Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

by Dr Ali W.Lafi

(Head of Translation Dept)

1.0 Introduction

Speech act theory is a comprehensive theory of linguistic communication. It is a theory of what a speaker and the listener have to know and to do if the former is to communicate with the latter through spoken discourse. The fundamentals of this theory, as Stelmann (1982:279) puts them, are as follows: Linguistic communication is more than merely saying something; it is saying something in a certain context, with certain intentions, and with the listener's recognition of what is said and of these intentions.

As Clark and Carlson (1982:35) point out: Speech acts cannot be fully understood without considering the hearers as well as the speakers. Speech acts are directed at real people, whose abilities to recognise put limits on what speakers can do with their utterances. There are direct speech acts as well as indirect ones. Misapplication of the indirectness principle can lead to communication disruption or even social corruption. For example, let us look at the utterance: You are tired. Go to bed. The utterance is only a polite way to suggest that the speaker himself is sleepy and wants to go to bed. An unsuspecting interlocutor, not used to such politeness, is likely to say: I am not tired, are you? The polite person, being polite, is obliged by reciprocity to say: I am not tired if you are not. This only means that in order for an indirect speech act to be effective, the listener has to be able to understand what the speaker means. Misapplication of the indirectness principle may promote corruption by people who over-anticipate the unexpressed needs of their superiors. But that is not the concern of the present research paper. What we are concerned with is the linguistic form and pragmatic function of both direct and indirect speech acts used by the interlocuters.

2.0 Direct and Indirect Speech Acts in Use

People talk for a purpose to assert beliefs, request help, promise action, express congratulations, or ask for information. Listeners would be remiss if they did not register this purpose and act accordingly. In normal circumstances, listeners record

beliefs, provide help, record promises, acknowledge congratulations, and provide information. In the process of comprehension, listeners figure out what a sentence is meant to express. They also register how the sentence is meant to carry forward the purpose of the speaker. They infer the underlined propositions and use them in the way speakers intend.

The fundamental function of language is communication. In this activity, there are three main elements: a speaker, a listener, and a signalling system or language. The signalling system must be one that speakers and listeners are both able to use. Communication begins with speakers. They decide, for example, to impart some information in a particular way. They then select signal. This signal is a particular utterance. They believe that it is appropriate and therefore they produce it. The listeners receive the signal which is the uttered sentence and take it for immediate use.

With that, one stage of communication is complete. The function of language is intimately bound up with the speakers' and listeners' mental activities during communication. The function of language is closely tied up in particular with the speakers' intentions, the ideas they want to convey, and the listeners current knowledge. First, speakers intend to have some effect on their listeners .In order for the speakers' intention to be appropriately understood, speakers must get listeners to recognise these intentions. The utterances used must therefore reflect these intentions. Secondly, speakers want to convey certain ideas, and to do this the sentences must also reflect the listeners' ways of thinking. Listeners have their own perspectives on and conceptions and misconceptions of objects, states, events, and facts. And thirdly, speakers must have some conception of what is on their listeners' minds at the moment. At the same time they should have an understanding of where they want the communication to lead. The sentences used must reflect these conceptions as well.

Once speakers have decided on a particular speech act, they have to decide what form it should take. One basis on which they make the selection is efficiency. Some forms are shorter and less cumbersome than others. A more usual basis, however, is interpretation. The indirect ways of expressing a speech act usually carry slightly different interpretations.

The varieties of indirect requests provide a good illustration. They differ mainly in their politeness:

1. Open the window.
2. I would like you to open the window.
3. Can you open the window?
4. Would you mind opening the window?
5. May I ask you whether or not you would mind opening the window?

These run the gamut of politeness from the first utterance to the fifth one. The first one is normally rude and authoritarian whereas the filth one is usually polite. Lakoff (1973) has argued that this variation comes about from two rules of politeness: avoid imposition, and give options. The first utterance is the most imposing and therefore, the least polite. Because it does not give options, it assumes the speaker has considerable authority over the listener. The second utterance gives the listener the option of whether or not to please the speaker. However, that is not very much of an option and so it also imposes, though not as much as the first utterance. The third utterance is a question and gives an explicit option. The listener can answer 'yes' or' no' to the question about the possibility of opening the window. It assumes little authority, imposes very little, and is therefore more polite than the preceding utterances. The fourth utterance goes one step beyond the third one and gives the listener the option of saying whether or not opening the window would be an imposition. The last utterance is ultra- polite. It requests permission even to ask the listener whether or not opening the window would be an imposition. So, to choose among the five utterances, speakers have to decide on several questions. What is their authority relative to the listener? Do they want to be rude or polite, and if so, to what degree? Should they give options? In an emergency, as during a fire or fight, they would not want to give options and would always shout 'open the window.'

Each sentence, taken as a whole, is designed to serve a specific function. It may be meant to inform the listeners, warn them, order them to do something, question them about a fact, or thank them for a gift or act of kindness. The function it serves is critical to communication. Speakers expect listeners to recognise the functions of the sentences they speak and to act accordingly. Whenever they ask a question, for example, they expect their listeners to realize that it is a request for some information.

If the listeners fail to appreciate this intention, they are judged as having misunderstood, even though they may have taken in everything else about the utterance. But just how is this function of sentences to be characterized? And how does each sentence convey its particular function?

These questions have been answered in part by Austin (1982) and Searle (1969) in their theory of speech acts. According to them, every time speakers utter a sentence, they are attempting to achieve something with the words. Speakers are performing the speech acts. What is meant by a speech act can be shown by such examples as:

(I) I hereby sentence you to five years in jail.

(2)   I   marry   you,   Mary,   to   this   gentleman,   Charles.
(3)   1   bet   you   fifty   dollars   the   Iraqi   team   will   win.
(4)   I   promise   to   pay   you   a   pound   of   flesh.
In each instance the speaker performs a speech act in the very utterance of the word. The judge's words in the first example constitute the formal act of sentencing a criminal. Properly speaking, the criminal would not have been sentenced without the words of the judge. He would not have been obliged to go to jail had the words been spoken by a teacher, for example. The minister's pronouncement in the second example constitutes the act of marrying the couple. Without the pronouncement, the ceremony would have been incomplete. Similarly, the football fan makes the bet by saying 'I bet you.' Analogously, Antonio in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* makes the promise by saying 'I promise you.' Before uttering these sentences the football fan and Antonio had not yet performed the acts of betting and promising. They have performed these acts by the end of their utterances. These four examples illustrate performative and direct speech acts. But there are other speech acts which are not overt or explicit as the ones mentioned above. They are called indirect speech acts. For example, although in English the standard way to command someone to do something is to use the imperative form, that is not the only way. The act can also be performed indirectly with declarative constructions, interrogative constructions and other special   devices,   as   illustrated   here:
Direct   Command: Open   the   door
Indirect   Command: Can   you   open   the   door?
            Would   you   mind   opening   the   door?
            The   door   should   be   open?
            Why   not   open   the   door?
            Haven't   you   forgotten   to   do   something?

I   would   prefer   the   door   open.
You   will   open   the   door   right   this   minute   or   else.
It's hot in here.

Under the right circumstances, each of these constructions could be used to get someone to open the door. Of course, the nine utterances differ in their politeness, directness, and so forth. Most other speech acts have alternative forms of expression too. There is a distinction, then, between direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts are those expressed by the constructions specifically designed for those acts. For example, an interrogative construction is meant to ask a question, a declarative construction is designed to make a statement, and an imperative construction is reserved for issuing orders. Indirect speech acts are those expressed by other constructions. The eight utterances under indirect commands above reveal to us that one can order someone to open the door through interrogatives as well as declaratives.

It is not easy to characterize the indirect correspondence between speech acts and sentence types. The sentence 'It's hot in here' could be used in different situations to assert that it is hot in the room, request someone to open the window, request someone to close the window, warn someone not to enter the room, and so on. But how do listeners decide which way the utterance is to be taken? And how do speakers select this sentence, confident that listeners will arrive at the right interpretation? Besides relying on an appropriate intonation pattern, speakers obviously depend heavily on the immediate situation to tell listeners which interpretation to select. And listeners obviously make use of this information. The immediate situation includes the time and place of conversation in addition to the topic. The context also involves factors like interpersonal relations, status, sex, age,   and   so   on.
Listeners interpret utterances in specific ways. It is possible, therefore, to characterize very roughly how listeners utilize sentences:

Step One; On hearing an utterance, listeners identify the speech act,

        propositional   content   and   thematic   content.
Step Two: They next search memory for information that matches the given

        information.
Step Three; Finally, depending, on the speech act, they deal with the new

        information.

a. if the utterance is an assertion, they add the new information to memory;

b. if the utterance is a yes/no question, they compare the new information with what is in memory and, depending on the match, answer yes or no;
c. if the utterance is a wh-question, they retrieve the wanted information from memory and compose an answer conveying that information;
d. if the utterance is a request, they carry out the action necessary to make the new information true.

Sentences can be used to inform people of something, ask them about something, warn them about or request them to do something. Each of these must have content to convey the ideas speakers want to. So a very important function of sentences is to specify the ideas around which a speech act is built. These ideas are conveyed by the propositional content, sometimes called the ideational content, of a sentence. Of course, if listeners are ever to grasp these ideas, this content must fit people's requirements for what is a proper idea. The propositional content of a sentence is nothing more than the combination of propositions it expresses. Propositions, as wholes, have one of three basic functions:
a.   they   denote   states   or   events;
b.   they   denote   facts   about   states   or   events;   and
c.   they   qualify   parts   of   other   propositions.
In short, the propositional structure of a sentence is used to denote the objects, states, events, and facts that make up the core ideas behind a sentence. Because the propositions themselves are not present in surface structure, it falls on the words, phrases, and clauses to make clear what propositions are being expressed. Speech itself is linear. Words follow one another in succession as they are uttered. Therefore, the expression of propositions is forced into a single line. And this is what makes sentences complex. For speakers the problem is how to express propositions in strings of words. For listeners the problem is how to reconstruct the underlined propositions.

At first it seems as if these judgements must be impossible. How could Charles Dickens, writing *David Copperfield* many decades ago, possibly know what is on people's minds as they read it now? The solution is quite simple. He introduces everything readers need to know as he goes around. He tells readers at least everything that is not part of common knowledge. He can then assume that readers know everything in the novel upto the current sentence. He can also assume that they don't otherwise know the story he is telling. With these two assumptions he can accurately gauge what readers do and don't know at each point of the novel. In everyday conversation this task is even easier. Speakers know not only what has been said, but also what is available to their listeners to see, hear, or feel.

In English, as in all languages, thematic structure has three main functions. The first is to convey given information and new information, the second subject and predicate, and the third frame and insert. Speakers must tailor their sentences to fit

what they think their listeners know. When people talk, they also tailor their sentences to suit themselves. They have something they want to talk about, and something they want to say about it. These functions are conveyed, respectively, by the subject and the predicate. In most sentences the subject is the given information and the predicate the new information. Speakers deliberately try to orient their listeners towards a particular area of knowledge. With this view on mind, they place a particular phrase at the beginning of a sentence. This phrase can be called a frame. Speakers then use the rest of the sentence progressively to narrow down what they are trying to say. The remainder of the sentence can be called an insert. In short, speakers have to decide what is to be subject and predicate, what is to be given information and new information, and what is to be frame and insert (Thorat 2000:47). Subject and predicate specify topic and comment, given and new information specify known and unknown information, frame and insert specify the framework of the utterance and its contents. Normally these three pairs of functions coincide.

When we talk about speech acts, we have to take into account the different categorizations of verbal acts propounded by linguistic philosophers and speech act theorists. Austin (1962) and Searle

 (1969) have elaborated on the different types of speech acts. For example, there are acts like commissives, directives, declarations or performatives and expressives. Another classification of speech acts talks about locution, illocution and perlocution. In addition to these categories, there are two broad or macro-classes such as direct and indirect speech acts. Commissives are acts like promises, commitments, undertakings, assurances, oaths and so on. Directives are acts like requests, orders, questions and so forth. Declaratives or performatives are those acts which are inseparable from the actual events and happenings. Thanking, congratulating, complimenting, etc. are instances of expressive acts.

One can analyze a play or a novel within the framework of these speech acts. For example, *Doctor Faustus* by Marlowe exemplifies almost all these speech acts. At the outset Doctor Faustus decides to abandon his academic pursuits in favour of magical practices. This resolution is an instance of commissive speech acts. He commits himself not to do one thing and start doing something else. The good and evil angels persuade him to pursue academic studies and to refrain from them respectively. Their admonitions are conflicting directives. Doctor Faustus's determination gets strengthened after his meeting with Valdes and Cornelius who assure him of wondrous potency. Their assurance is another case of commissive act. Faustus reaffirms his pledge to pursue black magic and this reaffirmation is another example of commissive speech act. Dr. Faustus declares his pleasure at the prospect and requests to see demonstrations of such powers. The declaration of pleasure and request for demonstrations are expressive and directive speech acts respectively. Doctor Faustus conjures up Mephistophilis and a devil who appear

before him. This is an example of perlocutionarily effective directive. Faustus expresses his pleasure over the execution of his new powers. This expression of delight is an expressive speech act. After these speech acts comes the most significant and crucial speech act. Doctor Faustus exchanges his soul for twenty four years of supreme supernatural powers. This final act is an example of commissive speech act.

Any novel could also be analyzed along the same lines. However, our purpose here is to cite a few examples from different discoursal fields to illustrate the performance of these speech acts.

Now let us elaborate on the distinction between locution and illocution and perlocution. When a speaker speaks, he produces an utterance. His utterance consists of clauses, phrases, words, syllables and phonemes. The actual production of an utterance is called utterance act. Let us illustrate this point. In *She Stoops to Conquer,* by Oliver Goldsmith, Mrs. Hardcastle asks Tony, her son, a rhetorical question : 'Is this ungrateful boy, all I am to get for the pains I have taken in your education?' (44) Linguistically speaking, what Mrs. Hardcastle has done in uttering this question is this.

She has made use of English sounds and he has put them in particular order so as to produce words. The words that she has uttered occur in a systematic sequence. As far as the grammar part of the occurrence is concerned, she has chosen a question form. Thus the production of the utterance involves syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices. Mrs.Hardcastle could have said the same thing in a variety of other ways: 'You are ungrateful'; 'This is a bad way to treat me'; You are impolite'; 'You treat me in an uneducated way.' and so on. There are several possibilities. But there must be some reason for the choice of the rhetorical question. Perhaps the reason is interpersonal or social. Mrs. Hardcastle has made use of the hinting strategy. She has pointed her finger at something which he, and everybody present around, believes to be unspeakable, unmentionable and unpleasant. The presence of Miss Neville restricts the selection of words and grammatical form to express the proposition that focuses on Tony's character. All these considerations are part of the utterance act. What Mrs. Hardcastle has done is that she has produced an utterance that refers to somebody and something. This is called predication or proposition act. Mrs.Hardcastle has produced an utterance in a specific socio-cultural context. That gives a culture-specific value or significance to her words. The literal meaning of her words is the proposition that she makes. But that is not the end of the story. Her question is not a question at all; it is a statement in the form of a question and it does not require an answer.

The possibilities that we have listed above are the implicatures of her utterance. She has commented on Tony's predicament in such a way that no one present around her can hold her responsible for saying the unsayable. This suggestivity is

called the illocutionary aspect of an utterance. The intended message of an utterance is appropriately understood by the people present there. The effect of Mrs.Hardcastle's comment on the audience is that no one except Tony responds. Mrs.Hardcastle says that she had done great sin or crime just to serve her spoiled son and ensure his future life .The others do not share the knowledge of the fact that Mrs. Hadrcastle has stolen the jewels herself.

As has already been made clear, speech acts are also classified into direct and indirect ones. A direct speech act is one where there is no attempt to save the face of the addressee/s. It is a bland, plain, ordinary way of saying things. An indirect speech act is a kind of circumlocution, an attempt to save the face of the addressee. The indirect complaint, for example, is a type of negative evaluation. A negative evaluation is a speech act that evaluates some person or situation through an utterance that carries a negative semantic load. An indirect complaint is defined as the expression of dissatisfaction to an addressee about oneself or someone/something that is not present. It differs from a direct complaint in that the person concerned is neither held responsible for nor capable of remedying the situation.

Speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behaviour. Talking is doing things according to rules and norms. It goes without saying that one can do things or get them done either in a direct way or in an indirect manner. The 'how' of one's utterance is dependent upon who says what to whom, when, where and why. The linguistic realization of a speech act is determined by a number of factors such as linguistic resources available, interpersonal relationship, social taboos, nature of the topic, presence or absence of a third party, shared know1edge and so on. The linguistic resources include lexical items, phrasal and idiomatic expressions and syntactic structures.

The interpersonal relationship between the addressor and the addressee is governed by the two major principles of solidarity and power. The conversational partners may be on good or bad terms or their relationship may be characterized by neutrality. In other words, the interactants may be friends or enemies or strangers. The intimacy or distance in terms of relationship influence their conversational moves. Moreover, the addressor and the addressee are not like islands. They live in a speech community and internalize the rules and regulations of the language that their speech community uses. As language is inseparable from the social realities which bind the interlocutors, they cannot lose sight of what is regarded as decent and indecent, pleasant and unpleasant, acceptable and unacceptable, appropriate and inappropriate, within the bounds of the speech community. There are socially acceptable ways of saying things as there are socially prohibited ways of doing so. The traditions and customs of the community all the times impinge upon the

linguistic behaviour of speakers and hearers. As there are culture- and community-specific ways of producing speech, there are society-specific ways of interpreting it. What this signifies in the context of speech act analysis is that even within the matrix of directness, there are variations from culture to culture. A direct speech act in one culture may be linguistically realized differently from a parallel direct speech act in another culture. A direct complaint, for example, in British English may display different linguistic manifestations from a similar speech act in Indian English.(Thorat 2000:54)

The nature of the topic also determines as to whether a speaker will resort to a direct speech act or an indirect one. This is noticeably evident as far as topics like human anatomy, sexual behaviour, death and excrement are concerned. The role of the speaker and the hearer, to a certain extent, controls directness and indirectness. For example, a physician may make use of words such as urine, stool, die, and so on. But even he may prefer euphemistic words like excrement, sink, collapse, pass away, and so forth. However, within the four walls of his consultation room, lie may be direct and yet he will not be dubbed a vulgar person. But when people who do not perform such a specified role are not supposed to make use of expressions carrying unpleasant semantic load.

Of course, there are exceptions to this social norm. When two persons arc quarrelling, for example, they may exploit the 'negative resource' available to them. This is what happens when Gulabo in *Untouchable* (a famous Indian Novel) calls Sohini a prostitute and a bitch.

A Summary and Recommendations

To sum up the discussion , barring few circumstances, indirect speech acts are widely used by speakers as linguistic strategies to observe politeness principles .They are used when there is a need to avoid giving a direct answer to a question. Interlocutors and politicians ,in

particular, make effective use of indirect speech acts for the purpose.

The use of indirect speech acts is encouraged, too, because of their multifunctionality. As we have seen, a single utterance used in the

right context can convey more than one meaning. Indirect speech acts

such as rhetorical questions are especially used to create stronger perlocutionary effects on the hearer. Patil (1994: 233) believes that

"a person can be unpleasant to the addressee by being deliberately

 indirect or misleading in form."

Directness and indirectness are not black and white terms. A particular direct speech may become indirect if uttered in a different context or environment. However , direct speeches are plainly informative and often used to express orders and harmful or dry unfriendly talk. It is used by superiors but in the case of danger like fire, for instance, direct speech is used even by inferiors without causing any harm.

In Arabic literature there are a lot of novels that bear rich examples of aspects of pragmatic and discoursal norms that may reveal how the Arab speakers express their ideas and how they use the different strategies to achieve their goals in discussions .It is recommended that researchers start analyzing the available works . Surely they will discover new strategies that might be Arab-specific and others which are borrowed from different civilizations.

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