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## **How French Speaking Children Understand Promises: The Role of the Future Tense**

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*The purpose of this study was to gain insight into one of the textual characteristics of promises: the future tense as a temporal marker of utterances. More specifically, our aim was to determine the role of the future tense in the comprehension of promises by native French-speaking children between the ages of 3 and 9. In line with speech act theory, a promise is defined here as a commitment on the part of a speaker to perform a future act. Promise comprehension is assumed to be dependent upon textual characteristics (the linguistic form of the utterance, temporal markers in the utterance, etc.) as well as contextual characteristics (listener's desire, social implications of the promise, etc.). Children performed a story-completion task from two-character stories presented in comic strip form. The stories varied in two ways: the verb tense (immediate future, simple future, or past) and the utterance production context (specific or neutral). The main results can be summarized as follows: (1) The 3- and 6-year-olds based their interpretation of the promises primarily on the contextual characteristics of the communication situation; (2) after the age of 6, the children began to rely on temporal markers in the utterances whenever the immediate future tense was used and promise-specific contextual information was lacking; and (3) the 9-year-olds always based their interpretation of the promises on temporal cues in the utterance. The results are discussed in the framework of interactionist theories of development and models of language functioning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although still not studied much and less frequent than requests in adult-child interaction, promises are a very important kind of speech act in everyday si-

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tuations (Astington, 1988a; Bernicot, Comeau, & G Feider, 1994; D'Andrade & Wish, 1985; Dore, 1974). How do children understand utterances that express a promise? How does their comprehension evolve with age?

To answer these two questions, we need to determine what cues children use to interpret promise utterances. Do they rely on textual cues such as the utterance's linguistic form or the temporal markers it contains, or do they consider contextual cues instead, such as the listener's wishes about the accomplishment of the action (Bernicot & Laval, 1996) or the social implications of the propositional content of the utterance? The goal of the present study was to examine the role, in promise comprehension by children aged 3 to 9, of one of the textual characteristics of utterances: verb tense.

According to speech act theory (Searle, 1969, 1979; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985; Vanderveken, 1990a, 1990b), a promise is an illocutionary act that belongs to the commissive category. It consists of a commitment on the part of the speaker to perform a future act, as in "Je promets de ranger ma chambre." ("I promise to clean my room"). Four fulfillment conditions accompany this definition:

1. *Propositional content condition.* The utterance says something about a future act to be performed by the speaker (in the above example, the speaker says he or she is going to clean his or her room).
2. *Preparatory condition.* The listener would rather have the speaker accomplish the future act than not accomplish it (the listener wants the speaker to clean his or her room).
3. *Sincerity condition.* The speaker intends to carry out the future act (the speaker intends to clean his or her room).
4. *Essential condition.* It becomes the speaker's obligation to carry out the future act (the speaker is obligated to clean his or her room).

The propositional content of a promise does not always correspond to a formal or solemn declaration like a marriage vow ("I promise to be faithful to you"). A promise is very often an ordinary utterance produced during everyday events, as in "Je promets de ranger ma chambre" ("I promise to clean my room"). From a linguistic standpoint, the expression *I promise* is not a necessary part of a promise utterance (Searle, 1969). There are other linguistic forms capable of achieving the same function, as in "Je vais ranger ma chambre" ("I am going to clean my room") or "Je rangerai ma chambre" ("I will clean my room"). For Searle (1979), the utterance "Je promets de ranger ma chambre" ("I promise to clean my room") is the surface form of *je promets + je rangerai ma chambre* (I promise + I will clean my room). This analysis leads us to the conclusion that all linguistic forms specific to promises must express a future action, whether in their deep

structure, as in “je promets de ranger ma chambre” (“I promise to clean my room”) or in their surface structure, as in “je vais ranger ma chambre” or “je rangerai ma chambre”. (“I am going to clean my room” or “I will clean my room”). In other words, the future as a temporal marker is a textual characteristic specific to promise utterances.

In French as in other languages, future markers used to express the aspect of an action (e.g., the desiderative future) and to situate it in time. Several studies (Bronckart, 1976; Ferreiro, 1971) have shown that, until the age of 6, children rely primarily on adverbs and time prepositions to place an action in time; it is not until after that age that they begin to use verb tense. For promises in particular, we are only interested here in the future tense as a temporal marker: it specifies that the action described in the propositional content of the utterance will take place at some time after the utterance is produced. From a morphological standpoint, the future in French can be expressed in four ways (Fleischman, 1982; Maingueneau, 1981): (1) via the present tense or *praesens pro futuro*, as in “Paul joue du tennis demain” (“Paul is playing tennis tomorrow”), (2) via sentences combining a modal auxiliary and an infinitive verb, as in “Paul doit jouer au tennis demain” (“Paul must be playing tennis tomorrow”), (3) via the immediate future tense, as in “Paul va jouer au tennis” (“Paul is going to play tennis”), and (4) via the simple future tense, as in “Paul jouera au tennis” (“Paul will play tennis”). Only the immediate future and the simple future, which provide interpretable temporal markers in cases where an adverb or time preposition is lacking, are relevant to the study of promises. Although both of these ways of expressing the future are used in promise utterances, they are not interchangeable. A number of studies on this subject (Confais, 1990; Franckel, 1984; Haegeman, 1989; Maingueneau, 1981) have shown that the immediate future commits the speaker to the accomplishment of the action in the very near future, whereas the simple future is less suitable for talking about an action that will follow immediately. For example, if a little boy asks his mother to buy a toy and the mother says “Oui, je vais te l’acheter” (“Yes, I am going to buy it for you”), he is usually satisfied with that answer; but if she answers “Oui, je te l’achèterai” (“Yes, I will buy it for you”), the boy will usually say, “Yes, but when?” In everyday situations, the immediate future does not necessarily correspond to an immediate action, but it serves as a sort of guarantee that the action will be executed right away. In contrast, the simple future may look like a threat that things will not happen as expected.

In the present developmental study of promises, language is regarded as a communication system, and language acquisition as the acquisition and use of that system. The emphasis is therefore placed on the functional aspects of

language (Bates, 1976; Becker, 1990; Bruner, 1983; Golinkoff, 1983; Ninio & Snow, 1988, 1996; Street & Cappella, 1989). It has been shown in this perspective that interaction formats or routines (prototypical exemplars of social relations) are very important for young children (Bernicot, 1994; Garvey, 1984; Marcos & Bernicot, 1994; Shatz & Watson O'Reilly, 1990).

Research on promises is scarce. The few existing studies on the subject concern native speakers of English and are part of research on the philosophy of language (Astington, 1988b, 1990; Gibbs, & Delaney, 1987). These studies have demonstrated the psychological validity of Searle's (1969, 1979) model, for both the preparatory condition and the propositional content condition. The findings were confirmed for French by Bernicot and Laval (Bernicot & Laval, 1996; Laval, 1996) in their studies on the role of the textual characteristics of the utterance and/or the contextual characteristics of the communication situation in promise comprehension by children aged 3 to 10. The Bernicot and Laval (1996) study showed that children rely heavily on the contextual characteristics of the promise, particularly the sincerity condition, which appears to be mastered earlier than the preparatory condition. Although to our knowledge there are no studies dealing specifically with the comprehension of temporal markers in promise utterances, studies on the comprehension of the future have a few interesting points to offer. These studies have shown that for both English-speaking children (Cromer, 1971; Harner, 1976, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Heriot, 1969) and Spanish-speaking children (Van Naerssen, 1979, 1980), the immediate future is understood earlier (at about the age of 3 or 4) than the simple future. They confirmed the results on the production of time and aspect obtained by Ferreiro (1971) and Bronckart (1976), who showed that, until the age of 6, children are better at using time adverbs than verb tense to locate an action in time. Note, however, that none of these studies used a task involving a communication situation.

In the light of the above findings, three major objectives were set in the present study. Our first goal was to determine the role of the future tense in the comprehension of promises. In accordance with Searle's (1979) analysis, only linguistic forms that express a future action were considered to be specific to promises. We were interested here in two temporal markers of the future which unambiguously express the future in French without adverbs or time prepositions: the immediate future and the simple future (Fleischman, 1982; Maingueneau, 1981). These two tenses are not equivalent: With the immediate future the degree of certainty about whether the upcoming action will be accomplished is higher than with the simple future. Accordingly, if the future (immediate and/or simple) is the tense specific to promises, then understanding an utterance expressing a promise means being able to process textual markers that place actions in the future, i.e.,

linguistic forms that indicate verb tense. In this perspective, it was hypothesized here that the comprehension of promises by children would vary with the temporal characteristics of the utterance, and that the use of a future tense would promote promise comprehension. In addition, in line with the results of studies on future-tense comprehension by children (Cromer, 1971; Harner, 1976, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Heriot, 1969; Van Naerssen, 1979, 1980), it was predicted that the immediate future (“je vais te donner la pelle”, “I am going to give you the shovel”) would facilitate promise comprehension more than the simple future (“je te donnerai la pelle,” “I will give you the shovel”), especially for the youngest children.

Our second goal was to determine the role of the preparatory condition as one of the contextual parameters of promise comprehension. The study by Bernicot and Laval (1996) pointed out that children under 6 years of age have trouble taking the preparatory condition into account. This finding was obtained by comparing the comprehension of promise utterances in communication situations where the preparatory condition was satisfied (the listener wanted the speaker to accomplish the promised action) with situations where the preparatory condition was violated (the listener did not want the speaker to accomplish the promised action). It was very difficult, particularly for the youngest children, to interpret the subjects’ responses in this study because the utterance and the preparatory condition were radically opposed. In order to better understand these results, we propose here to consider utterance production contexts involving a lesser degree of variation in the preparatory condition. To this end, contexts in which the preparatory condition was fulfilled were compared to “neutral” situations where the preparatory condition was neither explicitly fulfilled nor explicitly unfulfilled. It was hypothesized that, in this case, even the youngest children would take the preparatory condition into account, and that explicit fulfillment of the preparatory condition would promote interpretation as a promise, while the neutral condition would promote interpretation as a nonpromise.

Our third objective was to determine the potential links between the text and the context in language functioning, particularly during language acquisition. How does the future tense promote promise comprehension in children? To what extent do promises promote the comprehension of future tense markers? Given the importance of interaction formats (Bernicot, 1994; Bruner, 1983; Garvey, 1984; Marcos & Bernicot, 1994; Shatz & Watson O’Reilly, 1990) and the results already obtained on the impact of context on request comprehension in young children (Bernicot, 1991; Bernicot & Legros, 1987), it was predicted here that fulfillment of the preparatory condition would facilitate the comprehension of future tense markers by the youngest children, and that future tense markers would promote the comprehension of promises in the oldest children.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Fifty-four native French-speaking children participated in the experiment (26 girls and 28 boys). They were divided into three groups of 18. The mean ages of the three groups were 3 years, 4 months (range: 2 years, 11 months, to 3 years, 10 months); 6 years, 3 months (range: 5 years, 11 months, to 6 years, 10 months); and 9 years, 4 months (range: 8 years, 11 months, to 9 years, 10 months). Hereafter, these three groups will be called the 3-year-old group, the 6-year-old group, and the 9-year-old group.

### *Materials*

Eighteen stories about the adventures of a character were devised. In all 18, a little boy named Bill was speaking to a same-age peer named Loulou (a nickname for a boy in French). Each story was composed of six pictures (10 × 10 cm) with short captions. The pictures, which provided a situational context for the linguistic context, showed real-life situations taken from children's everyday experiences, and helped keep the subject's attention focused on the task. Some sample stories are presented in Fig. 1. Each story had four parts.

*Part 1.* The first part of the story was depicted in Picture 1. The caption stated the general theme of the story, presented the two interlocutors (Bill and Loulou), and stated that the listener (Loulou) had the focal object. The corresponding picture showed the two characters in the story setting, and made it very clear that the listener had the focal object.

*Part 2.* The second part of the story was depicted in Picture 2. The caption emphasized the fact that the situation had changed since Picture 1, because the speaker now had the focal object. Two contexts were manipulated in the caption: a specific context and a neutral context. In the specific context, the preparatory condition was fulfilled. In other words, the listener's desire was made plain in the caption: The listener obviously wanted the speaker to accomplish the action described in the propositional content of the utterance. The corresponding picture showed the speaker and listener together, with the speaker in possession of the object and the listener wishing he had it (depicted as a bubble with a drawing of the focal object inside). In the neutral context, the listener's desire about the accomplishment of the action described in the propositional content of the utterance was not clear: Nothing was said about whether or not the listener wanted the promised action to be accomplished. The corresponding picture showed the speaker and listener together, with the speaker in possession of the focal object and the listener doing something else.

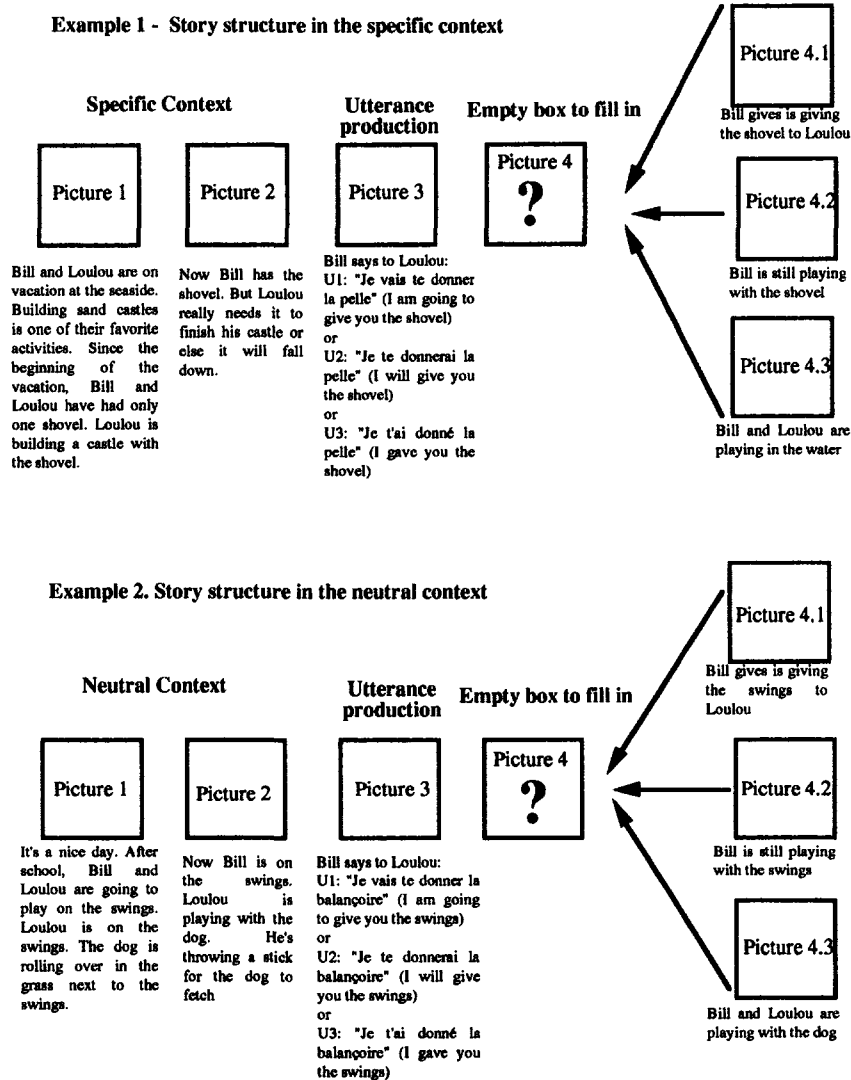


Fig. 1. Story structure.

*Part 3.* The third part of the story was depicted in Picture 3. The picture showed the speaker in the foreground talking to the listener. The caption was used to manipulate the utterance produced by the speaker. The verb in the utterance was in one of three tenses: (1) immediate future (structure: "I + am going + infinitive verb + you + direct object," as in "je vais

te donner le vélo,” “I am going to give you the bike”); (2) simple future (structure: “I + verb in simple future + you + direct object,” as in “je te donnerai le vélo,” “I will give you the bike”); and (3) passé composé, hereafter simply called the past tense (structure: “I + verb in past tense + you + direct object,” as in “je t’ai donné le vélo,” “I gave you the bike”). The most direct way for us to determine the role of the future in children’s comprehension of promises was to oppose utterances in the future to utterances in the past. In other words, the past tense was used here as a control for the verb-tense variable.

*Part 4.* The fourth part of the story was depicted in Picture 4. Three different pictures, each corresponding to a different ending, were proposed for Picture 4. The subject had to complete the story by choosing one of the three. Picture 4.1 depicted the speaker giving the focal object to the listener. For utterances in the future tense, this picture corresponded to the accomplishment of the propositional content of the utterance, and the selection of this picture was indicative of textual and/or contextual processing based on the experimental conditions. Picture 4.2 showed the speaker keeping the object for himself and the listener in the background. For utterances in the future tense, this picture corresponded to the non-accomplishment of the propositional content. For utterances in the past, the selection of this picture was justified by the fact that the listener had the focal object in Picture 1, giving the speaker every right to keep it for himself. This choice was indicative of textual and/or contextual processing based on the experimental conditions. Picture 4.3 showed the two interlocutors together, with one of the elements of the setting. The element in question had nothing to do with the propositional content of the utterance. In all experimental conditions, the choice of this picture meant that the text had not been processed, and therefore, that processing was purely contextual.

#### *Procedure*

Each child performed the story-completion task individually. The experimenter first made sure that the child could distinguish the two characters in the story (Bill and Loulou). The procedure was as follows. The experimenter told the beginning of the story by reading the captions of the first three pictures, and then asked the child to complete the story by choosing a picture from among the three proposed. The children’s answers were written down by the experimenter. Each child saw all 18 stories. The story presentation order was varied randomly across subjects. The six presentation orders for the three possible choices were randomly assigned to six children.

*Experimental Design*

There were three independent variables in the experimental design: (1) subject age (3, 6, and 9 years), a between-group variable; (2) utterance production context (specific, neutral), a within-group variable; and (3) verb tense (immediate future, simple future, and past), a within-group variable.

**DATA CODING**

The subjects' answers (pictures chosen) were labeled according to the textual characteristics of the utterance (immediate future, simple future, past). This way of coding the results thus reflected the relationship between the utterance and the accomplishment or nonaccomplishment of its propositional content. More precisely, if the speaker agreed to execute the act in the future, the logical ending to the story was accomplishment of the action: This was the case of utterances in the future tense. On the other hand, if the speaker stated that he or she had already accomplished the action, the logical ending was the nonaccomplishment of the action: This was the case for utterances in the past tense.

This defined three response categories (see Table I):

- (1) Theoretically right answers (RA), which included all choices where the action was accomplished when the utterance was in the future tense, and all choices where the action was not accomplished when the utterance was in the past tense (e.g., the right answer for utterance U1 in Example 1 of Fig. 1 was Picture 4.1).
- (2) Wrong answers (WA), which included all choices where the action was accomplished when the utterance was in the past tense, and all choices where the action was not accomplished when the utterance was in the future tense (e.g., the wrong answer for utterance U2 in Example 1 of Fig. 1 was Picture 4.2).

**Table I.** Response Coding

	Immediate future or simple future	Past
Right answers (RA)	Choice 1: Action accomplished	Choice 2: Action not accomplished
Wrong answers (WA)	Choice 2: Action not accomplished	Choice 1: Action accomplished
Contextual answers (CA)	Choice 3: Interlocutors with one of the elements of the setting	Choice 3: Interlocutors with one of the elements of the setting

- (3) Contextual answers (CA), which included all choices of the picture showing the two interlocutors with one element of the setting. Choosing this “neutral” answer was a way of avoiding textual processing and was a direct proof of purely contextual processing. There were two main reasons for including the contextual answer category. The first was methodological, the idea being to increase the number of choices proposed to the subjects. The second was more theoretical and was aimed at finding out whether the youngest children would do essentially contextual processing rather than textual processing (e.g. the contextual answer for utterance U1 in Example 1 of Fig. 1 was Picture 4.3).

Table I gives the different types of answers for each category of the verb-tense variable.

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

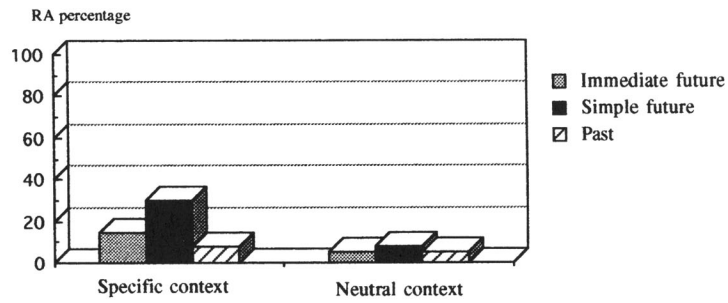
The results were analyzed in two steps. First the theoretically right answers were considered alone. Then the wrong answers and the contextual answers were analyzed. For the last two dependent variables, only those findings relevant to the specific objectives of this study will be presented.

### *Analysis of Right Answers*

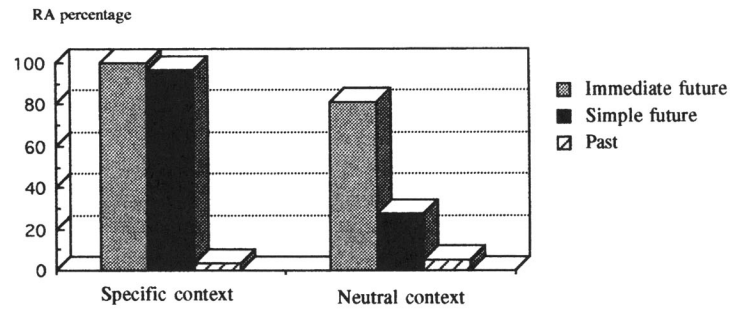
The dependent variable “number of right answers” was examined using an analysis of variance with three factors: Subject Age (3)  $\times$  Type of Context (2)  $\times$  Verb Tense (3). Figure 2 shows the mean percentage of right answers, by age, utterance production context, and verb tense. The analysis yielded a significant effect of age [ $F(2, 51) = 271.26, p < .0005$ ], an interaction between age and utterance production context [ $F(2, 51) = 15.44, p < .0005$ ], and an interaction between age and verb tense [ $F(4, 102) = 59.11, p < .0005$ ]. The main findings can be described as follows.

The 3-year-olds gave fewer right answers (11.72%) than the 6-year-olds (52.46%), who in turn produced fewer right answers than the 9-year-olds (97.22%). The 3- and 6-year-olds gave more right answers in the specific context (17.28% and 66.66%, respectively) than in the neutral context (6.17% and 38.27%, respectively). This difference did not exist at age 9 (specific context: 97.53%; neutral context: 96.91%). At the age of 3, utterances in the simple future gave rise to more right answers (18.51%) than utterances in the immediate future (10.18%). At the age of 6, the immediate future led to a greater number of right answers (90.74%) than the sim-

THREE-YEAR-OLDS



SIX-YEAR-OLDS



NINE-YEAR-OLDS

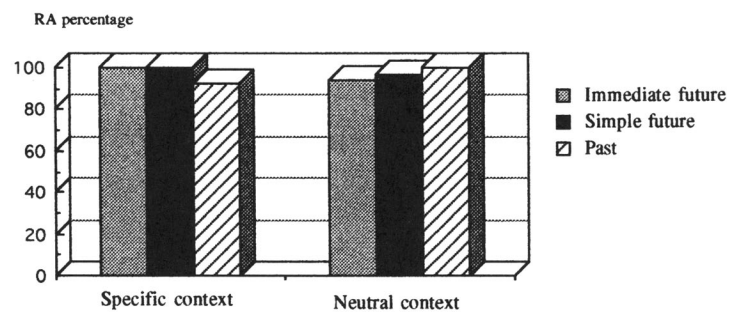


Fig. 2. Mean percentage of right answers, by age (3, 6, and 9), utterance production context (specific vs. neutral), and verb tense (immediate future, simple future, and past).

**Table II.** Wrong Answers and Contextual Answers: Mean Percentage, By Age, Utterance Production Context, and Verb Tense

		WRONG ANSWERS		CONTEXTUAL ANSWERS	
		Specific Context	Neutral Context	Specific Context	Neutral Context
Age 3	Immediate Future	11.11%	11.11%	74.07%	83.33%
	Simple Future	5.55%	14.81%	64.81%	77.77%
	Past	24.07%	7.4%	68.51%	87.03%
Age 6	Immediate Future	0%	7.4%	0%	11.11%
	Simple Future	0%	12.96%	3.71%	<b>59.25%</b>
	Past	<b>94.44%</b>	7.4%	1.85%	<b>87.03%</b>
Age 9	Immediate Future	0%	3.7%	0%	1.85%
	Simple Future	0%	3.7%	0%	0%
	Past	7.4%	7.4%	0%	0%

ple future (62.03%) [ $F(1, 17) = 35.67, p < .0005$ ], which in turn triggered more right answers than the past tense (4.62%). For the 9-year-olds, the correct answer rate was nearly 0% for all verb tenses (immediate future: 97.22%, simple future: 98.14%, past tense: 96.29%).

#### *Analysis of Wrong Answers and Contextual Answers*

Given the high number of right answers produced by the 9-year-olds, their wrong answers and contextual answers will not be analyzed. Table II gives the mean percentage of wrong answers and contextual answers as a function of age, utterance production context, and verb tense.

*Wrong Answers.* The data for the dependent variable “number of wrong answers” (see Table II) was input into an analysis of variance with three factors: Age (2)  $\times$  Type of Context (2)  $\times$  Verb Tense (3). Partial comparisons showed that, for utterances in the past tense, the interaction effect between age and context was significant [ $F(1, 34) = 47.38, p < .0005$ ]. The 6-year-olds gave more wrong answers in the specific context (94.44%) than in the neutral context (7.4%) [ $F(1, 17) = 169.92, p < .0005$ ]. The difference between the specific (24.07%) and neutral (7.4%) contexts already existed at age 3, but was much smaller [ $F(1, 17) = 4.63, p < .05$ ].

*Contextual Answers.* The data for the dependent variable "number of contextual answers" (see Table II) was input into an analysis of variance with three factors: Age (2)  $\times$  Type of Context (2)  $\times$  Verb Tense (3). Partial comparisons between the simple and immediate future yielded a significant interaction effect between age and verb tense [ $F(1, 34) = 24.52, p < .0005$ ]. For the 6-year-olds, simple-future utterances (31.48%) gave rise to more contextual answers than did immediate-future utterances (5.55%) [ $F(1, 11) = 28.08, p < .0005$ ]. This difference did not exist for the 3-year-olds (immediate future: 78.7%; simple future: 71.29%). In addition, the 6-year-olds gave more contextual answers for the simple future in the neutral context (59.25%) than in the specific context (3.71%) [ $F(1, 17) = 36.26, p < .0005$ ]. The same result was obtained for the past tense: The interaction effect between age and context was significant [ $F(1, 34) = 33.10, p < .0001$ ]. The 6-year-olds gave more contextual answers in the neutral context (87.03%) than in the specific context (1.85%) [ $F(1, 17) = 115.9, p < .0005$ ]. The 3-year-olds also exhibited a difference between the specific (68.51%) and neutral (87.03%) contexts [ $F(1, 17) = 5.12, p < .05$ ], but it was not nearly as great.

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained here validate and further refine our hypotheses on the role of the future in the comprehension of promises, both regarding the early processing of the preparatory condition and the link between text and context.

As a whole, the 3-year-olds' performance was poor (approximately 12% of their answers were correct). However, variations were observed across verb tenses as well as contexts. In the specific context, more right answers were produced for simple-future utterances than for utterances in the other two tenses. And more right answers were found in the specific context than in the neutral one.

The results for the simple future at this age were the opposite of those previously obtained. Prior research (Cromer, 1971; Harner, 1976, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Heriot, 1969; Van Naerssen, 1979, 1980) has shown that the immediate future is understood before the simple future. However, most of the above studies were not conducted with children as young as ours, and the tasks used did not involve a communication situation. One yet-to-be-confirmed interpretation of this finding is that for very young children, the temporal markers of the simple future ("je te donnerai la pelle," "I will give you the shovel") are easier to detect and distinguish than those of the imme-

shovel”) because in French, the immediate future and the passé composé (“je t’ai donné la pelle,” “I gave you the shovel”) are closer in structure. This result also raises the question of the early interpretation of the future as marker of tense and not simply as a marker of aspect (see Bronckart, 1976; Ferreiro, 1971). The promise context in the present study appears to have favored the interpretation of the future, which in past studies was not observed until the age of 6 (Cromer, 1971; Harner, 1976, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Heriot, 1969; Van Naerssen, 1979, 1980).

The results for the 3-year-olds point out the importance of the utterance production context in the comprehension of promises. Remember here that in the “specific” context the preparatory condition was clearly satisfied, and that in the “neutral” context it was neither explicitly satisfied nor explicitly violated. The fact that the children gave more right answers in the specific context than in the neutral one (along with the very low scores obtained in that context) validates the results already obtained by Bernicot and Laval (1996), and suggests that 3-year-olds have not yet mastered the preparatory condition. This result also confirms the facilitating role of the preparatory condition in the comprehension of promise utterances, and in agreement with other authors (Bernicot, 1994; Bruner, 1983; Garvey, 1984; Marcos & Bernicot, 1994; Shatz & Watson O’Reilly, 1990), points out the importance of prototypical situations for young children.

For the 6-year-olds, the overall performance level was about 53%. Like the 3-year-olds, performance varied across tenses and contexts. In the specific context, the best scores were obtained for utterances in the immediate or simple future. In the neutral context, the immediate future gave rise to higher scores than did the other two tenses. In line with our hypotheses based on Searle’s (1979) theory, the future was found to favor the interpretation of the utterances as promises. This result is particularly important for the immediate future in the neutral context, because it suggests that at the early age of 6, children can base their interpretation of utterances on verb tense when contextual cues are lacking. In contrast, 6-year-olds do not yet appear to be capable of using simple future cues in contexts that are not specific to promises. This finding was reinforced here by the fact that contextual answers were numerous for utterances in the simple future. An analogous result was obtained for past tense utterances in the neutral context. The results concerning the earlier acquisition of the immediate future compared to the simple future are compatible with past work (Cromer, 1971; Harner, 1976, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Heriot, 1969; Van Naerssen, 1979a, 1979b).

As a whole for 6-year-olds and 3-year-olds alike, right answers in the specific context outnumbered those in the neutral context, where the scores

were particularly low for both the simple future and the past. Contrary to our hypothesis, these results confirm those obtained by Bernicot and Laval (1996), who compared situations that either obviously fulfilled or obviously violated the preparatory condition. We can therefore assume that 6-year-olds do not fully master the preparatory condition and acquire it after the sincerity condition. Relating language to a theory of mind (Hall, Franck, & Ellisson, 1995; Wellman, 1990), we can conclude that, during promise comprehension, children take the speaker's intentions into account before considering the listener's desires. Prototypical situations favor the comprehension of promise utterances in 6-year-olds. The importance of context to utterance comprehension is particularly well illustrated by the difference observed here between future-tense utterances and past-tense utterances: When the context was specific, utterances in the past tense were interpreted as promises (in this situation, the percentage of wrong answers was as high as 94.44%). We can regard this finding as an indication that verb tense was completely ignored. In a communication situation where textual cues (past tense) and contextual cues (preparatory condition fulfilled) are contradictory, 6-year-olds consider the production context first. The results obtained here for context with the 3- and 6-year-olds are in line with the findings of Fayol, Hickmans, Bounotte, and Gombart (1993) showing that the production of temporal markers by native French speakers (adults and 10-year-olds) is highly dependent upon the narrative context.

At the age of 9, the children's answers were nearly 100% correct. The lack of a variation across tenses and contexts shows that the children systematically based their interpretation on tense markers in the utterance. This result is particularly interesting for the neutral context, since it clearly demonstrates that, when contextual cues are lacking, the interpretation of a promise utterance is based on future tense markers, whether it be the immediate future or the simple future. In other words, it is through the processing of future tense markers that utterances are interpreted as promises.

It thus appears here that context can orient or favor the processing of the textual characteristics of utterances in children aged 3 and 6. It also appears that textual-cue processing can lead to contextual-cue processing. This tendency starts emerging at the age of 6 and becomes general by the age of 9. For 6-year-olds, whether or not the context is processed on the basis of the text depends on the features of the communication situation. In other words, when promise-specific contextual information is lacking, these children correctly process certain markers of the future tense (the immediate future but not the simple future) and reconstruct the promise from those markers. These results validate the hypothesis of the tight link between textual and contextual characteristics during language acquisition and language functioning.

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