

Existential Commitment  
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Existential commitment is sometimes carried by NPs. For example, (1) seems to entail (2):

- (1) The boat is in the garage.
- (2) There exists a boat.

By contrast, (relevant) existential commitment does not appear in *inceptive* cases:

- (3) The boat is under construction.

(3) may entail the existence of *something*, but it does not entail the existence of a *boat*. Furthermore, it is far from clear that (relevant) existential commitment appears in *defective* cases:

- (4) The boat has a hole in it.

If boats by definition are vehicles for traversing surfaces of water, and if x is incapable of traversing surfaces of water because x has a sufficiently large hole in it, then x is not a boat, even though it may be *called* one.

My paper addresses the following issues.

- 1.** Under what conditions does a statement carry existential commitment, or not? Using experimental data from an elicitation task, I argue that existential commitment is sensitive to pragmatic (extra-linguistic) context, it is carried under default conditions (cf. Jaszczolt 2005), and it fails under a variety of specifiable conditions.
- 2.** The potential difference between what something actually is and what it's commonly or conventionally called matters in determining (e.g.) whether an inoperable car is a car and whether an unborn child is a child. Discourse analyses of legal interpretations and political rhetoric reveal systematic equivocation between what might be called attributive uses of NPs and referential uses (cf. Donnellan, 1966).
- 3.** What theory of meaning best explains the distribution of existential commitment? Extending insights made by Kripke (1977), Searle (1979), and Soames (1994), I argue that existential commitment is a pragmatic phenomenon (contra Donnellan, endorsing Soames). Distinguishing between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning allows us to say that even when *sentences* make existential commitments, *speakers* need not.