

Pragmatic Markers

Speakers have other ways of indicating how their utterances are to be interpreted. They can include short forms such as you know, well, I mean, I don't know, which are optional and loosely attached to the utterance. These are pragmatic markers and they can be used to mark a speaker's attitude to the listener or to what is being said. Speakers can use you know to indicate that knowledge is being treated as shared, and I mean to self-correct or to mark an attempt to clarify something. They had been reading something by Charles Wright, you know, the famous poet and well, I mean, he's famous in America at least, but em they didn't really understand it. After making a statement about the poet, the speaker uses well to mark a shift from conveying information to commenting on it, with I mean introducing a clarification. A more recent change of function has turned I don't know into a pragmatic marker. This phrase has evolved from a way of indicating lack of knowledge (What's a lychee? ~ I don't know) to become a marker of hesitation or uncertainty when a speaker is about to say something potentially in disagreement with another speaker. L E E : I'm not very fond of Edinburgh it's so drab and it's always cold there. J E N : Oh, I don't know, I really enjoyed going to the Festival there last year. By appearing hesitant about disagreeing, the speaker can signal a desire not to challenge the other speaker. It seems to be a new way of being polite in interaction.

Politeness

We can think of politeness in general terms as having to do with ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. In the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is "face." Your face, in pragmatics, is your public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. Politeness can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of another person's face. If you say something that represents a threat to another person's self-image, that is called a face-threatening act. For example, if you use a direct command to get someone to do something (Give me that paper!), you are behaving as if you have more social power than the other person. If you

don't actually have that social power (e.g. you are not a military officer or prison warden), then you are performing a face-threatening act. An indirect request, in the form associated with a question (Could you pass me that paper?), removes the assumption of social power. You are only asking if it is possible. This makes your request less threatening to the other person's face. Whenever you say something that lessens the possible threat to another's face, it can be described as a face-saving act.

Negative and Positive Face

We have both a negative face and a positive face. (Note that "negative" doesn't mean "bad" here, it is simply the opposite of "positive.") Negative face is the need to be independent and free from imposition. Positive face is the need to be connected, to belong, to be a member of the group. So, a face-saving act that emphasizes a person's negative face will show concern about imposition (I'm sorry to bother you ...; I know you're busy, but ...). A face-saving act that emphasizes a person's positive face will show solidarity and draw attention to a common goal (The same thing happened to me ...; Let's do this together ...). Ideas about the appropriate language to mark politeness differ substantially from one culture to the next. If you have grown up in a culture that has directness as a valued way of showing solidarity, and you use direct commands (Give me that chair!) to people whose culture is more oriented to indirectness and avoiding direct imposition, then you will be considered impolite. You, in turn, may think of the others as vague and unsure of whether they really want something or are just asking questions about it (Are you using this chair?). In either case, it is the pragmatics that is misunderstood and, unfortunately, more will often be communicated than is said. The distinction between direct and indirect ways of communicating can be analyzed as different types of linguistic action, or speech acts. **Speech Acts** We use the term speech act to describe an action that involves language such as "requesting," "commanding," "questioning" or "informing." To take a more specific example, if you say, I'll be there at six, you are not just uttering a sentence, you seem to be performing the speech act of "promising." We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance.

Direct and Indirect Speech Acts When an interrogative structure such as *Did you ... ?*, *Is she ... ?* or *Can you ... ?* is used with the function of a question, it is described as a direct speech act. When you seriously want to know the answer to *Is she wearing a wig?*, that utterance is a direct speech act. If we really don't know something and we ask for the information (e.g. about ability), we normally use a direct speech act, as in *Can you ride a bicycle?*. Compare that utterance with *Can you pass the salt?*. In this second example, we are not really asking a question about someone's ability. We are using an interrogative structure to make a request. This is an example of an indirect speech act. Whenever one of the structures in Table 10.2 is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it on the same line, the result is an indirect speech act. For example, you can also use a declarative structure (*You left the door open*) to make a request (to the person, who just came in from the chilly outside, to close it). That is another indirect speech act. Indirect speech acts offer fairly good evidence in support of the pragmatic principle, stated earlier, that communication depends on not only recognizing the structure and meaning of words in an utterance, but also recognizing what speakers mean by their utterances in a particular context.