

أفعال كلام الإلزام: فهمها واستعمالها

Commissive Speech Acts: Recognition and Use

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Iraqi EFL university students are frequently observed to confuse between a commissive act and other speech acts and further they yield inappropriate utterances of commissive which are not in conformity with the social and cultural standards and norms. Thus, the current paper tends to identify Iraqi students' ability to recognize and produce illocutionary acts of promise, threat and guarantee. Forty Iraqi EFL students in 4th year have been selected to represent the sample of the study; they have been exposed to a test of two phases: recognition and production. Responses to a two-phase test (recognition and production) have been assembled and investigated. The findings demonstrate that students find more difficulty in producing than in recognizing these acts. Their difficulty may be attributed certain factors: students' unfamiliarity with these acts and their reliance on syntactic rather the pragmatic

knowledge in handling these acts. Further, L1 interference in solving problems related to pragmatics is another factor.

Key words: *Iraqi EFL students, Commissive speech acts, Promise, Threat, Guarantee*

المستخلص

أنه ما تم ملاحظته أن طلبة الجامعات العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية (EFL) يمزجون ما بين أفعال الإلزام وأفعال الكلام الأخرى. لذا فإنهم يقومون بإنتاج عبارات غير مناسبة و لا تتوافق مع المعايير والأعراف الاجتماعية والثقافية. لذا، هدفت هذه الدراسة البحثية إلى تحديد قدرة الطلبة العراقيين على تمييز وإنتاج أفعال الكلام الإلزامية، مثل الوعد والتهديد والضمان . شملت عينة هذه الدراسة أربعون طالباً عراقياً من السنة الرابعة، دارسوا اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية حيث خضعوا لأختبار من مرحلتين: التمييز والإنتاج.

تم جمع إجابات الطلبة على اختبار من مرحلتين (التمييز والإنشاء) تم التحقق من الاختبارين .

أظهرت النتائج أن أفراد العينة يجدون صعوبة أكبر في إنتاج هذه الأفعال مقارنةً بتمييزها. و تعزى هذا الصعوبة الى عوامل معينة، مثل عدم إلمام الطلبة بهذه الأفعال، واعتمادهم على المعرفة النحوية بدلاً من البراغماتية في التعامل معها و أيضا تداخل اللغة الأم (L1) في حل المشكلات المتعلقة بالبراغماتية و الذي يعد عاملاً آخر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية العراقيون، أفعال كلام الإلزام، الوعد، التهديد، الضمان

1. Introduction

Commissive acts are initiated to commit speakers to a specific direction of act. They articulate speakers' belief and intent that "his utterance obliges him to do something" (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p. 22). By uttering, "I promise to pay the bill on time", the speaker is committed to doing 'the act of paying the bill'; he/she is obliged to perform the expressed act. Such an utterance, which implies a direct speech act of promise (I promise), may be easily understood by Iraqi EFL students since it is plainly identified by the lexical item 'promise'. The problem is when a speaker gives an indirect commissive such as "come earlier or you will be dismissed" said by a fierce boss to his employee.

Students, then, must gain pragmatic, sociocultural and linguistic knowledge which can help them to interpret the pragmatic behaviour of commissive speech acts of promise threat and guarantee. Apparently, one of the difficulties those students face in recognizing and using promise and threat is their reliance on structural (formal) rather than on their sociocultural (pragmatic) principles and characteristics. As a result, Iraqi EFL students encounter difficulties in distinguishing and producing utterances with suitable commissive speech acts of promise and threat. The upcoming sections are dedicated to the presentation of a brief account of speech acts in general, commissives as a specific class of speech acts, commissive speech acts of promise, threat and guarantee.

2. Research Questions

1. What difficulties do Iraqi EFL students encounter in distinguishing the commissive acts of promise, threat and guarantee from other related speech acts?

2. What difficulties do they encounter in producing utterances of commissive acts of promise, threat and guarantee?
3. What are the reasons behind the students' failure of recognizing and using the illocutionary acts of promise, threat and guarantee?

3. Speech Acts in General

Speech acts theory was originated with the British philosopher, Austin (1962) in his book "*How to Do Things with Words*". It was initiated to refer an act performed by uttering certain words. Later, it was revised and expanded Searle (1969), in his book "*Speech Act*". The most crucial inspiration for the unearthing of the theory of speech acts is the restriction of semantic investigation grounded in "truth-condition"; the constraint of semanticanalysis to only a group of sentences, realized as "statements" or "declarative" whose being necessitates that a "sentence be verified as true or false according to certain truths about the world" (Mey, 1993, pp.109-10). For instance, in uttering:

-It's so cold inside,

the utterer of this saying intends to confirm the reality or inaccuracy of his/her sentence by verifying whether it is right or not (Sultan, 2007). However, in saying:

- Congratulation for your success,

the speaker does not intend to verify the actuality or falseness of his/her utterance; he/she is not asserting something, nonetheless, he wishes to verbalize his emotions towards a certain happy accomplishment of a specific individual (Adams, 1985, p. 4).

Moreover, Austin (1962, p.12) contends that, in the example above, the speaker in saying his/ her words, wants to "do something", i.e. to express his pleasant feelings towards the hearer. This leads him to conclude that people habitually "do things with words" when they employ "them to perform actions such as promising, welcoming, boasting, affirming, advising, and so on" (Mey, 1993, p.110). This entails the idea that along with the precise group of statements, other kinds of utterances are enunciated to accomplish some acts in the social life. Certainly, these utterances form an important part of how language is utilized in a society (Abd-Alnabi, 2024).

Saeed (1997, p. 204) expounds that the happy execution of a speech act is governed by: "*Interactivity and context dependence*". The first entails that "communicating functions involve the speaker in a coordinated activity with other language users". For example, "betting" takes place when the contributors interact with each other. In uttering:

- "*I bet you five pounds he doesn't get elected*".

The act cannot be taken as betting unless the listener (hearer) replies with.

-*You're on.*

The successful execution of the act of betting is determined by the interaction between the speaker and the hearer. However, not all speech acts need such overt replies. In ‘promising, commanding and greeting’, the hearer does not need to respond in a similar manner.

The second aspect ‘context dependence’ relates to the shared conventions used to sustain the enunciation of speech acts. The following utterance “*I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead*” must be said by a judge advocate in the court-place as he/she leads this utterance to the unlawful man in the coop. In other words, such an act of “sentencing” can only be executed by the appropriate individual (judge advocate) in the appropriate setting (court-place). This means that the act of sentencing is too determined by social regulations and principles (Saeed, 1997, p. 205).

To sum up, it is essential to recall Searle’s (1969, p. 16) words, i.e. "speaking a language is performing speech acts", e.g. threatening, advising, promising, commanding, etc. For him, all linguistic messages indicate communicative and linguistic acts. Put differently, the theory of speech acts is a theory that that theory which encompasses a communicative action attained with respect to the “speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation” in a particular circumstance under particular social principles and norms (For more information on speech acts, see, Abdulla, 2012).

4. Commissive Speech Acts

Commissives constitute one category of speech acts via which a speaker commits herself/ himself to a upcoming act. They generally designate commitments or undertakings of various types; they take on a responsibility or states of purpose. That

is, they are employed to reflect the speaker's intent. They include speech act verbs such as threat, promise vow, and guarantee. Commissive speech acts can be implemented either by only the speaker or by the speaker within a group. In performing a commissive act, the speaker intends to "make the world fit the words" (Yule, 1996, p. 54). For example, by issuing the act of promise in:

"I promise to come earlier tomorrow." (Austin, 1962, p.151),

the speaker wants his/her "words to match the world". for this promise to successfully performed, the "world must be changed" with respect to his /her words.

Elaborately, Searle (1979, p.12) expounds that enunciator of a commissive act often tends to "do something by uttering his words. In *"We won't do it again."*, the speaker must commit himself /herself to a "certain future course of action" i.e. not doing something once more. Furthermore, commissive acts are instigated to articulate the "speaker's intention or belief" in a way that his/her utterance obliges him/her to perform a certain action stated in the "propositional content" bounded by particular suitable environments.

As the execution of commissives is frequently determined the speaker's intention to attain a certain influence on the listener/hearer in terms of social norms, Adams (1985, p. 46) draws a distinction "between *intentional* and *conventional* speech acts", confirming that speech acts mostly are "intentional in the sense that they are communicative". In issuing a promise, it is the speaker's 'intention' but not his/her 'convention' that compels him/her to do a future action, while conventional acts are

“greatly influenced by the circumstances in which speech acts occur”. People find no difficulty in distinguishing *promises* given to individuals in various settings from only *firing* particular individuals under appropriate situations (Hussein, 2005, p.53).

To elaborate on the discussion above, Adams (1985, p. 46) offers two examples in which the first is seen as an intentional act while the second is seen as a conventional act.

- “*You’ll be fired.*”

- “*You are fired.*”

The two utterances display two different interpretations; he contends that the first (intentional) is deemed as intentional as since it is vulnerable to misinterpretation, while the second (conventional) speech act, under certain suitable situations, is not open to misinterpretation. It may be said by a furious manager to his/her employee to fire him/her. In other words, “conventional speech acts” must every so often be identified with regards to the situations they are utilized in. Three commissive speech acts, *Promise*, *Threat* and *Guarantee*, are selected and detailed in the following pages, as they constitute the most characteristic ones.

4.1 Promise

As discussed above, commissive speech acts are distinguished from one another; there are certain features that can be utilized to differentiate promise from guarantee, from threat, from offer ... etc. Promise in particular, is a kind of “statement of telling

someone that you will definitely do or not do something” (Al-Bantany, 2013, p.25). Certainly, like other commissives, it is an oral commitment by an individual to another individual to do (or not) certain future action. Nadar (2009, cited in Al-Bantany, 2013, p.25) suggests that there are five necessities for producing a successful promise:

“First, the speaker has to intend to do what he promises, then the speaker must believe (that the hearer believes) that the action is in the hearer’s best interest, the speaker has to believe that he can perform the action; the speaker must predicate a future action, and the speaker has to predicate an act of himself.”

For Pambudi, (2017, p.20), commissive promise can be verbal or “written agreement to do or not to do something”, it is an utterance exercised to recall someone concerning a thing to be performed in the time ahead. Relationally, it is a statement given to a certain individual in regards with the future, allocating declaration that someone will perform or not a future action. It is an oral commitment by an individual to another consenting to do an action. In the utterance: “I will drive you to the Martyr Square”, the utterer tries to persuade himself/herself to keep his/her words to drive the listener to Martyr Square (p.21).

4.2 Threat

From a pragmatic perspective, the first definition of threat as a commissive speech act was given by Austin (1962, p.214). He defines it as an act which involves “the

speaker's commitment to causing harm, punishment, or negative consequences if a certain action is or is not performed” It is a declaration of the speaker’s purpose to chastise or injury a certain individual. In some cases, threat can be taken to spring intimidation to the listener, if the latter does not obey the former to perform a certain action. In this case, threat is usually driven by hate and cynicism of the former to the latter. Here, the speaker believes that he has “higher power to intimidate the hearer via his utterance” (Bantany, 2013, p.26)

Furthermore, Mifflin (2003, p.1) explains that threat is an “expression of an intention to inflict pain, injury, punishment or evil”. It is a declaration with which an individual informs another individual that the former will cause the latter damage or distress if he/she refuses to perform an action the former wants to do. For instance, in the utterance “Come! Try! I must really scold you if you don’t”, the speaker threatens his/her hearer that if latter will not *come and try*, the former will take an action (Pumbudi, 2017, p.20). In other words, threat is an explanation of someone’s intention “to do something, which can make somebody misfortune or make difficult of someone”. Hence, threat appears to convince the listener to have confidence in the speaker, since it is a proposal that “something unpleasant or violent” will take place (p.22).

Accordingly, Benoit (1983, p.305) describes threat as a hostile speech act which the listener must obey. Likewise, Wierzbicka (1987, p.187) affirms that threats are “utterances that refer to a future action by the speaker which is regarded as bad for the addressee”. This is clearly noticed in Wierzbicka’s example “I will do something that will be bad for you if you don’t do something” (p.178). For this reason, threat is associated with a face-threatening act; it is often attributed to authority and power. Brown and Levinson (1987) contend that the relative authority of the speaker and the social

remoteness between the speaker and hearer are crucial principles for evaluating the significance of a face-threatening act in most, societies.

4.3 Guarantee

A guarantee is a commissive act that implies a fixed promise that the speaker commits himself/herself to doing or not doing something. The status of misperception is obviously exemplified in the commissive verb act of guarantee. It is seen as a pledge with which “something will happen or that something is true”. The grade of assertion is the instrument of differentiating guarantee from other commissives, e.g. promise. Guarantee is considered a composite speech act that involves both “an assertion and a conditional promise”. That is, an individual who “guarantees a “proposition P both asserts P and promises simultaneously some (moral or other) compensation in the event that his statement turns out not to be true (or some commitment is not carried out”, etc.) Vanderveken (1990, p.183).

By the same token, (Nadar, 2009, p. 88) elucidates that Guarantee is analytically equivocal, as being an assertive as well as commissive act. However, the term 'guarantee' semantically informs that the speaker, by issuing a guarantee speech act, aims to attain some action in the future. For the hearer, the act of guarantee requires him/her to realize the guarantor's intent in satisfying his/her guarantee in the future. Besides, the guarantor must be sincere when issuing guarantee. Fundamentally, the act of guarantee requires a “shared knowledge between the guarantor and the guarantee. In “*I guarantee John will pass the exam*” is a guarantee, since it commits himself/herself to doing an action in the future contained in the proposition (John's passing the exam).

To sum up, Beller et al. (2009, p.115) infer that ‘promises, threats and guarantee’ are commissives that intend to change an individual’s behavior in terms of an individual’s objectives. These acts intermix numerous elements according to various levels: “goals and incentives belong to the motivational level, formulations to the linguistic level, and effective responses to the emotional level”.

5. Methodology

Methodology is concerned with three stages: the method employed for data and results analysis, the selected sample of 4th year students and a test as a main instrument for collecting data.

5.1 Method

The researcher employs an amalgamation of ‘quantitative and qualitative’ practice to designate and investigate the replies to the test. The data collection is drawn from the answers to the two-part test (recognition and production). The analysis of the gathered data is grounded in the pragmatic examination of the learners' responses to the items of test. The analysis of results is taken with respect to frequencies and percentages of the items involved to measure students' amount, kind and ratio of faults practiced by the students.

5.2 Sample

The study sample comprises 40 4th year students of the Department of English, College of Arts, Iraqia University. Fourth year students are chosen because they are anticipated to gain satisfactory and sufficient knowledge of pragmatic issues, including commissive speech acts. This is due to the fact that they have gone through subjects

related to pragmatics and speech acts in courses of Grammar, General Linguistics in their BA periods.

5.3 Instrument

The principal instrument utilized in this paper is a test involving two parts, eight items of recognition and 8 items of production, (recognition: 4 for promise and 4 for threat; production: 4 for promise and 4 for threat). In the first recognition part, students are required to identify the commissive promise and threat and distinguish them from other related speech acts. In the second production part, students are required to produce utterances implying the speech acts of promise and threat. Then, they are given eight spoken situations with the commissive acts of promise and threat and gurantee; the fourth- year students are required to give commissive utterances in compliance with these situations. The test was directed to the students in the second term of the academic year 2016-2017 (specifically on April, 8, 2025).

To escape any crosswise consequence on the test and to ensure the homogeneousness of the examinees, some issues, variables and factors are considered so as to gain actual consequences. These variables involve students' educational standard and age and their parents' standard of educational background. Markedly, the students are somehow of the same age (they all are of morning classes).

6. Findings

The results analysis of three commissive speech acts of promise, threat and guarantee involves two phases: results from replies to recognition items and replies to production items. These results are sought to give answers to the research questions initiated at the start of the paper.

6.1 Recognition

A recognition question consists of nine items; three items for each commissive speech act, promise, threat and guarantee. The students are required to identify the use of the speech via multiple-choice items with four options. In other words, they are to distinguish these three commissives from one another and from other speech acts. However, students vary in their replies. For promise, the sample of 40 students record 77 correct answers with a percentage of 64.16%, for the items 1, 2 and 3. For threat, they register 79 correct answers, having a rate of 65.83%, for the items 4, 5 and six. As far as the speech act of guarantee is concerned, they reach 41 correct answers, constituting a ratio of 34.61%, for the items 7,8 and 9. This means that threat is the easiest speech act to be recognized by the students; the speech act of promise occupies the second rank, while the speech act of guarantee is the most difficult one for students to produce. Two important factors play a great role in distinguishing the three commissive speech acts. First, familiarity, the most familiar speech act records the highest scores (i.e. threat), whereas the least familiar one records the lowest scores (guarantee). Second, syntactic structure is sometimes helpful for students to identify the nominated speech act, e.g. threat is often characterized structurally by the use of a clause with 'or /or else' as in "You have to come earlier or you be fired." To have a better understanding of the three commissive speech acts involved, consider table 1 which provides details of the students correct answers and their percentages in the nine items of the recognition question.

Table 1: Recognition of Commissive Speech Acts

SA	Items	Correct Answers	Percentage
Promise	1	26	65%
	2	20	50%
	3	31	77.50%
Threat	4	27	67.50%
	5	30	75%
	6	22	55%
Guarantee	7	17	42.50%
	8	13	32.50%
	9	11	27.50%

Relationally, Table 2 presents detailed information of the overall results of the three

and

SA	Frequency	Percentage
Promise	77	64.16%
Threat	79	65.83%
Guarantee	41	34.16%

commissive speech acts of promise, threat guarantee.

Total	197	54.72%
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Table 2: Overall Results of Recognition of Commissives

6.2 Production

A production question is also comprised of nine items; three items for the production of each commissive speech act (promise, threat and guarantee). The students are obliged to grasp the given situations and produce utterances implying the use of the given commissive speech acts. Nevertheless, students differ in their responses. In case

of promise, they score 60 correct answers, with a percentage of 50%, for items 10, 11 and 12. They gain 44 correct answers, with a ratio of 36.66% for threat, for items 13, 14 and 15, whereas guarantee records only 31 correct answers, having a rate of 25.83%, for items 16, 17 and 18. It is clear that students find more difficulty in producing than in recognizing the commissive acts of promise, threat and guarantee, as production question records 135 correct answers with a rate of 37.50%, while recognition question registers 197 correct answers with a percentage of 54.72%. This is simply because recognition as a cognitive process requires the students only identify a commissive speech act (i.e. select the most appropriate choice), while producing an utterance with a suitable speech act demands a more complex cognitive process. To produce an utterance with an appropriate commissive speech act, a student needs to identify the given situation and then attempt to give a pragmatically suitable utterance under the given situation, having a proper linguistic construction. Here, the reason behind the students' failure may be ascribed to certain issues. Firstly, they may fail to interpret the situation, and therefore, they were unable to give a suitable utterance. Secondly, students often rely on their syntactic rather than their pragmatic knowledge when encountering pragmatic issues. Thirdly, perhaps, they are not so familiar with producing such utterances due to their scarcity of practice. Lastly, it is important to note here that mother language interference plays a great role in producing these utterance (i.e. these commissive speech acts behave differently in Arabic). To present a summary of the production of these acts, examine table 3. The overall results of the three commissive acts are presented in table 4.

Table 3: Production of Commissive Speech Acts

SA	Items	Correct Answers	Percentage
Pro mise	10	17	42.50%

	11	20	50%
	12	23	57.50%
Threat	13	16	40%
	14	15	37.50%
	15	13	32.50%
Guarantee	16	11	27.50%
	17	10	25%
	18	10	25%

Table 4: Overall Results of Production of Commissives

SA	Frequency	Percentage
Promise	60	50%
Threat	44	36.66%
Guarantee	31	25.83%
Total	135	37.50%

7. Statical Support

To provide a satisfactory statistical justification for the differences between the three commissives (promise, threat and guarantee), ANOVA investigation is carried out to statistically distinguish the complete explanation of the distinction among the three acts.

Formula for One-Way ANOVA:

$$F = \text{Between-group variance} / \text{Within-group variance}$$

Where:

- Between-group variance measures differences among group means.
- Within-group variance measures variability within each group.

The followings are the results of the analysis:

(b) Recognition Data

ANOVA Table :

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES (SS)	DEGREES OF FREEDOM (DF)	MEAN SQUARE (MS)	F-STATISTIC	P-VALUE
Between Groups	154.89	2	77.44	12.45	0.002
Within Groups	37.33	6	6.22		
Total	192.22	8			

- $F = 12.45, p = 0.002$: Significant difference between groups.

Tukey Test Table :

COMPARISON	MEAN DIFFERENCE	P-VALUE	SIGNIFICANCE
Promise vs Threat	2.00	0.34	Not Significant
Promise vs Guarantee	7.00	0.001	Significant
Threat vs Guarantee	5.00	0.005	Significant

- The ANOVA test shows a highly significant difference ($p=0.002$).
- The Tukey test reveals:

- Promise vs Threat : No significant difference.
- Promise vs Guarantee : Significant difference.
- Threat vs Guarantee : Significant difference.

(a) Production Data

ANOVA Table :

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES (SS)	DEGREES OF FREEDOM (DF)	MEAN SQUARE (MS)	F-STATISTIC	P-VALUE
Between Groups	296.89	2	148.44	8.97	0.007
Within Groups	115.33	6	19.22		
Total	412.22	8			

- $F = 8.97, p = 0.007$: Significant difference between groups.

Tukey Test Table :

COMPARISON	MEAN DIFFERENCE	P-VALUE	SIGNIFICANCE
Promise vs Threat	1.00	0.99	Not Significant
Promise vs Guarantee	12.00	0.002	Significant
Threat vs Guarantee	11.00	0.003	Significant

Interpretation: Production Data

- The ANOVA test shows a significant difference ($p=0.007$).
- The Tukey test reveals:
 - Promise vs Threat : No significant difference.
 - Promise vs Guarantee : Significant difference.
 - Threat vs Guarantee : Significant difference.

To sum up, both Recognition and Production reveal significant differences among the three commissive speech acts. Guarantee differs significantly from both Promise and Threat, while Promise and Threat are not significantly different.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis of Iraqi EFL college students' responses to the recognition and production questions reveal that those students encounter difficulty in both questions. However, they face more difficulty with production than with recognition. This is because students in producing commissives, they require more complicated mental processes than in identifying these acts; they are required to identify situations concerning these acts, understanding them and then with respect to their pragmatic and linguistic knowledge they attempt to produce utterances of commissives. However, difficulty in both recognition and production may be attributed to their familiarity with these acts, their reliance on linguistic rather than pragmatic bases in solving problems related to handling these acts and finally their recourse to their mother language in tackling these commissive acts which are differently treated in both languages (L1 and FL).

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Appendix A: Recognition

Q1/ Select the most appropriate speech act.

1. I swear I'll be your partner.
a. threat b. promise c. guarantee d. request
2. An often late students says to his master: "I' ll never be late for classes"
a. advice b. threat c. guarantee d. promise
3. She is slow in mathematics, I say to her : "I'll teach you mathematics"
a. promise b. warning c. guarantee d. threat
4. "I promise to kill you if I see you walking with my daughter".
a. promise b. pledge c. guarantee d. threat
5. My grammar teacher says to me "Do your duty or you will be quitted"
a. threat b. promise c. guarantee d. order
6. You are required to reconsider your writing or else you will not be accepted.
a. condemn b. promise c. threat d. guarantee
7. "The refrigerator is warranted to be free from defect for 12 months."
a. threat b. promise c. guarantee d. safeguard

8. “ I promise this machine is of the highest quality.”

- a. threat b. guarantee c. promise d. congratulate

9. “ We are dedicated to superiority of the product”

- a. guarantee b. swear c. promise d. threat

Appendix B: Production

Q2/ Give suitable utterances of commissive speech acts in accordance with the situations given:

10. Promise you father to pass the mid-year exams.

11. You borrowed some money from your friend sami, promise to return the sum on time.

12. You’re invited to your uncle’s party next month. Promise to attend it.

13. Your friend does not pay your money back. Threaten to sue him.

14. Threaten the gang who have stolen your child.

15. How would you threaten someone who broke your computer?

16. Give an utterance guaranteeing that all cars in the store work rightly.

17. Provide a guarantee to someone that the machine will be repaired is damaged within one year.

18. Give an utterance of guarantee to the company statement “We will refund your money”