

THE INTERPRETATION OF *INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS* IN RELEVANCE THEORY

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Abstract

Despite being mentioned by most textbooks on semantics and pragmatics, only very little research on indirect speech acts has been published since the beginning of the 1980s¹. One possibility, one might speculate, is that its advocates, predominantly Searle (1979: 30-59) and Bach & Harnish (1979: 173-202), have said everything on the subject that needs to be said. However, judging from the few things that have been published, the reason seems rather to be one of general puzzlement about the significance of indirect speech acts. A couple of more prominent figures among these are Sperber & Wilson (1995: 243-254) who, although they do not address indirect speech acts directly, argue that speech act theory has very little to contribute to pragmatics. This paper examines their general skepticism about speech act theory and tries to establish what implications it might have for the notion of an indirect speech act. More specifically, the author is interested in the question as to whether it would be desirable to preserve the notion for a specific set of data extracted from the 2004 US Presidential debates between George W. Bush and John F. Kerry. This data not only appears to be different from that examined by Searle (1979: 30-59) and Bach & Harnish (1979: 173-202), but also to require a different type of explanation. However, in an attempt to keep the parallel to their work as transparent as possible, the paper mainly considers interrogative utterances that can be argued, or already have been argued, to involve indirect speech acts – questions being one of, if not the, dominant category among the original examples. Finally, in the end of the paper a revised, relevance-theoretic, definition of an indirect speech act is offered; which suggests that it might comprise as many as four different types of phenomena.

Key words: Relevance theory; Interrogative utterances; Indirectness; Generic speech acts; Pragmatic inference.

¹ In fact, I have only been able to track down two publications directly addressing the issue of indirect speech acts, Groefsema (1992) and Asher & Lascarides (2001). The first, Groefsema (1992), shows a very narrow concern for a specific issue related to indirect speech acts, i.e. whether ‘Can you pass the salt?’ can or cannot be explained as a short-circuited implicature. The second, Asher & Lascarides (2001), offers a discourse semantic solution which appears to open an entirely different range of issues than those specifically addressed in this paper. As a consequence, I won’t address it at all in this paper, as I hope I will be able to return to it later.

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