

## Chapter 2

# INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

### INTRODUCTION

The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says. In such cases the speaker intends to produce a certain illocutionary effect in the hearer, and he intends to produce this effect by getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce it, and he intends to get the hearer to recognize this intention in virtue of the hearer's knowledge of the rules that govern the utterance of the sentence. But, notoriously, not all cases of meaning are this simple: In hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor – to mention a few examples – the speaker's utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways. One important class of such cases is that in which the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more. For example, a speaker may utter the sentence "I want you to do it" by way of requesting the hearer to do something. The utterance is incidentally meant as a statement, but it is also meant primarily as a request, a request made by way of making a statement. In such cases a sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act can be uttered to perform, *in addition*, another type of illocutionary act. There are also cases in which the speaker may utter a sentence and mean what he says and also mean another illocution with a different propositional content. For example, a speaker may utter the sentence "Can you reach the salt?" and mean it not merely as a question but as a request to pass the salt.

In such cases it is important to emphasize that the utterance is meant as a request; that is, the speaker intends to produce in the hearer the knowledge that a request has been made to him, and he intends to produce this knowledge by

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means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce it. Such cases, in which the utterance has two illocutionary forces, are to be sharply distinguished from the cases in which, for example, the speaker tells the hearer that he wants him to do something; and then the hearer does it because the speaker wants him to, though no request at all has been made, meant, or understood. The cases we will be discussing are indirect speech acts, cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another.

The problem posed by indirect speech acts is the problem of how it is possible for the speaker to say one thing and mean that but also to mean something else. And since meaning consists in part in the intention to produce understanding in the hearer, a large part of that problem is that of how it is possible for the hearer to understand the indirect speech act when the sentence he hears and understands means something else. The problem is made more complicated by the fact that some sentences seem almost to be conventionally used as indirect requests. For a sentence like “Can you reach the salt?” or “I would appreciate it if you would get off my foot”, it takes some ingenuity to imagine a situation in which their utterances would not be requests.

In Searle (1969: chapter 3) I suggested that many such utterances could be explained by the fact that the sentences in question concern conditions of the felicitous performance of the speech acts they are used to perform indirectly – preparatory conditions, propositional content conditions, and sincerity conditions – and that their use to perform indirect speech acts consists in indicating the satisfaction of an essential condition by means of asserting or questioning one of the other conditions. Since that time a variety of explanations have been proposed, involving such things as the hypostatization of “conversational postulates” or alternative deep structures. The answer originally suggested in Searle (1969) seems to me incomplete, and I want to develop it further here. The hypothesis I wish to defend is simply this: In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying

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on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer. To be more specific, the apparatus necessary to explain the indirect part of indirect speech acts includes a theory of speech acts, certain general principles of cooperative conversation (some of which have been discussed by Grice (1975)), and mutually shared factual background information of the speaker and the hearer, together with an ability on the part of the hearer to make inferences. It is not necessary to assume the existence of any conversational postulates (either as an addition to the theory of speech acts or as part of the theory of speech acts) nor any concealed imperative forces or other ambiguities. We will see, however, that in some cases, convention plays a most peculiar role.

Aside from its interest for a theory of meaning and speech acts, the problem of indirect speech acts is of philosophical importance for an additional reason. In ethics it has commonly been supposed that “good”, “right”, “ought”, etc. somehow have an imperative or “action guiding” meaning. This view derives from the fact that sentences such as “You ought to do it” are often uttered by way of telling the hearer to do something. But from the fact that such sentences can be uttered as directives<sup>1</sup> it no more follows that “ought” has an imperative meaning than from the fact that “Can you reach the salt?” can be uttered as a request to pass the salt it follows that *can* has an imperative meaning. Many confusions in recent moral philosophy rest on a failure to understand the nature of such indirect speech acts. The topic has an additional interest for linguists because of its syntactical consequences, but I shall be concerned with these only incidentally.

<sup>1</sup> The class of “directive” illocutionary acts includes acts of ordering, commanding, requesting, pleading, begging, praying, entreating, instructing, forbidding, and others. See Searle (1975a, chapter 1 of this volume) for an explanation of this notion.

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### A SAMPLE CASE

Let us begin by considering a typical case of the general phenomenon of indirection:

1. Student X: Let's go to the movies tonight
2. Student Y: I have to study for an exam.

The utterance of (1) constitutes a proposal in virtue of its meaning, in particular because of the meaning of "Let's". In general, literal utterances of sentences of this form will constitute proposals, as in:

3. Let's eat pizza tonight

or:

4. Let's go ice skating tonight.

The utterance of 2 in the context just given would normally constitute a rejection of the proposal, but not in virtue of its meaning. In virtue of its meaning it is simply a statement about *Y*. Statements of this form do not, in general, constitute rejections of proposals, even in cases in which they are made in response to a proposal. Thus, if *Y* had said:

5. I have to eat popcorn tonight

or:

6. I have to tie my shoes

in a normal context, neither of these utterances would have been a rejection of the proposal. The question then arises, How does *X* know that the utterance is a rejection of the proposal? and that question is a part of the question, How is it possible for *Y* to intend or mean the utterance of 2 as a rejection of the proposal? In order to describe this case, let us introduce some terminology. Let us say that the *primary* illocutionary act performed in *Y*'s utterance is the rejection of the proposal made by *X*, and that *Y* does that by way of performing a *secondary* illocutionary act of making a statement to the effect that he has to prepare for an exam. He performs the secondary illocutionary act by way of uttering a sentence the *literal* meaning of which is such that its literal utterance

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constitutes a performance of that illocutionary act. We may, therefore, further say that the secondary illocutionary act is literal; the primary illocutionary act is not literal. Let us assume that we know how *X* understands the literal secondary illocutionary act from the utterance of the sentence. The question is, How does he understand the nonliteral primary illocutionary act from understanding the literal secondary illocutionary act? And that question is part of the larger question, How is it possible for *Y* to mean the primary illocution when he only utters a sentence that means the secondary illocution, since to mean the primary illocution is (in large part) to intend to produce in *X* the relevant understanding?

A brief reconstruction of the steps necessary to derive the primary illocution from the literal illocution would go as follows. (In normal conversation, of course, no one would consciously go through the steps involved in this reasoning.)

*Step 1: I have made a proposal to Y, and in response he has made a statement to the effect that he has to study for an exam (facts about the conversation).*

*Step 2: I assume that Y is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his remark is intended to be relevant (principles of conversational cooperation).*

*Step 3: A relevant response must be one of acceptance, rejection, counterproposal, further discussion, etc. (theory of speech acts).*

*Step 4: But his literal utterance was not one of these, and so was not a relevant response (inference from Steps 1 and 3).*

*Step 5: Therefore, he probably means more than he says. Assuming that his remark is relevant, his primary illocutionary point must differ from his literal one (inference from Steps 2 and 4).<sup>2</sup>*

This step is crucial. Unless a hearer has some inferential strategy for finding out when primary illocutionary points differ from literal illocutionary points, he has no way of understanding indirect illocutionary acts.

<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of the notion of “illocutionary point” and its relation to illocutionary force, see (Searle, 1975a, chapter 1 of this volume).

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*Step 6: I know that studying for an exam normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening, and I know that going to the movies normally takes a large amount of time relative to a single evening (factual background information).*

*Step 7: Therefore, he probably cannot both go to the movies and study for an exam in one evening (inference from Step 6).*

*Step 8: A preparatory condition on the acceptance of a proposal, or on any other commissive, is the ability to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).*

*Step 9: Therefore, I know that he has said something that has the consequence that he probably cannot consistently accept the proposal (inference from Steps 1, 7, and 8).*

*Step 10: Therefore, his primary illocutionary point is probably to reject the proposal (inference from Steps 5 and 9).*

It may seem somewhat pedantic to set all of this out in 10 steps; but if anything, the example is still underdescribed – I have not, for example, discussed the role of the assumption of sincerity, or the *ceteris paribus* conditions that attach to various of the steps. Notice, also, that the conclusion is probabilistic. It is and ought to be. This is because the reply does not necessarily constitute a rejection of the proposal. *Y* might have gone on to say:

7. I have to study for an exam, but let's go to the movies anyhow

or:

8. I have to study for an exam, but I'll do it when we get home from the movies.

The inferential strategy is to establish, first, that the primary illocutionary point departs from the literal, and second, what the primary illocutionary point is.

The argument of this chapter will be that the theoretical apparatus used to explain this case will suffice to explain the general phenomenon of indirect illocutionary acts. That apparatus includes mutual background information, a theory of speech acts, and certain general principles of conversation. In particular, we explained this case without

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having to assume that sentence 2 is ambiguous or that it is “ambiguous in context” or that it is necessary to assume the existence of any “conversational postulates” in order to explain *X*’s understanding the primary illocution of the utterance. The main difference between this case and the cases we will be discussing is that the latter all have a generality of *form* that is lacking in this example. I shall mark this generality by using bold type for the formal features in the surface structure of the sentences in question. In the field of indirect illocutionary acts, the area of directives is the most useful to study because ordinary conversational requirements of politeness normally make it awkward to issue flat imperative sentences (e.g. “Leave the room”) or explicit performatives (e.g. “I order you to leave the room”), and we therefore seek to find indirect means to our illocutionary ends (e.g. “I wonder if you would mind leaving the room”). In directives, politeness is the chief motivation for indirectness.

#### SOME SENTENCES “CONVENTIONALLY” USED IN THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIRECT DIRECTIVES

Let us begin, then, with a short list of some of the sentences that could quite standardly be used to make indirect requests and other directives such as orders. At a pretheoretical level these sentences naturally tend to group themselves into certain categories.<sup>3</sup>

*Group 1: Sentences concerning H’s ability to perform A:*

**Can you** reach the salt?

**Can you** pass the salt?

**Could you** be a little more quiet?

**You could** be a little more quiet

**You can** go now (*this may also be a permission = you may go now*)

<sup>3</sup>In what follows, I use the letters *H*, *S*, and *A* as abbreviations for “hearer”, “speaker”, and “act” or “action”.

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**Are you able** to reach the book on the top shelf?

**Have you got** change for a dollar?

*Group 2: Sentences concerning S's wish or want that H will do A:*

**I would like you to go** now

**I want you to do** this for me, Henry

**I would/should appreciate it if you would/could** do it for me

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

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

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

**I hope you'll** do it

**I wish you wouldn't** do that.

*Group 3: Sentences concerning H's doing A:*

Officers **will** henceforth wear ties at dinner

**Will you quit** making that awful racket?

**Would you kindly** get off my foot?

**Won't you stop** making that noise soon?

**Aren't you going** to eat your cereal?

*Group 4: Sentences concerning H's desire or willingness to do A:*

**Would you be willing** to write a letter of recommendation for me?

**Do you want** to hand me that hammer over there on the table?

**Would you mind** not making so much noise?

**Would it be convenient for you** to come on Wednesday?

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

*Group 5: Sentences concerning reasons for doing A:*

**You ought** to be more polite to your mother

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

This class also contains many examples that have no generality of form but obviously, in an appropriate context, would be uttered as indirect requests, e.g.:

You're standing on my foot  
I can't see the movie screen while  
you have that hat on.

Also in this class belong, possibly:

**How many times have I told you (must I tell you)** not to eat with your fingers?  
**I must have told you a dozen times not**  
to eat with your mouth open  
**If I have told you once I have told you**  
**a thousand times not to wear your hat in**  
the house.

*Group 6: Sentences embedding one of these elements inside another; also, sentences embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these contexts.*

**Would you mind awfully if I asked you**

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**if you could** write me a letter of recommendation?

**Would it be too much if I suggested that you could possibly** make a little less noise?

**Might I ask you** to take off your hat?

**I hope you won't mind if I ask you if you could** leave us alone

**I would appreciate it if you could** make less noise.<sup>4</sup>

This is a very large class, since most of its members are constructed by permuting certain of the elements of the other classes.

SOME PUTATIVE FACTS

Let us begin by noting several salient facts about the sentences in question. Not everyone will agree that what follows are facts; indeed, most of the available explanations consist in denying one or more of these statements. Nonetheless, at an intuitive pretheoretical level each of the following would seem to be correct observations about the sentences in question, and I believe we should surrender these intuitions only in the face of very serious counterarguments. I will eventually argue that an explanation can be given that is consistent with all of these facts.

*Fact 1: The sentences in question do not have an imperative force as part of their meaning.* This point is sometimes denied by philosophers and linguists, but very powerful evidence for it is provided by the fact that it is possible without inconsistency to connect the literal utterance of one of these forms with the denial of any imperative intent, e.g.:

I'd like you to do this for me, Bill, but I am not asking you to do it or requesting that you do it or ordering you to do it or telling you to do it

<sup>4</sup> This form is also included in Group 2.

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I'm just asking you, Bill: Why not eat beans? But in asking you that I want you to understand that I am not telling you to eat beans; I just want to know your reasons for thinking you ought not to.

*Fact 2: The sentences in question are not ambiguous as between an imperative illocutionary force and a nonimperative illocutionary force.* I think this is intuitively apparent, but in any case, an ordinary application of Occam's razor places the onus of proof on those who wish to claim that these sentences are ambiguous. One does not multiply meanings beyond necessity. Notice, also, that it is no help to say they are "ambiguous in context", for all that means is that one cannot always tell from what the sentence means what the speaker means by its utterance, and that is not sufficient to establish sentential ambiguity.

*Fact 3: Notwithstanding Facts 1 and 2, these are standardly, ordinarily, normally – indeed, I shall argue, conventionally – used to issue directives.* There is a systematic relation between these and directive illocutions in a way that there is no systematic relation between "I have to study for an exam" and rejecting proposals. Additional evidence that they are standardly used to issue imperatives is that most of them take "please", either at the end of the sentence or preceding the verb, e.g.:

I want you to stop making that noise, please  
Could you please lend me a dollar?

When "please" is added to one of these sentences, it explicitly and literally marks the primary illocutionary point of the utterance as directive, even though the literal meaning of the rest of the sentence is not directive.

It is because of the combination of Facts 1, 2, and 3 that there is a problem about these cases at all.

*Fact 4: The sentences in question are not, in the ordinary sense, idioms.*<sup>5</sup> An ordinary example of an idiom is "kicked the

<sup>5</sup> There are some idioms in this line of business, however, for example, "How about" as used in proposals and requests: "How about going to the movies tonight?" "How about giving me some more beer?"

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bucket” in “Jones kicked the bucket.” The most powerful evidence I know that these sentences are not idioms is that in their use as indirect directives they admit of literal responses that presuppose that they are uttered literally. Thus, an utterance of “Why don’t you be quiet, Henry?” admits as a response an utterance of “Well, Sally, there are several reasons for not being quiet. First, . . .” Possible exceptions to this are occurrences of “would” and “could” in indirect speech acts, and I will discuss them later.

Further evidence that they are not idioms is that, whereas a word-for-word translation of “Jones kicked the bucket” into other languages will not produce a sentence meaning “Jones died”, translations of the sentences in question will often, though by no means always, produce sentences with the same indirect illocutionary act potential of the English examples. Thus, e.g., “Pourriez-vous m’aider?” and “Können Sie mir helfen?” can be uttered as indirect requests in French or German. I will later discuss the problem of why some translate with equivalent indirect illocutionary force potential and some do not.

*Fact 5: To say they are not idioms is not to say they are not idiomatic.* All the examples given are idiomatic in current English, and – what is more puzzling – they are idiomatically used as requests. In general, nonidiomatic equivalents or synonyms would not have the same indirect illocutionary act potential. Thus, “Do you want to hand me the hammer over there on the table?” can be uttered as a request, but “Is it the case that you at present desire to hand me that hammer over there on the table?” has a formal and stilted character that in almost all contexts would eliminate it as a candidate for an indirect request. Furthermore, “Are you able to hand me that hammer?”, though idiomatic, does not have the same indirect request potential as “Can you hand me that hammer?” That these sentences are *idiomatic* and are *idiomatically used as directives* is crucial to their role in indirect speech acts. I will say more about the relations of these facts later.

*Fact 6: The sentences in question have literal utterances in which they are not also indirect requests.* Thus, “Can you reach the

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salt?” can be uttered as a simple question about your abilities (say, by an orthopedist wishing to know the medical progress of your arm injury). “I want you to leave” can be uttered simply as a statement about one’s wants, without any directive intent. At first sight, some of our examples might not appear to satisfy this condition, e.g.:

Why not stop here?

Why don’t you be quiet?

But with a little imagination it is easy to construct situations in which utterances of these would be not directives but straightforward questions. Suppose someone had said “We ought not to stop here.” Then “Why not stop here?” would be an appropriate question, without necessarily being also a suggestion. Similarly, if someone had just said “I certainly hate making all this racket”, an utterance of “(Well, then) Why don’t you be quiet?” would be an appropriate response, without also necessarily being a request to be quiet.

It is important to note that the intonation of these sentences when they are uttered as indirect requests often differs from their intonation when uttered with only their literal illocutionary force, and often the intonation pattern will be that characteristic of literal directives.

*Fact 7: In cases where these sentences are uttered as requests, they still have their literal meaning and are uttered with and as having that literal meaning.* I have seen it claimed that they have different meanings “in context” when they are uttered as requests, but I believe that is obviously false. The man who says “I want you to do it” means literally that he wants you to do it. The point is that, as is always the case with indirection, he means not only what he says but something more as well. What is added in the indirect cases is not any additional or different sentence meaning, but additional *speaker* meaning. Evidence that these sentences keep their literal meanings when uttered as indirect requests is that responses that are appropriate to their literal utterances are appropriate to their indirect speech act utterances (as we noted in our discussion of Fact 4), e.g.:

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Can you pass the salt?

No, sorry, I can't, it's down there at the end of the table

Yes, I can. (Here it is).

*Fact 8: It is a consequence of Fact 7 that when one of these sentences is uttered with the primary illocutionary point of a directive, the literal illocutionary act is also performed.* In every one of these cases, the speaker issues a directive *by way of* asking a question or making a statement. But the fact that his primary illocutionary intent is directive does not alter the fact that he is asking a question or making a statement. Additional evidence for Fact 8 is that a subsequent report of the utterances can truly report the literal illocutionary act.

Thus, e.g., the utterance of "I want you to leave now, Bill" can be reported by an utterance of "He told me he wanted me to leave, so I left." Or, the utterance of "Can you reach the salt?" can be reported by an utterance of "He asked me whether I could reach the salt." Similarly, an utterance of "Could you do it for me, Henry; could you do it for me and Cynthia and the children?" can be reported by an utterance of "He asked me whether I could do it for him and Cynthia and the children."

This point is sometimes denied. I have seen it claimed that the literal illocutionary acts are always defective or are not "conveyed" when the sentence is used to perform a nonliteral primary illocutionary act. As far as our examples are concerned, the literal illocutions are always conveyed and are sometimes, but not in general, defective. For example, an indirect speech act utterance of "Can you reach the salt?" may be defective in the sense that *S* may already know the answer. But even this form *need* not be defective. (Consider, e.g., "Can you give me change for a dollar?") Even when the literal utterance is defective, the indirect speech act does not depend on its being defective.

#### AN EXPLANATION IN TERMS OF THE THEORY OF SPEECH ACTS

The difference between the example concerning the proposal

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to go to the movies and all of the other cases is that the other cases are systematic. What we need to do, then, is to describe an example in such a way as to show how the apparatus used on the first example will suffice for these other cases and also will explain the systematic character of the other cases.

I think the theory of speech acts will enable us to provide a simple explanation of how these sentences, which have one illocutionary force as part of their meaning, can be used to perform an act with a different illocutionary force. Each type of illocutionary act has a set of conditions that are necessary for the successful and felicitous performance of the act. To illustrate this, I will present the conditions on two types of acts within the two genres, directive and commissive (Searle, 1969: chapter 3).

A comparison of the list of felicity conditions on the directive class of illocutionary acts and our list of types of sentences used to perform indirect directives shows that Groups 1–6 of types can be reduced to three types: those having to do with felicity conditions on the performance of a directive illocutionary act, those having to do with reasons for doing the act, and those embedding one element inside another one. Thus, since the ability of *H* to perform *A* (Group 1) is a preparatory condition, the desire of *S* that *H* perform *A* (Group 2) is the sincerity condition, and the predication of *A* of *H* (Group 3) is the propositional content condition, all of Groups 1–3 concern felicity conditions on

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

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directive illocutionary acts. Since wanting to do something is a reason par excellence for doing it, Group 4 assimilates to Group 5, as both concern reasons for doing *A*. Group 6 is a special class only by courtesy, since its elements either are performative verbs or are already contained in the other two categories of felicity conditions and reasons.

Ignoring the embedding cases for the moment, if we look at our lists and our sets of conditions, the following generalizations naturally emerge:

*Generalization 1: S can make an indirect request (or other directive) by either asking whether or stating that a preparatory condition concerning H's ability to do A obtains.*

*Generalization 2: S can make an indirect directive by either asking whether or stating that the propositional content condition obtains.*

*Generalization 3: S can make an indirect directive by stating that the sincerity condition obtains, but not by asking whether it obtains.*

*Generalization 4: S can make an indirect directive by either stating that or asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that H wants or wishes, etc., to do A, in which case he can only ask whether H wants, wishes, etc., to do A.*

It is the existence of these generalizations that accounts for the systematic character of the relation between the sentences in Groups 1–6 and the directive class of illocutionary acts. Notice that these are generalizations and not rules. The rules of speech acts (or some of them) are stated in the list of conditions presented earlier. That is, for example, it is a rule of the directive class of speech acts that the directive is defective if the hearer is unable to perform the act, but it is precisely not a rule of speech acts or of conversation that one can perform a directive by asking whether the preparatory condition obtains. The theoretical task is to show how that generalization will be a consequence of the rule, together with certain other information, namely, the factual background information and the general principles of conversation.

Our next task is to try to describe an example of an indirect request with at least the same degree of pedantry we used in our description of the rejection of a proposal. Let us take the

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simplest sort of case: At the dinner table, X says to Y, “Can you pass the salt?” by way of asking Y to pass the salt. Now, how does Y know that X is requesting him to pass the salt instead of just asking a question about his abilities to pass the salt? Notice that not everything will do as a request to pass the salt. Thus, if X had said “Salt is made of sodium chloride” or “Salt is mined in the Tatra mountains”, without some special stage setting, it is very unlikely that Y would take either of these utterances as a request to pass the salt. Notice further that, in a normal conversational situation, Y does not have to go through any conscious process of inference to derive the conclusion that the utterance of “Can you pass the salt?” is a request to pass the salt. He simply hears it as a request. This fact is perhaps one of the main reasons why it is tempting to adopt the false conclusion that somehow these examples must have an imperative force as part of their meaning or that they are “ambiguous in context”, or some such. What we need to do is offer an explanation that is consistent with all of Facts 1–8 yet does not make the mistake of hypostatizing concealed imperative forces or conversational postulates. A bare-bones reconstruction of the steps necessary for Y to derive the conclusion from the utterance might go roughly as follows:

*Step 1: Y has asked me a question as to whether I have the ability to pass the salt (fact about the conversation).*

*Step 2: I assume that he is cooperating in the conversation and that therefore his utterance has some aim or point (principles of conversational cooperation).*

*Step 3: The conversational setting is not such as to indicate a theoretical interest in my salt-passing ability (factual background information).*

*Step 4: Furthermore, he probably already knows that the answer to the question is yes (factual background information). (This step facilitates the move to Step 5, but is not essential).*

*Step 5: Therefore, his utterance is probably not just a question. It probably has some ulterior illocutionary point (inference from Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4). What can it be?*

*Step 6: A preparatory condition for any directive illocutionary act*

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*is the ability of H to perform the act predicated in the propositional content condition (theory of speech acts).*

*Step 7: Therefore, X has asked me a question the affirmative answer to which would entail that the preparatory condition for requesting me to pass the salt is satisfied (inference from Steps 1 and 6).*

*Step 8: We are now at dinner and people normally use salt at dinner; they pass it back and forth, try to get others to pass it back and forth, etc. (background information).*

*Step 9: He has therefore alluded to the satisfaction of a preparatory condition for a request whose obedience conditions it is quite likely he wants me to bring about (inference from Steps 7 and 8).*

*Step 10: Therefore, in the absence of any other plausible illocutionary point, he is probably requesting me to pass him the salt (inference from Steps 5 and 9).*

The hypothesis being put forth in this chapter is that all the cases can be similarly analyzed. According to this analysis, the reason I can ask you to pass the salt by saying “Can you pass the salt?” but not by saying “Salt is made of sodium chloride” or “Salt is mined in the Tatra mountains” is that your ability to pass the salt is a preparatory condition for requesting you to pass the salt in a way that the other sentences are not related to requesting you to pass the salt. But obviously, that answer is not by itself sufficient, because not all questions about your abilities are requests. The hearer therefore needs some way of finding out when the utterance is just a question about his abilities and when it is a request made by way of asking a question about his abilities. It is at this point that the general principles of conversation (together with factual background information) come into play.

The two features that are crucial, or so I am suggesting, are, first, a strategy for establishing the existence of an ulterior illocutionary point beyond the illocutionary point contained in the meaning of the sentence, and second, a device for finding out what the ulterior illocutionary point is. The first is established by the principles of conversation operating on the information of the hearer and the speaker, and the second

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is derived from the theory of speech acts together with background information. The generalizations are to be explained by the fact that each of them records a strategy by means of which the hearer can find out how a primary illocutionary point differs from a secondary illocutionary point.

The chief motivation – though not the only motivation – for using these indirect forms is politeness. Notice that, in the example just given, the “Can you” form is polite in at least two respects. Firstly, X does not presume to know about Y’s abilities, as he would if he issued an imperative sentence; and, secondly, the form gives – or at least appears to give – Y the option of refusing, since a yes–no question allows *no* as a possible answer. Hence, compliance can be made to appear a free act rather than obeying a command.<sup>6</sup>

### SOME PROBLEMS

It is important to emphasize that I have by no means demonstrated the thesis being argued for in this chapter. I have so far only suggested a pattern of analysis that is consistent with the facts. Even supposing that this pattern of analysis could be shown to be successful in many more cases, there are still several problems that remain:

*Problem 1*: The biggest single problem with the foregoing analysis is this: If, as I have been arguing, the mechanisms by which indirect speech acts are meant and understood are perfectly general – having to do with the theory of speech acts, the principles of cooperative conversation, and shared background information – and not tied to any particular syntactical form, then why is it that some syntactical forms work better than others? Why can I ask you to do something by saying “Can you hand me that book on the top shelf?” but not, or not very easily, by saying “Is it the case that you at present have the ability to hand me that book on the top shelf?”

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Dorothea Franck for discussion of this point.

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Even within such pairs as:

Do you want to do A?

Do you desire to do A?

and:

Can you do A?

Are you able to do A?

there is clearly a difference in indirect illocutionary act potential. Note, for example, that the first member of each pair takes “please” more readily than the second. Granting that none of these pairs are exact synonyms, and granting that all the sentences have some use as indirect requests, it is still essential to explain the differences in their indirect illocutionary act potential. How, in short, can it be the case that some sentences are not imperative idioms and yet function as forms of idiomatic requests?

The first part of the answer is this: The theory of speech acts and the principles of conversational cooperation do, indeed, provide a framework within which indirect illocutionary acts can be meant and understood. However, within this framework certain forms will tend to become conventionally established as the standard idiomatic forms for indirect speech acts. While keeping their literal meanings, they will acquire conventional uses as, e.g., polite forms for requests.

It is by now, I hope, uncontroversial that there is a distinction to be made between meaning and use, but what is less generally recognized is that there can be conventions of usage that are not meaning conventions. I am suggesting that “can you”, “could you”, “I want you to”, and numerous other forms are conventional ways of making requests (and in that sense it is not incorrect to say they are idioms), but at the same time they do not have an imperative meaning (and in that sense it would be incorrect to say they are idioms). Politeness is the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests, and certain forms naturally tend to become the conventionally polite ways of making indirect requests.

If this explanation is correct, it would go some way toward

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explaining why there are differences in the indirect speech forms from one language to another. The mechanisms are not peculiar to this language or that, but at the same time the standard forms from one language will not always maintain their indirect speech act potential when translated from one language to another. Thus, “Can you hand me that book?” will function as an indirect request in English, but its Czech translation, “Můžete mi podat tu knížku?” will sound very odd if uttered as a request in Czech.

A second part of the answer is this: In order to be a plausible candidate for an utterance as an indirect speech act, a sentence has to be idiomatic to start with. It is very easy to imagine circumstances in which: “Are you able to reach that book on the top shelf?” could be uttered as a request. But it is much harder to imagine cases in which “Is it the case that you at present have the ability to reach that book on the top shelf?” could be similarly used. Why?

I think the explanation for this fact may derive from another maxim of conversation having to do with speaking idiomatically. In general, if one speaks unidiomatically, hearers assume that there must be a special reason for it, and in consequence, various assumptions of normal speech are suspended. Thus, if I say, archaically, “Knowest thou him who calleth himself Richard Nixon?”, you are not likely to respond as you would to an utterance of “Do you know Richard Nixon?”

Besides the maxims proposed by Grice, there seems to be an additional maxim of conversation that could be expressed as follows: “Speak idiomatically unless there is some special reason not to.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the normal conversational assumptions on which the possibility of indirect speech acts rests are in large part suspended in the nonidiomatic cases.

The answer, then, to Problem 1 is in two parts. In order to be a plausible candidate at all for use as an indirect speech act, a sentence has to be idiomatic. But within the class of idiomatic sentences, some forms tend to become entrenched as conventional devices for indirect speech acts. In the case of

<sup>7</sup> This maxim could also be viewed as an extension of Grice’s maxim of manner.

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directives, in which politeness is the chief motivation for the indirect forms, certain forms are conventionally used as polite requests. Which kinds of forms are selected will, in all likelihood, vary from one language to another.

*Problem 2:* Why is there an asymmetry between the sincerity condition and the others such that one can perform an indirect request only by asserting the satisfaction of a sincerity condition, not by querying it, whereas one can perform indirect directives by either asserting or querying the satisfaction of the propositional content and preparatory conditions?

Thus, an utterance of “I want you to do it” can be a request, but not an utterance of “Do I want you to do it?” The former can take “please”, the latter cannot. A similar asymmetry occurs in the case of reasons: “Do you want to leave us alone?” can be a request, but not “You want to leave us alone”.<sup>8</sup> Again, the former can take “please”, the latter cannot. How is one to explain these facts?

I believe the answer is that it is odd, in normal circumstances, to ask other people about the existence of one’s own elementary psychological states, and odd to assert the existence of other people’s elementary psychological states when addressing them. Since normally you are never in as good a position as I am to assert what I want, believe, intend, and so on, and since I am normally not in as good a position as you to assert what you want, believe, intend, and so on, it is, in general, odd for me to ask you about my states or tell you about yours. We shall see shortly that this asymmetry extends to the indirect performance of other kinds of speech acts.

*Problem 3:* Though this chapter is not intended as being about English syntactical forms, some of the sentences on our lists are of enough interest to deserve special comment. Even if it should turn out that these peculiar cases are really imperative idioms, like “how about . . . ?”, it would not alter the general lines of my argument; it would simply shift some

<sup>8</sup> This point does not hold for the etymologically prior sense of “want” in which it means “need”.

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examples out of the class of indirect speech acts into the class of imperative idioms.

One interesting form is “why not plus verb”, as in “Why not stop here?” This form, unlike “Why don’t you?”, has many of the same syntactical constraints as imperative sentences. For example, it requires a voluntary verb. Thus, one cannot say \**“Why not resemble your grandmother?”* unless one believes that one can resemble someone as a voluntary action, whereas one can say *“Why not imitate your grandmother?”* Furthermore, like imperative sentences, this form requires a reflexive when it takes a second-person direct object, e.g. *“Why not wash yourself?”* Do these facts prove that the “Why not . . . ?” (and the “why . . . ?”) forms are imperative in meaning? I think they are not. On my account, the way an utterance of “why not?” works is this: In asking “Why not stop here?” as a suggestion to stop here, *S* challenges *H* to provide reasons for not doing something on the tacit assumption that the absence of reasons for not doing something is itself a reason for doing it, and the suggestion to do it is therefore made indirectly in accordance with the generalization that alluding to a reason for doing something is a way of making an indirect directive to do it. This analysis is supported by several facts. First, as we have already seen, this form can have a literal utterance in which it is not uttered as a suggestion; second, one can respond to the suggestion with a response appropriate to the literal utterance, e.g., “Well, there are several reasons for not stopping here. First . . .” And third, one can report an utterance of one of these, without reporting any directive illocutionary forces, in the form “He asked me why we shouldn’t stop there.” And here the occurrence of the practical “should” or “ought” (not the theoretical “should” or “ought”) is sufficient to account for the requirement of a voluntary verb.

Other troublesome examples are provided by occurrences of “would” and “could” in indirect speech acts. Consider, for example, utterances of “Would you pass me the salt?” and “Could you hand me that book?” It is not easy to analyze these forms and to describe exactly how they differ in meaning from “Will you pass me the salt?” and “Can you

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hand me that book?” Where, for example, are we to find the “if” clause, which, we are sometimes told, is required by the so-called subjunctive use of these expressions? Suppose we treat the “if” clause as “if I asked you to”. Thus, “Would you pass me the salt?” is short for “Would you pass me the salt if I asked you to?”

There are at least two difficulties with this approach. First, it does not seem at all plausible for “could”, since your abilities and possibilities are not contingent on what I ask you to do. But second, even for “would” it is unsatisfactory, since “Would you pass me the salt if I asked you to?” does not have the same indirect illocutionary act potential as the simple “Would you pass me the salt?” Clearly, both forms have uses as indirect directives, but, equally clearly, they are not equivalent. Furthermore, the cases in which “would” and “could” interrogative forms *do* have a nonindirect use seem to be quite different from the cases we have been considering, e.g. “Would you vote for a Democrat?” or “Could you marry a radical?” Notice, for example, that an appropriate response to an utterance of these might be, e.g., “Under what conditions?” or “It depends on the situation”. But these would hardly be appropriate responses to an utterance of “Would you pass me the salt?” in the usual dinner table scene we have been envisaging.

“Could” seems to be analyzable in terms of “would” and possibility or ability. Thus, “Could you marry a radical?” means something like “Would it be possible for you to marry a radical?” “Would”, like “will” is traditionally analyzed either as expressing want or desire or as a future auxiliary.

The difficulty with these forms seems to be an instance of the general difficulty about the nature of the subjunctive and does not necessarily indicate that there is any imperative meaning. If we are to assume that “would” and “could” have an imperative meaning, then it seems we will be forced to assume, also, that they have a commissive meaning as well, since utterances of “Could I be of assistance?” and “Would you like some more wine?” are both normally offers. I find this conclusion implausible because it involves an unnecessary proliferation of meanings. It violates Occam’s

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razor regarding concepts. It is more economical to assume that “could” and “would” are univocal in “Could you pass the salt?”, “Could I be of assistance?”, “Would you stop making that noise?”, and “Would you like some more wine?” However, a really satisfactory analysis of these forms awaits a satisfactory analysis of the subjunctive. The most plausible analysis of the indirect request forms is that the suppressed “if” clause is the polite “if you please” or “if you will”.

#### EXTENDING THE ANALYSIS

I want to conclude this chapter by showing that the general approach suggested in it will work for other types of indirection besides just directives. Obvious examples, often cited in the literature, are provided by the sincerity conditions. In general, one can perform any illocutionary act by asserting (though not by questioning) the satisfaction of the sincerity condition for that act. Thus, for example:

- I am sorry I did it (*an apology*).
- I think/believe he is in the next room (*an assertion*).
- I am so glad you won (*congratulations*).
- I intend to try harder next time, coach (*a promise*).
- I am grateful for your help (*thanks*).

I believe, however, that the richest mine for examples other than directives is provided by commissives, and a study of the examples of sentences used to perform indirect commissives (especially offers and promises) shows very much the same patterns that we found in the study of directives. Consider the following sentences, any of which can be uttered to perform an indirect offer (or, in some cases, a promise).

- I. Sentences concerning the preparatory conditions:
  - A. that *S* is able to perform the act:
    - Can I help you?
    - I can do that for you
    - I could get it for you
    - Could I be of assistance?

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- B. that *H* wants *S* to perform the act:  
Would you like some help?  
Do you want me to go now, Sally?  
Wouldn't you like me to bring some more  
next time I come?  
Would you rather I came on Tuesday?
- II. Sentences concerning the sincerity condition:  
I intend to do it for you  
I plan on repairing it for you next week.
- III. Sentences concerning the propositional content condition:  
I will do it for you  
I am going to give it to you next time  
you stop by  
Shall I give you the money now?
- IV. Sentences concerning *S*'s wish or willingness to do *A*:  
I want to be of any help I can  
I'd be willing to do it (if you want me to).
- V. Sentences concerning (other) reasons for *S*'s doing *A*:  
I think I had better leave you alone  
Wouldn't it be better if I gave you some  
assistance?  
You need my help, Cynthia.

Notice that the point made earlier about the elementary psychological states holds for these cases as well: One can perform an indirect illocutionary act by asserting, but not by querying, one's own psychological states; and one can perform an indirect illocutionary act by querying, but not by asserting, the presence of psychological states in one's hearer.

Thus, an utterance of "Do you want me to leave?" can be an offer to leave, but not "You want me to leave." (Though it can be, with the tag question "You want me to leave, don't you?") Similarly, "I want to help you out" can be uttered as an offer, but not "Do I want to help you out?"

The class of indirect commissives also includes a large number of hypothetical sentences:

If you wish any further information, just  
let me know.

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If I can be of assistance, I would be most glad to help.

If you need any help, call me at the office.

In the hypothetical cases, the antecedent concerns either one of the preparatory conditions, or the presence of a reason for doing *A*, as in “If it would be better for me to come on Wednesday, just let me know.” Note also that, as well as hypothetical sentences, there are iterated cases of indirection. Thus, e.g., “I think I ought to help you out” can be uttered as an indirect offer made by way of making an indirect assertion. These examples suggest the following further generalizations:

*Generalization 5: S can make an indirect commissive by either asking whether or stating that the preparatory condition concerning his ability to do A obtains.*

*Generalization 6: S can make an indirect commissive by asking whether, though not by stating that, the preparatory condition concerning H's wish or want that S do A obtains.*

*Generalization 7: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, and in some forms by asking whether, the propositional content condition obtains.*

*Generalization 8: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that, but not by asking whether, the sincerity condition obtains.*

*Generalization 9: S can make an indirect commissive by stating that or by asking whether there are good or overriding reasons for doing A, except where the reason is that S wants or desires to do A, in which case he can only state but not ask whether he wants to do A.*

I would like to conclude by emphasizing that my approach does not fit any of the usual explanatory paradigms. The philosopher's paradigm has normally been to get a set of logically necessary and sufficient conditions for the phenomena to be explained; the linguist's paradigm has normally been to get a set of structural rules that will generate the phenomena to be explained. I am unable to convince myself that either of these paradigms is appropriate for the present problem. The problem seems to me somewhat like those problems in the epistemological analysis of perception in which one seeks to explain how a perceiver recognizes an

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object on the basis of imperfect sensory input. The question, How do I know he has made a request when he only asked me a question about my abilities? may be like the question, How do I know it was a car when all I perceived was a flash going past me on the highway? If so, the answer to our problem may be neither “I have a set of axioms from which it can be deduced that he made a request” nor “I have a set of syntactical rules that generate an imperative deep structure for the sentence he uttered.”