

Indirect Speech Acts

Read: Searle 1975

Indirection in general

- Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight.
Student Y: I have to study for an exam.
 - I have to eat popcorn tonight.
I have to tie my shoes
- Primary vs. secondary (literal) illocutionary act.
- Steps in the derivation:
 - Step 1: I have made a proposal to Y, and in response he has made a statement to the effect that he has to study for an exam (facts about the conversation).
 - Step 2: I assume that Y is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his remark is intended to be relevant (principles of conversational conversation).

- Step 3: A relevant response must be one of acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, further discussion, etc. (theory of speech acts).
- Step 4: But his literal utterance was not one of these, and so was not a relevant response (inference from Steps 1 and 3).
- Step 5: Therefore, he probably means more than he says. Assuming that his remark is relevant, his primary illocutionary point must differ from his literal one (inference from Steps 2 and 4).
- Step 6: I know that studying for an exam normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening, and I know that going to the movies normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening (factual background information).
- Step 7: Therefore, he probably cannot both go to the movies and study for an exam in one evening (inference from Step 6).
- Step 8: A preparatory condition on the acceptance of a proposal, or on any other commissive, is the ability to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).

- Step 9: Therefore, I know that he has said something that has the consequence that he probably cannot consistently accept the proposal (inference from Steps 1, 7, and 8).
 - Step 10: Therefore, his primary illocutionary point is probably to reject the proposal (inference from Steps 5 and 9).
- Conclusion is probabilistic, note:
 - I have to study for an exam, but let's go to the movies anyhow.
 - I have to study for an exam, but I'll do it when get home from the movies.
- General form of explanation for indirect illocutionary acts:
 - Mutual background information.
 - Speech act theory.
 - General principles of conversation.

Indirect Directives

- Group 1: Sentences concerning H's ability to perform A:
 - **Can you** reach the salt?
Can you pass the salt?
Could you be a little more quiet?
You could be a little more quiet.
You can go now (this may also be a permission = you may go now).
Are you able to reach the book on the top shelf?
Have you got change for a dollar?
- Group 2: Sentences concerning S's wish or want that H will do A:
 - **I would like you** to go now.
I want you to do this for me, Henry.
I would/should appreciate it if you would/could do it for me.

I would/should be most grateful if you would/could help us out.

I'd rather you didn't do that any more.

I'd be very much obliged if you would pay me the money back soon.

I hope you'll do it.

I wish you wouldn't do it.

- Group 3: Sentences concerning H's doing A:
 - Officers will henceforth wear ties at dinner.
Will you quit making that awful racket?
Would you kindly get off my foot?
Won't you stop making that noise soon?
Aren't you going to eat your cereal?
- Group 4: Sentences concerning H's desire or willingness to do A:
 - **Would you be willing** to write a letter of recommendation for me?
Do you want to hand me that hammer over there on the table?
Would you mind not making so much noise?

Would it be convenient for you to come on Wednesday?
Would it be too much (trouble) for you to pay me the money
next Wednesday?

Group 5: Sentences concerning reasons for doing A:

- **You ought** to be more polite to your mother.
- You should** leave immediately.
- Must you** continue hammering that way?
- Ought you** to eat so much spaghetti?
- Should you** be wearing John's tie?
- You had better** go now.
- Hadn't you better** go now?
- Why not** stop here?
- Why don't you** try it just once?
- Why don't you** be quiet?
- It would be better for you (for us all) if you would** leave the room.
- It wouldn't hurt if you** left now.
- It might help if you** shut up.
- It would be better if you** gave me the money now.
- It would be a good idea if you** left town.
- We'd all be better off if you'd** just pipe down a bit.

You're standing on my foot.

I can't see the movie screen while you have that hat on.

How many times have I told you (must I tell you) not to eat with your fingers?

I must have told you a dozen times not to eat with your mouth open.

If I have told you once I have told you a thousand times not to wear your hat in the house.

- Group 6: Sentences embedding one of these elements inside another; also sentences embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these contexts.
 - **Would you mind awfully if I asked you if you could** write me a letter of recommendation?
Would it be too much if I suggested that you could possibly make a little less noise?
Might I ask you to take off your hat?
I hope you won't mind if I ask you if you could leave us alone.
I would appreciate it if you could make less noise.

Some Putative Facts

- Fact 1: The sentences in question do not have an imperative force as part of their meaning.
- Fact 2: The sentences in question are not ambiguous as between an imperative illocutionary force and a nonimperative illocutionary force.
- Fact 3: Notwithstanding Facts 1 and 2, these are standardly, ordinarily, normally--indeed, I shall argue, conventionally--used to issue directives.
- Fact 4: The sentences in question are not, in the ordinary sense, idioms.

- Fact 5: To say they are not idioms is not to say they are not idiomatic.
- Fact 6: The sentences in question have literal utterances in which they are not also indirect requests.
- Fact 7: In cases where these sentences are uttered as requests, they still have their literal meaning and are uttered with and as a having that literal meaning.
- Fact 8: It is a consequence of Fact 7 that when one of these sentences is uttered with the primary illocutionary point of a directive, the literal illocutionary act is also performed.

Felicity Conditions

	Directive (Request)	Commissive (Promise)
Preparatory condition	H is able to perform A.	S is able to perform A. H wants S to perform A.
Sincerity condition	S wants H to do A.	S intends to do A.
Propositional content condition	S predicates a future act A of H.	S predicates a future act A of S.
Essential condition	Counts as an attempt by S to H to do A.	Counts as the undertaking by S of an obligation to do A.

Generalizations

- Generalization 1: S can make an indirect request (or other directive) by either asking whether or stating that a preparatory conditions concerning H's ability to do A obtains.
- Generalization 2: S can make an indirect directive by either asking whether or stating that the propositional content condition obtains.
- Generalization 3: S can make an indirect directive by stating that the sincerity condition obtains, but not by asking whether it obtains.
- Generalization 4: S can make an indirect directive by either stating that or asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that H wants or wishes, etc. to do A, in which case he can only ask whether H wants, wishes, etc. to do A.

Steps to infer indirect request

(Can you pass the salt?)

- Step 1: Y has asked me a question as to whether I have the ability to pass the salt (fact about conversation).
- Step 2: I assume that he is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his utterance has some aim or point (principles of conversational cooperation).
- Step 3: The conversational setting is not such as to indicate a theoretical interest in my salt-passing ability (factual background information).
- Step 4: Furthermore, he probably already knows that the answer to the question is yes (factual background information). (This step facilitates the move to Step 5, but is not essential.)

- Step 5: Therefore, his utterance is probably not just a question. It probably has some ulterior illocutionary point (inference from Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4). What can it be?
- Step 6: A preparatory condition for any directive illocutionary act is the ability of H to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).
- Step 7: Therefore, X has asked me a question the affirmative answer to which would entail that the preparatory condition for requesting me to pass the salt is satisfied (inference from Steps 1 and 6).
- Step 8: We are now at dinner and people normally use salt at dinner; they pass it back and forth, try to get others to pass it back and forth, etc. (background information).
- Step 9: He has therefore alluded to the satisfaction of a preparatory condition for a request whose obedience conditions it is quite likely he wants me to bring about (inference from Steps 7 and 8).
- Step 10: Therefore, in the absence of any other plausible illocutionary point, he is probably requesting me to pass him the salt (inference from Steps 5 and 9).

Some Problems

- Problem 1: Why do some syntactical forms work better than others?
 - Do you want to do A?
Do you desire to do A?
 - Can you do A?
Are you able to do A?
- Some syntactical forms are idiomatic ways of speaking.
- Sometimes such idiomatic forms become entrenched in the language and become conventional ways to express that indirect speech act.

Some Problems (cont.)

- Problem 2: Why is there an asymmetry between the sincerity conditions and the others such that one can perform an indirect request only by asserting the satisfaction of a sincerity condition, but not by querying it, whereas you can assert or query the propositional content and preparatory conditions?
- It is odd to ask other people about their own psychological states, and odd to assert the existence of other people's psychological states in addressing them.

Some Problems (cont.)

- Problem 3: Specific syntactical forms:
 - *Why not stop here?*
 - Why does this form so often count as a suggestion?
 - Perhaps enumerating the reasons not to do something and finding a short list leads easily to the inference that nothing prevents the act from being done.
 - *Could/would you pass the salt?*
 - Why is this form used instead of *can/will*?
 - Perhaps there is an implicit if-clause: e.g. *if you will...*

Asserting the satisfaction of the sincerity conditions

- I am sorry I did not believe it. (an apology)
 - I think/believe he is in the next room. (an assertion)
 - I am so glad you won. (congratulations)
 - I intend to try harder next time, coach. (a promise)
 - I am grateful for your help. (thanks)
- NH comment: insofar as felicity conditions can be seen to be exploited like we've seen in indirect speech acts, the theory of felicity conditions is supported, i.e. validated, empirically.

Commissives (offer, promise)

- I. Sentences concerning the preparatory conditions:
 - A. That S is able to perform the act:
 - Can I help you?
I can do that for you?
I could get it for you.
Could I be of assistance?
 - B. That H wants S to perform the act:
 - Would you like some help?
Do you want me to go now, Sally?
Wouldn't you like me to bring some more next time I come?
Would you rather I came on Tuesday?
- II. Sentences concerning the sincerity condition:
 - I intend to do it for you.
I plan on repairing it for you next week.

- III. Sentences concerning the propositional content condition:
 - I will do it for you.
I am going to give it to you next time you stop by.
Shall I give you the money now?
- IV. Sentences concerning S's wish or willingness to do A:
 - I want to be of any help I can.
I'd be willing to do it (if you want me to).
- V: Sentences concerning (other) reasons for S's doing A:
 - I think I had better leave you alone.
Wouldn't it be better if I gave you some assistance?
You need my help, Cynthia.
- Hypothetical sentences:
 - If you wish any further information, just let me know.
If I can be of further assistance, I would be most glad to help.
If you need any help, call me at the office.

Generalizations

- Generalization 5: S can make an indirect commissive by either asking whether or stating that the preparatory condition concerning his ability to do A obtains.
- Generalization 6: S can make an indirect commissive by asking whether, though not by stating that, the preparatory condition concerning H's wish or want that S to do A obtains.
- Generalization 7: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, and in some forms by asking whether, the propositional content condition obtains.
- Generalization 8: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, but not by asking whether, the sincerity condition obtains.
- Generalization 9: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that or asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that S wants or desires to do A, in which he can only state but not ask whether he wants to do A.