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How to Make and Understand a Request
But directives are only a part of the problem. Directives belong to a larger class of moves which affect the partner's actions, which I shall call control moves. Control moves may include efforts to encourage actions or to prohibit, slow, or stop actions already underway by another person. Control moves could include directives, prohibitions, warnings, and ownership claims having action consequences. They may also include offers, promises, permission requests, and statements of intention if they have consequences for the addressee's actions, possessions or territory.

Let us begin according to the tradition and focus on the problem of action rather than relationship or attitude. The same goal, the same action by the hearer, can be brought about by a variety of speech acts. The same utterance can have a variety of interpretations as to the action goal.

Suppose you walk into a friend's kitchen and see a thirty-month old child cutting carrots with a very large butcher knife. You are concerned that she might injure herself and so you speak:

(1) A-C: Can I help you?

How is this utterance to be understood? You may be making an offer to help, with the possibility of refusal. You may have already taken up the large knife, so your utterance merely expresses your intention to help. We often see such cases where offers or even directives are given after the adult speaker has already taken action. The difference between an 'offer' and an announced 'intention' is in the beliefs of viewers or participants, not in the action in view. In both cases the speaker will act, not the hearer. In the case of an offer, the hearer is the principal beneficiary and so has the right to control what happens.

Now consider the situation in which you, an adult, are slicing carrots and the same small child appears and says:

(2) C-A: Can I help?

If you consider yourself the beneficiary of the assistance of a well-trained Montessori-taught carrot-slicer, you may hear this as an offer. If you doubt the skill or even safety of the help, you may consider it a plea for permission, especially if said with a wheedling tone. The difference here is that in the case of permission requests the speaker, as principal beneficiary, wants the action more than the hearer. Yet again, in this situation there is no difference in the action itself which is in view.

Since it's very hard to tell the difference, perhaps it's not surprising that American children accept offers with OK, which sounds like compliance with a request. Maybe the boundaries between offers and requests are after all not well marked. For example:

(3) A-C: Do you wanna play outside?
(4) A-C: Do you wanna have more juice?

While we expect juice to be more often the desire of the consumer than the speaker, and to therefore be accepted as an offer, either (3) or (4) would be acceptable as an offer or as a directive, depending on desires and circumstances.

It must often be the case that participants do not agree as to the act intended. Since the consequences are so slight as the greater likelihood of thanks for offers, it cannot surprise us that even the participants are not always sure of intent, in speech act terms. Since the action goals are the same across these interpretations there is no sense of the collapse of communication.

But there are circumstances in which the social features even influence the view of the action goal. Picture an elderly landlady and her student tenant in conversation. The landlady says to the student:

(5) L-S: Can we move the dust bin over here?

The student will hear the utterance as a request to move the dust bin. The social features influencing this view include the knowledge that the student is younger and more capable of lifting dust bins.

There are also formal reasons to hear (5) as a request. Note that a common form in English for unexpected requests is the modal:
(6) Can you + (desired act)?
The form in (6) has been found to be typical of requests to listeners of a different age or rank, or to mark unexpected tasks or even greater distance (Ervin-Tripp 1976).

The we pronoun is commonly used to designate the addressee when a superior asks a subordinate to do tasks for the common good (Ervin-Tripp 1976, Sinclair and Coulthard 1975).

(7a) Doctor - nurse: We'll get a temperature at midnight.
(7b) Teacher - pupils: Let's take our naps now.

At this conference, E. Schegloff, acting as moderator, used we to a questioner he thought out of line:

(8) Moderator - questioner: If we will restrict ourselves to clarification questions.

Thus for both social and formal reasons (5) is heard as a directive to the student to perform the action mentioned.

But if the social positions are reversed there is a radical change in interpretation. In (9) the student asks permission using a standard permission form:

(9) S-L: Can we move the dust bin over here?

In this case it is the speaker, not the hearer, who is to carry out the action; it is the speaker, not the hearer, who wants the action done and who is the principal beneficiary.

The difference in interpretation is here very overt since a different person acts. The difference depends entirely on conventions such as those about can you and we in English, and the rank relation of the two parties.

This example came to my attention because a Turkish student said (9) to an American landlady intending a directive. But the landlady replied:

(10) Why, Ayhan, I didn't know you had a roommate!

In the landlady's view, her greater age (and possibly her rank as proprietor) entitled her both to receive permission requests more than directives, and to give but not receive we as a second-person form in her relationship with student tenants. The landlady's reply indicated that she heard an unambiguous permission request.

Despite the fact that an explicit goal was stated, it is not only the interpreted speech act which changes according to the social assumptions, but who is to carry out the goal act, the speaker or the hearer. In cases where the goal is implicit and not stated -- such as "Is there any coffee left?" -- the diversity of interpretation is well known.

We cannot know whether an utterance is a request for permission for the speaker to benefit himself, or an offer for the speaker to benefit the hearer unless we know the participants' assumptions about skill and benefit. We cannot know whether the speaker is going to act himself or is directing the hearer to act unless we know the speaker's estimate of relative rank. In more general terms, it's not possible to have an empirically satisfactory theory of control acts that is not also an analysis of social interpretation. Because there appears to be a very complex relation between action goals and utterances, it is sometimes thought the relation is completely indeterminate. But if we include social information we have shown that there is consistency in the relation between action goals and form. It is the omission of social information which obscures the mapping system.

Foregrounding social information. In the above examples, I took the action or goal as focal. In this perspective, the social information is necessary for disambiguation of action goals, since there is no one-to-one mapping of action goals. Sometimes -- perhaps more often than we realize -- control acts are a means for conveying social information (e.g. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977a):

(5) Sup-inf: Can we move the dust bin over here?
(9) Inf-sup: Can we move the dust bin over here?

Since (5) and (9) are alike, we could say that the utterance conveys two potential messages:
(11) You will move the dust bins: + you are inferior.
(12) You give permission + we will move the dust bins + we are inferior to you.

When the social relationship is perceived the same way by both and is not under negotiation, the resolution of the message with more than one axis is not a problem. The action then becomes focal and the message is informative about action.

If somebody was already busy moving the dust bin, and another participant said (5) or (9), the utterance would become an assertion about social relationships, since the action is unambiguous. Our family studies suggest that the intended action may be known to observers at least half the time. When that is the case, control acts can become at least as informative about social relationships and feelings as they are about action goals.

Looking back at the first example, we can contrast the alternatives:

(1) A-C: Can I help you?
(13) A-C: I'm going to help you.

The second alternative would explicitly specify that the adult intended to help whether the child gave permission or not. The social implication of the difference can only be correctly understood if we knew the usage distribution of explicit intention forms vs. permission forms in situations where the context makes clear that speech states intentions.

We have found in American middle class samples that many forms typically spoken by women in offices to persons different in rank -- either higher or lower -- are also spoken to children, e.g.

(14) Could you give me that?
(15) Would you please come in?

Adults in these cases appear to be signalling a rank difference and letting intonation convey the direction of the difference.

We have found that children, on the other hand, are likely to mark higher/lower by many different cues, rather than just distance or difference in rank. They often focus more explicitly on the social information conveyed, rather than the act. Andy Rogers (1979) reported an excellent example between an older and younger brother and sister:

(16) B-S: Carrie, stop sucking your fingers.
S-S: David, you're not the boss of me.

If we had unambiguous one-to-one coding of control acts they would be imperatives like carry the dust bin and give me the carrot knife. If we had unambiguous one-to-one representation of social relationships they might be declaratives like I'm the boss, I can do that better, or I love you. People do of course make such statements, and some mental health reformers think we should do it more, rather than conflating social and action messages. Real languages allow us to attend focally either to social relationships or action goals and let the other remain in the background. In such a system it is almost impossible to communicate action goals without at the same time signalling adult/child, inferior/superior, familiar/strange. Studies of pragmatics with respect to action have focussed either on conveyed intent or on social meaning and politeness. The outcome has been some despair at the possibility of discovering mapping rules that are empirically verifiable outside of the scholar's study.

The multiple mapping which includes both action goal and social claims helps us to see why there are so many communication problems. These are endemic in the differences of interpretation of speaker and hearer as to their relative skill, rank and so on, which on occasion can lead to a difference in interpretation of intended act or actor. Some speakers chronically use forms conveying greater distance or deference than hearers expect; such a speaker's control acts will be misinterpreted: her hints will not be heard as directives, her directives will be considered literal questions, her statements of intent will be heard as permission requests. While recent work suggests such chronic mis-mapping can exist between spouses, it would of course be more common to find it cross-culturally. We are usually more aware of social misinterpretations. For example, if Europeans believe the forms in (14)
and (15) are appropriate only to superiors, they might assume American middle class women are deferential to children. The mismatches leading to failure to comply with an action goal are likely to be incorrectly attributed.

My analysis proposes that social assumptions affect the interpretation of speech acts — if there is a level such as the speech act — and that social assumptions also affect the interpretation of action goals to be accomplished by the speech act. Conversely, assumptions as to conveyed intent or action goals affect messages received about social features conveyed. The decision as to whether a speech act level is analytically necessary awaits a detailed proposal incorporating social and action aspects into one description.

Interpreting speech in context. We have recently been engaged, in Berkeley, in a study of the practical problem of interpreting a system with two or more unknowns. Our empirical means have included: collecting critical instances of misunderstandings, identifying formal variations with correlated social differences, videotaping natural interaction to get context, and testing conveyed intent in situations where we can control what is known.

It is surprising to see, in everyday family interaction, how often actions are quite predictable. In order to test this intuition, we asked an audience of adults to watch and listen to the videotaped scenes. We stopped the action at critical test points and asked them what was going to happen next. They guessed the next speech act correctly half the time. These guesses were based on a few obvious principles:

(a) Actors hold intentions over time. When a control act fails, it will be tried again. Since the younger the child, the more limited the repertoire, the principle of repetition may apply at a low level, namely to the overt act or utterance itself.

(b) Events have trajectories. From the beginnings of social and physical experience, infants begin to recognize regularities of sequence. For instance, mother opens the refrigerator door, baby is fed soon. In infant games, schemes of sequence or alternation can be said to have simple trajectories. Baby throws toys out of the crib, partner puts them back. Door slams; Daddy enters the house, so that an early reported utterance is "Daddy" when a door slams.

The knowledge of trajectories makes many control utterances redundant with action. Suppose a person carrying a package enters a room and another points to a place suitable to put packages. The pointing is functionally equivalent to "put it there", but it is only intelligible because the participants (a) have noticed the package, (b) know that packages are put down, (c) agree on appropriate places to put packages, (d) on the particular occasion know that either the package or its bearer is not going further. Even pointing relies for its interpretation on prior knowledge of a course of events.

(c) Participants know the roles in the events. Norms like event trajectories develop out of early social experience. Infants, for example know if it is their father who supplies food, who feeds them. The combination of event knowledge and social roles can create powerful expectations about the course of actions.

Cooking can be a complex joint enterprise. Experienced adults would expect that there will be actions including the locating and adding of ingredients, and their processing. If a helper comes, they produce questions about location of food and utensils, questions about the next action, and the person who controls the resources can be expected to give directives to find, add, or process.

In such a situation, the interpretation of a particular utterance depends on assumed relative expertise.

(17) Where's the vanilla?

From an outsider (17) is more likely to be a location question; from the head cook it is more likely to be a directive.

We have studied children's understanding of implicit directives which do not state what is to be done. We showed stories with pictures in which children did naughty things like spill food on the carpet or couch. If the mother was in sight, or if her voice could be heard,
even three year olds expected that the event coming next would be that the naughty children would stop and clean up, regardless of what the mother said or whether she spoke at all. She might say (18) or she might be silent.

(18) M-C: Are you spilling food?

The crucial role of the mother is apparent from the contrast in consequences when it is another child who speaks instead of the mother. Our interpretation of these data is that children learn very early that certain actions are prohibited by the mother, and that she demands specific remedial acts like cleaning up. In fact, many children supplied what the mother would be likely to say. The mother's presence either in sight or in sound suggests this normal train of events. In the sense that the scenario is already familiar, what the mother says is not critical if it is congruent with this expectation. When it was not, the children said she was silly and told us what she should have said. For instance she was silly if she said she liked to play too, which of course is a serious violation of normal roles.

In another picture story, a mother and child carry groceries from the car. The door to the house is closed, but some children are playing nearby. By seven, half of the children we tested proposed opening the door even when nothing was said. They could actively construct the trajectory without additional cues. By six, children who were told the mother said (19) nearly always reported opening the door. The question directs attention to an obstacle.

(19) M-C: Is the door open?

The importance of social roles to the development of event/role expectations can be seen in a story in which we unwittingly violated normal roles. In this story a child sits near a cake at a dinner table. Farther away is the mother who announces (20).

(20) I've finished my cake.

It was very rare that any child proposed offering more to the mother, this being a reversal of usual roles.

We propose that before an utterance occurs, observers and participants are engaged in projecting the event trajectory with the actions according to expected roles. The utterance then has less burden in supplying information.

In cases where the point of view or knowledge of participants differs, more explicitness is necessary. With an adult in a joint cooking activity, a child might be more interested in process, for instance in mixing or beating, than in getting a particular food cooked. In such a case, (21) would be inadequate.

(21) M-C: One teaspoon of vanilla.

The child's event projection does not include food addition at this point, only more of the present activity.

(d) Utterances alter attentional focus. If a listener is preoccupied with different activities than the speaker, joint focus has to be brought about. Even a shared project need not result in joint focus if roles are divided or experience is different. Parallel activity can bring the partner into peripheral focus, allowing divided attention if such complex work is possible.

Many activities require that an actor divide attention at a given time. For instance, a source of frustration reported by housewives is the chronic overlap of attention, for instance to a household task, planning a future action, helping a child with homework, monitoring the path of a toddler. In such a situation, oscillations of relative focus determine how much special stimulation is necessary to bring intensive focus on a given target. A famous central European folktale chronicles the disasters coming to a husband who was unable to maintain simultaneous attention to multiple trajectories and program his interventions in the right order, when he trades jobs with his wife.

Take a specific incident to illustrate attention division. A driver and a passenger are commuting for an hour on a complex route in which highways must be entered and left at appropriate points, not always well marked. Both have two foci of attention at least, the route
and the talk. The driver also, of course, has the mechanics of driving the car, shifting, and turning. The passenger can afford to put almost all attention, perhaps all attention, on the narrative he is producing. The driver's attentional focus depends on the demands of the route, making turns at the right points and going through lights. At one point in the narrative, the passenger suddenly leaned forward, turned to the driver, waved his hand, and in an excited voice said:

(22) P-D: No, not the San Francisco Airport the Oakland Airport!

How was this to be heard by the driver?

The sudden shift in body attitude, the loud excited voice could signal an urgent warning. Or they could signal self-correction in the narrative. The content was appropriate to the narrative, but both airports were turn-offs from the route the car was on. So the content was equally relevant to the narrative and to the route.

The narrative had been relegated to secondary attention by the driver. So the effect of (22) was an initial interpretation that it was a warning. Why? If the driver's primary attention is to the route, the first scan of all messages will fit them to that framework. The accidental overlap of topic, and of kinesic and vocal cues fit the driver's primary framework of interpretation, with a disruption of driving until the secondary analysis according to the narrative was done. This was a dramatic evidence of the impact of attentional priorities in determining interpretive order.

In the videotapes of families, many control acts occur through altering attention. That change is enough to set to work the event knowledge which leads the listener to understand what needs to happen next. If one's own actions are very engrossing, or if one's abilities do not allow simultaneous attention to several trajectories at once, then special efforts to gain attention are needed. These are not just of the type to call attention to speech, though that, of course, is learned very early. In particular these attention-focussing utterances involve reference to obstacles to the successful completion of desired acts.

**Context and utterance.** The videotape analysis and the experimental stories have shown us that understanding starts first from context. When a listener is attending to ongoing action and its trajectory, then it is possible to understand a congruent utterance with minimal interpretive work. What is said is likely to be redundant with what is already known, or it may add specifications, as in the case of please, hurry, there, or three. Alternative interpretations are not likely to be considered at all, including "literal interpretations" unless the utterance is so unconventional as to require inference to reach a relevant interpretation. The activities in focus and trajectories of expected events to come create a field of relevance or projected relevance within which priorities of interpretation will be made.

In this view, language is needed to direct attention, to control timing, to specify, to organize action, to identify actors, to motivate or provide reasons, to reinforce or change social relationships affected by control acts. When any of these accomplishments are left undone by the prior work of the interaction or the prior knowledge of the participants, we can say that language is supplementary.

The evidence from our experimental work with children is that the calculation of the intent of the speaker is not necessary in many situations. If the partner understands the event trajectory, is aware of obstacles, and has a cooperative attitude about the removal of obstacles, understanding can occur without any inference about intent.

A standard interpretive model for speech acts makes the utterance occur first. Context is checked against possible interpretations. We can say that interpretation is retrospective to context. Our analysis of data suggests the opposite. We propose that participants become aware of inferential processes when there is incongruity or misunderstanding, and that this awareness has been the model for standard interpretation. Most of the time, language is facilitative to ongoing event projection, and merely confirms or supplements what is already known. Because so little needs to be done by language, it is available in everyday exchanges for ellipsis, for joking, or for the redundancy that
instructs children and newcomers about conventions. By generalizing the structural features of these redundant instances to new occasions, learners can project an interpretation into the novel instances which supply no supportive clues.

Conclusions. The major claims made in this paper are that interpersonal control acts always involve both information about social assumptions and relationships, and information about desired acts or goals. The analysis of interpretive processes which attends only to politeness, to social meaning, or to conveyed intent is doomed to fail. Since these meanings are conveyed jointly through a complex mapping they must be included in a model of interpretation and production.

Analysis of both videotaped and experimental control acts revealed that interpretive processes rely heavily on context, and appear to depend on expectations based on repetition, knowledge of usual sequences of events and roles, as filtered by attention. Although interpretive processes can be retrospective to context when something goes wrong, it appears far more common that language is redundant with or supplementary to knowledge already available from what was going on before the utterance in question. The selective power of such prior knowledge permits extremely efficient interpreting of control acts and by-passing of irrelevant literal interpretations.

FOOTNOTE:

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