

Book Reviews



Nicolas Ruytenbeek, *Indirect Speech Acts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xii + 226 pages, ISBN: 978-1-108-48317-9

“The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says.” (Searle, 1975: 59). However, not all communication is that straightforward. Speakers often communicate more than they actually say. When somebody says, for instance, “It’s cold in here”, it can be a statement about the temperature, but it can also be understood as a request to close the window. This special category of utterances are called *indirect speech acts* (ISAs).

In his book *Indirect Speech Acts*, Nicolas Ruytenbeek looks at this phenomenon. The book is a textbook oriented monograph that is part of the Cambridge series ‘Key topics in Semantics and Pragmatics’, and it seems to fit perfectly in the series. ISAs are omnipresent in daily communication, and, as the author states in the introduction of the book, they are “very much worth investigating from the perspective of linguists, of course, as they challenge the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics” (Ruytenbeek, 2021: 2–3). In the introduction, Ruytenbeek establishes his point of departure for the book, which was the observation that there was no book available on ISAs with a broad overview of pragmatic theories on ISAs and accessible explanations on the topic. The book is intended to serve as a comprehensive resource for both students and scholars from different fields, interested in exploring the phenomenon of ISAs.

The book approaches the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective and consists of six chapters. Each chapter begins with a short introduction that hints at the topics covered in the chapter. It closes with a chapter summary, questions for discussion – suitable for using in semantics and pragmatics classes or research seminars –, and suggestions for further reading. The chapters provide thorough overviews of both the main theoretical frameworks and empirical questions surrounding the meaning and usage of ISAs. The first

three chapters of the book are dedicated to theoretical approaches and concepts, whereas the last three chapters focus on empirical studies in experimental pragmatics, in which findings of early fieldwork are complemented with recent psychophysiological experiments.

The first chapter takes the reader to the classic speech act theoretic approaches, such as Searle's (1969) speech act theory, in which the notion of an ISA was first introduced, and in which a clear separation was assumed between the direct or 'literal' and indirect or 'non-literal' meaning of expressions such as *Can you (verb phrase)?* (e.g., *Can you close the window?*). The contributions of Grice (1957), Bach and Harnish (1979), and Brown and Levinson (1987), to name but a few, are also addressed in a concise and lucid manner without getting lost in details.

Building up on this opening chapter, Chapter 2 considers the semantics of the major sentence-types in English, i.e., the semantics of imperative, interrogative, and declarative sentences. The aim is to examine which features of the three sentence-types make them compatible with the performance of (indirect) SAs. For example, two features of the imperative sentence-type are that they are 'addressee-oriented' and 'referring to a state of affairs presented as potential'. Because the imperative sentence-type semantically encodes these two features, it lends itself to the ascription of future actions (directives) or future properties (expressives) to addressees. In a similar way, interrogative sentences – which semantically express questions – can be used in the performance of SAs other than questioning, such as a request for action. As for declaratives, *you must/should*, for example, encode strong/weak obligations and are predisposed to the performance of indirect directives.

The chapter is mainly concerned with formal semantic/pragmatic approaches to indirect communication, and is illustrated with many examples, which facilitate the understanding of the specific concepts dealt with.

In Chapter 3, the author guides the readers through the cognitive and relevance-based approaches to utterance interpretation in terms of a graded notion of explicitness of the communicated meaning. In this chapter, cognitive linguistic approaches (e.g., Panther and Thornburg, 1998) and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) are described. A separate section is devoted to the graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 2002), since this model shares some elements with both cognitive linguistic and relevance theoretic approaches. All approaches are interested in the cognitive processes involved in the interpretation of ISAs, which make them relevant to the empirical research of different ISA constructions. The body of empirical work on ISAs, often with a focus on indirect requests (IRs), is given more attention in the next three chapters.

Chapter 4 provides a systematic overview of available experimental studies on the comprehension of different types of ISAs and includes some key findings. One of those findings is that indirectness does not constitute a homogeneous pragmatic category, since some studies show that IRs increase reaction times, while in other studies it was found that IRs do not take longer to process compared to their direct counterparts. Another finding is that the comprehension of an IR does not systematically require the prior derivation of the direct meaning of it. In Chapter 4, Ruytenbeek also focuses on three variables that determine the processing of ISAs to a large extent: conventionality of means, degree of standardization and degree of illocutionary force salience. The conclusion of this chapter is that there is still much experimental research needed on ISA processing, especially on the processing costs associated with different conventions of means and with different degrees of illocutionary force salience.

In Chapter 5, the major reasons explaining the existence of indirect communication (e.g., face-threat minimization, economy of means for speakers) are considered from a sociolinguistic perspective. Also, the complex relationship between politeness and indirectness is discussed. The chapter further deals with the importance of context, in particular, with interpersonal parameters (e.g., relative status, degree of imposition, social distance, gender, and other individual variables such as culture or personality) affecting both the production and the interpretation of ISAs. The last part of the chapter addresses empirical research of Ruytenbeek and colleagues (e.g., Depraetere et al., 2021) on Twitter complaints, showing that the more explicit the complaint, the more face-threatening and less polite it is perceived.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents new computational models of ISA interpretation, where the author distinguishes between two types of approaches: the general inferential rules of the plan-based model and the specific interpretation rules of the idiomatic approach. The hybrid approaches that combine the best of both worlds are also briefly mentioned. The chapter further deals with a useful application of these models, namely with the topic of indirectness in human-robot interactions.

In the concluding chapter of the book, key points are summarised and critically discussed with recommendations for future research. For example, Ruytenbeek suggests that “the status of indirectness with respect to its direct alternative(s) should be rethought. There is no reason, on the basis of the empirical data available, to view ISAs as a conscious, marked departure from DSAs, which would be default” (Ruytenbeek, 2021: 200). He also proposes a shift away from the Anglo-Saxon focus in experimental studies, since results might differ across cultures. Also, the need to examine individual difference

variables in studies on the processing, use and interpretation of ISAs is highlighted. These suggestions are very relevant to update our understanding of the multiple aspects of indirectness. They can also be used to forge new ways of studying ISAs.

In addition to the chapters discussed above, a glossary is provided (pp. 202–205) which includes concise explanations or definitions of key concepts. The glossary is especially helpful to readers who are less familiar with the field.

The book is a useful tool for developing a solid theoretical basis as well as a strong foundation for empirical research exploring ISAs. One of the strengths of the book is that it is richly illustrated with relevant and appropriate example sentences, often extracted from web corpora, which make it easier for the reader to understand the different theoretical approaches presented. The structure of the book is straightforward: the first part provides several useful frameworks for conceptualizing indirect communication, whereas the second part consists of an extensive review of empirical and experimental studies. This structure serves the readers well, taking them on a journey from the 20th-century early literature on indirectness to 21st-century experimental research, for example, on human-robot interactions. On a more critical note, it would have been useful to have had an overview – for example in the form of a table – of the definitions of indirectness, in particular those of ISAs, discussed in the book. This would have been an added value, especially because one of the aims of the book – as stated in the introduction – was to overcome the shortcoming “that a clear definition of indirectness is nowhere to be found” (Ruytenbeek, 2021: 2).

Overall, the book is comprehensive and clearly written, and the interdisciplinary perspective makes it suitable to both novice and expert researchers in many different fields such as semantics, pragmatics, second language acquisition, psycholinguistics, computer-mediated communication, cognitive science, or social psychology. Although the author notes that the book might have raised more issues than it solved, and that “much more research needs to be carried out before we will properly understand the multiple facets of indirectness” (Ruytenbeek, 2021: 201), the book is an instructive and thought-provoking academic piece of work. It is highly recommended both for readers who are interested in familiarising themselves with the topic and for readers who want to refresh their existing knowledge.

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