'A promise is a promise… but what about threats?': an English-Spanish contrastive analysis of the verbs *promise-prometer* and *threaten-amenazar*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate 'I promise' and its counterpart in (Peninsular) Spanish *prometo*. After briefly revisiting the theoretical debate on performativity and performative verbs, the paper adopts a corpus-based approach to quantify the main uses of 'I promise' in both languages. This contrastive analysis has an ultimate didactic purpose, since these verbs can raise problems of understanding and use for Spanish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL henceforth) and of translation studies. In order to carry out this analysis, the *British National Corpus* and the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* were used, manually fine-graining the initial automatic search. To make both datasets comparable, only the oral and the fiction sections were considered since they are both shared by the two corpora. Interestingly, during the analysis there has also emerged an unexpected result which seems to be pointing out to the beginning of a linguistic change in Spanish. Thus, it can be observed that there is an emergent use in Spanish of the verb *amenazar* ('to threaten'), sometimes with the action function of "promising". This emergent use seems to be especially frequent in computer-mediated communication (*e.g.* blogs, forums, *etc.*) but it is still extremely rare in English.

Keywords: performative verb, promise, threaten, Spanish-English contrastive linguistics

1 Introduction

As pointed out by de Ponte (2017, 34), "knowing how to promise or how to issue an order is one of the basic competences required to master a language". Given that promises commit the speaker to a future course of action, it is crucial for students of English as a foreign language to be able to perform this speech act appropriately so as not to incur in

pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983) or dissonance[1] (Zamborlin 2007) when dealing with native speakers of English in intercultural encounters. As Thomas (1983, 97) points out:

> *While grammatical error may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person. Misunderstandings of this nature are almost certainly at the root of unhelpful and offensive national stereotyping: 'the abrasive Russian/German', 'the obsequious Indian/Japanese', 'the insincere American', and 'the standoffish Briton'<…>. Pragmatic failure, then, is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown, but in spite of this, teacher and textbook writers alike have almost completely ignored it.*

Indeed, there are different ways to make a promise. Thus, the speaker can simply enunciate whatever they are promising (*e.g.* I will go). However, as de Ponte (2017, 34) argues,

> *to get the intended result <...> it is often useful – or even necessary – to name the act by including the performative verb in the sentence uttered, as in 'I promise I will go' <…>. Sure enough, we could make promises or give orders without mastering explicit performatives.* **But we could not master a language – with performative verbs – without knowing how to correctly use explicit performatives.** [my emphasis]

The aim of this paper is thus to carry out a contrastive analysis of *prometo* and 'I promise' so as to help Spanish students of English to master the latter. More specifically, I shall focus on identifying the parallelisms and differences in use of this verb so as to find out whether language transfer will be mostly positive or negative for Spanish learners of English[2] (*cf.* also the preliminary study by Maíz-Arévalo 2009).

2 Revisiting performative verbs

Performative verbs have long attracted the attention of scholars given their particular nature in contrast to constative verbs (*cf.* Grant 1949; Bach & Harnish 1979; Hancher 1979; Verschueren 1980; Vanderbeken 2001; Wierzbicka 1987; Pérez Hernández 2001; among many others).

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[1]   Dissonances are defined as "circumstances in which speakers, deliberately or not, organize the linguistic action in such a way that hearers perceive it as conflicting with the harmonious flow of the conversation" (Zamborlin 2007, 22).

[2]   In this paper, language transfer is canonically understood as "the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin 1989, 27).

The concept of performativity was first introduced by Austin (1962). In speech-act theory, performative verbs can thus be defined as verbs that explicitly convey the kind of speech act being performed, *e.g.* apologise, declare, congratulate, *etc*. In other words, the mere utterance of these words performs the uttered act in "I speak, therefore I do" fashion, as opposed to constative verbs, where speakers merely state some fact. As a result, whilst constative verbs refer to a true or false reality, performative verbs cannot be considered to refer to either true or false states of affairs. In contrast, they perform or not a particular course of action given the appropriate felicity conditions. For example, whilst the utterance "I hereby declare you husband and wife" in the proper context will lead to a couple being married, the utterance "I hereby run three miles a day" is not even grammatical in English, given than the verb "run" expresses an action but it is not performative.

Austin (1962) also established three main linguistic features that characterise actual performative verbs, in what could be termed the "test of performativity" (Weigand 2010, 169). Thus, these verbs are linguistically realised in the present simple, commonly in the first person (both singular and plural) and can include the adverb "hereby", as in the example above "I hereby declare you husband and wife".

The test of performativity has, however, triggered a great deal of criticism (*e.g.* Levinson 1983; Searle 1989; Thomas 1995; Pagin 2004; Jary 2007, amongst others). In his own writings, Searle (1989) admitted that Austin's definition of performativity faces some challenges.

Thomas (1995, 44) has argued more specifically against the test of performativity, by pointing out that

a) there is no formal (grammatical) way of distinguishing performative verbs from other sorts of verbs. For example, if a speaker employs the first person present simple of the verb "I drive" this form is exactly the same as that of the performative verb "I promise".

b) some prototypical performative verbs can be used non performatively, as in the following example by Searle (1989, 537): "I promise to come on Wednesday", which is a performative utterance, as opposed to "I promise too many things to too many people", which is not, since the speaker is not committing to any particular future action but simply stating a fact about him/herself. Furthermore, in the case of *to promise*, the verb can actually be used to express modality after having undergone a diachronic process of subjectification (*cf.* Traugott 1997; Cornillie 2004, 2007).

c) the presence of a performative verb does not guarantee that the specified action is performed. For example, just uttering "I promise" does not guarantee that the speaker will actually perform the actual promise, which would turn it into an unfulfilled promise.

Despite criticism, it seems difficult to deny the performative character of some verbs (García-Carpintero 2013). However, rather than an all-or-nothing characteristic – *i.e.* a verb is performative or it is not, it appears to be more suitable to consider them as belonging to a continuum "which extends from one end where the performative verbs are, to the other end where, because of pragmatic constraints, these verbs cannot be used performatively" (Verschueren 1980 in López Álvarez 2005, 691). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve further into the theoretical constraints of performativity and performative verbs.

For the purpose of the present paper, and following Cornillie (2004, 2007), I shall then concentrate on the three major categories:

(i)   Performatives: are those cases where the speaker's utterance commits herself to a future course of action, hence making a promise to the interlocutor(s). The verb is thus used lexically. Thus, "when the speaker says *prometo* 'I promise', i.e. using the first person and the present tense of *prometer*, (s)he produces a speech act in which the act of promising conveys direct commitment to what (s)he says" (Cornillie 2007, 102).

(ii)   IF-performatives: are those cases where the speaker's promise is 'conditioned' by (external) circumstances. Linguistically, they are typically realised either by a conditional sentence or a temporal subordinate clause.

(iii) 'Subjectified' use of the original performative verb: this involves those cases where the originally performative verb has undergone a process of subjectification, *i.e.* "a semantic shift or extension in which an entity originally construed objectively comes to receive a more subjective construal" (Langacker 1991, 215 quoted in Cornillie 2007, 95). In other words, the speaker is not really committing to a future course of action but using the verb as a modal, expressing prediction, certainty, *etc*.

3 Methodology

The present analysis is corpus-based and combines a quantitative and qualitative approach. An initial quantitative approach might thus be helpful to contrast the main linguistic constructions where the English performative and its Spanish counterpart are

used. This quantitative analysis will be further supplemented by a qualitative approach to zero in on possible reasons for language transfer (both positive and negative) amongst Spanish learners of English, with a special attention to their spoken production and to their translation skills (especially of literary texts).

There are three main reasons for focusing on these two areas. First, speaking is usually the skill Spanish students find harder to master, increasing their levels of classroom anxiety and thus diminishing their learning process (*cf.* Horwitz 2001). Thus, reinforcing their knowledge of how *prometo* 'I promise' works in oral interactions might help them lessen their anxiety and perform better, say, in intercultural encounters. Secondly, and as a teacher of literary translation, it could be helpful for translation students to know about the different uses of these verbs so as to improve their translations. Finally, the nature of the corpora used for the analysis has also played a role (see section 3.1 below) in this choice of areas.

3.1 Description of the corpora

The *British National Corpus* (BNC henceforth) and the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA henceforth) have been chosen as the main data source since both corpora share common features which make them liable to comparison and contrast, as shall be seen in the following paragraphs.

The BNC was originally created by Oxford University Press, and consists of 100 million words covering a wide range of genres. More specifically, the BNC encompasses seven sub-sections: spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, non-academic, academic and miscellaneous. Finally, and as its name indicates, the BNC only includes one variety of English – *i.e.* the British one.

The CREA corpus was developed by the Spanish Royal Academy of Language (RAE) and consists of approximately 200 million tokens, including a wide range of oral and written current texts (1975–2005) of different registers. More specifically, the CREA includes nine sub-sections; namely: Oral, Fiction, Politics; Economics, commerce and finance; Social sciences, beliefs and thought; Arts; Leisure, daily life; Health; Science and technology and Miscellaneous.

As can be observed, there are some similarities in these sub-sections; however, there are only two of them which fully coincide, namely oral (*e.g.* casual conversations) and fiction. It might be argued that there is a third group which coincides (*i.e.* miscellaneous) but it is more difficult to determine whether the same type of genres and contents have been included in this group by both corpora. Since the ultimate aim of this paper is to help Spanish students of English develop better speaking skills to avoid pragmatic failure

and to help them in their translation of literary texts, I have only considered the tokens of the oral and fiction sub-sections in both corpora. Future research intends to focus on other categories such as academic discourse to observe whether the same patterns are also employed so as to help Spanish students develop better writing skills in the L2.

The spoken sub-section of the BNC corpus accounts for 10% of the total whilst the written sub-section is 90% of the total. This means the spoken sub-section, which includes recordings from radio interviews, TV interviews, or transcribed informal conversations amounts to 10 million words. Similarly to the BNC, the spoken sub-section of the CREA corpus accounts for 10% of the total whilst the written sub-section is 90% of the total. This means the spoken sub-section, which includes recordings from radio interviews, TV interviews, or transcribed informal conversations amounts to 10 million words. This final number makes both oral sub-sections suitable to comparison.

As for the fiction sub-section, the BNC consists of 15,909,312 words from novels, theatre and poetry. The CREA fiction sub-section amounts to 49% of the written corpus, also devoted to novels, narratives and theatre. The number of words of the peninsular variety, however, is superior to that of the BNC, with 38.5 million words. Thus, and in order to quantify results more accurately, all results will be normalised and the ratio per number of tokens calculated.

Another major difference between both corpora is that, unlike the BNC, the CREA corpus includes many different varieties of Spanish (*e.g.* Argentinian, Chilean, Cuban, *etc*.). However, for the current study only the peninsular variety has been considered. This decision has been determined by three main reasons. First, to contrast just two varieties of two languages (British English and Peninsular Spanish). Secondly, to balance the number of words in each corpus since the Peninsular variety accounts for 50% of the CREA corpus, which means it amounts to 100 million words. Last but not least, the majority of students who might benefit from the results obtained in this study speak the peninsular variety of Spanish as their L1.

Figure 1 sums up the main features of both corpora.

	BNC	CREA
Varieties	British English	Peninsular Spanish
Nº of words total	100 million	100 million
Register studied	Oral	Oral
Nº of words in oral register	10 million	10 million
Nº of words in fiction subsection	Near 16 million	Over 38 million

Figure 1. Corpora used in the analysis

3.2 Procedure

As for the procedure to compile the dataset, I focused on the first person present simple form of the verbs, namely: *I promise* and *prometo* 'I promise', both occurring in isolation (*i.e.* "I promise") but also followed by a subordinate linguistic structure such as a non-finite clause (*e.g.* "I promise to help you"), a finite clause (*e.g.* "I promise I'll help you"), or a noun (*e.g.* "I promise you my eternal support"). There are two main reasons for taking these two forms *I promise* and *prometo* as the point of departure in the analysis. On the one hand, these forms have traditionally been regarded as prototypically performative (*cf.* Austin 1962). On the other hand, and for practical reasons, these forms can easily be searched for automatically to obtain raw numbers before actually carrying out a manual analysis to refine results and set aside those cases which are not used to actually make a promise.

4 Data analysis

This section presents the results from a quantitative perspective. For the sake of clarity, it has been divided into four sub-sections. After presenting an overview of the results in the paragraphs below, section 4.1 deals with the performative use of 'I promise' in both the oral and fiction sections of the two corpora under analysis. This is followed by section 4.2, which focuses on what I have termed IF-performatives. Section 4.3 concentrates on non-performative, subjectified uses of 'I promise'. Finally, section 4.4 zeroes in on those aspects that might lead EFL Spanish students to negative language transfer so as to help them improve their communicative skills in the L2.

The initial automatic search for these aforementioned forms ('I promise' and *prometo*) renders the following results, as illustrated by Figure 2, which reflects the number of occurrences (tokens) of each form in the oral and fiction subsections of both corpora, together with the corresponding ratio in each of the subsections (see figure 1 for total nº of words in each subsection):

	BNC		CREA	
	Tokens	**Ratio (per nº of words)**	**Tokens**	**Ratio (per nº of words)**
Oral	36	0.00036%	13	0.00013%
Fiction	362	0.0022%	29	0.000008%

Figure 2. Tokens and ratio in oral and fictions sub-sections of corpora

As can be observed, the use of 'I promise' and its Spanish counterpart are very limited in both cases, but especially in the Spanish corpus. It could thus be argued that *prometo* 'I promise' seems to have developed a more literary flavour that prevents users from

employing it in their casual everyday conversations except when aiming for emphasis. Furthermore, it is also important to point out that this initial raw number derived by the search was followed by a manual search. Thus, all the examples were retrieved in their full context (as provided by both corpora) and manually classified into the three major categories already mentioned in the Introduction:

(i) Performative use: where the speaker commits to a future course of action, hence making a promise to the interlocutor(s), as in examples (1) and (2).

(1)   [BNC-ORAL] *When is it again? // [3] March. // Twenty fifth, isn't it? I think! // Yeah. // I am going to be in the front seat! // Oh no you're not! // I'll (unclear) speak to you. // My mum wants a front seat as well! // (laugh) (pause) There'll be a great big (pause) clamour I sho-- I should think for those seats! I think it's hilarious! // But you're very loud, they'll all going shh! // I won't laugh I promise! // No, you'll, look you be-- better (unclear) // I'll be really serious.*

(2)   [CREA-ORAL] *Hemos parido la revista número quince. Que felicidades a todas las madres de estos días. Sí porque en estos días parece que está de moda el parir, aunque les prometo que será el último día que hablemos de partos*.
'We have given birth to our fifteenth magazine. By the way, congratulations to all the mothers nowadays. Yes, because these days it seems giving birth is fashionable, although I promise you that it will be the last day we speak about labours.'

(ii) IF-performatives: are those where the speaker's promise is conditioned by (external) circumstances. Linguistically, they are typically realised either by a conditional sentence (as in examples 3 and 4) or a temporal subordinate clause, as in examples (5) and (6).

(3)   [BNC-FICTION] *I promise you we'll give you a shake if anything untoward occurs.*

(4)   [CREA-FICTION] "*No quiero que te mueras sin conocer América", lo dejé con las ganas, ¿qué se me había perdido en América a mí? "**Si te casas, bueno, entonces te prometo ir a la boda", le decía por carta o por teléfono.*
'"I don't want you to die without going to America." I left him yearning for more, why on Earth would I want to go to America? "**If you marry, well, then I promise I'll go to your wedding**", I'd tell him in my letters or on the phone.'

(5)   [BNC-FICTION] *I'll sew them back when you goes [sic] home. I promise.*

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3   (//) is used to indicate a change of speaker in the conversation.

(6)   [CREA-FICTION] *Las muertes y la forma de anunciarlas es algo muy real. Lamentablemente, no sabemos nada más. Pero vamos de cráneo, eso sí.* **Cuando la cosa se aclare, te prometo venir a contártelo.**
'Deaths and the way to announce them is something very real. Unfortunately, we don't know anything else. But things have got off to a bad start, that's for sure. **When everything is cleared up, I promise to come and tell you**.'

   (iii) 'Subjectified' use of the original performative verb: are those cases where the original performative verb has acquired a modal meaning (Cornillie 2007), as in examples (7) and (8).

(7)   [BNC-FICTION] *a few -- I mean, he probably shouldn't have said what he did. I happened to let slip how much James gave me for it. He was shocked. He said I'd been cheated. 'Not necessarily,' Ginny said. 'The sale was nearly two years ago. And you said yourself that the house was in a terrible condition.' I told him all that. Didn't make a blind bit of difference.* **'You've been cheated, old man.' Those were his very words, I promise you.**"

(8)   [CREA-FICTION] *La última pregunta que le formuló Ana María a Esther fue por qué no tenían en casa un perro o un gato. "Hacen mucha compañía, ¿no?" "Sí, es verdad -accedió Esther-. Pero dan mucho la lata.* **Y te prometo que Jacinto y Clara se bastan y sobran para no dejarme respirar."**
'The last question Ana Maria asked Esther was why they didn't have a dog or a cat at home. "They keep great company, don't they?" "Yes, that's true", Esther admitted. "But they also bother a lot. And **I promise you that Jacinto and Clara are more than enough to keep me bothered**.'"

In cases like (7) and (8), the speaker is not committing to a future course of action but to the truthfulness of their words. This lack of commitment to future action is also reflected by the verbal tense of the subordinate clause: either past (as in 7) or present simple (as in 8), none of which points to the future.

In the following subsections, I will focus of the three categories in both corpora in the oral and fiction sections, respectively.

4.1 Performative use: making a promise

The initial search of 'I promise' in the BNC oral section renders a total of 36 tokens (n= 36). However, the analysis reveals that it is only performatively used by the speaker to actually make a promise in 21 cases (57% of the cases), as in example (9), where the speaker emphasizes his commitment not to ruin something, as shown by the repetition of the performative both at the beginning and the end of his utterance:

(9)   [BNC-ORAL] *No Ben, please. You're just ruining it (unclear)* // ***I promise, I won't ruin it I promise***.

The frequency of the performative in CREA is even more limited in the oral sub-corpus, where only 13 tokens were found (n=13). Out of this total, there are 8 cases that can be considered performatives since the speaker is committing to a future course of action (36%), as illustrated by example (10):

(10)   [CREA-ORAL] ***Le prometo que hablaremos también*** *de ya lo hemos hecho en otra ocasión, pero le dedicaremos un tiempo especial de la misma forma que ayer nos dedicamos a la enseñanza privada, lo haremos también de la enseñanza pública*.
       '**I promise you that we will also speak**, we have already done so on other occasions, but we will devote some time just as we devoted ourselves to talking about private schools yesterday, we will do the same in relation to public schools.'

Interestingly enough, the performative use is far from frequent in the spoken corpus, which might be a good reason to discourage students of EFL to overuse it. It is more difficult, however, to determine why this is the case. A possible argument might be the fact that promises can be made by simply resorting to an utterance like 'I will help you', thus complying with the economy of language (Baker 2015). The performative seems to be used in order to reinforce the illocutionary force of the commissive speech act, as in example (9) and is hence a marked choice.

With regard to the fiction sub-corpora, the situation is slightly different and, although the use of the performative is scarce, it seems to adopt a literary flavour inexistent in everyday casual conversation. Thus, the BNC renders a total of 362 tokens in the fiction sub-section whilst the CREA amounts to just 29 tokens (n=362 versus n=29). Thus, understanding how to transfer the English source form into the Spanish target form becomes highly relevant to students of literary translation. More specifically, 220 tokens seem to reflect a performative use (61%) in the BNC whereas there are only 13 tokens in the CREA (45%), as illustrated by examples (11) and (12):

(11)   [BNC-FICTION] *'I must go out,' Craig said, 'but **I promise I won't be long**.'*

(12)   [CREA-FICTION] "*Lo hago por si acaso. Pero **te prometo que no te volveré a engañar**." "Todas las noches me prometes lo mismo.*"
       'I do it just in case. But **I promise you I will not cheat on you again**.' 'You promise me the same thing every night.'

Figure 3 sums up the use of the performative in the oral and fiction sub-sections of both corpora:

	BNC		CREA	
	ORAL (n=36)	**FICTION (n= 362)**	**ORAL (n=13)**	**FICTION (n=29)**
Tokens	21	220	8	13
Ratio	57%	61%	61.5%	45%

Figure 3. Performative use in the oral and fiction sub-corpora

4.2 IF-Performatives: making a conditioned promise

It can be argued that, when the speaker's promise is conditioned by (external) circumstances, the commitment is weaker than in the case above, since the promise might not take place if the aforementioned conditions are not fulfilled.

In the case of the BNC oral section, it is possible to find 8 tokens where the promise seems to be conditioned either by a conditional or a temporal subordinate clause. In other words, the action of the main clause – *i.e.* the promise – will only be realized if/when the condition is fulfilled, as illustrated by examples (13) and (14) below, which show either a condition or a temporal circumstance respectively:

(13)   [BNC-ORAL] ***I will pay you back, I promise, as soon as I get payed*** [sic], ***I give you the money back.*** *// Well I don't think we can buy one quite as quickly as that.*

(14)   [BNC-ORAL] *As soon as she comes back I promise I'll ask her.*

In case of time subordinate clauses, it might be argued the promise still exists, even if delayed, which also explains why the speaker resorts to the canonical form *I promise*.

As for the CREA oral sub-section, I have not found any examples, which is rather telling. Given the low use also in English, Spanish EFL students should be warned against overusing this form.

As for the fiction sub-corpora, the use of conditioned promises also seems to be relatively scarce, although more frequent than in everyday oral interaction. Thus, it is possible to find 52 tokens in the BNC and 8 in the CREA, illustrated by examples (15) and (16), respectively:

(15)   [BNC-FICTION] *"Professor Benson, Dr. Wickram, I suggest you follow his example.* ***I promise you we'll give you a shake if anything untoward occurs."***

(16)   [CREA-FICTION] *"Precisamente por esto, porque sólo yo podría sospechar la importancia de lo que he escrito. Si muero, El Público no tiene razón de ser para los demás." "**Sólo te prometo devolvértelo cuando regreses de Granada, sin haberlo leído**."*

'That's precisely why, because it is only me that could understand the importance of what I've written. If I die, the Public won't have any sense to others.' '**I only promise to give it back to you when you are back from Granada**, without having read it.'

Figure 4 sums up the use of the conditioned performative in the oral and fiction sub-sections of both corpora:

	BNC		CREA	
	ORAL (n=36)	**FICTION (n= 362)**	**ORAL (n=13)**	**FICTION (n=29)**
Tokens	8	52	0	8
Ratio	22%	14%	0%	27.5%

Figure 4. IF-Performative use in the oral and fiction sub-corpora

4.3 Subjectification of 'I promise'

In the oral sub-section of the BNC, there are 7 tokens where the verb is used non-performatively, as illustrated by example (17), where the performative verb seems to be used as a marker of evidentiality rather than committing the speaker to a future course of action (Cornillie 2007, 95):

(17)   [BNC-ORAL] *No you're not. // (laugh) //You can try. (laugh) // (unclear) // That's exactly what he sounds like when it's played back. // What? // When I talk on it. (mimicking) When I talk on it. // no I can't understand, well (mimicking) now I can, now I can understand why they take the piss out of me for my voice. // (laugh) // Oh shut up. // Don't, it's so sensitive I promise. <…>*

As for the CREA oral sub-section, the use of subjectified *prometo* 'I promise' amounts to five cases, where the speaker seems to be reinforcing the truth of what (s)he is saying, as shown by example (18)[4]. Example (18) transcribes the conversation between a taxi driver and a famous TV presenter, with the taxi driver "promising" that it is an honour

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[4]   In the case of examples quoted from CREA, the only editing has been to include double slashes to separate the different conversational turns in the case of conversational exchanges for the sake of clarity since they are inexistent in the original corpus.

for him to drive the presenter. He is not committing to any future action but rather to the truthfulness of his own statement:

(18)   [CREA-ORAL] ¿Qué tal? Los muchos que hay. Porque yo soy el rey del taxi, pero a mí llevar reyes // Pero no vas en plan rey en el taxis.// Bueno no, porque no dejan. // Bueno. ¿A dónde vamos? // Llévame al centro. Pero no muy deprisa.// ***Pues te prometo que para mí es un vamos, que es un honor pero tela llevarte en el taxi*** *porque* // *Muchas gracias, hombre.*
'What's up? There are many. Because I am the taxi king, but driving kings // But you don't show off like the taxi king.// Well no, because we can't. Well, where are we heading? // Take me downtown, but not too fast. // **I promise you it is an honour, really, it is a real honour to drive you in my taxi** because. // Thanks a lot, man.'

A similar case seems to be (19), where one of the interlocutors stresses her lack of success with men and that she has actually never seduced any despite what people might think:

(19)   [CREA-ORAL] *Y eres una mujer que te llevas a los hombres de calle, Lina. // ¿Tú crees? // Yo creo que sí. Lina, por favor. // Ni uno te Ni uno.* ***Te prometo que ni uno****. // Vaya, es una lástima.*
'And you are a woman men feel attracted to, Lina. // Do you think so? // I do. Lina, please. // Not even one, not one. **I promise you that not even one.** // Well, that's a shame.'

In the case of fiction, results are slightly more similar, with 21% in the BNC and 27.5% of the cases in CREA. Examples (20) and (21) show subjectification in fictional texts:

(20)   [BNC-FICTION] *in a small mairie, some fifty kilometres outside Paris. No guests. No reporters. Isobel had her wedding-ring first. She chose her engagement-ring belatedly in the de Chavigny Paris showrooms. She passed over the trays of sapphires, of rubies, of diamonds; she chose an emerald. When Edouard slipped it on to her finger, she looked up at him and smiled. 'This one has no superstitions attached to it, I hope?' Edouard put his alms around her.* ***'My darling, none. It's very very lucky, I promise you.'***

(21)   [CREA-FICTION] *Te prometo que me quedan cinco duros[5], macho.*
'I promise you I am broke, man'

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    5   *Cinco duros* amounts to twenty-five pesetas. It is no longer used as currency but can be understood as having very little money.

In both examples, the speaker is not committing to a future course of action but rather emphasizing what he believes to be true. This also reflects in the use of present simple rather than future tense to complement 'I promise'. In other examples, speakers opt for emphasizing the truthfulness of past events, as in (22) and (23):

(22)   [BNC-FICTION] *Those were his very words, I promise you.*

(23)   [CREA-FICTION] *A mí es que me encanta cómo eres tú físicamente tan delgado, te prometo que pensaba en ti cuando lo hacía con el Rómulo*.
       'I really like your physical appearance, your thinness, **I promise you that I was thinking of you when I was making love to Romulo**.'

Figure 5 sums up the results of subjectified uses of *prometo* and 'I promise' in both the oral and fiction sub-sections of both corpora:

	BNC		CREA	
	ORAL (n=36)	FICTION (n= 362)	ORAL (n=13)	FICTION (n=29)
Tokens	7	77	5	8
Ratio	19.5%	21%	38.5%	27.5%

Figure 5. Subjectified use of 'I promise' in the oral and fiction sub-corpora

As can be observed, the modal use of *prometo* seems to be more frequent in Spanish than in English, *e.g.* as a way for the speaker to emphasize the truthfulness of their claims. Spanish EFL students might thus run the risk of overusing this expression when using the L2 and could benefit from being taught about this difference.

As a final summary, Figure 6 reflects the three main categories and their respective ratios in the oral and fiction section of both corpora.

		BNC		CREA	
		ORAL (n=36)	FICTION (n= 362)	ORAL (n=13)	FICTION (n=29)
Performative	Tokens	21	220	8	13
	Ratio	57%	61%	61.5%	45%

IF-performative	Tokens	8	52	0	8
	Ratio	22%	14%	0%	27.5%
Subjectified	Tokens	7	77	5	8
	Ratio	19.5%	21%	38.5%	27.5%

Figure 6. Summary of results in both corpora

4.4 Negative language transfer for EFL Spanish students

This section focuses on those linguistic patterns with 'I promise' that show the most outstanding differences between Spanish and English so as to help Spanish students of EFL improve their language skills in the L2.

One of the most important differences between both languages is the performative use of 'I promise' followed or preceded by an embedded clause whose verbal predicate includes the modal operator *will* (or *shall*), as illustrated by the examples below, where only the fragment where the structure is used has been quoted for the sake of space:

(24) *I won't laugh I promise!*

(25) *And I promise I won't fall on you, no*

In the case of Spanish, the use of a subordinate clause in the future tense –either following or preceding the performative verb –is also common. Such a similarity may benefit Spanish students of English, who are likely to positively transfer the structure from the L1 to the L2. However, preceding subordinate clauses (as 25) are likely to be more problematic for Spanish students since the following performative includes a neutral pronoun (*lo*) referring back to the preceding clause (*te **lo** prometo* 'I promise you that') which is not necessary in English, where the performative can be used on its own:

(26) *A la hora de la comida hablaremos, te lo prometo.*
      'We'll speak at lunch time, I promise you.'

This difference may lead Spanish EFL learners to produce incorrect expressions such as *I'll help you, *I promise you it*, where they are trying to transfer the use of the neutral pronoun into the English construction. This also applies to cases where the performative is employed as a full independent clause in itself, either because the speaker is answering a previous question (27) or because the promised action is easily retrieved from the co-text, as in (28):

(27)   "*You promise?*" "*I promise*"

(28)   "*And promise never to stop loving me*" "*Never. I promise.*"

In Spanish, however, the use of the performative in an independent clause is not grammatical, and is limited to very specific contexts such as promising obedience to the Constitution by Ministers or Members of Parliament, as illustrated by (29), which reproduces the formula uttered by members of parliament:

(29)   *Los diputados de HB recurrieron la decisión de la Mesa del Congreso que les privó de su derecho de adquirir la condición de diputados por acatar la Constitución con la fórmula „sí, prometo, por imperativo legal".*
        'The HB deputies appealed the Congress decision depriving them of their right to acquire the condition of deputies to abide by the Constitution under the formula "yes, I promise, by law."'

In addition, Spanish seems to favour the use of the periphrasis "*ir a* + infinitive" 'going to' to follow *prometo* when used performatively (as in 30) or as a modal to express a prediction (Cornillie 2007), as in example (31):

(30)   [CREA-ORAL] *Bien, doctor Freixa le doy las gracias por la consulta gratuita que ha concedido usted a los pocos espectadores que debo tener. Y, bueno, le prometo que yo droga no voy a tomar, aunque ya tomo bastante a través del tabaco y me deja hecho polvo. Muchas gracias doctor.*
        'Well, Dr. Freixa, I thank you for the free consultation you have offered to the few spectators I must have. And, well, I promise that I'm not going to take any drugs, although I already take enough by means of tobacco and it leaves me worn out. Thanks a lot doctor.'

(31)   [CREA-ORAL] *Le prometo que no le va a pasar nada.*
        'I promise you nothing is going to happen to you'

This structure, however, is extremely rare in English (with only 1 token in the oral-subsection):

(32)   [BNC-ORAL] *Well, this morning, er, you know all know Colin, there's er no need for me to spend a lot of time introducing him to you. He's been here several times before, and er, we do look forward to having another interesting morning with you, and I understand that er, you're going to give us a musical morning, this morning, and er, (unclear) (unclear) sing to us. // **Not going to sing. I promise not**, well I might get carried away.*

It could be argued that the speaker is simply repeating the same verbal form that has been previously used by his interlocutor ("I understand that you're going to give us a musical morning"), which might explain why he resorts to "going to" rather than the most frequent subordinate clause with will. However, because of the frequent use of the periphrasis going to in their L1, Spanish students might be led to negatively transfer the periphrasis into English, rendering their expression awkward to native ears, and producing promises like 'I promise I'm not going to do that again!', which are grammatically correct but not very idiomatic rather than the more idiomatic 'I promise I won't do it again!'.

It has been argued (*cf.* Fernández Ramírez 1985; Matte Bon 2005; Bravo 2008; Gozalo Gómez 2009, among others) that there are two main differences regarding the use of the periphrasis (*ir a* 'going to' + infinitive) and the future simple or morphological future. On the one hand, the periphrasis is more common in oral (and informal) Spanish whilst the morphological future is more often employed in written (and formal) registers (Gozalo Gómez 2009, 4–5). On the other hand, and more interestingly, the use of the periphrasis in Spanish invests the utterance with more conviction about the realization of the future action as well as a higher degree of intention on the speaker's part to carry it out. In Illamola and Burguera's words (2007, 78), 'The use of the periphrasis invests the utterance of a higher degree of security or conviction about the realization of the action being described' [my translation][6]. Similarly, Gozalo Gómez (2009, 5) argues that the Spanish periphrasis allows the speaker to stress commitment, which might explain why it is so commonly employed in Spanish to perform promises. In her own words:

> *Thus, by means of the periphrasis, a future action is presented as a natural consequence of a present state of affairs. From this defining feature, it is possible to derive the nuances of intentionality, immediacy and inevitability* [my translation][7].

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[6]   Original text: "el uso de la perífrasis aporta al enunciado mayor grado de seguridad o de convicción sobre la realización de la acción que se describe."

[7]   Original text: "Así pues, mediante la perífrasis una acción futura se presenta como una consecuencia natural de un estado de cosas presente. De este rasgo definitorio podrían derivarse los matices de intencionalidad, inminencia e inevitabilidad."

5 'I threaten': An emergent usage?

Besides its most common use, the performative can also be employed with a negative outcome for the addressee – *i.e.* it can become a threat. This is in line with Weigand's (2010, 133) claim that performative verbs can be used to express an action function "opposite to its literal meaning". Furthermore, in her seminal paper on promises and threats, Preetz (1997, 581) already admitted that the performative "I promise" can actually be used to threaten the interlocutor, as in this example she gives: "I promise to kill you".

A similar case is given by Moyne (1985, 224), who illustrates the opposite meaning of the performative in the following example: "If you do that again, I promise I will spank you". He also argues, however, that the correct interpretation of the speech act is dependent on the context since the same utterance might be interpreted as a promise by, say, a masochist and as a threat by any other addressee.

Indeed, promises and threats have often been linked together as sharing their linguistic realisation (*cf.* Castelfranchi & Guerini 2007), with the only difference being

> *the positive or negative signing of the consequent. In a promise, the speaker tries to persuade the hearer to do something by holding out the prospect of a particular reward; in a threat, the speaker tries to refrain the hearer from doing something by holding out the prospect of a particular punishment.* (Verbrugge *et al.* 2004, 106)

Preetz (1977, 580) establishes a more clear distinction between both, besides stating that there is no performative *I threaten*, which may lead users to employ *I promise* in a negative outcome for the addressee rather than a positive one:

> *There is, however, no illocutionary force bearing locution 'I threaten' and this is because there is no specific illocutionary act of threatening. Threats constitute a sub-class of statements of intention. When one threatens someone, one states one's intention to do something which would normally be considered to harm or to be unpleasant for the person threatened. What makes an utterance a threat is not the illocutionary force of the utterance (which is given by 'I will' or 'I intend' or even, 'I state that I intend') but the content of the act.*

Indeed, the BNC renders zero results for *I threaten*. The question this raises is whether the same picture can be applied to peninsular Spanish. In CREA, there is only one example, quoted below as (33). The speaker (a famous actor) uses 'amenazo con' in the course of a TV interview:

(33)   [CREA-ORAL] Actor: *Estoy en un buen momento, sí.*
Interviewer: *Recientemente has triunfado, en esta serie maravillosa, Gatos en el tejado, ¿cuál es el próximo capítulo de la serie de tu vida, o sea, qué preparas en el futuro?*
Actor: *De momento estoy tratando de acabar un guion para volver a dirigir porque **amenazo** con volver a dirigir y también tengo entre manos un proyecto de teatro.*
'I'm living a good moment, yes.'
'You have recently succeeded in this wonderful series, Cats on the roof, what is your next chapter in the series of your life, I mean, what are you preparing for the future?'
'So far I am trying to finish a script to direct again because **I threaten** to direct a film again and I am also working on a theatre project.'

It could be argued that this is not, however, a performative since the speaker is not committing to a future course of action but to the whole period of trying to finish something. However, it could also be claimed that the speaker is making what seems to be a possible promise to those fans of his who liked his previous work as a director. There are different reasons why the speaker might have felt inclined to use this verb rather than *to promise*.

As already mentioned, the speaker might be interpreted as offering to take a future course of action that implies a positive outcome for his followers, since his first directed film was a success and his directing a second film may thus be perceived as a welcome state of affairs for his followers, just as promises are. As Searle (1969, 58) points out

> *One crucial distinction between promises, on the one hand, and threats, on the other, is that a promise is a pledge to do something for you, not to you; but a threat is a pledge to do something to you, not for you. A promise is defective if the thing promised is something the promisee does not want done; and it is further defective if the promisor does not believe the promisee wants it done, since a non-defective promise must be intended as a promise and not as a threat or warning.*

In this second scenario, the two questions that arise are why he has chosen not to employ the performative (*I promise*) but an infrequent *I threaten* and, secondly, whether this is merely an isolated case or the emergence of an in-going linguistic change in Spanish.

The reasons underlying this choice can be linked to politeness, more specifically, to the maxim of modesty (Leech 1983, 119). According to this maxim, the speaker should "Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of

self." In other words, since the interviewer is maximizing the actor's positive face by stating his success in front of the audience, the latter might feel compelled to show a more modest face by resorting to an apparently negative outcome for his followers when actually promising them a second film.

Another possible explanation might be related to politeness in a different way. By employing this friendly banter in a mock impoliteness form, the speaker might also be resorting to humour as a positive politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson 1987), presenting himself as a closer, and more amiable interlocutor who is trying to diminish the distance with the addressee. Lastly, the use of a different kind of expression to express a promise might also be perceived by the speaker as a more fashionable way to talk, by resorting to newer uses of language. More likely, it could be argued that, in the case of example (33), a combination of all three factors might be at play.

Despite being an isolated example, a secondary search for *amenazo con* 'I threaten to' was carried out online. Thus, the expression was looked up in the popular online dictionaries *Linguee* and *WordReference*[8] as well as in the most popular browser, Google.

Results of the two online dictionaries show that the use of *I threaten* is still far from being established. However, the search on Google of the performative *(yo) amenazo con* 'I threaten to' seems to be rising in everyday use in Spanish, especially in computer-mediated communication, even if still not officially recognized as such by the Royal Academy of the Spanish language (RAE). The most common one of these expressions appears to be *amenazo con volver* 'I threaten to come back', which renders 82,600 tokens, which could arguably be considered as the user's further promise to the addressee to come back as a positive outcome for both of them:

(34)   – *Que me voy mañana pero... ¡**amenazo con volver** cada dos o tres años mientras vos no vuelvas a Buenos Aires!* – ¡Ay, Betty, no sabés qué alegría me estás dando! (from the novel *Autaurique*, by Cristina Balcala, published in 2014)
'I am leaving tomorrow but… **I threaten to come back** every two or three years while you are not coming back to Buenos Aires! – Oh, Betty, you can't imagine how happy you are making me!'

In this example, it could be argued that the speaker is making a promise since coming back is a future action in her agentive control as well as being perceived as a positive outcome by the addressee ('Oh, Betty, you can't imagine how happy you are making me!').

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[8]   Available at http://linguee.com and http://www.wordreference.com

Other relatively common expressions where the construction *amenazo con* 'I threaten to' can be found is in love promises, as shown by the following examples:

(35) *Amenazo con besarte jijiji* (retrieved from forum debates.motos.coches.net) 'I threaten to kiss you hehehe'

(36) *¿Pero si te amenazo con besarte me dices que sí puedo ir? – chilló. Erika rio. – De todas maneras me vas a besar – le dijo ella alzando una ceja* (retrieved from forum Wattpad.com)
      'But if I threaten to kiss you, will you tell me I can go? – he screamed. Erika laughed. – You're gonna kiss me anyway –she told him raising her eyebrow.'

(37) *Hoy amenazo con quererte* (popular song by singer José Artiles)
      'Today I threaten to love you.'

As for English, the use of *I threaten* seems to be much less established than in Spanish, even though some isolated examples can still be found:

(38) *"Once in a lifetime holiday"*
      [Negative aspects of your stay] That i could not stay longer...
      [Positive aspects of your stay] Staff. A place where you feel at home. More than just a good value for money. I threaten to come back...just to mention their Austrian sense of humor! (visitor's review retrieved from Booking.com)

(39) *As we approach the Lone Madrone Tasting Room on the way to the Fat Cat Farm, Rhoda walks by again and* **I threaten to come back and interview her someday soon**. (retrieved from blog paso-robles-daily-photos.blogspot.com)

(40) *She giggled, feeling limp. Lazy. Giddy. Happy. Sexy. All for the first time in far too many years. "Never!"*
      "Even if **I threaten to kiss you***?"*
      "Even then!"
      "Is that an invitation to kiss you?" (retrieved from the romantic novel *Taking on Twins* by Carolyn Zane)

It is difficult to foresee what path the use of this emerging use might take or whether it is a subjectified form. Future research might delve into its use in the coming years so as to ascertain whether it has definitely caught on in Spanish as an ordinary and accepted use and whether it spreads into English –maybe influenced by non-native speakers using English as a lingua franca.

6 Conclusions

The present paper has focused on the verbs *to promise* and *prometer* in peninsular Spanish and British English respectively, taking the oral and fiction sections of the Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA) and the British National Corpus as the point of departure for their contrastive study. As reflected by the data, the performative use of these verbs is rather infrequent, especially in the oral sections of both corpora. Besides the performative use, there were two other main categories analysed: conditioned promises (IF-Performatives) and subjectified *prometo* 'I promise'.

I have also focused on some of the outstanding differences with regard to the linguistic patterns following these verbs. Such differences may cause Spanish learners of English and of translation studies to sound less idiomatic to native ears, especially if they perform a negative language transfer of these frequent Spanish structures to their English production. A case at hand is the use of the verbal periphrasis *ir a* ('going to') after the performative, which is much more frequent in Spanish than in English, where it rarely occurs.

Incidentally, the current study has also revealed what might be an emerging new use in Spanish of *amenazo con* 'I threaten to'. This new usage seems to be spreading in everyday use, as reflected by its frequent presence in more colloquial genres such as online hotel reviews, forums or blogs, where users might be resorting to a more informal register reflecting their everyday use of the language. Although this use seems far less established in English, some examples may nonetheless be found, which might be showing an emergent tendency or merely a passing fashion. Future research might zero in on the use of this expression in both languages to see its development.

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