

Asymmetry of Contextual Information and Intention Negotiation in Linguistic Communication

Min Zhang

School of Foreign Studies, Hunan Institute of Technology, Hengyang, China

Email: amyzhang1989@126.com

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Abstract

Applying asymmetry of contextual information between the speaker and the hearer under the four conditions for illocutionary acts and intentions in meaning, this paper aims to understand Madame Cui's promise in the *Romance of the Western Bower* in order to find out what role the context plays in Madame Cui's breaking her promise and how other people are able to negotiate with Madame Cui to make her fulfill her promise. The process of how Madame Cui makes the promise, breaks the promise, and fulfills the promise will be analyzed. The analysis can illustrate that context or contextual information plays a significant role in the making and understanding of a promise, and that meaning understanding is a process of construction by both the speaker and the hearer.

Keywords

Contextual Information, Asymmetry, Promise, Intention Negotiation, Meaning Understanding

1. Introduction

The *Romance of the Western Bower* by Wang Shifu of the Yuan Dynasty, as one of the best Chinese classical dramas, combines poetic language with oral language, which helps to make it a promising research data for historical pragmatics. It has inspired nearly one hundred and sixty versions and thirty-three follow-up stories and rewritings in Ming and Qing (Huang, 2013). Many more folktales and literary works including the great novel *Hongloumeng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), are believed to be influenced by this drama.

The *Romance* is about the love story between a young scholar named Zhang Gong and Cui Yingying, daughter of former Prime Minister Cui. After Zhang

Gong and Cui Yingying first meet in the temple, they fall into love. The subsequent plot is about Madame Cui's promise to marry Yingying to Zhang on condition that he can protect the temple from attack by bandits. However, she goes back on her words after Zhang forces the bandits to retreat with the help of his friend, General Du. In order to get married, the young lovers, together with Rose, Yingying's maidservant, make every effort to turn the broken promise into a fulfilled one. In the end, Zhang and Yingying are happily married.

In China, the *Romance* has long been considered an ode to free love, reflection of the rise of women consciousness, and denunciation of oppressive feudalistic customs (Zhang, 1990; Jin, 2020; Du, 2021). In addition to its profound thoughts, writing techniques, illustrations, features of performance, and many other aspects are favoured topics of Chinese writers, painters, drama performers and so on. It is one of the many outstanding dramas of the Yuan Dynasty that are characterized by the combination of poetic language and considerable quantities of oral language (Huang, 2005; Miao, 2012; Gu, 2011). To study how Chinese people of earlier times used language to express themselves and communicate with each other is no doubt of great theoretical and cultural significance. A historical pragmatics analysis of the promise in the *Romance* can contribute to the study of meaning-making processes in historical contexts. In the meantime, it may help exploit and enrich the research of Chinese classics. This study, based on a historical text, might be a helpful supplement and enlightenment to recent pragmatic study in China which mainly focuses on linguistic data of contemporary Chinese.

In some sense, this story is about a promise which proceeds from making the promise and breaking it to fulfilling it. It is also a process of linguistic communication and non-defection of a commissive speech act.

In speech act theory, a basic theory in pragmatics, defective or infelicitous speech acts are often discussed. Nonetheless, most linguists such as Austin and Searle focus on how to define defective or infelicitous performatives and how to categorize different kinds of infelicities. Seldom do they explain the defect or infelicity of illocutionary acts such as promising or explore the possibility to turn a defective performative into a successful and non-defective one. To study the promise in the *Romance* which switches from an insincere one to a sincere one might shed some light on a somewhat new sphere of speech act theory.

The aim of this research is to apply asymmetry of contextual information under the four conditions for illocutionary acts, in particular those of promising, and the role of intentions in the experience of meaning to understand Madame Cui's promise in order to find out why Madame Cui can break her promise and how other people are able to negotiate with her to make her fulfill her promise.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on the *Romance of the Western Bower*

The *Romance* has long been a popular topic of research since its birth. Over

hundreds of years, researchers have achieved fruitful results. Zhang (1996) makes an overall summary of studies on the *Romance* over one hundred years. Among all kinds of research orientations, textual research is a traditional and important one. The writer's life, the origin and features of characters are typical topics. Wang (2022), Ji (2014), and Dong (2013) respectively make an in-depth analysis of Cui Yingying's image. Tu (2013) analyzes the comedic elements of the character Zhang Gong and their origins. Chen Yunfa (2009), and Chen Yiquan (2011) focus on another key character, Madame Cui.

Study of its poetic language is also an important topic. Huang (2005) and Miao (2012) outline a pattern of language style in the *Romance*. Chen W. (2009) illustrates how poetic language has helped to express emotions of characters in the drama. Ouyang (2011) lists some beautiful and meaningful sentences. The beauty of poetry in this drama is presented by Xu (1992).

In addition to research that compares the *Romance* with other ancient Chinese literary works and Western plays such as *Romeo and Juliet*, there are several studies that aim at its translated English versions, especially the one translated by Xu Yuanchong. Xue (2020) makes a comprehensive and systematic study of the translation of *Xixiangji* in the English-speaking world. Wen and Hao (2012) summarize results of research on English versions of the *Romance*. In his master's thesis, Meng (2012) launches an analysis of Xu's translation in light of adaptation theory from four perspectives, adaptation to contextual correlates, adaptation to structural objects, adaptation to dynamic communicative and linguistic context, and salience of adaptation. Li (2013) makes a comparative study of the two English translations of the *Romance* from the perspective of translator's subjectivity.

Of all kinds of studies, most are about the plot, characters, and different versions of the *Romance*, while there are few based on linguistics. Liao (2011) categorizes words and phrases in the drama according to their semantic fields of food and clothes. Gao (2013) looks into the characteristic of vocabulary usage by categorizing words and phrases with respect to parts of speech, dialects and idioms. Wang (2011) takes a functional equivalence perspective to explore the appropriate translation in terms of the performability and cultural connotations of drama by comparing the two English versions by Chinese scholar Xu Yuanchong and Western scholars Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema respectively. The result shows that Xu's translation is more suitable for stage performance. Tang (2021), Chen (2014) and Sun (2012) study its English translation of culture-loaded words, couplets, and metaphors from the perspective of relevance theory. Wang (2012) combines translation with the theory of intertextuality to discuss how to convey cultural connotations in allusion translation. Yuan (2010) applies Leech's politeness principles to make a pragmatics analysis of Rose, Cui Yingying's maidservant's speech. She sums up Rose's personality with ten phrases. By analyzing conversations in the *Romance* by Wang Shifu as well as *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm) by Cao Yu, Tang and Kong (2008) aim to prove that dis-

obeying cooperative principle is a kind of communicative strategy. They do this mainly by examples of violating the quantity maxim, the quality maxim, and the relation maxim in the *Romance*.

2.2. Previous Studies on Promises as Speech Acts

With the distinction between performative sentences and constative sentences as the beginning, Austin (2002) discusses truth and falsity, felicity and infelicity about these two categories, and attempts to find out possible criteria of performatives. In this process, Austin, for the first time, brings up the concept of speech act and puts speech acts into three categories: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. He then distinguishes five general classes of illocutionary acts according to their illocutionary force. They are verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. Among them, the key of a commissive is “to commit the speaker to a certain course of action”.

Searle (1976) believes that illocutionary act is the basic unit of human linguistic communication. He revises Austin’s classification of illocutionary acts and puts forward another five basic kinds: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. The illocutionary point of commissives is to “commit the speaker to some future course of action”. In *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Searle (2001) explores the conditions needed to be met if the speaker *S* sincerely and non-defectively promises to the hearer *H*, and further refine those nine conditions into a condition set of semantic rules that indicate the illocutionary force of commissives (Harnish & Plunze, 2006). They are the propositional content condition, preparatory condition, sincerity condition, and essential condition. If one of the four conditions is not satisfied, a promise will be defective.

The Propositional Content Condition. The speech act of promise *Pr* is to be uttered only in the context of a sentence *T*, the utterance of which predicates some future act *A* of the speaker *S* (Searle, 2001). In other ways, *S* utters a sentence *T* to express a proposition *P* to *H*, and the act in the promise cannot be a past one, nor done by someone else other than *S*.

The Preparatory Condition. *Pr* is to be uttered only if *H* would prefer *S*’s doing *A* to his not doing *A*, and *S* believes *H* would prefer *S*’s doing *A* to his not doing *A*. *Pr* is to be uttered only if it is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *S* will do *A* in the normal course of events (Searle, 2001). If the promisee does not want the thing promised done, or if the promisor does not believe the promisee wants it done, the promise is defective (Searle, 2001). The right point seems to be that the promisee wishes that the thing promised be done, and the promisor is aware of this wish (Searle, 2001). The other part of preparatory condition is that *A* will not be done in the normal course of events. If *A* is going to be done anyway with or without a promise, there is no need to make a promise. This is how human language activities fit in with the Zipf’s law, the principle of least effort. We human beings seek to achieve “maximum illocutionary ends with minimum pho-

netic effort” (Searle, 2001).

The Sincerity Condition. *Pr* is to be uttered only if *S* intends to do *A* (Searle, 2001). The distinction between sincere and insincere promises is whether or not *S* has the intention to do *A*. In a sincere promise, *S* intends to do *A* and he thinks it possible to do it. Searle amends this condition by adding that “*S* intends that the utterance of *T* will make him responsible for intending to do *A*” (Searle, 2001). Theories on intention will be discussed later.

The Essential Condition. The utterance of *Pr* counts as the undertaking of an obligation to do *A* (Searle, 2001). If *S* utters a promise, he will be under an obligation to perform a certain act. This condition, according to Searle, is what distinguished promises from other kinds of illocutionary acts. Also, it determines the other conditions (Searle, 2001). Since the essential condition requires that the utterance counts as an attempt to get *S* to do something, the propositional content condition should include future behavior of *S*, the preparatory condition has to exclude the possibility of the thing to be done in the normal course of events, and the sincerity condition needs to make sure *S*'s intention to do *A*.

2.3. Previous Studies on Meaning as Intention

In meaning understanding, the importance of *S*'s intentions is now widely accepted in pragmatics. Ever since Grice published his article—“Meaning”, study on intentions has been popular and important in pragmatics and philosophy of language. Meanwhile, the role that intentions play in meaning of language has been commonly accepted by linguists. There are various papers and articles that attempt to explain the role intentions play in understanding meaning in linguistic communication.

After revising arguments of earlier linguists and assumptions of his own, Grice (1957) arrives at some conclusion on meaning: “*S* means something by *T*” is roughly equivalent to “*S* intends the utterance of *T* to produce some effect in *H* by means of the recognition of this intention”. Furthermore, he holds that to ask what *S* means is to ask for a specification of the intended effect. Searle (2001) agrees approximately with Grice's assumption. He thinks that it makes a connection between meaning and intention and that it captures one essential feature of linguistic communication by referring to the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intention as a channel to achieve the intended effect. However, Searle objects to Grice's defining meaning in terms of intended effects because in his opinion it confuses illocutionary with perlocutionary acts.

In *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Searle (1983) considers sentences as objects just like any other objects in the world, and thus “their capacity to represent is not intrinsic but is derived from the intentionality of the mind”. He believes that language is derived from intentionality and not the other way round. Intentional states represent objects and states of affairs in the same way as speech acts do. When people perform an illocutionary act with a propositional content, they are using that propositional content to express a certain in-

tentional state. He then infers that the conditions of satisfaction of speech act and expressed psychological state are identical. For commissives, sincerity condition is intention (Searle, 1976). One's promise will be kept if and only if the expressed intention is carried out. Later in this book, Searle brings up a double level of intentionality in the performance of illocutionary acts which is a level of the intentional state expressed in the performance and a level of the intention to perform the act. He calls the former the "sincerity condition", and the latter the "meaning intention". The conditions of satisfaction of a promise and the conditions of satisfaction of its sincerity condition are identical. On the other hand, meaning intention includes two aspects, the intention to represent some fact or state of affairs and the intention to communicate.

As Levelt puts it, "talking is an intentional activity" (from O'Connell (1992)). He further holds that *S*'s communicative intention involves intention recognition by *H* (from O'Connell (1992)).

The role of communicative intentions in understanding what is said is one of Raymond W. Gibbs' research subjects. He applies some examples to illustrate how "our understanding of human behavior depends on our ability to make inferences about people's intentions" (Gibbs, 1999). The meaning of any utterance in communication lies not just in the mind of a specific individual, but comes from a collaborative process of interaction between participants (Gibbs, 1999). *S* and *H* cooperate and coordinate with each other to understand intentions (Gibbs, 1999). In this way, it is possible that in some situations a new, emergent meaning will appear that wasn't originally in the mind of *S* or *H* (Gibbs, 1999).

The main concern of Feng (2013) lies with the relation between speaker's intention and other Gricean notions of signification, cancellability, and context. He sees the account of meaning focusing on the notion of intention as Grice's most renowned contribution to pragmatics. He collates Grice's ideas about speaker's intention and seeks to find out the relation between speaker's intention and meaning, non-cancellability, and contextual factors. With that done, he argues that the total significance of an utterance, i.e., the meaning of an utterance, is "ultimately determined by speaker's intention". As what is said and what is implicated are intended by the speaker, they cannot be cancelled unless the whole utterance is self-contradictory. They can be corrected or denied under some circumstances.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this paper is to apply asymmetry of contextual information under the four conditions for illocutionary acts, in particular those of promising, and the role of intentions in the experience of meaning to understand Madame Cui's promise. It attempts to answer the following three questions:

- 1) What role does context play in Madame Cui's promising act and how do

others respond to it?

For a promise to be sincere and non-defective, it has to meet several conditions, or follow semantic rules needed to ensure its illocutionary force. The conditions are propositional content condition, preparatory condition, sincerity condition, and essential condition (Searle, 2001). If these conditions are satisfied or made satisfied, illocutionary acts such as promising will have illocutionary force and hence be successful and non-defective. People who make a promise and who respond to it both need to determine whether these conditions are met or not according to the contextual information they have in hand. In the *Romance*, there is asymmetry of contextual information between the speaker and the hearers, which results in the indeterminacy of meaning and thus their different ways of understanding the very promise.

2) How does the promising speech act proceed between Madame Cui and her interlocutors?

In the story, when Zhang Gong manages to protect the temple from attack by bandits, Madame Cui refuses to honor her promise by playing some little tricks, while others take her promise seriously and refuse to accept her breaking of it. Respectively, Zhang Gong, and Rose conduct their confrontations with Madame Cui to make sure that she has the intention expressed in her promise to betroth her daughter to the one who succeeds in protecting the family from danger. By doing so her promise is made to satisfy the sincere condition and essential condition for illocutionary act. In the end, the promise is honored.

3) Why can Madame Cui break her promise?

According to common sense, if one makes a speech act of promising, he or she is bound to the realization of it. Apparently, this is not the case in the *Romance*. Madame Cui has more contextual information than Zhang Gong does, which leads to the asymmetry between speaker's intentions and listeners' understanding of those intentions. The meaning of the promise is thus indeterminate. Under this circumstance, as *S*, Madame Cui can break her promise by denying her intentions of betrothal. On the other hand, as *H*, Zhang Gong can negotiate with Madame Cui to determine her intentions and thus the meaning of her promise. The negotiation between *S* and *H* may help carry out a successful linguistic communication.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

In recent study in the field of speech acts and historical pragmatics, people begin to lay their eyes on how *S* and *H* negotiate to create meaning. In *Speech Acts in the History of English*, Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008) draw the conclusion that historical pragmatics focuses on “the meaning-making processes in past contexts”. It studies how meaning is negotiated, and it takes language users into account. In another research, Brinton (2007) agrees that meaning is constructed by both *S* and *H* “within the broader context of a social and cultural context, of language, of discourse conventions...” (from Brinton (2007)). This paper focuses

on how to understand a promise from the perspective of historical pragmatics, which means context and interaction between *S* and *H* will play significant roles.

For a promise to be successful and non-defective, it is supposed to satisfy four semantic rules that indicate its illocutionary force, according to Searle (2001). In linguistic communication, both *S* and *H* need to estimate whether these conditions are met. Their estimation can differ in virtue of irreciprocal contextual information they hold.

If the propositional content condition is to be satisfied, the act in the promise cannot be a past one, and it cannot be accomplished by someone else other than the speaker.

To decide whether the preparatory condition is satisfied, we need to find out in the context if *H* wants the thing promised be done, and if *S* is aware of that wish or desire. In addition, we need to be sure that both *S* and *H* know that *A* will not be done in the normal course of events. In other words, only when a promise is made or when it is under special circumstances will *A* be done.

The essential condition distinguishes promises from other illocutionary acts in the way that it places *S* under an obligation to do *A*. Searle makes an amendment from Grice's meaning formula to explain what it is for *S* to mean the utterance as a promise. In his amended formula, *S* intends (*i-I*) to produce in *H* the knowledge (*K*) that the utterance of *T* is to count as placing *S* under an obligation to do *A* by means of *H*'s recognition of *i-I*, and *S* also intends this recognition to be achieved in virtue of the fact that the meaning of his utterance conventionally associates it with placing him under that obligation (Searle, 2001). With the help of the context, it is easy for both *S* and *H* to determine whether the essential condition is met.

The sincerity condition is the key factor to understand a promise. From context, we can get to know if *S* has the intention to do *A* and if he thinks it possible to do it. For *H* whose perception of context maybe different from that of *S*, it could be a totally different story. In some situations, *H* can be in a good place to presume that *S* has the intention to do *A* and that it is possible for *S* to do it while the truth is quite the other way round. This is when a promise is insincerely made, but sincerely taken, as mentioned by Pakkala-Weckström (2008).

According to Strawson (1964), there is a certain symmetry between speaker and hearer, which clarifies that linguistic communication is a "joint act" (Parikh, 2000). Other than the symmetry, there is the asymmetry between *S* and *H* that lies in contextual information.

In linguistic communication, context provides the main source of information for *H* to determine "whether an interpretative hypothesis corresponds to the speaker's meaning" (from Feng (2013)). Context has its role to play in the hearer's interpretation of the speaker's utterance. Besides the general principle of conversation, contextual information is what a hearer or an analyst employs to "infer or reconstruct what the speaker has intended to mean" (Feng, 2013). Without being informed of the context, a hearer may not be able to understand

an utterance.

Thus understood, asymmetry of contextual information between the speaker and the hearer bears upon their different interpretations of an utterance. Without adequate context, the hearer will have difficulty in inferring what is actually intended by the speaker. If the hearer makes mistakes about the speaker's intention, he cannot reconstruct the real meaning of the utterance. In this way, the message intended by the speaker is not correspondent to the message construed by the hearer, which causes misunderstanding (Schlesinger & Hurvitz, 2008). Due to this, a linguistic communication may fail.

I agree with Feng that context can constrain what *S* can succeed in communication given what he says, but it cannot constrain what *S* intends to communicate in choosing what to say (Feng, 2013), whereas I have a different opinion when he seems to cite as a common ground that *S* does not consider "what contextual factors are needed for the hearer to fix demonstratives, to resolve ambiguities, or to clear away other uncertainties" (Feng, 2013) while saying that *P*. In some situations, *S* might make use of asymmetry of contextual information between himself and *H* to utter *T* which may involve an insincere promise. Since the contexts they hold are not reciprocal, it is possible that *H* will not be clear about *S*'s insincerity. *S* thus may succeed in having his communicative intentions materialize without carrying out his expressed intention.

Every step of the promising in the chosen text will be analyzed under the condition set of semantic rules and contextual information. This paper aims to explore what role context plays in meaning understanding and how meaning is determined through intention negotiation between *S* and *H*.

3.3. Research Methodology

This research is mainly qualitative. What is to be analyzed in this paper is Madame Cui's promise to marry Cui Yingying to Zhang Gong in the famous play, *Romance of the Western Bower* written by Wang Shifu (2008). An English version based on the *Romance* with preface and comments by JinShengtan and translated by Xu Yuanchong is chosen as my data source. This version of the drama is considered as one of the most valued. The play contains a narrative part in prose and a lyrical part in verse (Xu, 1992). The translated version by Xu is a clear demonstration of how to preserve the original beauty in sense, sound, and form by using the methods of "paraphrase", "imitation", and "metaphrase".

The drama is divided into five acts and twenty scenes. The contextual information and the process of promise making, promise breaking, and promise fulfilling will be drawn out for the sake of analysis.

The process of how the promise is made, broken and fulfilled will be analyzed as follows:

- 1) Madame Cui's making of the promise;
How Zhang Gong, Cui Yingying and Rose interpret the promise respectively;
- 2) Madame Cui's breaking of the promise;

How Zhang Gong, Cui Yingying and Rose react to it, including the confrontations of Madame Cui with Zhang Gong and Rose respectively, Zhang Gong and Cui Yingying's sexual relations without marriage, and Zhang's success in the civil service examinations;

3) Madame Cui's fulfilling of the promise.

In this process, asymmetry of contextual information between *S* and *H* under the four conditions for illocutionary acts and intentions will be employed to explore how promises should be understood and how meaning is determined through negotiation in linguistic communication.

4. Case Analysis

For a start, I will examine whether the promise by Madame Cui in the *Romance* satisfies the four conditions and enumerate contextual information *S* and *H* each holds. How Madame Cui denies her intention to betroth Yingying to Zhang Gong and refuses to fulfill her promise will be the next part in this analysis. In the end, I will analyze how *S* and *H* cooperate to determine the meaning of the promise through intention negotiation and make the promise a non-defective and sincere one.

4.1. Making the Promise

In Act II, Sun Feihu, a leader of the bandits who hears of Cui Yingying's incomparable beauty and charm, marches long to the monastery where Cui lives in an attempt to take her as his wife by force. Although Yingying is willing to be handed over to the bandit so as to save the lives of her family, Madame Cui refuses to take her on the plan with two reasons. The first,

(1) 老身年纪五旬，死不为夭，奈孩儿年少，未得从夫，早罹此难，如之奈何？(p. 90)

"I'm fifty now. For me death would not be premature. But you, my dear child, you are still young and not yet married. How can I bear to see you fall victim to this disaster?"

The second,

(2) 俺家无犯法之男，再嫁之女，怎舍得你献与贼汉，却不辱没了俺家谱！(p. 90-92)

"In our family not a man has ever broken the law and not a woman has ever remarried. How can I bear to hand you over to the bandit so as to disgrace our family!"

Later, Madame Cui asks the abbot to assemble all of the monks and laymen in the monastery so that she may work out a solution at their suggestions. When all of the people arrive at the preaching hall, Madame Cui says to her daughter:

(3) 如今两廊下众人，不问僧俗，但能退得贼兵的，你母亲做主，倒赔房奩，便欲把你送与为妻。虽不门当户对，还强如陷于贼人。(p. 94)

“If anyone in the corridors, priest or layman, is able to induce the bandits to withdraw, I will present you to him as his wife and give him a handsome dowry. Though a lopsided alliance, such a match would be better than falling into the hands of the brigand.”

She then asks the abbot to proclaim her proposal in the preaching hall. In a minute, Zhang Gong responds and says that he has a plan to drive away the bandits. This time, Madame Cui promises him in everyone’s presence:

(4) 恰才与长老说下，但有退得贼兵的，便将小女与他为妻。(p. 96)

“I have just told the abbot: I will give my daughter as wife to anyone who can drive the bandits away.”

According to the classification of speech acts by Austin and Searle, the sentences uttered by Madame Cui in (3) and (4) are commissives in illocutionary acts. Next, I will analyze how asymmetry of contextual information can affect *S* and *H*’s understanding of four conditions for illocutionary acts.

Madame Cui’s promise is uttered in (3) and (4), and it involves a future course of act by the promisor herself. This promise is made in the preaching hall to all the people present. The propositional content condition is thus satisfied.

In Act I of the *Romance*, Zhang Gong and Yingying fall in love at first sight. They employ poems to express their love. As the hearer, Zhang Gong is more than willing to have Yingying as his wife. On the other hand, Madame Cui knows very well that any man would be delighted to marry her daughter since it is obvious that Yingying has incomparable beauty and elegant bearing. We can say that *H* wants the thing promised to be done, and *S* is aware of that wish or desire. In addition, both *S* and *H* know that Yingying will not be betrothed to a Mr. Nobody in the normal course of events because she is the only child in the wealthy and powerful family of the former Prime Minister. In any actual speech situation, participants will assume that this preparatory condition is satisfied (Searle, 2001).

With regard to the essential condition, it depends on whether the promise places *S* under an obligation to do *A*. Searle’s formula is adopted here to test the essential condition of Madame Cui’s promise:

S intends (*i-I*) to produce in *H* the knowledge (*K*) that the utterance of *T* is to count as placing *S* under an obligation to do *A*;

S intends to produce *K* by means of the recognition of *i-I*;

And he intends *i-I* to be recognized in virtue of *H*’s knowledge of the meaning of *T*. (Searle, 2001)

First, in the *Romance*, Madame Cui intends to produce in the hearers the knowledge that her promise in (3) and (4) is to count as placing herself under an obligation to give her daughter to any man who can drive the bandits away. Second, she intends to produce *K* by means of the hearers’ recognition of her intention, which is true in this case, because only when people in the preaching

hall recognize that her promise will place her under an obligation to betroth Cui Yingying will they be stimulated to protect Cui's family from the danger. Third, Madame Cui intends this recognition to be achieved by means of the fact that the meaning of her promise is conventionally associated with placing her under the obligation to do the act promised. As an intellectual, Zhang Gong must know about the conventional association between a promise and its intended effect. In short, the essential condition of the promise is met.

The important part lies in the sincerity condition which means that *Pr* is to be uttered only if *S* intends to do *A* (Searle, 2001). Whether Madame Cui has the intention to betroth her daughter and whether she thinks it possible to do it is the key factor to the satisfaction of sincerity condition. Due to asymmetry of contextual information, the speaker Madame Cui and the hearer Zhang Gong have different understandings on this condition.

In the literal sense of (3) and (4), if the promisee Zhang Gong can make the bandits withdraw, he can take Cui Yingying as his wife. It does not matter if he is a monk or a layman, or if his family is not as wealthy and powerful as Yingying's. Other than this, the contextual information within Zhang's possession is that Yingying is the daughter of the former Prime Minister, unmarried. To him, Madame Cui's promise is clear and definite enough to be performed immediately after he deals with the bandits.

In the meanwhile, the promisor Madame Cui has some contextual information which the promisee Zhang Gong does not have. First, when Madame Cui enters in the first scene of Act I, she says:

(5) 相公在日，曾许下老身侄儿、郑尚书长子郑恒为妻，因丧服未满，不曾成合。(p. 2)

"She was betrothed, when my husband was alive, to my nephew Zheng Heng, eldest son of Minister Zheng; but as the period of mourning has not expired, their marriage has not yet taken place."

And

(6) 一壁书写附京师，唤郑恒来相扶回博陵去。(p. 4)

"I have written to Zheng Heng in the capital, requesting him to come to help us in the conveyance of the coffin."

This means that Yingying's fiancé will soon arrive in the Mid-River Prefecture where the Salvation Monastery they live in is located. It also shows that the speaker Madame Cui and the hearer Zhang Gong have different knowledge about Yingying's marriage status. In a society of ancient China where the husband had the absolute power over almost everything in a family, a betrothal decided by the father would not be easily subject to change. Even though Madame Cui makes the promise, it is nearly doomed from the start since Yingying is already engaged. She does know well that it is almost impossible to perform the act promised, although we cannot be sure whether she has the intention to do it. This leaves the satisfaction of sincerity condition in doubt.

Second, when Sun Feihu besieges the monastery with his five thousand soldiers and attempts to take Yingying by force, Madame Cui says (2) to Yingying. Again, this makes it clear that Yingying has already been engaged and will be considered remarried with another betrothal. In order to save the reputation of her family, she does not have the intention to give her daughter to anyone else whether the person is a bandit or a scholar. For this reason and the one above, the sincerity condition for Madame Cui's promise is not satisfied.

Furthermore, in Act IV Scene Two, Madame Cui says to Zhang:

(7) 俺家三辈不招白衣女婿，你明日便上朝取应去，俺与你养着媳妇儿！
(p. 310)

“But for three generations past our family has never had a son-in-law who had no official rank. So you must go to the capital to attend the civil service examinations. I will take care of your future wife.”

It is obvious that Madame Cui has no interest in a son-in-law who happens to be a monk or a poor person. She is actually expecting someone whose family can well match the Cui family in terms of wealth and power. This is contradictory to her words publicly uttered in the preaching hall and hence another evidence of her lack of intention to carry out the act promised.

To the hearer Zhang Gong, the three aspects of contextual information above are missing. As it happens, they are major grounds on which we can test whether the speaker has the expressed intention and also become vital excuses for Madame Cui to refuse to fulfill her promise.

4.2. Breaking the Promise

1) Breaking the Promise: Step I

With Madame Cui's promise in mind, Zhang Gong first manages to make Sun Feihu unarmed and win three more days, and then writes to his friend Du Que, General on the White Horse for help. When General Du arrives, Sun Feihu surrenders in a hurry and his troop falls apart. After the bandits withdraw, Zhang Gong is confident about his marriage with Cui Yingying. He says to General Du:

(8) 今日便应随仁兄去，却又为夫人昨日许以爱女相配，不敢仰劳仁兄执柯。(p. 120)

“I ought to accompany you back today, but Madame promised to give me her beloved daughter in marriage. I should be grateful to you if you could defer your departure and act as go-between.”

Zhang asks his friend to be a go-between. General Du believes that he has helped Zhang fulfill the precondition of the promise and therefore offers:

(9) 恭喜恭喜！老夫人，下官自当作伐。(p. 120)

“My hearty congratulations and best wishes to you, Madame. I shall be delighted to act as go-between.”

Nevertheless, Madame Cui ignores his intention by saying:

(10) 老身尚有处分。安排茶饭者。(p. 120)

“I have still other arrangements in mind. Let dinner be served.”

She avoids mentioning her promise deliberately. This is the first time she refuses to fulfill her promise.

2) Breaking the Promise: Step II

When Zhang Gong is invited to the thank-you banquet arranged by Madame Cui, everyone believes that she is going to betroth her daughter to Zhang. Conversations between Zhang and Rose before the banquet can prove this point. In the first round,

(11) 张生：敢问红娘者，此席为何，可有别客？

“Zhang: May I ask you, Miss Rose, why this banquet is held? Will there be other guests present?”

红娘：第一来为压惊，第二来因谢承。不请街坊，不会诸亲，不受人情。避众僧，请贵人和莺莺匹配。(p. 128)

“Rose: It’s held to ease the alarm, in the first place; and secondly to thank you for your act of grace. Nor neighbors nor relations will appear; no gifts will be received, however dear. All priests are kept away; alone you are invited to be betrothed today.”

Rose holds that the precondition for Madame Cui’s promise to be fulfilled has been met, and that the purpose of the banquet is the betrothal. In the second round,

(12) 张生：敢问红娘姐，那边今日如何铺设？小生岂好轻造！

“Zhang: May I ask you, Miss Rose, what arrangement has been made and how the chamber is decorated for today? Is it appropriate for me to go there without due preparation?”

红娘：正中是鸳鸯夜月销金帐，两行是孔雀春风软玉屏。下边是合欢令，一对对凤箫象板，雁瑟鸾笙。(p. 132)

“Rose: We have prepared a curtain embroidered above with around moon and below with birds of love, two screens of jade adorned with peacocks standing at ease enjoying the vernal breeze; a music band consisting of phoenix flute, ivory castanets and wild swan lute.”

Rose’s description of the decoration in the chamber further assures Zhang of the oncoming fulfillment of Madame Cui’s promise. In the third round,

(13) 张生：敢问红娘姐，小生客中无点点财礼，却是怎生好见夫人？

“Zhang: May I ask you, Miss Rose, as a traveler (who) has brought nothing with him as a ceremonial gift, how can I go to see Madame with bare hands?”

红娘：聘不见争，亲立便成，新婚燕尔天教定。(p. 132)

“Rose: When no betrothal money is needed, the marriage will be all the more speeded. Your happy union is determined by fate.”

According to the Six Manners (Zhang, 2009), Zhang should offer a considera-

ble amount of bride wealth to Madame Cui at a betrothal party if he is to marry Yingying, daughter of the former Prime Minister. Given the special circumstance, Rose thinks that the bride wealth is not a necessity any more.

After the communication with Rose, Zhang is completely convinced that Madame Cui will honor her promise and marry Yingying to him. He thinks to himself:

(14) 比及我到得夫人那里，夫人道：张生，你来了也，与俺莺莺做一对儿，饮两杯酒便去卧房内做亲。(p. 136)

“When I arrive in the presence of Madame, she will say, ‘Here you are, Master Zhang. You and my Yingying will make a happy couple, so drink two cups of wine before you go to the bridal chamber.’”

And Yingying holds the same opinion:

(15) 除非说我相思为他，他相思为我，今日相思都较可。(p. 142)

“You say I am lovesick for him and he for me, but cured today our lovesickness will be.”

She considers the thank-you banquet to be a chance for her mother to betroth her to Zhang in order to perform the act promised. In such a way the lovesickness of Zhang and her will end.

As the banquet starts, everything turns out to be different from their imagination.

(16) 夫人：小姐近前来，拜了哥哥者。

“Madame: Come near, my dear daughter, and pay your respect to your elder brother.”

张生：呀，这声息不好也！

“Zhang: Ah! This is not a good augury.”

莺莺：呀，俺娘变了卦也！

“Yingying: Oh! My mother has changed her mind.”

红娘：呀，这相思今番害也！(p. 144)

“Rose: Oh! They will be lovesick again.”

Madame Cui has Zhang and Yingying call each other elder brother and younger sister as an effort to pass over her promise. “这声息不好也” and “俺娘变了卦也” show that Zhang Gong and Cui Yingying have been aware of the fact that Madame Cui is now denying what is promised. “这相思今番害也” explains the outcome of breaking the promise. If Zhang and Yingying are brother and sister, they cannot be engaged or married. In this way, the preparatory condition for the promise will not be satisfied. Hence the utterance by Madame Cui will no longer put her under an obligation to betroth Yingying to Zhang. This is the second time Madame Cui refuses to fulfill her promise.

3) How Madame Cui Manages to Break the Promise

According to Feng, *S* may not be aware that he is following his intention when uttering *T*, but he will appeal to it when he needs to “clear up ambiguities, mis-

takes, and uncertainties” (Feng, 2013). These ambiguities, mistakes, and uncertainties can occur when *H* makes an inference that is not intended by *S*. Now *S* would do something, linguistic or non-linguistic, to block that inference (Feng, 2013). We can use this argument as a provisional device to test the sincerity of a promisor.

When Zhang Gong manages to save the Cui family from the attack, everyone is confident that Madame Cui will betroth her daughter to him according to her promise. The later events prove that their inference is not intended by Madame Cui. When General Du offers to be the go-between, Madame Cui avoids joining him on the topic of betrothal and diverts the conversation to dinner. Besides, at the thank-you banquet, she asks Zhang and Yingying to call each other elder brother and younger sister, which makes it further manifest that she does not have the intention to marry Yingying to Zhang. From the above data, it is fair to say that the promise by Madame Cui is insincerely made, but sincerely taken. She refuses to fulfill her promise by violating the key point of a commissive which is to commit the speaker to a certain future course of action (Austin, 2002; Searle, 1976).

Based on the analysis of the last part—Making the Promise, the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, and the essential condition are met in Madame Cui’s promise. Whether the sincerity condition is satisfied or not is in doubt for the moment. If Madame Cui wants to break the promise, she needs to deny that she has the intention to betroth her daughter when making the promise. In consideration of her social status and the non-cancellability of what is meant, however, it would be inappropriate for her to do this directly. As a result, she takes two steps to make the conditions for commissives unsatisfied in an attempt to disclaim her obligation to carry out the expressed intention.

In Step I, Madame Cui refuses to discuss with General Du her promise to marry Yingying to Zhang Gong by changing the topic. It seems that she wants to deny her utterance. If so, it is obvious that the propositional content condition for a commissive will not be met, let alone other conditions. In Step II, Madame Cui tries hard to build up a relationship of brother and sister between Zhang and Yingying. If she is successful, the two will not be able to get married, and she will no longer be under an obligation to betroth Yingying to Zhang even with the promise made earlier. The preparatory condition and the essential condition will thus not be satisfied.

4.3. Fulfilling the Promise

The different understandings of intentions and other semantic rules for a promise between *S* and *H* make the meaning of the promise indeterminate and may result in the abortion of the promised *A* and thus the failure of the linguistic communication. Since the meaning of any utterance in communication lies not just in the mind of a specific individual, but comes from a collaborative process of interaction between participants (Gibbs, 1999), *S* and *H* can cooperate and

coordinate to construct the meaning of the promise by intention negotiation for the sake of a happy ending. A successful negotiation between *S* and *H* in the *Romance* will be illustrated in this section.

1) Zhang Gong's Confrontation with Madame Cui

In the *Romance*, Zhang Gong manages to save Cui Yingying's family from danger, but only to find that the act promised by Madame Cui is not carried out as expected. He immediately initiates a series of intention negotiation with Madame Cui and is aided by Rose during the process.

At the banquet, when Madame Cui attempts to make him and Yingying as brother and sister and refuses to fulfill her promise, Zhang confronts her face to face by saying:

(17) 张生：前者狂贼思逞，变在仓促，夫人有言，能退贼者，以莺莺妻之，是曾有此语否？

“Zhang: When the bandits threatened violence and danger menaced, Madame promised to give Miss Oriole as wife to anyone who could make the bandits withdraw. Is this not what you said?”

夫人：有之。(p. 154)

“Madame: Yes, it was.”

This conversation forces Madame Cui to acknowledge her making of the promise. In other words, the propositional content condition for a promise to have illocutionary force is satisfied. Zhang then makes Madame Cui confirm that he is the one who induces the bandits to withdraw. Later, he proclaims:

(18) 当时小生急忙作书，请得杜将军来，徒为今日哺啜地乎？今早红娘传命相呼，将谓永践诺金，快成倚玉。不知夫人何见，忽以兄妹二字，兜头一盖？请问小姐何用小生为兄？若小生真不用小姐为妹。常言算错非迟，还请夫人三思！（p. 154, 156）

“When I wrote that letter in haste, requesting General Du to come, was it only because I wanted something to eat and drink today? When Rose came this morning to summon me, I thought you were going to fulfill your promise and I was to marry your beautiful daughter. Who knows what has made you suddenly change your mind and call me her elder brother? May I beg to ask what use your daughter can have for me to be her elder brother and what use I can have for her to be my younger sister? As the old saying goes, it is never too late to mend. I request you, Madame, to reconsider the matter.”

He blames Madame Cui for going back on her words by calling him the elder brother of Yingying. With a relationship of brother and sister, Zhang and Yingying will not be allowed to be married, which means that the preparatory condition for the promise is violated. “算错非迟” and “请夫人三思” show that he is pleading with Madame Cui to mend the matter by complying with the sincerity condition and the essential condition. He also complains about it to Rose:

(19) 只是夫人堂堂一品太君，金口玉言，许以婚姻之约。红娘姐，这不

是你我二人独听见的，两廊下无数僧俗，乃至上有佛天，下有护法，莫不共闻。(p. 158)

“But Madame is a lady of the first rank, whose word should be as good as gold. How could she break her promise of marrying her daughter to me? Oh, Miss Rose, her promise was not only heard by us two, but by all the priests and laymen in the monastery, and even by the Buddha above and the abbot below.”

By saying this, he makes it clear that the promise is made in the presence of everyone in the monastery, which means that the propositional content condition for Madame Cui's promise is met. He risks his life to help because he believes Madame Cui, a lady of high rank, does have the intention to perform the act promised. In his opinion, the sincerity condition is not a problem. “许” in Chinese implicates that the promise places Madame Cui under an obligation to do what she says. The essential condition is thereby met.

2) Rose's Confrontation with Madame Cui

With the help of Rose, Zhang Gong and Yingying are able to express their love and finally develop a de facto relationship as man and wife. When reprimanded by Madame Cui, Rose audaciously blames the scandal on her mistress:

(20) 信者，人之根本，人而无信，大不可也！当日军围普救，夫人许退得军者，以女妻之。张生非慕小姐颜色，何故无干建策？夫人兵退身安，悔却前言，岂不为失信乎？(p. 302)

“It is fundamental for a man to keep faith. One who does not is not worthy of the name of a man. When the Salvation Monastery was surrounded by the bandits, you promised to give your daughter as wife to anyone who could make the bandits withdraw. If Master Zhang had not been an admirer of the beauty of my young mistress, would he, an outsider, have proposed a plan to such an effect? When the bandits retreated and you were left in peace, you repented and went back on your words. Was not this a breach of faith?”

She confirms that Zhang wants the thing promised done, and that her mistress is aware of that desire. That is to say, the preparatory condition for the promise is satisfied. By reminding Madame Cui that her promise places her under an obligation to betroth Yingying to Zhang, she reaffirms the satisfaction of the essential condition. She also explains to Madame Cui why Zhang Gong and Yingying are having a sexual scandal without marriage:

(21) 既不允其亲事，便当酬以金帛，令其舍此远去。却不合留于书院，相近咫尺，使怨女旷夫，各相窥伺，因而有此一端。(p. 302)

“Unwilling to approve the match, you should have rewarded him with money and made him go far, far away. It was wrong of you to keep him in the library near my young mistress' abode, so that the lonely maiden and bachelor had a chance to meet each other.”

After that, she offers her suggestion as to how Madame Cui can cover up the

scandal:

(22) 依红娘愚见，莫若恕其小过，完其大事，实为长便。(p. 302)

“In my humble opinion, it would be far better to forgive the wrong he had done and not to return evil for good, but to fulfill the promise you have made them as man and wife.”

In this way, Rose persuades Madame Cui to comply with her expressed intention and officially make the pair of lovers as man and wife. Madame Cui accepts Rose's advice:

(23) 这小贱人，到也说得是。(p. 304)

“What the little wretch has said is reasonable.”

She finally agrees to honor her promise and turn her expressed intention into realization. What is worthy of mention is that the meaning of the phrase “再嫁之女” in Madame Cui's excuse in (2) has now changed. The first time she refers to it, Yingying has been betrothed to Zheng Heng, and will hence be considered remarried if she is given to Sun Feihu or Zhang Gong as wife. At the end of the story, Yingying and Zhang Gong have already been in a common-law marriage according to conventions in ancient China. Therefore, if Yingying is given to Zheng Heng as wife on account of the former betrothal, she will be a remarried woman.

3) Intention Negotiation in the *Romance*

The negotiation of intention in the *Romance* gives us an example of how the speaker and the hearer cooperate and coordinate to construct the meaning of a promise and achieve a successful linguistic communication. For a promise to have illocutionary force to be fulfilled, the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the essential condition, and the sincerity condition need to be satisfied. When *S* and *H* have different understandings of the same promise due to irreciprocal contextual information, they can negotiate these conditions with each other. In the end, they can hopefully reach an agreement on the meaning or even create a new, emergent meaning that was not originally in the mind of *S* or *H* (Gibbs, 1999).

5. Conclusion

In this research, I assume and draw on asymmetry of contextual information under the four conditions for illocutionary acts, in particular those of promising, and the role of intentions in the determination of meaning to understand the promise made by Madame Cui in the *Romance of the Western Bower* and the negotiation between interlocutors. Through the above analysis and discussion, the following findings are achieved.

First, context, or contextual information plays a significant role in making and understanding a promise. For a promise to have its illocutionary force, it needs to satisfy four semantic rules which are the propositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition. Gen-

erally speaking, once a commissive illocutionary act is made, it involves some future act of *S*, and both *S* and *H* presume that the preparatory conditions of the promise are satisfied. The sincerity condition and the essential condition have more to do with contextual information. The difference in the contextual information of each side can to a large extent influence their understanding of whether the promisor has the intention to carry out the promised act and whether it is possible to do it. If the promisor does not have the intention to do *A*, he is making an insincere promise. If he does have the intention to do it, but knows from the context that it is impossible for him to do it, whether he is under an obligation to do *A* will be in doubt. Under this circumstance, he may be making an insincere and defective promise. With different contextual information, the hearer can take another view on the sincerity condition and the essential condition. Suppose that his view differs from that *S* has intended, the meaning of the promise will thus be indeterminate, which leaves room for negotiation.

Second, meaning is constructed by both *S* and *H* through cooperation and coordination. When *S* and *H* have different understandings of the very promise, they can still achieve a successful linguistic communication through intention negotiation. During this process, both sides need to lay out their understanding of each condition, particularly the sincerity condition. They need to explain how the contextual information they have affects the understanding of the promise and how the condition set of semantic rules is carried through. A successful linguistic communication would come out if *S* and *H* can come to an agreement on intentions.

Third, why can Madame Cui break her promise? In my opinion, there are two reasons. For one thing, meaning can be indeterminate because the contextual information *S* and *H* have is not reciprocal. Though what is said and what is implicated cannot be cancelled, they can be corrected or denied (Feng, 2013). This makes it possible for *S* to deny the expressed intentions and for *H* to construe some idea that is not held by *S*. For another, the promisor has a communicative intention as well as the expressed intention in a promise. Even if the expressed intention is not carried out, he may realize his communicative intention as well. In the *Romance of the Western Bower*, Madame Cui makes the promise with the communicative intention that somebody will stand up and defend her family as well as an expressed intention that she will betroth her daughter to whoever can protect her family from the danger. Regardless of her insincerity, she succeeds in saving the family with the promise.

Meaning with respect to language as well as philosophy is an eternal question for humans. To understand the meaning of *S*, *H* is supposed to fully recognize the intentions of *S*. Unfortunately, asymmetry of contextual information between them will definitely influence the process and result of intention recognition and meaning understanding. Study on the asymmetry of contextual information may lead us to a possible explanation of the infelicity of speech acts.

With this research done, we may possibly propose that contextual information could be something more than what *H* needs to infer the meaning of *S*'s speaking. It could be taken advantage of by the speaker in order to influence the illocutionary force of *S*'s speech act. In that way, the result of the linguistic communication could be the other way around.

In meaning understanding, the importance of *S*'s intentions is now widely accepted in pragmatics. Ever since Grice, many linguists and philosophers have been exploring the existence and function of intentions in interpreting what *S* says. *H*'s recognition and interpretation of *S*'s intentions have a great influence on a linguistic communication. What if *H* fails to pick up all the intentions, overt and covert, of *S* or *S* is saying something he does not mean? This may result in failure of communication. Or hopefully *H* will negotiate with *S* to determine the real communicative meaning. To be exact, the cooperation of *S* and *H* is not only embodied in *S*'s conveying intentions and *H*'s recognizing them but also displayed through their negotiation to decide the meaning jointly. Meaning is constructed and decided by both the speaker and the hearer. The research of meaning negotiation would possibly draw our attention to a more active role of *H* in communication, and may thus lead to a new phase in the study of meaning.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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