"Why Don't People Simply Say What They Mean?" Discuss the Issue of Indirectness in Discourse

Zhaoran Luo

Shenzhen Senior High School, Shenzhen, 518040, China

Abstract: To ensure successful communication, people may speak indirectly. Although it can be very problematic and culture-specific, it is still necessary and justifiable to employ indirectness, for it is widely considered as the norm to achieve communicative or social goals. This paper firstly focuses on theoretical accounts for indirectness, and then exemplifies some possible factors governing indirectness. Next, the paper presents some possible problematic factors, and intends to explore motivations for employing indirectness.

Keywords: Indirectness; Pragmatics; Politeness

1. Introduction

Occasionally, people do not express exactly as they intend to convey. If we want to borrow money from our friends, we may ask them "could you do me a favor" first rather than directly request them by saying "give me some money". For various considerations such as showing respect or avoiding embarrassment, when making requests, people rarely speak in a too straightforward way. It seems that to ensure successful communication, people may try to speak indirectly.

To define indirectness, Srinarawat (2005) notes that it refers to a speech act where speaker's intentional meaning does not match his utterance meaning. Similar statement is made by Thomas (1995), when he further points out that this language phenomenon is universal, for it almost occurs in all languages and cultures (p.199). In terms of its significance, it is believed that indirectness plays an indispensable role in people's interactions (Tannen, 1989). As Kasper (1990) explains, it is a matter of performing linguistic action aiming at achieving certain communicative goals. Also, Thomas (1995) emphasize that indirectness is a rational behavior, as it is employed to reach some social or communicative advantages.

This paper aims to explore various aspects of indirectness: what is indirectness, why it is employed by speakers and as well as the factors that may influence indirectness. Though indirectness can be risky and highly cultural-dependent, it is still regarded as a universal norm of achieving certain communicative and social goals.

Apart from the introduction, the remaining paper can be split into five sections: theoretical accounts for indirectness, possible factors governing indirectness, possible problematic factors, motivations for employing indirectness and the final conclusion. The first section will explore relevant theories that can explain indirectness in speaking. Then this paper will focus on some universal factors that may manipulate the degree of indirectness. The third section will try to find out some factors that may cause problems in indirectness. The forth section will explore the reason why people need to speak indirectly in-depth. In the last section, all the key points will be pulled together and a natural conclusion can be drawn.

2. Theoretical Accounts for Indirectness

A number of research studies such as Speech Act theory (Austin, 1962), Conversational Maxims (Grice, 1975, 1989) and Relevant Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) have contributed to the study of indirectness. In order to explore indirectness more comprehensively, those relevant theories need to be introduced.

In the theory of Speech Act which focuses on how utterances can perform actions, there is a clear distinction between directness and indirectness. Yule (2010) exemplifies these two kinds of speech acts by using the utterance "you left the door open". If this utterance, in a declarative structure, is made to state a fact, it is classified as a direct speech act. However, if the speaker feels cold at that time, what he in tents to do is to let the person coming in close the door. When the speaker uses a declarative sentence rather than an imperative sentence to perform a function of requesting, he is doing an indirect speech act (Yule, 2010). That is, speakers may decide the way they perform an action by using different syntactic structures. Therefore, indirectness, in the light of Speech Act theory, can be explained as the mismatch

between the speech goal that speaker wants to achieve and the syntactic structure that the speaker actually use.

In terms of Grice's pragmatic theory, indirectness can be treated as its apparent violation. It is believed that communication is a rational action or behavior governed by certain standards which can be called as the co-operative principle (Grice, 1975). He (1975) argues that this principle, consisting of the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Relevance and the Maxim of Manner, can be used to explain how people correctly recognize others' real intentions and how they successfully comprehend others' implicate meanings. As he further points out, to make effective contribute to the communication, speakers need to obey the co-operative principle and its four maxims which respectively expects speakers to be helpful, co-operative and to talk informatively, truthfully, relevantly and clearly (Grice, 1989). Taking Sperber and Wilson's "do you want some coffee" as a typical example, in light of Grice's theory, the hearer may obey the maxims when he answers "no". But by contrast, it is the case that the hearer does not satisfy the expectation of being relevant and clear, if he responses it indirectly as "coffee would keep me awake" (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p 34). However, the contradiction lies in the fact that the hearer does answers the question and even provides an informative explanation to make his refusal reasonable. Though Grice then explains how speakers can do to dispose of this violation and then make their utterances inferable, his idea on indirectness seems to be groundless. As Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue, there is no rationale behind his theory and its terms have great vagueness.

Compared with Grice's theory, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory may has a more universal explanation for indirectness, for it answers the questions how speakers can imply more information than they literally express and why they prefer to do so. Basically, in the Relevance theory, it is believed that indirectness requires speakers more processing effort but also produces more cognitive effects (Sperber &Wilson, 1995). Here, "relevance" is a notion associated with cost and benefits which respectively refer to the positive cognitive effects it achieves and the mental effort demanded during the process (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). According to them (1995), there is a presumption of optimal relevance created by speakers, requiring the utterance to be at least relevant enough to process. What they (1995) further put forward is that if speakers automatically create this relevance, extra processing effort needed should be offset by extra effects. As the example mentioned above, though the hearer answers the speaker's question in an indirect way, the speaker may still predict that the information given should be at least relevant enough to him to process. Since the hearers' response needs to follow the presumption of optimal relevance, the speaker may have the prediction of getting extra cognitive effects. As we can judge, the explanation "coffee would keep me awake" offers the speaker additional information which cannot be simply achieved by responding "no".

To sum up, in Speech Act Theory, indirectness, along with directness, are treated means of performing actions. Grice's pragmatic theory, by contrast, explains indirectness as its violation. As for Relevance Theory, indirectness is adopted to provide speakers more cognitive effects.

3. Possible Universal Factors Governing Indirectness

It is true that indirectness is a pervasive pragmatic phenomenon in all languages. However, it does not mean that people employ indirectness all in a similar way. It may be the case that indirectness, in natural language use, varies from speakers to speakers and differs from situations to situations (Thomas, 1995). Regardless of specific factors such as individual differences and cultural variations, there are several universal factors that may govern the pragmatic choice in indirectness.

To begin with, different social distances may require different levels of indirectness. As a social member, what we utter is always influenced by our social life and relationships. Therefore our interactions, to some extent, are determined by social relationships. As Yule (1996, P.59) states, to explore interactions, factors related to social distance and closeness need to be looked at. Social distance can associated with factors such as age, sex, occupation or degree of intimacy, and it even can be describe as their composite (Thomas, 1995). According to Leech (1983), within one situation, social distance can determine the level of respectfulness. Similar statements are made by Thomas (1995, p.128), when he explains that the greater similarities you share with your hearer in terms of age, social class or sex, etc., the less need you may feel you to employ indirectness in speaking.

Example 1:
Mary wants to invite someone to have dinner with her.
(1a) Have dinner together?
(1b) I'm wondering if it is convenient for you to have dinner with me.
In the example 1, to invite a friend to have dinner, Mary can speak directly to show their closeness (as in 1a). However, to show her respect to the elder, greater indirectness is demanded (as in 1b). Therefore, increase in social distance may require more indirectness and less indirectness, in turn, may be employed to show closeness between speakers.

Moreover, different degree of power demands different degree of indirectness. Though there are different types

of "power", basically, it refers to the relations of domination and subordination in social practices (Cameron, 2000). As Thomas (1995) puts forward, the general relations between indirectness and power is that speakers would use higher level of indirectness to the one with authority rather than the one without any power. It seems to be true if a secretary speaks to her manager who has more power, she tends to be more careful and more indirect about the message she conveys. But by contrast, if the manager asks his secretary to do something, he may require her straightforwardly by saying "bring me the files". There is little need for the manager to consider the way to speak, for the manager has more authority over his hearer.

However, it is noteworthy that people feel difficult to distinguish from "power" and "social distance", since these two factors differ in definitions but may overlap in practice. Similar statements are made by Thomas (1995), when he further explains the reason why we fail to maintain the distinction between "power" and "social distance' is that those two factors frequently co-occur. For example, a manager may ask his secretary by saying "bring me the files", but he would never speak in such a direct way to his boss. The boss, in a higher social hierarchy, will inevitably have more power than his secretary. As Thomas (1995) explains, "…we tend to be socially distant from those in power over us" (P.129). Therefore, unequal powers may mark a distance in social relations, which then influence the degree we employ indirectness in speaking.

Apart from "social distance" and "power", the factor "relative rights and obligations" between speakers and hearers is another concern. It is believed that the key point of using indirectness lies in speaker's right of making requirements and also hearer's obligation of complying (Thomas 1995, P.131). As the example mentioned above, the manager can ask the secretary to bring the files quite directly, for he has the right to require so and in the meantime, his secretary has the obligation to obey so. In return, when the hearer has no obligation to comply the speaker's requirement or demand, the speaker has to speak indirectly. A typical example is illustrated as follows:

Example 2:

Mary is talking to her friend Peter.

Mary: I have some urgent issue that my father gets sick and need to receive an operation. But I don't have enough savings.

In the example 2, we can infer that Mary actually wants Peter to lend her some money. But it is not the necessary thing that Mary should expect Peter to do, therefore she has to speak implicitly by using some hints. That is, indirectness often occurs when one speaker has no right to demand the hearer to do something and the hearer does not have the obligation to comply so.

In conclusion, distance of social relationship, speakers' power or authority, relative rights and obligations between speakers and hearers seem to be three universal factors that govern how indirect the speech can be.

4. Possible Problematic Factors

Though a number of strategies related to indirectness are frequently adopted by speakers, indirectness may simultaneously raise problems. Compared with directness in speech, indirectness can be troublesome for both speakers and hearers.

Firstly, indirectness is believed to be costly and risky. Dascal (1983) first puts forward this point, and then Thomas (1995) illustrates it in details. As Thomas (1995) sates, to speak indirectly is costly, since it may take more efforts for the speaker to produce and also longer time for the hearer to understand (P. 120). If one utterance made by the speaker is too periphrastic but informative, the hearer may feel difficult and tired to concentrate themselves on its key points. However, indirectness can also bring some benefits to the hearer. As Relevance Theory explains, speakers create an optimal relevance that extra processing effort will be offset by extra cognitive effects. As the example mentioned before, to answer the question "do you want some coffee", the hearer responses as "coffee would keep me awake" rather than "no". Though the former answer is more complex and indirect than the latter one, it produces more information and by speaking indirectly, his refusal becomes reasonable and more acceptable. In addition, Thomas (1995) also notes that indirectness is risky, for there is a concern that indirectness may cause misunderstanding. In the following example (example 3), the husband fails to let his wife step aside, for the wife misinterprets his real intention but treats her husband's words as a genuine praise.

Example 3:

The husband, sitting on the sofa, is watching the TV, while his wife is cleaning the room. Suddenly, the wife stands in front of the TV and block his view.

Husband: Oh, Mary! Nice body!

Wife: Thanks, darling.

Moreover, indirectness can be highly cultural-dependent. Generally, scholars and linguists maintain that cultural variations, including cultural values, beliefs and norms, will influence the selection of speech styles and as well as the types and degree of indirectness (Tannen 1985; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988; Cheng 2003). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1985) exemplify it by comparing people in individualist cultures such as Americans and people in collectivistic context such as Japanese. Americans prefer to express their ideas directly by choosing explicit words, while Japanese tend to speak indirectly by using ambiguous words or utterances.

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International Journal of Intelligent Information and Management Science
ISSN: 2307-0692, Volume 8, Issue 4, August, 2019

However, even same type of indirectness is adopted and same degree of politeness is invested in the process of communication, the social meaning of indirectness may still differ distinctly from culture to culture (Kasper, 1990). It seems to be true, since people from different culture backgrounds make requests or compliments in completely different ways.

For requesting, people in Asian countries prefer to make more implicit requests than western speakers. As Kasper (1990) explains, in Japanese culture, there exists a high degree of shared presuppositions that explicit requests may negatively influence people's social relationship. Therefore, taking social solidarity in to consideration, Japanese people tend to adopt indirectness in making requests. However, indirect requests are not always properly acceptable. In the culture of Israel where openness and frankness are widely treated as social norms, implicit indirectness may be treated as insincerity (Blum-Kulka, 1987).

For complimenting, it is believed that American speakers always try to compliment others by explicitly praising them (Kasper, 1990). For example, praises such as "you look so pretty today" are frequently spoken in their daily life and even are used to open a conversation. It seems to be the true when Americans are widely considered comparatively direct and straightforward (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1991). However, Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to compliment others implicitly. In their cultures, people hold shared expectations that both speakers and hearers want to keep their behaviors modest. In Kasper's (1990) words "Japanese…requiring some affective restraint on the expression of appreciative emotion where mainstream American cultures opts for emphatic enthusiasm" (p.199). Notably, in order to keep humble, even facing sincere praise, Chinese people may refuse to accept it. Responses like "no, you must be kidding me" will be well-acceptant in Asian countries. However, it is a rather rude answer in Western cultures.

In conclusion, indirectness can be problematic, for it is costly for both speakers and hearers, and there is an increasing risk of being misunderstood when it is employed in conversation. In addition, indirectness can be highly culture-specific, since how people use it or interpret it may be affected by their cultures.

5. Motives for Indirectness

It seems that if people can express exactly what they intended to convey, it will be much easier for hearers to achieve speakers' meaning, and success of the communication therefore can be ensured. However, the actual fact is that indirectness is always considered as the universal strategy being adopted by people.

Though indirectness is costly, cultural-dependent, and will increase the risk of being misunderstood, it is still very reasonable for people to employ it in their communication. Several reasons of employing indirectness will be illustrated as follows.

5.1. Consideration of politeness

People speak indirectly in order to make their language more polite. Investigation of politeness in speech has been taken by a number of researchers and politeness is always considered as the main concern for indirectness (e.g. Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Brown & Levinson 1987).

Defining politeness as the avoidance of offense, Lakoff (1973) adopts Grice's idea and then puts forward her own theory of politeness. As Tannen (1984) concludes, it comprises the rule of "don't impose", the rule of "give options" and the rule of "be friendly". To put it in a detailed way, the first rule requires speakers to keep distance by using formal expressions, while the second rule states the situation of showing consideration for others. The third rule, compared with the first rule, puts emphasis on the closeness between speakers. That is, these three rules respectively require formal situation, informal context and intimate relationships. However, Lakoff's rules are restricted in scope and are of great ambiguity. There seem to be no clear distinctions between the utterance "Please pass me the paper" and the speech "Can you pass me the paper" in Lakoff's theory, and people are difficult to make a judgment on the degree of politeness required by different situations.

But in terms of the relations between indirectness and politeness, Lakoff (1973) argues that politeness is one of the main reasons for speakers to adopt indirectness in speaking. Tannen (1989), by using Lakoff's theory of politeness, further explains that "Indirectness is preferred…: to save face if a conversational contribution is not well received, and to achieve the sense of rapport that comes from being understood without saying what one means" (P.23).

Leech (1983), similar with Lakoff, employs some ideas of the Grice's pragmatic theory and proposes the principle of politeness. As he (1983) argues, speakers need to minimize the expressions which are unfavorable to hearers while try to maximize those polite expressions. In other words, if speakers want their language more polite, what they expect to do is to focus more on others' good points rather than to highlight their shortness. For example, to response the question "How about my new shirt and new glasses", praises like "I like your glasses" is believed to be more polite than the response "I don't like your shirt".

It is also noteworthy that Leech (1983) points out that there is a clear connection between indirectness and politeness. It is believed that a more indirect utterance is more polite than the direct one, if same situations are given to speakers (Leech, 1983). As he explains:

Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be (Leech 1983, p.108).

Apart from those theoretical accounts for politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) adapt Goffman's theory of "face" and develop the well-known Politeness Theory. Being a universal concept, "face" refers to one's public self-image that every social member tries to claim for (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Accordingly, in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, politeness can be defined as the means of considering other speaker's face (Yule, 1996). They further state that if a speaker says something that may hurt other's self-image, it can be defined as a "face threatening act" (FTA for shorten) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In order to address the issue of FTAs and speak in an appropriately polite way, different strategies can be adopted. Here, two types of "politeness" are highlighted: the "positive politeness" which refers to the strategy of showing solidarity or friendliness to others; the "negative politeness" which refers to the strategy of respecting other's independence or privacy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, if you want others to open the window, you can either say "How about opening the window for me" or "Could you open the window for me". The former utterance showing closeness belongs to "positive politeness", while the latter one emphasizing distance is guided by "negative politeness".

It is true that politeness is bound up with indirectness. However, the degree of politeness is not dependent on the level of indirectness, and the level of indirectness also cannot determine how polite the utterance can be. To take "Could you please close the door for me" as an example, if it is an utterance made by a boss to a secretary, it is appropriately polite. But by contrast, if a husband speaks to his wife in such an indirect way, his wife may complain about his strangeness. Universal factors that govern indirectness, as what we have discussed, should be the social distance, power relationship, rights and obligations between speakers and hearers.

5.2. Consideration of revealing attitudes

People employ indirectness in speech in order to reveal their attitudes. Here, metaphor, as one examples of indirectness, will be introduced to illustrate this point. Metaphor refers to the concept that literal meaning is replaced by its figurative meaning. For example, the speaker may use the metaphor "she is an angel" instead of the statement" she is very kind and nice" to describe a girl. In the view of Relevance Theory, it is believed that metaphor will inevitably require hearers more effort of processing. In despite of that, speakers may still prefer to use metaphors. As what has been explored, there is a presumption of optimal relevance that additional processing effort implies extra effects (Sperber &Wilson, 1995). In the example of "she is an angle", the hearer's encyclopedic knowledge of "angel" may let him think of the person who is beautiful, innocent and very kind-hearted. With such encyclopedic knowledge, the hearer not only may construct a general hypothesis about that girl, but also may infer that the speaker likes the girl and therefore speaks so highly of her. Likewise, "John is a lion" not only suggests that John has great courage, but also reveal the speakers' positive attitude towards him.

However, in the utterance of "Peter is a donkey", different attitude can be inferred. The speaker may try to convey insults or scorn to Peter, for the word "donkey" often associate with the assumption that the person is stupid or stubborn. Therefore, by using indirectness, speakers can express their likes or dislikes.

5.3. Consideration of privacy

Apart from those reasons mentioned above, privacy can be another concern for employing indirectness. Speakers with shared knowledge speak indirectly to avoid being understood by outsiders. By developing the ideas of Lakoff (1973), Tannen (1989) explains that "…by requiring the listener or reacter to fill in unstated meaning, indirectness contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking" (P.23).

Example 4:

Lily is talking about her boyfriend with Lucy, but she is afraid that her father can understand.

Lucy: How about your holiday with BLACK?

Lily: PUPPY makes me happy.

In example 4, in order to prevent Lily's boyfriend from being known by her father, two girls purposely make their words implicit. Though BLACK and PUPPY do not make any sense in literal meaning in following utterances, both Lily and Lucy can understand well with each other. Since BLACK and PUPPY are based on shared knowledge about Lily's boyfriend, her father who did not participate in previous conversations will be naturally excluded in this talking. When outsiders fail to catch the speakers' actual meaning, privacy in the conversation is successfully protected.

To sum up, taking their own privacy into consideration, people try to speak in an indirect way.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, different theories account for indirectness differently. Speech Act Theory regards it as one means of performing speech act, while Grice's pragmatic theory treats it as its apparent violation. And in the Relevance Theory, indirectness is a strategy employed to achieve more cognitive effects.

In addition, several universal factors such as social distance, power, rights and obligations are believed to de-

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International Journal of Intelligent Information and Management Science
ISSN: 2307-0692, Volume 8, Issue 4, August, 2019

termine the degree of indirectness. Also, other factors concerning cultural variations may affect the way people employ and perceive indirectness.

Most importantly, speakers intentionally speak in an indirect way on account of their communicative or social demands. There are three possible underlying motivations for speakers to employ indirectness: the need for making language polite, the need for expressing their emotions or stance and the need for protecting privacy.

All in all, indirectness is a theoretically reasonable behavior and is universal in all languages. Although it can be very problematic and culture-specific, it is still necessary and justifiable to employ indirectness, for it is widely considered as the norm to achieve communicative or social goals.

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