

# Management of care or management of face: Indirectness in Nurse Practitioner/patient interactions



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## Abstract

This paper explores the use of indirect speech in medical encounters. Drawing on more recent definitions of indirect speech including discursive indirectness (Walker et al., 2011; Geis, 1995) and indirect addressivity (Lempert, 2010; Kiesling and Gosh Johnson, 2010), I examine indirect speech in medical visits between a Nurse Practitioner (NP) and patients who have been hospitalized with diabetes-related complications. I outline two ways in which indirectness functions in the data: the NP's indirect challenges of patients' assertions regarding their ability to manage their disease and the NP's use of ventriloquism (Tannen, 2010) to provide advice and medical directives to the patients. Indirectness on the part of the NP may be viewed not only as avoidance of face-threatening acts (i.e. for the benefit of the patients) but also as a second order indexicality, projecting her own identity as a competent Nurse Practitioner who engages in the patient-centered medical approach.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on indirect speech, dating back to Searle (1975), has sought to discover why participants in interactions choose to be indirect despite the additional mental effort required in processing indirect speech (Bonneton et al., 2011) as well as attempts to define indirectness. How this translates to medical practice and linguistic choices in medical encounters has not been examined in depth. In this paper, I focus on how indirect speech functions in medical encounters and attempt to account for the use of indirectness in these encounters.

### 1.1. Expanding notions of indirectness

The theoretical concept of 'indirect speech' stemming from John Searle's (1975) account of Indirect Speech Acts (ISA), makes an explicit distinction between 'what is said' and 'what is implicated.' Searle (1975) defined an indirect speech act as a "sentence that contains the illocutionary force indicators for one kind of illocutionary act" but performs, "in addition, another type of illocutionary act" (p. 268). Although not argued specifically, Searle seems to be limiting indirectness to a mapping of one illocutionary act onto another. Inherent in this assumption are two claims that scholars have argued against more recently: (1) one utterance has only one indirect meaning, and (2) indirectness resides within a single

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utterance. More recent work (Thomas, 1986) has shown that single utterances may have multiple indirect meanings. Thomas illustrates that there are not simply two illocutionary acts that correlate with ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated,’ or to use her terms, between ‘utterance meaning’ and ‘speaker meaning,’ but that there can also be two or more meanings within the ‘speaker meaning.’ Deviating from Searle’s one-to-one mapping, Thomas shows that some utterances may be ambivalent, where utterance meaning can be mapped onto a range of related speaker meanings, any one of which may be taken up by the listener. What seems to be important in the interaction is not so much which particular utterance meaning is taken-up but that the listener recognizes an intended meaning beyond ‘what is said.’ Similarly, Conversation Analysts (Levinson, 1983; Schegloff, 1988; Geis, 1995; Walker et al., 2011) have argued that the mapping from the ‘literal force’ of an utterance to its indirect meaning is dependent on many factors and the focus on a single utterance rather than a stretch of discourse may be misleading in terms of what speech act a particular utterance is performing. Geis (1995), for example, argues that indirect speech acts are not just contextually situated in the discourse but that they are “emergent properties of the interaction” (1995: 29). For these reasons, I use the terms ‘indirectness’ and ‘indirect speech’ rather than ‘indirect speech act’ as this term carries with it a Searlean understanding that fails to encapsulate the full range of indirect speech that is found in discourse.

### 1.2. Indirect addressivity

One of the major themes of indirectness beyond the utterance level distinction between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ is what Lempert (2012) terms ‘indirect addressivity.’ This, he argues, is an essential way of viewing indirectness that departs radically from Searle’s ISA, which focuses specifically on the linguistic form and its departure from a presumably direct version of the same utterance. Indirect addressivity, as the name implies, includes a kind of indirectness in which the addressee may not be directly addressed but instead the message is funneled through another person or a medium. Again, this concept is not one that is acknowledged by Searle, but has been shown to be a common form of indirect speech in a variety of languages and cultures. Indirect addressivity also includes the idea that indirect speech may be indirect in not only who the speaker appears to be addressing, but also in terms of where the message is coming from.

One of the clearest examples of this is Tannen’s (2010) work on ‘ventriloquism.’ Tannen argues that ‘ventriloquizing’ is a type of indirectness that involves putting the utterance in the imagined voice of someone other than the speaker. In this, she illustrates how speakers may temporarily take on the voice of someone else in order to seem to be only an animator rather than the principal (Goffman, 1981) of the message. One example she gives of this is of a father speaking to his daughter while they are making a salad together. He tells the daughter, “Now your mom would say, ‘Oh, you need more lettuce!’” (Tannen, 2010: 311). By ventriloquizing the mother, the father is able to distance himself from the message and therefore distance himself from the command he is giving. The message is conveyed through indirect means via a circuitous route involving the absent mother. Kiesling and Gosh Johnson (2010), argue for a similar type of speaker-distancing indirectness, which they term ‘production indirection’ (one of four categories of indirectness they propose). Borrowing from Rampton’s (1995) term ‘crossing,’ they argue that speakers, much in the same way as Tannen’s example from above illustrates, will momentarily take on an identity that is not authentic to their own. Kroskrity (1998), similarly, shows how speakers of Arizona Tewa do this in ritual performances, specifically through the use of the particle, ‘ba.’ He argues, “By disclaiming any novelty on the part of the narrator, this particle and its repeated use provide a continuous and obligatory indexing of ‘the voice’ of the traditional narration” (p. 105). By using this particle, speakers are essentially voicing the past and positioning themselves separately from their present selves.

Drawing on these more contemporary understandings of indirectness and moving away from the one-to-one correlation of Searle, indirectness then can be understood as emergent in the discourse, and involving not only what is said but also the circuitous route that a message can take (i.e. production indirection).

### 1.3. Indirectness in medical settings

Despite the large body of literature on indirect speech within the field of Pragmatics and the extensive research on medical interactions between providers and patients (for an overview, see Heritage and Clayman, 2010), there is very little research that spans these two areas to examine how indirectness is used in medical encounters. Only a few studies seem to address this topic, and those that do so are limited in scope, focusing on therapy and counseling sessions rather than more traditional medical visits. For example, Ruth Parry’s (2005) study focuses on the communicative practices of physiotherapists working with stroke patients. She points out that despite the professional best-practice guidelines to be “direct, open and honest” (p.208) when providing feedback to patients, the therapists in her study used directness only when giving praise of successful performance of tasks, but were indirect, through minimizing or mitigation strategies, in reference to a problem (e.g. ‘a little bit weak,’ p.209). Because this study falls outside the field of linguistics, it does not provide a theoretical framework for analysis nor does it explicitly define indirect speech but instead seems to equate

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