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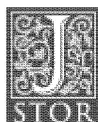

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Is Sybil there? the structure of some American English directives

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ABSTRACT

Directives to hearers can be expressed in a variety of syntactic forms. The social distribution of such forms shows them to occur systematically, according to familiarity, rank, territorial location, difficulty of task, whether or not a duty is normally expected, whether or not non-compliance is likely. Except for some hints and questions not mentioning what is desired, directives do not require inference from a prior literal interpretation to be understood. Indeed, misunderstandings and puns imply that the interpretation of many directives is not likely to include a literal phase. On the contrary, where knowledge of obligations and prohibitions is shared, simple interpretation rules suffice, allowing prompt understanding. To interpret the affective significance of directives, one must compare the expected and realized forms, and recognize the social features that the difference implies. Deference, solidarity, coldness, sarcasm, rudeness, and qualitatively specified compliments or insults can be communicated systematically by such departures. (Pragmatics, directives, requests, politeness, conversational analysis, performatives, US English.)

INTRODUCTION[1]

(1) May I please speak with Sybil?
Is Sybil there?
Sybil, please.

Play subscripts and conversational transcripts reveal that people do not often

[1] This is a revision of a paper given at a colloquium of the Linguistic Society of America summer institute in Ann Arbor, August 1973, and widely circulated under the title 'Wait for me, roller-skate'. Some of the adult examples have been discussed in the context of questions about socialization and social metaphors in 'Speech acts and social learning', in K. H. Basso & H. Selby (eds.) *Meaning in anthropology*, University of New Mexico Press. I have profited much from discussions of the paper with John Gumperz, Robin Lakoff, Gillian Sankoff, and my seminar students and from extensive editorial comments by Dell Hymes. The time to write this revision was supported by the Guggenheim Foundation and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where Karl Heider and David Sankoff provided some good examples.

literally say what they mean. We can accomplish the same ends by various means, many of them indirect.

The formal diversity provided by languages has recently been the focus of attention from anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers. Philosophers and linguists have taken as problematic how the central intent of the speaker can be conveyed when form is so various. How can the listener know that 'Is Sybil there?' is intended as a directive, when the wording is the same as an information question? They have been concerned with finding the structure of inference and the minimal information needed to account for conveyed intent (Gordon & Lakoff 1971; Sadock 1972; Searle 1975).

Anthropologists and sociolinguists on the other hand have observed that variations in expression are systematically related to social features (Brown & Gilman 1960; Ervin-Tripp 1968; Friedrich 1972; Geohegan 1973; Gumperz 1971; Hymes 1971; Labov 1972; Soskin & John 1963; Tyler 1972). They have shown that variation does major work in interaction, conveying concurrent information about social features of the speakers and situation, communicative intent and affect. A system with many unknowns would in theory be uninterpretable, but participants share knowledge at particular points in the interaction, and this becomes the relevant context for interpretation.[2]

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the relation between these different perspectives through a focus on variant expressions of one act, the directive. Since first commenting on the systematic character of this variation (Ervin-Tripp 1964) I have been collecting evidence from the speech settings to which my students have immediate access. This evidence reveals a high degree of orderly structure and carries implications for issues of interpretation. Directives were chosen as the focus for this work, rather than some other speech act, for three reasons: they are frequent at all ages, they are likely to be relatively sensitive to addressee features since they ask work of the hearer, and they often lead to action and might therefore be relatively easy to identify.

The paper will be addressed to the following questions:

I. What is the empirical distribution of formal variants across social features, or can we predict the form of a directive if we know social features of its context?

[2] John Gumperz has shown that 'setting, discourse topic and background knowledge of participants constrain the type of verbal activity that can be enacted, but *they do not uniquely determine it*...At the start of any one verbal encounter, a speaker, building on his background knowledge, makes a semantic judgment about what activities can normally be enacted. Once talk begins this judgment is then either confirmed and sharpened, or altered by assessing discourse topic, nonverbal cues, as well as contextualization cues...', which include shifts in stress, intonation and rhythm, choice of pronunciation, words, syntax, dialect, language, and stereotyped openers or sequencing strategies, any of which can indicate which framework of assumptions to use in interpreting what happens. (Gumperz, in press.)

Evidence of such negotiation has been pointed out in such work of Erving Goffman as *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) and *Interaction Ritual* (1967).

II. How might these variants be recognized as directives given the social contexts in which they actually occur?

III. Are variants a simple function of politeness?

The data were initially gathered with the intention only of addressing the first issue, but they have such a strong bearing on current arguments on the other two points that these will be taken up in the discussion.

METHODS

The examples and the summaries of empirical findings derive largely from students' term projects since 1964. The data are therefore exploratory and have major gaps, such as blue-collar work and task-oriented talk around action. The unpublished term papers relied on most heavily were those on family and living-group interaction by Radell Simon (1967), Bessie Dikeman & Patricia Parker (1964), and Sally Teaford (1974); on office, hospital, and laboratory interaction by Elaine Rogers (1967), Carol Gardner (1968), Deborah Valentine (1967), J. R. Wisner, Jr. (1967), and Gayle Hane (1974); on brief requests for goods in hamburger and tobacco shops Brian Stross (1964); Elizabeth Selkirk (1967), student dining halls Sydney Matheson (1967), and adult education classes Dorothy Kakimoto (1967); and on linguistic socialization in a Marine Corps recruiting depot Glenn Humphress (1974).

The data were obtained by four different methods: (a) systematically writing down all identifiable directives occurring in the chosen setting between different sets of participants, with a focus on varying pairs; (b) selecting all instances of directives from transcripts of tape-recorded natural conversations;[3] (c) eliciting directives by creating special situations and varying the addressees for unsuspecting speakers; (d) noting naturally occurring instances of misunderstandings. The bulk of the student papers used the first method, since this approach maximizes social variation in situation, and our purpose was the analysis of formal variation. There are obviously many weaknesses in the data: the paper and pencil method results in an omission of linguistic context and sequencing, poor information on intonation, and unknown selectivity. The tape recordings suggest that there is greater formal range than the paper and pencil recordings have located, and that the directives do much more than direct (Mitchell-Kernan, in press; Isola 1974). But they were consistent with the overall distributional results.

The selectivity in the data turns on two points: the observers noted only some social features – such as rank, age, sex, familiarity, and role – which, on the basis of what was then known about address rules, were expected to be the most

[3] Examples in the text have also been taken from conversational transcripts generously supplied by William Soskin, Harvey Sacks, and Susanna Isola.

powerful. Some particularly sensitive observers added other features, such as physical distance and territory, but the absence of this information in some samples cannot be considered negative evidence.

How does one recognize directives in natural conversation? Dore (1975) found that the communicative intentions of children were largely identifiable from the surrounding context of speech, such as preparatory explanations and the 'contingent replies' of which Garvey (1975) speaks, and by observation of outcomes. In the observational studies, cases have probably been lost in which statements or questions meant as directives were oblique and rested on presuppositions unknown to the observer. Instances were probably included as directives for goods and services in which the speakers' motive was to initiate or continue social interaction. We have imputed directive intent perhaps when it was not there. Because of the diversity of sources and the methodological weaknesses of the date, both from the standpoint of systematic sampling methods and quality of recording (especially in comparison to filming methods we are now using) the results have been given here very sketchily and not in a formal statistical fashion. Yet these observations, however tentative, give different results from the discussions based on hypothetical cases, so they are worth reporting.

In these projects it was taken as particularly important to record verbatim instances at the time. Recall or hypothetical invention creates a new situation affected by temporal delay, audience, and the new discourse context (as court testimony shows). Of course, the collapse of formally different events into a single description, when the original is known for comparison, could be potentially useful evidence of speakers' categorization of formal variants as functional equivalents.

Some discussion of speech acts has turned, not on direct observations of acts, but on reports about them. Terms like 'promise', 'tell', 'request' which appear as performatives in some linguists' rules (e.g. Gordon & Lakoff 1971; Gruber 1975) are derived from the vocabulary of indirect speech, in which speech events are reported as categories. The verbs used in indirect speech are a source of information about native speakers' categories in the ethnography of speaking.[4] The English verbs used in reporting are not necessarily the best analytic categories for classifying speech events, though they are a plausible first hypothesis. There is no reason to believe English has a good metalanguage for itself, as linguistic terminology testifies.[5]

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[4] Children as young as two differentiate directives to different addressees, but at seven may produce the same forms when asked to 'tell him to bring it' and 'ask him to bring it'. The ontogeny of performative vocabulary is not identical to the development of ability to perform.

[5] This point has been made by Hymes (1974, Chapter 9).

RESULTS: SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF DIRECTIVE TYPES

The corpus yielded six different types of directives, in the first analysis of forms. We examined the distribution of these forms across settings, and within settings across social relationships and other features which might identify what was distinctive, if anything, about them. The list below, in the following text and in Table 1 displays the forms ordered approximately according to the relative power of speaker and addressee in conventional usage and the obviousness of the directive:

Need statements, such as 'I need a match'.
Imperatives, such as 'Gimme a match' and elliptical forms like 'a match'.
Imbedded imperatives, such as 'Could you gimme a match?' In these cases, agent, action, object, and often beneficiary are as explicit as in direct imperatives, though they are imbedded in a frame with other syntactic and semantic properties.
Permission directives, such as 'May I have a match?' Bringing about the condition stated requires an action by the hearer other than merely granting permission.
Question directives, like 'Gotta match?' which do not specify the desired act.
Hints, such as 'The matches are all gone'.

[I] *Need statements*

Need statements occurred between persons differing in rank. The social distribution in our sample showed them to be distinctly different from imperatives. They appeared in two kinds of settings. One was the transactional work setting, where who is to do what is very clear, and a statement of need by a superior implied an obligation on the part of the subordinate.

(2) [Physician to technician]:
I'll need a routine culture and a specimen.
Do you mind?
(3) [Doctor to nurse in a hospital]:
I'll need a 19 gauge needle, IV tubing, and a preptic swab.
(4) [Customer to bartender]:
I'll have a Burgie.
(5) [Head of office to subordinate]:
I want you to check the requirement for stairs.

In all of these cases, what is wanted is as baldly stated as in an imperative. Indeed, it is easily possible to mark them as requests by adding 'please', or other conventional request embroidery, as in example (2).

Need and want statements also occur in families, when solicitude on the part of the hearer could be assumed. They are among the earliest directives by children:

(6) [Four-year-old to Mother]:
I need a spoon. Mommy, I need a spoon.

The only adult examples upward in rank were marked by the conditional (7) and by addressee displacement (8):

(7) [Young housecleaner to older employer]:
I could use some furniture polish.
(8) [Orderly to other orderlies, within hearing of nurse]:
I'm really hungry this evening.
[Nurse]:
Why don't you go ahead now to dinner...

[II] *Imperatives*

Imperatives normally include a verb and, if it is transitive, an object, and sometimes a beneficiary. In situations where the necessary action is obvious, it is common to produce elliptical forms specifying only the new information – the direct or indirect object. These will all be considered imperatives in this analysis.

(9) [Customer to waitress]:
Coffee, black.
(10) [Clinic technologist to secretary who is pouring coffee]:
Me, too, Sue (holding out cup).

The above variants of deletion appear to be based on the principle of retaining new information. But there are four more important structural variants: (i) *you* + imperative, (ii) attention-getters, (iii) post-posed tags, (iv) rising pitch:

(11) [Passenger to driver]:
You should turn right here, then you go straight.
(12) [Marine drill sergeant]:
You privates will repeat preparatory command and aye aye sir.
(13) [Department head at office to part-time worker]:
Here, you can run these in the book.
You want to put these under Westcan.
(14) [Husband]:
I'm surprised, I thought we were particularly good in mathematics.
[Wife]:
Well, you read (= imperative) that article. It's more complex than you'd think.
(15) [A child is yelling in the vicinity of a group of adults talking]:
[Father to child]:
Please!
(16) [A student enters lecture hall, starts to sit on chair and finds a pile of books]:

[To person seated in next chair]:
Excuse me!

Preposed greetings, attention-getters like 'hey' or 'excuse me', names or honorific address terms, and 'please' seemed to have among their functions calling attention to a gesture or to what will follow. In addition, 'please' signals that a directive will follow, if it is not obvious already from the situation as in the above case.

(17) [Professor to colleague]:
Carry some of these, will you?

Post-posed modals, or 'OK', and post-posed or medial address terms and 'please', were very common. These are of particular interest since they cannot be construed as attention-getters.

(18) [Student to another]:
Give me a copy?
(19) [Office worker to others]:
Someone has to see Dean X?
(20) [Professor to another]:
Get me that book, Al?

With other structures held constant, rising pitch provided a consistent contrast between alternatives. It was especially common, in Gardner's (1968) office study, as an upturn on a name post-posed to a statement, or on a 'please'. Otherwise, of course, imperatives, statements, and information questions do not normally carry rising terminal pitch.

The social distribution of the variants was distinctive.[6] Stross (1964) found that 'please' was added to orders by waitresses when they asked cooks to perform services *outside the cooks' normal duties*. Harvey Sacks has given me a transcript in which a husband and wife are engaged in persuading a stepfather to eat herring, in which a similar contrast appears:

(21) (a) [Wife to husband, who has herring]:
Bring some out, so that Max c'd have some too.
(b) [Wife to husband, as she tastes herring later]:
Geschmacht. Mmm. Oh it's delicious Ben c'd you hand me a napkin please.

In the case of (21a), serving the stepfather was a central goal to both, throughout

[6] Brevity rules in written style have made scholastic editors oblivious to the information in formal variants in colloquial speech. A recent Berkeley fourth grade assignment to remove 'unnecessary words' took the postposed modal out of 'Help me with my homework, will you, Grandma?' rendering it less appropriate.

a long episode, and a bare imperative (with explanatory adjunct) was employed. When the beneficiary was herself, the speaker not only transformed the directive to an imbedded imperative but added an address form and 'please'.

In studies of dining-hall and office directives, *physical distance* increased the frequency of rising pitch on imperatives, as shown by the pitch numerals on (22). Gardner also found that physical distance increased the use of post-posed modals and address terms:

(22) (a) (near)^2 Bring the^3 file!
(22) (b) (far)^2 Bring me the ^{3}file, would you, ^{2}Rose?

In settings where the normal directive is an imperative, as at table (pass the salt) or a tobacconist's shop (Lucky Strikes), 'please' is available to mark *rank or age differences*, though it is an option only used by some speakers, according to our observations. Selkirk (1967) noted that female speakers, as one might expect on other evidence of steep register gradients, showed most addressee-based variation in the use of 'please' (and of imbeddings). Teaford (1974) found that a compatible male living group used preposed address terms; an incompatible female group used them frequently, in her judgment, as a distancing device. Blue-collar workers interchange imperatives frequently while moving heavy objects, but in some settings liberally use first names even when they are not needed as attention-getters.

Request forms and certain other speech features appear to co-vary. Consider the following utterances of technicians in a particular university medical laboratory (Rogers 1967):

(23) [J.J.]: Hey, Len, shoot the chart to me, willya?
(24) [J.J.]: Shall I take it now, Doctor? (outsider present)
(25) [A.D.]: Oh by the way, Doctor, could you leave that chart when you're through?

In this group, slang, casual phonology, and first-naming co-occurred with imperative form. Scrambling would result in some combinations that might be judged funny by this group, if we could ask them, such as:

(26) (a) *Hey, Doctor, shoot the chart to me, willya?
(b) *Oh, by the way, Doctor, shoot the chart to me, willya?

We need much more detailed data to obtain the scaling of the co-occurrence rules which identify styles in particular groups.

In the examples of (23) to (25), there were two speakers. J.J. was among those who took the option of using informal address and style to the physicians she works with, when she perceived apparent permission (see 'dispensation' in address research, Ervin-Tripp, 1968). A.D. did not do that, but always maintained formal, rank-marked style. Outsiders' presence made a status-marked

transactional situation in which personal relations were not shown. Possibly this contrast is sharpened in medical settings where rank is emphasized in socialization more than in some other occupations, through segregation and formality of interaction.

[III] *Imbedded imperatives*

We have used the term imbedded imperative for all instances in which agent and object are explicit, so that the forms preceding them are a kind of formal addition. Examples are:

(27) (a) Why don't *you open the window*?
(b) Would *you* mind *opening the window*?
(c) Could I trouble *you to open the window*?
(d) Can *you open the window*?
(e) Can't *you open the window*?
(f) Will *you open the window*?
(g) Won't *you open the window*?
(h) Would *you* care to *open the window*?

There is no interpretive problem with these utterances; two-year-olds often successfully understand their directive intent, since they hear the imperative (Ervin-Tripp, in press; Shatz 1974). The social meaning carried by the imbedding expressions is, of course, not identical in all of these examples.

In a fine analysis of the discourse structure of English classrooms Sinclair & Coulthard (1974) characterized a rule for many of these forms:

Modal directive rule:
An interrogative clause is to be interpreted as a *command to do* if it fulfills all the following conditions: (i) it contains one of the modals *can*, *could*, *will*, *would* (and sometimes *going to*); (ii) the subject of the clause is also an addressee; (iii) the predicate describes an action which is physically possible at the time of utterance (p. 32).

They point out that although 'can you swim?' would in the classroom be interpreted as a yes/no question because of feasibility constraints, by a swimming pool it would be 'interpreted as a command followed by a splash'.

Gordon & Lakoff (1971) have said that even in context certain of these imbedded imperatives are ambiguous. For most, however, it might be argued that no other interpretation is even entertained, unless the act mentioned is not feasible or appropriate. Many of the imbeddings are unique to directives.

(28) [Hospital desk, nurse to aide]:
Would you hand me Mr Adam's chart, please?
(29) [Funeral home, employee to mourners]:
If you'll wait in the car for just a minute, please.

(30) [Department office, typist to professor]:
Would you sign these sometime this week, Professor Handlin?

(31) [Hospital desk, nurse to nurse]:
Julie, how about bringing me back a coke when you go to dinner?

(32) [Hospital switchboard]:
The line is busy; would you care to wait?
Yes . . . I would care.
Then I'll connect you right away.

Many *can* imbeddings occur in contexts where the directive interpretation is the only one possible (unless the addressee makes a joke):

(33) [Adult to teen-age guests in back seat of car]:
Can you keep your voices down?

(34) [To stranger in theatre]:
Can you move your coat over there?

(35) [Parent to son at restaurant table]:
Can you stop kicking your sister?

Since modal imperatives, including *can* imbeddings, are routinely interpreted as directives when the acts are feasible and appropriate, conversion to a question directive is necessary when the addressee's rank is high and the task difficult. Gardner's (1968) data from an office shows nicely contrasted cases:

(36) [Typist to professor]:
Would you sign these sometime this week, Professor X?

(37) Do you think you can have the manuscript by tonight?

(38) *Can you have the manuscript by tonight?

Imbedded imperatives are the earliest form of structurally differentiated directives in children with social variation in addressees in English. While children of two may use 'please' and addressee-naming for differentiation, by the middle of the third year imbeddings appear (Ervin-Tripp, in press). Later, when asked to 'tell' or 'ask' (someone to do something) they differentiate by contrasting imperatives and imbedded imperatives.

In adult, as well as child speech, direct imperatives and imbedded imperatives have a distinctly different social distribution:

(21) Wife to husband, trying to persuade stepfather to eat herring:
(a) Bring some out, so that Max c'd have some too.
(b) (tasting) Geschmacht. Mmm. Oh it's delicious Ben c'd you hand me a napkin please.

In this case, the difference in beneficiary changes the directive form.

(39) [Woman addressing mate]:
Hey Richard, shut up for a minute.

(40) [Woman friend addressing same man as above]:
Hey Richard, will you please shut up!

(41) [Technician to another]:
(a) Try this. (cake)
(b) Have some cake, June?

(42) [Technician to doctor]:
Would you like a piece of cake, Doctor?

(43) [Compatible roommate to another]:
Butter!

(44) [Incompatible roommate to other (speaker had just cut herself)]:
Could you please wipe up the blood before I faint?

Downward address to aides, orderlies or ward clerks by the hospital nurses Wisner (1967) observed took the form of imperatives, but directives from the lower ranks to nurses or doctors never took the need or imperative form.

[Nurse]:

(45) See what 269 wants.
(46) Cindy, run to CSR for a box of ABDs.
(47) Mrs Stockwell, call a porter for the bathroom in 2118.
(48) Make sure that I.V. stays up until at least 10 o'clock and then do it.

Glen Humphress (1974) reports that marine drill sergeants use only imperatives or elliptical imperatives to new recruits:

(49) Now get out, get out. Bring me more coffee cups.
(50) Git your eyes off me, puke.
(51) I can't hear ya, girls. Again!

The one exception was an imperative which was imbedded in a threat:

(52) Awright hogs, you mothafuckers got three seconds to swalla them goddam cigarettes.[7]

Our texts also revealed many imperatives between parents and children in activity-oriented situations.

Some suggestive setting and speaker differences have appeared. Both hospitals and military services are extremely rank-sensitive, and they employ imperatives downward in rank. In the office study by Gardner (1968) direct imperatives only

[7] In this example, the conventional values are reversed, titles becoming insults, imbedding becoming threat; in addition the sincerity of the directive is intentionally ambiguous. Marines have been known to swallow cigarettes or eat grease in response to such orders. Threat-imbedded imperatives obviously have a different social distribution from the varieties of imbeddings considered in this paper.

occurred when there was similarity of rank and age and familiarity; the speakers were predominantly middle-class women. The selective factors which have appeared in the studies so far have been addressee variables of rank, age, and familiarity; presence of outsiders, especially those of high rank; territorial location; and relation of the directive to expected roles. These variables, at least the first three, are like those found in address studies. An immediate hypothesis we might entertain is that the structure of requests and of address will be similar. Is this so?

Geohegan's study (1973) of coding rules and marking rules in address differentiates sharply between the two. They are parallel to the situational and metaphorical shifting of codes, as described by Blom and Gumperz (Gumperz 1968: 274–310). One system is obligatory and predictable from largely public variables such as relative rank, age, and the setting. The coding rule defines the normal, unmarked form for naming, or the situational rule the normal code or language in a conversation. The model Geohegan developed was an information-processing sequence in which social features were sequentially entered until a determinate form is chosen.

The data in Gardner's (1968) study of a university office suggested a highly structured coding rule for directives in that setting like address rules (Ervin-Tripp 1968). It appeared that the social determinants were ordered and that the early selectors neutralized later ones.[8] Thus, the presence of a high-ranking person in the office diminished the number of directives and converted the audible ones to a form appropriate to higher-ranked addressees. This effect is similar to the presence in a medical laboratory of supervisory personnel or other outsiders; rank-related forms superseded person-related or solidary forms.

If a high-ranking person was not present, pressure or tension in the university office – e.g. at exam or registration time – might lead to the use of direct imperatives towards persons who normally didn't receive them. The next selector appeared to be familiarity. A new young employee received more elaborate requests for a month before her peers settled into the imperatives used normally in peer directives.

Normally, directives were differentiated according to similarity of rank or age of the addressee. The office was divided into two ranks of office workers, the

[8] Sociologists have pointed out that when a close friend says 'How are you' there is an obligation to tell about an illness or accident (if there is time) but a relative stranger is told 'fine', and etiquette books advocate this reply as tactful. Sacks (1973) considers this an example of 'everyone has to lie'. However, if this is an example of contextual determination, this is *not* a lie. That is, if the participant assesses first who the other is before hearing the utterance as greeting or information question, then there is no issue of truth value at all for the greeting, any more than there is thinking about capacity when someone says routinely 'can you pass the salt'. When interpreted as a routine greeting, the alternatives of 'hi', 'fine' and so on depend on various social conditions, but the truth value issue doesn't arise in conventional unambiguous situations except for those verbal adepts who pun and think of alternate meanings.

older, experienced staff and a younger, new staff. Students, professors, and the Dean constituted other ranks. The normal form between those alike in rank and age was the imperative; between those who differed, the hint, question directive, or imbedded imperative. There was the option of moving to a less formal directive if the addressee was in the speaker's territory, or a more formal one in the reverse case. The simple imperative with or without post-posed material occurred either under tension or in directives to peers. For purposes of comparison, sufficient data to prepare and test formal coding rules for different speakers and settings will be needed.

Several variables have appeared in request studies which are new, in that they were not evident in studies of address. Examples are territoriality, physical distance, the seriousness or cost of the service asked, and whether compliance may be assumed because of the type of service, normal roles, or power relations. Some of the variables appear to involve continua, as one might expect in the kind of cost–benefit situation of asking goods and services of others. Because continua may require different formal solutions than discrete 'selectors', we need more detailed data. Agar's work on the choices of drug addicts seeking a 'fix' brings up parallel problems (1973).

[IV] *Permission directives*

Of relatively low frequency in the texts was the form of directive which consists of modal + beneficiary + have/verb + ? The modals include ***can***, ***could***, and their negatives, and ***may***, so the rule looks very much like the Sinclair & Coulthard (1974) rule for imbedded imperatives. The difference is the shift of focus to the beneficiary or recipient's activity, rather than the donor-addressee's. The overt form, therefore, looks like a permission request, but the two can be discriminated in that the activity required includes activity of the addressee.

(53) [Brother to sister]:
Can I have my records back?

(54) [Nephew to aunt]:
Can I invite us to have dinner with you tonight?

(55) [Salesman to secretary]:
May I see that for a minute, please?

(56) [Salesman to clerk]:
May I have change for a dollar?

(57) [Employee to older employer]:
May I have the salt?

(58) [Hospital aide to nurse]:
Miss Silva, can I get some help with Mrs Cramer? (help will come from someone the nurse designates).

These are the only examples in the corpus. The tendency they show is for such forms to be directed upward in rank. The forms were lacking between adults in the family studies for the most part, and even in most of the offices. They were very common in speech by children, usually as, 'Can I have X?' because of the control of resources by others.

The permission directive is available as a follow-up on question directives which are not understood to be directives, presumably because they are considered appropriate for non-peers and strangers, when tasks are difficult or compliance doubted but specificity is needed. In this sense they may be the most elaborate 'on record' directive, except those with several levels of imbedding.

[V] *Non-explicit question directives*

With the discussion of question directives, we finally have come to some directives which are not what they appear to be. Question directives, in this respect, constitute a more difficult challenge to theories of interpretation than do imbedded imperatives. They give the listener who does not want to comply an escape route, in treating the question directive as if it were an information question.

(59) [Daughter to father]:
You ready?
Not yet.
(60) [Roommate]:
What *are* you doing, John?
Shaving.
(61) [Caller to secretary]:
Is Dean Lehrer in?
No, I'm sorry. He's just stepped out.

Discriminatory landlords and protective secretaries can perhaps lie more easily since the excuse has already been framed.

The question directive gives listeners an out by explicitly stating some condition which would make compliance impossible. If a negative tag question is posed, the questioner implies a greater than 50 per cent chance that there will be a negative reply, which makes non-compliance seem even easier.

(62) [Customer to drive-in waitress]:
You don't have any doughnuts or rolls to go, do you?
(63) [Motorist to gas station attendant]:
You don't happen to have any change for the phone, do you?
(64) [Girl Scout cooky salesgirl to customer on doorstep]:
You don't want any Girl Scout cookies, do you?

(65) [Lab director to campus colleague on the phone, about picking up a visitor]:
I guess I'll come down. You don't happen to come up here, do you?

We know very little about the social distribution of the negative forms, but would expect that they might occur, like statements, under conditions when leaving maximum choice to the listener to refuse may be important.

Misunderstandings occur in the case of question directives, thus providing evidence that they can be ambiguous. We have collected the following instances:

(66) [Professor telephones room permits office]:
(intent of speaker: getting information)
Do you have a room for 20 on Monday nights?
Just a minute. Yes I do. Give me your name, department, and course number, please.
(interpretation of hearer: directive)

(67) [Office workers at lunch break]:
(intent of speaker: getting information to offer service if needed)
Are we out of coffee?
No. Pass your cup.
(interpretation of hearer: directive)

(68) [Teacher to pupils in class]:
(intent of speaker: starting lesson topic)
What are you laughing at?
Nothing.
(interpretation of hearers: directive)

(69) [Professor to student who had left front door open]:
(intent of speaker: getting information)
Did you want the door open?
Should I have closed it?
(interpretation: possible directive)

(70) [Caller to friend's wife on phone]:
(intent of speaker: getting information)
Is John there?
Just a minute, he's upstairs.
(interpretation of hearer: directive)

(71) [Host to guests, 2 a.m.]:
(intent of speaker: offering a service)
How about another drink?
Oh no, we're going to leave soon.
(interpretation: directive to leave)

The hearers, who heard these questions as directives, made appropriate inter-

pretations. These utterances represented the normal form for expressing directives in these situations between these speakers. The question neutralizes the contrast in intent between getting information and directing.

In the distributional analysis, question directives appear to have the same social determinants as imbedded imperatives. We can see these features by comparing the examples given earlier with their imperative glosses:

Age and rank difference between speakers

(67) [Office workers]:
Are we out of coffee? (Give me some coffee.)

(68) [Teacher and pupils]:
What are you laughing at? (Stop laughing.)

(69) [Professor to graduate student]:
Did you want the door open? (Lock the door.)

Territoriality and physical distance

(70) [Caller to friend's wife on the phone]:
Is John there? (Bring John to the phone.)

(66) [Professor to room permits office]:
Do you have a room for 20 Monday nights?
(Reserve a room.)

Intimacy-distance

[72] [Hospital patient to orderly]:
Do you feel a draft?
[Orderly]: No.
Well, can I have a blanket?

Why was not an imbedded imperative used in these cases? The social features here are those which also appear in differentiating the direct and imbedded imperatives. It is my surmise that in most of these examples there is a substantial possibility that the listener cannot comply – there may be no coffee, no vacant room, John may be out, or the student had good reason not to lock the door. On the other hand, in our examples of imbedded imperatives, the examples seem to be cases of acts clearly within the choice of the listener. (In testing these alternatives, one has, of course, to avoid the conventionalized instances like, 'Is Sybil there?' which have lost their apparent indirectness by usage.)

A good example is the set of cases in Gardner's (1968) data about requests for coffee and cocoa. Coffee came from a distant machine; cocoa was made on the premises. The cocoa supply was potentially depleted, therefore, but getting coffee was a larger service.

(73) (a) [Peers]:
Get me a cup of coffee while you're there.

(b) [Non-peers]:
Would you get me some coffee, Jeanie?
(c) [Non-Peers]:
Is there any more cocoa left there?
[Typist to professor]:

(36) (Easy)
Would you sign these sometime this week, Professor X?
(37) (Hard)
Do you think you can have the manuscript by tonight?

Under the condition of a strong probability of non-compliance, the speaker can make it easy for the listener to make a non-compliant response by directly addressing the realistic obstacle.

In order to test women students' methods for making very simple directives more socially differentiated, Jeffrey Stewart (1967) had students request a pencil from a strange peer or professor. Most used the request-question for strangers, 'Do you have a pencil?' but differentiated the professor by an apology and address term. Only 15 per cent complicated the request structure itself ('Do you happen to have a pencil?') by lowering the implied compliance probability.

Within families, we found more such instances than between job peers, but often conventionalized, rather than referring to any real obstacles.

(74) [Husband to wife]:
Where do you keep these things?
(i.e. put them away)
(75) Is that bacon? (i.e. pass it)
(76) Where's the coffee, Dremsel?
(i.e. get some for me)

Oblique directives in personal situations – both question directives and hints – were sources of solidarity and humor in puns.

(77) [Restaurant. Wife has not noticed four menus piled before her when she sat down]
[Husband]:
Are you collecting those?
(Wife looked down, surprised expression. Laughed, distributed menus.)

The question would have been funny also had she had a pile of match books and all present were non-smokers. This aspect of the humor comes from the anomalous coincidence of surface appearance and unlikely implied intent. But the particular mileage of this joke came from two simultaneous interpretations. At the moment everyone's eyes fell on the menus, the question was heard as funny just when it was heard as a directive, since in a restaurant a menu is to be

distributed. The economical convergence of functions also occurs in Teaford's (1974) analysis of hint examples in a compatible living group, e.g.,

(78) You make a fine door, Sal.

The most complete analysis of dual interpretive possibilities turning on key appears in Hymes (1974: 179–92).

[VI] *Hints*

General statements, like questions, are not on the surface directives. They thus present a problem for theories of interpretation. It is easy for a listener to ignore them, and for this reason, they go farthest in leaving options open.

From the standpoint of bearing a direct relation to the pre-conditions for an act, many examples of hints are very indirect and require considerable knowledge of the situation. Questions appear to be more narrowly confined to the expected needs related to the fulfillment of the act, especially, of course, those which have become conventional ways of giving directives.

In our data there appeared to be three kinds of social circumstances in which hints occurred: First, children used statements of condition frequently, possibly because small children do not at first have a well-articulated sense of what they have to do to relieve discomfort, and they rely on their caretakers to find the solution:

(79) My nose is bleeding. (2.6)
(80) I hungry. (2.11)

Second, if a service is special, and the speaker is reluctant to be explicit, the interpretation is left to the listener's solicitude:

(81) [Daughter to mother]:
Mother, you know I don't have a robe.
I know.
Well, we're having a slumber party tomorrow night.
(82) [Wife to husband who is rowing]:
Jock! I don't want to swim right now.
(83) [Adult sister to brother, as she reaches into cupboard]:
Oh dear, I wish I were taller!
Here, can I get something for you?
Yes, please, some of those green dishes up there.

Third, in settings where the necessary acts are very clear, statements of time or condition may be sufficient, since everyone knows what must be done and by whom. In office settings these condition directives tend to be to a different age or rank.

(84) [Laboratory director to secretary]:
We're waiting for Dr Klepper from Texas. I'll be gone until two o'clock.
(i.e. tell him...)

(85) [Office worker to younger worker]:
I think Sarah opened the Xerox room Joan.
(i.e. make copies...)

(86) [Professor to office worker]:
Mrs Terry, it's quite noisy in here.

(87) [President of company to clerk]:
This goes to Clyde Holloway.

(88) [Nurse to aide]:
Mrs Watkins, Mrs Sherwood needs to go to the bathroom.

Hints are very frequent in families and communal groups. Teaford (1974) found many more hints in the compatible male living group she studied than in the incompatible female group, and gave nicely contrasting examples:

(89) [Compatible]:
There's a big can of tomato sauce.
(i.e. use it up)
[Incompatible]:
Why don't you use up the stuff in the refrigerator?

(90) [Compatible]:
You make a fine door, Sal.
(i.e. let me through)
[Incompatible]:
Excuse me.

(91) [Compatible]:
We can hear you out here, Beth.
(i.e. pipe down)
[Incompatible]:
Marilyn, I want to use the phone!

Hints can serve multiple functions perhaps more effectively than the other forms. They can tease, and joke, for example, as in (97) and in the following:

(92) [Laboratory technologist to another]:
Hey, dummy, you forgot this!

They can, by alluding to shared knowledge, serve solidarity-enhancement, as in-group jokes do. We find many hints that are difficult to interpret without the use of fairly complex shared information:

(93) [Husband to wife]:

There's a wine tasting tomorrow night.
(i.e. serve dinner early, pick up *au pair* at night school)

Hints appear to be prime examples of the kind of communicative abbreviation which appears in high solidarity, closed networks of communication.[9] Unlike the case in task-centered groups in offices and laboratories, where explicitness and clarity have a value because of the focus on task, in families and compatible living groups the personal relationships are central. High frequency of communication results in shared knowledge and the possibility both of highly conventionalized forms which on the surface appear to be indirect, and of novel or humorous directives resting on shared knowledge about norms, beliefs, habits, events, and personal motives. Our data are not systematically comparative between person- vs. task-centered groups and topics, and between work involving physical coordination and more symbolic activities, all of which might affect directive structure in terms of explicitness.

Because of their indirectness, condition directives are likely to be relatively ineffective, except under strong obligation or solicitude:

(94) [Chairperson of a small conference]:
I notice the smokers are losing their self-control.
(One smoker then lit up, another continued.)...I'd like to use my last moments in this chair to remind people they are not allowed to smoke in this room. (no effect)

The above formulations are also very impersonal, given that in several days the participants knew each other well.

If indirection can be so ineffective, why use it? Brown & Levinson (1974), in their thorough exploration of the basis for alternations, state the dilemma concisely:

> Conventional indirectnesses satisfy two conflicting wants simultaneously to some degree. They are a compromise solution to the desire to go 'off record' and avoid imposing, and the desire to go 'on record' in a businesslike manner allowing explicit redress. The conflict is powerful enough to generate the indefinite number of means of resolving it (1974).

Hints usually demand inference, so we expect that there will be many cases of misunderstanding.

(95) [Hostess to out-of-town dinner guest at 10 p.m.]:
(intention: directive)
You look tired, Susan. Stan can give you a ride back.

---

[9] John Gumperz pointed out the connection of network type to preferred type of communicative strategies. Even in work groups we found hints increased over time.

Oh no, I'm fine.
(hearer's interpretation: solicitude)

(96) [Later the same evening]:
[Stan]: V's having an operation tomorrow. I think she better have some rest.
(hearer's interpretation: directive)

In the above example, the hosts tried two different tactics to communicate the end of the party. Only the one with the shorter inference route worked.

Just as in the case of questions, however, hints can also be heard as directives when none was intended:

(97) [Woman to escort]:
(intention: small talk)
It's really cold tonight.
Take my jacket, here.
(interpretation: directive)

(98) [Mother at breakfast]:
(intention: comment to self)
I forgot the paper.
[Daughter]: I'll get it.

Like request questions, statements can be the target for pragmatic puns.

(99) [Mother to son]:
That door is still open.
Yes it is.

(100) [Son to mother]:
I need a ten-speed bicycle.
I'm sure you do.

DISCUSSION: FEATURES OF ALTERNATIVE DIRECTIVES

The formal variants which appeared in the corpus of data varied in respect to dimensions which I will call *explicitness*, *discourse constraints*, and *neutralization*. A summary of the results can be found in Table 1.

(A) *Explicitness*. I became aware of explicitness as a problem in working with children's comprehension of directives, since it turned out that the intelligibility of directives was a function of the demand properties of the situation and what was made explicit in the words of the directive (Ervin-Tripp, in press). The term 'indirect' has been applied to directives like 'Can *you give me* the *salt*?' (Garvey 1975; Lakoff 1973; Searle 1975) even though all the components are explicit and the directive is readily interpretable by two year olds (Shatz 1974). The term

TABLE I. *Summary of Directive Types*

Directive type	Neutralized form	Discourse constraints* Comply	Non-comply	Obvious†	Social Features
Need statements	yes	none	excuse	yes	subordinates
Imperatives	no	none	excuse	yes	subordinates or familiar equals
Imbedded imperatives	no	agree	excuse	yes	unfamiliar or diff. rank task outside role or territory expect compliance
Permission directives	yes	agree	excuse	yes	superiors(?) or unfamiliar
Request questions	yes	answer + inference	answer (= excuse)	no‡	non-compliance possible
Hint	yes	(reply +) inference	reply	no‡	non-compliance possible or familiarity or routine roles

* Normal expected verbal response which might be appropriate in these social conditions to an adult, accompanied by compliance or non-compliance.
† Obvious directives are those which are routinely understood as directives under these social conditions (= on-record, Brown & Levinson 1974).
‡ Some questions and hints have become routine directives though they retain the neutralized form.

'indirect' derives from the assumption that the main interpretive problem is not the discovery of the components of the act to be performed, but the action message to be construed from those components (propositional content vs. illocutionary force).

The semantic components of positive directives include the agent, action, beneficiary, and if there is one, the object of action. In many situations, these are invariant. In a dyadic exchange the addressee is the agent of a conventional imperative. In a grocery store, the object is normally the only component at issue.

When the component is not fixed, the listener must locate what it is. In some instances this is done by a simple transformation:

(101) I want a cooky = You give me a cooky.
(102) Can I have an eraser = You give me an eraser.

These transformations are routine when the addressee physically controls the supply of the object.

In other cases the components are identified by pronouns, deixis, or lexical specification. The obviousness of hints, for example, can be altered considerably

by removing all reference to what is wanted, as in 'It's two o'clock' vs. 'Time to go practice!'

A form of non-explicitness found in the corpus which was important because of its systematic social distribution was *agent indirection*. In these cases the action and object may be specified but the agent is either indefinite, absent, or replaced by 'we'.

In collective situations such as an office where work is shared, hints and questions can be used which specify the task but leave open whether the task has already been done or who should do it. When the speaker talks about a hard task, an indefinite agent can recruit a volunteer. Note that in some cases the volunteer is named by address.

(103) Has anyone gone to Accounting this week? (not yet filled out)
(104) Whose turn is it to make coffee this week, Ruby? (rising pitch)
(105) Is anyone working on the family law manuscript?
(106) Someone has to see Dean Milton? (rising pitch)
(107) Someone has to take dictation for Professor Spellman, Janet? (rising)
(108) Somebody, the water's boiling!
(109) [Son to parents on ski slope]:
Will somebody hand me my poles?[10]

How are these to be interpreted as directives? They appear to conform to a rule modeled on those of Sinclair & Coulthard (1974: 33):

Any declarative or interrogative is to be interpreted as a *command to do* if (i) the agent is *we*, *someone* or there is no agent, (ii) it refers to an action or activity within the obligations of the addressee, and (iii) in the case of 'we', it is directed to a subordinate.

This interpretive rule seems to be especially effective in a social system with clearly prescribed roles and activities, such as an office.

(110) [Mother to daughter]:
This room has to be vacuumed before he comes.
(111) [Doctor to technician]:
We have to do a few things over.
(112) [Director to secretary]:
This has to go back to the office.

Wisner (1967) found that when doctors spoke to nurses, they used imperatives to refer to the present, but 'we' directives to refer to the future:

[10] This example is a genuine case of seeking a volunteer, given lesser power. The indefinite can do other work, as the following example illustrates:
[Clerk to stock boy and his older female boss, at a distance, about heavy mail bag she wanted to open on a table]: Can somebody help me lift this up...please!
(When asked to account for the indefinite she said she had no right to give orders to the stock boy.)

(113) I guess we should check his temperature every couple of hours, too.
(114) Let's give her 100 of phenobarb at H.S.

Passives and 'we' statements were downward in rank. They allowed a very direct and explicit statement of the act required, but without the discourse properties of a more indirect form. 'We' implies a pseudo-participation.

(115) [Nursery school teacher]:
Let's all take our naps now.

An excellent test of the accuracy of our inferences about social features is the occurrence of misunderstanding. Ayhan Aksu, a Turkish student, reported in class the following incident:

(116) [Student to elderly landlady]:
(intention: directive)
Could we put the garbage can over here?
Why Ayhan, I didn't know you had a roommate!
(interpretation: permission questions)

Ms Aksu thought that the 'we' directive was more polite than a second person directive, and used it as a directive to the landlady. However, she did not realize that such a form would only be appropriate downward in rank. The landlady interpreted the 'we' as a plural subject in a permission request, which happened to be homonymous with the directive with agent shift.

In Table 1 the term 'obvious' is used. 'Obvious' directives were those which were likely to be uniformly heard as directives in the contexts in which they occurred, since what was contextually left open was verbally explicit. Need statements, imperatives, imbedded imperatives, and permission directives typically require the surface specification of the new components of the desired action. They are normally explicit. The exceptions have been mentioned: ellipsis, transformations, and systematic agent indirection. But hints and question directives are forms in which there can be a wide range in the explicitness with which the speaker specifies what is wanted – particularly the objects involved. In addition, there is a variation in the extent to which questions and hints have become routinized by experience in the particular social group, and have therefore become obvious to the members, despite apparent lack of explicitness.[11] Explicitness provides information to newcomers, from which inference may be easy.

(B) *Discourse constraints.* A common feature of linguistic systems at all levels is neutralization and diversification or alternation (Lamb 1964), in the expression

[11] Preposed 'please' can appear with any directive, as an attention-getter and an apology for interruption. Postposed and medial 'please' seem to be limited to obvious directives, including conventional or routinized hints and requests.

of a given content. By neutralization is meant the use of the same surface expression for more than one underlying meaning, or in this case the same speech act or intent. In the following cases, identical utterances can potentially express quite different pragmatic intents:

(117) May I have some of your coffee?
(permission vs. service request)
(118) Is Sybil there?
(information request vs. service request)
(119) I need a new hat.
(goods request vs. information offer)
(120) Dr Jones is here.
(service request vs. information offer, etc.)

It is theoretically puzzling why there should not be a direct correspondence between pragmatic intent and surface form, since the formal categories are present for such a one-to-one correspondence. One obvious advantage in the system of multiple expressions for the same intent, and in neutralization in these overlapping expressions, is that the discourse features of the surface expression can be taken up.

In the context of conversation, utterances can do work on several axes at once: maintaining continuity of topic, asserting new information, performing or bringing about interpersonal actions, communicating affect, and creating openings for discourse continuation or termination. A question creates a position for an answer, as well as selecting a later participant in multi-party discourse (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1975). One of the major differences between the various directive types is that they have different consequences for discourse. To some extent these differences are separate from whether the listener complies; indeed, we occasionally find, especially in children (e.g. Reader 1975; Garvey 1975) instances in which the discourse sequence and action are not congruent; the hearer says 'no' but performs as if saying 'yes!' While the listener may take up the conventional discourse option, he need not, yet the existence of that option creates a virtual framework which can color the connotations of the directive form.

There is an interesting asymmetry in the discourse constraints, which can be illustrated by a hypothetical example:

(121) [Raining outside. Two co-workers]:
a. I need your umbrella. Sorry, I'll need it myself.
b. Give me your umbrella. ,, ,, ,, ,, ,,
c. Would you give me your umbrella. ,, ,, ,, ,, ,,
d. Can I take your umbrella. ,, ,, ,, ,, ,,

In these cases, if for any reason the addressee does not want the speaker to use

her umbrella, she would probably not say merely 'no' (assuming the interaction was focal enough not to be ignored); she would be obligated to account for her non-compliance. Garvey (1975) has given examples of such excuses in child speech; the excuses included 'I've got it', 'I can't' and 'I don't want to', turning, in content, on the various conditions surrounding services to others.

On the other hand, consider some replies to question directives and hint, for example:

(122) a. Do you need your umbrella? Yes, I guess so.
b. It's really a downpour. Sure is.

The addressee is not obliged to mention her umbrella at all, when a hint is used, and the question directive allows a simple response as if to an information question.

In the terms of Brown & Levinson (1974), the first four directive types, which we have called obvious, create a discourse position for the addressee to go 'on-record' by formulating an excuse in not complying. Since in a question directive the excuse is already presented, the addressee simply appears to be complying with a discourse sequence in answering the question. In the case of hints, listeners can ignore the interpersonal function in replying; they may in some cases even ignore the topic.

A parallel exists in the phrasing of information questions in which new information is demanded:

(123) Where's the Registrar's office?
I don't know.

(124) Do you know where the Registrar's office is?
No, I don't.

In the case (123) if the addressee is ignorant, he must formulate his ignorance overtly. When the yes/no question is used instead (124), he can appear to be complying with the overt function of the question in answering negatively, and need not mention his own ignorance.

This difference in obligation to on-record formulation of an excuse is correlated with the social distribution of hints, question directives, and the other directive formal variants. In the case of the hints and question directives, normal conversational continuity can be maintained without any overt recognition that an interpersonal failure has occurred. The obscuring of failure protects both parties, so we might expect these forms most commonly when non-compliance is likely.

The selection between the obvious directive variants seems to be related to discourse constraints when compliance occurs. Both the permission directives and the imbedded imperatives, since they take interrogative form, allow the complying addressee to say 'yes', 'sure', 'OK' appearing to make a voluntary

commitment and to be engaging in conversational interchange rather than the giving of goods and services.

(C) *Summary*. Directives include a range from explicit and slightly qualified imperatives to questions and statements which are formally identical to utterances which are not requests. Members learn to interpret such utterances routinely as directives when the service is feasible or part of their normal role, and when the interpersonal relations known to the participants account for the selection of the form of the directive. The discourse constraints of statements, interrogatives, and imbedded imperatives are successively more coercive. Statements allow the listener not to respond verbally at all; interrogatives allow the non-compliant listener to reinterpret the directive as an information question; imbedded imperatives allow the compliant listener to reply as if he had acted voluntarily. Indirection protects both parties from the embarrassment in explicit non-compliance. The forms also differ in the amount of inference or knowledge they require. Statements and question-directives require the most if the goods or services are not mentioned and the utterances are novel.

INTERPRETING DIRECTIVE INTENT

If two different intentions can be realized by the same utterance, how can the listener know which the speaker intended?

(A) *Inference* from the utterance to its conveyed intent is obvious in many hints and question directives. The inference can be very direct, as in 'You're standing in my way', or on a rainy day 'Where's my umbrella?': or it may be relatively complex, as in 'I'm going to a wine tasting tomorrow'. In the last case, the statement only becomes a directive by virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the normal schedule of activities of both parties on that night, and how it must be altered to meet the speaker's needs and obligations. If this statement happens at regular intervals, the inferential task may become routinized, so that the hint becomes a conventional directive. One cannot know just from the oblique form of a directive whether it is interpreted by inference or has become routinized.

Recent discussions about indirect speech acts – directives other than direct imperatives – have shown that there is a common content in many excuses, hints, imbeddings, and adjuncts (supporting arguments), namely the 'sincerity conditions' which apply to speech acts, such as whether the hearer is able and willing to perform the act, whether the speaker desires it, and whether the act has been or will be performed (Gordon & Lakoff 1971; Garvey 1975; Searle 1975; Mohan, n.d.). Many conventional directives can also be interpreted inferentially, just as sentences which have become routinized, or phrases that are completely idiomatic often remain accessible to formal syntactic analysis.

Searle's (1975: 73) analysis of a ten-step inferential interpretation of 'Can you pass the salt?' is a good example.

But perhaps in cases of neutralization listeners make interpretations without inference from the 'literal' or context-free syntax of the directive. Further, there are varieties of directives in which there is very little information in the 'literal' meaning. In these cases, there must be a very complex inferential process if an inference explanation is to be adequate. Our analysis of the social distribution of forms suggests another route to situated meaning making use of the high predictability of forms. In such cases inference remains as a remedial resource.

Any interpretive theory must account for both the speed and the power of interpretive ability. Very rapid, routinized interpretations are based on the predictability of a large part of human interaction. Listeners also can interpret entirely novel utterances, including directives. A theory that tries to encompass both in a single interpretive process is as unrealistic as a theory that argues that the contextualized understanding of 'They asked the White House' and 'They bought the green house', must be described by identical syntactic processes.

We do not yet have good techniques for discovering the actual information processing stages in situated interpretations.[12] However, we can make inferences about processing from misunderstandings and puns. Speakers anticipating misunderstandings could disclaim the interpretation they think most likely:

(125) Hello. I don't want to speak to her right now, but is Sybil there?

Our data suggest that letting the misunderstanding happen is the usual occurrence, not making a disclaimer. The misunderstandings indicate that intonation, while it can differentiate potentially ambiguous cases, does not always do so. On the principle of least effort, one expects that when directives are neutralized they will not be heard as directives, since they require work by the hearer. So the best evidence of ambiguity occurs when utterances are heard as directives when they were not so intended. Such cases were presented in examples (66) to (71). Sinclair & Coulthard (1974: 56) give one case:

(68) Teacher to pupils in class:
(Intent of teacher was starting a lesson topic)
What are you laughing at?
Nothing.

The teacher inadvertently referred in the eliciting move to forbidden activity, so the eliciting move aborted and the child heard a rebuke. It is unlikely that the child entertained the hypothesis that the teacher was trying to open a discussion about the materials being taught, though the utterance was at an appropriate

[12] Clark & Lucy's (1975) excellent work on inferential steps does not provide a situational context to test processes in everyday comprehension.

point in the discourse. The directive interpretation in these conditions can be completely routine and there is no evidence that the information question interpretation (the 'literal' meaning) need be entertained.

Reply puns provide a second test of what the listener understands. Pragmatic puns pretend a failure to recognize obvious directive intent. They reveal a sharp gap between the two types of possible interpretation. One of these, the 'literal' interpretation, is funny precisely because it is unexpected. Some teasing uses the same tactic.

(126) Stop growing!
(127) [One student to another]:
  Are you going to share your candy with me?
  Oh I don't know.
(128) [Child to mother]:
  Do you know where Daddy hid the candy?
  Yes.
(129) [Wife to husband]:
  Do you know how to put the water in the windshield wiper squirter?
  How?

Just as everyone knows that growth is involuntary, the participants knew that (127) and (128) were directives and that (129) was an information question, not an information offer. The humor comes from the violation of what everyone knows, the irritation from the refusal to comply with a solicitation when the message was obvious.

The humor in pragmatic puns derives from the sharp dislocation of awareness when the listener notices a meaning not apparent before. The humor implies that the alternative, or 'literal' meaning, was not interpreted en route to the normal pragmatic meaning.

There is no such sharp dislocation, and hence no humor, in the failure of hints, as in example (95) in which the hearer just seems preoccupied or dense, not clever at all, so the speaker had to provide a more interpretable hint (96). Such cases argue for the primacy of the directive interpretation in the processing of directives in which pragmatic puns are possible. Pragmatic puns and misunderstandings are likely to be complementary in distribution, since reply puns require a correct understanding of intent. Still, both are based upon formal pragmatic neutralization.

Another test for the power of the theory of inference is whether directives always have a meaning which is plausibly a lead into an inference sequence with a directive interpretation. While most do, some do not. In some cases the questioner already clearly knows the answer. In others, the answer is so irrelevant as to be funny.

(130) [Dinner table guest]:
How about the salt?

(131) [Customer gazing at large supply of licorice on the shelf]:
Do you have three sticks of licorice?

(132) [Mother looks at barefoot son and slippers in closet]:
Where are your slippers?

(133) [Teacher to student turning in anonymous homework]:
Where is your name?

(134) [Mother to son]:
What is your coat doing there?

(135) [Bus-stop. Stranger to another who is looking at his watch]:
Do you have the time?

(136) [Teacher to child, entering the room]:
Why don't you sit over here?

(137) [Customer watching director through glass partition, to director's secretary]:
Is Mr Zimmerman in?

(138) [Father to son]:
How many times have I told you about that door, damn it!

In these cases, it seems highly unlikely that a literal interpretation must be seriously entertained and rejected. All the interpretive work is then left up to the inferential process, even though some of these forms are frequent and normal, and thus could be routinized.

(B) *Conventional directive frames.* Both imperatives and imbedded imperatives contain the components of the desired act. They also have other structural and lexical features which mark them as directives. Sinclair & Coulthard's (1974: 32) Rule 1 specified that any pattern consisting of modal+you+feasible act would be an appropriate directive. Shatz' (1974) evidence shows that this rule is learned through explicit shaping with redundant gestures, so that for two-year olds it generalizes to 'May you . . .' There are probably some constraints on its generality, in the neutralized cases (like 'can you') if the situated context is biased to another possible interpretation. This may be one of a family of interpretive rules defining directive-identifying frames.

Some directive frames are so frequent as to be formulaic, as in the case of 'Get in, whyncha?' and 'Sit over here, ya wanna'. The degree of lexicalization vs. generality of these components of the frames may vary in different speakers. For example, some modals may be more appropriate in directives than others, and as in all conventions there are probably differences in the details according to speech community.

(C) *Directive rules.* Within the cultural knowledge which listeners bring to

interaction is awareness of the types of goods and services they will be expected to supply in a given interaction. The most extreme constraints occur in structured settings like the army, classroom, and small store, in which it can be said that certain objects and actions have demand properties. Their very mention, within a wide range of linguistic context, may have the effect of a directive.

Sinclair's group first noticed this interesting phenomenon in their work on classroom interaction. They pointed out that:

> Any declarative or interrogative is to be interpreted as a *command to stop* if it refers to an action or activity which is proscribed at the time of utterance . . . [but] as a *command to do* if it refers to an action or activity which teachers and pupil(s) know ought to have been performed or completed and hasn't been (Sinclair & Coulthard 1974: 32–3).

The statement may be too comprehensive. Gordon and Lakoff (1971: 65) have made a far more restrictive rule, namely:

> One can convey a request by asserting a speaker-based sincerity condition or questioning a hearer-based sincerity condition.

They add that the listener must assume that the speaker also has directive intent. But this rule, while including direct need statements and most imbedded imperatives, will not account for most of the following examples, all of which may be effective directives to pass the salt:

(139) (a) Mary did put the salt out.
(b) Where's the salt?
(c) Who has the salt?
(d) Is that salt?
(e) Is that good salt?
(f) Is that sea salt?
(g) Is there any salt left?
(h) Did anyone put salt out?
(i) I like salt.

There are some limitations in this list. All, for example, involve reference to specific salt on the table. General statements about salt, without reference either to things or persons now here, might not always qualify, except in a special key.

(140) (a) There are salt mines in Utah.
(b) Salt can be obtained by evaporation.

Strictly construed, the set (139) does not meet Sinclair's definition, in that none uses the words 'pass the salt' or synonyms. On a wider construal of the rule, namely that any mention of objects with some demand properties in that situation (that is, salt at table is usually to be passed and sprinkled), is adequate to be a demand, then the instances in (140) present difficulty.

Those utterances will be interpreted as directives which (i) break rules of relevance in discourse or are structurally or intonationally marked, (ii) contain addressee cues for persons whose role includes the desired act, (iii) refer to acts prohibited to or obligatory for addressees, mention referents central to such acts, or give exemplars of the minimal semantic features which are base components of understood social rules.

The following sequence from a family transcript of Susanna Isola illustrates the first point. Three children are carving pumpkins with parents, and begin shouting competitively about the relative number of seeds in each pumpkin.

(141) [Father]:
Sh, not so loud, Karrie.
Is the volume turned on full?
[Mother]:
Godamit.

In this sequence, the topic shift is partial, from the noise of the child's voice to the tape recorder level, but the mother immediately knows the meaning of the directive from the topic shift (and possible addressee selection by gaze-direction). If utterances like (140) were in the middle of relevant discussion, they would not be taken as directives. In the Sinclair–Coulthard classroom case, I can imagine that a teacher might talk about how chewing gum is manufactured, or in an applied botany context talk about the uses of gum trees, without having sentences about chewing gum become prohibitions.

Grice (1975) has argued that the stricture 'be relevant' is a conversational maxim. Records of intimate conversation show wide relevancy limits in some settings, since speakers' associative processes are adequate reason for any topic on some turns (not for replies). In most discourse, shift of topic is marked and must be congruent with other cues, or accounted for. Listeners will notice such shifts and not assume they continue the function or intent of the previous utterance. Topic shift, of course, is not the only cue available; channel cues such as loudness, breathing rate, gaze direction, and other paralinguistic and gestural indicators may mark a change of function for listeners.

Semantic feature specification can be minimal.

(142) [Office supervisor]:
What happened to the ***requisitions***? (to be filled out).

To illustrate minimal semantic features, consider the variety of ways in which a parent might complain about a child's leaving his shoes in the living room:

(143) (a) Look *where* your *shoes* are.
(b) *Where* are your *shoes*?
(c) *Where* do your *shoes* belong?

(d) Why are your *shoes there*?
(e) What are *those*?
(f) What's wrong *here*?
(g) Well, *here* are some *shoes*.

Notice that all that these utterances do is to put a place and an object together, either by reference to location or by deixis (or in the sentence (143) (f) by implication) and to make these features focal. Mere mention of shoes isn't enough; there must be some indication about location, because the aversive condition is the joint feature shoes/location. The Sinclair & Coulthard (1974) rules make it clear that these utterances only could function as directives if the listener clearly has in mind that there is a rule about where shoes ought to be, so that any utterance or gesture which calls attention to this mismatch can be a directive.

But these should be less often successful:

(144) (a) Are those shoes blue or green?
(b) Where did you buy your shoes?
(c) Those shoes are getting old, aren't they?

At the opposite explicitness extreme from the lexicalized frames are directives which rely wholly on attracting the listener's attention to a function change, and alluding to the problem, as in the general directive rule above. Only if the listener's obligations are already known and accepted can such general references be effective. In the case cited in (94) general remarks about smoking were inadequate since the smokers felt no obligation to stop.

Good examples of such general directives are 'Somebody's talking', 'There's some chewing gum', 'Where does your dish go?' and 'What are those shoes doing there?' Indexical methods of reference to object or location are common, question words are common.

This class of directives is an important challenge to the view that literal interpretations must be part of the inference process. In these cases effective directives contain common semantic elements which could be interpreted short of a full analysis of the utterance, and certainly short of fully entertaining an alternative pragmatic interpretation and checking its feasibility conditions.

Recognizability of a directive may be contingent on the match between social context and the particular form used. The Agent Indirection Rule included a specific interpretive limit to 'we' ambiguity confining it to speech to a subordinate. Ayhan Aksu's landlady (example 116) did not hear 'Could we move the garbage can over here?' as a directive at all, but as a permission request.

Other instances may be said to be highly situated, in that their identity as directives has arisen by conventions in specific contexts, discourse positions, and between speakers and hearers having particular roles. For instance, 'Is Sybil there?' (or the more general form 'Is X there' 'Is X in?', etc.) is optimally a directive on the telephone when produced by the caller directly following the

greeting. If it is a shout by a mother about her toddler, Sybil, who disappeared upstairs, it is likely to be heard as an information request.

Since such conventionalization of specific forms is likely to require sufficient frequency of use for shared understanding to develop, we may expect especially to find situated conventional directives in families, task settings with repetitive events, and in groups where identity marking is important, such as the Marines.[13] In schools, there are many conventions marking routine events; the language simply is a signal for a familiar act: 'It's twelve o'clock?' 'Juice time!' These rules may not be abstract at all but involve particular words.

(D) *Context in interpretation.* In natural directives, the listener has available information which pre-sets the probabilities of interpretations. What is this information?

1. *Transactional settings* predefine which transactions are dominant and which party will perform each role when roles are divided.

(145) [Small grocery store. A rack of cigarettes behind the counter where the owner stands by the cash register. Woman enters, scans rack]:
Where's the slims?

Consider the reverse situation, in which the owner made the utterance. An observer would have had to search for some hypotheses about the social role of the addressee, perhaps consider whether it was a delivery agent, etc. The utterance would be a problem to solve.

(146) [Owner sets down a pack of cigarettes]:
Forty.

Had the entering stranger done this, it would have raised questions about whether she was a dope peddler, what was the sum she was asking for, and so on.

In the context of the store, the chief unknown which is presented by an entering client is the object wanted, and the chief unknown to be customer, once the object is in hand, is the price to be paid. The presumed activity is an interchange of money for goods, so any mention of desired acts or beneficiaries (in a dyad) is redundant. Utterances will be interpreted within the framework of

[13] Marine drill sergeants spend considerable effort retraining recruits' language, including the avoidance of first and second person pronouns. The deliberate ambiguity illustrated in (52) is used also in a contrast between an order which is ungrammatical in Marine language but not in ordinary civilian speech. The recruits' resulting disarray displayed their failure to be fully socialized Marines, making them available to public ridicule (Humphess 1974).

Normal Marine order: Platoon...halt! (timed to the march).
Illegal command: Stop, mob, stop. Whoa mob, stop, stop herd.
You girls don't wanna march, huh?
Hold hands girls, now walk, that's right.
Hippety hop, mob stop.

(a) the category list relating to these unknowns and (b) the structural range normal for directives in this social relationship (namely, for everyday items known to be in stock a direct or singly imbedded imperative).

2. *Ongoing activity* presents certain exchanges of goods and services as required by the task or process. There are cases (such as simultaneously driving and talking) in which the salient conversational topic may so outweigh in attention the ongoing activity that even directives that are driving-related (like 'You better stop') would not be so heard if they are at the same time topic-relevant unless marked shifts of intonation, posture and so on cue attention to a change. Task-relevant and role-appropriate directives are more likely to be direct rather than imbedded or embroidered imperatives since they need to be marked less for attentional purposes.

3. *Relationship of speaker and addressee* – relative rank, age, and so on – will define a range of forms likely to occur as directives. Coming from a teacher, even a lexical reference to required or prohibited school activities is heard as a directive. How could so general a rule work as a processing device? Perhaps by creating a kind of semantic marker on these activity names, or their conceptual domain, activated when occurring in the context of the teacher. In the case of the Agent Indirection Rule, the desired act is explicit. Those speakers of American English who understand this rule will hear the act as the responsibility of the subordinate unless it is specifically assigned to another agent.

The context in the unambiguous, clear, highly probable cases (which are, after all, very frequent) can provide what might be considered the first dial turns on a padlock, which the utterance simply clicks into place. The utterance can make explicit what is left unspecified by context. But context is not simply the factors mentioned above (and the many others in the studies in the ethnography of communication). It is also the prior exchanges of posture and language which can negotiate rank between strangers, mood, key, and the task. This process of negotiation, and its defects across differences in communicative assumptions, has been described in greater detail by Gumperz (in press). My main point in this section is to show that the social norms reported in this paper suggest that the work of the hearer need not begin with the utterance, but that the set or priming of the hearer can be so great that a nod is a directive. But if the form is inappropriate to the context, it may not be heard as a directive at all.

SOCIAL MEANING IN DIRECTIVES

Is the variation in directive form merely a politeness scale?

It is commonly assumed that the variation in the forms for speech acts is due to politeness (Lakoff 1973; Mohan, n.d.). If we set out a list of various ways of saying the same thing, we can obtain judgments that show them to be scaled in politeness. James (1975) and Mohan (n.d.) have done just that. James' (1975)

ranking correlated highly with Mohan's. Mohan asked judges to rank written sentences in the following hypothetical context: 'You are sitting in a room within easy reach of the only window. The window is closed. An acquaintance (not a close friend) of the same age and sex as yourself is sitting on the opposite side of the room.' Intonation was of course variable in the imaginations of the readers. They were asked to rank the items for politeness between 'Open the window, please' and 'Go open the window right away'. The list includes in the judged order:

Do you mind opening the window?	1.34
May I ask you to open the window?	1.61
Will you open the window?	2.07
Can you open the window?	2.50
Open the window.	3.00 (given anchor point)
I want you to open the window.	4.04
You will open the window.	4.80

A distribution of forms across social situations, such as we examined in detail in this paper, could be interpreted two ways at least. It could be seen as a case in which forms have semantic features. By using a question, one gives an option, and giving an option has politeness value of a certain amount. One selects the appropriate politeness value according to the rank and age of the addressee, difficulty of the task and so on. This might be called a semantic feature version of how variants are selected and interpreted.

Let us consider some problems with this view. There are a great many social features, not just one, which are coded in the rules for naming and in those for directives: territoriality, distance, familiarity, normality of task or role, difficulty. Neustupny (1972) has recently shown a similar richness in Japanese social features in the coding rules for honorifics; he rejects a unidimensional analysis, which would make rank central.

It is not clear that the choice of address terms or directives to superiors is mediated by a feeling of deference or politeness at all. Yet semantic features imply some semantic process. In my work on address (Ervin-Tripp 1968) there was no point in the coding rule in which being polite entered; address was simply automatic and unconscious, given certain social rules. It is important to separate those aspects of speaking which are routine from those that involve semantic options and become focal; it is likely that studies of both judgments and memory will show that contrast with the expected, and change, is what is communicative in language. The rest does work, true, but by creating the context or background. By isolating examples from contexts in soliciting judgments, naturally we highlight semantic processes since the routine context is gone.

Empirically, the most persuasive evidence is that forms do not lie along a scale of increasing politeness for all social conditions. In languages with dif-

ferentiated second person pronouns, the V form can be used to insult. Friedrich (1972) quoted Tolstoy, who said that his grandmother sometimes did not use the 'ty' which would normally be addressed to a young prince. 'When a young prince walked up to her, she said a few words calling him *vy* and looked at him with an expression of such contempt that if I had been in his place, I would have become utterly confused.' Friedrich summarized: 'Under certain circumstances the opposite of the expected usage could confuse, humiliate, or affront an addressee' (p. 280).

Consider the following case:

(147) (a) Take out the garbage!
(b) Could I trouble you to take out the garbage?

The second form appears to be more polite. One can imagine it being used to a visiting aunt when the baby is crying and guests are expected. But imagine a different situation. The addressee is a nine-year-old boy who is supposed to put out the garbage each day before going to school. When he forgets, he is likely to be reminded by (a). If his older sister gives him (b) in the same tone of voice it may not sound polite, but sarcastic. She could exaggerate the effect with address terms:

(148) (a) Could I trouble you to take out the garbage, Joe?
(b) Could I trouble you to take out the garbage, Joseph McAllister?
(c) Could I trouble you to take out the garbage, King Alfred?

We need a theory which will account fully for cases in which deviation from the expected occurs. Can the model of the naming system (Geohegan 1973) be used despite the apparent difference in syntactic complexity?

The coding rule defines the normal, unmarked, expected name, just as the situation defines the expected language for bilinguals (Blom & Gumperz 1972). Such usage gives no information about the speaker's attitude since the expected form was used. If the speaker wishes to add nuances to meaning, it is necessary to shift code, dialect, or language, or use a nickname or honorific which is not obligatory. The embroidery added to imperatives, such as address terms, 'sir', rising pitch, and 'please' was also found with imbedded imperatives and even question directives. (Do you have any more cookies, please?) These forms were available to add optional marking to indicate deference or ingratiation, but since they also appeared in cases of greater difficulty or distance, and to set off discourse-imbedded utterances as directives, their social interpretation depends on what the normal, unmarked form would be in that context. If the normal form in a farewell between adults is 'good-night', then 'nighty-night' carries an affective nuance derived from its use to children.

In normal circumstances, when an expected form occurs, *listeners need make no affective interpretation at all.* If a stranger gives a modal imperative appro-

priate to the setting and feasible, an American listener hears the utterance as a directive, since the coding rules allow imbedded imperatives from strangers. If the social features are ambiguous, the form the speaker uses may give the hearer information on how he views their relative age, and rank, and the amount of service asked. If social features are clear, but the form is unexpected by his own coding rule, the hearer assumes that the speaker is imputing different social features than he thinks he has, and reacts to the imputation as deference, sarcasm, arrogance, coldness, undifferentiated annoyance, or a joke. These inferences appear to be relatively systematic, to the point of being like marking rules. To see how such social inference might work, let us begin with a familiar example of address. American English, like Russian, leads us to make affective interpretations of unexpected address terms. If a used car salesman who is a stranger first-names me, I hear it as false solidarity, because I expect that is the tactic of salesmen (pseudo-Gemeinschaft), and I want to apply distance, perhaps by returning 'Mr X'. When an unfamiliar young gynecologist first-names me, I hear it as condescending, as treating me like a child, ignorant and submissive, and I ask for his first name to reciprocate. Yet the overt act has been the same, and I never considered the alternative interpretation in either case. Some of the interpretive work then, is done by viewing the choices as metaphors, in which the speaker has given the addressee features (colleague; child) other than she thinks she has. One or the other of these interpretations is required by my coding rule, if it is a base for such metaphors, since between strangers only colleagues or children receive first name (Ervin-Tripp 1968, Fig. 1). Prior beliefs resolved the ambiguity, perhaps erroneously. The idea of metaphor in social interpretations was first developed by Blom & Gumperz (1972) to account for dialect and language shifting, but it is entirely compatible with the findings about marking rules in Geohegan's most detailed work (1973), allowing some productivity beyond conventional marking.

A similar tactic of communicating affect by systematic deviation from a norm is illustrated by the following scene at a professional meeting:

(149) [Speaker at a symposium calls on fifth questioner]:
[Questioner]: Thank you.
[Speaker]: Oh, I'm sorry. Did I overlook you?

'Thank you' would be considered polite in any simple scaling of meaning. In this case it was interpreted as a criticism, and elicited an apology. Why? 'Thank you' occurs following a service. Calling on someone is not, in this group, a service meriting thanks. Therefore there is an empty discourse slot unaccounted for. Calling on someone after a long wait could be said to be a service. The thanks has a dual function, then; it magnifies the service beyond its due (overpoliteness one could say) and it calls attention to the delay which is the fault of the speaker, so it implies a criticism of the speaker. Had it been a practice for all questioners to

thank speakers who call on them, the act would have been unremarkable, unremarked, and uninterpreted socially.

The interpretive process with directives can work the same way. If what is said matches what would be within the predicted range for the social context, the interpretation as a directive is all that is made, and there is otherwise no social interpretation needed. If there is a mismatch, the hearer identifies what social features the mismatch might be appropriate to. These features are being imputed by the speaker to the hearer, the task, or the setting. The main point is that the social interpretation or marking derives from the existence of norms which can be compared: the form which was expected, and the social features appropriate to the expression used. Obviously for such a process to flow smoothly participants must share norms; if not, what is intended as socially unmarked interaction will be heard as marked and misunderstood.

(150) [New secretary to Berkeley department chairman as she locks office door]:
I'm going to lunch, now.
[Chairman replies]:
(a) Would you mail this package to my mother, please?
or
(b) Are you going to go by the Post Office, by any chance?

(151) [Young file clerks who have worked together for four months]:
I got the applications done finally.
(a) Could you take these back to Emma, please?
or
(b) Take these with you.

It is clear from the office studies that the first example in each case should be judged by participants as inappropriate. It sounds rude from the boss and cold from the file clerk. (One would want contextualized subjective reaction tests to check member reaction, to be sure.)

Why should one expect differences in the quality of the reaction in the two cases? The imbedded imperative in example (151) is supposed to be more polite. In the first example (150), the expected form is a question-directive because of the high probability the service would be out of her way and the fact that it is outside her normal tasks. The imbedded imperative assumes a subordinate's compliance, and therefore implies she is his personal secretary and that he has more power than he has.

In example (151) the expected form for a routine easy task between peers at work is the direct imperative. An imbedded imperative in an office implies that the addressee is either new and unfamiliar, or separated from the speaker by age or rank. To address a familiar peer as a non-peer is to be cold and distancing.

Teaford (1974) found some evidence in the incompatible living group she studied that 'polite' forms were used as distancing devices. They occurred even under duress (Could you please wipe up the blood). One woman said 'excuse me' whenever she wanted to occupy another's place. The other two roommates reacted to this as rude; she was using a marked attention-getter as a command, thus implying that they were inattentive and would ignore slighter cues.

The reason it is sarcastic, and not at all polite, to tell a younger sibling 'Could I trouble you to take your feet off my face?' is that the only grounds on which elaborate imbedding would be appropriate in a household would be either a difficult service or a high rank. If it is a difficult service to remove his feet, he's lazy. If he thinks he is of high rank, he should come off it. Both know he is not of high rank.[14] Over-deference as a device to irritate a listener is not confined to peers; it is the classic way to insult a superior, with sufficient ambiguity to protect the speaker.

New learners of languages containing many social alternatives, such as Japanese, are said to have great difficulty in achieving address which is neither sarcastically deferent or rude. The social norms of distribution have to be learned from exposure. Many of the choices achieve their effect through a certain frequency in the text, as in the case of the honorifics mentioned by Geertz (1960) and by Martin (1964). How does one learn the appropriate and expected density for a given set of contextual conditions? One clearly cannot learn frequency by one exposure, by exposure in one social environment (such as teacher–pupil), or from books. If politeness was simply a meaning dimension, there would be no bad effects in erring by being too polite. It is because the deviance from a norm is given a social interpretation that ingratiation can be as insulting as deviance through rudeness. Without a theory of discourse context, familiarity, rank, and so on, one cannot account either for meaning reversals or qualitative changes in social meaning.

A skilled speaker relies on the contrast between what is expected and what occurs as a resource for implying meaning. His ability to communicate qualitative insults, deference, anger, sarcasm, humor, intimacy and distance rests on knowledge of what the listener expects to hear, and what social features cue that expectation. Thus both to interpret the pragmatic intentions of the speaker who is ambiguous, and for the development of rhetorical strategies, speakers and hearers have to have a normative reference point.

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[14] This use of sarcasm through employing directives normal to a higher rank or harder task seems analogous to lexical sarcasm. In lexical sarcasm of some kinds, positive-valued terms are given when both speaker and hearer know the value is false or can so infer from the presence of intonations normal to negative adjectives:
He certainly is a ^{3}génius. (after a stupid act).
That was a ^{1}gŕeat party. (pitch drop on maximally stressed adjective).
^{2}Very ^{1}fúnny. (pitch drop).

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