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THE PRAGMATICS OF INDIRECTNESS IN PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH: AN OVERVIEW OF DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS

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Abstract: Professionals rarely issue bare commands. They ask, hint, suggest and hedge, and colleagues still understand what they are being asked to do. This article reviews how directive speech acts, utterances meant to get someone to act, are realised indirectly in professional English. The review draws on foundational theory and on empirical studies of workplace talk, business correspondence, email and English as a business lingua franca. It asks how indirect directives are classified, what motivates their use at work, and how context shapes the choice of form. The review finds that conventional indirectness (Could you send the figures?) is the default polite request in English, while hints are less predictable and not automatically more polite. Choice of form depends on power, social distance, imposition, the right to ask, and the medium. Workplace studies show that directness can index solidarity or efficiency as much as rudeness, and that mitigation devices such as past modals, just and grounders do much of the relational work. Email and lingua franca communication add risk, since a form that suits one setting can read as abrupt or evasive in another. The article closes with implications for teaching professional English and for further research.
Keywords: pragmatics; directive speech acts; indirectness; politeness; requests; workplace discourse; professional English

1. Introduction

Much of the work done in an office is done through directives. A manager assigns a task, a colleague asks for a file, a client is reminded of a deadline. Yet few of these acts take the form of a bare imperative. Speakers of English more often say Could you have a look at this?, Would it be possible to move the meeting?, or simply The client is still waiting on those numbers, and hearers usually understand each as a request to act.

This gap between what is said and what is done is the subject of the pragmatics of indirectness. Speech act theory established that utterances perform actions (Austin, 1962) and that one act can be performed by way of another (Searle, 1975). Politeness theory explained why speakers might choose the less direct route (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). Later work showed that the link between indirectness and politeness is not simple (Blum-Kulka, 1987) and that the meaning of a directive depends heavily on the setting in which it is produced (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Vine, 2009).

These questions carry particular weight at work. Workplaces combine institutional hierarchy with the need for cooperation, and they increasingly operate in English among speakers of many first

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languages (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Nickerson, 2005). A request that sounds courteous to one colleague can sound vague or curt to another. Misjudging such choices can cause what Thomas (1983) called pragmatic failure: misunderstanding that arises even when every sentence is grammatical.

This article offers an overview of directive speech acts in professional English, with a focus on indirectness. It synthesises theoretical and empirical work and is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. How are directive speech acts and their degrees of indirectness classified in the pragmatics literature?

RQ2. What motivates the use of indirect directives in professional discourse?

RQ3. How do contextual factors such as power, distance, medium and culture shape the realisation of directives at work?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech act theory and directives

Austin (1962) argued that saying something is often doing something, and distinguished the locution (what is said), the illocution (the act performed in saying it) and the perlocution (its effect on the hearer). Searle (1969) developed this into a theory of the conditions an utterance must meet to count as a given act. In his taxonomy, directives are acts by which the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something; they range from mild suggestions to orders (Searle, 1976). Requests, instructions, commands, suggestions and pieces of advice all belong to this class. What separates them is mainly who benefits and how hard the speaker presses.

2.2 Indirect speech acts

Searle (1975) defined an indirect speech act as one performed by means of another. Can you pass the salt? is literally a question about ability but is used as a request. He observed that many indirect requests work by questioning or asserting one of the conditions for a successful request: the hearer's ability (Can you…?), willingness (Would you mind…?), or the speaker's wish (I'd like you to…). Gordon and Lakoff (1971) proposed similar "conversational postulates", and Grice's (1975) account of conversational implicature explained how hearers recover meanings that are not stated, by assuming that speakers are cooperative.

Ervin-Tripp (1976) challenged the idea that hearers always compute a literal meaning first. Studying naturally occurring American English directives, she found that their forms were distributed systematically according to familiarity, rank, territory, the difficulty of the task, whether the act was a normal duty, and whether non-compliance was likely. Except for hints that do not mention the desired act, she argued, directives are understood without a literal phase.

A key distinction for this article is between conventional and non-conventional indirectness (Blum-Kulka, 1987). Conventional forms such as Could you…? are routinised in a language and are readily read as requests. Non-conventional forms, or hints, such as It's cold in here, rely on context and inference, and their force can be denied.

2.3 Politeness and indirectness

Brown and Levinson (1987) treated directives as acts that threaten the hearer's negative face, the wish to be unimpeded. Speakers weigh the threat by three variables, social distance, relative power and the ranking of the imposition, and select strategies from bald on-record through negative politeness to off-record hints. Leech (1983) similarly proposed that, other things being equal, a more indirect illocution is more polite because it gives the hearer more options.

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Blum-Kulka (1987) tested this assumption with speakers of English and Hebrew. She found that indirectness and politeness are not the same dimension: conventionally indirect requests were rated most polite, while hints were judged less polite, apparently because they lack pragmatic clarity. Politeness, on this view, balances the need to avoid coercion with the need to be clear. Later work moved further from a fixed scale. Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005) argued for a discursive view in which politeness is a judgement participants make in interaction, part of the wider "relational work" people do to manage relationships. Leech (2014) returned to the linguistic side and gave a detailed account of requests and other directives in English.

A different explanation comes from Pinker et al. (2008), who argued that indirect speech offers plausible deniability. A veiled request lets a cooperative hearer comply while giving an uncooperative one nothing to object to, and it lets speakers avoid openly renegotiating a relationship.

2.4 Directives in professional discourse

Workplace research has tested these theories against real data. The Language in the Workplace Project in Wellington, New Zealand recorded talk in government departments, private companies and factories. Holmes and Stubbe (2015) showed that people get things done at work through a wide range of forms, from imperatives to questions and hints, and that choice depends on power relationships, the nature of the task, and the culture of the workplace. Vine (2004, 2009) examined directives used by male and female managers in New Zealand government departments. Her analysis shows that one form can carry different force depending on the participants, their shared history and the task.

Koester (2006) analysed office conversations in the UK and the USA. Speakers there were constantly weighing transactional goals (getting the task done) against relational ones (keeping working relations good). Written business communication does the same balancing. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1996) studied authentic correspondence written by or to one managing director and found that requests varied with status and with whether a text was routine or relational. Pilegaard (1997) likewise reported that the form and amount of politeness in business letters correlated with the sender's status.

Research on email adds a further layer. Waldvogel (2007) found that greetings and closings in New Zealand workplace email reflected organisational culture as well as status and distance. Studies of learners' emails show how much depends on getting such forms right. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that email requests from Greek Cypriot students to faculty were marked by directness, few softening devices and omitted greetings and closings, and that faculty perceived them as impolite.

Research on English as a business lingua franca (BELF) starts from the fact that many professional exchanges take place between non-native speakers. Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) introduced the notion of BELF in a study of Finnish–Swedish corporate mergers, where speakers' first-language norms shaped how directly they wrote and spoke. Bjørge (2007) found that cultural norms about power distance influenced the forms of address and closings that students used in lingua franca emails.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

The study is a narrative (traditional) literature review. Its aim is conceptual synthesis rather than statistical aggregation, so no new data were collected and no effect sizes are pooled. The review brings together theoretical work on speech acts and politeness with empirical studies of directives in professional and institutional English.

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3.2 Source selection

Sources were selected on three criteria. First, foundational works that define the field were included (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1976; Grice, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). Second, studies were included if they analysed directives or requests in workplace talk, business correspondence, professional email or English as a business lingua franca. Third, cross-cultural studies of request realisation were included where their categories are widely used in professional-discourse research, notably the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs. Every reference was checked against a publisher or library record before inclusion.

3.3 Analytical framework

The synthesis is organised around the three research questions. For RQ1, it uses the CCSARP scale of request strategies, which groups realisations into direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect levels, and the project's distinction between internal and external modification. For RQ2, it compares face-based, clarity-based and deniability-based explanations. For RQ3, it draws on Brown and Levinson's (1987) variables of power, distance and imposition, supplemented by the contextual factors identified in workplace research (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Vine, 2009). Illustrative examples in Section 4 are constructed by the author to show each category in a professional setting; they are not drawn from a corpus.

4. Findings

4.1 Classifying directives by degree of indirectness (RQ1)

The most widely used classification is the nine-strategy scale of the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). It orders request strategies from most to least direct and groups them into three levels. Table 1 applies the scale to a single workplace goal: getting a colleague to send a report.

Table 1. Request strategies by level of directness, with constructed workplace examples

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Level	Strategy	Constructed example
Direct	Mood derivable (imperative)	Send me the report.
Direct	Performative	I'm asking you to send me the report.
Direct	Hedged performative	I'd like to ask you to send me the report.
Direct	Obligation statement	You need to send me the report today.
Direct	Want statement	I'd like the report by noon.
Conventionally indirect	Suggestory formula	How about sending the report now?
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	Could you send me the report?
Non-conventionally indirect	Strong hint	The report hasn't reached my inbox yet.
Non-conventionally indirect	Mild hint	The client meeting is at two.

Note. Strategy labels follow Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Examples are the author's own.

The query preparatory, which questions the hearer's ability or willingness, is the prototypical polite request in English (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Searle, 1975). Hints sit at the far end. They can be denied, but the hearer has to work out what is meant, and that depends on shared context.

The CCSARP also distinguishes the head act from its modification (Table 2). Internal modifiers soften or strengthen the head act itself. External modifiers are supportive moves around it. In professional English much of the politeness of a directive lies here rather than in the choice of strategy.

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Table 2. Common mitigating devices in professional directives

Type	Device	Constructed example
Internal, syntactic	Past tense or conditional modal	Could / Would you check the figures?
Internal, syntactic	Progressive aspect	I was wondering if you could check the figures.
Internal, lexical	Politeness marker	Please check the figures.
Internal, lexical	Downtoner	Could you just check the figures?
Internal, lexical	Consultative device	Would you mind checking the figures?
External	Grounder (reason)	The board meets tomorrow, so could you check the figures?
External	Preparator	Have you got a minute? Could you check the figures?
External	Disarmer	I know you're busy, but could you check the figures?

Note. Categories follow Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Examples are the author's own.

4.2 Why professionals choose indirectness (RQ2)

The literature gives three explanations, and they overlap rather than compete.

The first is face. Directives impose on the hearer, so speakers soften them in proportion to the threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). This explains why requests to superiors, or for large favours, carry more mitigation.

The second concerns clarity. Blum-Kulka (1987) showed that maximum indirectness is not maximum politeness. Conventional indirectness is preferred because it softens the request while leaving its force clear. That balance matters in workplaces, where tasks have to get done and a missed hint costs time.

The third is deniability. Indirect forms let speakers make a request without openly claiming the right to command (Pinker et al., 2008). In the discursive view, they are one resource for the relational work through which colleagues construct and maintain their relationships (Locher & Watts, 2005).

Workplace studies add that indirectness can also be a way of exercising power. A manager's Would you be able to have that done by Friday? is formally a question, but its hearer rarely treats it as optional (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Vine, 2004). Directness is not automatically rude either. Between peers working on a shared task, imperatives can signal efficiency and solidarity (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Koester, 2006).

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4.3 How context shapes directive choice (RQ3)

Power and status come first in most accounts. Superiors have the widest range of options. Subordinates tend to use more conventional indirectness and more external modification when directing upward (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996; Pilegaard, 1997). Vine (2009), though, cautions that power is only one of several interacting factors.

Familiar colleagues use shorter, more direct forms than strangers do. Organisational culture plays a part as well. Waldvogel (2007) found that greeting and closing practices in email differed between an educational organisation and a manufacturing plant. The two workplaces simply had different norms.

The size of the imposition matters too. Ervin-Tripp (1976) showed that directives for tasks that are part of someone's normal duties take simpler forms than those for unusual or difficult tasks. The more a request goes beyond the hearer's role, the more mitigation it attracts.

The medium changes the calculation. Email removes intonation, facial expression and the chance for immediate repair. Forms of address, greetings, closings and softeners therefore carry more of the interpersonal load (Waldvogel, 2007). Learner emails that omit them, or that rely on please alone to soften an imperative, are often judged impolite (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Speakers also transfer request norms from their first language. In BELF settings this can produce directives that seem abrupt to some colleagues and over-elaborate to others (Bjørge, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Ho (2010) and Merrison et al. (2012) show that the request emails of professionals and students also construct identities and relationships, so the same request can be phrased differently according to who the writer wishes to be seen as.

5. Discussion

Indirectness in professional English is best read as a resource for balancing clarity, efficiency and relationships. What a given form means depends on who uses it, to whom, about what, and through which medium.

The classic assumption that more indirect means more polite (Leech, 1983) holds only up to conventional indirectness. Past that point, hints trade clarity for deniability. In task-driven settings, the cost of being misunderstood can outweigh what the speaker gains (Blum-Kulka, 1987). The default professional request in English is therefore the mitigated query preparatory, Could you…?, often framed by a grounder.

Workplace research also complicates the face-based model. Power is enacted through indirect forms as much as through imperatives, and directness between peers can express solidarity rather than disregard (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015; Koester, 2006; Vine, 2009). That fits the discursive view, in which the politeness of a directive is judged in context rather than read off its form (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003).

Email and lingua franca communication raise the stakes further. Without tone of voice, small choices such as a greeting, a downtoner or a closing carry much of the relational meaning (Waldvogel, 2007). Where speakers bring different first-language norms, the same form can be read as courteous, curt or evasive (Bjørge, 2007; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005). Learners who have mastered the grammar of requests may still fail to signal the intended relationship (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Thomas, 1983).

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For teaching professional English, the implication is direct. Research on instructed pragmatics shows that pragmatic features can be taught and that explicit instruction generally works better than exposure alone (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2011). Courses could move beyond lists of request phrases and ask learners to compare forms, explain why one is more tentative or more formal than another, and choose a form for a given listener, task and medium. One simple exercise is to take a single request and rewrite it at each level in Table 1, then with each device in Table 2.

6. Conclusion

This article reviewed how directive speech acts are realised indirectly in professional English. Directives range from imperatives to hints, and the CCSARP scale offers a practical way to classify them (RQ1). Speakers choose indirectness to reduce imposition, to keep their requests clear but non-coercive, and to manage relationships and deniability (RQ2). The choice is shaped by power, distance, entitlement, workplace culture, medium and the first-language norms of the participants (RQ3). The most consistent finding is that conventional indirectness with modest mitigation is the safest default. Bare imperatives and opaque hints both carry risk.

The review has limitations. As a narrative rather than a systematic review, it does not claim exhaustive coverage, and its selection of sources reflects the author's judgement. Much of the empirical evidence comes from a small number of English-speaking settings, especially New Zealand, the UK and the USA, and from studies of student emails, which may not represent established professionals. The examples in the tables are constructed for illustration and are not corpus data.

Future research could examine directives in newer workplace media such as instant messaging and collaboration platforms, compare professional directives across varieties of English, and test whether explicit instruction in directive choice improves learners' performance in authentic professional tasks.

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