

Commitment

The city of Toulon, well-known for its navy and military facilities, clearly embraces the idea of “commitment”, as perhaps can also be seen by the importance in the city of rugby – a committed sport if ever there were one. There are numerous synonyms associated with this concept: action, acceptance, objectives, initiative or even compromise, as well as responsibility. To be committed also means taking decisions at crucial moments or at times of crisis (the root of this word, *krinein*, means “to choose” in Ancient Greek). At the same time, what should we be committed to (or strongly opposed to)? Furthermore, is an individual decision involved, or is there rather a common agreement? The overriding political nature of these questions does not, however, mask literary or aesthetic concerns, and ontological and teleological dimensions clearly emerge behind the subjective search for ideals such as order, justice or truth, all of these being at the heart of the notion of commitment. The fields which constitute English studies provide multiple avenues of research for this theme.

Even if the term “engaged literature” only dates back to the 20th century, it can easily be associated with much less recent English-speaking writers who defended various causes in the past. We can see, for example, English religious dissenters in the 16th and 17th centuries, Jonathan Swift’s condemnation of the British hold on Ireland in the 18th century, Charles Dickens’s fight against social inequality reflected in his novels or, on the other side of the Atlantic, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s commitment to fighting slavery. The early commitments of authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft or Margaret Fuller for women’s rights or the more recent ones of Commonwealth writers in a post-colonial context are also worthy of mention. From the point of view of narrative, including the field of cinema, commitment suggests a game between the narrator and the reader (or spectator). The former can “engage” the latter to follow a particular path with the risk of misleading him. This was the case of John Dowell in *The Good Soldier*, the best-known work of Ford Madox Ford, an eminent figure in the English-speaking world who lived in the area of Toulon.

English-speaking civilization studies have often focused on exploring the theme of commitment whereby movements or historical figures are “engaged” in the promotion of numerous political, religious or social ideas (and we should not forget the cinema’s portrayal of these figures and movements, often by socially engaged film directors). From independence movements in the British colonies upheld by political parties to the founding of political clubs such as the Fabian Society, commitment has always been the corollary of ideologies in which the historical context has played a major role. Being committed to such or such a path could also lead to the study of the directions taken by governments at key moments of their existence, whether it involves their founding, (as in the case of the debate on the Federal Constitution of the United States) or a political change, as in the “reduced commitment” of the State to policies in the United Kingdom or the United States. Finally, being committed to something also implies “keeping promises”, and another aspect of this theme involves studying the differences between the foundations of an ideology and their practical application.

In the field of teaching methodology, the theme could deal with commitment in the actual process of language teaching and learning: commitment in interaction, oral and multimodal commitment, the process of memorisation and creativity, the role of affect and emotions, strategies to reinforce independence, etc. Within the teaching-learning situation, the issues of involvement on the part of the pupils and teacher may also be raised, including the relationship with expertise and technologies, motivation, the pleasure of using other languages than the mother tongue, as well as ideas about how they work. Finally, questions may be raised about the relationship between teaching and research: the position a researcher needs to

maintain between being committed and keeping a distance on the one hand, and the role of those partners involved in education: pupils, parents of pupils, and so on.

Commitment in English linguistics, as in the case of language for specific purposes, may imply the choice of a particular approach to solving a problem, by arguing its advantages in the field of research under study compared to other theoretical approaches. This choice could be between a structuralist, generativist, enunciativist, cognitivist or, indeed, any other framework. It could also be an approach in translation studies, for example, in which the researcher tries to establish a theoretical framework for the transmission of information while remaining true to the ideas and feelings conveyed by the source text. Commitment may also signify the aim to demonstrate the real interpretation of linguistic data in empirical language studies by avoiding the distortion of statistics or results. This may cover discourse analysis, prosodic features in recordings of spoken language, lexical semantics, historical lexicology, as well as linguistic analyses of literary texts. Among all the possible existing or newly-created approaches, commitment in linguistics should thus imply the attempt to look for truth and for the reasons for the existence of phenomena observable in the English language.

Finally, a non-committal approach, or the need to break away from traditional and well-established theories on a particular theme, also represents a valid part of research. In some cases, the researcher may find that there is not enough evidence to support existing approaches to a subject. A literary critic, political commentator or linguist may even decide that his or her new theories and findings break enough new ground to form new avenues of research and theoretical frameworks.

Non-commitment, or breaking off commitments, may thus be related to certain themes in areas such as literature or politics. Such actions may include loyalty to a person, a group of people or political parties. These ideas may also be highlighted by analyses in linguistically-related fields such as stylistics, rhetoric, discourse analysis, and so on. In literature, non-commitment or neutrality, apart from ideas created in the fields of narration and different specialist areas, could also lead to an opposite trend when *Bartleby* claims "I would prefer not to". Is this not another form of commitment?