



Motives of Indirectness in Daily Communication

-- An Asian Perspective

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Abstract

Indirectness is often used in our daily communication as a major communicative skill to keep a harmonious interpersonal relationship. From an Asian perspective, this paper is to discuss the various motives of indirectness, such as: politeness, self-protection, humor, rejection or denial, etc.

Keywords: Indirectness, Politeness, Self-protection

1. Introduction

In our daily communication, we always want to form and keep good relationships with others, avoid embarrassment, misunderstanding or friction, and maintain interpersonal and social harmony. So, proper words (or behaviors) in proper places at the proper time to the right person is the highest rule in interpersonal communication. For this concern, we always draw on various communicative skills, of which, the use of indirectness is very much valued. Read the following examples please:

(1) "Frankly, I think you're boring."

(2) "I'm terribly sorry. I have to leave you alone now."

Why do we seldom hear people speak (1) so honestly? Unless you want to end a relationship, you do not tell another person what you think of her or him like this. In our daily communication, people do not always talk out what they really think about others, especially some unpleasant things. Usually they use some strategies to mitigate the force of their unpleasant words in order to avoid embarrassment, conflict, or friction so as to make the conversation go on smoothly, and also maintain a good, harmonious relationship.

2. Definition of Indirectness and its types

Communication is studied as the means of transmitting ideas, and the main means of communication among people are those that involve the use of words—oral communication and written communication. There is, however, another form of communication, which we all use most of the time, usually without knowing it. It is sometimes called body language, or non-verbal communication. What we are going to discuss in this thesis is the indirectness in oral and non-verbal communication

Searle (1975) once gave a definition for indirectness as "those cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by ways of performing another" In my paper, the definition of indirectness is much broader. And I'd like to give my own definition of indirectness as follows: Indirectness is the means in which one meaning is conveyed indirectly through utterances or non-verbal behaviors in order to achieve certain goal, or the means in which one's intent is revealed in a roundabout way.

Indirectness can occur either between two parties (the speaker and the hearer), or between more than two participants through verbal or non-verbal means. What should be noted here is that the speaker can either convey his intention indirectly to his addressee or convey his intention through his addressee to the third party. In the latter case, the speaker can express his meaning either directly or indirectly. Any way, it is also a strategy of indirectness to show one's idea, and to achieve certain goal.

In his speech act theory, Searle (1975) took the line that there are basically two types of indirectness: conventional indirectness and non-conventional indirectness. Conventional indirectness refers to those utterances which are standardized to perform only those acts conventionally designated for certain functional purposes which are not assigned to them in their grammatical forms (Searle, 1975). In the case of "Can you pass the salt?" both the means, i.e., the kind of ability that is used as an indirect utterance, and the form, i.e., the exact wording (e.g., "can you" as opposed to "are you able to") are conventionalized to signal the illocutionary force.

The second type of indirectness, non-conventional indirectness, also referred to as "hints", comprises those utterances, which are ambiguous on either prepositional content or illocutionary force or both. For example, by replying "I have to study for an exam" to an invitation to a movie, the literal meaning of the utterance and the intended meaning, i.e., refusal, do not match. There is no systematic relation between the utterance and rejecting a proposal as there is between "can you pass the salt" and its directive illocution. Its meaning is very much context embedded. Non-conventional indirectness is pragmatically vague, heterogeneous in realization, high in deniability potential and infinite in number (Searle, 1975; Grice, 1975).

As a strategy in communication to achieve certain goal, indirectness is not only widespread in oral communication, but also in non-verbal communication. Indirectness is a broad term, which can have a variety of facets and can underlie phenomena such as irony, metaphor, and understatement. In a sense, all interpretation in context is indirect; consequently, 'a full understanding of conversational organization will have to await an adequate account of indirect communication' (Brown and Levinson, 1978: 217).

3. Motives of Indirectness

3.1 Indirectness for politeness

If speakers always said what they meant, then there would be few problems for speech act theory of discourse analysis, and obviously fewer misunderstandings. There are, however, various reasons which lead interactants to express themselves indirectly, in some cultures perhaps more than in others. The motives for a speaker to employ indirectness in conversation have also been examined. One widely discussed motives is politeness, regard for face, and face management. Those scholars such as Leech, Lakoff, and Brown and Levinson, etc., have done a lot of research to investigate the use of indirectness in people's interaction. Their approaches are precisely those, which have shifted the identification of indirectness with politeness into the center of discussion on the basis of their interpretation of Seale (1975) and Grice (1975). They related indirectness to politeness, regarding it as a means to be polite. For example, Leech observed that the relationship between indirectness and politeness could be very complicated. The social distance between the speaker and the hearer, and the need to feel accepted by other people, can also have a significant effect on how we interpret the politeness of an utterance, and indeed how we structure our own utterance. A number of people, Searle in particular, have repeatedly stated that politeness is the chief motives behind indirect language use (Searle, 1975; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Disagreement exists and is supported by these studies of non-conventional indirectness, which maintain that it is not so much an issue of politeness, but high degree of deniability potential that underlies the use of indirectness. Anyway, in most cases, politeness is the most basic motives of indirectness. As for the relationship between indirectness and politeness, it is really complicated. We will make a further study in details in chapter3.

Besides the motives of politeness, indirectness is also used as a means of self-protection in language representative of particular culture and as a means of conveying denial, advice, humor, etc. There are still a lot of other reasons for which people decide to be indirect: teasing and joking, irony, lack of confidence, or even sarcasm and rudeness. Indirect speech acts are involved in too many different contexts to be accounted for by one i.e. politeness, or one main, motive force. Now, let us have a look at some factors beneath the use of indirectness.

3.2 Indirectness for Self-protection

Goffman firstly raised the notion of "face" in the later 50s. According to Goffman, "face" is a sacred thing for every human being, an essential factor communicators all have to pay attention to; face wants are reciprocal, i.e. if one wants his face cared for, he should care for other people's face (Goffman, 1959). This calls to mind that concise comprehensive rule in Scripture: Do upon all men as you would they should do upon you. So all the people try to protect the face of others, and at the same time save their own. In fact, whether one can save his face or not is in the control of others. If one does not want to lose his face, the safest way is not to damage the face of others. Therefore, the ultimate goal of not offending others is for self-protection. Indirectness is a way to show politeness to others and it is

used in many speech acts, such as request, invitation, etc. in case the possible rejection or conflict occurs. For example:

Could you possibly lend me your bike this afternoon?

If one wants to borrow something from others, the conventional indirectness of a question form is usually used. The speaker is technically asking permission to make a request. By being indirect, the speaker is making it less obvious that he expects the hearer to comply. On the surface, at least, this provides greater freedom for the hearer to refuse. Even if the hearer refuses, he will use polite language so as not to cause embarrassment of the requester, such as “Sorry, I will use it this afternoon”. However, it is another case if the requester asks in a direct and usually rude manner, such as:

Lend me your bike this afternoon.

With the imperative form, the speaker actually issues an order. It sounds rather impolite, abrupt and even insolent. What is more, it may cause antipathy in the requestee towards to speaker. As a result, the requestee will not be friendly to the requester either by showing him an indifferent face, or just says: “No, I do not want to lend it to you.” On hearing this, the requester will certainly get embarrassed and feel his face lost. So, indirectness is very important for self-protection.

3.3 Indirectness for Humor

Misunderstanding can occur when the hearer has miscalculated the intended illocution. And the speaker sometimes deliberately flouts the Cooperative Principle to imply more than the literal meaning. These often form the basis of humor. Read the following examples:

(1) Customer: Waiter! There is a fly in my soup.

(2) Waiter: Do not worry; there is no extra charge.

In this rather awful joke, the customer’s illocutionary meaning is really a complaint. But as the word “fly” has another meaning, the waiter deliberately misunderstands it and flouts the Maxim of Relevance in the Cooperative Principle. He takes it as a praise in order to avoid mentioning the fact, turns away from the potential conflicts, thus creates a sense of humor.

Humor is a kind of civilization cultivated by people when facing the common predicament in their lives. It enables us to express our sincerity, generosity and kindness in a light way. The power of humor lies not only in making people laugh, but also in lubricating the interpersonal relationship, showing one’s friendliness and tolerance towards others; eliminating miseries and troubles so as to be optimistic and open-minded; promoting one’s self-restraint and creating a meaningful life. Read the following dialogue in Chinese:

Gu ke: Wo de cai hai mei you hao ma?

Fuwuyuan: Nin ding le shen ma cai?

Gu ke: Zha wo niu.

Fu wu yuan: Ao, wo qu chu fang kan kan, qing nin shao deng pian ke.

Gu ke(sheng qi de shuo): Wo yi jing deng le ban xiao shi le.

Fu wu yuan: Zhe shi yin wei wo niu shi xing dong chi huan de dong wu.

Liang ren dou xiao le.

(Zhai zi Peng Zeng’an, 1998)

Customer: Is my dish ready?

Waiter: What have you ordered?

Customer: Fried nails.

Waiter: Oh, I will go to the kitchen and have a look. Would you
Please wait for a moment?

Customer: (in anger) I’ve already waited for half an hour.

Waiter: You know, Sir, snails are slow in movement...

The two laughed.

(Quoted in Peng Zeng’an, 1998)

This frequently occurs in restaurants where customers get impatient because their ordered dishes take too long a time. If the waiter says indifferently “Your dish hasn’t been ready yet. So what can I do”, on hearing this, the customer might fly into fury or even start a quarrel. It may damage the reputation of the restaurant. The waiter mentioned above carefully made use of the indirectness strategy in language, flouting the maxim of relevance, changing the topic delicately, thus creating a humorous atmosphere where the language is separated from reality. You see the indirectness can result in

humor, which in turn can maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship and avoid potential conflict.

3.4 Indirectness for Rejection or Denial

When you refuse other people's requests, disagree with their points of view, or just want to state your own opinions, you should be very careful about your expressions, avoiding using direct forms of rejection, or showing disagreement openly. In this case, one common strategy of language use is not to give out any explicit expressions of rejection or denial, but to show the reasons for it. This is an indirect way to express one's meaning in order to save the face of both sides, and avoid embarrassment. Because you do not give direct refuse or rejection, you need not apologize; on the other hand, if you reject others directly, you need explain or apologize more or less, bring about unnecessary trouble in conversational communication. Sometimes people just express a sense of negative meaning in an indirect way, revealing one's wit and humor. For example,

(1) A: Let us go to the park this afternoon.

B: I have classes this afternoon.

(2) A: I've found a model for you. How do you think about her?

B: It'll be perfect if she was a bit taller.

In (1), B's answer is just to state a fact, that is, an assertive. But in the specific context, its illocutionary meaning is in fact a rejection: Since I have classes this afternoon, I will have no time to go to the park. His words explain the reason for the rejection and are much more acceptable to the inviter than a direct rejection "No, I won't", which sounds much rude, and unsuitable. In (2), B does not state his negative meaning directly, but gives a hope, but in fact, his illocutionary meaning is "She is too short. I am not satisfied." B's way of expression offers room for A to infer his meaning, and also mitigates the force of denial.

In everyday life, people often express their negative meaning indirectly. It will sound more witty and pleasant, and sometimes emphatic. Read the following examples:

(3) How could I do that?

(= It is impossible that I should do that.)

(4) Catch me doing that.

(= I shall not do that.)

(5) Was ever such nonsense written?

(= Never was such nonsense written.)

One point should be noted here, that is, the implied negative meaning of the three sentences can only be inferred in specific context. Example (3) can be found in such a context: The speaker was blamed for what he had nothing to do. He then used a *wh*-question to assure his innocence, which is in fact an assertive. Example (4) can be found in such a context: When the speaker was stealing some apples in an orchard, the owner caught him on the spot. In order to get out of trouble, he used an imperative sentence with the illocutionary meaning of a promise. In this way, he indirectly admitted his wrong doings and stated his promise. Example (5) can occur in such a context: The teacher was annoyed by the student's bad writing and then used the question form to express his dissatisfaction or blame indirectly.

4. Conclusion

Indirectness, as an effective communicative skill, is widely used to achieve certain goals. When people speak or behave indirectly, they must have various purposes or motives beneath, which need our attention to find out. And of course, there are still many more factors beneath the use of indirectness, which need further research.

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