

ÁGNES DELI

COGNITION AND POLITENESS

Abstract: Scientists working in the areas of gestalt psychology and cognitive semantics rely on the fact that the physical experience of the surrounding world is a determining factor in cognition and in the establishment of conceptual systems. It has been found that these systems strongly bear upon human communication in general.

The paper seeks an answer to the question: why do speakers often use declaratives instead of interrogatives to ask questions?

The phenomenon is assumed to be related to politeness, which is manifested by the speaker's lexico-grammatical choice. It is proposed that in discourse the upshot of such unstraightforwardness is politeness, and it is likely to spring out of a process, which is a kind of metaphorization in the philosophical sense. This process involves various metaphors both on the side of production and interpretation, such as **MORE IS MORE**, or **DISTANCE IS LACK OF STRENGTH**, which affiliate with two underlying concepts: '**Knowledge is Mental Space**' and '**Cognition is a Tour**'.

By virtue of these basic concepts politeness is a reflection of physical reality.

1. Experience and Meaning

The human conceptual system contains several basic concepts. Some of these emerge directly from our physical experiences such as spatial orientation (eg. **UP-DOWN**, **IN-OUT**, **NEAR-FAR**, **FRONT-BACK**), others are ontological concepts (eg. **ENTITY**, **SUBSTANCE**, **CONTAINER**, **PERSON**), and we also encounter with some structured experiences and activities (eg. **EATING**, **MOVING**, **TRANSFERRING OBJECTS FROM PLACE TO PLACE**) in our life.

Cognitive linguistics is based on an approach to language in which meaning is understood to arise from the physical experience of the surrounding world. This gives rise to a novel interpretation of metaphor, which is considered inherent to understanding abstract concepts. The richness and complexity of the metaphorical systems of the English language has been discussed in a huge literature (see Lakoff and Johnson (1980),

Reddy (1979), Sweetser (1987), Lakoff (1985), Langacker (1986), Dirven (1985), Radden (1985), Johnson (1987), *inter alia*).

Lakoff (1985) assumes that besides these the human mind also contains metaphorical concepts. He defines them as follows:

“Metaphorical concepts are those which are understood and structured not merely on their own terms, but rather in terms of other concepts. This involves conceptualizing one kind of object or experience in terms of a different kind of object or experience“ (ibid.:58).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) classify metaphors into three types (see also Lakoff,1985):

orientational metaphors:

More Is Up, Control Is Up, Good Is Up, Rational Is Up,

ontological metaphors:

Ideas Are Entities and Words Are Containers, The Mind Is a Container, The Mind Is a Machine, The Mind Is a Brittle Object, Vitality Is a Substance,

and **structural metaphors** such as

Understanding Is Seeing, Life Is a Gambling Game.

Whether or not it is admitted many scientific communication theories account for **conceptual metaphors** and **folk theories** such as

‘Communication Is Sending’, ‘The Mind Is a Container’, ‘Ideas Are Objects’, ‘Linguistic Expressions Are Containers’.

These are parts of the pervasive folk theory which Reddy (1979) calls the CONDUIT metaphor. Theories that are based on the view that language is a code and communication is sending messages in that code from a speaker to a hearer make use of the CONDUIT metaphor. Reddy (ibid.) provides more than a hundred types of linguistic expressions in English that are systematically organized by the conduit metaphor. The following are but a few of his examples:

it’s hard to put my ideas into words, his words don’t carry much conviction, your words seem hollow, let me try to get across what I have in mind, who gave you that idea?

Lakoff (1985) notes that although the CONDUIT metaphor seems natural, because it fits very well certain types of situations which are taken by many communication theorists as being prototypical - e.g. at the checkout counter at the local supermarket - in most significant cases the CONDUIT metaphor is inadequate to a greater or lesser extent. He proposes that

“In fact, what makes such cases of communication important is the very failure of the CONDUIT metaphor. Communication matters

most where the elements that make the CONDUIT metaphor fit well are *not* present - that is, where we do not share the same cultural assumptions, relevant knowledge, and relevant experience, and especially where our conceptual metaphors and folk theories differ. In such cases communication requires special skill; it becomes a matter of imaginative and poetic skill on the part of *both* participants, not just the speaker“ (1985:71).

In the cognitive-experientialist view cognition involves some basic schemata which are inherent part of our thinking (cf. Neisser 1976).

Lakoff's (1987) and Johnson's (1987) work is based on the conception that meanings derive from our bodily experience of the surrounding world and our bodily interaction with the environment. They argue that the child's early sensorimotor experience in the spatial world determine our thinking, and that abstract thoughts are metaphorically grounded in our preconceptual kinesthetic image schemas. They notice that the basic schemas like 'the Container schema', 'the Link schema', 'the Up-down schema' and 'the Path schema' are mapped onto our abstract modes of thought, and thus they are reflected in the language.

The discovery that the physical world and our experiences of it are present in the language via imagination and metaphorical projection led Johnson to "put the Body back into the Mind" (cf. Johnson (1987)).

Johnson (ibid.) suggests that image schemata are central to meaning structure, and that they influence the ways in which we can make sense of things and reason about them. He points out that

“Metaphorically, we understand the process of reasoning as a form of motion along a path - propositions are the locations (or bounded areas) that we start out from, proceed through and wind up at. Holding a proposition is understood metaphorically as being located at that point (or in that area)“ (1987:38).

To illustrate how the above described general metaphorical system is reflected in the English language about reasoning Johnson (ibid.) provides the following examples:

Let us *start out from* the proposition that Hamlet feared his father.

You can't *move to* that conclusion from *where* you are now.

From here I'll proceed to show that humans are slaves of their passions.

Once you *reach that point* in the argument, you've got to *go on to* the conclusion.

The *next step* is to demonstrate that monkeys can make tools.

He *got off the track* of the argument.

That assumption will *lead you astray*.

In what follows I assume that cognition is a complex process in which two major domains of human experience play a determining role: the domain of 'KNOWING' and the domain of 'NOT KNOWING'. These are psychological states of mind alternating in the process of cognition, intertwining, and verbal communication presupposes the presence of both.

Cognition is a tour across these domains.

2. Conceptual Metaphors of Cognition

In the following I propose some elaboration of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) ontological metaphor: '*The Mind Is a Container*'.

My suggestion is that **psychological and cognitive states**, as products of the mind, just like ideas, are also **experienced as a substance**. Some states of mind are experienced as a pervading material medium into which humans can descend in the same way as they can plunge into a pool of water. The English language reflects this metaphorical projection in phrases expressing the shift into certain psychological states such as:

plunge into despair, plunge into daydreaming.

One can also *plunge into one's thoughts*, an obvious evidence that cognitive processes are experienced in a similar way.

Other phrases imply that "States of Mind Are Territories":

I don't want *to intrude on your grief*.

Don't *intrude into her solitude*.

Part of the concept of 'Knowledge' seems to be the metaphor 'Knowledge Is Mental Space'. States of consciousness like 'KNOWING' and 'NOT KNOWING' are territories, i.e. **domains** of the mind, which is reflected by phrases such as

live in ignorance, be / live in a fool's paradise, or be in the belief that..., advance in scientific knowledge.

In my interpretation the domains of 'KNOWING', and 'NOT KNOWING' intersect to form a third domain, that of 'BELIEVING'. To believe is neither to know nor not to know; it is to make a supposition, a hypothesis. In discourse a supposition can be either confirmed as true, or denied as not true, so the speaker expressing his hypothesis either gets into the domain of 'KNOWING' or slips over into the domain of 'NOT KNOWING'.

In figure a below I propose a schema of how the cognitive domains of the mind impart the three different kinds of domains:

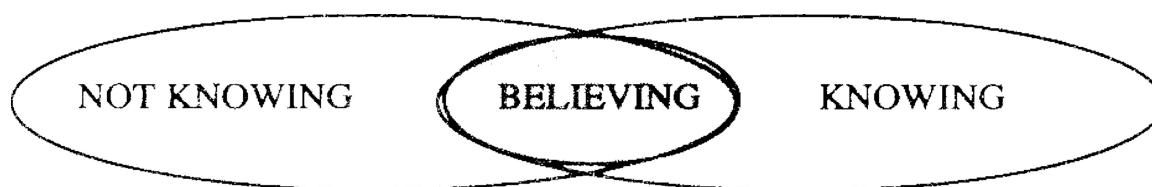


Figure A

It would be oversimplification of the matter, however, to maintain that the borderlines between the domains are as distinct as shown in Figure 1, and that their arrangement can be identified in such an explicit way. The schema is meant only to imply that in the process of cognition there is a possibility of transition from one domain into another one. The usual direction of the tour is from 'NOT KNOWING' to 'KNOWING' or from 'BELIEVING' to 'KNOWING', but it can also be diverse.

In the mind the process of learning or understanding is associated with movement:

one can get/come to know things, come to the understanding /conclusion that..., get into the way of things, make great strides in the domain of 'KNOWING' or run into problems/difficulties in the domain of 'NOT KNOWING', and perhaps go round in circles, which does not lead anywhere, whereas one who does not want to take such 'trips' may live in a cuckoo land, i.e. be ignorant of reality.

The experience of movement in the process of cognition gives ground for the metaphor: '**Cognition is a Tour**'.

In the course of discourse the participants often are in different 'domains', i.e. they are at different stages of cognition, and often, their purpose is to get into one and the same domain of knowing or believing, i.e. to come to some understanding or agreement. The process is a very delicate one, and it seems to involve several concepts about the physical world and reality.

One way of getting into the partner's domain is by asking questions.

3. The Force Dynamics of Questions

While tracing how image schemata provide the basis for meaning relations and for inferential patterns in our reasoning Johnson (1987) argues for the overwhelming experience of force and balance to be reflected in the realm of speech acts, as some metaphorical extensions of coherent basic level bodily experiences of systemic processes and states:

“...there are patterns of force at work in the structure of the speech act itself. So, besides physical force, social force, and epistemic force, there is a level of speech act force (illocutionary force) dynamics. My central claim,...,is that the relevant forces at this last level are also based on force gestalts metaphorically elaborated“ (1987:58).

I assume that social interactions such as conversations can also be described in terms of image schemata and metaphorical projection. Besides Lakoff and Johnson's above mentioned CONTAINER schema, the '**Knowledge is Mental Space**' and '**Cognition is a Tour**' metaphors seem to be at work in the process of discourse, which involves several other experiential patterns.

In the following I will use Johnson's (1987) schemata modified to my interpretation.

In his discussion of schematic configurations Johnson (1987:2) emphasizes the overwhelming experience of physical FORCE and BALANCE and sets up a COMPULSION SCHEMA as follows:



Figure B

In cognitive semantics the concept of force dynamics has played a major role in the interpretation of CAUSATION and TRANSITIVITY as well as in a new explanation of the senses of modal verbs (cf. Radden, 1991).

Sweetser (1990:49-75) suggests that the notions of modality are metaphorical extensions from the force-dynamic image schemas of the folk-physical world. *Must* denotes a compelling force which moves a subject toward an act.

Johnson (1987:51-2) also makes notes about the sociophysical force of *must*.

The compelling force, which is implied by the auxiliary *must*, Johnson argues, is similar to the sense of physical force, illustrated by the compulsion schema in Figure 2 above.

In a similar way, the concept of permission is understood as the removal of the potential barrier to one's action, which is represented by Johnson's (1987: 47) schema of REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT:

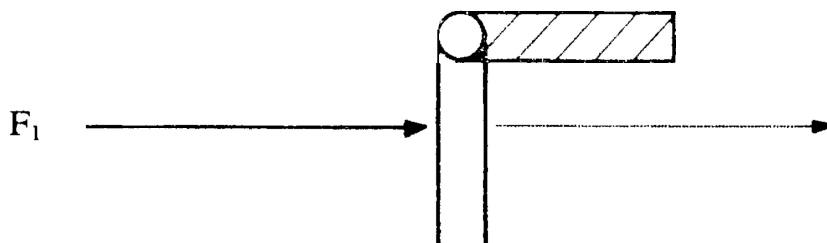


Figure C

My claim is that in discourse an act of demanding, i.e. commanding or asking a question (see Halliday,1985:68) is basically a compellation, and as

such it works as an external force coming from the speaker and operating on the addressee. When asking a question, the speaker, the source of the compellation, is in the domain of 'NOT KNOWING', whereas the addressee is supposed to be in the domain of 'KNOWING'. The speaker's aim is to get into the domain of 'KNOWING', which can be achieved by the removal of a 'blockage', i.e. the lack of knowledge. The removal of the blockage is to be carried out by the addressee. The diagram below stands here to illustrate this process schematically:

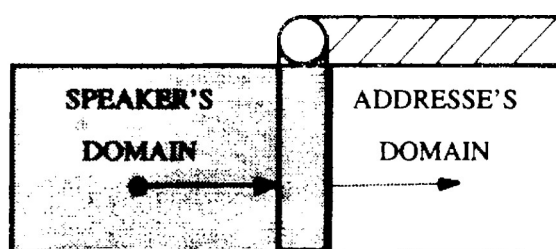


Figure D

The process can be interpreted as a metaphorical tour in which the participants co-operate in getting from one cognitive domain into another; the direction usually being from 'NOT KNOWING' or 'BELIEVING' to 'KNOWING' through the domains of shared experience.

A question is a blockage in the communication, which can be embodied in a linguistic sign, a word (e.g. a question word), or it can be 'a blockage' of a more abstract kind, a general sense expressed via the whole utterance. In the discourse the blockage is supposed to be moved by the addressee so that the participants end up in the same domain, the addressee's domain.

4. Question Function Realized by Declarative Form

Questions - both interrogative or non-interrogative - are of various forms, and the choices made by the speaker in terms of form are determined by various factors. One of these may be the speaker's motivation for politeness.

My observation is, that in radio interviews or in talk shows, i.e., the interviewer or the leader of the programme often uses non-interrogative

utterances to elicit a reply while taking the risk of being misunderstood or getting an unsatisfactory reply. It seems sensible to think that the reason for such a choice on the part of the interviewer may not only be to avoid the monotony of the default question-answer pattern of such encounters, but also to show compromise in terms of how much the addressee is willing to contribute, i.e. to be less intrusive, in other words, to be polite.

The extracts provided below are examples of a variety of the techniques a speaker can use to elicit a reply from his partner. The addressees' responses to the declarative elicitation are here to show that the declaratives of the first speaker are not necessarily interpreted as a hypothetical statement requiring affirmation, but often they are interpreted similarly to interrogatives.

1. A: *So it's the hours of your time, which is a crucial matter.*

B: That's right. We are creatures of the hour, creatures of time. We are a little bit like parking meters, really. The clock continues to click.

The second speaker could have given the simplest reply to the elicitation by saying 'Yes', but he came up with a longer response instead. His explanation implies that he thought he was expected not only to confirm the first speaker's hypothetical statement, but also to provide the reasons for it.

In extract 2. a simple confirmation - 'No' - would not have satisfied the interviewer:

2. A: *I don't imagine that you just write straight on the page.*

B: No. The whole art of easy writing, of course, is to make it look as if it were dashed off, as if it were knocked off. But you can write a sentence five times and then it reads as if it's been just knocked off.

The interviewee interpreted the speaker's declarative as "*How does good writing come about?*" or "*So what do you do?*".

The following sections seek an answer to the question how politeness comes about in the case of non-interrogative questions.

5. Cognitive Semantic Aspects of Politeness

For the past twenty-five years several phenomena in language use have been referred to as a matter of politeness, and to approach it from the other end: politeness has been investigated from many different aspects.

In philosophical linguistics indirect speech acts have been accounted for as acts motivated by politeness (Searle, 1975:74). Sociolinguists have investigated various aspects of the phenomenon. Goffman puts focus on the ritual character of politeness (see Goffman, 1967, 1971, 1981 e.g.). Gordon D. and Lakoff, G. (1971), or Brown and Levinson, (1978) consider politeness as strategic avoidance of conflicts, of which conventional indirectness in social encounters is a major strategy.

To reach their goals the participants use various tactics in the 'game'. The linguistic forms they choose can be definite and straightforward, as in the case of a question interrogative in form:

3. *What problems did you have yesterday coming back into the country?*

Quite often, however, the initiating utterance is not interrogative, yet it shows the speaker's aim to elicit a response:

4. *As far as I know you had some problems yesterday coming back into the country.*

5. *I gather you've just been made redundant.*

My assumption is that hypothetical statements eliciting a reply – such as 1., 2., 4. and 5. above – are a politeness phenomenon. The question arises: what is it that makes them so tactful, i.e. how does politeness come about in these utterances?

In this section I will make an attempt to explore some cognitive aspects of politeness by using relevant concepts and theories.

To get into the domain of the addressee is a kind of intrusion. Goffman's (1967) notion of 'face' implies this concept of territoriality, which he points out in his 'Replies and Responses' (1981:37) as follows:

"To ask an improperly personal question can be equivalent to making an unwanted visit; both constitute invasions of territoriality".

Grice's principles of co-operative behaviour (see Grice,1975) can be either observed or floated. However, floating the maxims of MANNER (viz. 1. Avoid obscurity of expression, 2. Avoid ambiguity, 3. Be brief, 4. Be orderly), is often to do with another principle: "Be polite". Conversationalists sometimes follow this principle at the cost of the maxims "Be brief", and "Avoid ambiguity".

Brown and Levinson (1987) offer a detailed discussion of the politeness principles, which are realized in various strategies of social encounters. Using Goffman's (1967) term 'face' they classify their linguistic forms into 'face saving' and 'face threatening' acts, and then cross-classify them into 'bald on record' and 'off record' types. Their notion of 'face' also ties up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'. As they put it:

"Thus face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face" (1987:61).

Requests are considered face threatening acts in linguistic literature. Using an imperative form is a "bald-on-record strategy" in Brown and Levinson's framework, and as such it is a face-threatening act (FTA) (cf. *ibid.*:95).

My view is that questions are also FTA's in the broad sense. A question represents a problem, and a problem is a compulsion of a psychological kind, consequently, any elicitation for a reply is a face threatening act. To maintain and enhance their partners' face speakers can opt out for less

'threatening' linguistic realizations by choosing the declarative form instead of the interrogative.

For an explanation why questions can be considered FTA's let us turn to a cognition theory again. Johnson's (1987) proposal about the force dynamics of speech acts, viz. the "illocutionary force", which determines whether the hearer will interpret the utterance as a question, assertion, command, or some other type of illocutionary act provides a sensible starting point:

"...statements are typically presented by speakers to force the hearers to add some belief to their belief system. Questions force the hearer to supply a certain relevant content to fill a gap in some informational structure. Directives exert force to compel the hearer to realize some state of affairs. And performatives (Searle's "declaratives") constitute forceful changes of the state of the world" (1987:59).

Although all utterances act upon the hearer with a particular force some force is stronger than another. Demanding acts, i.e. commands and questions, obviously, represent a stronger force than giving acts, i.e. assertions/statements. To be less forceful and intrusive, i.e. to save the addressee's face the speaker has the option of avoiding linguistic items that represent a 'problem' explicitly, and as such, demand immediate solution - "removal of the blockage" - by using less straightforward language. Johnson (1987:59) refers to "the force that acts on the sentence container", which determines the shape of the utterance, i.e. "of the speech-act container".

I assume that in conversation the **utterance form**, i.e. the "sentence-container" carries the **force of the utterance in inverse ratio to straightforwardness**.

The realizations of demanding acts can be arranged along a scale of straightforwardness as follows:

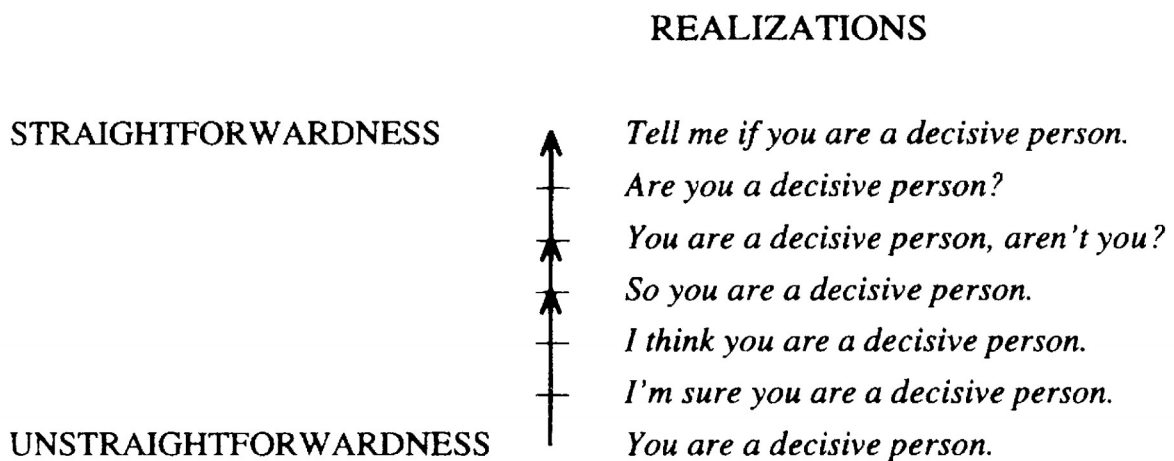


Figure E

What is the reason for the principle: the less straightforward the form the more polite the utterance? Why are utterances at the the bottom of the realization list considered much less intrusive than the interrogative at the top?

For the politeness feature of the interpersonal meaning of declarative elicitations I propose the following explanation:

The 'default' function of a declarative is that of a statement. In conversation comments on statements are usually optional. When the speaker asks the addressee in a form which is less straightforward than an interrogative, he also offers a choice, which can be regarded a face saving act. The utterance

6. *I think you are a decisive person*

when used as an initiation leaves it to the addressee whether or not he wants to reply. The force of the compellation here is rather weak, as there is no "blockage" realized in a lexico-grammatical sign, the only barrier being the signal of the hypothesis: *I think*.

Straightforward questions, i.e. interrogatives, on the other hand, offer no choice, they have a very strong compelling force, therefore they clearly are FTA's. The interrogatives

7. *Are you a decisive person?*

or 8. *What are you like?*

definitely demand an answer.

Another approach to cognition and politeness can be another 'physical' explanation, which implies the concept:

MORE IS MORE.

The larger the physical distance between two persons the less likely a "physical invasion" into their territories.

The longer an utterance the more time it takes and the more abstract distance it implies.

The longer the PATH the further away the PHYSICAL GOAL. If the goal is the addressee's mind, and the speaker's intention is to make the addressee react, the longer the time available for the addressee to prepare for the response the less the psychological compellation. By deliberately making the distance larger the speaker emphasizes his unwillingness to intrude on the addressee.

The concept MORE IS MORE seems compatible with Johnson and Lakoff's conceptual metaphor: CLOSENESS IS STRENGTH OF EFFECT (1980:128-132), and this allows us to make a step further and the following plausible inference.

DISTANCE IS LACK OF STRENGTH. This metaphor seems to underly not only to politeness, but also to common abstract concepts. It is probably such conceptual metaphors that provide basis for the meaning of several words and phrases used to describe human behaviour and relationships, too.

A person who *keeps the distance* does not want to get involved or have power. Someone who is called *distant* is cold, emotionally detached and unfriendly. A *stand-offish* person is rather unfriendly and behaves in a formal or distant way to other people, whereas a *close friend* usually has a strong effect on us.

Summary

The aim of this paper was to make a tentative suggestion of how politeness arises in those cases when the speaker uses non-interrogative forms to ask questions, and how this phenomenon is related to some cognitive semantic aspects of interpersonal communication.

It was suggested that politeness is related to the basic concept of DISTANCE as a physical experience, and that the more unstraightforward an utterance the longer distance it implies. The longer the distance the less the FORCE.

When being unstraightforward the speaker ventures his intentions not to be grasped exactly by the listener, yet he often takes the risk in order to prevent the addressee from the feeling of being stressed and forced to collaborate. It is very likely that it is the respect for the partner's face that motivates the speaker to use a declarative utterance to ask a question instead of a more forceful interrogative one.

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