INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS AND THEIR STYLISTIC ROLE IN LITERARY COMMUNICATION

Abduvohidova Shahribonu Akmalovna
Trainee Teacher at the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages.
princess13082001@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17480744

ABSTRACT

The article explores the nature, classification, and stylistic role of indirect speech acts in literary communication. It highlights how indirectness functions not only as a pragmatic device for politeness or social mitigation but also as a stylistic means that enriches characterization, narrative voice, and reader engagement. Drawing on the theories of J.L. Austin, J.R. Searle, H.P. Grice, and modern pragmalinguistic scholars, the paper examines the pragmatic mechanisms underlying indirect speech acts and their contribution to the artistic and aesthetic qualities of fiction.

Language in literature is not merely a transparent vehicle for meaning transmission but a sophisticated and multifaceted instrument of artistic expression. Literary language departs from the utilitarian function of ordinary discourse by turning linguistic structures into aesthetic tools that embody the author's creative intent. Within this rich artistic system, one of the most remarkable and functionally versatile phenomena is the **indirect speech act** is a form of linguistic behavior through which a speaker communicates more than, or something different from, what is explicitly said. This subtle interplay between literal form and intended meaning lies at the heart of pragmatics, but in literature it gains a unique artistic and interpretive significance.

Indirect speech acts constitute one of the key means by which writers encode layers of meaning and elicit active reader interpretation. When characters or narrators employ indirectness, the language ceases to be a simple conveyor of propositional content; it becomes a stage for expressing psychological depth, irony, and tension between what is meant and what is said. Thus, indirectness in literature not only fulfills pragmatic functions such as politeness or face-saving—but also operates as a stylistic device that contributes to characterization, thematic development, and narrative voice. The philosophical foundation for this phenomenon was laid by **J. L. Austin** in his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words*[1], where he introduced the concept of the **speech act.** Austin's insight that "to say something is to do something" shifted linguistic inquiry from static semantics to the performative dimension of language. Every utterance, according to

---

[1] Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Austin, can be viewed as a kind of action, involving three interconnected acts: the *locutionary act* (the act of saying something), the *illocutionary act* (the act performed in saying something, such as promising or requesting), and the *perlocutionary act* (the effect the utterance has on the listener).

Building upon Austin's theory, **J. R. Searle** developed a more precise taxonomy of speech acts and introduced the crucial distinction between **direct** and **indirect** speech acts[2]. A direct speech act occurs when the form of the utterance corresponds straightforwardly to its function. For example, *"Close the door"* functioning as a command. An indirect speech act, by contrast, arises when the speaker performs one illocutionary act by means of another, as in *"Could you close the door?"*, which formally appears as a question but pragmatically functions as a request. Searle argued that indirectness relies on the listener's ability to infer the intended meaning through shared background knowledge, contextual cues, and conversational conventions. In everyday communication, indirect speech acts serve several pragmatic functions. They are used to **soften commands** and thus mitigate imposition, to **express politeness** and respect for the interlocutor's autonomy, or to **preserve social harmony** through face-saving strategies. For example, when one says *"Would you mind helping me with this?",* the speaker avoids direct imposition while still conveying a clear request. This ability to balance communicative efficiency with social sensitivity makes indirectness a vital component of human interaction.

However, when transferred into the domain of literature, the indirect speech act assumes additional layers of significance. It ceases to be merely a tool of politeness and becomes an integral part of the author's **artistic and stylistic strategy**. In fiction, drama, or poetry, indirectness can be used to shape the reader's perception of characters, reveal psychological complexity, or construct irony and ambiguity. The gap between literal and intended meaning allows the author to engage the reader in a process of interpretation, inviting them to infer motives, emotions, and subtexts. For instance, when a character in a novel says, *"It's getting late,"* the utterance may literally refer to time, yet contextually it might function as an indirect request to end a conversation, a signal of discomfort, or even a subtle rejection. The reader's awareness of this double-layered meaning enriches the texture of the text, transforming a simple phrase into a site of emotional or moral tension. Thus, the **aesthetic value** of indirect speech acts lies in their capacity to generate multiplicity of meaning and to encourage interpretive participation. From a stylistic standpoint, indirectness contributes to the **authenticity of dialogue** in literary works. Real human conversations are rarely composed of direct statements; they are filled with hesitations, implications, and unspoken understandings. By incorporating indirect speech acts, authors reproduce the pragmatic realism of everyday speech, making dialogues sound natural and psychologically credible. At the same time, skilled writers manipulate indirectness for deliberate artistic effect creating irony, suspense, or emotional resonance.

---

[2] Searle, J. R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Irony, in particular, relies heavily on indirectness. When there is a deliberate discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, the utterance becomes a vehicle for ironic expression. Authors such as Jane Austen or O. Henry, for instance, masterfully employ indirect speech to reveal characters' hypocrisy, self-deception, or wit. The reader's task of interpreting these indirect meanings becomes part of the aesthetic pleasure of reading the recognition of what lies beneath the surface of words. Furthermore, the **psychological dimension** of indirect speech acts in literature cannot be overstated. Characters often use indirect language to conceal true intentions, to protect their emotions, or to manipulate others. In dramatic dialogue, for example, indirectness can signal tension or unspoken conflict; in narrative prose, it can reflect a character's uncertainty, politeness, or strategic behavior. Such linguistic behavior mirrors real social dynamics, reinforcing the verisimilitude of fictional worlds. Another significant aspect is the **interaction between narrator and reader.** In narrative prose, the author or the narrator as a textual persona may use indirectness to guide the reader's interpretation without overtly stating judgments. Through subtle hints, irony, or understatement, the writer invites the reader to read between the lines. In this sense, indirect speech acts function as **aesthetic prompts,** encouraging the reader to become an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive recipient. From a pragmatic perspective, the comprehension of indirect speech acts in literature requires the activation of **contextual inference.** Readers must rely on contextual clues, genre conventions, and background knowledge to reconstruct the intended meaning. This inferential process forms the core of literary communication: the author implies, the reader infers, and meaning emerges in the space between them. As **S. C. Levinson** and other pragmatists have noted, this interaction is governed by shared principles of cooperation and relevance, even within the fictional world of a text[3]. Indirect speech acts in literature represent a fusion of linguistic, pragmatic, and aesthetic functions. They transcend their everyday communicative purpose and become artistic devices through which writers shape meaning, express irony, and reveal character psychology. By embedding indirectness within dialogue and narration, authors create multilayered texts that stimulate interpretation and emotional engagement. The study of such speech acts therefore bridges linguistics and literary criticism, demonstrating how pragmatic theories initially developed to describe ordinary language use can illuminate the subtleties of artistic expression.

Let us examine several literary examples to illustrate how indirect speech acts perform stylistic functions. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Mr. Darcy: *"She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me."*[4] This statement, though framed as an evaluation, functions **indirectly as a social rejection.** It conveys Darcy's pride and irony, while also setting up the central tension of the novel. The reader perceives the indirect insult as a **stylistic revelation of character**.

[3] Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
[4] Austen, J. *Pride and Prejudice.* – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. – P. 7.

In pragmatic terms, indirectness is motivated by politeness (Leech, 1983), mitigation, or social distance[5]. However, in literary texts, it also functions stylistically, contributing to tone, irony, and subtext. According to Leech and Short (1981), literary communication involves a double-layered context the fictional world of characters and the real communicative act between author and reader.[6] Hence, indirect speech acts can operate simultaneously on both levels, enriching the interpretive complexity of a text. As Goffman (1967) and Schiffrin (1987) argue,[7] indirectness also maintains face and identity within interaction.[8] In fiction, this function helps represent the psychological authenticity of dialogue and social relationships between characters.

[5] Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics.* London: Longman.
[6] Leech, G., & Short, M. (1981). *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose.* London: Longman.
[7] Schiffrin, D. (1987). *Discourse markers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[8] Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.