

“Direct” and “indirect” communicative acts in semiotic perspective

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Abstract

Putrportedly universal instrumentalist views of language functions are critically reviewed, whether conceived more narrowly in respect of denotational (referential and predicational) uses or more widely in respect of interpersonal (pragmatic) goals or effects. In both these realms the concept of discernible degrees of “directness” vs. “indirectness” rests on various folk- or ethno-metalinguistic ideas of how language form can be iconic with an autonomous realm of that which it stands for, a projective semantic or pragmatic pictorialism of questionable utility in cross-cultural empirical investigation. Rather, through the analysis of Worora (Northern Kimberley, Australia) examples of social indexicality in the realms of ‘politeness’ and ‘avoidance/taboo’, it is seen that the interaction of pragmatic (indexical) norms for contextualizing language and the local culture’s ethno-metapragmatics determines the equivalent of what Western ethno-metapragmatics understands in terms of “direct” and “indirect.”

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1. Introduction

When we emphasize the strictly semantic aspect of language, we tend to conceive of it as a supervening denotational structure immanent in rational propositional thought and communication. When we emphasize the pragmatic aspect of language, we tend to conceive of it as a resource for actualizing event- and context-framed utterance acts. Within both perspectives, however, we encounter widespread use of the terms *direct* and *indirect* for the relationship of forms to propositions or to utterance acts – e.g., “indirect speech acts” (Searle, 1975) – bespeaking an instrumentalist view of structured language or actualized discourse, that is, language understood as a resource or causal means by which to effectuate consequential ends.

Such instrumentalist accounts of language’s (and discourse’s) functionality exemplify wider cultural ideologies about the roots of semiotic representation and of social action, to be sure; they are given verbal expression in a folk- or ethno-metapragmatics of “how to *do things* with words” (Austin’s 1975[1962] title [*italics added*]). But such views also serve as the underpinnings of many would-be technical – “scientific” – accounts of language in relation to its uses and users. In such professional discourse, unexamined instrumentalist functionalism merely perpetuates and compounds the problems and errors that arise from their folk-functionalist underpinnings, especially when they lead to claims about *why* we do certain things with particular words. One such problem is exemplified in what we can term *metaphorical pictorialism*; that is, seeing denotational code as a possible shortest path navigable between two

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otherwise independently knowable points (a concept and an expression's form; an interpersonal task and its linguistic utterance-formula). Another problem might be termed *metaphorical naturalism*, leading to recommendations that one select the “naturally” adapted simplex tool to build the desired conceptual or interactional object (recalling here William Strunk Jr's [1918:21] “omit needless words”). Now pictorialism and naturalism are both species of Peircean iconicity. The point is that like any iconic relationships, they are constituted and make sense only within sociohistorically and culturally specific semiotic ideologies and their sometime explicit instantiation in folk-metapragmatics. Such metapragmatics is the lens through which any specific community of language users reflexively understand – and culturally rationalize – their own (and thence, others') habits of semiotic form and function.

I want first to characterize in greater detail this family of folk and attempted technical theories. I then look at the form-function relationship of several kinds of purportedly “indirect” language uses. It will be seen that folk perceptions of “indirectness” are the result of viewing pragmatic or indexical paradigms instantiated in discourse through the distorting lens we characteristically encounter. Contextualizing indexical values of language forms are understood to be tropically transformed word- and sentence-level denotational code, thus creating a kind of projective mirage in the realm of register, as we will see exemplified in detail.

From such examples, we will be able to conclude that [1] so-called “indirect” language is pragmatically *marked discourse* within its indexed context of occurrence, formed of paradigmatically reduced constructional possibilities by constraining cultural norms of appropriateness-to-context; and that [2] filtered through the lens of a metapragmatics of denotation – as all reflexive perception of language use tends to be (at least in the Western linguistics tradition) – such usage is understood within some local cultural system to be tropically transformed use of denotational code. I outline two similar but contrasting “indirect” usages in Worora, an Aboriginal Australian language of the Northern Kimberley, Western Australia, to show that the topology or geometry of tropic transformation of indexically anchored categories, frequently deictic (indexical–denotational) ones, varies from otherwise comparable example to example. One example is understood to be a tropic index of ‘distance’, the other of ‘negation’. I argue that there is no unity of membership in what would have to be considered to be “indirect” usage—making the concept otiose as an analytic tool but revealing it to be a cover term within our tradition for what occurs universally: indexically marked uses of language that are consequential for users insofar as they are filtered through a local ethno-metapragmatics. We must conclude that the very concepts of “direct” and “indirect” are just local cultural facts of Standard Average European ethno-metapragmatic provenance that make sense within this widespread instrumentalist ideology of semiotic “least effort” and related cultural intuitions.

2. The concept of functionality in language form: denotational structural-functionalism

Edward Sapir already broached this topic of functional “directness” in his path-breaking paper of 1925, “Sound patterns in language,” one of the transformative theoretical expressions of 20th century structuralist thought. Here, observational categories of phonetic sound, such as one might use to transcribe spoken utterance using IPA or equivalent written signs, are referred to – seen as instantiations in speech of – abstract structural segment-classes within word phonology. Sapir's analytic rests on the fact that there is a grammar of “sound” as well as one of “meaning” giving structure to denotational code, i.e., a network of syntagmatic (combinatoric) and paradigmatic (contrastive) relationships of underlying phonological segments: phonemes or, as Sapir termed them, “true sounds” as opposed to merely audible (and transcribable) “conditional variants” [i.e., allophones]. His theoretical point is that such phonological structure is the primary locus of “[true] sound” in language as a denotational code, with respect to which people produce and receive articulate speech, and in respect of which, then, so-called “sound laws” operate in linguistic diachrony.

But in order to get to this theoretical denouement, Sapir starts out by distinguishing two kinds of humanly produced noises that have, superficially, precisely the same articulatory, acoustic, and auditory properties: one, the voiceless [ʰW-] sounded when blowing out a candle, the other the [ʰW-] uttered in the course of starting to pronounce the word *when*.¹ As Sapir notes, “the production of the candle-blowing sound is a directly functional act,” while the speech sound – the phoneme, as we now say – “is unconsciously felt as ‘placed’ with reference to other [phonemes]” “in a definite system of symbolically utilizable counters.” For “[a] sound that is not unconsciously felt as ‘placed’ with

¹ Of course, the second situation of phonation is complicated by the voiced vowel nucleus that follows the syllable-initial, so that somewhere in the course of pronouncing the phonological segment /ʰw/, there will be a voice-onset transition. The candle-blowing [ʰW] has no such complication.

reference to other sounds is no more a true element of speech than a lifting of the foot is a dance step unless it can be ‘placed’ with reference to other movements that help to define the dance.” The candle-blowing [ʰw-] is the direct behavioral and energetic cause of the snuffing out of the candle-flame as a consequence. The phonemic [ʰw-] is a Saussurean sound-segment in *langue* or denotational code-structure, only mediately – not directly – functional in the (“real”) world of physical cause and effect: it is part of the phonological form of a lexical item of a denotational code.

So when one uses a token of the phonemic segment, it instantiates, firstly, a *structural function* in the syllabic structure of English word phonology, the /hw-/ syllable onset as opposed to a /w-/ onset or a /kw-/ one. Thereby, secondly, by determining an identifiable lexical form or morpheme, the phonemic unit has as well a structural function within the lexico-grammatical order of the denotational code. Thirdly, it functions by contributing, thus, to a projection into the denotational semantics of whatever sentence-structure the denotational text-segment it occurs in instantiates. And thus, fourthly, the occurrence of the phoneme in the morpheme in the semantically interpretable phrase structure instantiated in a denotational text-segment in an utterance-act under certain conditions of discourse production contributes to the denotational significance – the contextualized “meaning” of what is said in-and-by utterance. Perhaps the /hw-/ of the word when helps speaker and addressee to relate two states-of-affairs one to another as temporally ordered circumstance to narrative focus (“When I [=Spkr] came in, the dog had already fallen asleep.”). Then there is the further question of the possibly fifth framework of indirect functionality of the initial sound, in how the utterance in context of such a denotational form might be the cause of some interpersonal consequentiality: an excuse, for example, rendered for personal (speaker) exculpation because the dog awoke in the middle of night, and being unwalked before the long nighttime, had deposited excrement on the oriental carpet over which speaker shares responsibility with the erstwhile addressee of the form – who, alas, already had encountered the matter-out-of-place. Such layered frameworks of “indirect” functional effects are conjurable, to be sure, without end.

What a long, difficult, functionalist story needs to be told about our little speech noise that occurs during verbal articulation of English! When it is understood to be a token of a phonemic unit within denotational code, only via such coding does it get to play its particular role in the utterer’s being able to do something interpersonal or social. That is, the sound plays an instrumental role in the consequential doing of something interactional by means of its structural-functional role in instantiating lexico-grammatically parsable discourse!

By contrast, think of the fact that for us speakers of American English the act of saying [ʰw-] as opposed to [w-] at the beginning of the word when is *directly* functional in a framework very different from that of blowing out a candle. The speaker, using the pre-aspirated, voiceless [ʰw-] sound as opposed to the non-aspirated, voiced sound [w-] is performing an *indexical act* of self-positioning relative to literary, let alone broadcast standard register American English. The [ʰw-] pronunciation places the utterer at the culturally constituted top-and-center of an essentially conical structure of understood social difference and stratification, using in this way what folk ideology understands as the “neutral” language spoken from social identity’s “nowhere-in-particular” at the peak of the conical axis.²

The hegemony of this register is such that all deviations from it are evaluated as lower-and-relatively peripheral in some relevant social formation realized in, and hence interpretatively projected from, the context of utterance –

² To be sure, the simplification of the initial cluster /hw-/ in English has proceeded apace, parallel in some ways to the simplification of inherited clusters /hn-/ , /hr-/ , /hl-/ during the 14th century, to the simplification of /kn-/ during the 18th century, by dropping the initial inherited segment. As Schreier (2005:80) notes (with references), “A total of nine initial clusters have disappeared from British English and are not found in (post-)colonial varieties. The two exceptions are /hw-/ , still common in Scottish English and varieties of American and New Zealand English . . . , and /kn-/ , which survives as a remnant feature on the Shetland Islands to the present day.” Actually, as McDavid and McDavid (1952) carefully note on the basis of historical sources and of the field records of the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, there are complex geographic and sociolectal factors involved in the Atlantic Coast distributions of /hw-/ vs. /w-/ (as in orthographic *whip*, *wheelbarrow*) and /hy-/ vs. /y-/ (as in *humor*, *Houston*). This, notwithstanding a widespread and persistent prescriptive bias down to the 20th century in favor of the h-initial cluster among American writers attempting to describe the social indexicality associated with the different pronunciations in terms of prestige (cluster) and non-prestige (simplex) variants, a large sampling of the views of whom the McDavids cite in a running footnote accompaniment to their article. By considering the chronology of cluster simplification of /hw-/ and /hy-/ in Britain in relation to the distributions documented along the American Atlantic Coast, McDavid and McDavid invoke settlement history, substratal influence of French- and German-speaking populations, urban vs. rural contact with sea-based, Anglo-focal commercial interests, etc. in explaining the patchwork of attested Atlas forms recorded principally in the 1930s and 1940s, with both clusters, with one or the other, or with neither. What becomes clear is that the ethno-metapragmatic image of cultivated, perhaps schooled standard American English presumes the full, clustered pronunciation with initial aspirate, despite complex patterns of deviation therefrom (clearly a function as well of stress, tempo, segmental phonological context, etc.). I am grateful for an anonymous referee’s query as the stimulus to document this, which is surely presumed upon by Sapir’s original discussion (Sapir having himself acquired a cultivated New York pronunciation by the time he was a professional scholar, as evidenced in recordings I have heard of his articulation from the early 1930s).

speaker's class and position legitimated with respect to institutions of power particularly salient here. Of course, paradoxically, speakers aiming at standard pronunciation (despite inherent variability) speak from *somewhere*, some sociological location – there we have the divergence of ideological reflexivity and sociological functionality. But standard register is the orientational or attitudinal top-and-center toward which each such indexical act is a little pious ritual genuflection of aspiration, realized with different rates of performance in different social segments and sectors. William Labov, of course, has made a career studying such indexical acts under the rubric of “linguistic change [inevitably and always] in progress” (see now the systematic treatment in Labov 1994 and 2001). In this work, the demographic and situational distributional asymmetries and perturbations of indexicality in phonetic realization of phonological structures, in relation to other indexes of register-anxiety, comprise what is termed sociolinguistic structure, a.k.a. “language change in progress” when signs in history are read as signs of history (see Fortes, 1970; Parmentier, 1985).

So, we have discovered in Sapir's pregnant example not only the candle-blowing “direct” functionality and the phonological “indirect” functionality that he identifies; there is a third kind of functionality. The candle-blowing [^hW-] is cause-and-effect directly functional in the framework of human bodies – or body parts – as instruments with physicochemical potential guided by agency. The phonemic /hw-/ is directly functional only within a Saussurean phonological system of the “doubly articulated” denotational code structure; phonological /hw-/ is mediately or indirectly functional with orders and orders of mediated remove in the framing world of how human subjectivities come to intersubjective social alignments through the magic of talk, of communicating what appear to be denotationally coded utterances one to another in the flow of such. The indexical paradigm of phonetic variability across a cline of [^hW-] to [w-] seems to cross-cut the distinction of these others, but leads us to consider the place of indexical semiosis, to which I now turn.

3. Indexical functionality and the direct/indirect distinction

Yet observe that our third functionality is, once more, seemingly “direct:” the social indexical [^hW-] – as opposed to [w-] – is part of what we term a conventional *pragmatic paradigm* of indices of utterer's social position (achieved or aspired to) relative here to a register organization (alternate coherent ways of “saying ‘the same’ thing”) of the language community's norms, one of the structural underpinnings of manifesting one's identity in-and-by *how* one says what one wants denotationally to communicate. The relative frequencies of realization of the variant forms of such indexical paradigms certainly constitute a “function” of language-in-use as legitimate in the phonetic signal as whatever denotational communication is going on, and yet a function independent of denotation as such. (Of course, as has long been known, the two turn out to be interestingly intertwined at the diachronic plane and in fact at the synchronic plane as well.)

So here is – through all this parable-like indirectness – my point. So-called “directness” and “indirectness” are terms that are meaningful only within various framing realms of cause-and-effect functionalities. Semiotically speaking, these are the realms of various kinds of indexicality, of how signs-as-occurrences point to the very conditions of their occurrence, as Charles Sanders Peirce long ago pointed out. In cultural forms, to be sure, these are facts of *conventional* indexicality. Such indexicality obtains as interlocutory participants understand the flow of dynamic mutual contextualization of occurring language, paralanguage, gesture, body movement, etc. relative to interpersonal social events as the context “in” which, as framing, all such multi-channel behavioral displays are produced and interpretable. Event frames are projectively imaginable, and hence such contributory indexical clues as to “what has been/will have been going on” are like the flow of bodily motions of a Marcel Marceau, from which the mime's observing audience can (re)construct the context, rendering the whole no longer mere bodily movement but visible and comprehensible social actions and activities of particular types (recall Sapir on dance steps, quoted above). Denotational language as such materializes, of course, in one modality of the oral-aural channel or equivalent, but this modality is intercalated as a portion of a multi-channel and multi-modal indexical flow.

The limitless realms of indexicality in language are functionally autonomous and cross-cut the realm of denotation considered narrowly. But they intersect it and intertwine with it in numerous places (e.g., *deictics*, or indexical denotational categories like demonstratives and tense markers; *registers*, or context-appropriate alternate ways of “saying the same thing” such as are seen in so-called “speech levels,” i.e., stratified lexico-grammatical principles of denotational coherence). Indexicality also intertwines with denotation in numerous ways, e.g., to the extent that

denotational function masks the *indexical plurifunctionality* of communicative use, perhaps precisely because the denotationally parsable forms of language frequently are the only means to render concurrent social-indexical functions systematically “visible” to naïve analysis at the level of canonical sentences, phrases, or words; etc. Thus, in the example of contemporary American English [ʰwɛn] vs. [wɛn], there is a whole framework of norms presumed in respect of which the contrast gets its social-indexical loading as an act of self-alignment and self-identification: in bare outline, it evinces a shared belief in the conical model of standard vs. other registers; a shared assignment of higher value to the aspirated voiceless pronunciation, indeed as a shibboleth within a formal, print-to-pronunciation standard register; a shared association of the bases for interaction-relevant social identities in systems of stratification of people’s positions in society. With this complex set of orientations and alignments in the background, the act of now *differential* pronunciation becomes a token act of self-identification. As variationist studies under such conditions of register stratification have shown, however, it may be the characteristic rates of production of tokens of the variant forms in an indexical paradigm like this within an interlocutory in-group vs. out-group context that cumulate in identity-indexing, frequently out of the focused awareness of the interlocutors.

4. Functionalist failures in linguistic pragmatics

Any analysis of cause-and-effect “function,” then, can be coherent only to the extent it addresses conventional social indexicality: what are the contextual pre-conditions for certain signal-fractions to be endowed with indicative value (how indexicals are licensed by context), and how the display of such signal-fractions has default, and, in relation to context, other actual indicative effects (how the occurrence of indexicals entails their resulting context). But in linguistics, and certainly in those approaches to pragmatics highly influenced by mainstream analytic or formal philosophical theories, approaches to conventional social indexicality have proceeded in a very different way, resting notions of “directness” and “indirectness” on a layered intuition of pictorialism and related kinds of naturalism – in Peircean semiotic terms, iconism – in how language relates to the world in the discursive scope or expanse of the parsable one-sentence-long utterance. The intuition of iconism is an ancient and widespread ideology about language (recall the Socratic discussion in Plato’s *Kratylos*), and it seems to be found in the contrast between relatively more “direct” and “indirect” in communication at two distinct planes of semiosis.

First, within the innermost, “official” use of language forms as grammatically organized and lexically manifest instruments for denotation (Austin’s [1975:92–98] ‘pHEME’ produced in-and-by a ‘phatic act’), the intuition emerges in the doctrine of “literal meaning,” i.e., the possibly “direct” transparency of the sense-bearing, grammatically conforming expressions to their proper denotata on the basis of decontextualized semantics. With respect to such a “directly” denotational expression, then, any other forms of expression used in attempting equivalent reference – an Austinian ‘rHEME’ produced in a ‘rhetic act’ – would be an “indirect” – or “metaphorical” – usage. We can call an omelet (an) omelet “literally,” in such a view, but calling an omelet sautéed chicken has only a charmingly “non-literal,” or “indirect” and “metaphorical” validity. Notice that in the latter case, to denote the very omelet one could just call an omelet “literally,” interlocutors must share a cultural cognitive schema of stage-like seriality involving chickens and our quotidian domesticity’s unmarked type of eggs (but which came first?) on the basis of which some inferential work needs to be done—presuming as well upon the interlocutors’ knowledge of the relationship between what are called eggs and omelets as, respectively, unmarked-or-raw vs. markedly and telicly cooked in a particular preparation (as opposed to what are called scrambled eggs, poached eggs, etc.).

At their most naïve, doctrines of semantic “literal”ism live in the universe of what Saussure dismissed as nomenclaturist views in the *Cours* (1916:97), innocent of the distinction between event-bound denotation and system-bound designation or sense. Nomenclaturism is certainly pre-structural in that it lacks any attention to the difference between words and expressions, those linguistic objects that occur in the flow of denotational discourse, and the underlying, abstract lexical forms (both open and closed class) and grammatically conforming constructions of them that occur in the abstracted and idealized flow of parsed language (parallel in its order to the phonetic—phonological distinction emphasized by Sapir as discussed *supra*). Indeed the Ascended Master showed for all time subsequently – certainly for all subsequent linguistics – that the doctrine of “literal meaning” can be a coherent and actually empirical theory – as opposed to an article of folk behavior resting on ideological faith – only if denotational literalness is identified with what I term ‘Saussurean sense categorization’, denotational differences covariant with

and a function of formal differentiation in lexico-grammatical form, from which such conceptual content can be projected.³ Sophisticated students of semantics and pragmatics (e.g., the philosopher Hilary Putnam [1975, 1978, 1988]) now understand that the rest – the preponderant aspect – of the denotational “meaning” of words and expressions comes not from language structure as such but from the sociocentrically grounded conceptual knowledge associable with particular words and expressions – note, not lexical forms of grammatical analysis – based on the sociolinguistic division of discursive labor. Complementarily, through attempts at modeling *grammatical categories* under Saussurean assumptions, we have also come to see how difficult it is to discern the universal semantic primitives with which to model the sense-projecting categories of any particular language’s grammar and lexicon so as to show how these compatibly instantiate those of language in general.

Be that as it may, the doctrine that language as a cognitive resource grounds literalness of (denotational) “meaning” feeds into minimax notions of using language denotationally in communicative context, in the image of a tendency of speakers and their addressees to obey a “Goldilocks Principle” of utterance: calculating, in effect, the denotationally “ju:::st right” amount of expression-form per sentence-long turn-at-communication within the longer flow of text. Such an argument has a long history among teachers of expository prose-writing (thus my invocation of Strunk above), and, indeed, is an ideology of the denotational transparency – to the world? to “thought?” – of properly “direct” and literal expression. Read as a theory of real language, Wittgenstein’s Tractarian doctrine rested upon this pre-structural discursive pictorialism of propositional form, anchored in the presumption of literalness. In recent years it has been most closely associated with the philosopher Paul Grice (1987) and his followers in linguistic pragmatics (see now Chapman, 2005, esp. 85–113; 185–216), who reason by a kind of semantic transduction of the doctrine of literalness that there must be some optimum (i.e., direct, or “literal”) way of effectuating a particular denotational end so that interlocutors are soothed by the upholding of a principle of denotational “cooperation.” Should a speaker’s formulated expression “violate” shared interlocutory expectations of amount, ordering, or literalness of denotational information (i.e., “directness” measured against denotational ends), an interpreting addressee is triggered to search cognitively for a construal of message and context that would restore a sense of (“literal”) denotational coherence, or locate the “non-literalness” of a communicated message in respect of special contextual conditions, such as various non-purely denotational ends of the communication.

There are many ins and outs of this family of approaches, but they have in common the presumption of “directness” of denotational communication in the guise of contextual minimax optimization (Horn, 2001:24–25) of form modulo denotational function. Alas, even where this is coherent it is at best a retrodictive and ad hoc attempt to get at the well-known phenomena of indexicality in language and discourse—the dependence of the “effectiveness” of signs in establishing social interactional realities based on the “appropriateness” of signs to their ever-shifting contexts of social interactional reality. Of course, this is a semiotic realm inherent in any event of language use, and any analytic understanding of situated discourse and its structuring of necessity must take into account the social interactional frame, that is, the kind of social interactional event in which language use occurs, and its place in an overall economy of social organization. The usual approach in linguistic pragmatics attempts to reduce interpersonal interaction to presumptive cognitive inferencing by each participant as an individual, anchored ultimately in orientations to canons of denotational “directness”; as well, it eschews accounting for a level of the social reality of events at the same time such a level of contextualization of denotation turns out, when examples are presented, to be absolutely essential to the hypothesized inferencing procedures invoked by such writers!

But, speaking of the social reality of interpersonal events, there is another folk theory of “directness” masquerading as an empirical one in the approach to so-called “speech acts,” associated with the philosophers John Austin (1975[1962]) and John Searle (1969, 1975). Here, as they have been taken up by followers both in philosophy and in linguistics, Austin’s hesitant distinctions between (a) “explicit” and, presumably, by contrast, implicit speech acts, as well as between (b) “primary” and, presumably, by degrees, “*n*-ary” – or at least non-“primary” – speech-act

³ Thus, note the idea that differential form projects into or maps onto a difference of sense, a Saussurean idea with a family resemblance to the approach in formal semantics, to transformational and other, later generative grammatical approaches, etc., invoking a notion of a “semantic interpretation” of purportedly autonomously generated “syntactic form.” There are, of course, numerous specific approaches to constructing such a projective mapping, about the adequacy of which in relating certain aspects of ‘form’ to certain aspects of ‘meaning’ there have been, and continue to be, intense controversy. One of the most notable of recent decades has been the “Generative Semantics” vs. “Interpret[at]ive Semantics” controversies peaking in the 1970s but never adequately sorted out as to what, precisely, were relatively central and peripheral issues, and which were mere artifacts of then-ascendant formal models. See Harris, 1993; Huck and Goldsmith, 1995; McCawley, 1999; Newmeyer, 1986 for close-in accounts.

formulae, reveal that folk doctrines of directness are involved in moving from the “explicit primary” kind of speech act usage to implicit and functionally derivative ones.

In essence, the speech act doctrine in Austinian terms aligns a single kind of structure visible to linguistic analysis, the grammatically conforming parsable sentence scheme, with a single function, denotation (i.e., reference and modalized predication), and it attempts, reductively, to see everything else in language as “indirectly” projected from this supposedly “direct” use of language even where the grammatical formula does not, in fact, seem simply to refer and modally predicate!⁴ So Austinian “directness” and “indirectness” are presenting folk terms within a cultural framework of folk functionalism; whether we can make anything out of them as analytic terms is, indeed, the problem. But accepting Austin’s terms as such leads inevitably to the revelation of their inadequacy as analytic concepts of universally applicable empirical theory.

Take so-called “speech acts” or “illocutionary acts” for example. As “acts,” such happenings or doings are infused with notions of institutionalized normativity: what one *conventionally* should be intending-to-accomplish in the way of interpersonal realignment in-and-by uttering some particular formula, or “illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)”⁵; note the very synonym of *index*-, viz., *indicate*-, in the complex nominal denoting the “active” element(s) of the formulae! The whole Austinian or, in this case, *Searlean* (1969) edifice is built on the charming introspective notion that there are explicit primary performative constructions that are the “direct” way of agentively accomplishing each different type of illocutionary act, the speaker in effect generating a “force” as it were, that interpersonally comes into being as a function of the differential denotation of the formula’s top-clause lexical verb stem (such as *promise*-, *[ad]judge*-, *offer*-, etc.). “Directness” here in the sense of uttering an “explicit and primary IFID” is, metaphorically, taking up a hammer and hitting a nail – in fact, the nail – on the head. But long ago – over 30 years, in fact – Susan *Ervin-Tripp* (1976) and her students gathered a nice large corpus of what counted not only illocutionarily but perlocutionarily as “directives” in Searle’s own town, Berkeley, California, with the interesting result that there are paradigmatic variants of sentence-forms each type of which counts-as a directive (Ervin-Tripp’s term, from Skinnerian psychology, is *mand*) under proper social-contextual conditions. In the study, Ervin-Tripp classifies these directives into the following six basic syntactic formulae:

- Need statements: “I’ll need a routine culture and a specimen.”
- Imperatives: “Repeat the preparatory command and ‘Aye, aye, Sir!’.”
- Embedded imperatives: “Why don’t you open the window?”
- Permission directives: “May I have change for a dollar?”
- Request questions: “Is Dean Lehrer in?”
- Hints: “Mrs. Terry, it’s quite noisy in here.”

In fact, their distributions across these different contexts seem to render them at once functional *mands* modulo particular types of contexts, contexts that they simultaneously functionally index, both as what is presupposed and what is rendered the resultant interpersonal state. The *mand* forms work at the level of illocutionary formulae or IFIDs precisely like deictics do at the level of denotational code. They indexically presuppose certain contextual conditions, and, in those conditions, occurring as a first adjacency pair-part, they realign the participants in the way of creatively or entailingly indexing the awaited occurrence of a compelled and conforming second adjacency pair-part, namely, complying with the *mand* (*or not*) with or without some verbalization by the erstwhile addressee, who has now become the speaker/responder – the second pair-parts themselves differing according to formal *mand* type and whether satisfying or frustrating it. In Ervin-Tripp et al.’s data, in fact, the paradigm of variation in *mand* forms systematically indexes the recognizable dimensions of *Brown and Gilman’s* (1960) “power” and “solidarity” (on which more below), inflected for positional statuses and functional expectations of specific interactional roles of utterer and

⁴ In his original lectures, Austin himself is buffeted between two perspectives both fatal to his analysis. One is a kind of social evolutionary perspective, in which “explicit primary performative” sentence-utterances are the refined, conventional endpoint of historical processes that have applied to a language like English, where presumably unrefined speakers of most languages have to make do with merely “primary,” though implicit, performativity, and politeness, as one would note with *Ervin-Tripp’s* (1976) data I will take up below, is thus a kind of primitive trait. The other is a kind of despairing realization that every utterance is, in fact, as “performative” as any other in having – lo and behold! – conventional contextual preconditions and effects, and as “constative” as any other insofar as there are contextually applicable truth-conditions lurking in all denotational formulae, however partial or fragmentary, even if they are not by convention to be applied in the circumstance (*Capt. Corcoran*: “I am the last person to insult a British seaman, Sir Joseph! *Sir Joseph Porter, KCB*: “Captain Corcoran, I believe you are the last person who did.”).

addressee. To emphasize: all of these forms of mand are ways of making requests/de-mands of others; they all count “illocutionarily” – and when successful, “perlocutionarily” – as *functionally doing the same thing with words* up to but not including the power/solidarity and participant membership conditions of context that they differentially index.

In relation to illocutionary theoretic functionalisms, the most telling forms of mand in Ervin-Tripp’s material are the so-called “hints,” like “It’s a bit stuffy in here” – interactionally meaning, for example, the com-mand “Stop farting!” – where a great deal of inferential work has to be done once one has the denotational meaning of the statemental form in order to render it, shakily, something with determinate illocutionary force. For note that under a doctrine of “directness,” i.e., under the assumption that there is a unique formula of primary explicit performative force, and degrees of “indirectness” moving away from this optimal form, a so-called “hint” is, *illocutionarily, the asymptotically entropic condition of all language form*, where all “direct” speech-act usages merge and blend ultimately in language used as so-called “hint.” *What [i.e., what illocutionary act] are you hinting at [i.e., performing]? How – absent a metapragmatic negotiation and prior interlocutory agreement – am I supposed to know that when you say ‘Basingstoke!’, it counts-as a com-mand (or de-mand) that I shut up?*⁵ [i.e., how can you presume that I know the indexical value of that particular formula in first adjacency pair-part position as constraining such a second adjacency pair-part on my part?].

Here, then, is the ultimate collapse of this approach to social effectiveness in language use. If *all* utterance, not just the recognizably explicit primary performative formulae, consists in “doing something with words,” the existence of hints, *universally*, means that any arbitrary utterance can be interpreted as any arbitrary illocutionary formula type. Speech act “theory” is empirically fruitless, since it emerges from a sociohistorically specific formulation from within a culture caught at a particular happenstance moment of lexicalization of certain metapragmatic verbs (verbs used to denote discursive interactional event types) which, as lexical primes, come into and go out of general use. It has, unfortunately, been sold like snake-oil to the unsuspecting within that same culture.⁶

Grice’s approach via implicature, as well, will not get us out of the problem of “hints,” I should note. Gricean implicatures, whether conventional or nonce, whether conversational or structural, depend on a view of social communication as nothing more than denotation plus logical inference. The implicatures needed in any situation are, essentially, metapragmatic propositions about the current situation, i.e., deictically anchored cognitions of contextualization, relative to which the problematically determinate and coherent in referential-and-predicational sense is to be rendered speech-act functional. *Why not just analyze the context as the sociological entity that it is, a “frame” in Goffman’s (1974) sense that comes into locally relevant existence whenever people interact with other ascriptively agentive beings? One sees in this way that people’s usage is indexically calibrated to context in two ways: both by presupposing a certain state of conditions – the who/whom, where, when, why of the social interaction, all implying schemata of social classification – relative to which normativity of usage is constrained and by entailing a certain, possibly transformed state of certain of these conditions in the happy or felicitous case that a particular usage will have been causally efficacious relative to its presupposed context. (But: How do you know when an utterance has been felicitous in “counting-as” a context-transforming illocutionary act? Even Austin had, ultimately, to fall back on interlocutory “uptake,” that is, subsequently occurring presupposing indexicals in the coherent flow of a second adjacency pair-part of interaction that indicate that the once uncertain entailment of a usage at some prior interactional moment has, in fact, become an intersubjective reality down the road. Observe here, too Goffman’s [1983] brilliant send-up of all this in one of his final, posthumously published papers.)*

5. Reframing functionality for cross-cultural study

In order to fashion a more usable empirical approach to the “directness” vs. “indirectness” issue, we must frame the problem with a firm adherence to principles emphasized by both Saussure and Goffman. Goffman always gestured

⁵ With apologies to Sir William S. Gilbert, librettist and lyricist of *Ruddigore*.

⁶ My colleague Jerrold Sadock nicely summed up the lexical dependence of the “speech act” approach in his formulation (1974:153) of illocution as “sense perlocution,” i.e., the understanding of the conventional sense of the head verb in an explicit primary performative construction plus its associated syntactic paraphernalia, e.g., [promise- that S] as entailing the intersubjective understanding that an act of ‘promis[e]ing’ is to hand, however felicitous, successful, etc. it may or may not turn out to be. The problem of how to relate all deviations from the “explicit primary” situation to a classification of illocutionary types in any particular language, as in language in general, to the happenstance finite list of such verbs at any given moment – speculations by philosophers about universals notwithstanding – is, of course, at the heart of the empirical failure of this approach, resting ultimately on metapragmatic predicability via simplex verb stems.

in the direction of *interaction ritual* – the title of his 1967 book – as a caption for how we should be looking to analyze communication as the mediator of social relations. At the same time Saussure warned that language form is not a denotational nomenclature in the image of lexicon, the denotata of which are known a priori on other grounds. We really have to take both these considerations seriously, and this requires that we re-read “directness” and “indirectness” in terms of the tropic or figurative local interpretability of signs as they index the various component conditions of their contexts of occurrence.

Pragmatic or indexical tropes at zero degree – where language form seems to point interlocutors to some specific configuration of communicative context – are what people experience asymptotically as “directness:” compare here the utopian notion (famously pursued by Bishop John Wilkins) that denotational language or equivalent representation can be rendered transparent to – iconic of – a pre-given “natural” reality, or the Bakhtinian (1981:366) understanding of narrative realism as a “voicing” structure degree zero indexically drawn across and tropically equating the world of narration and the narrated world. As illustrated by the native intuitions underlying Austin’s and Searle’s “speech acts,” our own cultural experience of possible tropic states of indexical phenomena is generally filtered through the metapragmatics of how we reflexively understand the denotational form–meaning relationship, in which all “indirect” communication gets processed as denotational or interactional “metaphor.” That is, “indirectness” in the folk view consists in *not* saying what could be said with lexico-grammatical forms at once more autonomous of and yet more transparent to their context of occurrence. The argument goes that for “indirect” illocutionary utterances we have to start with “direct” ones to which “indirect” ones can be mapped by grinding through inferential mechanisms like those retrodictively invoked by a Grice or by Griceans. But consider the following.

5.1. Power, solidarity, and the tropology of cultural acts

The paradigmatic “pronouns of ‘power’ and ‘solidarity’” were introduced into the theoretical literature 50 years ago by Roger Brown and Albert Gilman (1960). Here we have, in languages as diverse as “S[andard] A[verage] E[uropean]” ones (such as French, German, Italian, etc., analyzed by Brown and Gilman), Yokuts (California Penutian), and Worora (Northern Kimberley, Australia), an opposition par excellence between “direct” and “indirect” usage of a canonical denotational linguistic form, a personal deictic (vulgarly labeled a “personal pronoun”). The familiar Brown and Gilman account, generally followed by later writers on “politeness,” centers in the individual speaker’s denotational usage in a turn-at-communication, describing the phenomenon something like the following (though generally without a careful grammatical parsing).

In such languages, in every communicative event in which one refers to a unique interlocutory addressee, one must make a choice between what one might see as “direct” reference, using the in some sense paradigmatically identifiable personal deictic (formulaically “T”) and what one might see as “indirect” (formulaically “V”) reference, *using some other form in the personal deictic paradigm*, in effect the “wrong” denotational categories of ‘Person’ (Italian: 2nd person replaced by 3rd), ‘Number’ (French, Russian: 2nd singular replaced by 2nd plural; Yokuts: 2nd singular replaced by 2nd dual), or both (German, Worora: 2nd singular replaced by 3rd plural). In each case, the sender’s “indirect” denotational usage counts as the performance of an act of communicating with a more ‘power’ful or a non-‘solidary’ interactional alter. Hence, “V”-ing someone rather than “T”-ing someone – to use the Brown and Gilman delocutionary schematization – is a social act explicitly indexing the addressee’s deference-entitlement or a social act indexing speaker’s sense of interlocutor’s social alterity.⁷ As is now well known, in the European cases social relations in anonymous public or in organizationally ascriptive status-sensitive modes have tended to operate initially as mutual, symmetric “V”-ing; moreover, asymmetric usage communicates deferentially “up” social stratificational scales by addressing the interlocutor with “V” and peremptorily “down” such scales with “T.” (Yet, as Brown and various co-authors also noted, even as people may switch from symmetric “V” — “V” usage to symmetric “T” — “T” usage, *it is the metapragmatic right of the individual presumed to be higher in ascriptive deference entitlement to suggest or to initiate a shift to symmetric “T” usage!*)

⁷ We note as well that American English appellative address uses one among a whole paradigm of forms of the interlocutor’s personal name as the functional parallel to “T”/“V” indexing, as Brown and Ford (1961) established. Such a pragmatic paradigm has great salience and impact, as evidenced by many native plaints, commentaries, pre- and proscriptions, and the development of such metapragmatic descriptors as “No Naming” for avoiding use of any name expression at all common across cross-generation affinal relations, such as son(daughter)-in-law/mother(father)-in-law. Note also that the pragmatic paradigm of naming expression is salient in a three-party structure – speaker and addressee and referent – in non-face-to-face reference to someone, as Murphy (1988) shows.

So notice that the denotational “indirectness” revealed through this actor-centered understanding constitutes what must of course be recognized as an *inexplicit but primary illocutionary act* in which the social dimensions of two individuals’ standing in sender – receiver relationship are rendered intersubjectively visible by the sender’s usage and thus consequential in some way. But what kind of an illocutionary act is it? An Austinian (1975:151ff.) “verdictive,” perhaps, a stab at judging the nature of the social relationship in play at some moment of interactional time? Or a “commissive,” “exercitive,” or “behabitive” act on the part of the sender? It is obviously a little of every type, as such acts are characterized (in Austin’s original classification or the re-classifications later attempted [summarized in Hancher (1979:4, table 1)]), at the same time it is none of them, as I will explain below.

As well, were one to take a more Gricean approach, one might see the “indirectness” in using a “V”-form as a trigger for an implicature intentionally laid into the utterance-act by the intent of the sender. And in each one of the exemplary cases, it would be a convention of conversation that to denote a single interlocutory individual with a non-transparently coded personal deictic form must mean something else. But what, precisely? Is it something about the receiver-as-denoted on the ‘power’ dimension or on the ‘solidarity’ dimension? It is, of course, impossible to tell just on the basis of a single, lexico-grammatically sentential turn-at-utterance which of these is/has been the case.

As with so many of such attempts at explanation, the story here told in agentive speaker-centric terms can at most be retrodictive, because the critical data for understanding what unifies all of these “T”/“V” systems are not the denotational sentence-forms (or their parsable fragments) transmitted by a single sender in a single utterance act of a turn-at-communication. The critical minimal data are adjacency pairs that indexically inscribe three types of social relational topologies on the role relationality of the sender–receiver dyad, through the use of temporally ordered turn-dyads (T;T) vs. (V;V) in the symmetrical case, and (T;V) and (V;T) in the asymmetrical cases. If we think of the “V” as a deflection of denotation from the neutral categorical form of “direct”ness, then note that symmetric (T;T) represents mirror-image non-deflection, non-distantiation from the neutral *hic-et-nunc* of interpersonal role inhabitation by the two participants in the communication event. (V;V), by contrast, represents mirror-image mutual distantiation. The asymmetric usages (T;V) and (V;T) show one participant figuratively distanced by his or her interactional partner, the other not. From an interactional perspective, then, T/V systems play upon the differentiation of ‘distanced’ vs. ‘not-distanced’ alters as interactional partners, the actual basis for such distantiation being quite various in sociological terms. The topological logic of such binary systems follows precisely that of binary deictics like English now—here—this (these) vs. then—there—that (those), in that the interactional alter is figuratively placed at a remove from the presumed intimate region close to ego, here through the figurative mechanism of using a personal deictic at a remove from the one that would “literally” code a single interactional alter as referent, the ‘2nd person singular’ form.

5.2. Essentialization and what is essential in social indexicality

From this perspective Brown and Gilman’s ‘power’ and ‘solidarity’ “semantics” – as they term such dimensions of differentiating “kinds of” addressees as abstract referents – are social psychological attempts to essentialize – to give an essential content, located “in” the referent, as it were, to – this very general topology of interlocutory distantiation along some of the recurrently experienced social dimensions of comparability and non-comparability of people who come to inhabit such interlocutory roles. In asymmetrical situations, the relevant social identity of one of the participants is being recognized as “different,” and, accordingly, that individual is “V”-ed by the interlocutor in the figurative folk-logic by which deferring is indexed by muted, i.e., deflected or distanced – or “indirect” – person reference. In the symmetrical situations, either neither or both are so treated by the interactional other. In this way the actual dimensions of identity, however various, come, figuratively, to be subsumed under comparable topological positions within an interactional frame emergent in any given context. And precisely as in the case of the other deictic binaries noted above, the topology operative here is of a figuratively “inner” region at-and-around the sender vs. a figuratively “outer” region beyond some boundary of differentiation – whatever the substantive social quality being differentiated.

The folk concepts of “power” or of “solidarity” as such, from which one presumes Brown and Gilman attempted to refine out the homophonous technical terms, have nothing inherently to do with the way T/V systems operate; what is at work is the figurative indexical equation of distance of formal deflection (from expectable form in which reference to addressee is made) with interlocutory alter’s distance from interlocutory ego. Like many different predicate argument relationships – in fact, there are ultimately as many subtly different ones as there are distinct lexical

predicates in a language – being uniformly coded morphosyntactically by a very finite case-marking scheme, any gradient social relations of comparability-to, nearness-to, subsumption-under, etc. between two individuals can be invoked and rendered salient in a communicative context by the use of the T/V formal difference for how the “I” refers to “you” where such an indexical trope exists. Thus the T/V system is widely recurrent as a binary classification at the social indexical plane of semiosis, one whose indexical “content” varies greatly as a function of local cultural understanding, both as to the aspects of social identity the formal difference indexes under normative and actualized contextual conditions, and as to what essential value is read off adherence to (or violation of) such normativity.

What remains *formally* constant across all these cases is the fact that the T/V system’s indexical signs are linguistic forms coextensive with “second person” – ‘addressee = referent’ – forms for personal deixis at the plane of denotation. What is *functionally* constant is that folk theorists do, in fact, develop local cultural accounts of these systems that, like Griceans, start from the metapragmatic intuition of denotation and construct all sorts of motivating “explanations” of how the non-occurrence of the expected “direct” categories of addressee denotation might be interpretable as a socially motivated trope or iconic (diagrammatic) figure. As I have extensively written about elsewhere (1985:242–251; 2003:210–212), early Quaker writers, articulating their divinely inspired egalitarianism, railed against the figurative (=metaphorical, ergo Establishment) ‘pluralization’ of addressees for whom the norms of stratified 17th century English society demanded one use ye/you, the “V” form that differs along the grammaticosemantic dimension of ‘Number’ – for all humans, they reasoned, “count as one” before the deity, even royalty! Yokuts speakers, as documented by Newman (1944) have a comparable ethnometapragmatic verb, translatable as ‘to dualize; to treat-as-two’ for use of the Yokuts “V” form. Japanese speakers – who have at their disposal a much more elaborate system of stratified registers of lexico-grammatical forms, including second-person personal deictics, to be sure – speak of addressee being “inside” vs. “outside” [*uchi: soto*] the currently invoked reference-group of ego as the gloss of their equivalent T/V usage (see Bachnik and Quinn, 1994). And the Worora term this “*wa:ya-talk*,” use of a deference-indexing form in second person reference for anyone, male or female, who, by virtue of patriclan and moiety membership, stands in a classificatory wife-giver relationship to speaking Ego.

Of course, which particular essentialist “explanation” occurs in which language and cultural group cannot be predicted in advance – and this is precisely the problem with purported accounts in the Gricean and similar traditions that rely on concepts of optimal “directness” or iconic “literalness.” To be sure, since all indexicality is metapragmatically regimented (Silverstein, 1993, 2003, 2004), a local folk interpretation of the facts of indexicality is, of course, necessary to any indexical token’s functioning as an autonomous illocutionary act within the framework of verbally mediated interaction. But such a culture-specific ethnometapragmatics is not a systematic, comparative account such as that offered here in terms of the topology inscribed on an interactional dyad rendered into a grammatical system of ‘Person’.

5.3. “Indirectness” as negation: Worora avoidance register

So such illocutionary acts of “indirectness” must be studied through their local interpretations to see how very different can be the topologies of identity-in-interaction locally understood by them. Take the case of Worora taboo register, “*rambarr-talk*,” once used obligatorily in communicating across the dyadic social relationship between classificatory mother-in-law (and mother-in-law’s classificatory brother) and classificatory son-in-law (or classificatory son-in-law’s sister).

The basic idea of a taboo is, to be sure, avoidance, not doing something: those in structural *rambarr* relationship live a relational existence of figured avoidance of interaction. They cannot be visible one to another, and thus, preferably, they take pains to be physically removed; it is the obligation of the generationally junior in the relationship to move aside out of the path or presence of the senior relative. They ought never directly to give something to or receive something from the other. Like the deceased, around whom there are numerous taboos as well, they cannot, of course, be directly named even in absent reference. So in such a small-scale, face-to-face society, how does one communicate with the *rambarr*?

To accomplish this while still upholding the injunction to *rambarr* avoidance, Wororas implemented a different type of “indirection,” locally interpreted as avoidance. First, as widely reported in the Australianist literature (see Dixon, 1967:230–433; 1971; Haviland, 1979), there is a special “mother-in-law” lexical register that existed, comparable in lexico-grammatical properties to those elsewhere. Coherent discourse in this register uses a radically reduced number of lexical primes, as compared with neutral discourse, in a one-to-many relationship of denotational

substitution. The number of distinct lexical forms being radically reduced, for each area of denotation, there is generally a single term that is used, as opposed to a frequently greatly elaborated -onomic – i.e., taxonomic, meronomic, seriality, etc. – differentiation: for example, instead of all the different kinds of liquid materials one might specifically and differentially denote in ordinary talk, in *rambarr*-talk there is a single term that we can translate with our superordinate, denotationally inclusive term ‘fluid’. There is, thus, a many-to-one relationship within denotational fields of lexical items across the normal and the mother-in-law register. To speak in mother-in-law register, then, is *to speak with suppressed denotational delicacy (differential specificity)*, to speak allusively, “hintingly,” we might say, about what, precisely, might be the communicative focus and referential and predicational purport of discourse. The local understanding is of minimal, necessary communication that hardly counts, then, as communication at all: suppression of denotation is the indexical-plane equivalent of apophasis or paralipsis (formulating “I will not say that [S]” to communicate ‘S’ by claiming to suppress mention); i.e., it is not addressing the *rambarr* while communicating with her or him.

Think, by contrast, of the SAE metapragmatic ideology in relation to lexical fields organized by taxonomies and the like, the idea of generalization over many specific categorial distinctions that becomes discursively possible by virtue of deep taxonomies of superordinate hypernyms and their subordinate hyponyms. We interpret the movement from denotational specificity to denotational generality along the dimension of inclusion of denotata, of *generalizing* over specific cases as a powerful and important conceptual movement. What is true of all *flora*- will certainly be true of all things we might term *tree*- as well as of all things we might term *vine*-, though the reverse will not be the case. Much of systematic scientific discourse as an instrument of conceptualization depends on this ideology of generalization, to be sure, to which end we invent generalizing superordinate taxonomic lexical expressions as terms emerging from the process of inferencing and conceptual generalization. The contrast with how the older Worora speakers of my acquaintance understood this is important to consider, since for them it fell under what, surely, a naïve SAE theorist of “(in)directness” would have to take account of as a form of suppressed denotation, of a contextualized lack of “quantity” of semantic content. For them, it did not have the value of speaking a conceptually powerful, generalizing register; it was more like the closest thing to not speaking at all under conditions of *rambarr* taboo.

But hypernymy-as-figurative-indexation-of-non-communication is not the only communicational trope here. The grammar of Worora operates with both ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ first personal deictic inflectional categories on all inflectionables, as well as with five categories of numerosity (‘Singular’ through ‘Plural’), including, crucially, a ‘Dual’ for exactly two denotata. Such categorial manipulations are also central to “non-communication” with a *rambarr* individual. For in order to communicate with figured non-communication an interactional situation must be set up in which some third party – a child, a dog, the relative linking the two “in-laws,” etc. – is drawn structurally into a critical, mediating role-relationship. Each one of the *rambarr* dyad addresses this third party in earshot of – but of course, given taboos, not visible to – the other member of the *rambarr* dyad *using the first person dual inclusive* everywhere that a second person form – the form denoting the would-be “real” addressee in a normal, non-taboo interaction – would be appropriate were the two actually able to communicate and to denote each other. Thus for one *rambarr* relative to ask the other “Do you (sg.) want to drink some tea/water/sugar bag [honeyed drink]/grog [alcoholic beverage]?” he or she would say, addressing the mediating third party, “Are **we** (*du. incl.*) consuming fluid?”⁸ Through the transformed categories of reference, the very target of the communication has been rendered the outside “audience” or overhearer of the mock-dyadic conversation between speaker and shill “addressee”; thus is the addressee rendered the figurative “third person” present in the interactional triad but excluded from the “participant” dyad that includes both speaker and shill “addressee.” The targeted relative, using precisely the same mediated communication, can respond in turn, “Yes; **we** (*du. incl.*) are.” – thus completing an adjacency pair-part structure (and presumably having the drink passed via the mediating party). Here, note, the deflection or distantiation or grammatical-categorial “indirection” in denoting the actual target of interaction counts locally as a trope of *negation*, that is, of non-communication with the intended, though forbidden addressee, who is denotationally cut out of the permissible referents of discourse.

We can thus see that *rambarr* register is locally interpreted as negation of discursive interaction, even though its formally “indirect” denotational usage looks in principle no different from enregistered usages with very different ethnometapragmatic value in SAE and similar languages.

⁸ There is a single lexical item ‘consume’ that covers eating, drinking, etc., and all comestible liquids are subsumed under the single lexical form here glossed ‘fluid’.

6. Some comments directed toward “indirection” in accompanying papers

Since this paper began as a respondent’s commentary, I direct some remarks to how this semiotic reanalysis of “indirectness” emerges in other papers in this set. As the examples used in the papers here show, virtually all usage at every point is a plurifunctional lamination of many social interactional routines, like multiple sets of bowling pins being juggled up in the air at any given time. Which such functionality constitutes the “direct,” and which the “indirect” indexical act being performed at any given moment of interaction?

Kiesling’s fraternity brothers are performing one for another in the context of a social proscenium, where salesmanship vis-à-vis pledges – getting them to want to join the fraternity – one type of dyadic (or corporately many-to-many) interaction, is on display through the always mutually critically evaluative, bourgeois-masculine competition of the already fraternal “brothers,” which constitutes another type of dyadic interaction given voice in interdigitated transcriptional realtime. At the very same time, conversation directly with the pledges as addressees counts as cross-play in respect of the interchanges among the brothers themselves. In the latter, acts of put-downs and self-build-ups – the normal routines of competitive bourgeois masculinity that Kiesling elsewhere has so brilliantly analyzed (2001) – cannot be angrily challenged so much as good naturedly “bested.” There is constraint because the good-behavior camaraderie among the “salesmen” of the fraternity way of life – David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, anyone? – has to be in evidence to clinch the sale to the pledges.

Each one of these intersecting planes is framing “context” of social action for the indexical functionality of the other: so which is “direct” here and which “indirect?” I do not think it is useful to try to make a choice. The jocular competitive banter among brothers, something that they do “directly” one with another all the time, invites in its “audience,” the pledges for whom it is staged, like an advertising *tableau vivant*. At the same time the success of the play is cause for a sense of cooperative accomplishment in homosocial bonding notwithstanding the fraternal aggression out of which it is built, depending on the “direct” dyadic communication between fraternity brothers on the one hand and pledges on the other.

Note also in Kiesling’s paper the ‘delocutionary’ (Benveniste, 1966[1958]) metapragmatic usage of mothers with children as the adults proleptically regiment what should be children’s interactions. The mothers ventriloquate their children in the third person, in fact; this gives the purported conversations something of the quality of “indirect free style” (Voloshinov’s “quasi-direct”; 1973:125–159 [1929]) that both describes and inhabits another’s intentionality. It is, wonderfully, a multiplex projection of role inhabitation onto the children themselves, of the roles of ‘inviter’ and ‘invited’ that is *the equivalent of deictic transposition* (Hanks, 1990:217–223, citing Karl Bühler; cf. Haviland, 1993, 1996) done at the plane of interlocutor intentionality.

So it would seem that the mothers here are not, in fact, speaking “indirectly.” Isn’t this in fact the “direct” way that mothers-with-*in-fant*- (“speech-less”)-children (or pet-owners-with-pets) meet-and-greet? Indirect free style in the context of an *interactionally disabled* “with”⁹ is in fact the “direct” – socially licensed – index of transposed speakerhood. It is thus the expected and therefore, we might suggest, the “direct” ritual act of “with”ness in our culture, whether articulated through a transparently transposed ‘first person singular’ *I* or, more generally, through the absorptive ‘first person plural’ *we* (the latter perhaps a corporate or ex cathedra one).

Philips’s Tongan lexical registers of honorification demonstrate one of the recurrent effects of these types of usage, interpretable denotationally in terms of the experience of semantic figuration and semantic bleaching. Note how all maximally respectful language, language that plays to the negative face needs, as it were, of the interlocutory other, mitigates communication. (Compare the Worora case of *rambarr* lexical enregisterment.) Here, it mitigates by virtue of denotational nonspecificity, sometimes misleadingly termed semantic bleaching. Where same lexical forms are found in both non-honorific and honorific lexical registers, the transposition suggests a nonce trope, a lexical item by lexical item transpositional convention the ability to use and interpret which indexes one’s status; those who do not understand merely hear nonsense – but the “nonsense” of those of a privileged top-and-center status. Whether one is talking about speech level phenomena in the classic cases of Japanese, Javanese (Errington, 1988), etc., or mother-in-law or similar registers in Aboriginal Australian societies, or speech of-and-to the gods in Yurok (Buckley, 1984), all the indexically marked ways of speaking have this attenuated and/or tropic denotational effect, in effect constituting

⁹ The term is Goffman’s for one’s spouse or equivalent adult domestic partner, but can be broadened to institutionalized corporate dyads of several sorts in which at least one (in such a case) superordinate member of the dyad has rights of representation of intentionality not only for the dyad but for the subordinate member as well.

denotation by “hint” and by allusion – the phenomenon discussed above in reference to the indeterminacy of so-called “illocutionary” categorization of utterances.

Tannen’s related study of voicing transpositions in family interactions, can be seen in conjunction with the set of papers in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* vol. 15, no. 1 (Agha and Wortham, 2005)—a whole issue on interdiscursivity and how this aligns speakers with identities-made-real-in-the-here-and-now by recycling bits not of language, but of discourse or text. Richard Bauman, in his *A World of Others’ Words* (2004), a whole volume of folkloristic studies in interdiscursivity, points in particular to the more public and ritual use of this communicative move as part of strategic self-legitimation on the part of the person doing the citing, as for example through re-inhabiting – or at least aligning oneself with – the voice behind sacred and/or authoritative bits of text. Such *renvoi* is, thus, a mode of transposition of voice; compare Kiesling’s mothers with children.

In this respect, I might also point out that, while one can strategically self-align with anyone who has used a linguistic form like abduction, for example that New Age guru Gregory Bateson, whom Tannen cites, even Bateson himself was in actuality interdiscursively aligning with Charles Sanders Peirce (1955), who coined the term for the creative act of constructing a “covering law” (in syllogistic, a so-called major premise with quantified/open variable) that would make a particular phenomenon or set of phenomena (as describable in a “minor premise” with a logical constant) instances or exemplifications of that principle or covering law. For Peirce, indeed, abduction underlies all really creative human cognition. Case law, for instance, operates abductively, but with a discursive rhetoric of deduction (see Levi, 1949); terminological innovation and definitional neologism, too, are aspects of an abductive faculty.

Clearly the notion illustrated in this paper that one is but another instance of someone else’s social persona – two peas in a pod, as it were – has at least the quality of iconic grouping, grouping by “likeness.” But if Peircean abduction is really about the leap-to-principle-of-interpretation given some observed phenomenon or phenomena-as-instances, the mere reanimation does not quite do it.

Finally, Morgan reminds us forcefully of how no interactional move – so-called direct or so-called indirect – counts as anything for interlocutors (as also for analysts) without interpretatively referencing conventions of indexicality-in-context. (This reminds one of Kiesling’s observation, echoing and generalizing Austinian “uptake,” of course, that an interpretation has to become intersubjectively real both for perpetrator of an indexical form and for everyone else brought to it in its context of occurrence.)

The interactional act of “Othering,” invokes stereotypes of relational identities of stingingly asymmetric sorts across the sender—addressee divide, the sender presuming to be in the unmarked neutral social position. Especially where such divisions are racially charged and hurtful, there are delicate issues of if, let alone how, such social categorizations can be indexically invoked in any interaction, even if they cannot be literally denoted in overt reference and predication. (Compare here how classificatory *rambarr* kin among Worora speakers can communicate through acts that “count as” negations of communication while upholding the taboos thereon.) In a cultural milieu such as contemporary American society, where “directness” and “indirectness” are construed in purely denotationalist terms, we can reformulate the question this way: how can a speaker uphold the *denotational* taboos, for example, avoiding negatively judgmental social category terms for an addressee or other referent, all the while *indexing* the very same stereotypes? (It is thus the denotation vs. indexation dimension that underlies the folk terms “direct” and “indirect” in this situation.)

It is important to see that indexing one’s own and one’s interlocutor’s social categorial membership is absolutely central and essential to all interaction. This point has been long since forcefully set out in Schegloff’s classic study (1971) of how one formulates the interactionally “correct” – not merely referentially successful and denotationally plausible – locational expression, e.g., place-name so as to index interactionally relevant identities (and to make identities interactionally relevant to the current interactional “work”). But Morgan asks us to consider under what circumstances various dimensions of interlocutory identity are indexable, and whether or not so indexing them has the effect of suggesting or hinting at a negative or even stigmatized category of interlocutory identity across a social divide that separates a presumptively neutral-to-higher speaker and a presumptively neutral-to-lower addressee.

An earlier version of Morgan’s paper culminated in a fast-food service encounter, where the server, seeing an African American customer, verbalized the presumption that the customer would be ordering fried chicken. *In the context of such a service encounter*, wherein lies the basis for such presumption? In a service encounter, after all, the customer is supposed to be royalty: the customer occupies, if ever so momentarily, the position of interactional deference entitlement, and the person rendering service is at “royalty’s” service, after all. It is best to assume that one

will be on a (“V”;“V”) basis in an anonymous service encounter in public. We all complain of bureaucratic haughtiness or presumption – let alone indifference and obtuseness – when these presumptive interactional conditions are violated, as traditionally in post-offices, bureaus issuing certificates of one or another sort, medical waiting (perhaps even examination) rooms, and (as vividly imagined by Kafka) dwellings of The Law. There is a class connotation indexed in the degree of asymmetry as well, as familiar in literature as in everyday life. And, to be sure, there are relaxed, intimate, mutual-“T” types of service encounters just as much as there are ones emphasizing the role-relational and perhaps further status asymmetry of Served and Server.

Now in American culture what kind of service encounter is a take-out fast-food transaction? What presumptions can the speaker in the Server role exercise in respect of the would-be customer, the Served? What relational sameness vs. difference of positional statuses are possibly to be made relevant by indexing in such an encounter, and by whom? The point is, a Server who presumes upon identities irrelevant in principle to the relatively anonymous, public service encounter – perhaps indeed with a suggestion of stigma – renders the “service” unpalatable.

Note in this connection that in the 2008 U.S. Presidential primaries and the later campaign, Senator Barack Obama’s opponents were faced with the practical issue of how to index for voters all of the negative stereotypes associable with the denotationally unutterable set of terms for his ascriptive “race” and related matters of his biography, such as paternal Kenyan ancestry, while not explicitly predicating them. His Democratic primary opponent, Senator Hilary Clinton, used numerous techniques of illocutionary apophasis, such as questioning the possibility of his – as opposed to her – “in group” appeal to “white Americans” among Democratic primary voters, such as proclaiming herself and Senator John McCain, the Republican candidate, to be potentially “real Americans” ready to assume the Commander-in-Chief role in 2009, etc. Senator McCain’s campaign quickly took up the practice as well, even running campaign television commercials featuring Senator Clinton in a clever illocutionary deferral and act of authority-through-interdiscursivity (see above).

7. Conclusion

To repeat: the point of these examples, which can, in kind, be duplicated from around the world, is to underline this fact: Indexical semiosis “counts-as” an illocutionary act of whatever sort only as framed within a local, cultural metapragmatics that isolates particular linguistic forms, motivates contextual conditions in which they can be performed, and renders them distinctly performable as instruments of achieving certain entailed contextual alignments. We cannot predict precisely how a *local ethno-metapragmatics* will interpret such modes of indexicality.

To be sure, our local SAE ethno-metapragmatics of language construes it as a primarily denotational system, and within that denotational system tends to endow expressions with certain context-independent representational meanings (“senses”). The doctrine of “directness” and “indirectness” has grown up within that SAE ethno-metapragmatic scheme, and certainly convinces those innocent of cross-cultural experience that it is adequate to the task of explaining how people everywhere incorporate language forms into their interactional semiosis under locally relevant conventions.

The distinction of “direct” vs. “indirect,” to be sure, has emerged in modern times out of that rich SAE milieu of lay and professional development of these folk concepts by starting from pictorialism (iconism). The basic idea, elaborated as part of the anti-Catholic English Enlightenment by Bacon, Wilkins, Locke et al., is that language forms “represent” universes of denotation, and that rationally instrumental use of language is – and ought to be – oriented to maximize the “directness” of denotational use (as opposed to mystifications of figuration and “ornamentation” before good Protestant “plain style”). Hence, deviations from that “directness” – termed “indirectness” – must bespeak a concealed rationality of some sort (as in Gricean reconstructions of conversation, the reasons for concealment unfortunately not amounting to an empirical theory of any kind), or they must bespeak an evolution toward a telos of perfectability of expressible “directness” in representational terms (as in Austinian approaches to performativity or illocutionary action), or both.

But, starting from these ideas, there are as many different kinds of “indirectness,” then, as there are ways of conceptualizing the universes of denotation, and as there are contexts in which people communicate with a given language, let alone with other languages. These doctrines of “directness” and “indirectness” are both descriptive and theoretical dead-ends for comprehending cross-culturally how people use the semiotic resources of language in the social contexts of consequential communication, and should be abandoned by serious students of such phenomena. The object of investigation becomes the indexical normativities of language use in context, and within this realm of

phenomena, those privileged indexicalities that anchor and regiment the local cultural uses of language by the assignment to them of autonomous value, rendering them the “illocutionary” pillars of verbally mediated social interaction, things the locals understand they “do with words.” But this is what linguistic anthropology has been studying cross-culturally for some time.

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