

## **Chinese Children's Acquisition of the Promissory Speech Act\***

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The present study aims to investigate Chinese-speaking children's acquisition of the speech act of "promising" by examining four factors which affect their judgment of others' promises and production of their own promises: the promisee's social status, the outcome condition of the promise, the promiser's sincerity, and the explicitness of "the promise." Two comprehension tasks and one production task were given to a total of one hundred subjects. The subjects were divided into five groups of twenty: four experimental groups (consisting of children aged 6 to 9) and one adult group.

The results showed that the younger subjects were not sensitive to the social status of the promisee. In terms of the role played by sincerity in the judging of promises, it was found that a promiser's perceived sincerity had no effect whatsoever on the participants' judgment of the promise, indicating that an apparently insincere promise was still considered to be a promise by all groups. It was also found that a promise which explicitly stated a future act was more likely to be considered an effective promise by all the participants. Finally, the results of the production task showed that Chinese-speaking children were capable of making a commitment at the age of six, and that the promissory strategy most frequently adopted by all groups was to state the future act explicitly.

Key words: promise, social status, sincerity, explicitness, L1 acquisition

### **1. Introduction**

Keeping one's promise is universally recognized as a fundamental moral duty and as the very definition of being a "responsible" member of one's society. Psychological studies have shown that breaking a promise is considered immoral in all cultures (Turiel 1988), and the ability to keep one's promises is a key element in the evolution and development of human civilization. If nobody could keep a promise, the inherent trust between and among people would dissolve, resulting in communities and societies whose members were cold and detached.

Research has shown that children will behave more faithfully after making promises in public (Mant & Perner 1988, Lyon 2000). In Chinese society, the concept of making a commitment is thought to be fundamental in the forming of human relationships. Keeping promises has become a basic moral principle for both adults and young children. Inasmuch as making and keeping promises is crucial to human

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moral development and socialization, the development of children's understanding of the concept of making and keeping promises is an issue that invites further exploration.

According to Searle's (1969) speech act theory, a promise is still a promise even without one actually saying "I promise." That is, one needs not use the performative verb "promise" to explicitly indicate the intended action when making an utterance (Austin 1962). On the other hand, an utterance including "I promise" cannot always be considered a commitment (Searle 1969). For example, in the sentence "You don't need to (bring your umbrella with you tomorrow); it will be sunny all day, I promise.", the speaker is not making a commitment to the addressee; rather, he/she is simply making a prediction (Astington 1988a:160). Therefore, the form and actual intention or meaning of a promise may not always match.

The speech acts known as promises have often been discussed in sociolinguistic studies (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). Among these, Searle's (1969) analysis of promises—which contains the following four major conditions—has been widely adopted by researchers in their examination of children's understanding of promises as speech acts (Astington 1988a, Bernicot & Laval 1996, Maas 2008).

1. **Propositional Content Condition:** The most fundamental component of a promise is the propositional act, that is, the transaction between a promiser and a promisee. This propositional act is usually an utterance or statement made by the promiser, in which he/she says that he/she will accomplish a future action (Searle 1969).

2. **Preparatory Condition:** The preparatory condition has two parts. First, the speaker has to believe that doing this future act is in the hearer's best interest (Searle 1969). Indeed, it should be obvious that the content of the promise is mainly beneficial for the promisee, not the promiser. Second, what is promised should be something desired by the addressee, so that the speaker will do it specifically for the sake of the addressee.

3. **Sincerity Condition:** An essential aspect of the speech act of promising is that the speaker has to be sincere (Searle 1969). To fulfill this condition, (1) the promiser has to intend to perform the future act that is being promised; (2) the promiser has to deliver this intention to the promisee in his utterance; (3) the promiser must imply that he has the ability to complete the action being promised. Although the question as to whether an insincere promise is still a promise is a controversial one, Searle (1969) believes it is. He says that "a promise involves an expression of intention, whether sincere or insincere" (p. 62).

4. **Essential Condition:** After promising to perform a future action, the promiser must feel that he is under an obligation to complete that future action (Searle 1969).

Thus, the fulfillment of the commitment or obligation becomes the decisive factor which distinguishes the promissory speech act from other illocutionary acts.

In a successful and effective promise, all four conditions must be fulfilled. The promiser needs to sincerely make the promise; the promised content should be beneficial to the promisee and, most importantly, the promiser is obligated to carry out the future action that he or she has promised, as in (1) and (2).

(1) Wo hui dasao fangjian de.

1SG<sup>2</sup> will clean room DE

'I will clean up the room.'

(2) Wo daying yao bang ni xie gongke.

1SG promise to help 2SG write homework

'I promise to help you with your homework.'

Though the performative verb for commissives, *daying* 'promise', is not uttered explicitly in (1), the illocutionary act is clear: the speaker *wo* 'I' is guaranteeing a future action. In (2) the speaker *wo* 'I' explicitly uses the word *daying* 'promise' and so has put himself under the obligation of finishing the future action of *bang ni xie gongke* 'to help you with your homework.'

While making a commitment might seem like a complicated act, it is not a challenging task for adults. Any adult speaker can make and also recognize a promise without much difficulty. In fact, children also seem to comprehend this complex illocutionary act, one which involves an interaction between the minds of the promiser and the promisee, a process of communication between them. However, it is not so clear that they understand the relationship between the utterance and the action of a promise.

In studies of speech acts, social factors such as age, gender, and social relationships are commonly discussed (Wolfson 1983, Holmes 1988). It has been reported that adults are sensitive to the speech of people from different social backgrounds, and that they tend to use different strategies when talking to different people (Wolfson 1983, Holmes 1988). Many studies have also shown that contextual and social factors may influence children's acquisition of language use (Mannle, Barton, & Tomasello 1992, Howe & Recchia 2006). Children's awareness of social relationships as revealed by their shifting of registers to suit different social situations has been previously discussed in the literature (Ochs 1988, Anderson 1990).

In numerous studies of speech acts and politeness, the terms 'explicit' and

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<sup>2</sup> The following abbreviations are used in the paper: 1/2/3 SG: 1st/2nd/3rd person singular; CL: classifier; COP: copular; GEN: genitive; NEG: negative; PN: proper name; PT: particle.

‘implicit’ were used to examine the relation between different degrees of explicitness and directness (Blum-Kulka 1987, Lakoff 1990). More specifically, different degrees of explicitness have been analyzed in studies of such speech acts as requests, refusals, and apologies. Thus, the question arose as to how different degrees of explicitness in the act of “making promises” might affect children’s concepts of promising (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984). In making an explicit performative sentence, the speaker is saying what he is doing. A performative sentence is likely to be used performatively, but it can also be used non-performatively. For example, a sentence like ‘I often apologize to the community for my mistakes.’ is used to describe a typical situation where one apologizes. There are also cases where people perform some kinds of acts without using performative verbs. For instance, when making a promise, a person may just say ‘I will definitely go. Don’t worry, please.’ In the present study, the major difference between explicit and implicit promises lies in whether or not the act that the speaker is going to carry out is clearly mentioned in his utterance.

## **2. Previous Empirical Studies on Children’s Understanding of Promises**

In the literature, little research has been done on children’s concepts of a promise and promising. Chomsky (1959) found that 5-year-old children were capable of using the performative verb “promise” properly in a sentence. Yet while they had acquired the concept of promising to finish doing what they were asked to do, they could not accurately define the word “promise” before the age of nine (Mant & Perner 1988). It is clear that children’s pragmatic and metapragmatic concepts of promising evolve with age (Astington 1988a, Bernicot & Laval 1996, Liu & Fang 2003), yet the nature of this evolution remains intriguing.

Astington (1988a) set out to examine whether children’s mental concepts of a “promise” would be affected by the performative verb. In her study, she designed six stories in which one of the speakers said “I promise,” and had the subjects judge which speech acts were “promises.” Only in two stories was there a promise of a future action, while the other cases were predictions or assertions. Each story had three possible outcomes: promise fulfilled, promise unfulfilled, and outcome unknown. 170 subjects were involved in this study: 116 were children aged 5 to 13, and the other 54 were college students, who served as the Adult Group. The results showed that the 5-year-olds failed to distinguish a promise from a predication or an assertion, and that the children aged between 7 and 9 often incorrectly took “an unfulfilled promise” as “not a promise.” However, the 7-to-9-year-olds were aware that promisers should be responsible for their intentionally broken promises, a result in

accordance with Searle's essential condition that a promise contains the promiser's obligation to finish a future action (Searle 1969). The adults' responses were all consistent with Searle's (1969) definition of the speech act of promising. Most adults could make the correct judgment regarding what the speaker had promised, even if the promise was unfulfilled.

Maas & Abbeduto (2001) adopted Astington's (1988a) framework in her study of children's understanding of promises, but their research focused instead on broken promises. Thirty-two children and a group of native English-speaking adults were asked to participate in their study. The results showed a clear line of development from the 7-year-olds to the 9-year-olds and then to adults. They found that the 7-year-olds failed to recognize an unfulfilled promise as a promise, as they still incorrectly considered the outcome to be the most essential part of a promise. Thus once the outcome of the promise was not accomplished, they would consider the promise to not be a promise. Their results confirmed Astington's findings that children found it hard to recognize an unfulfilled promise as being in fact a promise. In addition, the young children often varied their judgment according to the cause of the broken promise. The 9-year-olds did not recognize an unfulfilled promise as an effective promise if the promiser had no reason for failing to accomplish the obligation of the promise. Furthermore, the 7-year-olds had a weak understanding of Searle's sincerity condition. They thought an insincere promise was not an effective one; that is, they believed the promiser's intention was important.

Maas (2008) examined children's understanding of Searle's sincerity condition for the speech act of promising. In her study, 4-year-old and 6-year-old children's understanding of the role of the promiser's intention in promises was examined. The results showed that the 6-year-olds had an incomplete understanding of the sincerity condition and the 4-year-olds only referred their judgments to the outcome. Maas's research dealt with younger subjects aged between 3 and 6 with regard to their understanding of the idea of a false belief. Although there is an obvious gap between the age at which children begin to understand the idea of a false belief and that at which they acquire the speech act of promising, Maas's results showed that the sincerity of the promiser affects children's judgment of a promise. In addition to the sincerity of the promiser's commitment, Maas found that the children aged 4 and 6 were more likely to judge an utterance as a promise when they were making judgments from their own perspective rather than from the listener's perspective.

Based on Austin's (1962) speech act theory, Wang (2009) examined Searle's (1969) preparatory condition and sincerity conditions of promising with Chinese children. Two hundred and ten native-Mandarin-speaking Chinese children were assigned to each of three age groups, made up of 3-, 6-, and 9-year-olds. Moreover,

the 630 subjects were further divided into eighteen subgroups of thirty-five subjects. The subjects were requested to make judgments and justifications. The results showed that children's understanding of promising evolved with age; the earliest age at which they acquired the concept of promising was nine, while at the age of three they could take the promisee's desire into consideration and predict the outcome. Thus a promisee's perspective on a promise was found to be a possible factor affecting children's understanding of a particular promise. Moreover, it was found that the linguistic form of a statement (promise-to-act, future-action, and predicative assertion) had no influence on young children's understanding of the speech act of promising.

In these previous empirical studies on children's understanding of promising, understanding of the promissory speech act was found to develop gradually with age. Around the age of seven, the concepts of a promise started to emerge and this was solidified at the age of nine (Astington 1988a, Maas & Abbeduto 2001, Wang 2009). Although previous findings have shown that Chinese children begin taking the promiser's sincerity into consideration at the age of three (Wang 2009), we found that our 4- to 6-year-old children were not capable of providing production data in the pilot study.

Regarding factors affecting children's views on making a promise, it was found that children considered the outcome of the promise to be the most important point. For young children, a promise must be fulfilled in order for it to be considered a successful speech act (Astington 1988a, Maas & Abbeduto 2001, Wang 2009). In addition, in the context of the criterion of responsibility, again it was found that the outcome of the promise was important (Astington 1988a, Wang 2009). However, older children tended to have more sympathy if the promiser broke a promise for a reason (Maas & Abbeduto 2001). Though Wang's study examined Chinese children's acquisition of promising, his findings were only based on comprehension tasks. Moreover, he viewed the outcome of the promise as a sign of the fulfillment of the sincerity condition, while for Searle the outcome would be categorized as an essential condition.

All in all, in previous studies of children's understanding of promises, promisers and promisees in the experimental scenarios were all from the same generation (Astington 1988a, Maas & Abbeduto 2001). The scenarios consisted of a child making a promise to another child in a formal setting. However, it is possible that children may hold different attitudes toward an elder since the factor of social relation has an effect on children's speech (Wolfson 1983, Holmes 1988, Ochs 1988, Anderson 1990). In addition, these previous studies on promises mainly focused on western languages (Astington 1988a, Bernicot & Laval 1996, Maas & Abbeduto 2001).

In the present study, potential factors were examined, such as social status, the outcome of promise, a promiser's sincerity, the explicitness of a promise, and promising strategies in both comprehension and production tasks. It is hoped that the findings will shed light on Chinese-speaking children's understanding of promises. We are interested in the relationship between the promiser's (more or less explicit) sincerity and the outcome of the promise.

More specifically, we will examine the relationships between and among the social status of promiser and promisee, the degree of explicitness of the promiser's utterances, and the promissory strategy because these factors have been shown to have the greatest effect on the development of the capacity of children to perform speech acts (Youngblade & Dunn 1995, Bucciarelli, Colle, & Bruno 2003, Hoff 2010).

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Subjects**

A total of one hundred subjects were asked to participate in this study, and they were further divided into five different groups according to age, with 20 subjects in each age group. Group 1 was comprised of kindergarten-aged children around 6 years old. Groups 2, 3, and 4 consisted of primary school children around 7, 8, and 9 years old. The Adult Group which participated in this experiment was made up of students whose average age was 20 and who attended a public university in northern Taiwan. All of the subjects were native Mandarin Chinese speakers who did not exhibit any speaking, hearing, developmental or language-impairment problems.

#### **3.2 Method**

In previous studies, it has been proven that contextual and social factors may influence children's acquisition of language use (Mannle, Barton, & Tomasello 1992, Youngblade & Dunn 1995, Bornstein, Haynes, Painter, & Genevro 2000, Howe & Recchia 2006). Gender, as the most studied social factor, was not included in the present study since it has already been found to be irrelevant to children's understanding of promises (Astington 1988a). Therefore, we mainly examined the influence of social status on the development of children's understanding of promises and promising. Many studies have shown that social status may influence children's acquisition of language use (Holmes 1988, Hoff 2010). In addition to this social factor, we also explored children's use of strategies in making promises and Searle's definitive conditions for the promissory speech act. Thus the outcome of a promise, the sincerity condition, and the explicitness of the propositional content were all taken

into consideration during the course of this study.

The factors mentioned above were examined using two comprehension tasks and one production task. Before the outcome was given, the subjects were asked to complete a production task and a comprehension task. They also had to do another comprehension task after the outcome of the promise was known. The production task was employed to examine the participants' strategies for making a commitment, and the comprehension tasks were designed to elicit the participants' judgments of others' promises.

In this experiment, there were a total of sixteen scenarios. In each scenario, the main character, *Yuanyuan*, made a promise to another character of a different social status. The criterion used to judge social status was the characters' age. To avoid being influenced by the participants' actual age, only the case of unequal social status was considered in this study. An older character, for example the main character's school principal or teacher, was considered to have a higher social status. One may wonder if it is problematic to manipulate social status with age since they don't always agree. However, according to Schaefer (2009), status can be categorized into two: achieved status and ascribed status. The former refers to cases where an individual earns social status via his achievements; the latter is defined as factors fixed at birth, including gender, age, race ethnic group and family background. Weber (1946) considers social status as social power in that if an individual is viewed as a social superior, he will have power over others because he is believed to have a higher status. Therefore, in the present study we associate social status with age assuming that seniors normally have power over juniors, i.e., an example of ascribed status. If a character was younger than the main character, for example *Yuanyuan*'s younger sibling, his or her social status was considered to be lower.

When *Yuanyuan* was making a promise, the form he used never included the performative verb *daying* 'promise' because this normally sounds rather formal. In the case of an explicit condition, *Yuanyuan* made a promise with a clear statement of a future action; for example, *Hao, wo saowan di hui qu bang ni na caisezhi* 'Okay, I'll go get the colored paper for you after I sweep the floor.' As for the implicit condition, some of *Yuanyuan*'s promises were only implied and thus not completely clear: for instance, *Hao, deng yixia* 'Okay, wait a moment.' To demonstrate the sincere condition, *Yuanyuan* said he was willing to help the promisee and then made a promise. As for the insincere condition, *Yuanyuan* was distracted by other things and so hesitated to make a promise; his unwillingness was represented by an animated "thought bubble."

Distribution of the scenarios in the experiment is shown in Table 1:

**Table 1. Distribution of the scenarios in the experiment**

Social Status	Sincerity Condition	Number of Items	Explicitness	Number of Items	Outcome	Scenario
L→H	+	4	+	2	+	Scen.1
					-	Scen.9
			-	2	+	Scen.16
					-	Scen.11
	-	4	+	2	+	Scen.5
					-	Scen.7
			-	2	+	Scen.14
					-	Scen.4
H→L	+	4	+	2	+	Scen.10
					-	Scen.6
			-	2	+	Scen.2
					-	Scen.12
	-	4	+	2	+	Scen.8
					-	Scen.15
			-	2	+	Scen.3
					-	Scen.13

Each scenario included three tasks, one production task and two comprehension tasks. To avoid any experimental bias, there were four items for each category and sixteen items in total for each task. The scenarios and tasks were presented with an animation using Microsoft Office PowerPoint 2007 (see the appendix).

### 3.2.1 The Production Task

The purpose of this task was to examine the participants' strategies for making a commitment. The subjects were asked to pretend that they were the promiser, *Yuanyuan*, in scenarios where they faced different situations. They were asked to use their own words to make a commitment. In each scenario, the participants heard an experimental question like "*Ruguo ni shi Yuanyuan, yao daying meimei jiao ta xie gongke, ni hui zenme shuo ne?*" 'If you were *Yuanyuan*, what would you say to make a promise to help your younger sister do her homework?' and they were also asked to make their promises spontaneously. Their promise-making strategies were collected and analyzed.

### 3.2.2 The First Comprehension Task

In the first comprehension task, the participants were asked to judge whether the main character, *Yuanyuan*, had made a promise to another character who had higher or lower social status. For example, the subjects heard the following scenario:

*Mingtian shi xiaozhang de shengri. Laoshi xiang zuo yizhang kapien gei xiaozhang. Dan jiaoshi li meiyou caisezhi le. Suoyi laoshi yao Yuanyuan qu bangongshi bang ta na. Keshi Yuanyuan zhengzai saodi. Ta gen laoshi shuo, 'Hao, wo sao wan di hui qu bang ni na caisezhi.'*

'Tomorrow is the principal's birthday. *Yuanyuan*'s teacher wants to make a card for him, but she does not have enough colored paper in the classroom. She asks *Yuanyuan* to help her get some from the office. *Yuanyuan* is sweeping the floor and he says, 'Okay, I'll go get the colored paper for you after I finish sweeping the floor.'

In each scenario, the subjects heard a question concerning their judgment of a promise such as "*Ni jue de Yuanyuan suan bu suan shi daying laoshi yijian shiqing ne? Weisheme?*" 'Do you think *Yuanyuan* has promised his teacher something? Why?' The question was asked before the participants knew the outcome of the promise. Therefore, they had to provide a yes or no answer according to their own understanding of promises. Also, they were asked to justify their answers.

### 3.2.3 The Second Comprehension Task

In the second comprehension task, the scenarios used in the previous tasks were used again; however, the subjects were informed of the outcome. To systematically examine the effect of knowing the outcome, the researchers designed two types of outcome: positive ones (the promiser carries out the promised action) and negative ones (the promiser breaks his or her promise). The promiser's judgment of the promise was included in order to see if the participants' judgments were affected by the outcomes. Similarly, a question was asked like "*Houlai, Yuanyuan sao wan di jiu qu bang laoshi na zhi le. Ni jue de Yuanyuan suan bu suan zhende daying le laoshi yijian shiqing ne? Weisheme?*" 'After *Yuanyuan* sweeps the floor, he helps the teacher get the colored paper. Do you think *Yuanyuan* has really promised his teacher something? Why?' Just as in the first comprehension task, the subjects were asked to say whether they thought *Yuanyuan* had really made a promise to the promisee, and

they had to provide an explanation for their answers.

### **3.3 Procedure**

Consent forms with a brief introduction of the tasks were given to the subjects' kindergarten and elementary school teachers. They were later passed on to the children's parents, who were informed that the subjects' performance would be recorded and that the data would only be used for the purpose of conducting research. The children whose parents signed the consent forms were asked to perform the tasks in the classroom. They were told they would first watch a short movie telling a story on a laptop, and then answer some questions about it. Before beginning each task, the subjects underwent a trial run to become familiar with the task.

After the experimenter was sure that the subjects understood the process of the experiment, the story presenting the tasks, using cute animal characters and pre-recorded voices in a sequential order, was shown on the laptop to each subject. The twenty scenarios with *Yuanyuan* talking to different people were played randomly. For each scenario, the subjects did the production and first comprehension tasks before the outcome was revealed. After knowing the outcome of the promise, the subjects were asked to complete the second comprehension task. All of the subjects' answers and responses were audio-recorded during the 25-minute experiment, and all the recorded data was later transcribed and analyzed.

In the comprehension tasks, the subjects had to judge whether a promise had been made or not by giving a "yes" or "no" answer. The expected answer to the "promise judgment" question, 'Do you think *Yuanyuan* has promised the teacher something?' was given one point. Unexpected, indeterminate, or irrelevant responses were not given any points. According to Searle (1969), an insincere promise is still considered "legitimate" since the content of the promise can be implied by its context, and an implicit promise would be accepted (Searle 1969). Therefore, the expected answers in the first comprehension task were all "yes."

For the promise judgment in the second comprehension task, the expected responses were also given a score of 1 and unexpected responses a score of 0. According to Astington's (1988a) analysis, the outcome of a promise is not a constitutive element of it; that is, at least for adults, an unfulfilled promise is still a promise. Hence, the expected answers in the second comprehension task were also all "yes." In the production task the question 'What would you say to make a promise?' was asked of all the subjects, and the promises they spontaneously made were examined in terms of their structure and categorized into different types of strategies based on Astington's (1988b) classification, as shown in Table 2:

**Table 2. The types of promising strategies**

Types		Examples
1	Promise made with an explicit future action	' <i>Wo hui qu bang ni na sezhi.</i> ' 'I will go get the colored paper for you.'
2	Promise made with an implicit future action	' <i>Deng yixia.</i> ' 'Wait a moment.'
3	Promise made without future action mentioned	' <i>Hao.</i> ' 'Yes.' or 'Okay.'
4	Irrelevant responses	' <i>Zhe ge xiaoji hen keai.</i> ' 'This chick is really cute.'
5	No response	nothing; ' <i>Wo bu zhidao.</i> ' 'I don't know.'

All of the tasks were analyzed using SPSS 19, a type of statistical software. The mean scores and standard deviation for the comprehension tasks were reported. A two-way or three way repeated measures ANOVA was executed to examine the significance of different factors as well as the interaction among them. Finally, the frequency of each promising strategy obtained from the production task was counted. A second rater was invited to code the production data independently, and there was 98% agreement.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Effects of Social Status on Promise Judgments

The descriptive statistics regarding the “yes” responses to the two comprehension tasks concerning social status designed for the present study are presented in Table 3.

Most subjects in the experimental groups performed better on their promise judgments when the promise was made to a person with a higher social status. In general, a promise made to a person with a higher social status was more likely to be considered as an actual promise than one made to a person with a relatively lower social status. As shown in Table 4, the two-way repeated measures ANOVA shows that there was an interaction between social status and group within subjects,  $F(1, 95) = 2.753, p = .032$ .

Moreover, significant differences were found in the 9-year-old group ( $p=.008$ ) and the Adult Group ( $p=.015$ ), who would consider the social status (higher or lower) of the promises when making promise judgments.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics for yes responses to the promise judgment question concerning social status**

Group	Social status	Number	Mean	SD
6-year-olds	High	20	0.55	0.18
	Low	20	0.59	0.18
7-year-olds	High	20	0.59	0.18
	Low	20	0.57	0.17
8-year-olds	High	20	0.65	0.11
	Low	20	0.62	0.11
9-year-olds	High	20	0.68	0.11
	Low	20	0.64	0.12
Adult Group	High	20	0.88	0.16
	Low	20	0.81	0.19

**Table 4. Tests of within-subjects effects on social status**

Source		Type III				
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SocialStatus	Sphericity Assumed	.025	1	.025	4.350	.040
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.025	1.000	.025	4.350	.040
	Huynh-Feldt	.025	1.000	.025	4.350	.040
	Lower-bound	.025	1.000	.025	4.350	.040
SocialStatus * Group	Sphericity Assumed	.062	4	.016	2.753	.032
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.062	4.000	.016	2.753	.032
	Huynh-Feldt	.062	4.000	.016	2.753	.032
	Lower-bound	.062	4.000	.016	2.753	.032
Error(SocialStatus)	Sphericity Assumed	.538	95	.006		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.538	95.000	.006		
	Huynh-Feldt	.538	95.000	.006		
	Lower-bound	.538	95.000	.006		

When making their promise judgments, our subjects also clearly revealed their sensitivity to social status. They did this by referring to the promisee's social status when the promise was being made to an elder promisee, as shown in (3).

- (3) Yinwei xiaozhang hen zhongyao. (G2S9, Scen.7)<sup>3</sup>  
 because principal very important  
 ‘(It is a promise,) Because the principal is an important person.’

On the other hand, when the promise was being made to a promisee with a lower social status, the participants were less likely to refer to the promisee’s social status when making their justification, as in (4):

- (4) Yinwei Yuanyuan daying yao bang ta gai  
 because PN promise will help he build  
 chengbao. (G2S9, Scen.6)  
 castle  
 ‘(It is a promise,) Because *Yuanyuan* promised to help him build the castle.’

In (4), this 7-year-old participant stated the utterance made by the promiser but did not address the promisee’s social status when making his promise judgment, thus indicating that he could distinguish between higher and lower social status.

In previous studies, it has been proven that children modify their styles of speech in order to adjust to different interlocutors (Shatz & Gelman 1973, Wolfson 1983, Holmes 1988, Hoff 2010). For example, in Shatz & Gelman’s (1973) study, children speak differently to listeners of different ages, using more complex speech in terms of syntax, and more politeness strategies in pragmatic terms when speaking to adults and peers rather than to younger siblings. Thus, our results are consistent with previous findings which show children tend to change registers according to the social status of those they are talking to. For example, our findings support Mey’s (1993) claim that it is necessary to take social status into consideration when making a promise (p.126). The tendency of participants in the present study to more likely recognize as promises those that are made to older promisees illustrates this sensitivity to social status. One possible reason why the younger children were not good at making discourse inference in general was because they were distracted by the connective *keshi* ‘but,’ pointing toward an account of general language growth or a growth in discourse comprehension.

In the younger groups especially we found a strong tendency to judge as promises those promises made to people of a higher social status. Piaget (1932, 1965), studied Swiss children aged 5 to 13, and found that children begin to develop a concept of morality between the ages of 5 and 8. During this period of development, children are in the initial stages of absorbing ethical concepts in school, and

<sup>3</sup> G2 = Group 2 (the 7-year-olds); S9 = Subject No. 9; Scen.7 = Scenario 7

interacting with their peers is likely to contribute to children's conventional moral reasoning (Kolhberg 1963). Because parents may impede their sons' and daughters' moral growth through adult authoritarian influence, children receive greater exposure to real-life social experiences in a school setting. Our 6-year-old preschoolers might have been more heavily influenced by experiences at home than their 7- and 8-year-old counterparts, who by attending elementary school and interacting with larger numbers of people have become more socialized. It is therefore understandable why our younger group performed worse than the older groups when it came to judging promises. Also, because 9-year-old children remain in school for longer periods of time, they are able to have more social interaction with their peers. This increased social exposure leads to greater sophistication, and likely explains why their responses to the promise judgments were closest to those of the Adult Group.

#### **4.2 Effect of Knowing Outcomes on Promise Judgments**

The descriptive statistics for the "yes" responses of participants in the comprehension tasks regarding the outcome condition are presented in Table 5:

**Table 5. Descriptive statistics for "yes" responses to the promise judgment questions in relation to knowing/not knowing outcomes**

Group	Outcome	Number	Mean	SD
6-year-olds	Not knowing	20	0.67	0.31
	Knowing	20	0.46	0.08
7-year-olds	Not knowing	20	0.68	0.29
	Knowing	20	0.47	0.09
8-year-olds	Not knowing	20	0.83	0.19
	Knowing	20	0.44	0.07
9-year-olds	Not knowing	20	0.79	0.19
	Knowing	20	0.53	0.06
Adult Group	Not knowing	20	0.88	0.16
	Knowing	20	0.80	0.22

As Table 5 shows, the scores for all groups tended to be higher when the outcome was not known. According to the two-way repeated measures ANOVA, as shown in Table 6, there was an interaction between the known-or-unknown outcome condition and group within subjects,  $F(1, 95) = 4.425, p = .003$ .

**Table 6. Tests of within-subjects effects on the outcome condition**

Source		Type III		Mean Square	F	Sig.
		Sum of Squares	Df			
KnowingOrNot	Sphericity Assumed	2.674	1	2.674	96.010	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2.674	1.000	2.674	96.010	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	2.674	1.000	2.674	96.010	.000
	Lower-bound	2.674	1.000	2.674	96.010	.000
KnowingOrNot * Group	Sphericity Assumed	.493	4	.123	4.425	.003
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.493	4.000	.123	4.425	.003
	Huynh-Feldt	.493	4.000	.123	4.425	.003
	Lower-bound	.493	4.000	.123	4.425	.003
Error(KnowingOrNot)	Sphericity Assumed	2.646	95	.028		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2.646	95.000	.028		
	Huynh-Feldt	2.646	95.000	.028		
	Lower-bound	2.646	95.000	.028		

There were significant differences between promise judgments before and after the outcome was known for all experimental groups (6-yr-olds:  $p=.006$ ; 7-yr-olds:  $p=.002$ ; 8-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ; 9-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ). However, the scores for the Adult Group showed no significant difference with regard to promise judgments made before and after knowing the outcome ( $p > .05$ ). That is to say, when making promise judgments, the children were more likely to take the outcome into consideration than the adults, indicating that they were more prone to be influenced by the outcome condition.<sup>4</sup>

In general, where the outcomes of promises are known, the promise outcome can be further categorized as positive (a fulfilled promise) and negative (an unfulfilled promise). The descriptive statistics for the “yes” responses to the promise questions regarding the outcome condition in the comprehension task are shown in Table 7:

<sup>4</sup> As pointed out by one of the reviewers, our Adult Group also treated outcome as an important factor for judgment promise. This being the case, how can we describe the children’s behavior as an error? In the present study, the major difference between the Adult Group and the experimental groups lies in that the scores for the Adult Group showed no significant difference but the scores for the experimental groups reached a significant difference with regard to promise judgments made before and after knowing the outcome ( $p < .05$ ) (see Table 5). In addition, the Adult Group recognized a promise either with a positive outcome or with a negative outcome as an effective promise (see Table 7), but the experimental groups tended to only recognize a promise with a positive outcome as an effective promise. The experimental groups’ behavior was not considered as an error in the present study, and it was assumed that they had not fully acquired adult grammar.

**Table 7. Descriptive statistics for “yes” responses to the promise judgment question in relation to the outcome conditions**

Group	Outcome	Number	Mean	SD
6-year-olds	Positive	20	0.88	0.13
	Negative	20	0.00	0.00
7-year-olds	Positive	20	0.93	0.17
	Negative	20	0.00	0.00
8-year-olds	Positive	20	0.93	0.15
	Negative	20	0.00	0.00
9-year-olds	Positive	20	0.99	0.04
	Negative	20	0.07	0.13
Adult Group	Positive	20	0.99	0.03
	Negative	20	0.61	0.44

For all groups, being confronted with positive as opposed to negative outcomes (promises kept or broken) led to significant differences in the subjects' scores. The two-way repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there was an interaction between the positive or negative outcome condition and group within subjects,  $F(1, 95) = 2.513$ ,  $p = .047$ . Significant differences were found in the subjects' judgment on positive and negative promises for all the experimental groups (6-yr-olds:  $p = .000$ ; 7-yr-olds:  $p = .028$ ; 8-yr-olds:  $p = .002$ ; 9-yr-olds:  $p = .000$ ) and the Adult Group ( $t = 3.216$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Affected by the obligational (essential) condition, all the subjects considered a promise as an effective promise when the outcome was positive.

In general, the developmental pattern of children's comprehension of “promising” found by this study followed the pattern found in previous research: the younger children failed to recognize a broken promise as an effective one and were more likely than older children to base their justification on the outcome of the promise (Astington 1988a, Maas & Abbeduto 2001). In effect, children are still naïve due to limited cognitive ability and can only recognize a promise as a promise when its content accords with a positive outcome. When justifying their promise judgments, the 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds were more likely to refer to the outcome than the other two groups, a finding consistent with previous research. They erroneously took the fulfilled outcome as part of the promise itself, while the adults tended to treat the outcome as a separate issue, as the following statement of an adult (G5S3) illustrates in (5):

- (5) Ta yijing daying le. Youmeiyou zuo shi lingwai  
 3SG already promise PT whether do COP another  
 yi hui shi. (G5S3, Q6)  
 one CL thing  
 ‘He already made a promise. Whether he does it or not is another thing.’

Although the promise judgments of the Adult Group still exhibited a significant difference with regard to whether the outcomes were positive or negative, the adults tended to recognize a broken promise as an actual one because the promiser had uttered the sentence that constituted a “promise.” This result indicates that the outcome of a promise affected the children’s understanding of a promise but did not affect the adults’ concept of a promise. Consider the examples below:

- (6) Yinwei ta meiyou zuodao, suoyi ta mei daying. (G1S2, Scen.6)  
 because 3SG NEG do therefore he NEG promise  
 ‘He didn’t make a promise because he didn’t do it.’
- (7) Yinwei ta wancheng le daying laoshi de shi. (G2S2, Scen.5)  
 because 3SG finish PT promise teacher GEN thing  
 ‘(It is a promise.) Because he finished what he promised to do for the teacher.’

As shown in (6) and (7), most of the children’s understanding of a promise was affected by the outcome of the promise, while the adults’ concept of a promise is as in (4) above. Generally speaking, the children were more likely to judge a promise from the promisee’s point of view, such that the promise had to be fulfilled to make it a promise. The adults, on the other hand, tended to make judgments from the promiser’s perspective in that they considered the promise to have been made once the utterance was expressed.

Piaget’s (1896-1980) theory of cognitive development has proved influential in many different education-related areas, including developmental psychology and moral development. He proposed four major periods of cognitive development:

1) Sensorimotor Stage: from birth to age 2, when infants rely on behavioral schemas (movement and the five senses) in adapting to the environment. At this stage, children are extremely egocentric, meaning they cannot perceive the world from others’ viewpoints.

2) Preoperational Stage: lasting from roughly ages 2 to 7, when children are thinking at a symbolic level but are not yet using cognitive operations; the latter is considered an internal mental activity that one performs using logical thinking. Egocentrism increases at this stage strongly and then weakens.

3) Concrete Operational Stage: lasting from about ages 7 to 11, when children begin to think more logically but only in relation to tangible objects and experiences. They are very concrete in their thinking, using practical aids, and are no longer egocentric.

4) Formal Operational Stage: from ages 11 to 16 and beyond, when individuals begin to think more rationally and systematically, using abstract reasoning and picturing hypothetical events. At this stage, they begin to think more logically and in terms of abstract concepts rather than objects.

According to this theory, children begin to use concrete object operations in order to “think logically” during the Concrete Operational Stage, when they are between the ages of 7 and 11. The tasks they can perform are more physical than mental because they are not yet able to perform logical mental operations. At this time, children are only capable of using concrete ideas or experiences to solve problems. After growing out of this stage, children move into the Formal Operational Stage (11-16) and begin to think more abstractly, to draw logical inferences and use their reason to solve problems (Inhelder & Piaget 1958). The developmental sequence of these two stages is universal (Piaget 1969, 1970); that is, every individual will progress through these cognitive-developmental stages in exactly the same order, with the former stage a prerequisite for the latter, though some may move on to the next stage earlier than others due to personal background or cultural influences. There can be no skipping of any stage of cognitive development because each successive stage is built upon the previous one and represents a more complicated way of thinking.

Piaget, then, argues that children do not move on from the Concrete Operational Stage to the Formal Operational Stage until they are around eleven years old. In the present study, when the outcomes of promises were concrete actions, they were normally explicit. Therefore, they could be readily confirmed by all participants. It makes sense that our children, who were more likely to refer to concrete outcomes than to abstract utterances, which were relatively more implicit.

However, according to Piaget's (1932, 1965) theory of moral development<sup>5</sup>, children have little respect for social rules during the Pre-moral Period (i.e. younger than 5). As they grow older—to the age of 5 and then 10, where 5-10 is Piaget's stage of Heteronomous Morality—they take the social rules and mores followed by powerful authority figures, such as their parents, as being sacred and unalterable. At

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, we follow Searle's (1969) four major conditions on promises, one of which is the Essential Condition to examine children's understanding of promises as a speech act. According to this condition, the fulfillment of the commitment or obligation is the decisive factor which distinguishes the promissory speech act from other illocutionary acts. In other words, a promise is an obligation and a belief as well (also see Raz 1977). Both making and keeping a promise are considered the promissory act and moral development is thus discussed in the present study.

this stage, children think of rules as moral absolutes and believe that breaking them will cause them to be punished. By the age of 10 or 11, the stage of Autonomous Morality sets in; this is when children start to realize that social rules are negotiable and changeable according to human needs. Children at this stage are able to revise the old rules and make new ones according to personal experiences in new circumstances (Peters 1981).

This moral theory too, then, can explain the preference of our 6- to 9-year-olds for positive outcomes when making promise judgments. It is the children's lack of flexibility in behavior as well as thinking which causes them to form a product-oriented concept of a promise, whereas adults are more flexible and sophisticated and can tolerate the disparity between a promise's content and its outcome. Children perceive a promise as being something which one is morally obligated to fulfill, according to the rigid rules they have learned; thus for them an unfulfilled promise is not considered to be a promise at all.

Nonetheless, in this study it was found that some of the adult participants were also affected by the outcomes of promises in making their promise judgments: the Adult Group showed a significant difference in their favorable judgments of positive-outcome promises as opposed to negative-outcome ones (0.99 vs. 0.61,  $p=.001$ ). This result may seem to go against Piaget's theory regarding both the development of abstract thinking and development of a more open moral view, since according to Piaget it seems that the adults (aged 25) should be able to make promise judgments regardless of the outcome. However, it is also true that by refining and extending Piaget's theory of moral development, Kohlberg (1963) came to believe that the relation between universal sequences of cognitive and moral growth on the one hand and age on the other is not absolute. He claimed that both cognitive development and relevant social experiences are the foundation for the development of moral reasoning.

### **4.3 The Effects of Perceived Sincerity on Promise Judgments**

The descriptive statistics for "yes" responses to perceived sincerity in the comprehension task are shown in Table 8.

The two-way repeated measures ANOVA showed no significant differences between the promise judgments in the sincere and insincere condition in any of the groups ( $p>.05$ ). That is to say, whether or not the promiser was perceived as being sincere did not affect our subjects' concept of a promise.

**Table 8. Descriptive statistics for the promise judgment question concerning sincerity**

Group	Sincerity	Number	Mean	SD
6-year-olds	Sincere	20	0.69	0.33
	Insincere	20	0.64	0.33
7-year-olds	Sincere	20	0.73	0.30
	Insincere	20	0.64	0.32
8-year-olds	Sincere	20	0.81	0.19
	Insincere	20	0.78	0.25
9-year-olds	Sincere	20	0.85	0.20
	Insincere	20	0.81	0.21
Adult Group	Sincere	20	0.88	0.17
	Insincere	20	0.89	0.16

Table 9 presents the descriptive statistics for the interaction between judging the promise, judging the promiser's sincerity, and knowing/not knowing the outcome.

**Table 9. Descriptive statistics for the promise judgment question regarding promise judgments, sincerity and knowing/not knowing outcomes**

Group \ Outcomes	Not Knowing Outcomes		Knowing Outcomes	
	S (SD)	I (SD)	S (SD)	I (SD)
6-year-olds	0.69 (0.33)	0.64 (0.33)	0.48 (0.05)	0.44 (0.12)
7-year-olds	0.73 (0.30)	0.64 (0.32)	0.47 (0.09)	0.48 (0.10)
8-year-olds	0.85 (0.02)	0.81 (0.21)	0.46 (0.06)	0.42 (0.11)
9-year-olds	0.81 (0.19)	0.78 (0.25)	0.53 (0.05)	0.53 (0.09)
Adult Group	0.88 (0.17)	0.89 (0.15)	0.81 (0.22)	0.79 (0.22)

Note: S = sincere condition; I = insincere condition

As shown in Table 9, the subjects' promise judgment scores for both sincere and insincere promises were relatively higher when the outcomes were not known. However, according to the two-way repeated measures ANOVA, there was no significant interaction effect between knowledge of outcomes and judgments of sincerity/lack of sincerity ( $p > .05$ ). Upon further examining sincerity in relation to the outcome condition and group, we still found no significant interaction effects ( $p > .05$ ) among the factors considered in the three-way repeated measures ANOVA. That is, none of the subjects exhibited sensitivity to the promiser's sincerity when making their promise judgments regarding the outcome condition.

In previous studies, younger children have been found to confuse the promiser's

sincerity with the promise's (expected) positive outcome; therefore, it was concluded that they may fail to recognize insincere promises as still being promises (Astington 1988a, Wang 2009). However, the present study found no significant interaction between promise judgments and sincerity judgments in any of the groups. The subjects as young as 6 years old could recognize an insincere promise as still being a promise. This result seems to conflict with previous findings that 6-year-old children have an incomplete conceptual understanding of the sincerity condition, and that young children around the age of 7 hold a fragile understanding of Searle's sincerity condition (Maas & Abbeduto 2001, Maas 2008).

Searle, as we know, said that when making a commitment, the promiser must be sincere in his/her intent to accomplish the future act. If a promisee is unaware of the insincerity of a promiser but the future act is later accomplished, an insincere promise would still remain effective. However, there is a slight possibility that a promisee might not know whether the promiser is truly sincere. Compared with the promise-utterances, a promiser's sincerity may be considered more abstract since one cannot read the other's mind. Although the utterances are an abstract idea, at least the promisee can hear them. Searle's (1969) sincerity condition initially postulated that, while performing a propositional act, a promiser has to make a promise with the intention of carrying out the promised action. He later modified this to include insincere promises because 'A promise involves an expression of intention, whether sincere or insincere (1969:62).' Therefore, as long as the promiser purports the intention of accomplishing a future act, the utterance is considered a promise.

In previous studies, 6-year-old English speaking children were shown to have an incomplete conceptual understanding of the sincerity condition. They felt that an insincere promise was not a promise; that is, the promiser's intention was found to be a factor defining a promise. The results of the present study indicate that Chinese-speaking children come to understand of the limited role of the promiser's intention in promises relatively earlier. Ancient Chinese society saw honesty as a virtue. Many proverbs or morals which focus on being true to one's word—that is, in actually fulfilling what one has promised—such as *Ren wu xin bu li* 'a dishonest man has no ground to stand on' and *Junzi yi yan, kuai ma yi bian* 'a man's word is faster than a spurred horse (i.e., a man's word is as good as gold)', are taught early in school. Therefore, among Chinese-speaking children, the actual content of a promise, and especially the actual carrying out of the promise by the promisee, may be more valued than perceived sincerity when making promise judgments.

From the perspective of psychological development, Freud (1935, 1960) argues that the third component of our personality (the other two being id and ego), the superego develops between the ages of 3 and 6. The superego tends to stand in

opposition to the impulsive desires of the unconscious or id<sup>6</sup> and acts as our moral conscience, judging whether ideas and actions are good or bad, acceptable or taboo. Children at this stage internalize the moral values and standards of their parents in order to adapt to the external environment and explore the world. Therefore, it is possible that children as young as 6 in this research understood that sometimes, even though one did not originally intend to fulfill a commitment, it had to be kept in order to adapt to the social environment.

#### 4.4 The Effects of Explicitness on Promise Judgment

The descriptive statistics for “yes” responses to the promises made in the explicit/implicit conditions are presented in Table 10:

**Table 10. Descriptive statistics for “yes” responses to promise judgment questions concerning explicitness**

Group	Explicitness	Number	Mean	SD
6-year-olds	Explicit	20	0.71	0.29
	Implicit	20	0.62	0.35
7-year-olds	Explicit	20	0.73	0.28
	Implicit	20	0.64	0.33
8-year-olds	Explicit	20	0.85	0.24
	Implicit	20	0.78	0.18
9-year-olds	Explicit	20	0.91	0.16
	Implicit	20	0.68	0.31
Adult Group	Explicit	20	1.00	0.00
	Implicit	20	0.77	0.32

As can be seen in Table 10, all the participants had higher mean scores in the explicit condition than in the implicit condition. The two-way repeated measures ANOVA indicated that there was an interaction between the explicitness of the promise and group within subjects,  $F(1, 95) = 13.807, p = .000$ .

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<sup>6</sup> The Id, Ego and Superego are the three components of the psychic apparatus defined in Freud's (1935, 1960) structural model of the psyche. According to this model, the id or “unconscious” is the domain of our animal instincts, impulses, desires, fears, etc.; the ego or “conscious mind” or “rational mind” is what we are normally aware (conscious) of in our everyday life; the superego is our “moral conscience” which checks the conflicts between our ego and id and produces feelings of guilt.

**Table 11. Tests of within-subjects effects on explicitness**

Source		Type III			F	Sig.
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square		
Explicitness	Sphericity Assumed	8.176	1	8.176	732.171	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	8.176	1.000	8.176	732.171	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	8.176	1.000	8.176	732.171	.000
	Lower-bound	8.176	1.000	8.176	732.171	.000
Explicitness * Group	Sphericity Assumed	.617	4	.154	13.807	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	.617	4.000	.154	13.807	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	.617	4.000	.154	13.807	.000
	Lower-bound	.617	4.000	.154	13.807	.000
Error(Explicitness)	Sphericity Assumed	1.061	95	.011		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1.061	95.000	.011		
	Huynh-Feldt	1.061	95.000	.011		
	Lower-bound	1.061	95.000	.011		

There were significant differences in the subjects’ judgment regarding explicit promises for all experimental groups (6-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ; 7-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ; 8-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ; 9-yr-olds:  $p=.000$ ) and the Adult Group ( $t=3.630$ ,  $p=.002$ ). That is to say, all the subjects significantly preferred a promise to be made explicitly, rather than merely implied.

When the subjects were asked to justify their promise judgments, they showed their sensitivity to the explicitness of promises as shown in (8):

(8) Ta you jiangchu ta yao zuo de shi, erqie  
 he have say he will do GEN thing and  
 ta you shuo ta zuowan na jian shi yao zuo  
 he has say he finish which CL thing will do  
 na jian shi. (G4S1, Scen.15)  
 which CL thing

‘He has already said what he is going to do, and he also said he will do it after he has finished something else.’

In (8), the 9-year-old participant (G4S1) referred to the explicitness of the promise content while justifying his promise judgment. He thought *Yuanyuan* had made a promise because he had explicitly told the promisee what future action was

going to be taken and when it would be carried out. On the other hand, invoking the implicit promise condition, the same student did not consider that another promise had in fact been made because the content was not stated clearly, as in (9):

- (9) Yinwei ta zhiyou shuo deng yixia, meiyou shuo yao  
because he only say wait a.moment NEG say will  
dai ta qu chi bing. (G4S1, Scen.2)  
bring he go eat ice  
'(It's not a promise.) Because he only said 'wait a moment,' and he did not say that he would take him to eat some ice.'

The subject (G4S1) thought *Yuanyuan* did not make a promise simply because he did not tell the promisee the promise content, that is, what was being promised.

In the context of how we may achieve integrity and efficiency in communication, Grice (1975) formulated the Cooperative Principle<sup>7</sup> to describe how people normally behave and interact with one another in conversation. He argued for the importance of quantity: 'make your contribution as informative as is required,' and relevance, 'a partner's contribution needs to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction' (1975:47). The Maxim of Quantity requires a speaker to provide the right amount of information to the addressee, which means not being too brief or giving redundant information. The Maxim of Relevance requires that a speaker gives information that is related to the main topic or issue being discussed. When someone makes a promise implicitly, without giving adequate information, the promisee has to draw an inference according to the information received from the promiser's utterances. The more explicit the promiser's promise, the fewer inferences the promisee has to make. Consider the following promise, which mentions no explicit future act:

- (10) Hao, deng yixia.  
yes wait a.moment  
'Okay, wait a moment.'

In (10), only the promiser would know whether s/he had made a promise.<sup>8</sup> For

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<sup>7</sup> The Cooperative Principle includes four maxims, which describe specific principles that naturally emerge and are followed when people communicate with each other: the Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Relevance; Maxim of Quantity, and Maxim of Manner.

<sup>8</sup> As one of the reviewers pointed out, the "implicit promises" in the study are actually ellipses such as *Deng yixia!* "Wait a moment!" These are ambiguous. In Austin (1962), an "explicit" performative sentence is one which makes explicit what act a person is performing. However, there are also "implicit" performatives. For example, when one uses "Get out!" to command someone to leave a

the promisee, “wait a moment” could be inferred to mean either: (1) the speaker would accomplish the future act in a short while; or (2) the speaker would soon talk about it more. It is a promise only if the speaker means to accomplish the future act in a short while. However, if the speaker’s intent is to discuss the issue later, it is not a promise. A misunderstanding may occur if the hearer misinterprets the intended meaning of the speaker’s utterance and draws from it a totally different implication from the one intended. For example, if *Yuanyuan* had earlier mentioned that he might help his younger sister with her homework, and later said ‘*Hao, deng yixia*’ ‘Okay, wait a moment,’ his sister might assume that *Yuanyuan* would help her later even if *Yuanyuan* had never really intended this. When a promise is implicitly made, it is sometimes difficult to judge whether it is a real promise. Therefore, most of our participants, including the younger children, more likely interpreted promises made by mentioning an explicit future act as actual promises.

#### 4.5 Promising Strategies

Table 12 presents different types of promising strategies used by the participants in the production task. These include the numbers of tokens and percentages.

**Table 12. A distribution of promising strategies used by the subjects**

Type	Group					
		6-yr-olds	7-yr-olds	8-yr-olds	9-yr-olds	Adult
Type 1: <i>promise includes an explicit future act</i>	%	<b>62%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>85%</b>
	N	198	240	251	282	272
Type 2: <i>promise includes an implicit future act</i>	%	<b>20%</b>	14%	14%	8%	12%
	N	63	46	44	26	39
Type 3: <i>promise includes no future act</i>	%	<b>8%</b>	6%	3%	1%	3%
	N	24	18	10	2	9
Type 4: <i>irrelevant responses</i>	%	<b>8%</b>	4%	3%	2%	0%
	N	24	12	11	6	0
Type 5: <i>no responses</i>	%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%
	N	11	4	4	4	0
Total	%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	N	320	320	320	320	320

room, the utterance is part of the performance of a command. The sentence is a performative; it is implicit since it does not make explicit that the act the speaker is performing is a command. In the present study, since *deng yixia* appeared after *hao* ‘yes’, it was categorized into Type 2, i.e., a promise which includes an implicit future act. Following Searle (1969), who also considers an implicit promise a promise, we thus included implicit promises.

Our participants differed significantly in their employment of promising strategies ( $\chi^2(16) = 100.254, p < .0001$ ). As shown in Table 12, among the three major types of promising strategies, the strategy of making a promise that included an explicit future act was used most frequently by all the subjects. Each group's members preferred to mention the future act explicitly, rather than implicitly or not at all, when making promises. This was consistent with their responses in the comprehension task, where they were more likely to recognize a promise made explicitly as an effective promise. In the youngest group (i.e., 6-year-olds), 10% (Type 4 and Type 5) of the participants could not offer any related responses, implying that some of the 6-year-old children had yet to acquire the ability to make a commitment to others. All the groups' subjects tended to use more explicit strategies when making a promise. Over 60% of all the participants chose to make promises with clear statements of a future act. The most common way for them to form a promise was to state exactly what the specific future act would be and when it would be carried out, as in (11):

- (11) Deng wo saowan di jiu qu bang ni na sezhi. (G2S2, Scen.1)  
wait 1SG sweep floor then go help 2SG get colored.paper  
'I'll go get the colored paper for you after I sweep the floor.'

Here the participant (G2S2) promised to "get the colored paper" (what) "after sweeping the floor" (when). The usage of the performative verb *daying* 'promise' was rarely found in our data, even in the production of the Adult Group. Usage of the performative verb *daying* 'promise' did not increase with age, indicating that the lack of the performative verb *daying* in Chinese-speaking children's promise-making expressions cannot represent their ability to make promises. This result differs from Astington's (1988b) findings that English-speaking children aged between 8 and 11 presented their preference for making promises with the English performative verb 'promise.' For them, the explicit performative verb best conveyed their intention to accomplish a future act to the promisee. However, in Chinese, it is uncommon to use the performative verb *daying* 'promise' in spoken language to make a promise.

With regard to the effect of social status, significant differences were found between the promises made to a person of a higher or lower social status. All groups of participants tended to use more explicit expressions to make promises to those persons of higher social status. Furthermore, conditional clauses like *ruguo wo you kong de hua* 'if I have time' and uncertain expressions like *zaishuo* 'we'll talk about it later' were mostly used with a promisee of lower social status, indicating that the participants regarded promises made to a person of a higher social status as being more important, as shown in (12) and (13):

(12) Laoshi, deng yixia xie wan gongke wo jiu  
 teacher wait a.moment write finish homework 1SG then  
 qu bang ni huahua. Yinwei duixiang shi laoshi,  
 go help 2SG draw because subject COP teacher  
 tongchang dui zhangbei jianghua jiuyao jiang qingchu.  
 usually to senior talk must say clear  
 ‘After I finish my homework, I’ll draw a picture for you, Teacher. Because I’m  
 talking with my teacher—an adult— I have to spell it out clearly.’

(G5S15, Scen.16)

(13) Deng yixia zai kankan. Dui didi meimei zheyang  
 wait a.moment we’ll see to younger.brother sister this  
 jiang jiushi hen fuyan, zuo dimei de  
 say COP very unthinking COP younger.sibling NM  
 jiushi yao you zhezong zijue, ruguo wo ge  
 COP must have this sense if 1SG older.brother  
 gen wo zheyang jiang wo jiu zhidao ta buhui jiao wo.  
 with 1SG this say 1SG then know 3SG NEG teach 1SG  
 ‘We’ll talk about it later. Talking like this to a younger sibling is really too abrupt.  
 As someone’s younger brother or sister, you have to have the ability to judge  
 your older brother’s or sister’s tone. If my older brother were to speak to me like  
 this, I know he would not be able to teach me anything.’ (G5S 15, Scen.12)

This subject of the Adult Group (G5S15) provided her own explanation for making promises using different strategies to people of higher or lower social status. She said the promisee’s social status would affect the way she made promises. However, Astington’s (1988b) study found that English-speaking children responded similarly to both their mothers and siblings when making or responding to promises. It is evident that cultural differences play an important role in language use. In Chinese society, children are taught to show respect to their elders since *jing lao zun xian* ‘to respect the aged and the wise’ and *zun shi zhong dao* ‘to respect one’s teachers and morals’ are traditional virtues that are highly valued, especially in one’s early childhood. However, to a person from a younger generation, Chinese speakers need not modify their speech in any special way.

By making promises in a more explicit way, we can avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings. The phrase *deng yixia* ‘wait a moment’ in the above contexts can have two different meanings: “I will accomplish the action in a short while” or “We can talk about it in a moment.” If a promiser intentionally makes an implicit promise (thus violating the Maxim of Quantity), ambiguity may arise. This may happen when

the promiser does this to hide his own insincerity, knowing that he may not accomplish the future act. When a promise is made without supplying adequate information, only the promiser knows whether a promise has actually been made. The results of our production task were consistent with the findings of the comprehension task given in the previous sections: the participants were more likely to recognize an explicit promise as an effective promise.

## 5. Conclusion

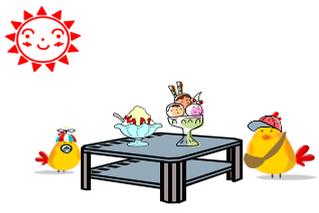
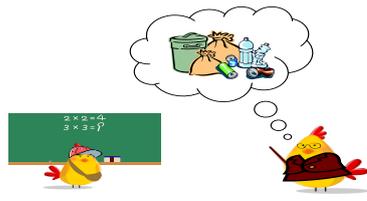
The present study investigated children's understanding of promises from the perspectives of both comprehension and production. In addition, many variables were introduced and examined in order to explore how they would affect children's concepts of promises and promising: the promisee's social status, the outcome of the promise, the promiser's sincerity in making a promise, and the explicitness of the promiser's utterances.

Though the overall results were interesting and informative, the following issues could perhaps be further investigated. In this study we only examined the promisee's social status as a factor affecting children's concepts of the promissory speech act. However, social status is just one of many social variables discussed in the literature. Future research might take other social factors, such as familiarity and social setting, into consideration. In addition, all of our experimental promising scenarios were designed with a child's ability to actually perform the task in mind. Thus, the need to make a very serious or important promise was not taken into consideration. In future research, the effect of the "seriousness" or "severity" condition—of "having a lot at stake"—when making a promise could also be examined.

### Appendix.

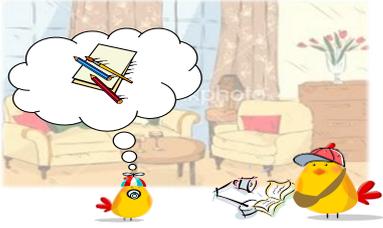
#### Scenarios Used in the Production and Comprehension Tasks

1. 	明天是校長生日，老師想做一張卡片給校長，但教室裡沒有彩色紙了，所以老師要元元去辦公室幫她拿，可是元元正在掃地，他跟老師說：「好，我掃完地會去幫你拿彩色紙。」
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	<p>後來，元元掃完地就去幫老師拿紙了。</p>
<p>2.</p> 	<p>今天天氣好熱，弟弟想吃冰，就跟元元說放學的時候在校門口等他，一起去吃冰，元元說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>放學以後，元元就帶弟弟一起去吃冰了。</p>
<p>3.</p> 	<p>妹妹最喜歡海綿寶寶了，今天妹妹想跟元元一起看卡通，元元正在廚房幫媽媽，雖然元元不想看海綿寶寶，但他還是說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元幫完媽媽就跟妹妹一起看卡通了。</p>
<p>4.</p> 	<p>教室裡有好多垃圾，老師叫元元幫忙把垃圾拿出去，可是元元正在擦黑板，雖然元元不想拿髒髒的垃圾，但他還是跟老師說：「好，等一下。」</p>

	<p>後來元元擦完黑板沒有去幫老師丟垃圾。</p>
<p>5.</p> 	<p>教室裡的花太久沒有澆水，都快要死掉了，所以老師請元元幫她澆花，元元正在寫作業，雖然元元不想去幫老師澆花，但他還是說：「好，我寫完以後會去幫你澆花。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元寫完就去幫老師澆花了。</p>
<p>6.</p> 	<p>弟弟在玩積木，他想蓋一個大城堡，可是他不會蓋，所以他請元元幫他，元元正在看書，元元說：「好，我看完書就去幫你蓋城堡。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元看完書沒有去幫弟弟蓋城堡。</p>

<p>7.</p> 	<p>校長的眼鏡不見了，沒有眼鏡校長什麼都看不到，所以校長請元元幫他找眼鏡，元元正在吃飯，雖然元元不想幫校長找，但他還是說：「好，我吃完會去幫你找眼鏡。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元吃完飯沒有去幫校長找眼鏡。</p>
<p>8.</p> 	<p>妹妹不會騎腳踏車，她想請元元教她騎，元元正在整理房間，雖然元元不想教妹妹騎腳踏車，但他還是說：「好，我等一下會去公園教你騎腳踏車。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元整理完房間就帶妹妹去騎腳踏車了。</p>
<p>9.</p> 	<p>早上校長想看報紙，所以他請元元幫拿報紙到校長室，但是元元還在吃早餐，他說：「好，我吃完會去幫你拿報紙。」</p>

	<p>後來，元元吃完早餐沒有去幫校長拿報紙。</p>
<p>10.</p> 	<p>弟弟不會畫畫，想要請元元教他，但是元元要先寫完功課，元元說：「好，我寫完功課以後會教你畫畫。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元寫完功課就教弟弟畫畫。</p>
<p>11.</p> 	<p>校長的鑰匙不見了，他找了好久都找不到，所以叫元元幫忙他找鑰匙，但是元元正在擦窗戶，他說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>後來元元擦完窗戶沒有去幫校長找鑰匙。</p>

<p>12.</p> 	<p>今天的功課好難，妹妹都不會寫，所以請元元教她寫功課，但是元元想先寫完自己的功課再教妹妹寫功課，元元說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>元元寫完以後沒有教妹妹寫功課。</p>
<p>13.</p> 	<p>今天是星期天，弟弟想去游泳，就找元元一起去，元元正在整理書包，雖然元元不想去游泳，但他還是說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元整理完書包沒有跟弟弟一起去游泳。</p>
<p>14.</p> 	<p>學校裡養了很多魚，今天校長叫元元去幫忙餵魚，元元正在畫畫，雖然元元不想去餵魚，但他還是跟校長說：「好，等一下。」</p>

	<p>後來，元元畫完就去幫校長餵魚了。</p>
<p>15.</p> 	<p>妹妹想到學校附近的新公園去玩，可是她不知道怎麼去，膽小的妹妹最怕迷路了，所以請元元放學帶她去，雖然元元不想去公園，但他還是說：「好，我放學以後會帶你去公園玩。」</p>
	<p>元元放學以後，沒有帶妹妹去公園玩。</p>
<p>16.</p> 	<p>老師在做教室佈置，她請元元幫忙畫畫，但是元元正在寫功課，他想先把功課寫完，他說：「好，等一下。」</p>
	<p>後來，元元寫完功課就去幫老師畫畫了。</p>

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## 台灣兒童承諾語言行為之習得

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本研究旨在探討中文為母語之兒童對承諾的理解，並驗證不同操縱變因（如：被承諾者的社會地位、承諾的結果、承諾者的誠意、承諾的明確性）對兒童承諾概念的影響。研究方法包含在不同情境下的承諾判斷及承諾表達兩種實驗題型。研究對象分為五組，由平均年齡為六歲至九歲的兒童與成人共一百位所組成，每組二十人。

研究發現如下：年長受試者與控制組皆認為對長輩做的承諾才算數，而年幼受試者對承諾的判斷則不會受到被承諾者不同社會地位的影響。兒童受承諾結果的影響較深，與成人達顯著差異，相較於未實踐的諾言，兒童較認可確實完成的承諾，顯示在兒童的承諾概念中，承諾的結果與承諾本身是密不可分的。然而，所有受試者對承諾的判斷並未受到承諾者的誠意之影響，顯示無誠意的承諾仍被認為是一個承諾。此外，所有組別的受試者均較容易認可清楚表達出內容的承諾。最後，在承諾表達結果中發現，中文為母語的孩童於六歲左右便可做出承諾。在策略上，受試者傾向做出內容清楚呈現的承諾。年紀越大的孩子在表達明確性上較接近成人。

關鍵詞：承諾、社會地位、誠意、明確性、母語習得