

Shu Ou

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What Makes Some Indirect Speech Acts Conventional?

My study *What Makes Some Indirect Speech Acts Conventional* is a follow-up study on the Speech Act Theory introduced by J.L. Austin and John R. Searle. My hypothesis for this study is that speakers will make the choice of choosing one kind of indirect speech act over the others to best address the potential obstacles (such as *Ability*, *Willingness*, and *Permission*) that might stop the addressees in completing the requests, thus some indirect speech acts are more conventional in some context than in the others.

I will first introduce some background information about Austin's and Searle's theories on Speech Act, and later talk about why my follow up study is necessary. Austin and Searle are two of the foremost attributed to the developing of the theory of speech act. In Austin's theory of speech acts, he introduced three levels in analyzing speech acts: Locutionary Act, Illocutionary Act, and Prelocutionary Act. Locutionary Act is the actual forms of words one utters and their semantic meaning; Illocutionary Act is the speaker's intention by using the words s/he uses, such as commanding, offering, promising; Prelocutionary Act is the effect of the illocution on the addressee, such as persuading, offending, etc. Later, After Austin's death, his former student Searle picked up on where Austin left off, and managed to group all the illocutions his teacher proposed into five basic categories. The five types of illocutions include Representatives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declaratives. Along with this taxonomy of speech acts, he also introduced one of the most important concepts in Speech Act theory, which is the concept of indirect speech acts. In Searle's definition of an indirect speech

act, if the linguistic structure of the utterance a speaker uses has no direct relationship with the illocutionary force s/he wants to produce, such speech act is considered as indirect. As Searle stated in his paper, often when a speaker produces a sentence, though s/he means what s/he says literally, but there also can be a deeper meaning for the sentence the speaker uses. For example, in Searle's paper in 1975, he used the example "Can you pass the salt?" One can take the literal meaning of this question as one questioning other's ability to pass the salt, but this question also achieves the illocution of requesting for the salt. In the indirect speech act such as the one mentioned above, the indirect meaning of the utterance (primary force) is much more important than the literal meaning of the utterance (secondary force). Searle then further classified indirect speech acts into Conventional indirect Speech Acts and Unconventional Indirect Speech Acts. The former still has a systematic relationship with Direct Speech Acts. A direct speech act has a direct relationship between the linguistic structure of the utterance and the illocutionary force the speaker desires to produce. Additionally, the primary illocutionary force of a conventional speech act can be obtained from secondary illocutionary force. The latter (unconventional indirect speech acts), however, are more complex, and their primary illocutionary forces can only derive based on the linguistic knowledge and conversation context shared by the speaker and the addressee.

Though I agree with the Searle's findings in 1975 regarding the categories of indirect speech acts, I found that different kinds of conventional indirect speech acts might not be equally suitable for a given social context. For example, a more suitable conventional indirect request for ordering a Big Mac in McDonalds' would be "Can I have a Big Mac" instead of "Do you have a Big Mac?" And through my research, I found that traditional theories of indirect speech acts, such as the one proposed by Searle in 1975, do not provide any reasons of why speakers see

some indirect requests as conventional in some social contexts while not in the others. Some studies simply stated that the choice of using the kind of conventional indirect speech act is arbitrary, which I disagreed. If I were able to receive the grant, I would use it to construct three experiments to explore such interaction between conventionality of an indirect speech act and the social context where it is used. My overall hypothesis is that speakers will use one type of speech act over the others in order to best state the potential obstacles that might stop their addressees in complying the requests. The first experiment will study speakers' ability to produce indirect speech acts to acknowledge the obstacles the addressees might have in complying the requests. For this experiment, I will illustrate six different common social contexts and for each context, there will be two versions: one with a specific projected obstacle and the other with an unknown obstacle. Each participant will be given a booklet with both versions of the six contexts, and will be asked to provide requests with the background information that is given to them. The two versions of a context that I plan to use in my experiments are the following:

Obstacle Version:

Tracy and Sara were tired of eating dinner at their college's dining hall. So they went downtown to find something exciting to eat. They decided to go to Tampico's. Sara wanted an enchilada, so when the waitress came to take their order Sara said to her.... (Insert answer)

Unknown-obstacle Version:

Tracy and Sara were tired of eating dinner at their college's dining hall. So they went downtown to find something exciting to eat. They decided to go to Tampico's. Sara wanted an enchilada, but was unsure whether the restaurant had them. The waitress came up to take their order and Sara said to her.... (Insert answer)

In the example above, the participant will need to imagine s/he is the character Sara, and needs to order enchilada in a restaurant, and in the obstacle version of this context, s/he will need to ask the waiter if the restaurant serves that specific dish s/he wants. The obstacle in this context is *Possession*—if the restaurant “possesses” that dish. In the unknown obstacle version, participant will not be given any hints on what the obstacle might be, thus speaker will have the freedom to decide what the obstacle in that situation might be and then make the decision of using a sentence that specifies that potential request or not. Other common obstacles that are presented in the six different stories are *Permission, Ability, State-of-world, Want/Desire and Imposition*. After collecting the participants’ responses for the stories, I will compare the kinds of indirect requests they use in the experiment and summarize the percentage of the kinds of result used in six different social contexts. I project that though the exact utterances will varies for different participants, the key words they use will be similar. For example, a question to ask one’s ability to perform a requested action usually takes forms such as “Can you...” “Is it possible for you to...?” And by looking at the summary, I will observe if the percentage use of the corresponding kind of indirect speech acts for the projected social context is significantly larger than other kinds of indirect speech acts. My prediction for this experiment is that the participants will use the type of indirect speech acts that corresponds to that particular social context much more often than other types of indirect speech acts.

The second experiment that I will construct aims to study people’s preference in using different kinds of indirect requests in a particular social context. In this experiment, participants will be given the same six illustrated scenarios as the first experiment, but this time only the “obstacle-specific” version will be given. Along with these six contexts, each participant will be provided with six different requests; each belongs to a different kind of indirect speech act. For

example, some of the possible requests provided for the participants for the Possession context (obstacle version) can be: “Do you guys have enchilada?”; “Can I have enchilada?”; “Can you give me enchilada?”, etc. The participants will then be asked to rate each request with a score from 1 to 7. One being that selected sentence is very much unlikely to be used in that specific context, while seven being that selected sentence being highly likely to be used in that specific context. For each scenario, I will compare the scores of the given requests, and make observation in whether the request with the corresponding indirect speech act receives significantly higher scores than the others. My prediction for this experiment is that the average score of the request with corresponding indirect speech act for that particular social context will be the highest. The result of this experiment will be another piece of evidence in proofing that the conventionality of an indirect request depends on the social context in which it is used.

The last experiment I will be conducting is to examine the difference in speed of people’s understanding indirect requests that specify the potential obstacles versus the ones that do not specify the potential obstacles for addressees. The method used in this experiment will be different from the one used in the first two experiments. In this experiment, participants will be given the same exact social scenarios as experiment I and experiment II, and there will be a dialogue for each scenario. Each dialogue ends with the speaker making an indirect request that fits the potential obstacle for the addressee, or an indirect request that is not suitable for that particular dialogue. The dialogue will be displayed on the computer screen one sentence at a time, and when the participant thinks s/he understands that sentence, s/he can then push a button on the computer keyboard to proceed to the next sentence. The total time taken to understand the entire dialogues as well as the time taken to read those indirect requests will be recorded. I will then observe whether the participants are able to understand an indirect request faster if it

correctly specifies the potential obstacle hinder the addressee in complying with the request in the dialogue.

All the subjects participating in my experiments will be native speakers of English. And all results will undergo hypothesis testing such as the F-tests to see whether the results are statistically significant. And with results of these experiments, I will be able verify my hypothesis that some indirect speech acts are apparently conventional because they correctly specified the potential obstacles that hinder the addressee in performing the request.

I constructed a pilot experiment similar to experiment I to test my hypothesis. I randomly selected six students studying in the Emory University main library to serve as the subjects of this experiment. After confirming that they are native English speakers, I showed three of them the obstacle version of the story and the other three the Non-obstacle version of it. The two versions of the story and the exact utterance the participants used is down shown below:

Obstacle Version

Paul wanted to get his midterm back from his T.A.'s office. Paul was apprehensive about going to get it, because he wasn't sure how well he had done. Cautiously he walked into the T.A.'s office and hoped she might let him see his exam score. Paul asked her...

1. "I was wondering if I could possibly see my exam grade."
2. "I came by to see if I can check my exam grade. If you have time, may I see it?"
3. "About the midterm, can I check my score with you?"

Non-obstacle Version

Paul wanted to get his midterm back from his T.A.'s office. Paul was apprehensive about going to get it, because he wasn't sure how well he had done. Cautiously he walked into the T.A.'s office. He greeted the RA and said...

1. “Can I see my test?”
2. “May I please see my exam score?”
3. “Have you graded the midterms yet?”

In the obstacle version of the story, the main potential obstacle for the addressee to comply the speaker’s request was whether she would allow the speaker to see his test. In other words, the potential obstacle here is *Permission*. All three students participating in this part of the experiment employed the similar sentences of the same kind of indirect speech act to specify the potential obstacle in the story. In the non-obstacle version of the story, however, only two students identified the potential obstacle as permission and used similar sentences of the same types of indirect speech acts as the students read the obstacle version of the story. The other participant that read the non-obstacle version, instead, employed a question that specified the obstacle as whether the addressee (T.A.) had graded the test. In other words, the potential obstacle the participant chose to specify was *Ability*, not *Permission*. The results of this pilot experiment are in line with what I would expect before -- speakers strongly prefer to produce indirect speech requests that best acknowledge the specified projected obstacles the addressees might have in complying the requests.

Part II

The results of all three my experiments confirm my Obstacle hypothesis, and my predictions for each one of my experiments. For experiment I, the percentage use of the corresponding kind of indirect speech acts for the projected social context is significantly larger than other kinds of indirect speech acts except for the projected obstacle *Imposition*. For the context with the projected obstacle *Possession*, 68% of the subjects produced utterances concerning the addressee’s permission of an object wanted by the speakers, 51% for both

Permissions and *Want/Desire*, 36% for *Ability*, 56% for *State-of-World*. For the projected obstacle *Imposition* (18%), the type of indirect requests used that has larger percentage is *State-of-World* (24%). The overall result, however, matches my prediction. For experiment II, in each context, the indirect request that matches the potential obstacle in that context received the highest average score. For instant, in the context involving the obstacle *Possession*, sentence of the type *Possession* received the highest average score of 5.6. It is particular noticeable that mean score for *Imposition* for in a context with a potential obstacle of *Imposition* was 5.6, which was significantly higher than the *State-of-World* (2.4). In short, the results of the first two experiments proved that speakers highly prefer to formulate their requests in different social contexts to best specify the obstacles for their addressees. The result of the third experiment is also the same as I expected. In experiment III, I aimed to test whether the speed of people understanding indirect requests that were correctly stated the potential obstacles faster than the ones that were inappropriate in that that conversational context. The results showed that the mean response time it took for the participants to understand target sentences that were appropriate for the given contexts was 1732 milliseconds, comparing to 1975 milliseconds for sentences that were inappropriate in the given context. In addition, I also found that subjects were able to understand target sentences faster when they were given a context. The mean response time for sentences with any contexts, but were intended to serve as appropriate target sentences is 2261 milliseconds, and the mean response time for sentences that were intended to serve as inappropriate target sentences is 2297 milliseconds.

From the results of the three experiments, I am able to conclude that social contexts make some indirect speech acts conventional, and other not. One of the questions arises during my experiments was that whether there exists a scale of conventionality of indirect requests that

represent different types of obstacles in a given context. For example, In the Big Mac example that I provided earlier in this paper, though the sentence “Do you have a Big Mac” (specifies the obstacle *Possession*) is not as appropriate as “Can I have a Big Mac” (specifies the obstacle *Permission*), but it is seems more acceptable for addressees than sentences such as “MacDonald’s generally offers Big Macs” (specifies the obstacle *State-of-World*). Thus, sentences that specify *Permission* might be more appropriate than sentences that specify *State-of-World*. Thus the conventionality scale in this particular example is *Permission* > *Possession* > *State-of-World*. Suppose we have a context in which the main obstacle concerning the addressee in complying the request was *Ability*.

TABLE 1
PROPORTION OF REQUESTS GENERATED FOR EACH OBSTACLE CONDITION

Sentences	Type of obstacle						
	None	Permission	Want/desire	Ability	Possession	State-of-world	Imposition
Permission	0.19	0.51	0.19	0.13	0.10	0.17	0.15
Want/desire	0.22	0.05	0.51	0.18	0.08	0.07	0.03
Ability	0.11	0.10	0.05	0.36	0.03	0.08	0.13
Possession	0.14	0.10	0.04	0.08	0.68	0.00	0.13
State-of-world	0.17	0.10	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.56	0.24
Imposition	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.18
Direct question	0.07	0.13	0.00	0.18	0.04	0.05	0.10
Name only	0.02	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
Embedded	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.07	0.00	0.03	0.03
Commitment	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.01	0.01
Direct request	0.01	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Unique	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00

From the results of Experiment I, as one can see from table 1, more than 30% of the participants chose sentences that specified the *Ability* obstacle. Some others, however, chose to use sentences that specified other obstacles such as *Possession*, and *Permission*. None of the participants, however, chose to use sentences such as direct requests, and few chose to use sentences that specified imposition. Thus according to the results from Experiment I, the conventionality scale of different types of indirect speech acts in a context presenting the *Ability*

obstacle can be : *Ability* > *Want/Desire* > *Permission* > *Possession* > *State-of-the World*. One can also notice from Table 1 that, among the types of sentences that were used by participants to address obstacles other than the kind of sentence they were supposed to address, *Permission* was most commonly used to address other obstacles.

TABLE 3
CONVENTIONALITY RATINGS FOR EXPERIMENT 2

Sentence	Type of obstacle					
	Permission	Want/desire	Ability	Possession	State-of-world	Imposition
Permission	5.5	4.3	3.0	3.5	4.6	4.8
Want/desire	4.4	5.6	3.4	3.6	3.4	2.9
Ability	4.0	4.2	5.0	4.0	3.1	4.2
Possession	3.9	4.3	3.2	5.6	3.6	3.1
State-of-world	2.4	1.8	3.0	1.7	5.7	2.4
Imposition	3.5	2.8	4.1	3.1	2.4	5.6

In addition, from the results of Experiment II (as shown in Table 3), one can also notice that sentences that specified the obstacle *Permission* also received the highest average rating of 4.04 $((4.3+3.0+3.5+4.6+4.8)/5)$ in contexts that do not contain the *Permission* obstacle. From the results presented in both of these experiments, I suspect that some types of indirect speech requests are more conventionally in general.

This time, I will also have three experiments to test my hypotheses. The planned experiments will be built on the foundation of the experiments I conducted before. Though the results from pervious experiments can be used as evidences to proof my new hypotheses, the sample size/the number of stories used to present each obstacle is too small. Thus instead of using only one story to present an obstacle, I will have multiple stories for each type of obstacle. For example, for the obstacle *Possession*, along with the restaurant story that I mentioned earlier, I will have another stories that present the obstacle Possession. Participants will be asked to provide three responses for every story of that obstacle. Each response needs to be a different

sentence type. For instant, if a participant's first response for the restaurant story is "Do you guys have enchilada?" his/her second response cannot be of the same sentence type. Response such as "I want enchilada." will be acceptable since it's of a different sentence type. The results will be analyzed and a scale of conventionality of different types of requests in every context will be created. This purpose of this experiment is to show that there is no absolute border for conventionality, and rather than a type of sentence either being conventional or in conventional in a context, there exists a scale of conventionality for each type of context, some types of speech acts might have higher conventionality in one context but not the others. This experiment is also used to test if people do use some types of indirect requests more often than the others in general. I predict that the type of indirect request that people used more often across different contexts will be requests that specify *Permission*.

The second experiment would be based on the experiment II I conducted previously. This time, I will provide multiple stories concerning the same obstacle. Reposes that belong to different types of indirect requests will be provided for each story in random orders. Just like in the past experiment, participants need to rate those responses from the scale of 1-7. A score of one being the most unacceptable response for that particular story, while a score of seven being the most acceptable. The purpose of this experiment is to test participants' acceptance for different types of indirect requests concerning the same obstacle, and to test whether there exists a type or two of indirect responses that are mostly generally accepted, no matter what the context is. For example, for Sara's restaurant story (obstacle version), I will provide six requests to the participants, each request specify each of the six obstacles (*Possession, Permission, Ability, State-of-world, Want/Desire and Imposition*). A request of the type *Possession* is: "Do you guys have enchilada?" a request of the type *Permission* is: "Can I have enchilada?"; a request of the

type *Ability* is: “ Can you give me enchilada?”,etc. The aim of the second experiment is to test if there is a type of indirect speech act that is more generally acceptable for speakers, no matter what the potential obstacle or context might be.

The third experiment I plan to conduct is to examine the difference in understanding time for different indirect requests concerning the same context, and whether participants are able to understand some types of indirect speech acts faster than the others generally. In this experiment, they will be multiple stories concerning each type of obstacle. Participants will first be given stories without the target sentence, and make sure that the amount of time it takes for the participants to understand the stories are similar. An example can be Sara’s restaurant ordering story without any response from Sara at the end of the story. Then the participants will be divided into a few groups. A group of the participants will be given stories that have target sentences that correctly specify the obstacles presented in the stories. For example, in Sara’s restaurant ordering story, this group will be given response that specified the “correct” obstacle *Possession*. Another group will be given the same exact stories but with all target sentences specify *Permission*, and some other group will have the same exact stories with target sentences that specify *Ability*, etc. The amounts of time it takes for participants to understand each type of stories with different types of indirect requests will be recorded. I will then observe if there exists a type of indirect requests that people can understand faster than other indirect requests generally.

The results of these three experiments will help me identify whether there exists a scale of conventionality for indirect speech acts in a general context.

Reference

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