

MISCELLANY

THE CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT OF *COMMIT* 'PLEDGE/BIND ONESELF'

IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS, to judge by dictionary entries, a change in the government of the verb *commit*—specifically and only with reference to some version of the meaning 'bind, pledge oneself to a course of action', previously requiring the obligatory use of the reflexive pronoun object—has occurred whereby the reflexive complement has become optional (at best), apparently for most speakers in every style of discourse.¹ Here is an example, in formal style, from a review in a philosophy journal:

Levi gives a clear account of how Peirce's distinction between explicative and ampliative reasoning differs from Frege's ideas while being equally non-psychologistic; this is an important point to keep in mind later in the volume, for example, in Haack's essay where desire to learn shows up in a key principle by which one *COMMITTS TO* the use of ampliative logic. [Smyth 1998, 772; emphasis added]

In my own written and oral grammar—doubtless, in that of other older speakers as well²—this example would be unacceptable for lack of the reflexive pronoun *oneself*. But dictionaries now commonly disagree, citing only examples without the reflexive:

commit. v. i. 12. to pledge or engage oneself: *an athlete who commits to the highest standards*. [Random House Dictionary 1987]

commit. Intr. To pledge or obligate one's own self: *felt that he was too young to commit fully to marriage*. [American Heritage Dictionary 1992]

The change from an obligatory reflexive after *commit* to its nonuse or optional use can be traced approximately to the period between 1969 and 1992, the dates of the first and third editions of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Witness the following entry:

commit. 6a. To pledge (oneself) to a position on some issue. b. To bind or obligate, as by a pledge. [American Heritage Dictionary 1969]

As a matter of fact, the first edition of *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1966) cites only examples with the reflexive:

commit, v.t. 5. to pledge (oneself) to a position on an issue or question; express (one's intention, feeling, etc.): Asked if *he was a candidate*, *he refused to commit himself*. . . . 7. to bind or obligate, as by pledge or assurance; pledge: *to commit oneself to a promise; be committed to a course of action*.

For the sake of completeness, this can be compared with the following two earlier entries in other authoritative American dictionaries:

commit. 3 d (i): to obligate or bind: to take some moral or intellectual position or course of action <a resolution *committing* the party to build 300,000 houses a year—B. C. L. Keeler> <this belief in science to which our forefathers then *committed* themselves—A. J. Toynbee> (2): to pledge to some particular course or use: contract or bind by obligation to a particular disposition <the government has *committed* 135 million dollars worth of surplus commodities in foreign barter activity> (3) to express the opinion of: reveal the views of <cautiously refusing to *commit* himself on any controversial subject> [*Webster's Third* 1961, 457]

commit. To commit one's self, (a) to intrust one's self; surrender one's self: with *to*; (b) to speak or act in such a manner as virtually to bind one's self to a certain line of conduct, or to the approval of a certain opinion or course of action: as, he has *committed himself* to the support of the foreign policy of the government; avoid *committing yourself*. [*Century Dictionary* 1906, 1131]

There is no doubt, then, of a change in verbal government. But how to explain it?³ It might be tempting to ascribe it to the general trend in English of using transitive verbs, including reflexives, absolutely. According to this view, the point with *commit* would not be a change of government of this particular word but its joining the increasingly frequent category exemplified by *Enjoy!* (for original *Enjoy yourself/yourselfes!*) or *He vented for a while* (replacing earlier *vented his anger* or the like), and so on. Rather than dispute this view in detail,⁴ I would like to propose an altogether different explanation.

While economy (of grammatical means) or analogy (with the syntax of *commit* in its other senses) may be relevant as contributory factors, perhaps one approach to a systematic understanding is to relate the verb to the verbal noun, *commitment*, as in *John's commitment to Mary*, which is familiar because of its frequency in "relationship" talk, specifically marriage—and after which no reflexive pronoun appears.⁵ The same is true of the passive participle and the adjective derived therefrom, *committed*. These might be sources of influence on the change of government of the verb. Because the word *self* is so ubiquitous as a staple of contemporary psychobabble, reflecting the existential importance attached to the concept of the self, it seems all the more remarkable that it is omitted after *commit*. But perhaps just because so many people are said to be afraid of "commitment," there is an apparent conflict between this narcissistic preoccupation with the "self" and the meaning ("binding oneself") of *commit*. The resolution in favor of an attenuated understanding of "commitment" is, then, reflected in the linguistic truncation of the reflexive after the verb.

What would otherwise seem like a highly speculative pop-psych explanation gains in credibility when it is seen to be rather a paradigmatic case of ICONICITY, which is a mirroring of meaning in form.⁶ There is a form/meaning parallelism between the dropping of the reflexive pronoun and

the attenuated semantic force of *commit*, that is, reluctance to commit oneself (to relationships?). Whereas the earlier meaning was ‘virtually to bind one’s self to a certain line of conduct’, now the DEGREE OF COMMITMENT involved in ‘binding oneself’ has been reduced, and the formal upshot of this shift has been the elimination of the reflexive pronoun.⁷ From the standpoint of contemporary American culture, this suggests that those speakers who have dropped or never had the reflexive pronoun after *commit* are expressing the idea that a commitment is less than binding.

NOTES

1. A search for quantitative evidence in published corpora that would make this assessment more precise was unsuccessful, leaving, however, the unequivocal lexicographic data cited below. Apropos of the latter, the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (1971–87) has one example from 1599 that would seem to be an early attestation of the reflexiveless construction (“The Duke . . . presently departed to Calic, and so committed to sea for England” [*commit* v. I. 1. c., glossed as “formerly also *absol.* = *refl.*”). But in the light of the five other examples cited in the same place—all with the reflexive complement—and the fact that the nonreflexive form is not cited for this meaning of *commit* in any other dictionary, this is more than likely a solecism. Rita and Victor Terras (pers. com., 1998) report an analogous case from contemporary German: they feel that *ich erinnere MICH* is the only way to say ‘I recall’, but today one hears and reads *ich erinnere* without the reflexive *mich*. They guess that this is one of the innumerable Anglicisms (= Americanisms) in modern German.

2. The fact that not all speakers have adopted the newer form (i.e., the one without the reflexive pronoun) makes this, strictly speaking, a change in progress. Hence, the four major American dictionaries adduced below, which fail to cite the traditional form, are incomplete and, therefore, inaccurate.

3. This is different from the question of where it started. My own hunch is that it came in originally from the language of football, where a “commit defense” is a particular defensive alignment and players “commit,” i. e., move in anticipation of an offensive play before it unfolds. Jules Levin (pers. com., 1998) reports on a specialized use of the reflexiveless form from the language of cardplaying not to be found in dictionaries: “I am in a weekly faculty noon poker game. It is always a high-low split pot game. We play one very complex stud game that involves keeping or passing on cards. Part of the decision-making process involves to ‘commit’ to either a low or high hand (or best of all—both ways). One wants to delay ‘committing’ as long as possible to see if the other players have been forced to commit one way or the other first. To commit means to pass a card that is clearly of benefit as high or low, thus committing to go in the opposite direction. Historically, poker has probably contributed as much vocab as any one sporting activity (exc. maybe baseball).”

4. *Enjoy!* is a Yiddishism that probably originated in immigrant New York speech (as heard, for instance, on the television program *The Goldbergs* in the 1950s). There is no doubt that the so-called absolute (i.e., nonreflexive) form of the verb

has the meaning of a generalized STATE, as in *He vented for a while*. To anticipate the explanation preferred for *commit* below, the absolute use of an otherwise reflexive verb to denote a state can generally be seen as an instance of iconicity: the reflexive-less form diagrammatizes the nonspecific (broadly defined, unmarked) meaning of the verb, whereas the form with the reflexive pronoun diagrammatizes a specific (narrowly defined, marked) meaning.

5. Here is a recent example from a story about single men and women looking for mates in the "Sunday Styles" section of the *New York Times*: "I don't want to meet a man walking around with a cell phone in a bar," said Avigail David. . . . Her theory was that any man who'd show up for lectures on ethics and the Biblical perspective on the fear of commitment made a good prospect" (Yazigi 1998, 2).

6. For more on iconicity in grammar, see now Matthews (1991, ch. 12).

7. I do not mean to imply that the two sentences *The prep athlete committed to playing football for Notre Dame* and *The prep athlete committed himself to playing football for Notre Dame* NECESSARILY differ in meaning in Standard American English, only that the first may historically be the result of a formal/semantic (= iconic) attenuation of the second. For (older) speakers who prefer the second and/or view the first as ungrammatical, the difference is what might generally be labeled STYLISTIC.

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