

# Sometimes Indirect Speech Is the Most Direct Course of Action

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Steven Pinker

Imagine you're at the hottest restaurant in Manhattan on a Saturday night. It's crowded and there's a long line of people waiting. Few of us, no matter how hungry we are, would directly come out and offer the maitre d' \$20 for a table. However, we may be more willing to quickly (and hopefully smoothly) flash the \$20 bill and say something along the lines of, "I was wondering if you might have a cancellation." The maitre d' is no fool and it's obvious in both scenarios what's really going on, so why do we insist on this charade and an "if you catch my drift" approach? According to this year's Psi Chi Distinguished Speaker, APS Fellow and Charter Member Steven Pinker of Harvard University, using indirect speech (that is, veiling our true intentions in innuendos and euphemisms) can reveal a lot about social life. In addition, it exposes a paradox in our attitude toward conversation. Pinker observes, "No matter how much we profess a desire for people to say what they mean, we use — and expect people to use — indirect speech."

Our choice of words can be influenced by our relationship with our conversation partner. Invoking the work of anthropologist Alan Fiske, Pinker suggested that people distinguish three major types of relationships: dominance (e.g., graduate advisor and their student), communality (e.g., family, close friends), and reciprocity (e.g., business relationships). We are very careful about our relationships and we distinguish various types of relationships sharply — behavior that is acceptable in one relationship may be inappropriate in another relationship. At a party, for example, you may eat a shrimp off of your spouse's plate, but you will probably not grab food off of your boss's plate. Pinker notes that "what we can get away with in a communality relationship, we can't get away with in a dominance relationship."

The difference between eating food off of our spouse's plate and our boss's plate may be obvious, but not all of our relationships have such clear boundaries. If you sell your best friend your car, negotiating a price can put a strain on the friendship, because it involves the rules of reciprocity, whereas a friendship is governed by communality. The use of innuendos or euphemisms may be a way of avoiding such awkwardness — for example, inquiring of the maitre d' whether there is a cancellation respects his dominance in his place of work, rather than switching the relationship to reciprocity, while still

conveying the intended offer.

In enforcing those relationship boundaries, we take into consideration what our partner is thinking. Direct speech, in which we come right out and say something, creates common knowledge, in which two people not only know something, but know that the other knows it, and so on. The fact that direct speech conveys common knowledge is the basis for our intuition that once you blurt something out directly, it's "out there," and "you can't take it back." Indirect speech prevents shared individual knowledge from becoming common knowledge. Since common knowledge is the basis for a relationship model — communality, dominance, or reciprocity — using innuendo, euphemism, and other forms of indirect speech allows communication to take place without challenging the relationship type, with all the awkwardness, shame, and other self-conscious emotions that result.

*Alluding to the subtitle of his book The Stuff of Thought, Pinker concluded, "And that's just one of the ways that language can serve as a window into human nature."*