

# Language in Action

**New Studies of Language in Society  
Essays in Honor of Roger W. Shuy**

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# Foreword

Deborah Tannen

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When my book *You Just Don't Understand* began to receive widespread attention, I received a handwritten note from my colleague Roger Shuy telling me that he had read and liked the book, and that I was doing something worthwhile by writing about sociolinguistics for a general audience. What a gift that note was. And how characteristic of Roger. Any academic can tell you that simply reading our colleagues' work is something that most of us wish we had more time to do. Taking the trouble to write a note of encouragement is even less common. And valuing the dissemination of academic research beyond the walls of the academy, valuing it for the help it can offer to people in their everyday lives, is both relatively unusual and a cornerstone of the life and work of Roger Shuy.

That was 1990, after I had been Roger's colleague in the sociolinguistics program of Georgetown University's linguistics department for eleven years. I had seen over these years the leavening effect of Roger's generous and enthusiastic support for his colleagues as well as students, his incisive and inquiring mind, his flawless insight about the workings of language, and the ready articulateness and wit with which he expressed all of these. Indeed, the program in which I taught was itself the creation of Roger's vision and enterprise. His guiding presence has had an inestimable effect on the very development of the field of sociolinguistics.

One more anecdote comes to mind because it was one of my first encounters with Roger—the first, in fact, after an initial job inter-

## **Indirectness at Work\***

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A university president was expecting a visit from a member of the board of trustees. When her secretary buzzed to tell her that the board member had arrived, she left her office and entered the reception area to greet him. Before ushering him into her office, she handed her secretary a sheet of paper and said something like, "I've just finished drafting this letter. Do you think you could type it right away? I'd like to get it out before lunch. And would you please do me a favor and hold all calls while I'm meeting with Mr. Smith?" When they sat down behind the closed door of her office, Mr. Smith began by telling her that he thought she had spoken inappropriately to her secretary. "Don't forget," he said, "you're the president!"

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\*This chapter is a slightly revised version of the chapter, "'Why Don't You Say What You Mean?': Indirectness at Work" in *Talking From 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power* (New York: Avon, 1994). This book was written with a nonacademic audience in mind. The issues discussed, however, and the examples examined are of interest to scholars concerned with indirectness, one of the linguistic strategies frequently discussed in the discourse analysis literature. For this reason, I decided to recast the chapter slightly for an academic audience.

Putting aside the question of the appropriateness of his admonishing the president on her way of speaking, it is revealing—and, I think, representative of many Americans' assumptions—that the trustee regarded the president's indirect way of telling her secretary what to do as inappropriately self-deprecating. He took it as evidence that she did not think she had the right to make demands of her secretary. He probably thought he was giving her a needed pep talk, bolstering her self-confidence.

In this chapter, I challenge the assumption that talking in an indirect way necessarily reveals a lack of self-confidence, powerlessness, or other aspects of the speaker's character. As Lakoff (e.g., 1973, 1975, 1990) has argued repeatedly, and as I have argued in my own writing (e.g., Tannen, 1984, 1986, 1994), indirectness is a fundamental element in human communication. It is also one of the elements that varies the most from one culture to another, and therefore one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding when speakers have different habits with regard to using it.

I want to dispel the notion that American women tend to be more indirect than American men across the board. Women and men are both often indirect, but, in addition to differences caused by the part of the country they grew up in and their ethnic and class backgrounds, they tend to be indirect in different ways and different situations. Crucial in the preceding sentence is the phrase "tend to." As I have argued elsewhere (Tannen, 1996, following Goffman, 1977), ways of speaking associated with gender are not sex-linked (i.e., necessarily used by all women or all men) but rather "sex-class linked" (i.e., aspects of "gender display" that become associated in a given culture with the *class* of women or the *class* of men but not necessarily with every individual in that class). I support this claim with reference to a study of workplace interaction.

In order to examine ways of talking in a work setting, I had a number of managers at a major corporation each tape-record their own conversations for a week. I was not present during these tapings, but I

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The study of workplace conversation on which this chapter draws was conducted during the academic year 1992–93, when I was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, CA. I am grateful for this year in academic heaven and for the financial support provided by the National Science Foundation SES-9022192 to the Center.

I am also grateful to Shari Kendall, Keller Magenau, and Keli Yerian, who worked closely with me in analyzing the transcripts of the workplace conversations. I would also like to thank Erle J. Rappaport and Mary Maggini for permission to quote from the unsolicited letters they kindly sent me. And, last but not first, I thank the companies that allowed me to observe and record conversations and the individuals who participated in the study by allowing me to observe them, by recording their own conversations, and by discussing the examples with me after the fact.

later shadowed each one for a number of days and interviewed them as well as others who work with them about their work situations and their impressions of their co-workers. The examples included in this chapter come from transcripts of these taped conversations as well as from interviews with participants in this study and from less formal conversations with individuals about their work experience.

## INDIRECTNESS AT WORK

At work, speakers frequently need to get others to do things. Different people have different ways of accomplishing this; any individual's ways will vary depending not only on conversational style but also on hierarchical relations: Is the person being addressed a boss, a peer, or a subordinate? At one extreme are bald commands. One manager, Mark, issued 25 commands in about five hours of meetings; only 4 of these 25 commands were significantly softened by indirectness. At another extreme are indirect requests that do not even sound like requests at all, but are just a statement of need or a description of a situation.

Another manager whose talk was taped, Kristin, tended to tell people what to do in this softened way. For example, in talking to a subordinate (Charles) about a report he was preparing for the director (Miller) about sales in a foreign country, Kristin asked about the conversion rate from the foreign currency to dollars and suggested that Charles put that information into his report. She had to repeat her suggestion several times as Charles seemed to miss her indirect way of making it:

- Kristin: And that works out to 2.50 per FFB [local currency].  
 Charles: 2.50 per FFC, right.  
 Kristin: Per FFB ... FFC yeah right [laughs]. Excuse me [laughs].  
 Charles: Yeah that's in then current dollars....  
 Kristin: OK. It might be useful- I'm not sure we're gonna show that.  
 Charles: Yeah. Well, like I- yknow I saw- I thought I'd like to have an arsenal [Kristin: Yeah.], or a sort of yknow collection of things [Kristin: Yeah.] from which we could pick and choose.  
 Kristin: This would be good in the arsenal, absolutely, yeah. Go for it.  
 Charles: OK.  
 Kristin: Yeah. You might want to also—well ... W-would he- would Miller know that 12- 12 dollars per unit is the same as 20 FFC?

- Charles: Um, actually it's 15 dollars, it's more like this number that we were quoted before. Um it's 15- this is 15 and a half. [Kristin: Oh, OK.] Fifteen or 16 depending on how you measure it. Uh top of the line or bottom of the line. It's 15 dollars a unit [Kristin: OK.] for before tax, which is 5 dollars an FFC.
- Kristin: You know- you might put in parentheses you know, to- yeah- you- you- you could put dollars per unit, and then in parentheses put you know dollars per FFC.
- Charles: OK.
- Kristin: Just for /?/ for people like me who are not that quick with the conversions [laughs]. That would be good.

Kristin first tried to suggest that Charles put the conversion rate from local currency to dollars by saying:

It might be useful- I'm not sure we're gonna show that.

She seems to have started to say, "It might be useful to put the conversion rate in," and then stopped midsentence and substituted a general statement, "I'm not sure we're gonna show that." When Charles did not respond to her suggestion, she made it again with slightly more directness:

You might want to also—well ...  
W-would he- would Miller know that  
12- 12 dollars per unit  
is the same as twenty FFC?"

Again Kristin seems to have started to say, "You might want to put the conversion rate in your report," but again she cut herself off and asked whether the director would know the conversion rate. That should have led Charles to the conclusion himself. But Charles ignored this and continued talking about the conversion rate. Only then did Kristin actually tell him to put it in his report:

You know- you might put in parentheses you know, to- yeah- you- you- you could put dollars per unit, and then in parentheses put you know dollars per FFC.

Note that her instructions were still indirect: "You might put" rather than "put," and that they were softened by hesitations and "yknow." Then, as a final softener, she added a reason for her instructions, using herself as an example of someone who might need the extra information:

Just for /?/ for people like me  
who are not that quick with the conversions.

Kristin further softened her instructions with a soft laugh. Note that she could just as easily have questioned the director's mental ability rather than her own; she could have said, "Just in case Miller isn't that quick with the conversions."

Notice too that when Charles was talking, Kristin inserted frequent supporters like "yeah" and "OK," even though he was not addressing the issue she kept raising. Also, she ratified his metaphor about an arsenal by repeating it approvingly, before steering the conversation back to the point she was trying to make. However, her frequent laughter was not joined by Charles, who left her to laugh alone. All this verbal behavior gives Kristin's style a "soft touch," an evaluation of her that I heard from her colleagues. For my purposes here, it is interesting to note that the kernel of her style is the indirect way she told Charles what to do.

Some people would find Mark's direct commands more appropriate; others would find them abrasive. Some would find Kristin's indirect directives congenial; others would find them irritating. One woman told me that she enjoyed working for a boss who tended to say things like, "I have a problem. I really have to get this report done, but I can't do it myself. What do you think?" Predictably, the employee would offer to write the report, to help her boss out. This woman preferred being given the opportunity to volunteer rather than being directly asked or even ordered, but someone who expected to be told directly might resent rather than appreciate it.

People with direct styles of asking others to do things perceive indirect requests as manipulative, if they perceive them as requests at all. But "manipulative" is often just a way of blaming others for one's discomfort with their styles. This boss's way of allowing her employee to offer to write the report is no more "manipulative" than making a telephone call, asking (to borrow an example from Ervin-Tripp, 1976) "Is Sybil there?" and expecting whoever answers the phone to put Sybil on. Only a child is likely to answer "Yes," and continue holding the phone—not out of orneriness but because of inexperience with the conventional meaning of the question. (A mischievous adult might do it to tease.) This is what leads some people to feel that indirect orders are illogical or manipulative—they do not recognize the conventional nature of the indirect requests.

I do not believe that it is purely coincidental that the manager who issued bald commands, Mark, was male, whereas the one who was indirect, Kristin, was female. But not all the managers whose talk I observed at companies across the country fell into this gendered pattern. One male manager (I'll call him Sid) never gave unmitigated directives. He typically asked his secretary to do things by assuming they would be done. For example, the following interchange took place when they were discussing preparations for the impending visit of several high-level managers from a regional office:

Sid: Oh and I was meaning to ask you about that.  
When I meet them Sunday, I'll have the invi-  
invitation for Sunday night's activities, and also I'll  
have an agenda, for the following day? In fact an  
agenda for the following week, for them- to give  
them, is that right?

Rita: Well we can we can do that.

Sid: So that so that that night they can plan on they can  
just look down through the agenda and see where  
they're going the next day and we don't just pre-  
sent it to them Monday morning first thing.

Rita: That's a very good idea. I'll uh-

Sid: And uh if it could just be in an envelope or  
something for each one of them and when I give  
them the invitation I can give them also the agenda  
showing them what the what is, going to happen  
for not only Monday but Tuesday and Wednesday,  
they've got the whole, three days laid out.

...

Rita: That's a very good idea. OK we'll see if we can  
have a whole lot of things for you to present to  
them.

Sid: OK. All right, yep that's a good idea.

Sid never actually told Rita to make up a schedule for the visitors' entire week and have it ready in envelopes for each one by the time they arrive. He spoke as though he presumed she would have it ready ("I'll have the invi-invitation for Sunday night's activities, and also I'll have an agenda, for the following day?"). But it's clear from Rita's response that she was hearing this idea for the first time and took it as a request with which she would comply ("That's a very good idea. I'll uh-"). He also told her indirectly to put each one in an envelope, by setting up a subordinate clause beginning with "if" ("if it could just be in an enve-

lope or something for each one..."). This structure, which appeared frequently in the discourse recorded for this study, typically occurred without a main clause following. (I believe the implied main clause is something like, "that would be great.") The "if" construction has become conventionalized as a mitigated way of giving orders.

Sid's indirect way of speaking to his secretary comes across as polite, yet he did not say "thank you" at the end. In fact, Sid almost never said "thank you" in the week's worth of talk that I examined. However, this seems to go along with his never making direct requests, but rather maintaining the appearance that Rita was going to do these things anyway. In that sense, not saying "thank you" could be a way of not foregrounding that she would be doing this because he told her to.

The common assumption (made by researchers as well as participants) that asking people to do things indirectly shows insecurity and powerlessness is refuted by this and many other examples from Sid's speech. In the week's worth of talk he recorded for me, Sid always spoke this way when asking his secretary or other subordinates to do things. And yet nothing about Sid gave the impression of lack of confidence or powerlessness. Sid's strategies for giving directions to subordinates is evidence of the more widespread phenomenon that issuing orders indirectly can be the prerogative of those in power.

Imagine, for example, a master who says "It's cold in here," and expects a servant to make a move to close a window, whereas a servant who says the same thing is not likely to see his employer rise to correct the situation and make him more comfortable. Indeed, a Frenchman who was raised in Brittany tells me that his family never gave bald commands to their servants but always communicated orders in indirect and highly polite ways. In other words, using indirectness can be not only consonant with a position of authority or power, but a way of expressing and enacting that authority. This insight renders less surprising the finding of Bellinger and Berko Gleason (1982) that fathers' speech to their young children had a higher incidence than mothers' speech of both direct imperatives such as "Turn the bolt with the wrench" and indirect imperatives like "The wheel is going to fall off." In this light, the indirect imperatives were as much an expression of the father's authority as the direct imperatives were.

The use of indirectness can hardly be understood without the cross-cultural perspective. Many in the United States find it self-evident that directness is logical and aligned with power, whereas indirectness is akin to dishonesty as well as subservience. But for speakers raised in most of the world's cultures, varieties of indirectness are the norm in communication. This is the pattern found by Harada (1993) in his analysis of a conversation between a Japanese boss and a subordinate.

In the conversation Harada recorded and analyzed, the markers of superior status were clear. One speaker was a Japanese man in his late 40s who managed the local branch of a Japanese private school in the United States. His conversational partner was a Japanese-American woman in her early 20s who worked at the school. By virtue of his job, his age, his sex, and his native fluency in the language being taught, the man was in the superior position. Yet when he addressed the woman, he frequently used polite language. For example, when he wanted her to find a photography store that would redevelop some photographs in black and white for a flyer about the school, he simply stated what needed to be done and allowed her to volunteer to do it. Harada observed that given the fact that there are some duties to be performed and that there are two parties present, the subordinate is supposed to assume that those are his or her obligation. It is precisely because of his higher status that the boss is free to choose whether to speak formally or informally, to assert his power or to downplay it and build connection—an option not available to the subordinate, who would seem cheeky if he or she chose a style that enhanced friendliness and closeness.

Pan (1994) finds a similar pattern in Chinese discourse. In her analysis of a meeting of the staff of a Chinese neighborhood youth center, she observed that all staff members spoke in ways that reflected their place in the hierarchy. A subordinate addressing a superior always spoke in a deferent way, but a superior addressing a subordinate could either be authoritarian, demonstrating his power, or friendly, establishing connection. As the one in power, he had the option of choosing which style to use. In this spirit, I have been told by people who prefer their bosses to give orders "politely" (by which they usually mean indirectly) that those who issue bald commands must be pretty insecure—otherwise why would they have to bolster their egos by throwing their weight around?

The point I am building toward is not that those who give orders directly are really insecure and powerless, any more than I want to accept that those who give indirect orders necessarily are. The point is that ways of talking should not be taken as obvious evidence of inner psychological states such as insecurity or lack of self-confidence. Nor is this to say that no one is insecure or underconfident. It is simply that, considering the many influences on conversational style, individuals have a wide range of habits with regard to what they consider the right way to get things done and to express their intentions or emotional states. Personality characteristics such as insecurity cannot be linked to ways of speaking in an automatic, self-evident way.

Those who expect orders to be given politely are offended when directives come unadorned. One woman said that when her boss gives her instructions, she feels she should click her heels, salute, and say, "Yes, boss!" His directions sound so imperious to her as to border on the militaristic. In view of this association, it is ironic that military communication is often maximally rather than minimally indirect. This is dramatized in a letter I received from a man telling me that indirect orders were a fundamental part of his military training. He wrote:

Many years ago, when I was in the Navy, I was training to be a radio technician. One class I was in was taught by a Chief Radioman, a regular Navy man who had been to sea, and who was then in his third hitch. The students, about 20 of us, were fresh out of boot camp, with no sea duty, and little knowledge of real Navy life. One day in class the Chief said it was hot in the room. The students didn't react, except perhaps to nod in agreement. The Chief repeated himself: "It's hot in this room." Again there was no reaction from the students.

Then the Chief explained. He wasn't looking for agreement or discussion from us. When he said that the room was hot, he expected us to do something about it—like opening the window. He tried it one more time, and this time all of us left our work benches and headed for the windows. We had learned. And we had many opportunities to apply what we had learned.

This letter especially intrigued me because the phrase, "It's hot in here," is so close to the standard sentence linguists use to illustrate an indirect way of getting someone to do something, just as I used it earlier. In this example, it is the very obviousness and rigidity of the military hierarchy that makes the statement of a problem sufficient to trigger corrective action on the part of subordinates.

As this man's recollection shows, there are many ways in which styles associated with men are indirect. I have written elsewhere (Tannen, 1990) about the widespread pattern in conversational style by which many women want to talk about a problem or situation, but when they bring the topic up for discussion with men they are close to, the men offer solutions. I had not previously observed, however, that a man who responds to troubles talk by trying to solve the problem is operating on a system of indirectness. The woman did not ask, "So what do you think I could do to solve this problem?" He probably concludes she wants a solution because he assumes that she would not bother telling him about the problem if she did not want something from him, and he surmises that what she wants must be a solution. The gender pattern,

then, lies not in whether one has the ability to interpret indirectness in conversation, but rather whether one expects indirectness in a given situation and the type of indirectness one expects.

Another letter I received from a reader leads to the same conclusion. This letter was written by the curator of a private art collection, a woman who was dependent on three young men to install works of art for exhibition according to her vision. In explaining how she learned to work with these men, she wrote:

Usually when I get really upset I just walk away, shed a few tears alone and then return to continue as though nothing happened. I've come to realize that they admire me for this. I never flog them with my tears, but they respect that they've gone too far and we usually end up compromising in a satisfactory way. That I can let go of the disagreement is a marvel to them—women usually don't let it go. We fight, we return to work, joking and enjoying each other's company. I've learned to validate my own anger—and the fact that they tease me afterwards is an acknowledgment that they validate it too.

They're actually quite sensitive and endearing fellows — as long as I don't make them *talk* about their feelings. If I try to do that, they get quite annoyed. So we don't talk about *anybody's* feelings, but, if I listen carefully, they tell me things about themselves (and me!) in little bits of conversation. They really pay attention to me—they're all very sensitive to my moods and safety. But, to look at them, you'd think they didn't know I was alive.

Men, I think, are more subtle than women and I really appreciate this difference. Women need to learn to listen to what men say—because it really is there, it's just not as direct as we'd like it to be.

This woman's insights were fascinating to me in many ways. She says she can tell that the men she works with have registered and responded to her anger not because they say so but because they tease her—an indirect way of acknowledging that they went too far if they drove her to tears. She sees them as sensitive not because they say they care about her but because they act as if they do, by compromising, allowing for her moods, and watching out for her safety. She concludes that men are simply more indirect than women.

The suggestion that men are more indirect than women must come as a surprise to those who have believed and argued that women are more indirect than men. But the truth is that everyone is indirect, meaning more than we put into words and deriving meaning from others that they never actually said. Patterns of difference are a matter of where, when, and how individuals tend to be indirect and look for hidden meanings. Most studies finding girls and women to be more indirect than boys and men focus on their attempts to get others to do things

(e.g., Goodwin, 1980, 1990; Tannen, 1990). That, too, can be common among men—as the cases of the military officer and the manager I called Sid demonstrated. But the situations in which men are most often found to be indirect have to do with the expression of emotions other than anger—of weakness, problems, and errors.

Just that kind of indirectness appears in a study by Ainsworth-Vaughn (1992) of doctors talking to patients. As an example of a doctor who changes topics without getting the patient's verbal agreement, Ainsworth-Vaughn presents an exchange she taped in which a patient expressed such extreme emotional distress that she wondered aloud whether life is worth living. The doctor responded by asking about an appointment with a therapist:

[Patient has reported severe side effects from medication for lowering cholesterol, and physician has replied that the medication prevents an early death.]

Doctor: And if we're going to (treat) your cholesterol if you decide that you want to do that ahh together with me, then like I said there's not a whole lot of other options in terms of medications for your cholesterol.

Patient: Yeah, so you prolong your life for what, you know?

Doctor: (3-second pause) Do you have an appointment to see a therapist soon? (p. 421)

On the surface, the doctor's response had no relation to what the patient had just said. Indirectly, however, it did. The doctor seemed to change the subject unilaterally, but what he changed it to was the subject of the patient seeing a therapist—someone who could, presumably, deal with her feelings that life is not worth living.

An assumption parallel to the one that men tend to be more direct than women is that men focus more on information, whereas women focus more on interaction—another type of indirectness. But this too depends on the activity and the situation. Winter (1993) compared male and female political interviewers on Australian television and concluded that the woman interviewer was more focused on information, whereas the man was more focused on the interaction: He expressed his own opposing views, became more emotional, and turned the interview into a competitive conflict in which he was a full participant. I offer this example not to imply that all interviewers function in this way, but to show that at least one study found the woman to be more focused on information than the man, not less.



## THE DANGERS OF INDIRECTNESS

On January 13, 1982, a freezing cold, snowy night in Washington, DC, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from National Airport, but it could not get the lift it needed to keep climbing. Down, down it went until it crashed into the 14th Street Bridge linking the District to the state of Virginia and plunged into the Potomac. Of the 74 people on board, all but 5 perished, many floundering and drowning in the icy water while horror-stricken bystanders watched helplessly from the river's edge and thousands more watched, aghast, on their television screens. Experts later concluded that the plane had waited too long after deicing to take off. Fresh buildup of ice on the wings and engine brought the plane down. How could the pilot and co-pilot have made such a blunder? Did not at least one of them realize it was dangerous to take off under these conditions?

In accordance with airline regulations, all conversations that take place in the cockpits of planes are automatically recorded. If a flight proceeds without mishap, the tape is automatically erased, but if the plane crashes, the heavily armored "black box" containing the tapes can be recovered to help analysts figure out what went on just before the crash. Charlotte Linde has studied the "black box" recordings of cockpit conversations that preceded crashes as well as tape recordings of the conversations that took place among crews during flight simulations in which problems were presented (Goguen & Linde, 1983; Linde, 1988). Among the black box conversations she studied was the one between the pilot and co-pilot just before the Air Florida crash.<sup>1</sup> The pilot, it turned out, had little experience flying in icy weather. The co-pilot had a bit more, and it became heartbreakingly clear on analysis that he had tried to warn the pilot, but he did so indirectly. The co-pilot repeatedly called attention to the bad weather and to ice building up on other planes:

<sup>1</sup>The cause of the crash is described by Goguen and Linde (1983) as follows:

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of this accident was the flight crew's failure to use engine anti-ice during ground operation and takeoff, their decision to take off with snow/ice on the airfoil surfaces of the aircraft, and the captain's failure to reject takeoff during the early stages when his attention was called to anomalous engine instrument readings. Contributing to the accident were the prolonged ground delay between deicing and the receipt of ATC takeoff clearance during which the airplane was exposed to continual precipitation, the known inherent pitchup characteristics of the 737 aircraft when the leading edge is contaminated with even small amounts of snow or ice, and the limited experience of the flightcrew in jet transport winter operations. (p. 106)

Co-pilot: Look how the ice is just hanging on his, ah, back, back there, see that?

Captain: Side there.

...

Co-pilot: See all those icicles on the back there and everything?

Captain: Yeah.

He expressed concern early on about the long waiting time between deicing:

Co-pilot: Boy, this is a, this is a losing battle here on trying to deice those things, it (gives) you a false feeling of security that's all that does.

Shortly after they were given clearance to take off, he again expressed concern:

Co-pilot: Let's check these tops again since we been setting here awhile.

Captain: I think we get to go here in a minute.

When they were about to take off, the co-pilot called attention to the engine instrument readings, which were not normal:

Co-pilot: That don't seem right, does it? (3-second pause). Ah, that's not right. ... (Well)—

Captain: Yes it is, there's eighty.

Co-pilot: Naw, I don't think that's right (7-second pause). Ah, maybe it is.

Captain: Hundred and twenty.

Co-pilot: I don't know.

The takeoff proceeded, and 37 seconds later the pilot and co-pilot exchanged their last words:

The observation that the Air Florida crash was caused in part by the failure of the pilot to pick up on the co-pilot's indirect expressions of concern is the result of Goguen and Linde's analysis. They do not, however, present the actual examples of indirectness in the transcripts. The excerpts from the dialogue between the captain and co-pilot that appear here I have identified in and taken from the Aircraft Accident Report NTSB-AAR-82-8 published by the United States Government National Transportation Safety Board, Washington, DC 20594.

Co-pilot: Larry, we're going down, Larry.  
 Captain: I know it.  
 (Sound of impact)

The co-pilot repeatedly called the pilot's attention to dangerous conditions but did not directly suggest that they abort the takeoff. In Linde's judgment he was expressing his concern indirectly, and the captain missed the hints—with ineffectually tragic results.

That the co-pilot was trying to warn the captain indirectly is supported by evidence from another airline accident—a more minor one—that Linde investigated, which also involved the unsuccessful use of indirectness. On July 9, 1978, Allegheny Airlines Flight 453 was landing at Monroe County Airport in Rochester, NY, when it overran the runway by 728 feet. Fortunately, everyone survived. This meant that the pilot and co-pilot could be interviewed. It turned out that the plane was flying too fast for a safe landing. The pilot should have realized this and flown around a second time, decreasing his speed before attempting to land. He said he simply had not been aware that he was going too fast. But the co-pilot told interviewers that he “tried to warn the captain in subtle ways, like mentioning the possibility of a tailwind and the slowness of flap extension.” His exact words were recorded in the black box:

Co-pilot: Yeah, it looks like you got a tailwind here.  
 Pilot: Yeah.  
 ? Yeah it moves awfully # slow.<sup>2</sup>  
 Co-pilot: Yeah the # flaps are slower than a #.  
 Pilot: We'll make it, gonna have to add power.  
 Co-pilot: I know. (Linde, 1988, p. 379)

The co-pilot reported that he thought the captain would understand that if there is a tailwind, it would result in the plane going too fast, and if the flaps are slow, they would be inadequate to break the speed sufficiently for a safe landing. He thought the captain would then correct for the error by not trying to land. But the captain said he did not interpret the co-pilot's remarks to mean they were going too fast.

Linde believes it is not a coincidence that the people being indirect in these conversations were the co-pilots. (But then if a pilot perceives danger, he does not have to worry about how he is going to communicate it; he just acts on his perceptions.) In her analyses of flight-

<sup>2</sup>Linde explains in a footnote: “# is transcription convention of the NTSB [National Transportation Safety Board], indicating ‘nonpertinent word.’ Its various placements suggest that it is used to indicate the presence of obscenity or profanity.

crew conversations she found it was typical for the speech of subordinates to be more mitigated, although requests were less mitigated in problem flight conditions. She also found that topics broached in a mitigated way were more likely to fail, and that captains were more likely to ignore hints from their crew members than the other way around. In view of these patterns, some airlines now provide training for flight crews to express their concerns, even to superiors, in more direct ways.

The conclusion that people should learn to express themselves more directly has a ring of truth to it—especially for Americans. But there is evidence that the most direct communication is not necessarily always preferable. If more direct expression is better communication, then the most direct-speaking crews should be the best ones. But Linde was surprised to find in her research that crews that used the most indirect speech seemed to be the best crews. As part of the study of talk among cockpit crews in flight simulations, retired but still active pilots observed and rated the performances of the simulation crews. The crews they judged top in performance had a higher rate of mitigation than crews they judged as poor.

This finding seems to be at odds with the fact that indirectness led to crashes in the examples we just saw. A possible explanation was suggested by Harada (1993). Harada believes that the secret of successful communication lies not in teaching subordinates to be more direct, but in teaching higher-ups to be more sensitive to indirect meaning. In other words, the crashes resulted not only because the co-pilots tried to alert the captains to danger indirectly, but also because the captains were not attuned to the co-pilots' hints. In this view, what made for successful performance among the best crews might have been the ability of the addressees to pick up on the hints, just as members of families or long-standing couples come to understand each other's meaning without anyone being particularly explicit. It is not surprising that a Japanese sociolinguist came up with this explanation; what he described is the Japanese system, by which good communication is believed to be that in which meaning is gleaned without being stated directly—or at all.<sup>3</sup>

### INDIRECTNESS AS THE NORM IN JAPANESE COMMUNICATION

Whereas people in the United States believe “The squeaky wheel gets the grease” (so it's best to speak up), the Japanese say, “The nail that sticks out

<sup>3</sup>Harada was a member of a seminar I taught at Georgetown University in Fall 1993. It was in the course of discussion in the seminar that he made this observation.

gets hammered back in" (so it's best to remain silent if you don't want to be hit on the head). Many Japanese scholars writing in English have tried to explain to bewildered Americans the ethics of a culture in which greater value is placed on silence than on speech, and ideas are believed to be best communicated without being explicitly stated. Key concepts in Japanese give a flavor of the attitudes toward language that they reveal.

Lebra (1986) explains that one of the most basic values in Japanese culture is *omoiyari*, which she translates as "empathy." Because of *omoiyari*, it should not be necessary to state one's meaning explicitly; people should be able to sense each other's meaning intuitively. Lebra explains that it is typical for a Japanese speaker to let sentences trail off rather than completing them in order to "avoid expressing and imposing his ideas before knowing the listener's response" (pp. 38–39). Related to this is *enryo*, "a type of self-restraint" by which Japanese refrain "from expressing disagreement with whatever appears to be the majority's opinion" (p. 29). In stark contrast to Americans' assumptions that directness is best, Lebra explains that "the Japanese find aesthetic refinement and sophistication in a person who sends nonverbal, indirect, implicit, subtle messages," the understanding of which is made possible by empathy. Accordingly, "the Japanese believe that only an insensitive uncouth person needs a direct, verbal, complete message" (p. 47).

Another concept in Japanese communication is *sassuru*, which refers to the highly praised ability to anticipate another person's message intuitively. *Sasshi*, the anticipation of another's message through insightful guess work, is highly valued in Japan and considered an indication of maturity (Ishii, 1984; Yamada, 1992).

Considering the value placed on direct communication by Americans in general, and especially by American business people, it is easy to imagine that many American readers may scoff at such conversational habits. But the success of Japanese businesses makes it impossible to continue to maintain that there is anything inherently inefficient about such conversational rituals.

If Japanese communication offers an example of a system in which indirectness is the valued norm, analysis of interaction between Japanese mothers and their children offers insight into a cultural system in which indirectness is perceived as powerful rather than powerless.

Clancy (1986) tape-recorded talk between Japanese mothers and their 2-year-old children. She noticed that these mothers rarely denied their children's requests with explicit "no's". Instead, they might avoid or delay, ignore the request, promise to do it later, try to distract the child, suggest something else, or simply ask questions about the request. They often explained why they could not or would not do what the children asked. For example, when one child told his mother to draw a truck with a

siren on it, she asked him, "Does it have that kind of thing?" and did not comply. When he wanted candy, his mother responded, "Didn't you eat a lot of candy this morning?" To get their children to stop doing something, the mothers rarely said, "Don't," but instead appealed to what others might think or how others might feel. When a child pretended to eat a toy dish, her mother said, "Isn't it strange to do that kind of thing, if you eat a plate? No one eats plates, do they? Who eats plates?" Another time the mother tried to get the child to stop misbehaving by attributing disapproval to the researcher, whom she referred to in the customary way as "older sister": "Older sister is saying, 'I'm surprised. I'm surprised at Maho.'" The mother even made an appeal to the feelings of fruit to convince her child to stop dropping apples on the floor: "If you do that kind of thing, Mr. Apple says, 'Ouch!'" (p. 234).

Clancy's explanation for why Japanese mothers do not say "no" directly to their small children should give pause to Americans who assume that giving orders in an indirect way is a sign of insecurity or powerlessness:

Why do Japanese mothers bother to give reasons for refusing requests when, at the age of 2 years, the children do not seem to understand or to care what the reasons might be? In addition to their more general wish to avoid a direct refusal, an important factor is probably the mothers' wish to maintain their status as rational adults in going against their children's wishes. Simply refusing requests with *Iya* 'No/I don't want to', as the children usually did, would bring a mother down to the same level as her 2-year-old, making her sound selfish and childish. It would also reduce the exchange to a battle of wills, bringing the mother into direct conflict with her child. In contrast, giving reasons for her refusal puts the mother in a superior position and helps mitigate the conflict. (p. 243)

The contrast is stunning. On the one hand, most Americans believe that talking indirectly shows insecurity and powerlessness. On the other hand, Japanese mothers reportedly assume that speaking directly means losing status, and speaking indirectly (giving reasons instead of just saying "no") means gaining status. Why does an American mother feel more authoritative when she says "No" and adds, "Because I said so," whereas a Japanese mother feels more authoritative when she gives reasons?

The explanation I would suggest is that ways of speaking become associated in a given culture with the class of mothers or the class of children, just as I suggested earlier that patterns of speaking become associated with a sex-class.<sup>4</sup> Clancy, like many other analysts of Japanese style,

<sup>4</sup>Another way of putting this, following Ochs (1992), is that ways of speaking are associated with a stance that "indexes" gender, motherhood, or childhood.

explains that Japanese norms for speaking prescribe that conflict should be avoided, harmony should be maintained, and almost no one says "no" in public. She cites an article by Ueda (1974) entitled "Sixteen Ways to Avoid Saying 'No' in Japan." According to Clancy, these include "silence; ambiguity; expressions of apology, regret, and doubt; and even lying and equivocation. Ueda's subjects reported using direct no at home, but very rarely in public" (Clancy, 1986, p. 215). As a result, saying "no" is something associated with children who have not yet learned the norm. If a Japanese mother spoke that way she would feel she was lowering herself to her child's level precisely because that is how Japanese children talk, and not how Japanese adults talk. As Wetzel (1988, p. 561) put it, "assertion of dominance," "making direct declarations of fact and opinion," and other behaviors that Americans associate with authority "contrast with what it means to be a mature adult" in Japan, in which such verbal strategies "are much more likely to be viewed as immature or childish behavior." Because American norms for talk are different, it is common, and therefore expected, for American parents to "just say no," so when an American mother talks that way, she feels authoritative because it fits her image of how an authoritative adult talks to a child.

The point is that ways of speaking do not *in and of themselves* communicate psychological states such as authority, security, or confidence. We perceive them to connote those states because we associate certain ways of speaking with people we assume feel those emotions. Because Japanese adults learn to be indirect, they associate indirectness with maturity and power. Because middle-class, European-American women are more likely to give orders and make requests in an indirect way, we associate indirectness with powerlessness and insecurity—emotions we expect women to have. The situation is reinforced by the negative response people are likely to get if they do not speak in expected ways. In other words, women who give direct commands often get negative results.

### THE USES OF INDIRECTNESS

The Japanese communication system sheds light on the benefits of indirectness that may not be immediately apparent to Americans, who are inclined to see it as pointlessly confusing—so confusing, and so pointless, that they wonder, "Why bother with it at all?" One reason is that those who expect indirectness will be offended by talk in any other mode. For example, the secretary to the university president who appeared in my first example told me that she is very happy working for this president, precisely because she speaks to her in what the secretary regards as a respectful way.

In other words, an indirect/polite way of speaking, like any way of speaking, works well when used with those who understand its ritual nature and are accustomed to it. In my observations of workplace interaction, I frequently saw indirectness working well among women and men who preferred this style. The following is a single example.

I spent a week observing in a small community outreach center. One day I was with Sally, the manager of support services, in her office. Our conversation was interrupted by a phone call that she answered on the speaker phone. It was Marian, the administrative assistant to the department's director, part of whose job was to answer calls coming in to the agency. The conversation went like this:

- Marian: Sal, are you busy?  
 Sally: No.  
 Marian: What're you doing?  
 Sally: Just talking to Deborah Tannen. Do you need me to cover the phones?  
 Marian: Yes, I have to go to the accounting office.  
 Sally: Okay, I'll be right there.

The indirect question clued Sally in that she should offer to help, so her colleague did not need to ask. By the same token, Marian did not take at face value Sally's reply "No" to her question "Are you busy?" Obviously Sally was doing *something* when Marian called. Even though Sally had answered that she was not busy, Marian considerably asked what exactly she was doing in order to decide whether to pursue her request. By not having to ask directly, Marian did not have to risk being turned down or appearing demanding, and Sally could feel that she was volunteering, rather than being *asked*, to cover the phones—something that, after all, was significantly beneath her skills and responsibilities (but not unusual in a small business).

I hear myself giving instructions to my assistants without actually issuing orders: "Maybe it would be a good idea to. . .," "Why don't you. . .," "I think we should. . .," all the while knowing that I expect them to do what I have asked in a timely fashion. If I discover several days later that something has not been done, I am annoyed. This rarely creates problems, though, because the people who work for me know that there is only one reason I mention tasks—because I want them done. I *like* giving instructions in this way; it appeals to my sense of what it means to be a nice person. And I have been told by many of the women who have worked for me that they appreciate the way I give them work to do. What I do not like is when the things do not get done. But I have never been told that the reason was because it was not clear what I wanted.

Another common misjudgment is that being indirect is somehow less than honest. This was the judgment of a young man working in an office as a general assistant who was asked to organize the office library that had just been relocated. All the books were still packed in boxes in a closet. He took out the boxes, spread them on the floor in front of the library shelves, then set about the task by emptying each box and stacking its contents into piles on the floor before placing them in the right order on the shelves. The secretary commented that the boxes and stacks of books on the floor were unsightly. He agreed and diligently kept working. Later, his boss came in and said, "You really should put all the books on the shelf first, and then organize them from within." The secretary then added her voice: "That's what I *told* him." The young man did not mind being told to do the job in a different way, but he was incensed that the secretary claimed to have told him something she had not. He did not realize that she thought she *had* told him—by pointing out that the way he was doing it was making a mess.

The problem in this instance was not that the secretary communicated indirectly, but that she communicated indirectly to someone who did not understand her style. In contemporary U.S. culture, however, the burden seems to rest on those who are indirect. I rarely hear people question their tendency to be direct ("What's wrong with me? Why do I say what I mean?"), but I often hear people question themselves for being indirect ("Why do I do that? Why do I ask 'Are you hungry?' when I want to go for lunch?"). Distrust of indirectness is so pervasive that it has affected psychological treatment. A gay man told me that when he was an adolescent he was in treatment with a psychotherapist who attributed homosexuality to indirectness. "I can always tell homosexuals when I pass them in the street," this fully credentialed psychologist told him. "They won't look you in the eye." He advised his young patient that if he only learned to be more direct, he would stop having homosexual feelings. This is not as isolated an example as one might think—and hope. Following a talk I gave at a university, I was told by a psychologist that his counseling with women students often consists of teaching them to be more direct.

Even if they are not in therapy, many people—especially but not only women—feel that their styles are wrong and reveal deep-seated psychological problems. Two things must be said. First, it is not the case that women are always more indirect, as I have just shown. Second, there is nothing wrong with indirectness as a strategy when it is shared. When it is not shared, however, trouble can result—not from the indirectness, but from the style difference.

## CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AMONG AMERICANS

I found myself falling into just such a cross-cultural chasm while getting information about a lecture I was scheduled to give. I was talking on the telephone to a woman I will call Loraine, the personal assistant to the CEO of the company I was going to speak to. In the midst of our conversation she said to her secretary, without making an effort to muzzle the phone, "Tell him I'm talking to Deborah Tannen." Then she said to me, "That's Mr. Smithey, the CEO." I was confused. Because the CEO was her boss, if he wanted to talk to her, she should excuse herself from the conversation with me and talk to him. I would not have minded because I had plenty of other things to do at my desk. But she gave me no overt indication that she wanted to end our conversation. I was reminded of how my agent often calls out, in the midst of a phone conversation, "Tell him I'll call him back in a few minutes." By this I know she has another call and would like to finish with me in a few minutes. I was not sure how Loraine wanted to handle this. So I asked, "Should I wait?" She said, "Well, I have to talk to him about a few things." This still did not tell me whether she wanted me to get off the phone or finish quickly. In the absence of a clear signal to end the conversation, I continued it, but Loraine was obviously preoccupied until she finally blurted out, "He doesn't like to wait. I'd better talk to him," and I said hurriedly, "Oh, of course. Call me back if there are any questions," and hung up. It was only then that I realized I should have volunteered to get off the phone. She probably thought I was rude not to; had I not known about conversational style, I would have thought her odd, if not manipulative, because she did not simply say, "I'm sorry; I have an important call I have to take; would you mind very much if I call you back?"

Although we were both women, both White, and both middle class, we had different senses of conversational politeness. She thought it would be rude to tell me to get off the phone, so she gave me a clue and expected me to offer to get off. I knew something was up, but I expected a direct indication of what she wanted—which she could not give me because she felt it would be rude. Our different conversational expectations probably had less to do with gender than with our geographic backgrounds—mine from New York, hers from Minnesota. Habits regarding indirectness vary greatly with ethnic and geographic background. No doubt the fact that we did not know each other well, and the formality of our conversation, figured in as well.

## CONCLUSION

Lakoff (1975) identified two benefits of not saying exactly what you mean in so many words. One is defensiveness; the other is rapport. Defensiveness refers to the preference not to go on record with an idea in order to be able to disclaim, rescind, or modify it if it does not meet with a positive response. The rapport benefit of indirectness results from the pleasant experience of getting your way not because you demanded it but because the other person wanted the same thing. Assuming that only the powerless use indirectness reflects its defensive payoff but ignores the payoff in rapport. Understanding the rapport payoff allows us to appreciate the benefits of indirectness.

A woman who owns a bookstore had to have a talk with the store manager. She had told him to do something; he had agreed to do it; and now, days later, it had not been done. When they sat down to talk about it, they traced what she saw as his recalcitrance to a difference in conversational styles. The owner had said, "The bookkeeper needs help with the billing. What would you think about helping her out?" He had said, "Okay," by which he meant, "Okay, I'll think about helping her out." He thought about it and came to the conclusion that he had too many other important things to do and could not spare the time to help the bookkeeper with the billing. The owner felt she had given him an order in a considerate way, but he had not heard her question as an order at all. He thought he had been given an option and was within his rights to choose not to do it. Some months later, I asked the bookstore owner how things were going with the manager. She answered, "Fine. We don't have problems anymore." I asked, "Have you changed the way you tell him to do things?" "No," she said. "Now he understands how I mean what I say."

Because she was the boss, the owner did not have to alter her own style. Furthermore, the ease with which the manager learned to understand how she meant what she said is evidence that there is nothing inherently incomprehensible about indirect communication. This final anecdote supports what I have tried to argue throughout this chapter: that indirectness does not necessarily evidence lack of self-confidence or powerlessness. Among other influences, the hierarchical relationships among speakers become a factor influencing the use and interpretation of indirectness. Finally, the cross-cultural perspective, along with observations made in my own study of workplace interaction, provides a more complex view of indirectness as a fundamental and pervasive aspect of conversational style.

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## Standard Language and Linguistic Conventions

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The universal human ability to develop and use language is perhaps one of the most important capabilities of our species. We are a social species, born so immature that we need protection and nurturing for many years before we can survive on our own. It is not only that we are physically immature. We are born into increasingly complex cultures. We need nurturing and support until we are able to survive socially and economically in human society. Survival, even at maturity, is all but impossible outside human society. Language is the means by which the complex interdependencies in human society are maintained.

The families and communities into which we are born have one or more languages used for a full range of general and specific functions. Survival and development depends on each of us joining the society and taking on the language and culture of the family and community. Language development begins at birth, and during the first few years of our lives, our language first moves toward the conventions of the language of family and then the wider community.