

## **A Study of Indirectness in Business Meetings**

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### **Abstract**

The present study examines spoken interactions (with a focus on indirectness) performed by speakers in intercultural external meetings between a Hong Kong-based airline company and a bank on a co-branded credit card project. This study will firstly investigate how indirectness is applied when the communicative goals conflict, for example, when a speaker disagrees or intends to voice out a correction. Secondly, this study will examine the impact of power differences on the use of indirectness. This study suggests that indirectness may help speakers to increase the effectiveness of the message to be conveyed. In the business meetings, it is found that the functions of indirectness depend on the goal of the meeting and business relationships (for example, the power relationship) between the participants.

**Keywords:** functions of speech; business meetings; indirectness; communicative purposes; power relationship.

### **Introduction**

Indirectness is a multifunctional linguistic phenomenon, and has been closely associated with the politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Leech, 1983). ‘Indirectness’ is perceived as being ‘implicit’ in a verbal context (Sew, 1997:363). Sew (1997) also states that indirectness is a form of politeness where a speaker avoids expressing himself/herself explicitly either in conversation or writing, and is understood as a style of formulating speech acts which has an inherent pragmatic role. In conversation, indirectness can be realised in various ways such as avoidance of confrontation, joking, overstating, or understating (Tsuda, 1993). In past studies, different forms of

indirectness have been examined. For example, McCarthy (1998) examines indirectness in pragmatic forms of politeness, whereas Reiter, Rainey and Fulcher (2005) study the impact of conventional indirectness on the realisation patterns of pragmatic categories in language. Goatly (1995) looks at indirectness in speech acts and Ogiermann (2009) also studies politeness and indirectness across cultures through cross-cultural variation in speech act realisation. Lakoff (1973:303) explores the ways in which speakers typically do not say exactly what they mean and comments that “indirectness is preferred for two main reasons: to save face if a conversational contribution is not well received, and to achieve the sense of rapport that comes from being understood without saying what one means”.

Tannen (1989:23) describes the role of indirectness in conversations as: “a fundamental aspect of language call ellipsis and analysts of conversation call indirectness (or, in formal pragmatics, implicature) conveying unstated meaning”. She also argues that indirectness is not only a fundamental and pervasive element in human communication, but also one of the elements which varies most from one culture to another. In some circumstances, it can cause enormous misunderstanding when speakers have different conventions and expectations about how it is used (Tannen, 1995).

The direct/indirect dimension refers to the “extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit communication”, where an indirect style of communication refers to “verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers’ true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation” (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988:100). In employing indirectness, **people might obtain some advantages**, for example they may wish to avoid hurting someone or avoid some negative consequence, **for example, appearing too pushy or creating an uncomfortable feeling** (Thomas, 1995). Pyle (1975) also suggests that people apply **indirectness when their communicative goals conflict**, for example, when they have to tell someone **the truth but do not want to hurt the person’s feeling**.

In business contexts, there is a general view that the person in authority has the right to be relatively direct rather than to mitigate orders (Thomas, 1995). However, some studies show that women of a higher rank can speak indirectly when it comes to telling others to

admit fault or weakness. This paper will study the impact of power differences on the use of indirectness in business meetings with focuses on politeness (off-record strategy).

## **Review of Literature**

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the basic way for a speaker to perform a face-threatening act and choose to do it indirectly is to invite conversational implicatures. Such strategies include: Give hints / Give association clues / Presuppose / Understate / Overstate / Use tautologies / Use contradictions / Be ironic / Use Metaphors / Use rhetorical questions (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 211-224). In addition, rather than inviting a particular implicature, a speaker may choose to go off record by being vague or ambiguous in such a way that his/her communicated intent remains ill-defined. Such strategies are: Be ambiguous / Be vague / Over-generalize / Displace H / Be incomplete, use ellipsis (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 222-227). In Blum-Kulka's (1987) study of indirectness and politeness in requests, the strategy rated as the most indirect is 'off record' indirectness.

“One motivation for going off-record is to soften impositions” (Sifianou, 2005:224). Sifianou (2005) comments that off-record utterances are an expression of politeness and a means of ‘preserving face’, but in situationally and culturally specific ways and not necessarily just as a means of avoiding impositions. Gu (1990) presents an account of politeness phenomena in modern Chinese through a critical comparison between western notions of face and politeness and their Chinese counterparts.

It is also necessary to look at the type of social relationships prevalent in a particular society and the values which inform them before arriving at conclusions concerning the type and degree of politeness encoded in off-record requests (Sifianou, 2005). As off-record devices have more than one plausible interpretation, they enable the speaker to avoid taking the responsibility for having committed a particular act, while also allow the hearer to decide freely how to interpret the utterance (Sifianou, 2005). Therefore, the decisive factor for a hearer to choose the off-record strategy depends on the degree of imposition involved in the act, that is the higher the degree of imposition, the more indirect the utterance to minimize it.

## **Objective of the Study**

In a business context where intercultural communication takes place, linguistic behaviour will generally be formulated according to the nature of the context, relationship between the speakers, their job roles and the communicative purpose. In the Hong Kong context, as business is becoming increasingly international and dynamic, people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are coming into contact more frequently, intimately and in a greater variety of settings.

This study will investigate speech interactions (with a focus on indirectness) performed by speakers in intercultural external meetings between a Hong Kong-based airline company and a bank on a co-branded credit card project. This study will firstly investigate how indirectness is applied when the communicative goals conflict, for example, when a speaker disagrees or intends to voice out a correction. Secondly, this study will examine the impact of power differences on the use of indirectness in business meetings with focuses on politeness (off-record strategy).

## **Research Design**

The data used in the present study were transcribed recordings collected from business meetings at a Hong Kong-based airline. The business discourses selected reflect the use of English among people in international business contexts in Hong Kong, in which English is frequently employed as a lingua franca. The purpose of the business meetings are to work on a co-branded credit card project between an airline company and a bank. The data set comprises approximately four hours of recordings from three meetings. There are a total of 9 participants (4 males, 5 females), 2 of whom are native speakers of English (1 male, 1 female) and 7 non-native speakers of English (3 male, 4 females). The two companies met to discuss the project proposal that the bank originally initiated and to discuss the system logistics and operational workflow at both airport check-in counters and in-flight. In addition, they met to work out the branding and positioning for the card launch campaign as well as to design ongoing marketing promotion. The relationships between the two sets of speakers are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

**TABLE 1: Background of the participants  
from the bank at the meeting**

Speaker	Gender	Age	Nationality	Native Language	Organisation	Role in the Meeting / Job Position	Power Difference
B	M	30s	American	English	Bank	Partner (Senior Vice President)	-p b1 / =p b2 / +p a1 / +p a2 / -p A / =p a3 / +p a4 / +p b3
b1	m	50s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Bank	Partner (Director)	+p B / +p b2 / +p a1 / +p a2 / =p A / +p a3 / +p a4 / +p b3
b2	m	30s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Bank	Partner (IT Manager)	-p b1 / -p B / +p a1 / +p a2 / -p A / -p a3 / +p a4 / =p b3
a1	f	40s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Bank	Partner (Vice President)	-p b1 / -p B / -p b2 / +p a2 / -p A / -p a3 / =p a4 / =p b3
a2	f	30s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Bank	Partner (Assistant Vice President)	-p b1 / -p B / -p b2 / -p a1 / -p A / -p a3 / =p a4 / =p b3

Table 1 shows the backgrounds of the group of participants from the bank. Speaker B is the Senior Vice President as well as the project leader. Speaker b1 is his boss, the Director of Credit Card Section. He used to play a supportive role to his subordinates during the meeting as he is at a very senior position in the bank. Speaker b2 is an IT Manager who works at the Information System Section. He contributes his technical knowledge during the discussion of the setting up of a card reader machine at the airline's airport check-in counters. Speaker a1 is subordinate of Speaker B. She is a Vice President in the team and she coordinates closely with the airline marketing team throughout the project development. She has low power in the bank group. Speaker a2 is an Assistant Vice President. She is a colleague of Speaker a1 and she also reports to Speaker B. As Speaker a2 is a new member of staff to

the team, she acts as an assistant to Speaker a1 throughout the project. The level of the power distances between individual speaker and the other participants in the meetings are shown by the signs of '+', '-', and '='. A '+' sign denotes 'more power', a '-' sign denotes 'less power' and a '=' sign denotes 'equal power'. For example, Speaker B has less power (-p) than Speaker b1, while at the same time he has equal power (=p) with Speaker b2, and more power (+p) than Speaker a1.

**TABLE 2: Background of the participants from the airline at the meeting**

Speaker	Gender	Age	Nationality	Native Language	Organisation	Role in the Meeting / Job Position	Power Difference
A	F	40s	American	English	Airline	Partner (GM Marketing)	=p b1 / +p B / +p b2 / +p a1 / +p a2 / +p a3 / +p a4 / +p b3
a3	f	50s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Airline	Partner (Assistant GM Loyalty Marketing)	-p b1 / =p B / =b2 / +p a1 / +p a2 / -p A / +p a4 / =p b3
a4	f	30s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Airline	Partner (Manger Loyalty Marketing)	-p b1 / -p B / -p b2 / =p a1 / =p a2 / -p A / -p a3 / -p b3
b3	m	50s	HK Chinese	Cantonese	Airline	Partner (Manager Ground Services)	-p b1 / =p B / =p b2 / +p a1 / +p a2 / -p A / =p a3 / +p a4

Table 2 shows the backgrounds of the group of participants from the airline. Speaker A is the General Manager Marketing. She is also the chair of the meetings and she has the most power in the meetings. Speaker a3 reports to Speaker A. She is the Assistant General Manager of Loyalty Marketing as well as the project owner of the co-branded credit card project. Speaker a4 is her subordinate, the Loyalty Marketing Manager, who coordinates closely with the bank marketing team throughout the project development. Speaker b3 is the Ground Services Manager. He is invited to join the meeting as the project team needs to consult him regarding airport operations. He will be heavily

involved in the airport operational set-up for the co-brand card. Both Speakers b3 and a4 have less power in the meetings compared to the other participants.

In the extracts which follow, lower case letters denote non-native speakers and upper case letters denote native speakers. Female speakers are signified by the letter A (native speaker) and a (non-native speaker), and male speakers by the letter B (native speaker) and b (non-native speaker). For each set of example, there are two extracts showing the same function of indirectness. In addition, the use of italics and bold font indicates either an instance of directness or indirectness examined in this study.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

Following Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) realisations of "off-record" strategies, this paper examines indirectness in spoken interactions in intercultural business meetings between a Hong Kong-based airline company and a bank on a co-branded credit card project.

Extract 1a is an example of disagreeing done indirectly by a low power speaker by the strategy of "displace H" (Brown and Levinson, 1987). A speaker may go off-record to who the target for his face-threatening act is, or he may pretend to address the fact-threatening act to someone whom it wouldn't threaten, and hope that the real target will see that the fact-threatening act is aimed at him (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In the extract, both Speaker B and A hold a high-powered status, whereas Speaker b3 has less power in the meeting.

#### **[Extract 1a]**

- 790 B : but actually our views er er there having er a lot of (.)  
concerns of the budget in the
- 791 in-flight thing [in the meanwhile (.) because er if we buy a  
ticket we have to give to
- 792 b3 : [mm
- 793 give in a lot of permission (.) so er perhaps on things like that  
[it's it's I I er I
- 794A : [mm

- 795 would if I'm going to process the transaction I would rather  
do it (.) on ground by  
796 by the staff  
797 b3 : *well (.) you never know*  
798 ((laughs))  
799 b3 : *because (.) even for staff (.) we have less people*  
800 B : yeah yeah yeah wait wait wait there must be some but I mean  
in terms of  
801 processing the transaction we have a plan so far

The extract begins with the transfer of credit points. In line 790-796, Speaker B points out the views from the bank. Their team would prefer to process the credit points transfer transactions on the ground by the airport check-in staff. However, Speaker b3 disagrees with the idea. In line 797, he responds and displaces the hearer. He goes off record as his utterance is targeting the senior management of the airline, not the bank team. He wants to let the senior management know that he is already short of ground staff and any additional workload will prolong the check-in operation. If there is an alternative way, he would rather let the in-flight team handle the transactions. In line 799, Speaker b3 further explains he is already running short of staff. Instead of the senior management of the airline responding, in lines 800-801, Speaker B from the bank responds that he gets the message.

Extract 1b shows another example of disagreeing but the disagreement is performed directly by a high-powered speaker. Both Speaker b1 and Speaker A have equally high power.

**[Extract 1b]**

- 971 b1 : I like to discuss the case and implication [is I I I I (.) I've  
been going around (.)  
972 a3 : [yeah  
973 erm delivering seminar er (.) at field trips (.) on the cobrand  
er (.) it would be  
974 unrealistic (.) for the partners (.) to focus this programme  
and make money for  
975 you (.) strictly on issuing cards (.) I think the benefit for (.)  
cobrand (.) card for (.)





**[Extract 2a]**

- 472 a1: and how about the download of the data from er the host to  
the palm er (.) is it er
- 473 ((pause))
- 474 a1 : how how er what's the time for download
- 475 ((pause))
- 476 B : er ***again this is instantly*** (.) ***I think*** (.) the data is more than  
it show out [**just like**
- 477 a1 :  
[mhm
- 478 ***days may be*** (.) ten days within that ten days we can do that
- 479 a1 : mm
- 480 b2 : ***we have two ways*** (.) ***one is the PDA another is the printout***  
***because*** (.)
- 481 ***actually we*** (.) ***we get*** (.) ***may be the er e email list er in the***  
***flight list we see***
- 482 ***er air stewardess is not quite easy to use the er PDA because***  
[er it's not
- 483 a1 :  
[mm
- 484 ***stable so***
- 485 a3 : [yeah
- 486 B : yeah at the beginning we have an option (.) cause we we are  
aware that there are a
- 487 lot of er flight attendant they have (.) er hoping to keep all  
these information
- 488 inflight er as I know how can we (.) we can use printouts or  
may be emails (.) it's
- 489 up to them on which objects

The discussion is about preparing the data information for in-flight duties. In line 472, Speaker a1 from the bank group questions her team about the time for data downloading, but there is no response. She repeats her question in line 474, again there is still no response. Then in lines 476-478, her superior Speaker B answers. However, it appears

that he is not too certain about his answers. He first says ‘instantly I think’, but then he says ‘just like days may be’. In lines 480-484, Speaker b2, the IT manager provides an indirect correction by using the strategy of presuppose. He corrects Speaker B’s response about the required time for data downloading. He presupposes that the airline team already has in mind, the two ways of downloading, one way by PDA and another way by printout. In fact, the bank team prefers to go for printout as they are concerned about the stability of using PDA.

Extract 2b is another example of correcting. It is done directly by a high-powered speaker. Both Speaker a3 and Speaker B have equally high power.

**[Extract 2b]**

- 147 B : and here what we propose (.) again in in your er request for proposal document (.)
- 148 you say that we are allowed to have er choices in terms of collecting er which
- 149 thing they like and prefer to (.) but we think that er we should have a privilege for
- 150 the dragon (.) mileage (.) so they they we will highlight points for them to do the
- 151 redemption that’s how we propose
- 152 a3 : ***just a bit er interruption*** (.) in fact for our co-branded card ***what we are thinking***
- 153 ***with we don’t we do not just*** er D airline okay rather than er have an
- 154 alternative or offer for the A\_\_ M\_\_
- 155 B : that we need the ((inaudible)) just not the identity then
- 156 a3 : yeah yeah the auto conversion
- 157 B : okay
- 158 a3 : yeah

In lines 147-151, Speaker B, the Senior Vice President of the bank, talks about providing members a choice of mileage redemption to travel on the airline. Then in lines 152-154, Speaker a3, the Assistant General Manager of the airline, interrupts and corrects his point with the actual idea of the airline. She wants to extend the mileage redemption offer

to include other airlines' participation. This will make the co-branded card programme more attractive to the members. In line 152, Speaker a3 directly remarks 'just quite a bit interruption'. She minimizes the imposition here as both she and Speaker B are equal in power.

Extract 3a shows an example of refusing done indirectly by a low-powered speaker by the strategy of "give hints and association clues" (Brown and Levinson, 1987). To give hints, "a speaker says something that is not explicitly relevant, he invites the hearer to search for an interpretation of the possible relevance" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:213). And to give association clues, "a speaker mentions something associated with the act required of the hearer, either by precedent in speaker-hearer's experience or by mutual knowledge irrespective of their interactional experience" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:215).

**[Extract 3a]**

612 b3 : [*for economy class we only have two minutes not more than two minutes*

613 B : [mm

614 ((pause))

615 b3 : so if you have more process at the all the check-in counter (.) would have more

616 *more problems* (.) that means *more blocks and queues* (.) *need more counters*

617 *need more staff*

618 A : is is it that erm help (.) to (.) shorten the time because that as well erm need to put

619 to action to get the R O I print

The discussion is about card verification during passenger check in. The bank proposes to set up special check-in counters with a card reader for member verifications. Speaker b3, the Ground Services Manager of the airline, is very concerned that the verification process will affect the on-time performance of the ground check-in. He refuses to take up the suggested procedure. In line 612, by giving hints he brings up to the senior management the current performance standard and indirectly points out the time constraint that his team will be facing. He gives hints by the words 'only have two minutes' and 'not more

than two minutes'. In lines 615-617, he repeats using the word 'more' as giving an association clue that the most critical issue is the required operating time. He expresses it indirectly in order to alert the senior management of the airline marketing team about the time issue. He wants to convey the message that he foresees difficulties in coping with what the bank plans to do. In lines 618-619, Speaker A the General Manager Marketing talks about shortening the time. She understands Speaker B's message about his concern of the processing time. She queries if there is another way out to solve the time issue.

Extract 3b shows another example of refusing done directly by a high-powered speaker. Speaker A has the most power in the meeting.

**[Extract 3b]**

- 42 A : then let's see how each part comes out
- 43 B : on provision we can see that er er even what things we can propose to A\_\_ M \_\_
- 44 then
- 45 A : **no no I think would be begin with** the er distributed at cost nothing with miles at
- 46 all [will just be flights er so **what what we thought about** er just er (.) and may be
- 47 B : [ahh okay
- 48 our approach is that (.) so **the thing we want is** we want it very shine er on er (.) [and
- 49 B :
- [shine
- 50 (.) **we would like to have** a deduction in our point system that (.) allow a stand point
- 51 for a lot of people to join erm but not just on that alone (.) [erm and so
- 52 a4 :
- [mm
- 53 ((pause))
- 54 B : yeah [yeah

Speaker A, the General Marketing Manager from the airline starts the meeting by sharing with the bank group some of the decisions

which the airline team has made after the previous meeting. She emphasizes that the airline would like to centralise the co-branded credit card around frequent flyer points and that the card needs to include some elements of a frequent flyer programme. In response to her idea, Speaker B – Senior Vice President from the bank offers (Line 43) to work on things which they can propose to another frequent flyer programme as a kind of partnership. However, at a higher power level, Speaker A immediately refuses the offer in lines 45-51. She refuses directly by using the words ‘no no’, which is followed in line 45 with ‘I think would be begin with’, in line 46 ‘what what we thought about’, in line 48 ‘the thing we want is’, and in line 50 ‘we would like to have’.

**TABLE 3: Summary of the Speakers’ Relative Power Level**

Speaker	Role in the Meeting / Job Position	Politeness of Speech	Power Level	Power Distance
b2	Partner (IT Manager)	INDIRECT	LOW	-p B / =p a1
b3	Partner (Manager Ground Services)	INDIRECT	LOW	-p B / -p A
A	Partner (GM Marketing)	DIRECT	HIGH	=p b1 / +p B / +p a3
a3	Partner (Assistant GM Loyalty Marketing)	DIRECT	HIGH	=pB

Table 3 shows a summary of the relative power level of the speakers in the above extracts. It is found that both Speaker b2 and b3 perform their functions of speech indirectly as compared to Speaker A and a3, who have high power level while Speaker A and a3 perform functions directly even to hearers who have equal power distance.

## **Conclusion**

There is always an assumption that indirect, polite ways of speaking are driven by the power status of the speaker in communication (Takano, 2005). Reynolds (1990), for instance, suggests that professional women in leadership positions speak with assertions and forcefulness so as to establish authority in the workplace. It is believed that the power distance inherent in the speech situation or context does affect speakers' performance. Tannen (1995) comments that people in powerful positions are likely to reward linguistic styles similar to their own, because we all tend to take as self-evident the logic of our own styles. Those who tend to be indirect when telling subordinates what to do may be perceived as lacking in confidence. However, there also are cases in which the higher-ranking person assumes a more indirect style.

This study suggests, based on the roles in the meeting, that the less powerful player in an interaction is more likely to go "off record" using indirect and implicit linguistic strategies to express their views at the meeting. For example, making a request to the proposal or to disagree to the suggestions made by the higher power participants in the meeting. Those in authority can exploit their influential position and adopt a more assertive style, pressuring others to change and accept their viewpoint, like in the case of Speaker A – the chair of the meeting. On the other hand, a speaker with lower power is more indirect in interactions with superiors, like Speaker b3 in Extracts 1a and 3a. However, a speaker is more likely to perform speech functions directly to a hearer who has equal power status, like Speaker a3 in Extract 3b.

On the contrary, it is also noticed from this study that there are cases in which higher ranking persons assume a more indirect style of speech. Firstly, for example, for the purpose of building rapport between the working groups, high-powered speakers will be more tolerant of the use of indirectness. Secondly, higher ranking persons will manage indirectness at critical moments of negotiation in business meetings, such as in discussions relating to monetary issues. Thirdly, high-powered persons will perform indirectness as a strategy in order to seek more support for their view points.

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