Why We Don't Say What We Mean: A Study of Verbal Indirection in Communication

Jamaliah Mohd Ali
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya

Introduction

This paper deals with the study of language as a tool of interaction. It looks at various kinds of meanings which can be conveyed in language, meanings which involve the interaction between the speaker and the hearer. In this paper, I would like to demonstrate that in everyday interaction, people make linguistic choices in encoding and decoding messages in accordance with systems that are internally consistent for each individual and may differ from one individual to the next and that these differences can explain misunderstandings that may occur. This paper also aims to explore the strategies through which indirectness finds expression in conversations, the role it plays in "face-work" (Goffman, 1959) and in polite behaviour (Brown and Levinson, 1978) and why interactants abstain from directness. The above discussion will also examine the cultural influence in the verbal indirection of the Malays.

Face

Face, according to Brown and Levinson (1978:66), is the "public self image that every member wants to claim for". It involves more than demeanor, that is, how one appears. It in fact, involves what one projects, and claims for oneself (Wardaugh, 1985:287). Interactants judge each other's words against the faces they present during conversation. This, by implication, suggests that the spoken word is extremely powerful in any face-work. Commenting on the ritual dangers of the spoken word, Goffman (1981:37) writes: "once the exchange of words has brought individuals into a jointly sustained and ratified focus of attention, once, that is, a fire has been built, any visible thing (just as any spoken referent) can be burnt in it".

So powerful and 'deadly' is the spoken word that conversational participants adopt various strategies in order not to step on one another's toes or threaten each other's faces. Face cannot be maintained by ego only, its maintenance depends on mutual co-operation between ego and alter, each maintaining the other's face (Wardaugh, 1991).

Preserving face ('jaga maruah', or 'air muka' in Malay or 'lien mentzu' in Chinese, or 'ma:nam or mariathe' in Tamil) has important significance in the Malaysian society. Face is important because one of the main intentions is the maintenance of social harmony and cordial relationships. Face means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing or humiliating him in public. If face is preserved, interpersonal relations will be smoothened and harmony and respect will be maintained. In the Malaysian context loss of face is more painful than physical pain.

Politeness

Politeness plays a significant role in face-work. In the Malaysian context, in particular in Malay culture, an expression or utterance is said to be a polite expression if it is suffused with terms of politeness or courteous addressives. Politeness is in fact socially prescribed and polite speech is used to express either solidarity or deference. For example, in formal Malay speeches a stylistic politeness is often suffused with apologetic formulae and disclaimers such as;

"minta maaf jika terlanjur perkataan"
(Forgive me if I've come overboard in my words)

"dalam makalah yang serba kekurangan ini"
(In this article which has many shortcomings)

"jika terdapat silap dan salah, harap maafkan"
(If I have done any wrong, please forgive me)

Such apologetic formulae are used to warn the hearers and other interactants of an imminent profanity as well as to disclaim any possible impression of irreverence or offensive intent in the use of the language.

Discussion

I will now look at the communicative strategies in which indirectness is used or to put it simply "Why we don't say what we mean" and the role it plays in the maintenance of face and politeness. These utterances sometime can cause misunderstandings amongst speakers. Some of the examples here are taken from the home front, the family, the husband and wife as well as observations from daily encounter and findings from a company study.

Example 1

While staying with an English family some years ago, I had to eat noodles and spaghetti most of the time for dinner. Although I love all types of noodles, I would also love to sample an English meal once in while. I was served noodles because I had carelessly mentioned to my hostess that noodle soup is my favourite dish. My hosts thought these comments indicated a preference for noodles for my dinner. In fact, I had only mentioned these things to make conversation.

Example 2

Once I visited a relative in the northern state, I happened to ask whether "durian Siam" was in season at that time, and what happened after was that I found I had 'durians' for tea.

Example 3

And then there was my Scandinavian friend who I thought never had anything to say until I discovered that she had been trained to allow a certain period of silence to elapse before taking her turn to speak. This period of silence never occurred when I was there because I perceived it as a void that must be filled by another comment of mine for silence in my culture is uncomfortable.

The examples above illustrate that we, my English hosts, my relative, and my Scandinavian friend and I were trying to be polite. But clearly we had misunderstood each other.

Rules of Politeness

A look at the Rules of Rapport (Lakoff, 1973) can help explain these mix-ups:

1 Don't impose.
2. Give options.
3. Be friendly.

In the examples given above, when I referred to my favourite food, the noodles, I was just applying Rule 3, trying to be friendly by making small talk. I was applying the same rule when I hurried to fill in the silence I perceived as awkward so that my Scandinavian friend would not feel uncomfortable. And her waiting for silence or a pause to ensue before taking the floor is a way of ensuring that person is not imposing with her comments before the other has finished her sentence. Confusions like these are in keeping with Lakoff's own observation that all cultures have the same rules of politeness, but they may differ with respect to their order of precedence. In societies which are more stratified, Rule of Rapport – 'don't impose' is more preferred than in others. Rule of Rapport, 'be friendly' seems to be the practice.

Mix-ups like these are not only confined to intercultural communication, they also occur between people who speak the same language. As Susan Ervin–Tripp (1969) succinctly puts it;

> "We can assume that a shared language does not necessarily mean a shared set of sociolinguistic rules."

Cultural, subcultural and idiosyncratic forces all conspire to determine a person's linguistic choices and among these choices is a position on a directness and indirectness continuum ranging from the application of the Rules of Rapport and on the other hand with direct communication, that is, saying what you mean in a way that will be understood.

Why Don't We Say What We Mean?

When we open our mouths to say something, we usually feel we are just talking, but what we say and how we say it are chosen from a vast range of possibilities. Others will react to it just as they may react to the clothes we wear. Our clothes give the impression about the kind of people we are and also our attitudes to the occasion. For example, wearing jeans may signal scruffiness and casual attitude toward the occasion whilst on the other hand wearing a three piece suit or a Malay Baju signals formal style and respect for the occasion. Formal and casual, scruffy, and attitudes like respect or lack of it are also signalled by ways of talking. Ways of talking or conversational styles which also take into consideration the tone of voice, as well as pitch are the basic tools of talk. These signals are used in the linguistic devices that do the work of communication. For example, by taking turns when talking, by showing how ideas are related to each other, revealing how we feel when we are talking and so on. These are some of the conversational signals that make up how we talk. Interestingly while what we say is an important clue to what we mean, we may not always say what we mean in so many words. We use hints, we refrain from saying exactly what we mean, sometimes we use metaphors to refer to certain things, we use innuendoes, double talk and so forth. Linguists refer to the way people mean what they don't exactly say, as indirectness.

Many people, especially in western societies tend to associate indirectness with dishonesty and directness as honesty, a quality they see as self evident and desirable. This view of indirectness is not fair and not realistic. After all, in most day to day situations when we talk to each other we are always monitoring our relationships to each other and this information is found in metamessages, that is information that is not spelled out in words but signalled by the way words are spoken. So, indirectness in the sense of metacommunication is basic to communication.

To illustrate the points made above let's look at some of the examples, "Why we don't say what we mean?"

Case 1

> Zurin had just returned from her study leave in the United States. She attended her sister's wedding and at the reception she met a host of her relatives and old college friends. She had told no untruths and had no intention of telling any and yet she found that she had misrepresented herself because she had told different people different accounts of her life overseas. In some conversations she had stressed how she enjoyed her stay overseas, how she liked the people over there and expressed satisfaction with her life and her studies. But in talking to other people she had painted a different picture, she expressed how lonely she was, how she had trouble finding proper accommodation, her constant problem adjusting to the changing climatic conditions and her financial constraints

Both the stories were true, because they were both composites assembled from pieces of truth. When constructing a story for a specific occasion, we instinctively identify a main point and include the details that contribute to it. We tend to omit certain information in one account and include others in the other. In the example above, Zurin painted a positive picture of her life when she spoke to her relatives because she did not want them to worry or cause them concern. The negative view of her life was told to her close friends, maybe to friends who are slightly envious of her life of independence abroad. The idea is to forestall rather than incite their envy.

Case 2

> I remember as a young girl, if I wanted to go to a party I had to ask my father for permission. He never said 'no' directly but I could make out from the way he said 'yes' whether he meant it or not. 'Yes, if you want to go, you can go', (Ha, kalau nak pergi, pergilah). I did not go for I took it that it wasn't a good idea. I could read his conversational style through the tone of voice and his facial expressions.

Why didn't he tell me the truth? If he didn't like me to go then say so. What my father was trying to do was, he did not want to appear too harsh. He wanted me to choose to act properly rather than appear to be imposed on. By using the

indirectness mode, he wanted to contribute the feeling of rapport rather than being harsh. The other benefit is avoiding confrontation.

Case 3

Wife : Nina is having a birthday party tonight. Do you want to go?

Husband . O.K.

Wife : Are you sure?

Husband : O.K. let's not go, I've some work to finish.

In the above example the wife asks her husband if he wants to go to Nina's party and asks again later if he is sure of going without expressing her own preference at all. The husband is the one who suggests that they do not go and he says that he has to finish some work. The wife, in this case, is operating on a fairly direct strategy; in fact one may interpret that she is employing the politeness strategy. She is being friendly or as Lakoff termed it maintaining camaraderie. The husband, on the other hand is applying politeness or operating on an indirect system. He is, in fact, looking for hints for the wife's preference. He takes her mention of going to the party as an indication that she wants to go but he takes her later question, "Are you sure?" as evidence that she is not particularly keen to go. Since he is operating on this indirect system, he doesn't say what he means which is something like this; "Of course, I want to go, since you don't, I'll tell you the truth". Instead, he graciously agrees to do what he thinks she has indirectly indicated. Furthermore by applying the politeness strategy, he offers the excuse, "I've to finish some work", which will make his wife happy that he is giving in to her.

We have seen from the above examples how the indirectness mode is being communicated. Had it been done directly the metamessage of rapport would then be lost.

Indirectness: the Malay Way

Indirectness is an important aspect of Malay culture. Verbal indirection in Malay culture is a strategy in which the interactants abstain from directness in order to avoid crises and thus make their utterances consistent with face and politeness. According to Asmah (1990), in Malay culture,

> "...good breeding is nurtured through the way one relates oneself to other people in various forms .....To complete the well-bred gesture, their verbalisation should not have any indication of 'directness' That is to say, whatever they want to put across to the other person, it should be done in an indirect way, no matter what the intention is, and this is considered refined. This is to avoid being labelled as 'kurang ajar' (not properly tutored)."

This explains why some Malay students appear to be reticent during job interviews. The directness of communication which is the norm in modern business world where self-acclamation and aggressiveness are the rules of the game is something new in the Malay way of life (Jamaliah, 1991).

Casual observations from day to day encounters with Malay taxi drivers also show that many of them resort to the traditional mode of communication in their business transactions. This is illustrated in the interchange below:

Passenger: Berapa tambangnya, Encik?"
(What's the fare, Sir.?)

Taxi driver: Biasanya tiga ringgit, tapi terpulanglah."
(Normally, it's three ringgit, but it's up to you to pay any amount you wish)

The word "terpulanglah" or "terserahlah" bears several interpretations such as, "it's up to you to pay any amount you want but it has to be more than the normal fare". He, of course, expects more than RM3 but in this case he does not clearly specify that he wants to be paid more but he uses the indirectness mode as in "terpulanglah", "terserahlah", or "ikut sukalah" He adopted this mode of communication because in traditional Malay culture asking for more in a direct manner is considered coarse or too aggressive a behaviour that could result in conflict.

In a company study conducted recently, I discovered that the Malay workers appeared to be reticent in their jobs. It is not known at least from my interviews and observations for a Malay employee to go up to his boss and ask for a raise. To show his discontent, invariably what he will do is throw various signals such as appearing to be shirking in his job, throwing hints of 'boycotting' the management, avoiding his supervisors at work and socially. I call this form of behaviour the 'merajuk' mode.

I also noted that the reluctance of the Malay workers to directly voice their discontent to the senior manager even in situations where such a conduct is encouraged, is in fact an expression of 'respect' to the position of the senior manager. It is no indication of passiveness. I would say that this form of behaviour appears to be a direct transfer of what is considered in the traditional Malay setting, with its rather rigid social hierarchy, to be the proper form of conduct.

Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, we have seen that human interaction and co-operation is governed by politeness and face-saving. I have demonstrated that indirectness or "Why we don't say what we mean" plays a significant role in politeness and face-work. Thus, I have shown that utterances which communicate difficulty or whose verbalisation can cause face-threat are verbalised indirectly. Indirection, in effect, helps save and maintain face. We have seen that in being indirect, there is a payoff in rapport. It is better to get what we want to be understood without saying what we mean. It makes us feel the pleasure of being on the same wavelength. Secondly, there is a payoff in self-defence. If what we want or say does not meet with positive response, we can withdraw it, perhaps we can sincerely claim that that's not what we meant. Through indirectness we can test the interactional waters before committing too much, rather than blurt out our ideas we send out feelers and get potential reactions of others and shape our thoughts as we go.

However, the beauty and pitfalls of language are two sides of the same coin. Indirectness can be counter productive, subtle meanings and signals can be missed. Our meaning can be gleaned in a way that was not intended. Our power to communicate through indirectness entails the danger of miscommunication This is especially so in business settings for miscommunication can lead to undesirable and unintended repercussions.

Therefore, in business settings in particular, appropriate training programmes which include various cultural components with respect to communication need to be devised. The workers should not only be technically well trained but must also be taught to express their feelings about working conditions to their superiors in a clear and direct manner. The management should adopt a pro-active approach to the problem and provide all the encouragement to the workers to express their feelings. Malay entrepreneurial training, for example, must obviously include business communication apart from the usual curriculum such as finance, marketing, production, etc. In short, business language must be direct and unambiguous and Malay businessmen must learn to discard their inhibition of stating their position clearly and in a businesslike manner. Finally the management especially foreign managers should be made aware and understand the cultural norms of the workers and read the hidden signals of discontent and react appropriately.

Conversation is a vehicle for socialization, and this paper has attempted to shed light on the close link between linguistics and the other social sciences, such as ethnography, anthropology and sociology, since language cannot be divorced from the culture in which it is used.

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