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## INDIRECTNESS IN CONVERSATION: FLOUTING GRICE'S MAXIMS AT DINNER\*

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**1. Introduction: Gender-differentiated language.** There is a popular belief in our society that women's speech is more indirect than men's speech. Consistent with this belief, Lakoff 1975 argues that women's speech is more polite than men's speech, for example that women use more tag questions, hedges and mitigating language than men, and she proposes that women tend to speak not only more politely, but also more indirectly than men. However, a number of empirical studies have shown a lack of correlation between sex of the speaker and politeness (cf. Dubois and Crouch 1975, Baroni and D'Urso 1984, Brouwer, Gerritsen, and De Hann 1979, and Brouwer 1982). While these studies cast doubt on the claim that women are more polite, they do not question the premise that women are more indirect.<sup>1</sup>

There have been several studies dealing with gender-differentiated language and indirectness within the field of child language acquisition. Bellinger and Gleason 1982 (see also Gleason and Greif 1983) approached the topic of indirectness by studying mothers' and fathers' use of directives when talking to children in a laboratory setting. They isolated three types of directives: (1) imperatives, such as 'Give me the screwdriver', which were the most direct; (2) indirect questions, such as, 'Would you give me the screwdriver?'; and (3) implied directives, like 'I could really use the screwdriver', which were the least direct. They found that mothers used more indirect questions, which are considered to be the more polite forms, while fathers used both imperatives, the most direct, and implied directives, which are the least direct. So both fathers and mothers were indirect, but preferred to use different forms of indirectness.

Here I present a study which explores the relationship between indirectness and gender of the speaker, examining the speech of parents when talking to their children.

**2. Conversational implicature and the cooperative principle.** Grice 1975 examines the notion of indirectness, distinguishing CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE, where the conventional meaning associated with words or structures used in an utterance will determine what is implicated, from CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE, which is what is implied or suggested beyond the conventional meaning, within a specific context in conversation.

As the basis for conversational implicature, Grice proposed the Cooperative Principle and maxims of conversation, as given in (1).

- (1) Cooperative Principle (CP): Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.
  1. Maxim of Quantity (Do not say more or less than is required.)
  2. Maxim of Quality (Do not say what you believe to be false or that for which you lack evidence.)
  3. Maxim of Relation (Be relevant.)
  4. Maxim of Manner (Avoid obscurity, ambiguity; be brief and orderly.)

When the maxims are adhered to in conversation, the speaker intends to convey the content of an utterance as well as inferences beyond the semantic content of the utterance. Grice's theory has a social basis, where via the maxims, speakers learn from childhood to use indirectness in conversation and to interpret the meanings intended in indirect speech.

**3. Flouting.** Grice also discussed four ways in which it is possible for a participant to FAIL TO FULFILL a maxim. First, the speaker may VIOLATE a maxim by deliberately misleading the hearer, for example by telling a lie. Second, s/he may OPT OUT, making it clear that s/he is not willing to cooperate, e.g. 'my lips are sealed'. Third, there are situations in which TWO OR MORE MAXIMS MAY CLASH, where fulfilling one may violate another. And fourth, the speaker may OVERTLY NOT OBSERVE a particular maxim. Overtly not observing a maxim, which is referred to as FLOUTING, is a particular type of indirectness. When flouting a maxim, the speaker deliberately does not observe the maxim, and s/he expects the addressee to know that the maxim is not being observed; thus the Cooperative Principle is still in effect. According to Grice, irony, metaphor, meiosis and hyperbole are all instances of the speaker flouting a maxim, specifically the maxim of quality, i.e., do not say what you believe to be false. Grice provides a number of examples of flouting, one of which I present here as number (2), flouting the maxim of quantity by not giving enough information in a letter of recommendation:

- (2) Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.

**4. The study.** In order to investigate the claim that women are more indirect than men, I decided to study one type of indirectness, namely what Grice refers to as flouting, in natural conversation, comparing and contrasting its use in men's and women's speech. Specifically, I am examining men's and women's speech in the following situations: (1) mothers and fathers speaking to their children, and (2) male and female participants in informal conversation, where no children are present. In this paper I discuss the results of a preliminary study of the first situation, with data collected from three families.

Based on my own observations of men interacting with their children, and hearing with some frequency exchanges such as the one illustrated in (3), I have suspected that men are indeed often indirect in speech.

- (3) (The child walks into the kitchen and takes a handful of popcorn.)  
Father: I thought you were practicing your violin.  
Child: I need to get the stand.  
Father: Is it under the popcorn?

The father's first statement in (3) is indirect and generates the conversational implicature that the child should be practicing. It is in fact an indirect directive to practice. The father's second utterance is even more indirect, and, since the question is not sincere, here the father is flouting the maxim of quality. I have thus formulated the hypothesis that when speaking to children, men flout Grice's maxims more than women do. In order to test this hypothesis for the pilot study, I asked three families to tape four evenings of dinner conversation, all with children present. In analyzing the data, I specifically addressed the following questions: How often did the father and mother flout the maxims? Did the father in fact flout the maxims more often than the mother did, and when flouting occurred, who was the addressee? Are some maxims flouted more often than others? And finally, Why do people flout the maxims? What functions does flouting perform?

**4.1. The participants.** The people participating in the study are friends and neighbors with whom I am quite well acquainted, including members of my own family. In order to control variables such as education, age, and socio-economic level for the preliminary study I chose families who are similar in many respects. All parents are

college graduates between the ages of 35 and 40; both parents in each family are professionals, with all mothers working outside the home. Each family has two children ranging in age from five to eleven, all of them well beyond the initial stages of language acquisition, but not yet adolescents or young adults. A disadvantage of studying such a homogeneous group is that the conclusions reached concerning these data cannot be generalized to the entire population, but as Jenkins 1985:147 notes, 'contrary to traditional social science dictum, you can sometimes learn more by first observing and interviewing people you know well, rather than those you don't'; similarly, Tannen 1984:33 justifies recording the conversation of friends at dinner by saying that 'recording a conversation among friends that would have taken place anyway makes available for study patterns of language use that do not emerge among strangers, such as playful routines, irony and allusion, reference to familiar jokes and assumptions.'

**4.2. Methods of collecting the data.** Each family has agreed to record four evenings of dinner table conversation within a reasonable span of time.<sup>2</sup> As stated previously, what is presented here is from the initial study of three families.

The method of collecting the data involves asking the participants to turn on a taperecorder at meal times, and to turn it off when they finish the meal. The assumption is that they will forget about the taperecorder as they become involved in their day-to-day conversation. Fishman 1983 studied the conversation of three couples in their own homes. The participants agreed to allow a taperecorder to be placed in their apartments, but they also had censor rights and could turn it on and off at will. 'All six people reported that they soon began to ignore the tape recorder' (p. 92). In response to the possibility that participants are aware of a taperecorder and thus might not speak naturally, Tannen states that 'if there is a relatively large number of participants who have ongoing social relationships, they soon forget the taperecorder' (p. 34). In my study, initially the taperecorder was a distraction for each family. Children in particular 'performed' at the beginning of each meal. However, as the meal progressed the recorder was forgotten and conversation became more spontaneous.<sup>3</sup>

**4.3. General results.** The results of this study show that, overall, the fathers in each family do flout the maxims more often than the mothers do. In the tables that follow the participants in this study will be known as M1, M2, M3, where M=Mom, and D1, D2, D3, where D=Dad.

	Total number of utterances	Number of flouted utterances	% of flouted utterances	Mean
D1	395	92	23.30	
D2	267	52	19.50	
D3	256	16	6.25	16.35%
M1	468	34	7.30	
M2	330	19	5.75	
M3	267	05	01.90	04.98%

TABLE (1) FLOUTING THE MAXIMS AT DINNER: GENERAL RESULTS

Based on the total number of utterances for each speaker, as shown on Table (1), D1 flouted on the average of 23.3% of the time, whereas M1 flouted the maxims only 7.3% of the time. In the second family, D2 flouted the maxims 19.5% of the time, while M2 flouted only 5.75%; and in the third family, while D3 only flouted 6.25% of the time, M3 flouted even less, 1.9% of her total utterances. The percentages for individuals vary greatly, especially when comparing the results for D1 and D3. And even though D3

flouted much less than either D1 or D2, he still flouted much more than M3. Before the study was begun, my intuition was that both D1 and D2 are prone to communicating by flouting. The results indicate that flouting the maxims is more a part of the conversational habits of these two men than it is with D3. Based on these data, I cannot say that men in general are prone to flouting the maxims, but it seems clear that these fathers all flout the maxims more than the mothers do. It should be noted that in all three families the father flouted over three times as often as the mother did.

Participant	Child as Addressee	Adult as Addressee	Other
D1	78%	22%	2%
M1	59%	41%	0
D2	79%	15%	6%
M2	68%	32%	0
D3	62.5%	37.5%	0
M3	60%	40%	0

TABLE (2) FLOUTED UTTERANCES ACCORDING TO ADDRESSEE

As shown on Table (2), all participants flouted the maxims more often when the addressee was a child than when the addressee was an adult. In each family, however, the percentage of flouts to children is greater for fathers than for mothers (although in Family 3 the difference is negligible).

Because the study involved two adults and two children at the dinner table, when a speaker addressed an utterance to one person, the other two people, though not addressed, heard what was said. Clark and Carlson 1982 propose four basic roles in conversations: the **SPEAKER**, who then determines who fills the other roles; the **PARTICIPANTS**, those meant to take part in the conversation; the **ADDRESSEE(S)**, directly spoken to and also included as participant(s); and the **OVERHEARERS**, those listening but not intended to take part in the conversation. Relating this to dinner conversation in Family 1, when D1 addressed M1, the children were still participants in the conversation. When D1 addressed an utterance to M1 which flouted a maxim, the children, as participants, were also meant to hear the utterance. One could speculate that even though 78% of D1's flouts were directly addressed to a child, 100% of the examples of flouting could be due to having the children as participants.

The above situation exists in Families 2 and 3 as well. Even though a number of flouted utterances were directed to an adult, the children were in fact participants in the conversation.<sup>4</sup>

I have only a small amount of data without children present, two evenings of conversation in Family 1 after the children had left the table, and there is no evidence of flouting by either D1 or M1. Also, one evening after one child had left the table, the other child was treated as what Clark and Carlson refer to as an overheard rather than a participant; she was present but not intended to take part in the conversation. The content was such that it did not involve her and she was not interested. No flouting by either M1 or D1 took place during this part of the conversation. These data suggest that both mothers and fathers flout the maxims more frequently when conversing with children as participants than they do when in adult conversation, an hypothesis that will be tested later in the study.

**4.4. Maxims flouted.** Grice states that 'the presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out' as follows: 'To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will reply on the following data:

(1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the CP and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case' (p. 50). Under these circumstances I have found that it is possible on occasion to arrive at more than one interpretation of an utterance. I have also found that any given utterance may in fact flout more than one maxim. All possibilities found have been included in the percentages on Table (3).

	D1	M1	D2	M2	D3	M3
Quality	50%	50%	75%	83%	75%	75%
Quantity	26%	31%	08%	33%	06%	25%
Manner	16%	14%	15%	08%	06%	25%
Relation	08%	03%	02%	0	13%	0

TABLE (3) MAXIMS FLOUTED

Note that, for all adult participants, the maxim of quality, do not say what you believe to be false, was the most often flouted maxim, whereas the maxim of relation or relevance was flouted least often for five of the six participants.

**4.5. Examples and discussion.** In this section I present examples from the data, after which I discuss possible interpretations. First of all, typical of at least one conversation in each family and several in two of the families, was the situation where the father would flout on a given topic, and both he and the mother would continue flouting on that topic through a portion of the conversation, as shown in examples (4a) through (4d).<sup>5</sup>

- (4a) (The child is not eating his dinner. The child hates corn, but corn is NOT being served at this meal. There is no corn in the house.)  
D[12]: You eat what you have there, you don't have to eat your corn.
- (4b) D[33]: Say, \_\_\_\_, am I going to have to go buy corn?  
Child: No.
- (4c) D[36]: You have to eat your dinner. Otherwise It's gonna be corn and Bert [a troll from a story] will sit on you and squish you all to jelly if you don't eat your corn.  
Child: [In exaggerated tone] Oh no!
- (4d) M[45]: You have to finish everything or I'll start making corn.

In contrast, none of the flouts initiated by mothers were continued or built upon by fathers. In other words the father was the instigator of flouting, whereas the mother went along with it. One possible conclusion this leads to is that since many of the mothers' flouts were prompted by the fathers' flouts, mothers might have flouted even less than they did had the fathers not been part of the conversation. Thus the fathers appear to play a dominant role in this type of speech. Tannen 1984 noted a similar trend when discussing humor in her conversation data. A male participant was the initiator of humorous remarks and a female participant built on them.

There are several examples in the data of men expressing superficial self-criticism, as in example (5).

- (5) (Discussion topic is television programs. Child has been explaining what happened on 3-2-1 Contact.)  
D: I don't think I ever watched 3-2-1 Contact. I never got beyond Electric Company. I thought Electric Company was kinda hard.

The father is not being sincere in his comment, and everyone knows this. In the conversations in this study neither the children nor the mothers engaged in this behavior.

Parents frequently play a role in regulating the behavior of their children. In the families studied here there is evidence of gender differences in how this regulation of behavior is expressed. Both parents asserted their authority, both directly and indirectly, but fathers expressed it by flouting more often than mothers did.

An obvious way that parents regulate behavior is by use of directives. The fathers in this study, much more often than the mothers, performed directives by flouting, for example those illustrated in (3) and (4) above. Note in (4a) and (4c) that the father starts with a directive, but immediately tones it down by flouting, whereas in (4b) the entire utterance is an example of flouting. The exchange in (6) shows a nice contrast between the approach of mother and father:

- (6) (Child is not eating and complains that some of the noodles on his plate are not cooked.)  
M: Well, then don't eat them.  
D: The banana's not cooked either.

Whereas the mother is more direct, the father is rather obscure, flouting the maxim of relevance as well as that of manner. The immediate implication is that the child eats bananas even though they are not cooked. Based on his previous remarks it is clear that he thinks the child SHOULD eat everything.

Another way that parents regulate their children's behavior is by criticism. Again fathers criticized by flouting more than mothers did, as illustrated in (7) and (8).

- (7) M: There's one piece [of pie] left.  
Child: What is it? Rhubarb? Oh.  
D: We can split it.  
Child: What's it made of?  
M: Rhubarb.  
D: Pineapple.  
Child: That's original!

In example (7), first of all note again the contrast in parental approach. The mother's response is direct, while the father's response generates the implicature that the child's question was inappropriate or silly, since pineapple is not an ingredient in rhubarb pie, and the father and child both know this.<sup>6</sup> The child's retort is actually parroting a comment that the father made earlier in the conversation.

- (8) (Child has been refusing to speak because she is angry with her father. Now she is making exaggerated motions to indicate that she is having trouble cutting her piece of pizza.)  
D: Would you like a hatchet?

In example (8), the father is not sincere, since a hatchet is an unlikely tool for a child to use on a piece of pizza, implicating that the child is making too much fuss over her pizza-cutting problem, but also that he thinks that she should be talking.

Although the above examples show that fathers flout when attempting to regulate their children's behavior, in a number of utterances this position of power is softened by the use of flouting. In the following situation the child is still angry with her dad for shouting at her. She refuses to speak throughout a portion of the conversation. Finally, she begins to make hand motions as if she wants to contribute.

- (9) D: Sounds like...one syllable...first word.  
 (Child continues to make undecipherable motions.)  
 D: One...One...let's see...IXI...so that's...that's ten!

In (9) by being silly and teasing the child, the father is actually trying to ease her back into the conversation. He is successful, as several utterances later she is again an active speaker. She asks where the oars and pump for a rubber raft have come from, and the father responds with (10).

- (10) D: The oars and the pump were purchased separately by your generous father...masquerading as the mean ogre...who lives here...and shouts.  
 Child: And doesn't like people to talk!

The father's utterance here is mitigating in nature, an apology of sorts, but note that the child, even though she is now speaking, hasn't quite forgiven him.

There are several hypotheses available through which one can analyze these examples. Most prevalent in the literature on gender-differentiated speech is the notion of power and dominance (for example see Fishman 1983, West and Zimmerman 1983). As shown in example (4) it seems clear that fathers play a dominant role in flouting. They use it in directives as well as in criticism when speaking to these children. People in a position of power can be confident in expressing their dominance through humor and teasing, or more severely through sarcasm. In analyzing the data I asked the child involved how she felt about the remarks in (7) and (8). She remembered the instance in (7) as being funny, but in looking at (8) she remembered being irritated. She indicated that what is doubly maddening about remarks like this is that they are funny as well as being irritating. When I asked her if she thought her dad was being mean when he talked like this, she responded, 'No, he can't help it. That's just the way he talks.' One final point in support of the power factor is that people who are older and bigger can also afford to put themselves down, being secure in the fact that the addressee will know that it is not to be taken seriously. This is illustrated in (5), where the father says that he always thought Electric Company was too hard. It appears that he is implicating that he is in fact bigger and more knowledgeable than the children are.

Another possible hypothesis (cf. Maltz and Borker 1982) is that men prefer to show themselves off to their best advantage in conversation. They tend to posture, to want a dominant role in the conversation, to want to be center-stage. Many of the examples in my data are humorous. The participants in the conversation do laugh. All of these examples could be interpreted as men's attention-getting strategies. When these men flout the maxims they continuously reassert their control over the conversation by getting everyone's attention. To support the interpretation that these men are trying to be entertaining, there are several instances of children saying, 'Dad, you're crazy,' or 'Don't be dumb,' after the father has flouted a maxim. The children do not appear to be threatened by flouting when they can respond in this way.

Finally, although there is evidence that men prefer direct confrontation, it has been suggested that men, when interacting with women in some situations, prefer to avoid

direct confrontation, also avoiding emotional scenes. Example (4), where the father continuously tries to avoid a direct command to the child to eat his dinner, could be interpreted as avoidance of conflict with the child. If the father had said, 'Eat your dinner,' the child could more easily reply with a negative. What in fact happens here is that the child picks up on the idea of the illusive corn. In (4b) he responds 'no' to his father's having to go buy corn, not to the directive that he should be eating his dinner; whereas in (4c) he responds in mock horror to the idea of being squashed by a troll. In (7), the rhubarb/pineapple example, if the father had said, 'That's a stupid question,' instead of flouting a maxim, the child would have been more likely to take offense, be hurt, and possibly even cry. As it is, she plays his game, responding as he might respond in a similar situation. The examples in (9) and (10) of appeasing and mitigating behavior fit well into this theory, as avoidance of a directly expressed apology.

Gleason and Greif 1983, in examining studies of parents and children, note that fathers tend to be 'impolite or insensitive to their children during conversation' (p. 147), but that they also have a style that demands more from children, e.g. they use more difficult vocabulary, request more sophisticated information, and encourage the children to display their knowledge. The authors propose that the father's use of implied directives requires more inferencing from the child. They conclude that mothers are more polite and sensitive to the child's conversation, more 'tuned-in' to the child's communication, which means that the child does not have to communicate well verbally for the mother to understand; whereas the father, demanding more precise communication skills, serves as a 'bridge' to the community, where the child will have to express her/himself clearly in order to be understood. Their hypothesis provides another perspective in examining the speech of the fathers in this study. Since flouting requires more inferencing than a direct statement, one could speculate that the frequent use of flouting challenges the child's ability to inference. The reasons the fathers flout could be any of the above mentioned possibilities, a power ploy, an attention getter, or an avoidance of direct confrontation, but one effect on the children might be that, through exposure to this type of speech at home, they are better able to deal with inferencing in general.

**5. Conclusions and implications.** Based on these data, the preliminary hypothesis that, when speaking to children, men flout Grice's maxims more than women do, is upheld. Thus, with respect to at least one type of indirectness, flouting the maxims, men's speech appears to be more indirect than women's speech.

Since in the small amount of data presented here without children present no flouting occurred, I propose several questions for further research: Do men flout the maxims more than women do when children are not participants in the conversation? Does flouting by either men or women occur at the same frequency when children are not present as when children are present? In other words, does the presence of children increase or decrease the amount of flouting in natural conversation? And, does the sex of the child play a role in frequency of flouting by either parent? Two of the three families in the pilot study have a boy and a girl, and each parent flouted to both more or less equally; but whether the sex of the child plays a role in frequency of flouting is an important question to continue to address in the larger study. In order to answer these questions, my study continues on two fronts. First, more families have agreed to participate, thus increasing the amount of data; and second, all parents involved have agreed to be recorded in conversation at a social occasion without children.

In conclusion, Sperber and Wilson 1986 propose an alternative to Grice's theory of indirectness. Their theory of relevance puts all types of speech on a continuum from most explicit to least explicit, deriving all inferences from a single principle of relevance: thus the relevance of the utterance to the situation is the only factor involved. Their theory also differs from Grice's in that it has a cognitive rather than a social basis. Within this theory one would be less likely to expect social variables to interact with degrees of indirectness. Ziv 1988:539 has noted that Sperber and Wilson's approach cannot explain

social conventions such as politeness. 'For politeness to be subsumed under the PRL [Principle of Relevance] it would have to be considered an aspect of cognition, which it is clearly not. The essence of politeness is social, and as such the PRL cannot account for it.' The results of my study show tentatively that there are differences in how men and women use implicature, i.e. that the social variable of gender is a significant factor in the use of indirectness. This also seems to provide evidence for a theory with a social component as well as a cognitive component. Thus my study not only bears on the specific question of gender differences and indirectness, but also on the broader issue of whether conversational inference is based entirely on a cognitive foundation.

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<sup>1</sup>But see Tannen 1982 on interpreting indirectness in male-female discourse.

<sup>2</sup>The first family recorded six sessions, but I asked the others to do only four.

<sup>3</sup>One adult (D2), though, did speak to the taperecorder and occasionally treated me as a participant in the conversation.

<sup>4</sup>D1 and D2 both have a small number of utterances directed towards no particular addressee or towards a pet. It may be the presence of children as participants that instigated this behavior.

<sup>5</sup>The numbers given after D or M indicate the utterance number of that person, illustrating the fact that these utterances were distributed over a portion of the conversation.

<sup>6</sup>It has been suggested to me that the mother's response is also a flout, that she is flouting the maxim of quantity by giving too much information.

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