Did John really promise Mary to leave?

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Abstract

This paper contrasts finite and non-finite complement constructions containing the matrix verb *promise*. Using data from the British National Corpus, I show that when no explicit mention is made of the promissee the non-finite form of complement is overwhelmingly preferred to its finite counterparts. The exact opposite is the case when the promissee is mentioned between the matrix verb and the complement clause. In addition, the promiser in the *x promise y to* infinitive construction is almost always pronominal. I suggest that these two facts, the dispreference for the *to* infinitive form of complement when the promissee is mentioned and the pronominal encoding of the promiser in such cases, are both related to the very rarity of this form of construction in English. Data is adduced showing that another rare construction, the so-called possessive *-ing* construction, also occurs with a disproportionate number of pronominal subjects. It is suggested that the preference for pronominal subjects in these constructions may be related to a wish to reduce the overall processing complexity of the predications in question.

1. Introduction

There are some matrix verbs in English that occur in two or more constructions which are almost, if not completely, synonymous.[1] One example of such a verb is *help*, which may be followed by both the bare and the *to* form of the infinitive. In many instances, the difference in meaning between pairs of sentences containing *help (bare)* infinitive and *help to* infinitive (see, for example, Mair 1995) is very subtle and difficult to pin down. The focus of the present article is another such case of near-synonymity. In this case one of the constructions in question is much rarer in occurrence than its counterparts. The constructions to be explored all contain the matrix verb *promise* followed by either a finite or a non-finite complement clause. The finite clause may

[1] *Construction* is here understood in the sense of a form-meaning unit containing a combination of linguistic elements, one or more of which may be schematic.

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or may not contain the complementiser *that*. In addition there may or may not be explicit mention of the promissee. There are thus six constructions in all. These are listed in (1) to (6).

(1)	*X promise to*	as in	*She promised to*
(2)	*X promise that X*	as in	*She promised that she'd*
(3)	*X promise X*	as in	*She promised she'd*
(4)	*X promise Y to*	as in	*She promised him to*
(5)	*X promise Y that X*	as in	*She promised him that she'd*
(6)	*X promise Y X*	as in	*She promised him she'd*

There are few matrix verbs in English that have attracted so much attention from scholars as *promise*. Note, for example, that some of the articles from which examples (9) – (14) are taken have been very influential indeed in the development of various paradigms in the last quarter of the last century. Linguists have shown a particular interest in *promise* constructions with a *to* infinitive complement, as in (7) and (8), taken from the British National Corpus (hereafter BNC).[2]

(7) Breathless, she straightened up and said fiercely, 'You can only stay for a minute and then you *must promise to go*'.
(BNC CEY 1983)

(8) 'You *must promise* me,' he says, '*never to wear* mourning.'
(BNC H0F 271)

The popularity of the *promise to* construction(s) is easy to understand, as the construction in (4) and (8) is unique in English, being the only same-subject (equi-subject) construction containing a *to* infinitive complement to allow the explicit mention of the addressee between the matrix verb and the complement clause. The discussion below opens in section 2 with some

[2] The British National Corpus contains almost 100,000,000 words of British English, 10,000,000 of which are spoken English, from the last quarter of the twentieth century. Of the total corpus, including both written and spoken parts, 5,703 tokens of *promise* are unequivocally tagged as verbal according to the standard search engine SARA. This article is based on these 5,703 tokens.

examples of how the construction in (4) has been exemplified by a handful of grammarians of various theoretical persuasions, and then goes on to describe how it is actually used in present-day British English as evidenced by the material in the BNC. The *promise to* constructions are then compared to the related same-subject finite complement constructions illustrated in (2), (3), (5) and (6). Section 3 contains a short presentation of the relative incidence of various types of subject in the three constructions with explicit mention of the promissee. Section 4 looks at the *promise* constructions in spoken and written English and section 5 at the form and discourse status of the promissee in the *X promise Y* constructions. Section 6 contains a discussion of the facts presented in the previous four sections and some data from the BNC about another rare construction, the so-called possessive *-ing* construction. Finally, section 7 contains a short summary and some suggestions for further research.

2. The *promise* constructions in the literature and the BNC

The *X promise Y to* construction has received a lot of attention in the literature on complementation. As for its exemplification, it turns out that this is most commonly done in the form of sentences in which both *X* and *Y*, both the promiser and the promissee, are cited in the form of full nominals. Examples (9) – (14) may be taken as representative in this respect.

(9) John promised the men to like himself.
(Bach 1979: 520)

(10) John promised (Bill) [PRO to win].
(Chomsky 1980: 32)

(11) John promised Mary to be on time.
(Bresnan 1982: 403)

(12) John promised Bill to leave the room.
(Farkas 1988: 27)

(13) John promised Mary to leave.
(Chierchia 1989: 143)

(14) Lee promised Pat to leave.
(Sag & Pollard 1991: 65)

Examples (9) – (14) are all discussed at some length in the articles from which they are taken. Moreover, as was mentioned above, some of these articles have been very influential indeed in the development of linguistics over the last twenty five years. All six grammarians from whose work examples (9) – (14) are taken encode the promiser, and five of six the promissee, in the form of a proper noun. The sixth, Bach, encodes the promissee as a definite NP. We will explore below to what extent these examples are similar to the products of users of the language as these are recorded in the BNC.

Like most verbs, *promise* is polysemous. It is most commonly used to encode a commitment on the part of the subject to carry out some course of action. This sense is exemplified in (15) and (17). In another sense, which we find exemplified in (16), *promise to x* means something like '*looks like x-ing*'. In a third sense, exemplified by (18), *promise* means 'assure'.

(15) Major *promised to introduce* a 'classless society' and announced a review of the community charge (poll tax), which had been extremely unpopular with the electorate.
(BNC HLB 4964)

(16) In fact John Major *promises to emerge* mildly well from the schemers' cauldron.
(BNC CRB 1793)

(17) 'She *promised me that she* would come.'
(BNC AD1 2503)

(18) Violet Sangston *promised me that I* knew most of the other guests.
(BNC H9U 86)

The present article is concerned solely with contexts in which *promise* functions as a communication verb (i.e. a matrix verb used to encode an act of communication). Thus utterances

like (16) will be ignored. Nor will utterances such as (18), in which the subject of the complement clause differs from the subject of the matrix verb, be dealt with. The discussion will thus be restricted to constructions like (15) and (17). These may be described as same-subject communication constructions, i.e. constructions encoding an act of communication in which the subject of the complement clause is identical in reference to the subject of the matrix verb. (Included are utterances in which the subject communicates with him- or herself. In these cases the promissee is realised as a reflexive pronoun.) In non-finite clauses, such as (19) the promiser is only mentioned once; in finite clauses, such as (20) and (21), he or she is mentioned twice.

(19) 'But I'll just have to collect my bag, so you run home and I *promise to be* there in ten minutes.'
(BNC FRE 1317)

(20) I, I *did promise that I'd be* away at eight o'clock.
(BNC HYJ 1055)

(21) 'I must go out,' Craig said, '*I promise I won't be* long.'
(BNC CKD 877)

These three constructions may be said to be near-synonymous in the sense that they all encode the expression of a commitment on the part of the subject to carry out a stipulated course of action at some time in the future. In (19) – (21), for example, the promisers commit themselves to being (or not being) in a particular location at or by a particular time. This is not to deny that there may be subtle differences of meaning between the constructions, and we will uncover some pragmatic differences in the course of this article. Nevertheless, it does certainly seem to be the case that speakers may choose any one of these three partially synonymous constructions to convey much the same point to their addressees.

Taken together, the same-subject communication constructions account for just over a quarter of all utterances containing the verb *promise* in the BNC.[3] The *promise to* construction is by far the most common of them, as may be seen in figure 1, which depicts the incidence of the three forms *without* the explicit immediately post-verbal mention of the promissee.

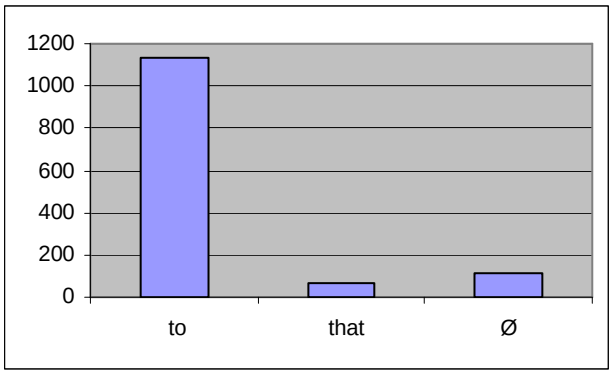

Figure 1. The total number of tokens in the BNC of the three same-subject *promise* constructions, *promise to*, *promise that* and *promise Ø* , without explicit mention of the promissee.

As may be seen in figure 1, there are over 1,100 tokens of *promise to* in the corpus as opposed to fewer than 200 of the two finite constructions. The predominance of the infinitive constructions is predicted by Hawkins' principle *Minimize Domains*, which states:

> The human processor prefers to minimize the connected sequences of linguistic forms and their conventionally associated syntactic and semantic properties in which relations of combinations and/or dependency are processed" (Hawkins 2004:31)

Indeed Hawkins himself states of this construction: "If no other constituent intervenes [between *promise* and *to*], the infinitival should be highly preferred" (Hawkins 2004:157). The picture changes completely, however, when we look at constructions containing explicit mention of the promissee, as in (22) – (24).

(22) 'But you *must promise* me *not to tell* Uncle Jake.'
(BNC JXS 1873)

[3] There are a total of 1,484 relevant tokens of *promise* among the 5,703 tokens unequivocally labelled verbal by SARA.

(23) You *must promise* me … *that* if anything goes wrong, *you'll run* for cover.
(BNC G0L 3254)

(24) She said, 'You' *ve got to promise* me *you'll go* back to college and finish your education.
(BNC FU1 1759)

Details of the number of tokens in the BNC of the three same-subject *promise* constructions with explicit mention of the promissee are contained in figure 2.

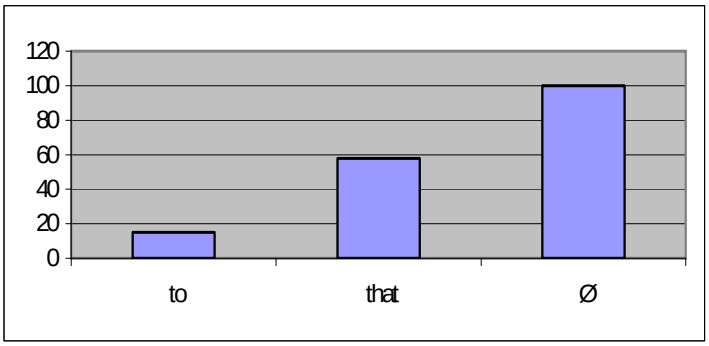

Figure 2. The total number of tokens in the BNC of the three same-subject promise constructions, *promise to*, *promise that* and *promise Ø*, with explicit mention of the promissee.

As is shown by figure 2, the construction containing the infinitive is by far the least popular of the three when the promissee is mentioned between the matrix verb and the complement clause. Rohdenburg (1999: 105) notes a similar difference in distribution in a corpus of texts from the American News Magazine *Time* and states that what he calls "the dramatic effect produced by personal objects … may come as a bit of a surprise". There is no doubt that Rohdenburg is correct in describing the effect as dramatic. The change in the relative distribution of the three complement types in the BNC is statistically significant at the level of $p = 0.0000$.[4] There are two reasons why it may come as "a bit of a surprise". The first is the fact that the infinitive construction *without* mention of the promissee is so common. The second reason why it may come as a surprise is that grammarians are so used to encountering the construction in (22) in

[4] Pearson's chi-square (with two degrees of freedom) = 527.696.

the literature that they may have taken it for granted that it is common among the products of the language.[5]

Why should the finite complement form be so much more favoured than the non-finite one in utterances containing an explicit promissee? We will return to this question in section 6. At this stage some general considerations may suffice. The insertion of the promissee between the matrix verb and the complement clause does not lead to greater complexity in the complement clause *per se*. However, there is no doubt that the simple *promise to* construction in (1) is less complex than the finite ones in (2) and (3) according to Hawkins' principle of minimising domains (see, for example, Hawkins 2004: 157). Insertion of the promissee does not alter the relative complexity of the three constructions. It merely adds one more element to each of them. In so far as a hearer must access fewer morphemes in order to discern the syntactic structure, the infinitive construction is still less complex structurally than the two finite ones. Thus the principle of minimizing domains cannot explain the preference for the finite construction when the promissee is explicitly mentioned.[6] But there is a second idea to be pursued here: Rohdenburg (1995), having

[5] The primary reason for its looming presence in the syntactic literature is the fact that grammarians are committed to explaining all the syntactic structures of the language, irrespective of how often these structures surface in performance data. Secondarily, the *X promise Y to* construction is prominent in the literature because it differs from all other constructions of the form *X* – matrix verb – *Y to* in terms of control relations. The scholars from whose works examples (9) – (14) have been taken are all preoccupied with this question of "control", with how one should incorporate into the grammar the fact that *X* is the subject of the complement clause predicate in the *X promise Y to* construction, while, on the other hand, *X* is *not* the subject of the complement clause predicate in other communication constructions such as the *X persuade Y to* construction.

[6] Note that Hawkins maintains that in cases like this

> "the processing domain for appropriate subject assignments to an infinitival verb must [...] access both the matrix verb and the controlling subject argument, and since the presence of a personal object necessarily increases that domain in the case of *promise* and *pledge*, we expect a higher proportion of finite complements" (Hawkins 2004:158).

However, in the case of both types of finite complement one also has to access both the matrix verb and the controlling subject argument in order to distinguish the *assure* sense of *promise*, as in *she promised him that he* from the *commitment to act* sense, as in *she promised him that she*.

addressed this sort of issue, formulated a principle called the Complexity Principle. It goes as follows:

> The less directly the dependent clause is linked to its superordinate clause, or the more complex the dependent clause turns out to be, the greater is the need to make its sentential status more explicit. (Rohdenburg 1995: 368)

Since, although the insertion of the promissee does not lead to greater complexity in the complement clause, it does lessen the degree of directness in the link between the superordinate and subordinate clauses, Rohdenburg's principle predicts, correctly, that a finite form would be favoured in contexts like this. It should be noted here that Rohdenburg's Complexity Principle is formulated with respect to varying degrees of complexity in strings to the right of the matrix verb in the canonical order of utterance. In particular, it focuses on the complexity in the subordinate clause and in the complementation link between this and the matrix clause. The principle does not address directly the question of whether degrees of complexity in constituents to the left of the matrix verb may influence the choice of complement form. In the next section we will examine the question of whether such complexity, as evidenced by the choice of full nominal as opposed to pronominal subjects, may also influence this choice.

3. The subject in the *promise* constructions

Figures 3 – 5 contain totals for pronominal and full nominal promisers and promissees in all three constructions with explicit mention of the promissee. As may be seen in the figures, the *promiser* is overwhelmingly pronominal in all three. Moreover, it is only the construction containing the complementiser *that* that is represented by more than a single example in which both promiser and promissee are full nominals. (25) and (26) are examples of this construction, (27) is the only instance of two full nominals with *X promise Y to*.

(25) *Reza Khan had promised Ironside that he* would not depose Ahmad Shah and for a time he did not.
(BNC G3R 770)

(26) *Pete Waterman had once promised his prodigy that* one day *he* would transform her into the Madonna.
(BNC ADR 1459)

(27) I'll still score for England – Platt, by David Harrison. *DAVID PLATT* last night *promised Graham Taylor to continue* his England goal supply – despite his recent drought in Italian football.
(BNC CEP 3698)

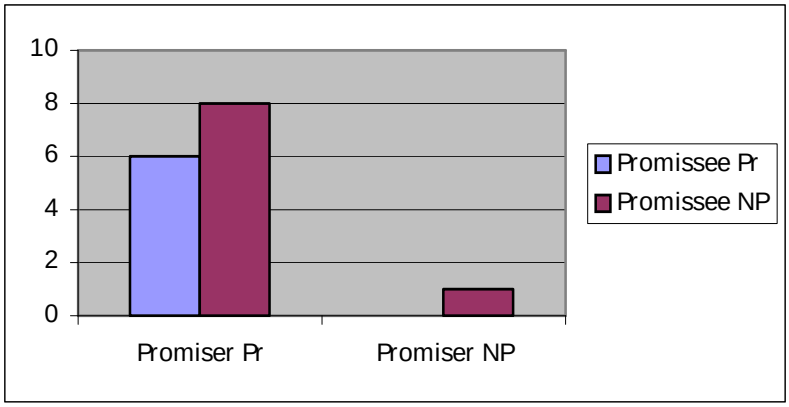

Figure 3. The incidence of promisers and promissees encoded as pronouns and full nominals in the same-subject *X promise Y to* construction.

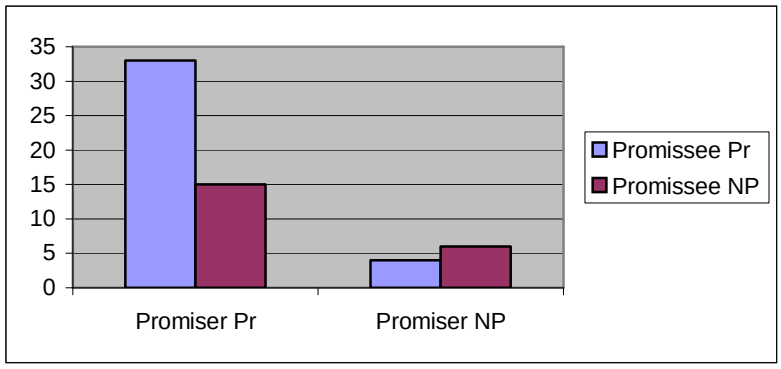

Figure 4. The incidence of promisers and promissees encoded as pronouns and full nominals in the same-subject *X promise Y that* construction.

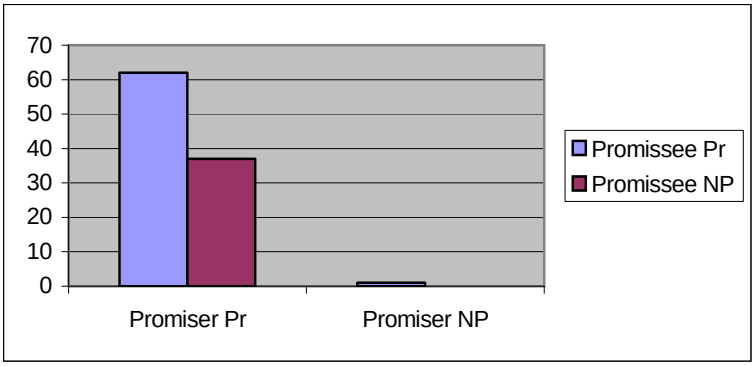

Figure 5. The incidence of promisers and promissees encoded as pronouns and full nominals in the same-subject *X promise Y Ø* construction.

Note that in (27) the promiser, the footballer in question, *has just been mentioned in the newspaper headline*. Indeed, it is mainly in this sort of context that one repeats a proper noun as subject of an immediately subsequent sentence. In most other contexts one would employ a pronoun. (Other exceptions are some forms of legal document.) There would seem to be a very strong tendency for language users to avoid employing the *X promise Y to* construction when *X* cannot be instantiated pronominally. The same point may be made with respect to the *X promise Y Ø* construction. The *X promise Y that* construction would therefore appear to be overwhelmingly favoured when the promiser is a full nominal. In this connection one may note that *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* states that "[*Liz promised me to phone at six*] is rather marginal: many speakers find this unacceptable and it would be much more usual to use a finite complement here" (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: Ch. 14, 1229-1230).[7] One point the authors of the *Cambridge Grammar* do not address is whether this feeling of unacceptability is

[7] Quirk et al.(1985: 1216) note that the infinitive construction with the promissee is less common than the infinitive construction without it, but do not compare the infinitive constructions to the ones containing finite clauses. Biber et al. (1999: 388) note the occurrence of all three forms. They do not, however, comment on their acceptability. They are listed together, as SVOi + complement clause", in table 5.7, 388. Dixon (1991) maintains that the *X* promise *Y to* construction is acceptable in some dialects of English but not in others. He writes "Only some dialects permit this construction with *promise* when the Addressee is stated, e.g. *I promised John to clean the house* (dialects which exclude this are here restricted to a *that* construction, e.g. *I promised John that I would clean the house*)." (Dixon 1991:257).

influenced by the encoding of the promiser by a proper noun rather than a pronoun or by the mere presence of a promissee.

The full nominal subject in (27) shares with the pronominal subjects of the *X promise Y to* construction the property of being given in the immediate discourse context. However, the fact that promisers in some of the other *promise* constructions are more often full nominals does not, of course, mean that these necessarily encode participants new to the universe of discourse. We must at least consider the possibility that the constraint with respect to new as opposed to given subjects which we have noted in the case of the *X promise Y to* and *X promise Y Ø* constructions (i.e. a preference for pronominal subjects) may be a property of the verb *promise* rather than the constructions themselves. Examples (28) – (31), containing tokens of the simple *X promise to* construction and the *X promise Y that* construction, show that this is not the case.

(28) Taking out a separate maintenance contract can also bring you peace of mind if you're running mission-critical applications – those vital programs you need to have running if your business is going to survive. Where *most manufacturers promise to get* an engineer on-site within a couple of days, Micro Systems Maintenance guarantees to have an engineer on-site within eight hours.
(BNC CTX 1828)

(29) The tentative price was £8,000 and Oceanic Airways of Australia were interested as they operated 10 Monospar four-seaters. Named Croydon it was ready for flight tests in March 1936. British Airways tried the Croydon but preferred to order the Lockheed 14 because of its metal-skinned construction, whereas the Croydon was fabric covered. *Major C R Anson* of Anson Airways *promised to buy* the prototype if it made a record flight to Australia where it would be operated.
(BNC CLV 1120)

(30) DEPTS PAY FOR CLIFF Last year during the second quarter's administration incentive for Pest Control, the team at Sheffield were discussing going to see Cliff Richard. *Henri Amiss*, the branch manager [in one of his moments of madness] *promised them that* if they won the debtor day part of the competition *he would pay* for their tickets.
(BNC HBH 429)

(31) 'I suppose I have always seen myself as a younger version of Joan Collins,' she confided. 'This is the kind of acting part I want to be offered in future. If i [sic] get a good script and it calls me to do a hefty love scene why not?' she added, lips that were once sugary and innocent now curled coquettishly. *Pete Waterman had once promised his prodigy that* one day *he* would transform her into the Madonna.
(BNC ADR 1459)

In (28) and (29), both of which instantiate the simple *X promise to* construction, the promisers are completely new to the universe of discourse. No previous mention has been made of *most manufacturers* in (28) nor of *Major Anson* in (29). Note the specifying post-modifier *of Anson Airways* in the latter. A similar specifying function is served by the apposed noun phrase *the branch manager* in (30). As for (31), which is an expanded version of (26), the promiser *Pete Waterman* is not mentioned in the previous 100 sentences.[8] Table 1 contains figures for given and new subjects in all six *promise* constructions. Practical reasons (the impracticality of trawling through almost 1,500 texts) dictate that *given* is to be understood in the rather narrow sense of having been mentioned in the immediate discourse context.

[8] An anonymous reviewer points out that "Waterman could be present as backgrounded knowledge in the discourse world. At least I assume he is very much 'given information' (assumed to be known) in this context (or rather co-text)." This is, no doubt, the case. However, the point here is that this sort of contextual licensing does not seem to be sufficient in the case of the *X promise Y to* construction. The latter appears to require a given subject in a narrower sense of the term, i.e. one who has been mentioned very recently in the discourse.

	promise to	*promise y to*	*promise that*	*promise y that*	*promise Ø*	*promise y Ø*
given	953	15	62	54	108	100
new	180	0	6	4	2	0
totals	1133	15	68	58	110	100

Table 1. Given versus new subjects in all six *promise* constructions.

The fact that there are as many as 192 instances of tokens with new subjects in the data in table 1 indicates that the restriction to given subjects is not a property of the matrix verb *promise*. Nor is it a property of the *X promise to* construction. It does, however, appear to be a property of the *X promise Y to* and *X promise Y Ø* constructions.

At this point one ought to raise the question of whether the avoidance of the *X promise Y to* construction when *X* is a full nominal may be influenced by its occurring primarily in spoken genres. This question will be addressed in the next section.

4. The six *promise* constructions in spoken and written English

Research on full nominal versus pronominal subjects has shown that there is a marked difference between written and spoken genres with respect to the incidence of the two types. (See, for example, Hindle 1981; Givón 1995: 51; Francis, Gregory & Michaelis 1999.) Spoken genres contain more pronominal subjects. This tendency is also reflected in the BNC. One must therefore ask whether the very high number of such subjects in the case of the *X promise Y to* construction may not be due to its occurrence in spoken contexts. Figure 6 contains percentages for all same-subject communication *promise* constructions in all written and genres on the one hand and spoken dialogue on the other.

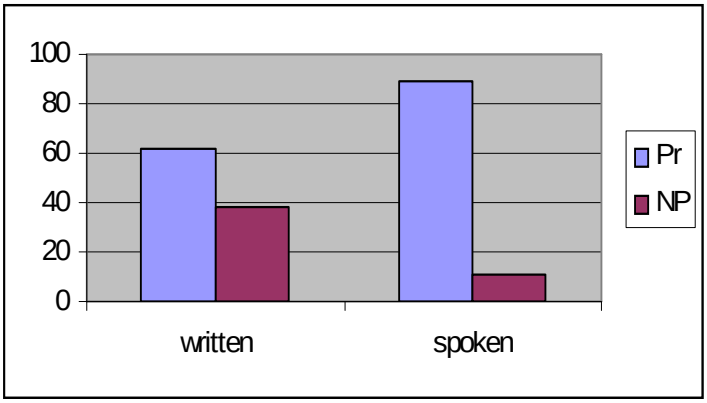

Figure 6. Percentages of pronominal and full nominal subjects in all same-subject communication *promise* constructions in written texts compared to spoken dialogue.

An examination of all tokens of the *promise* constructions shows that five of the six constructions occur in the spoken dialogue part of the BNC. Details are given in figure 7.

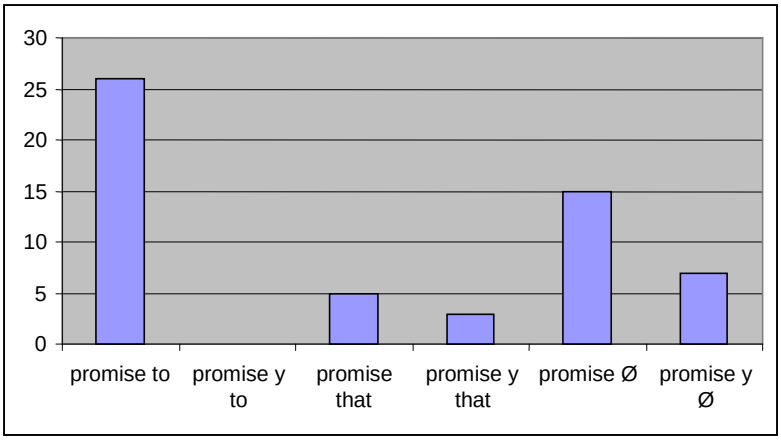

Figure 7. Incidence of the six communication *promise* constructions in the spoken dialogue sub-section of the BNC.

As may be seen in figure 7, the only one of the six constructions *not* to occur in the spoken dialogue part of the BNC is *X promise Y to*. In other words, one of the two constructions with the highest incidence of pronominal subjects is the only one not to appear at all in dialogue. It differs markedly in this respect from the other one, the *X promise Y Ø* construction. There is thus no doubt that the high incidence of pronominal subjects in the *X promise Y to* construction cannot be ascribed to the medium of usage.

As regards the other five constructions they do occur in spoken dialogue, with pronominal subjects being in the majority. Indeed only two of them are represented in the spoken dialogue part of the BNC with full nominal subjects. These are *X promise to* and *X promise that*, exemplified by (32) and (33).

(32) You know, there's a lot of symbolism that really has been lost, people don't think about in the wedding service, but is underlying, you know, until fa fairly recently a lot of people promised to obey, erm look at Prince Andrew and that when he got married, you know, erm, *the Duchess of York* actually *promised to obey* him.
(BNC FLP 207)

(33) Now, as far as Conservatives are concerned, I speak myself and I'm sure everyone here would offer the same sympathy as the *the government* has promised that *they* will do something about this.
(BNC J9M 647)

There are only six tokens in all that resemble (32) and (33) in having a full nominal subject. These represent 11% of all the tokens of *promise* in the six constructions in the spoken dialogue section. The corresponding percentage for full nominal subjects in the written part of the BNC is 38%. This is in line with what one would expect from the discussions of the interaction of medium and subject form in the literature mentioned at the start of this section.

One item remains to be investigated before we proceed to the discussion of the corpus data. This is the promissee. In the next section we will look at the form and discourse status of the promissee in the *X promise Y* constructions.

5. The promissee *Y* in the *X promise Y* constructions

Table 2 contains figures for pronominal and given and new full nominal promissees in the three *promise Y* constructions. As was the case with table 1, practical reasons dictate that *given* is to be understood as mentioned in the immediate discourse context.

	promise Y to	*promise Y that*	*promise Y Ø*
Pronominal	6	37	63
FN given	3	8	2
FN new	6	13	35
totals	15	58	100

Table 2. Pronominal and given and new full nominal promissees in the three *X promise Y* constructions.

While the promiser in the *X promise Y to* construction is invariably given in the universe of discourse, the same is not true of the promissee. As may be seen in table 2, nine of the fifteen promissees are full nominals. Moreover, a majority of these do not encode given participants. (34) – (36) are typical examples of the construction with given promissees.

(34) 'Just for one day,' she told the bright-eyed Kirsty. 'We'll come back again tomorrow night.' 'On the train again?' 'On the train again.' Shiona gathered her up in her arms and kissed her. Then she held her at arm's length and frowned a little. 'But *you must promise me not to tell* Uncle Jake.'
(BNC JXS 1873)

(35) 'I reckon Uncle's got it wrong. That star stopped. Quite definitely stopped. It did not go in.' 'He's not often wrong,' Dick pointed out. 'We all make mistakes,' said Gedanken. 'That's what Uncle says. I reckon we ought to go and investigate.' 'Your promise, Gedanken. *You promised Uncle Albert not to get* too close,' Dick reminded her.
(BNC FNW 3004)

(36) Flavia looked at the open doors. Rosette could be heard talking in the kitchen. 'Not here'. Andrée shrugged. 'My dear, this is not my house'. 'Couldn't you leave?' 'Like that? With you? You must be mad. Besides *I promised Rosie-Posie to stay* for tea.'
(BNC F9R 2645)

In (34), an expanded version of (30), the promiser and promissee are the two, maximally salient, discourse participants. In (35) the uncle in question has been mentioned by the promiser in her most recent contribution to the conversation, and in (36) *Rosie-Posie* or *Rosette* is present in

the background, where she can be heard talking in the kitchen. In addition to examples such as these, the promissee is, of course, also given in the utterances in which he or she is identical to the (given) promiser. One such instance is cited as (37).

(37) Boldwood realized they had noticed him, and suddenly felt unsure of himself. He did not know enough about women to discover from Bathsheba's manner whether she wanted to see him or not. And so he did not enter the field, but walked on, past the gate. *Bathsheba*, however, knew that he had come to see her, and felt extremely guilty. *She promised herself never again to disturb* the peace of this man's life.
(BNC FRE 680)

Two tokens containing promissees new (or at least relatively new) to the discourse, are cited as (38) and (39).

(38) *Athelstan* sighed. Sir Ralph Whitton's murder was simple compared to the complexities surrounding Mowbray's. *Athelstan* rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand and remembered *he'd promised Benedicta to meet* her at the Fleet prison where Simon the carpenter would spend his last evening on earth.
(BNC K95 2130)

(39) *I've* never felt like this before about anyone. *I* didn't know such strength of feeling existed. *I* can't think straight. *I* feel numb to anything but thoughts of Marc. My whole body seems to be on fire. What can *I* do? *I* must get away. *I* must! *I* must! But *she had promised Peter to stay*.
(BNC JXU 1056)

In both (38) and (39) the promiser is very salient in the discourse. In (38) *Athelstan* is the subject of three of the previous four predicates. In (39) the promiser, in the form *I*, is the subject of 8 of the previous 9 predicates. In both these utterances, however, the promissees, *Benedicta* in (38) and *Peter* in (39) are not given in the immediate context.

Both the *X promise Y that* and the *X promise Y Ø* constructions also favour given promissees.[9] In table 1 we saw that not one of the 100 tokens of the *X promise Y Ø* construction in the present study contains a promiser that is new to the immediate discourse context. In the case of the promissee, on the other hand, almost a third of the tokens are new. (40) – (42) are typical examples.

(40) He *had promised William Tanner he would keep* his eye on his daughter and make sure that she was treated right and that none of the customers took advantage of her.
(BNC EA5 1457)

(41) Seems you offered her a lift home, and she *promised her baby-sitter she'd be* back at a reasonable hour.
(BNC HA6 1911)

(42) I'*d promised my mother I'd buy* her some new central-heating, and the only time it could be fitted was the next week, so I needed to be home for Monday when the workmen came round.
(BNC HA6 1911)

(40) occurs some twenty sentences into the sixth chapter of a novel: *William Tanner* is not mentioned in these twenty sentences. And in (41) and (42) the promissees are not mentioned in the previous 100 sentences. In all three examples the promiser is encoded by a pronoun, as is the case in 99 of 100 tokens of this construction.

To sum up, the form and discourse status – as opposed to the mere existence – of the promissee appears to exert little influence on the choice between a finite and non-finite complement form, which is in marked contrast to the form and status of the promiser in these same constructions.

[9] The data in table 2 might seem to indicate that the *X promise Y that* construction favours them to a greater extent than do the other two constructions. The differences in the relative distribution of the three constructions with new and given promissees is, however, not significant at the level of $p = 0.05$.

6. Discussion

Let us now take stock of the facts. We have seen that:

(i) The *X* promise *to* construction is much more common than the same-subject finite *X promise that/Ø* constructions.
(ii) The *X* promise *Y to* construction is much less common than the same-subject finite *X promise Y that/Ø* constructions.
(iii) In the *X promise Y to*' construction *X* is invariably given in the immediate discourse context.
(iv) In the *X promise to* and the *X promise Y that* constructions *X* is sometimes new to the universe of discourse.
(v) In all three *X promise Y* constructions *Y* may or may not be given in the immediate discourse context.
(vi) The *X promise Y to* construction does not appear to occur in spoken dialogue in the BNC.

How are we to account for these facts? Rohdenburg's Complexity Principle was cited in section 2. With respect to *promise* Rohdenburg speculates that

> the replacement of [the *infinitive* complement type] by [the *that* complement type] may be attributed to a desire to avoid the processing complexity associated with an *increasingly unusual* choice of controller (Rohdenburg 1999: 105)

In other words, it may require more effort to process an instantiation of an uncommon construction type than a common one. Talmy Givón makes a very similar point with respect to *experience* types. He writes: "Frequent experience types are accorded more efficient, automated processing. Infrequent experience types are processed less efficiently" (Givón 1995: 63). That means that situations which are only rarely encountered in what Givón refers to as "external reality" require more effort to be communicated in language both from the point of view of the speaker and the hearer than do situations which we encounter on a regular basis. It is the contention of the present article that the same point may well apply to *construction* types. The controller of the complement predicate in the *X promise Y to* construction is maximally

"unusual", to borrow Rohdenburg's expression, in that this is the only construction in English to contain an element in the syntactic position of *Y* in which it is *X* and not *Y* that fulfils the role of subject of the complement predicate. Its unusualness is cemented by the fact that there are hundreds of constructions of the form *X* matrix verb *Y to* where it is *Y* rather than *X* that functions as the subject of the complement clause predicate. As Hawkins puts it:

> since verbs like *promise* are in a distinct minority compared with *persuade*-verbs, the finite complement could also be motivated by a desire to make clear that the subject of the subordinate verb is not the matrix object, as it usually is" (Hawkins 2004: 158)

If Rohdenburg's (and Hawkins') assumption that finite clauses are preferred to non-finite ones in order to avoid processing complexity is correct, then the avoidance of such complexity may also be the reason why one restricts the utilisation of an infrequent construction type to contexts in which the primary argument (the subject) is particularly salient in the discourse context. The speaker ensures thereby that a maximum degree of processing capacity is available to process the construction itself.

Of a total of 18 tokens of the *X promise Y to* construction in the BNC, 15 contain a pronominal promiser. Of the three exceptions one has already been cited as example (27). In its case we saw that the repetition of the subject in proper noun form in consecutive sentences was conditioned by the transition from a newspaper headline to the first line of the journalist's article. The other tokens in which the subjects are full nominals are (43) and (44).

(43) And *his mother promised him to do so*; and then he departed from them and went out against the frontier of the Moors.
(BNC ASW 515)

(44) Later that evening *Herbert and I* discussed the problem, and promised *each other to be* more careful than ever.
(BNC FPU 1800)

According to the BNC, the text from which (43) is taken is called "Warriors of Christendom", written by John Matthews and Bob Stewart, and published in 1988. The actual author of the text in question, however, is Robert Southey. It is his 1808 translation of a Spanish text from 1637. Example (43) was therefore excluded from consideration in this study, as was (44) which is taken from *Great Expectations* and (45) which is a quotation from an eighteenth century gardening treatise.

(45) In all *we promise the publick to be* as careful as possible not to lead them into mistakes, nor will we mention any particular tree, plant, flower or fruit which is not in our own garden ... we do not propose to mention many different species of trees and plants that are either in the public Botanick Garden, nor that may be in the possession of some curious gentlemen, but only such as are actually in the nurseries of persons belonging to this Society and from where any Gentleman may be furnished with any of the particulars here treated of by directing their letters for the Society of Gardeners at Newhall's Coffee House in Chelsea, Nr.
(BNC ALU 1045)

This leaves 15 tokens of *X promise Y to*, in 14 of which *X* is realised by a pronoun. In the sixteenth token, example (27), it is realised by a proper noun. How should we account for these facts in a usage-based, bottom-up approach to grammatical classification? Recall that this construction is unique in English, so we cannot avail ourselves of analogy with other constructions containing two animate participants. Faced with such a rare construction, the only one of its type, there are, in theory, at least two ways, (a) and (b), of trying to account for the fact that its subjects are overwhelmingly pronominal.

(a) There is a construction NP_1 *promise* NP_2 *to*. In all but a small handful of cases the first NP is instantiated, for discourse reasons, by a pronoun.
(b) There is a construction Pronoun *promise* NP *to*. In a small handful of cases a speaker may choose, for discourse reasons, to substitute a full nominal for the pronominal subject.

The discourse reasons referred to in both (a) and (b) are not difficult to describe. With respect to the reasons mentioned in (a), there is no doubt that in all 15 tokens of *X promise Y to*, *X* is not only given in the universe of discourse, but is either first or second person or, if third, is extremely salient in the discourse.[10] This explains why it is normally realised by a pronoun. With respect to the reasons mentioned in (b), the only one encountered in the present study was the decision by a copy editor to state a topic in a newspaper headline and to restate this same topic in the first line of the body of the text.

Given a choice between these two approaches, the second one may appear more attractive, in the light of the genre restrictions that seem to apply to the realisation of the subject as a full nominal. However, one may question whether there is any need to choose between the two, whether the linguistic facts might not be better captured by a statement, such as (c), that makes reference to the current discourse status of the subject.

(c) There is a construction *X promise Y to* in which *X* is always given in the immediate discourse universe, and thus normally encoded pronominally.

(c) would appear to account satisfactorily for all 15 tokens of the construction.

The *X promise Y to* construction is not unique in English in its tendency to occur with pronominal subjects. This tendency also applies, for instance, to the possessive *-ing* construction, illustrated in (46). The possessive *-ing* construction also shares with the *X promise Y to* construction the property of having a near-synonymous counterpart, the accusative *-ing* construction, illustrated in (47).

(46) *She* recalled *his* saying, 'I want you to love and desire me with the same degree of passion that Lucia loved and desired my namesake.'
(BNC JY2 3025)

[10] See the appendix for details of the person and number of all promisers and promissees in the three constructions in which the latter are explicitly mentioned.

(47) Luce was about to ask him what he meant, when *she* recalled *him* saying his father's marriage had been arranged, and hadn't proved a happy one, and bit her tongue.
(BNC JY2 3792)

These two constructions, hereafter referred to as poss. *-ing* and acc. *-ing*, often appear to be almost, if not completely, synonymous. This is certainly true of examples (46) and (47), both of which are the product of the same author. In these two examples the replacement of the accusative form of the complement clause subject by the possessive form, or vice versa, would appear to result in an equally idiomatic utterance. According to Biber et al. (1999: 750) in cases like this "the possessive option focuses attention on the action described in the *ing*-clause. In contrast, use of the objective form emphasises the person doing the action." On the other hand one could argue that the more nominal structure of (46) may incline one to interpret the act of *saying* as more of a reified process than is the case in (47), where *saying* retains more of the 'ongoing' sense normally associated with the verbal *-ing* form. However, there is no doubt that in the case of both interpretations we are dealing with very fine meaning distinctions.

Of the two constructions, acc. *-ing* is much more common than poss. *-ing*. Biber et al. (1999: 750) note that "the objective case is used for the overwhelming majority (over 90%) of noun phrases occurring in the pattern verb + NP + *ing*-clause". In a similar vein, Mair (2002: 112) notes that the "archaic type of gerund, with the notional subject in the genitive, is attested very rarely in present-day English". Although both Biber et al. and Mair are undoubtedly correct in stating that the poss. *-ing* construction is the less common of the two, both constructions are represented in the BNC.

To elaborate further on similarities with the *promise* construction; an investigation was carried out of constructions containing 15 matrix verbs that occur with both types of complement. The verbs in question are *anticipate*, *avoid*, *fancy*, *forbid*, *hate*, *involve*, *justify*, *mind*, *postpone*, *preclude*, *prevent*, *recall, resent, risk* and *understand*. Random samples of 1,000 tokens containing

each of these verbs were selected and the relevant tokens were extracted from these samples (in the case of matrix verbs represented by fewer than 1,000 tokens in the BNC, all tokens were considered). The accusative form of the complement clause subject is the more common of the two in the case of all verbs except *postpone*, of which were found only two tokens, one of each sort. Of a total of 433 tokens of the constructions in question, 372 are accusative and 61 possessive. All 433 tokens were analysed with respect to the form of the subjects of both the matrix verb and the complement clause predicates. The subjects were divided into two categories. The first category, labelled "Pr", comprises pronouns of all sorts, as well as the understood subjects of imperatives. The second, labelled "FN/C" comprises full nominals and, in the case of matrix verb subjects, clauses. Table 3 and Figure 8 contain details of the matrix verb and complement clause subjects of all tokens.

Matrix verb subject - Complement clause subject	Pr-Pr	Pr-FN	FN/C-Pr	FN/C-FN	Totals
accusative *-ing*	93	104	47	128	372
possessive *-ing*	37	5	17	2	61
Totals	130	109	64	130	433

Table 3. The forms of matrix and complement clause subjects in both acc. *-ing* and poss. *-ing* constructions. "Pr" stands for pronoun, "FN" for full nominal and "C" for clause.

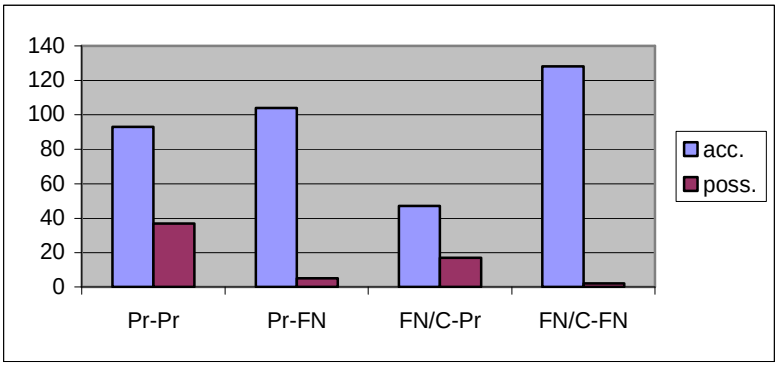

Figure 8. The forms of matrix and complement clause subjects in both acc. *-ing* and poss. *-ing*' constructions. "Pr" stands for pronoun, "FN" for full nominal and "C" for clause.

We can see in table 3 that 54 possessive complement clause subjects (89%) are pronominal. The corresponding percentage for accusative complement clause subjects is 35%. This difference between the two types of subject is statistically significant at the level of $p = 0.001$. 42 of 61 tokens of 'poss. *-ing* contain pronominal matrix verb subjects, compared to 197 of 372 tokens of acc. *-ing*. The difference between the two is statistically significant at the level of $p = 0.05$.[11] The fact that the possessive *-ing* construction favours a pronominal complement clause subject has frequently been remarked upon in the literature. For instance, Quirk et al. (1985: 1063) state: "In general, the genitive is preferred if the item is a pronoun, the noun phrase has personal reference, and the style is formal". Similarly, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* states:

> …the genitive in a gerund-participial is awkward with NPs of any significant length or complexity, especially those with post-head dependents. It is most likely with personal pronouns, and after that singular NPs that refer to people and have no more than one or two words as pre-head dependents (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1193)

Neither of these major reference works note the tendency for the construction to occur with pronominal *matrix verb* subjects. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, this tendency has not been remarked upon in any previous study of these constructions. Nevertheless, the tendency does exist. Moreover, it resembles the tendency found in the case of the *promise* constructions: in both cases the more/most unusual of two or more near-synonymous constructions is the more/most likely to occur with a pronominal subject.

[11] Pearson's chi-square (with one degree of freedom) for complement subjects = 54.882 ($p = 0.0000$), for matrix verb subjects = 4.787 ($p = 0.0286$).

7. Summary and conclusion

The data adduced in this article reinforces the conclusion reached by Rohdenburg (1999) that the explicit mention of the promissee in a *promise* construction leads to a marked shift in favour of finite complement forms. In addition to having demonstrated how rare the *X promise Y to* construction actually is, I have also shown that it appears to strongly favour pronominal subjects, as does another comparatively rare construction, the poss. *-ing* construction.

The question was posed in section 2 as to whether utterances like those cited in (9) – (14), such as *John promised Mary to leave*, are representative of how the *X promise Y to* construction is used in English. We have seen that they are not. This is not to say that one can totally exclude the possibility of their ever occurring in real speech. They may well do so, provided that *John* has already been firmly established in the current discourse context. The six authors whose examples were cited as (9) – (14) are interested in what they term "control" in sentences of the type *X promise Y to*. In particular, they are interested in capturing in their models the fact that *X* rather than *Y* instantiates the subject of the predicate in the complement clause. We have seen in section 3 that the form of the complement of *promise* is influenced by the form of the matrix verb subject. The facts about the *X promise Y to* construction that have been pointed out in this article may well be quite irrelevant to the theoretical discussions of control relations in articles like Chomsky (1980) and Bresnan (1982). It is, nevertheless, possible to argue that these analyses do neglect a significant fact about the construction. This is the fact that the subject *X* must *itself* be sanctioned in the universe of discourse, either by encoding the speaker or hearer, or by anaphora. As was pointed out above, the reason for this constraint may well be related to the very rare occurrence of the construction in actual usage. Being so unusual, it may be rather difficult to process. It is therefore more likely to be employed in contexts where the subject is easy to process. In contexts where the subject is more difficult to process, where it is encoded by a full nominal, we have seen that the maximally explicit *that* complement clause is preferred.

In the case of both sets of near-synonymous constructions dealt with in this article it is the minority construction that occurs most frequently with pronominal participants. The tentative contention is that this tendency may well be related to the rarity of the construction types in question. To what extent this contention can be generalised to include other rare construction types is an open question requiring further research. Near-synonymous pairs of constructions which are asymmetric in their distribution are, of their very nature, thin on the ground in synchronic corpora. Future research could, however, take the form of laboratory experiments, or excavations of diachronic corpora. It is especially in the latter that one might expect to find pairs of near-synonymous constructions.[12]

[12] The reason for this is the tendency for one of a pair of synonymous constructions to be phased out over time. As Hawkins puts it: "Synonymy is highly inefficient, since it increases the number of forms in a language, at no extra benefit in terms of property signalling, and it is for this reason that pure synonyms are quite rare" (Hawkins 2004: 40).

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Appendix

Tables i, ii and iii contain details of person and number for all pronominal promisers and promissees in the three *X promise Y* constructions. Full nominals are classified as either given or new in the tables, "givenness" being defined narrowly in the sense of being explicitly mentioned in the immediate discourse context.

		Promissee								
		1st sg	2nd sg	3rd sg	1st pl	2nd pl	3rd pl	FN given	FN new	Total
Promiser	1st sg	1						2	1	4
	2nd sg	3						1	1	5
	3rd sg	1							3	4
	1st pl	1								1
	2nd pl									
	3rd pl									
	FN given								1	1
	FN new									
	Total	6						3	6	15

Table i. Pronominal and given and new full nominal promisers and promissees in the *X promise Y to* construction

		Promissee								
		1st sg	2nd sg	3rd sg	1st pl	2nd pl	3rd pl	FN given	FN new	Total
Promiser	1st sg	5	6	2			1	1	2	17
	2nd sg	7							3	10
	3rd sg	1		10				3	5	19
	1st pl									
	2nd pl									
	3rd pl	1						1		2
	FN given	1		1			1	1	2	6
	FN new						1	2	1	4
	Total	15	6	13			3	8	13	58

Table ii. Pronominal and given and new full nominal promisers and promissees in the *X promise Y that* construction

		Promissee								
		1st sg	2nd sg	3rd sg	1st pl	2nd pl	3rd pl	FN given	FN new	Total
Promiser	1st sg	9	9	8			1	1	22	50
	2nd sg	21		1					3	25
	3rd sg	4		9				1	6	20
	1st pl								3	3
	2nd pl									
	3rd pl								1	1
	FN given			1						1
	FN new									
	Total	34	9	19			1	2	35	100

Table iii. Pronominal and given and new full nominal promisers and promissees in the *X promise Y Ø* construction