PS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-past</td>
<td>EM, COM/EM</td>
<td>EM, COM/EM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>EM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
subject or tense (notice that every cell of Table 4 contains EM). In contrast, the *I promise* construction is likely to convey the commissive meaning when the construction contains a first-person subject and non-past tense in its embedded clause, which likely cues the construal involving the speaker's commitment to act. Next, Section 5 provides a detailed discussion of the correlations between frequencies and functional distributions.

5 Discussion

This section elaborates on the comparison of the constructions by discussing how the conceptual structures are modeled within the MST framework and the implications of the frequency distribution of the constructions (see Section 4).

5.1 *The I Guarantee Construction Profiles the Speaker's Committed Prediction*

The data discussed in the previous sections indicate that the prototypical conceptual structure motivating the *I promise* construction involves the speaker's intention to make some target situation happen. In contrast, that of the *I guarantee* construction does not necessarily involve the speaker's intention, but rather profiles the speaker's prediction of a target situation (i.e., commits to the prediction that the speaker is making). How the construals of the commissive and/or the epistemic modal meanings are conveyed by the *I promise* and the *I guarantee* constructions is transparently captured by modeling them within mental spaces theory, as illustrated in (17).

(17) a. *I promise you will have your chance.*
    b. *I guarantee you won't make that much money.*
Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual structure of the utterance in (17a) and Figure 4 that of the utterance in (17b). In (17a), a talk show host (S) and a guest (H) talk about a subject matter (SbjM) and the show host interrupts the guest for a commercial break by using the *I promise* construction. It is noteworthy that in Figure 3, the link from S in the Base space to S' in the M SIT space is accounted for. Even though the utterance does not explicitly contain a first-person subject denoting S' and a linguistic item denoting SbjM', one would construe the utterance such that the assumed interlocutor and the assumed topic are evoked. In (17b), the speaker (the guest of a TV interview show) is conversing with the show host on a social issue, and predicts that a certain course of action will not make people rich. The speaker takes a strongly positive epistemic stance toward the lower clause situation (i.e., people not making that much money). Notice that in the space M S, the role S does not exist: the speaker makes a prediction of an irrealis event in an objective manner, which is represented by a situation (SIT).

In both of the figures, the Base space accommodates a frame where S converses with H, and the space M SIT accommodates the embedded clause situations. However, the event structures that the space M S contains in the two cases are different from each other. In the case of the *I promise* construction, the speaker expresses the intention and commitment to make a certain situation (SIT) take place. In contrast, in the case of the *I guarantee* construction, the speaker’s commitment to act is not necessarily involved. Figure 4 makes this clear: the representation lacks a link from S in the Base space to S in the M S space because there is no S in the M S space. Compare this to Figure 3, where the S of the Base and S of the M S are connected via the identity link. The kind of frame structure involved in M S in Figure 4 is accordingly different because it mainly indicates the speaker’s prediction of a consequence regardless of the speaker’s commitment to making the consequence happen. In sum, both of the

![Figure 4](image-url)
constructions require that the embedded clause situation has not taken place yet, but the speaker explicitly intends to make a contribution to the realization of the situation in question in the construal of the \textit{I promise} construction; in contrast, in the construal of the \textit{I guarantee} construction, the speaker claims and believes that the embedded clause situation will take place regardless of the speaker’s involvement. The only profiled portion of the construction is the focal situation as a firmly predicted consequence in the speaker’s epistemic world.

This conceptual difference rests on whether the speaker intends to make a situation happen or makes a prediction, which is critical in distinguishing the meaning of the two predicates. To \textit{promise} is to tell someone that one will certainly do something; to \textit{guarantee} is to promise that something will happen or exist (Cambridge Dictionary online, accessed in October 2020). The fact that whether the speaker’s commitment to act is involved or not is the critical cue is also supported by the frequency data, which are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

The two tables indicate the functional distributions of the two constructions according to their constructional properties. Specifically, they are sorted into six (Table 5) and four (Table 6) major combinatorial possibilities based on whether the embedded clause subject is first person or not and whether their construals are commissive, epistemic modal, or both. Regarding the \textit{I promise} construction, it shows three kinds of functional distribution in that it may convey the commissive interpretation, the epistemic modal interpretation, or both; meanwhile, the \textit{I guarantee} construction may convey the commissive/epistemic modal interpretation or the epistemic modal interpretation (but not the purely commissive interpretation).

The comparison of the two tables reveals the following points. The \textit{I promise} construction is more likely to convey the commissive construal than the \textit{I guarantee} construction (50.62\% [\textit{EM + COM/EM}] vs. 8.04\%). The claim that
its default conceptual structure includes the speaker's intention is supported by the fact that a first-person subject is more likely to appear in the embedded clause of the *I promise* construction than in that of the *I guarantee* construction (57.55% vs. 14.32%). Furthermore, the *I promise* construction has more commissive instances with a first-person subject in the embedded clause (47.96% [COM + COM/EM] vs. 6.03%).

In a nutshell, the token frequency of the *I promise* construction with a first-person subject in its lower clause is higher than its token frequency with a non-first-person subject. When the *I promise* construction conveys the epistemic modal meaning, it is unlikely that its lower clause has a first-person subject. The token frequency of the *I guarantee* construction with a first-person subject is low as its canonical conceptual structure does not necessarily include the speaker's intention, which would be necessary for the commissive use.

### 5.2 The *I Guarantee* Construction Is More Compatible with Conditionals

As shown in Section 5.1, the frame structure accommodated in the space $M_S$ of the *I guarantee* construction is characterized by the speaker's prediction. In contrast, that of the *I promise* construction is characterized by the speaker's intention/commitment to make a situation in question happen. Given that the general purpose of using conditional constructions is to make a prediction and/or to draw a logical conclusion from a premise, the frame structure of the *I guarantee* construction is more compatible with conditionals. For example, let us take a look at the example in (18), where the *I guarantee* construction follows a conditional protasis.

(18) **Greenberg:** *If you go on an adventure trip today, I guarantee you you’ll see people 50-plus all over the place. That would not have happened 10 years ago.*
In (18), with the *I guarantee* construction with the epistemic modal construal, the speaker makes an epistemic assessment of the lower clause situation (i.e., *your seeing people 50-plus all over the place*) based on the premise given in the protasis of the *if* clause (i.e., *if you go on an adventure trip today*). This conceptual motivation is supported by the ratios of the co-occurrence of the two constructions with conditional protases, which is indicated in Tables 7 and 8.

The comparison reveals that the *I guarantee* construction is more likely to co-occur with a conditional premise (24.87% [99/398 tokens]) than is the *I promise* construction (12.26% [68/563 tokens], e.g., *If you would just hold that thought for a moment, I promise I'll come back to you first* (commissive); *And if you do those things, I promise you, you will feel better after a certain amount of time* (epistemic)). Motivated by the fact that its default conceptual structure does not necessarily include the speaker’s commitment to make a target situation happen, the *I guarantee* construction’s epistemic modal uses are most frequently (90.91%) in conditional contexts (cf. 63.23% for the *I promise* construction [em + com/em]). Moreover, it has fewer tokens where the embedded clause has a first-person subject (13.13% vs. 47.05%).

**Table 7** The *I promise* construction: Frequency of co-occurrence with conditionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guarantee-cooccurrence</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: 1ps</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: non-1ps</th>
<th>Sub-total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commissive</td>
<td>23 (33.82%)</td>
<td>2 (2.94%)</td>
<td>25 (36.76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic modal</td>
<td>6 (8.82%)</td>
<td>33 (48.53%)</td>
<td>39 (57.35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM/EM</td>
<td>3 (4.41%)</td>
<td>1 (1.47%)</td>
<td>4 (5.88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32 (47.05%)</td>
<td>36 (52.94%)</td>
<td>68 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8** The *I guarantee* construction: Frequency of co-occurrence with conditionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promise-cooccurrence</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: 1ps</th>
<th>Embedded clause subject: non-1ps</th>
<th>Sub-total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COM/EM</td>
<td>7 (7.07%)</td>
<td>2 (2.02%)</td>
<td>9 (9.09%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic modal</td>
<td>6 (6.06%)</td>
<td>84 (84.85%)</td>
<td>90 (90.91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13 (13.13%)</td>
<td>86 (86.87%)</td>
<td>99 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 Conclusion

This paper has provided a comparative investigation of the *I promise* and the *I guarantee* constructions from a usage-based perspective. The study looked into their constructional properties based on the spoken data of COCA. The construals of the *I promise* construction and the *I guarantee* construction are similar in that they convey either a commissive reading or an epistemic modal reading in general, depending on whether the lower clause contains a first-person subject and/or a past-tense predicate. However, they differ in that 1) purely commissive instances of the *I guarantee* construction are not attested; 2) the embedded clause subject is mostly first person for the *I promise* construction, whereas it is mostly non-first person for the *I guarantee* construction; and 3) the *I guarantee* construction occurs relatively more frequently with conditional protases. This paper further claimed that the semantic difference – whether the speaker’s commitment to make a target situation happen is involved in the conceptual structure of the construction – motivates these differences. Mental spaces theory was employed to effectively model whether the speaker’s intention is involved and/or the speaker’s prediction is profiled in the conceptual structure of the constructions.

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