Indirectness in Discourse: What Does It Do in Conversation?

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Introduction

This paper tries to explore the various aspects of indirectness in conversational discourse. In the beginning, the theoretical frameworks for the analysis of indirectness are explored by examining Grice's theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principles, Ervin Goffman's theory of face, the application of the idea of face to politeness by Brown and Levinson, and Deborah Tannen's theory of conversational style of message and metamessage.

Secondly, different functions of indirectness in conversational interaction will be explored in the light of these analyses. In particular, avoidance of confrontation, manipulation of information, joking, and understatement will be examined as manifestations of violations of Grice's cooperative principles. Cultural differences of indirectness will also be explored.

I. Theoretical Frameworks for Indirectness in Conversation

1. Conversational Implicature

According to Grice (1975), conversational implicature plays an important role in our personal interactions. In conversation, we usually understand what others are saying even when people do not express their intentions straightforwardly. Grice provides a theory which explains how we correctly interpret what others are implying by universal conventions in human interaction which are called cooperative principles. These

principles explain how hearers are able to interpret speakers' intentions. Grice calls such principles conversational maxims, which are rewritten by Levinson (1983) as follows:

The Co-operative Principle
make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged
The Maxim of Quality
try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically: (i) do not say what you believe to be false (ii) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
The Maxim of Quantity
(i) make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange
(ii) do not make your contribution more informative than is required
The Maxim of Relevance
make your contributions relevant
The Maxim of Manner
be perspicuous, specifically:
(i) avoid obscurity
(ii) avoid ambiguity
(iii) be brief
(iv) be orderly

In short, these maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, co-operative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information. (Levinson: 102-3).

It would be of particular interest to us to see what kind of communication will result when one or more than one of these maxims are violated. Before we turn to this question, we will examine the theory of face by Ervin Goffman in relation to the theory of politeness by Brown and Levinson. (1987)

2. Face and Politeness

Ervin Goffman's theory of face in human interaction explains why we say things indirectly. Brown and Levinson (1987) make use of the theory in explaining politeness expressions, which I review briefly in the following to show how closely it is related to indirectness in conversation.

Face is defined as an individual's self esteem. It has two aspects, namely negative and positive face. Negative face is 'the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions' and positive face is 'the desire (in some respects) to be approved of'. (Brown and Levinson:13)

When we interact with others in society, it is necessary to keep one's own face or to avoid threatening another's face. In order to avoid these face-threatening acts (abbreviated as FTA's), we try to employ politeness strategies in our interactions. Brown and Levinson (1987) classify different kinds of such politeness strategies used according to the ways we react to FTA's. They also point out that the determinants of the kinds of politeness strategies used are the following three sociological factors: the relative power of the hearer over the speaker, the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, and the ranking of the imposition in doing the face-threatening act. (Brown and Levinson:15-16) And it is clear that politeness necessarily involves indirectness.

When a face-threatening act is involved in our interaction, we make a decision whether or not we should execute it. If we decide to do it, we can either do it directly, i.e. 'on record' by Brown and Levinson's term, or do it 'off record', which means it is done indirectly. If we do it without paying any consideration to the hearer, we do it 'baldly'. If we try to reduce the face-threatening effect to the hearer, we use either positive politeness or negative politeness. Positive politeness means that the speaker tries to save the hearer's positive face by reducing the distance between them. By negative politeness, on the other hand, the speaker tries to keep the hearer's negative face by valuing the hearer's personal territory. (Brown and Levinson: 68-71)

Observing Grice's cooperative principles in the light of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, we understand that face plays a very important role in the kind of expressions we choose to take. Especially, when the speaker tries to do an FTA but tries to keep negative face or positive face of the hearer, politeness strategy is used. In the following, in order to see how individuals or cultures differ in choosing these strategies, Deborah Tannen's theory of conversational style will be examined.

3. Message and Metamessage

Tannen (1984) develops her theory of conversational style by taking R. Lakoff's theory of politeness as a model. According to Tannen, R. Lakoff's Rules of Politeness consist of the following three principles:

1. Don't impose (Distance)
2. Give options (Deference)
3. Be friendly (Camaraderie) (Tannen: 11)

Tannen explains that the choice of one principle results in a particular style, which is indicated in parentheses. That is, Rule 1 states that we keep distance from others by not imposing. In order to keep distance from others, she points out that we tend to use formal expressions or use technical vocabulary to exclude personal emotions. In Brown and Levinson's terms, Rule 1 would be equivalent to negative politeness.

The second principle, deference is characterized by saying things hesitantly, by not stating one's will clearly or by using euphemisms. It involves the status difference of the speaker and the hearer, and the speaker yields to the power of the hearer by leaving the option of decision to the hearer. Tannen points out that women often behave in this way to show consideration to others, or to leave the decision to others. This strategy is also related to negative face in Brown and Levinson's sense and involves indirectness.

The third principle, camaraderie, on the other hand, emphasizes equality between the speaker and the hearer, and it enhances closeness between them. By using Brown and Levinson's term, this strategy enhances positive face of the speaker and the hearer. In this principle, indirectness can be also employed when the speaker and the hearer understand each other completely and there is no need to talk. In this case, indirectness brings rapport to them.

By employing R. Lakoff's theory of politeness as a basis for her analysis, Tannen (1989) clarifies the role of indirectness in conversation as follows:

> A fundamental aspect of language is what literary analysts call ellipsis and analysts of conversation call indirectness (or, in formal pragmatics, implicature): conveying unstated meaning. (Tannen 1989: 23)

According to her, indirectness is always present and indispensable in conversational interaction. She explains what kind of functions indirect expressions play in our conversation by using R. Lakoff's theory and by linking it with that of Brown and Levinson:

> Lakoff (1973, 1979) describes and explores the ways that conversationalists typically do not say exactly what they mean. Indirectness is preferred for two main reasons: 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. In addition, by requiring the listener or reader to fill in unstated meaning, indirectness contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking. Brown and Levinson ([1978] 1987) present a formal model for representing the systematic ways that speakers avoid making their meaning explicit. (Tannen 1989:23)

It is interesting to note that indirectness not only increases distance between the speakers but also can enhance rapport. Tannen shows how R. Lakoff's theory of politeness and Goffman's theory of face moulded Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, in which negative face and positive face are explained as representations of the defensive function and the rapport function of indirectness respectively. She also relates direct and indirect communication to Brown and Levinson's terms as follows:

> Brown and Levinson (1978), building on Lakoff's work on politeness and Goffman's on deference as well as Goffman's (1967) notion of 'face', identify two aspects of politeness semantics as negative and positive face. Their notion of negative face corresponds to Lakoff's defensive function of indirectness or distance strategy... Brown and Levinson's notion of positive face corresponds to camaraderie and to the rapport function of indirectness....Negative and positive politeness strategies grow out of these face wants....Finally, Brown and Levinson's terms on record and off record correspond to what has been referred to by others as direct and indirect communication. (Tannen 1984: 15)

In developing her own theory of conversational style, Tannen refers to indirectness in the conversational interaction including silence as metamessage. Message represents, on the other hand, the information content of the interaction. She discusses how we use metamessage in interaction with others in politeness expressions, complimenting others, confronting others, building up rapport, etc. in her analysis of conversational style (Tannen 1986). She claims that each of us has conflicting needs to be independent from others and to be involved with others at the same time, and we are always balancing these contradictory needs by making use of message and metamessage.

In the next part, indirectness in conversational discourse will be analyzed by utilizing the theoretical frameworks that have been reviewed in this section.

II. Functions of Indirectness in Conversation

1. Violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle

In the real world, people do not always follow the cooperative principle. People often try not to give information which is unfavorable to themselves or to the hearers. When they are questioned about the information which they do not want to release, their face is at risk. It is not easy for them to be sincere and violations of Grice's maxims occur.

Brown and Levinson (213-229) classify the ways of doing FTA's indirectly according to the kind of violation of Grice's maxims: when the relevance maxim is violated, people give hints, association clues, or presuppose. For example, people often give hints instead of making requests:

> It's cold in here. (c.i. Shut the window) (215)

Violation of the quantity maxim results in understating, overstating, or tautologies. An example of understating is as follows:

A: What a marvellous place you have here.
B: Oh I don't know, it's a place. (219)

Violation of the quality maxim results in using contradictions, irony, metaphors, and rhetorical questions. An example of irony is:

Beautiful weather, isn't it!
(To a postman drenched in a rainstorm.) (222)

Violation of the manner maxim results in ambiguous, vague, over-generalized, incomplete expressions.

Perhaps someone did something naughty. (226)

In the following, we will observe a quotation from a Japanese newspaper as an illustration of a violation of Grice's maxims. In the Nikkei Newspaper on February 17, 1993, there was a full page record of the hearing at the budget committee in the Japanese House of Representatives. The former secretary of the LDP Ichiro Ozawa was questioned how much he knew about and if he was involved in the 0.5 billion yen alleged bribery by Sagawa Express given to the former Vice-Premier Shin Kanemaru. Ozawa avoids giving specific answers to the questions and repeats such expressions as "I do not remember," "I don't know," like the following quotation (The original is in Japanese, and it is translated into English here):

Takazawa: Who were present at the meeting?
Ozawa: I do not remember very well. It involves people other than myself, and it is hard to be accurate. I would rather not answer the question.
Takazawa: Do you still have that meeting?
Ozawa: I don't know .
(*Nihon Keizai Shinbun,* Feb.17, 1993)

Since it is not particularly necessary for the questioner Takazawa to be concerned about Ozawa's face at the hearing, Ozawa's negative face is threatened by being asked about the bribery. In order to save his face, Ozawa tries not to release any information which is unfavorable to him or Kanemaru. This is a violation of the maxims of quantity in that he does not give enough information and of quality in that he is not sincere when he answers the questions. He is also violating the Maxim of Manner by answering ambiguously.

From looking at this interaction, Ozawa does not seem to feel that he must be sincere with the questioner when his face is threatened. He sounds more concerned

about keeping the secret for the sake of the influential man Kanemaru in the Liberal Democratic Party, to which he also belongs. By looking at this kind of interaction, we understand that indirectness in this case is employed in order to keep Ozawa's negative face. And he succeeds in doing so by violating the maxims of quantity, quality, and manner.

As we have observed, people try not to give much information to the questioners who threaten their face. In such cases, we often encounter violations of Grice's maxims because people are neither concerned about being cooperative nor about keeping camaraderie in the conversation. They try to keep their face and their independence as much as they can.

When the face of people of higher status is threatened, it is easier for them to ignore their responsibility to respond sincerely to the questioner. They keep their negative face by giving very vague answers such as "I do not recall," "I cannot answer the question," etc. Tannen's analysis of Power and Solidarity very clearly explains what kind of relationship is held between the speaker and the hearer when Grice's maxims are violated.

2. Power and Solidarity

Tannen (1986) discusses power in relation to involvement and independence.

> The term power and solidarity capture the way we juggle involvement and independence in the real world. Power has to do with controlling others--an extension of involvement -- and resisting being controlled -- and extension of independence: the desire not to be imposed on. (93)

She points out further that in real life "power can masquerade as solidarity" (94). She illustrates this by an example of a father who gives an indirect order to his daughter. The father does not straightforwardly tell his daughter not to go out at night but makes her realize that her father really does not want her to do so. He makes her stay home without explicitly telling her to follow his order. This method of manipulation is often used in daily life as researchers of indirect speech acts show. In a way, it is an example of tact, and makes our life and interaction go smoothly.

However, indirectness sometimes damages communication when it is used only for selfish aims to manipulate others. In a society where people are sensitive to the rank order of the people in a group as in Japan, indirectness is often employed by people of higher status to control people of lower status. In such situations, it is face-threatening

for people of lower status to say something which may threaten a person of higher status. Although the status difference is present in any society, this tendency is stronger in Japanese society than countries where equality and fairness are more valued.

Wardhaugh of the University of Toronto has pointed out one characteristic of Japanese society, which seems to illustrate its power relationship (personal communication). He told me that he had experienced a staff meeting at a Japanese university in which one Japanese professor kept talking for about 15 minutes. Wardhaugh commented to me that no professors at a staff meeting in any North American university would allow their colleague to monopolize the turn for such a long time. North American universities and Japanese universities seem to differ in regard to their consciousness of power and status.

3. Joking as Indirect Expression

Joking is often used for the purpose of enhancing camaraderie especially in western countries. For instance, a joke at the beginning of a speech breaks the ice between the speaker and the audience. As Brown and Levinson point out "joking is a basic positive-politeness technique" (1987:124). In Japan joking is also used for people to feel that they share the same value and it is used to maintain each other's positive face.

However, the occasions in which Japanese people joke seem to be different from western countries. In Japan, joking is more often used in private talks between close friends. In order to illustrate the differences of occasions in which joking is employed between Japan and English speaking countries, some of my personal experiences will be shown in the following.

A Japanese friend of my husband who resigned from a Japanese company to work for an American company came to visit our home in Japan recently. He told us various differences between the States and Japan. He said he always tries to make his colleague or assistants laugh by telling jokes. He said that it is a very important way to get along with his colleagues in American society. Another Japanese friend of mine in Canada has told me about his similar experience. He said he always tells jokes to get along with his neighbors. In Japan, it is not necessary to be good at joking to be successful in business or to get along with neighbors.

Recently in London, I went to a restaurant with several people including a Japanese scholar who had been living in the UK for a long time. When we were ready to leave the restaurant, one of them talked to the attendant of the cloak room as follows:

Attendant:	Yes, sir.
Japanese scholar:	Mink fur coat for me.
Attendant:	(laughs)

Japanese people would seldom tell a joke in such a situation in Japan.

More than 20 years ago, I was trying to change planes from an international flight to a domestic flight at Chicago O'Hare Airport, which is quite spacious. I was waiting for a bus which would take me to the domestic flight terminal with my big suitcase and wondering if I was waiting at the right place. I was very nervous because I was neither used to travelling alone nor speaking in English. A bus stopped and I asked the bus driver if the bus was going to the terminal I wanted to go to. The driver said "no" with a serious face, and I was at a loss where to go with my big suitcase. But suddenly he laughed and said,"Come on in!" Then I realized that he was just joking to relieve my tension. I had not imagined that a bus driver would tell a joke to a customer.

Just a month ago during the entrance examination period in my college, all of the staff of the English department gathered in a big reading room and were marking

examination sheets. Everybody was concentrating on our work not to make any errors in marking. Suddenly outside of the room, we heard a very strange cry "cock-a-doodle-doo!" and found that a British colleague was making that sound. We all laughed. It is unimaginable for a Japanese to do the same thing in the same situation. All these examples of joking are intended to reduce tension or to avoid face threat, and to keep positive face with others.

As we have seen, Japanese sometimes make effort to learn when to use jokes to relieve tension and to build up camaraderie in western countries. Japanese people also use joking to enhance camaraderie, but at formal occasions, joking is seldom used and people seem to prefer keeping their negative face to keeping positive face by way of telling jokes. Japanese seem to have other occasions and ways to enhance bonds in the group.

4. Indirectness as a Japanese Way of Communication

When an FTA is involved in our interaction, we have observed that indirectness is used in keeping negative or positive face of the speaker or the hearer. At times, as shown in the example of interaction between Ozawa and Kitazawa, indirectness helps keep only the negative face of the speaker and very little information is given to the hearer. This type of indirectness is employed when power relation is involved between the speaker and the hearer as explained by Tannen's theory of power and solidarity.

However, indirectness can be used to keep the face of the speaker and the hearer as shown in the examples of joking. Joke conveys no more information than a negative politeness strategy as illustrated above, but it at least brings rapport between the speaker and the hearer. I have pointed out that the Japanese and Westerners differ in the situations in which joking is used to relieve tension.

However, indirectness and power are not necessarily linked to each other in Japanese society. As is often pointed out, indirectness is preferred to directness in many other aspects. A copy writer Chris Mosdell very cleverly illustrates this Japanese tendency to value indirectness by referring to a Haiku poem by Basho in an attempt to compare the image sell or the soft sell of Japanese advertisement with the fact sell or the hard sell of American advertisement:

> Today, a Japanese commercial uses a totally different approach to its American counterpart; one that reflects not only its own modern culture, but one could even say the 'ancient soul' of its people. Basho's famous poem is a good illustrating point:
>
> "Furuike ya, kawazu tobikomu, mizuno oto"
> Breaking the silence
> Of an ancient pond,
> A frog jumped into water--

A deep resonance.
Its success and beauty rely on the "mood" it creates, the picture it paints and the image that is there "between the lines". This poem shows essentially an 'understatement' and is in fact the essence of the Japanese culture.
(Mosdell:4-5)

When there is no face-threatening act involved in the interaction, the Japanese tendency to value understatement is not hazardous to communication. People understand each other without saying much. But when face-threatening acts and the power relation are involved, the Japanese way of valuing indirectness can prevent the issues from being fully and clearly discussed, because little information is exchanged in order to avoid confrontation and it usually works favorably only to the people in power.

Summary and Conclusion

In the theory of pragmatics, indirectness in communication is analyzed as conversational implicature. When a face-threatening act is involved, people employ conversational implicature and often violate the cooperative principle of conversation. In order to keep face, people use positive politeness or negative politeness, both of which are representations of indirectness in conversation.

In conversational interaction, indirectness is realized in various ways such as avoidance of confrontation, joking, overstating, or understating. When there is no face-threatening act involved and people share the same values or background, understatement is highly appreciated. But when face-threatening acts and the power relation are present, indirectness hinders people from communicating effectively.

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