

Polite responses to polite requests

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Abstract:

Indirect requests vary in politeness, for example, *Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is?* is more polite than *Shouldn't you tell me where Jordan Hall is?* By one theory, the more the literal meaning of a request implies personal benefits for the listener, within reason, the more polite is the request. This prediction was confirmed in Experiment I. Responses to indirect requests also vary in politeness. For *Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is?*, the response *Yes, I can* — it's up the street is more polite than *It's up the street*. By an extension of that theory, the more attentive the responder is to all of the requester's meaning, the more polite is the response. This prediction was confirmed in Experiments 2, 3 and 4. From this evidence, we argued that people ordinarily compute both the literal and the indirect meanings of indirect requests. They must if they are to recognize when the speaker is and isn't being polite, and if they are to respond politely, impolitely, or even neutrally.

Article:

When people make requests, they tend to make them indirectly. They generally avoid imperatives like *Tell me the time*, which are direct requests, in preference for questions like *Can you tell me the time?* or assertions like *I'm trying to find out what time it is*, which are indirect requests. The curious thing about indirect requests is that they appear to have one meaning too many. *Can you tell me the time?*, as a request, has the indirect meaning "I request you to tell me the time". Yet it also possesses the literal meaning "I ask you whether you have the ability to tell me the time". If the speaker is merely requesting the time, why the extraneous question about ability? How does it figure in the listener's understanding of that request? It was these two questions that prompted the present study.

These questions suggest two general kinds of processes by which an indirect request might be understood. The first kind, which we will call *idiomatic processes*, creates one and only one meaning — the indirect meaning. *Can you tell me the time?*, used as a request, would be understood directly and solely as "Please tell me the time". At no point would the listener create and use the literal meaning "Do you have the ability to tell me the time?" The second kind of process, which we will call *multiple-meaning processes*, creates both the literal and the indirect meanings, though not necessarily one after the other. By this kind of process *Can you tell me the time?* would be understood as involving both a question ("Do you have the ability?") and a request ("Please tell me the time").

Each kind of process is needed in certain clear cases. An idiomatic process is probably required for *How do you do?*, which is a question indirectly used as a greeting. Although the historical vestiges of the literal question ("How are you?") are still present, the question no longer has any force; it isn't answered sensibly by *Fine*, *thank you*. On the other hand, a multiple-meaning process is probably required for the use of *It's late, isn't it?* to request the time. There seems to be no way of figuring out the request without knowing what the speaker meant literally. However, on the continuum from frozen idioms like *How do you do?* to novel requests like *It's late, isn't it?* there are intermediate cases in which a sentence is *conventionally* used for an indirect purpose. For these, either kind of process might apply.

For conventional indirect requests like *Can you tell me the time?*, which kind of process is used? Within linguistics, the earliest proposals by Sadock (1970) required an idiomatic process, but more recent ones, by Searle (1975) and Morgan (1978) for example, require a multiple-meaning process. Within psychology, Schweller (1978) and Gibbs (1979) have proposed idiomatic processes, but Clark & Lucy (1975) and Clark (1979) have proposed two different processes of the multiple-meaning variety. Thus, there is an issue here to be resolved.

The feature that makes the multiple-meaning processes distinctive is their assumption that literal meaning, plays a role in comprehension. But if it does, what is that role? For indirect requests, one answer has been offered by Lakoff (1973, 1977) and by Brown & Levinson (1978): The literal meaning is important in conveying politeness. As requests for the time, *May I ask you what time it is?* is ordinarily more polite than *Won't you tell me what time it is?* Since the two requests have the same indirect meaning, the reason must lie in their literal meanings. The literal meaning of the first, roughly "I request permission to ask you what time it is", presumes very little on the requestee and offers him the power to grant permission. The literal meaning of the second, roughly "I ask you if you do not intend to tell me what time it is", presumes a good deal on the requestee and expresses a not-so-hidden criticism. By this logic, conventional indirect requests get their politeness rather directly from the literal meanings.

In a roundabout way, responses to indirect requests may get their politeness from the literal meanings too. When Ann asks Bob *Can you tell me the time?*, Bob might ordinarily respond with a single "move", *it's six*. But if he wanted to be especially polite, it is our intuition that he would add a first move, as in *Yes, I can — it's six*. Let us call *Yes, I can* the literal move, and *it's six* the indirect move. If we assume that Bob couldn't give the literal move without computing the literal meaning, then he must have taken in Ann's request by a multiple-meaning process. But are responses with both moves actually more polite, and if so, why?

In this paper, then, we will investigate two issues jointly. The first is comprehension. Does literal meaning play a role in the understanding of indirect requests, and if so, what? The second issue is politeness: What makes some indirect requests, and some responses, more polite than others? In the first half of the paper, we will take up the politeness of indirect requests, and in the second half, the politeness of their responses.

The politeness of indirect requests

In a request and its response, two people coordinate an exchange of goods. For convenience, let us assume the requestor is a woman called A, and the requestee a man called B. In her turn, A requests B to do something for her, and in his turn, B commits himself, or refuses to commit himself, to do what she wanted. When she requests information, as in all the requests we will consider, B ordinarily gives the information instead of merely committing himself to give it.

The problem with requests is that, on the surface, they are inequitable. While A benefits from the information she receives, it costs B some effort to give it to her. In Goffman's (1955, 1967) terms, requests threaten B's "face". For Goffman, face is the positive social value people claim for themselves. It consists of two particular wants — the want to be unimpeded, free from imposition by others, and the want to be approved of in certain respects. People ordinarily act to maintain or gain face and to avoid losing face. Clearly A's requests, by imposing on B, are potentially threatening to B's face. Brown and Levinson (1978), following up work by Lakoff (1973, 1977), have incorporated this idea in a general theory of politeness whose basic tenet is this: people are polite to the extent that they enhance, or lessen the threat to, another's face. In our case, A will be polite to the extent that she can reduce or eliminate the threat to B's face caused by her request.

We will look at only a few of the linguistic devices by which A could reduce or eliminate the threat to B's face - for example, *Can you*, or *Couldn't you*, or *Will you tell me the time?* These devices differ in how much they benefit or cost B. Ordinarily, if a device benefits B, it simultaneously costs A, although the benefit to B may not equal the cost to A. For simplicity, we will assume that the benefit or cost to B actually does equal the cost or

benefit to A. So A will be polite to the extent that the linguistic device she selects benefits B or lowers the cost to B (at least within limits).

Table 1. *Examples of the 18 request types used in Experiments 1, 3, and 4*

Descriptive category	Request type
1. Permission	May I ask you where Jordan Hall is? Might I ask you where Jordan Hall is? Could I ask you where Jordan Hall is?
2. Imposition	Would you mind telling me where Jordan Hall is? Would it be too much trouble to tell me where Jordan Hall is?
3. Ability	Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Could you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Can't you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Do you know where Jordan Hall is?
4. Memory	Have I already asked you where Jordan Hall is? Did I ask you where Jordan Hall is? Have you told me where Jordan Hall is? Do I know where Jordan Hall is?
5. Commitment	Will you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Would you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Won't you tell me where Jordan Hall is? Do you want to tell me where Jordan Hall is?
6. Obligation	Shouldn't you tell me where Jordan Hall is?

The linguistic devices we have selected are ones in which A asks B a literal question answerable by yes or no, and by virtue of that question she requests from him a relatively slight piece of information. Example: *Will you tell me who is coming to dinner tonight?* From the literature on indirect requests (e.g., Gordon & Lakoff, 1971; Green, 1975; Heringer, 1972; Sadock, 1972, 1974; Searle, 1975), we selected the 18 types listed in Table 1. These requests vary from polite to impolite; some of them take a literal yes answer for compliance, and others take a no. We will use the first few words of each request as its abbreviation, like *May I ask you?* for *May I ask you where Jordan Hall is?*

Since all 18 requests have the same indirect meaning, their differences lie in the literal meanings. Indeed, these requests can be ordered, on *a priori* intuitive grounds, for how much their literal meanings, if taken seriously, would benefit B or reduce the costs to B. Note that all of them have one cost in common. They impose on B by asking a question he must answer with yes or no. Otherwise, the requests can be sorted into six broad categories (see Gordon & Lakoff, 1971; Searle, 1975), as shown in Table 1. These categories can be ordered approximately for their benefit to B.

1. *Permission*. With the literal meaning of *May I ask you where Jordan Hall is?*, A is offering B the authority to grant her permission to make her request. This is obviously a great benefit to B. He now has a higher status, or authority, than he had the moment before, and the status entitles him to give permission to A even to make a rather trivial request. Such a benefit makes this and the other two requests in this category particularly polite.

2. *Imposition*. With the literal meaning of *Would you mind telling me where Jordan Hall is?*, A is no longer offering B the full authority to permit her to ask him for the wanted information. Still, she is offering him the authority to say that her request imposes too much. This benefits B. A is thereby admitting that she is imposing on him, and the admission benefits B too. So *Would you mind?* should be relatively polite too, although not as polite as *May I ask?* and its kind. The authority to grant permission, on the face of it, benefits B more than the mere chance to say that the task is too imposing.

3. *Ability*. When A says *Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is?*, she is literally asking B to say whether or not he has the ability to tell her where Jordan Hall is. By giving him the opportunity to deny this ability, the question both benefits and costs B a little bit. It benefits him by allowing him to avoid the embarrassment of being asked a request he couldn't comply with. But it costs him a little by suggesting that he may not be competent to comply. Compared to *May I ask?* and *Would you mind?* with their great benefits to B, *Can you tell*

me? should be less polite. In so far as the other three ability requests reflect the same rationale, they should be similar in politeness. We will take up this qualification later.

4. *Memory.* The literal meaning of *Have I already asked you where Jordan Hall is?* makes a subtle demand on B. It asks him whether or not he can remember whether A asked him earlier for the location of Jordan Hall. Most of the time he won't find this literal demand easy to fulfill, and anyway, why should *he* be expected to keep track of what he has told her when she is in as good a position to remember as he is? So this question, if anything, costs B something, which works against politeness. The same goes for the other three requests in this category, especially *Do I know?* These requests should be less polite, generally, than those of permission, imposition, or ability.

5. *Commitment.* With the literal meaning of *Will you tell me where Jordan Hall is?*, A is asking B whether or not he will commit himself to tell her the wanted information. Commitments, of course, are quite the opposite of per-missions. In commitments, B obligates himself to A to carry out an action. This gives her the authority later to demand the fulfillment of his obligation, and that puts him in a position inferior to her. This should cost B a great deal — probably as much as or more than the memory requests. If so, *Will you tell me?* and its kind should be less polite even than the memory requests.

6. *Obligation.* The last request, *Shouldn't you tell me where Jordan Hall is?*, should be the least polite of all. By using *should*, A is literally asking B whether or not he is under some obligation to tell her the wanted information. By using *shouldn't*, she further implies that B has failed in his obligation. Her request, then, costs B in two ways. It implies that he is obligated to tell her something; he has no choice in the matter. The obligation here is more severe than in the commitment requests. And it scolds him for already having failed in his duties. With such onerous costs to B, this request should be relatively impolite.

As this discussion shows, the ways in which the literal meaning can be used to benefit and cost B involve many factors. The ordering of these six categories of requests is our best judgment of how these factors combine for a net amount of politeness. Yet three factors that cut across these six categories and lead to subsidiary predictions are conditionality, negativity, and strength.

The difference between *May I ask you?* and *Might I ask you?* is one of conditionality. The subjunctive *might* ordinarily indicates that what is being said is conditional on something. For *Might I ask?*, Brown and Levinson (1978), among others, speculate that the implicit condition is *if you please*. If so, *might* should benefit B and increase the politeness of the request, since it makes explicit that B can do as he pleases. The same contrast is found between *Can you tell me?* and *Could you tell me?*, and between *Will you tell me?* and *Would you tell me?* In each case, the conditional request should be the more polite of the two.

The second factor is negativity, the difference between *can* and *can't* and between *will* and *won't*. The literal question *Can you tell me?* doesn't express any opinion pro or con about what the answer is likely to be. *Can't you tell me?*, however, does (Bolinger, 1975, pp. 528-529). In some contexts, it indicates that A expects a yes answer, supposing that B really can tell her the information. This is the so-called conducive reading. In other contexts, it indicates that A supposes that B cannot tell her the information and what she is questioning is whether or not her supposition is correct. This is the so-called plain reading. Either interpretation should be costly to B. The first presumes on B since it indicates that A already knows what his answer will be. And the second expresses a negative opinion about B — he doesn't have the ability to tell her the wanted information. Similar arguments go through for *Will you tell me?* and *Won't you tell me?* In both pairs, the negative should lead to less politeness.

The final factor is strength. Compare *I will go* and *I want to go*. Although they differ in other ways too, they differ in the strength of the implied desire to go. *Will* indicates an intention to go; *want* indicates a more positive desire. For A to ask B to *want* to tell her something is therefore to ask for a stronger commitment. Since that is more costly to B, *Do you want to tell me?* should be less polite than *Will you tell me?* Also, there is a difference

in strength of imposition implied between *Would you mind?* and *Would it be too much trouble?* With the first, A doesn't suggest that her imposition on B is very great, whereas with the second, she does — it may be too much trouble. Since the second benefits B more than the first, it should be more polite.

These predictions assume requests among peers who are acquainted but not intimate. Among other people, the same factors should come into play but with different consequences. It would be very odd for a general to ask a private *May I ask you what time it is?* That would put the general in an inferior position that is inconsistent with his rank. The literal meaning still benefits B. It is just that it is inappropriate for a general to defer to a private. This suggests that politeness, as defined by costs and benefits, can be studied somewhat independently of appropriateness, whether or not it is appropriate to be so polite, or impolite. In this paper we will avoid this complication and stick to politeness among acquainted but not intimate equals.¹

Experiment 1

Method

Thirty Stanford University undergraduate students rated the politeness of 54 requests, three of each of the 18 types of requests in Table 1.

The 54 sentences used each requested different information. The information was ordinary, but fictitious everyday information of a relatively simple kind about who someone was, what something was, or where or when something happened. There was one each of these three kinds of content for each of the 18 types of requests. Examples: *May I ask you where you bought your jacket?* and *Did you tell me who went to the party last night?* These 54 requests were typed in random order, 18 to a page, on three mimeographed sheets, which were stapled in random order for each student. The students wrote their ratings next to each request.

The students were instructed to rate each request on the following scale: 1 — very polite; 2 — fairly polite; 3 — somewhat polite; 4 — neither polite nor impolite; 5 — somewhat impolite; 6 — fairly impolite; and 7 — very impolite. They were either paid \$2.50 or given credit for a course requirement, and were the same students who participated in Experiment 4. They completed Experiment 4 first and then Experiment 1, all within an hour.

Results

The ratings of politeness turned out very much as predicted. This can be seen in Table 2, which lists the mean rating for each type of request and for each category. These means were submitted to an analysis of variance in which both subjects and items were random effects (Clark, 1973). It showed that the means differed reliably from one another, $F(17,71) = 15.66, p < 0.001$.

The mean ratings for the six categories of requests were expected to order themselves from permission to obligation, and except for a minor reversal, they did: 2.16, 3.04, 3.85, 3.80, 4.20 and 5.77. These ratings are significantly correlated with the predicted rank order (Abelson & Tukey, 1963), $F(1,71) = 166.08, p < 0.001$. The predicted rank order accounts for 57% of the variance among the 18 means. If instead of taking all the means we consider only the two most polite forms within each category, the ordering is still as predicted, except for a different minor reversal: 1.94, 3.04, 2.92, 3.50, 3.82, and 5.77.

The three subsidiary predictions were also generally upheld. Conditional modal verbs raised politeness an average of 0.54 units, $F(1,71) = 5.87, p < 0.001$. The increase was 0.17 units for *may/might*, 0.59 units for *can/could*, and 0.85 units for *will/would*. As for negativity, an added negative lowered politeness an average of 1.26 units, $F(1,71) = 23.32, p < 0.001$. The decrease was 2.36 units for *can/can't*, although only 0.17 units for *will/won't*, so this finding isn't nearly as consistent. Finally, strength was important. *Will you?* was 0.50 units more polite than *Do you want?*, and *Would it be too much trouble?* 0.54 units more polite than *Would you mind?*, together $F(1,71) = 4.06, p < 0.05$. If we combine the rank order of the six categories, conditionality, negativity, and strength, we account for 80% of the variance among the 18 means with only 4 degrees of freedom. The variance left over, however, is sizable and significant, $F(13,71) = 7.04, p < 0.001$, suggesting that we haven't identified all of the factors that affect politeness.

Table 2. Mean politeness ratings for 18 types of requests (Experiment 1)

Category	Request type	Mean	Category mean
Permission	May I ask you?	2.00	2.16
	Might I ask you?	1.87	
	Could I ask you?	2.62	
Imposition	Would you mind?	3.31	3.04
	Would it be too much?	2.77	
Ability	Can you tell me?	3.22	3.85
	Could you tell me?	2.63	
	Can't you tell me?	5.58	
	Do you know?	3.98	
Memory	Have I already asked you?	3.48	3.80
	Did I ask you?	3.51	
	Have you told me?	3.99	
	Do I know?	4.24	
Commitment	Will you tell me?	4.24	4.20
	Would you tell me?	3.39	
	Won't you tell me?	4.41	
	Do you want to tell me?	4.76	
Obligation	Shouldn't you tell me?	5.77	5.77

Note – 1 is “very polite”, and 7 is “very impolite”.

Discussion

The costs and benefits theory of politeness is strongly supported by these results. It says that the more A's request benefits B, within limits, the more polite A is. On this basis we identified six broad categories of requests, and they were ordered in politeness as predicted. And we identified three other factors that should affect politeness - conditionality, negativity, and strength -- and they turned out roughly as predicted.

But are these requests understood by an idiomatic process, or by a multiple-meaning process? About this question, the results are less clear. At first, they appear to offer incontrovertible evidence for a multiple-meaning process. Since all 18 requests have the same indirect meaning, by an idiomatic process they should be identical in politeness. Since they weren't, they must have been handled by a multiple-meaning process. This makes good sense. To judge politeness, people had to figure out the costs and benefits of each request. These were present only in the literal meaning, and so people must have computed both meanings.

The idiomatic processes could be saved, however, if we assumed that the 18 requests weren't really identical in their indirect meanings. We could assume, rather, that each request had an indirect meaning with two parts: "I request you to tell me where Jordan Hall is" and "I am hereby being polite to degree p ". Each request in Table 1 would have a different politeness value p conventionally associated with it. This p would be conventional in the sense that it would be a permanent value associated with the request's form itself and would not be computed from the literal meaning. Crudely put, *May I ask you?* would have a p of 2.00, and *Do I know?* a p of 4.24. When people judged politeness, they would merely retrieve these p 's and select the corresponding scale values. In this view, the politeness of each request is conventional. It is retrieved, not computed, each time the request is understood.

The mystery in this position is why there is such a tight fit between the benefits and costs implied by the literal meaning and the conventional politeness values, the p 's. The fit could hardly have come about by accident. One explanation might be historical. At one time, people computed the politeness of *May I ask you?* from its literal meaning, just as the theory claims. Over the years, however, its particular value, say 2.00, became dissociated with the literal meaning and began to be learned as a conventional and therefore arbitrary value. This is not entirely implausible. Morgan (1978) has traced just such a historical process for such expressions as *goodbye*, and Clark and Clark (1979) have done so for such denominal verbs as in *to boycott grapes*.

There are at least two problems with this historical explanation. First, the fit between literal meaning and politeness seems altogether too tight. In the cases Morgan, and Clark and Clark, brought up, there were certain

quirks of meaning. As the meaning of an expression became partially or fully dissociated with its historical origins, it became partly or fully specialized, or it changed altogether. There is little evidence of that sort of specialization in the requests of Table 1.

The more serious drawback is that there would have to be too many *p*'s. For an idiomatic process to work right, *May I ask you?* would have to have a lower *p* than *Won't you?* regardless of context. Yet, as offers, *May I ask you to take a piece of cake?* appears to be *less* polite than *Won't you take a piece of cake?* If this is so, *May I ask you?* would require one *p* for its use as a request and another *p* for its use as an offer. Each of the other forms would have two *p*'s too. By the multiple-meaning hypothesis, on the other hand, this inversion is quite predictable. Requests are for things B didn't intend to do, and offers, for things B wants to do, so it is more imposing on B the more obligated he is to carry out a request, but less imposing the more obligated he is to accept the offer. It is more parsimonious to assume that the politeness of these forms is based on the relation between the literal meaning and what is being requested or offered. By this argument, a multiple-meaning process is necessary after all.

The politeness of responses

Just as there are many ways of making requests, so there are many ways of responding to them. For A's request *Can you tell me the time?*, B could respond in any of these ways, among others: *six; six o'clock; it's six; it's six o'clock; . yes, six; yes, it's six; . sure, it's six; and yes, I can, it's. six*. How does B choose? One way is by the seriousness of A's literal meaning (Clark, 1979). If B understands A to have intended the literal meaning of her request to be taken seriously, then to be cooperative he should include a literal move such as *yes* or *sure* or *yes, I can*. If the literal meaning was intended merely pro forma, he needn't include such a move. Another way is by how polite he wants to be. Some of these responses seem more polite than others. These differences, we propose, reflect the costs and benefits theory of politeness as applied to responses. The more B's response raises the benefits or lowers the costs. to A, within limits, the more polite B is. The question is how A is benefitted by B's response.

We propose an *attentiveness hypothesis*: The more attentive B is to all aspects of A's request, within reason, the more polite B is. For indirect requests for information, there are at least four ways B can benefit A. (1) *Precision*: B should provide the requested information as precisely as required. In the time example, */t 's six* would be more polite in most con-texts than *It's late afternoon*. (2) *Clarity*: B should express the requested information clearly. */t 's six o'clock*, for example, is clearer without being unnecessarily wordy or redundant than *Six*, where ellipsis could interfere with A's comprehension of the information. (3) *Completeness*.. B should take seriously the literal meaning, as well as the indirect meaning. Ordinarily, that means including a literal move, making *Yes, it's six* more polite than a mere *it 's six*. Other times, including a literal move may lead to less politeness, as we shall show. (4) *Informality*: B should put A at ease by not being too formal, or too informal, for the occasion. In casual conversations among acquainted peers, *Sure, it's six* might well be more polite than *Yes, it's six*.

B should ordinarily be much less polite when he doesn't comply with A's request. To be attentive to A's request is, ideally, to comply with it. There are, however, several ways in which B can mitigate the negative consequences of not complying. (5) *Apologies*: B should apologize for not complying. In the time example, *I'm sorry, I can't* would be more polite than a simple *I can't*. (6) *Explanations*: B should explain why he is not complying. Responses that contain a good reason, like *I can't, I don't have a watch*, would be more polite than ones without, like *I can't*. Apologies and explanations benefit A in different ways. Apologies place B in a deferential position and give A the benefit of increased status. Explanations tell A that B isn't refusing to comply merely to snub, put down, or otherwise do in A. Explanations lower the cost to A of B's refusal. Experiments 2, 3, and 4 test several aspects of the attentiveness hypothesis. Experiment 2 explores the range of factors involved, while Experiments 3 and 4 examine more closely how politeness is related to literal meaning.

Experiment 2

Method

Students were asked to rank order for politeness three to five alternative responses to each of eight requests. The eight requests are shown in Table 3. For each we composed two sets of three to five responses. One set consisted of compliant responses, and the other set of refusals to comply. These sets are also listed in Table 3. In composing the responses we tried to find ones that sounded as natural as possible.

We constructed two different questionnaires. Each one contained the eight requests typed four to a page in random order on two mimeographed sheets. Under each request were three to five responses also in random order. For one questionnaire, four of the requests were followed by compliant responses, and the other four by non-compliant responses. For the other questionnaire, that assignment was reversed. For each response set separately, the students ranked each response for politeness by writing "1" next to the most polite response, "2" next to the next most polite response, and so on down to, at most, "5". They were not to give ties. One questionnaire was completed by 15 students and the other by 16 students, all Stanford University undergraduates who were either paid or given course credit. The task took less than 15 minutes.

Results

The mean rank for each response is shown in Table 3. Within each set the responses are listed from most to least polite. The differences within each set were tested by the Friedman analysis of variance by ranks (Siegel, 1956). Of the 16 analyses, 14 were significant at the 0.001 level and one at the 0.01 level. The only set not significant was the set of non-compliant responses to *Would you tell me your name?* We will take up the most robust of these findings without further statistical justification and leave the more subtle comparisons to Experiments 3 and 4.

Table 3. *Mean politeness ranks for alternative responses to indirect requests (Experiment 2)*

Request	Response	Mean rank
1. Can you tell me who the guest speaker will be?	Yes, it's Tom James.	1.63
	Yes, I can. It's Tom James.	1.94
	It's Tom James.	2.56
	Tom James.	3.75
	No, I'm sorry, I can't. I don't know.	1.07
	No, I can't. I don't know.	1.93
	I don't know.	3.07
	No.	3.93
2. Can you direct me to the Lost and Found?	Certainly. It's around the corner.	1.13
	Yes, I can. It's around the corner.	2.00
	Yes. It's around the corner.	2.87
	It's around the corner.	4.00
	No, I'm sorry, I can't.	1.00
	No, I can't.	2.00
	No.	3.00
3. Can you lend me \$5.00?	Sure, here.	1.81
	Yes, I can. Here it is.	2.19
	Yes, here it is.	2.31
	Here it is.	3.94
	Here.	4.75
	Sorry, I don't have any money.	1.60
	No, I'm sorry, I can't.	1.60
	No, I can't.	2.93
	No.	3.87
4. Could you tell me who will be here for dinner tonight?	Sure, Tom and Janet.	1.67
	Yes, I could. Tom and Janet.	2.27
	Yes, Tom and Janet	2.33
	Tom and Janet.	3.73
	No, I'm sorry. I couldn't.	1.25
	No, I couldn't.	1.94
No.	2.81	
5. Could you tell me what time you close?	Yes, I could. We close at 9:00.	1.87
	Yes, at 9:00.	2.07
	We close at 9:00.	2.07
	9:00	3.80
	No, I don't know.	1.13
	No, I couldn't.	2.00
	No.	2.88

Table 3 (continued)

Request	Response	Mean rank
6. Would you tell me your name?	Yes, my name is Sheila King.	1.40
	Yes, I am Sheila King.	1.87
	Sheila King.	2.73
	No, I wouldn't.	2.00
	No, I won't.	2.00
	No.	2.06
7. Would you mind telling me where the bathroom is?	No, not at all. It's around the corner.	1.07
	Sure, It's around the corner.	2.20
	No, it's around the corner.	2.93
	It's around the corner.	3.80
	No, I'm sorry. I don't know where it is.	1.06
	No, I don't know where it is.	2.19
	I don't know where it is.	2.81
	No.	3.94
8. Do you have the time?	Yes, I do. It's 6:10.	1.69
	Sure, it's 6:10.	1.81
	Yes, it's 6:10.	2.50
	It's 6:10.	3.81
	No, I'm sorry, I don't.	1.07
	No, I don't.	2.07
	I don't.	3.33
	No.	3.53

The factor of completeness turned out to be highly influential. The compliant responses were of two types. The first, called answer-plus-information responses, included a literal move like *Sure* or *Yes, I can* or *Certainly*, and the second type, called information-only responses, did not. The answer-plus-information responses averaged 1.98 ranks, and the information-only responses 3.54 ranks, suggesting that the literal move added in a full 1.56 ranks worth of politeness. Its influence appears even more substantial if we compare wherever possible each answer-plus-information response with the information-only response that was identical in every respect except for the lack of the literal move. Then the literal move added in 1.66 ranks worth of politeness. Within each response set, every answer-plus-information was ranked more polite than every information-only response, except for one tie.

Clarity was an important factor too. This can be seen first in the information-only responses. They were sometimes expressed as complete sentences, like *It's Tom James*, and sometimes in elliptical sentences, like *Tom James*. For Requests 1, 3, and 5, where these two forms could be compared, the complete responses were judged more polite by an average of 1.24 ranks. Clarity also showed up in the literal moves. They were sometimes expressed as "full" answers, like *Yes, I can*, and other times as "half" answers, like *Yes*. For 12 of the response sets, there were pairs of responses that differed only in whether they contained full or half answers. In all 12 sets, the full answer was judged more polite than the half answers. The average difference in ranks was 0.58.

Another factor, informality, showed up too. Among the compliant responses, the literal move sometimes contained *yes* and other times the less formal *certainly* or *sure* (see Clark, 1979, Experiment 2). Three pairs of responses differed in this respect alone, and for each the more informal response was more polite. Informality won out by an average of 1.02 ranks.

In the refusals the additional factors of apologies and explanations were both influential. There were six pairs of responses that differed only in that one contained the apology *I'm sorry*. For all six pairs, the apologetic response was more polite, an average difference of 1.00 ranks. As for explanations, every response with an explanation was rated more polite within its set than every response without one. Note that the full literal moves are often explanations themselves. For *Can you direct me to the Lost and Found?*, the response *No, I can't* explains briefly that B doesn't have the requisite ability. This response was more polite than the simple *No*, which can readily be taken as a refusal even to consider the request. In five such comparisons, the explanatory responses were always more polite, and by an average of 1.03 ranks. When the two other pairs of responses with and without explanations are included in this comparison, explanations had an edge of 1.25 ranks.

Discussion

The attentive response, these data tell us, is a polite response. For *Can you tell me what time it is?*, B could reply simply *Six*. He will be more polite, however, if he: (1) makes his information clearer with *It's six*; (2) answers the literal question with *Yes*, or more clearly with *Yes, I can*; and (3) softens the formality of this literal answer with *Sure*. If he intends not to comply, he will be more polite if he: (4) apologizes with *I'm sorry*; and (5) gives an explanation with *I don't have a watch*. Each added move signals more concern with A's full request. Some of them are attentive to the indirect meaning, and others to the literal meaning.

If to be polite B has to be attentive to A's literal meaning, then he must be computing both the literal and the indirect meaning. He must be using a multiple-meaning process, not an idiomatic process. Is this conclusion justified? Not completely. It might be argued that just as there are conventional ways of making indirect requests, there are conventional ways of responding to them politely. The link between the two is historically based but by now entirely conventional. By this argument, B could be using an idiomatic process. However, in Experiment 1, we found reasons for doubting such an idiomatic hypothesis for indirect requests, and the same reasons should make us suspect the idiomatic hypothesis for responses. Experiments 3 and 4 were designed to dissect this argument more incisively.

Experiment 3

The politeness of a response need not work the same way for every indirect request. For example, while a literal move may add politeness for one indirect request, it may not do so for another. In this experiment we will take up two factors that should affect response politeness. We will use the 18 request types in Table 1.

The first factor is conventionality. Indirect requests, according to Clark (1979), Morgan (1978), and Searle (1975), differ in how conventionally they are used for making requests. Although *Can you tell me the time?* and *Is your watch still working?* can both be used in the right circumstances for requesting the time, the ordinary, usual, or conventional form for that purpose is *Can you?* and not *Is your watch?* These two indirect requests differ in *conventionality*, and so do the 18 requests in Table 1.

The politeness of a response should depend on conventionality. According to Clark (1979), the conventionality of an indirect request is one piece of information B uses in deciding whether or not to take that utterance as a request. Because *Can you?* is highly conventional as a request, B can be fairly confident that it is indeed being used to request the time and not merely to ask a question, and hence that he is expected to comply. By the attentiveness hypothesis, it would be impolite of him not to comply. But because *Is your watch?* is *not* conventional as a request, he cannot be so confident that it is being used as a request and that he is expected to comply. This utterance may not be a request at all, so it wouldn't be so impolite to answer it literally and do nothing more. The prediction, therefore, is this: The more conventional the indirect request, the more polite B is to provide the requested information. This prediction is tested in Experiment 3.

The second factor is the politeness of the literal move of the response. For each request in Experiment 2, a response *with* a literal move (e.g., *Yes, I can*) was more polite than a response without. But how much politeness should a literal move add? That depends, we propose, on what the literal move asserts. Compare *Can you tell me?* and *May I ask you?* from Table 1. In response to the first, the literal move *Yes, I can* is really an abbreviation of the assertion *I can tell you where Jordan Hall is*. In response to the second, the literal move *Yes, you may* is an abbreviation for *You may ask me where Jordan Hall is*. Of these two assertions, the first would ordinarily be more polite among peers. The second presumes B has the authority to permit or forbid A's asking where Jordan Hall is, whereas the first doesn't presume much at all. When the literal moves to the 18 requests in Table I are each spelled out this way, they will vary in how polite they are judged as assertions. We propose that the more polite the assertion, the more politeness that literal move should add to the response as a whole. This prediction is also tested in Experiment 3.

Experiment 3 is therefore divided into three parts. In Experiment 3a, people were asked to rate the 18 requests in Table I for conventionality. In Experiment 3b, other people were asked to rate the assertions corresponding to

the literal moves in responses to these same requests for politeness. And in Experiment 3c, still other people rated the full responses themselves for politeness.

Experiment 3a

The 18 requests in Table 1 were each typed on a separate file card with *Candlestick Park* in place of *Jordan Hall*. The deck of cards was shuffled and presented to each of ten Stanford University students with the instruction: "On each card there is a different way of asking where Candlestick Park is. Some of these requests represent usual, ordinary, and conventional ways of asking for information, while others represent ways that do not seem usual, ordinary, or conventional. We would appreciate your rank ordering these 18 requests from most to least conventional. Just put the cards in the order you think is most to least conventional."

Table 4. Mean ranks of 18 requests judged for conventionality

Category	Request type	Mean rank	Category means
Permission	May I ask you?	8.6	8.2
	Might I ask you?	8.5	
	Could I ask you?	7.6	
Imposition	Would you mind?	7.2	8.4
	Would it be too much?	9.6	
Ability	Can you tell me?	2.2	5.4
	Could you tell me?	2.5	
	Can't you tell me?	13.3	
	Do you know?	3.8	
Memory	Have I already asked you?	15.0	14.3
	Did I ask you?	11.3	
	Have you told me?	13.7	
	Do I know?	17.3	
Commitment	Will you tell me?	6.8	8.8
	Would you tell me?	3.4	
	Won't you tell me?	12.4	
	Do you want?	12.6	
Obligation	Shouldn't you tell me?	15.2	15.2

Note – Rank 1 is most conventional, and rank 18 least conventional.

The mean ranks of the 18 requests are listed in Table 4. The student raters were highly consistent in their rankings. Kendall's coefficient of concordance W was 0.76, $p < 0.001$. There was an average rank order correlation of 0.73 between any two student raters.

The most conventional of the requests in Table 4 are *Can you?*, *Could you?*, *Would you?*, and *Do you know?*, in which the category of ability dominates. These requests are of middling politeness of Experiment 1. This suggests that even though these mean ranks correlate 0.51 with the politeness ratings of Experiment 1, conventionality is distinct from politeness. Recall that in Experiment 1 our hypothesis about the order of the six categories correlated 0.75 with politeness. Once that factor is partialled out, the correlation between conventionality and politeness is 0.28, which accounts for less than 8% of the variance. In short, conventionality appears to have a somewhat independent status.

Experiment 3b

Corresponding to the literal moves in the responses to the 18 requests in Table 4 are the 13 assertions in Table 5. As we stipulated in Experiment 3c, *May I?* and *Might I?* both had the literal move *Yes, you may*; *Can you?*, *Could you?* and *Can't you?* all had *Yes, I can*; and *Will you?*, *Would you?*, and *Won't you?* all had *Yes, I will*. That is why there are five fewer assertions than requests. Each assertion was typed on a separate file card, and the deck was shuffled and presented to each of ten Stanford University students with these instructions: "On each card there is a different statement a person might make in the middle of an ordinary conversation. Some of these statements are polite things to say to someone in the middle of a conversation and others are not so polite. We would appreciate your rank ordering these 13 statements from most to least polite. Just put the cards in the order you think is most to least polite to say to someone in the middle of a conversation."

Table 5. *Mean ranks of 13 assertions judged for politeness*

Category	Assertion	Mean rank
Permission	You may ask me where CP is.	10.5
	You can ask me where CP is.	9.6
Imposition	I wouldn't mind telling you where CP is.	3.8
	It wouldn't be too much trouble to tell you where CP is.	1.5
Ability	I can tell you where CP is.	3.6
	I know where CP is.	6.1
Memory	You haven't yet asked me where CP is.	6.7
	You didn't ask me where CP is.	11.4
	I haven't told you where CP is.	3.2
	You don't know where CP is.	12.1
Commitment	I will tell you where CP is.	7.6
	I want to tell you where CP is.	7.1
Obligation	I should tell you where CP is.	7.8

Note – Rank 1 is most polite, and rank 13 least polite.

The mean ranks of the 13 assertions are listed in Table 5. The raters were highly consistent in their rankings. Kendall's coefficient of concordance W was 0.73, $p < 0.001$; there was an average rank order correlation of 0.70 between any two students.

These rank orders make good sense. The more an assertion benefits and doesn't cost A, the more polite it ought to be. So when B says that he has the ability to provide the wanted information, or that it wouldn't be difficult for him to do so, that should benefit A a great deal without any cost. These indeed were the two most polite categories. On the other hand, telling A that he intends to give the information regardless of her wishes, or that he is obligated to give it to her, or that she has his permission to ask him for it, or that she has forgotten to ask for it — all these cost A, and the assertions should be correspondingly less polite. Indeed, they were.

Experiment 3c

Method

Thirty students were each given 54 pairs of requests and responses and were asked to rate the politeness of each response on a 1 to 7 scale.

The 54 requests were the same as those used in Experiment 1, with three examples for each of the 18 types of requests in Table 1. For each request we composed three plausible responses. One had a full literal move followed by the requested information; a second had only a half literal move, either *yes* or *no*, whichever was appropriate for compliance; and a third consisted of the requested information alone. The three responses to *Could I ask you who ate all the eggs?* were: (1) *Yes, you can. It was my boyfriend.* (2) *Yes. It was my boyfriend.* (3) *It was my boyfriend.* These will be called the full, half, and null literal responses, respectively. As mentioned earlier, we used the indicative *can*, *will*, and *may* instead of the subjunctive *could*, *would*, and *might* for the literal moves, except for *Would you mind?* and *Would it be too much trouble?*, where we retained *would*.

The 54 responses each student rated consisted of one full, one half, and one null literal response to each of the 18 types of request in Table 1. The assignment of the full, half, and null responses to the 54 requests was counterbalanced in a Latin square design over three groups of ten subjects each. The 54 requests paired with their responses were typed in random order 18 to a page, the request on one line and its response on the next, and the pages were shuffled for each student.

The 30 students, Stanford University undergraduates, were told to think of each request as having been made by Speaker A and its response as having been made by Speaker B. They were to rate the politeness of B's response. They used the same rating scale as in Experiment 1 on which 1 was "very polite", 4 "neither polite nor impolite", and 7 "very impolite".

Results

The politeness ratings came out much as predicted. They are listed in Table 6 by request type and response type. There are two main findings of interest, the differences among the request types and the politeness added by the literal move.

Table 6. Mean politeness ratings for responses to 18 types of requests (Experiment 3c)

Category	Request type	Response type				Category means
		Full	Half	Null	Means	
Permission	May I ask you?	2.67	3.30	3.83	3.18	3.19
	Might I ask you?	2.80	2.90	3.63	3.11	
	Could I ask you?	2.93	3.27	3.60	3.27	
Imposition	Would you mind?	2.80	3.57	4.03	3.47	3.38
	Would it be too much?	2.70	3.20	4.00	3.30	
Ability	Can you tell me?	2.53	3.30	3.90	3.16	3.31
	Could you tell me?	2.83	3.13	4.20	3.39	
	Can't you tell me?	2.87	3.20	4.13	3.40	
	Do you know?	2.87	3.27	3.73	3.29	
Memory	Have I already asked you?	3.17	3.57	4.30	3.68	3.68
	Did I ask you?	3.23	3.40	4.10	3.58	
	Have you told me?	2.93	3.63	3.93	3.50	
	Do I know?	4.07	3.67	4.13	3.96	
Commitment	Will you tell me?	2.90	3.17	3.60	3.22	3.27
	Would you tell me?	2.80	3.03	3.67	3.17	
	Won't you tell me?	3.10	3.03	3.80	3.31	
	Do you want?	3.10	3.17	3.90	3.39	
Obligation	Shouldn't you tell me?	3.27	3.33	4.10	3.57	3.57
	Overall means	2.98	3.26	3.92	3.38	

As predicted, the mean response politeness for the 18 request types (column 4 in Table 6) correlated very highly with the mean conventionality for the same 18 requests (Table 4). The correlation was 0.72, $\min F'(1,76) = 19.40$, $p < 0.001$. The variance in response politeness *not* accounted for by conventionality was not significant, $\min F'(16,76) = 1.13$. Although the correlation between response politeness and request politeness (Table 2) was a moderate 0.42, when conventionality was partialled out, this correlation reduced to a negligible 0.09. There was virtually no correlation, 0.19, between response politeness and the politeness of the literal assertion (Table 5). The main predictor of response politeness was conventionality: the more conventional the request, the more polite it was for B to provide the wanted information.

Overall, the half and full literal moves — for example, *Yes* and *Yes, I can* — each added politeness to the response with no literal move. The half literal moves added an average of 0.67 units, and the full literal moves another 0.29 units. Both increases were significant, $\min F'(1,75) = 16.91$, $p < 0.001$, and 2.97 , $p < 0.05$, respectively. These data reinforce Experiment 2 in showing that the more complete the literal move in general, the more polite the response.

The politeness added by the full literal move, however, varied from 0.06 units for *Do I know?* to 1.37 units for *On you tell me?* and *Could you tell me?* As predicted, this variation was highly correlated with the politeness of the assertion made by the literal move (see Table 5). The correlation was 0.73, which is highly significant, $F(1,17) = 19.39$, $p < 0.001$. The conventionality of the request, however, was also moderately correlated, 0.43, with the increase in politeness from the literal move, $F(1,17) = 3.48$, n.s. With both assertion politeness and conventionality as predictors, the multiple correlation is 0.81.

Which part of the full literal move accounts for these variations in added politeness — the affirmation or denial *yes* or *no*, or the elliptical assertion *I can*, *You may*, or whatever? Let us call these two parts "yes/no" and "assertion fragment". The increase from the yes/no alone correlated a negligible 0.22 with assertion politeness. But the increase from the assertion fragment correlated 0.70 with assertion politeness. This correlation is only slightly less than the 0.73 correlation for the increase from the full literal move. The correlations for conventionality follow the same pattern, being 0.12 and 0.42, respectively. It is the assertion fragment, then, that seems to account for how *much* politeness is added by the full literal moves.

Discussion

According to these results, the politeness of responses to indirect requests fits the attentiveness hypothesis. First, the more conventionally a sentence is used for making requests, the clearer it should be that A wants certain information, and the more polite B should be to provide it. That was confirmed. For example, giving the requested information was more polite for the conventional *Can you tell me?* than for the less conventional *Have I already asked you?* Second, the more polite it is to assert what is literally being asked, the more polite it should be to add the literal move. This too was confirmed. Adding a pleasant *Yes, I can* in response to *Can you tell me?* increased politeness more than did adding an insulting *No, you don't* in response to *Do I know?*

Literal moves like *Yes, I can* and *No, you don't*, we noted, divide into two parts — the yes/no and the assertion fragment. It was largely the assertion fragment that governed how much politeness was added. There are two possible reasons for this. The most obvious is that *I can* and *You don't* are clearer than the bare *yes* or *no* about what B is asserting with the literal move. A less obvious reason is that *yes* and *no* alone may be ambiguous. *Yes* in response to *Can you tell me?* might indicate either "Yes, I can tell you", which is the assertion fragment, or "Yes, I'll tell you if you like", which is not. The second sense indicates a mere intention to comply, which shouldn't vary so much from one request to the next.

These findings implicate literal meaning even more than before. If B wants to respond to A's indirect request politely, he must "hear" at least the literal *form* of her request. Without that, he has no way of figuring out which literal move to include. But to account for Experiment 3, he must truly *understand* her literal meaning. He needs this in order to decide whether or not it would be polite to include the literal move. In short, he is required to use a multiple-meaning rather than an idiomatic process.

Experiment 4

What we have shown so far is that B's response to A's indirect request will ordinarily be judged more polite when it contains a literal move -- a move that deals explicitly with the literal meaning of the request. How much politeness is added depends on what that move means as an assertion. But do people trying to make themselves polite think of using this device, the literal move? This was the question that led to Experiment 4, in which people were given a request together with a response with no literal move, like *Do you know where Jordan Hall is?* and *Up the street*, and were asked to revise the response — *Up the street* — to make it more polite. By examining these revisions, we could test certain hypotheses about the conventionality of the request, the politeness of the literal move, and the elliptical nature of the response.

For certain requests, B is expected to include the literal move. According to the Clark (1979) proposal, when A uses a conventional form for making a request, like *Can you tell me?*, she is very likely signalling that she doesn't intend the literal meaning to be taken seriously — it is merely *pro forma* — and so B isn't expected to deal with it explicitly. But when she uses a less conventional form, like *Have I already asked you?*, she may well intend the literal meaning to be taken seriously, and if B is to be polite, he ought to deal with it explicitly. This theory leads to a straight-forward prediction: The less conventional the request, all other things being equal, the more likely B will take the literal meaning seriously and the more likely he will include the literal move.

But as we showed in Experiment 3, it isn't always so polite to include the literal move, since this may make B sound presumptuous or superior. It wouldn't be particularly polite to tell A that she doesn't know where Jordan Hall is, which is what the literal move for *Do I know?* would do. Accordingly, the more polite the literal move is, the more likely it should be included. But these considerations come into play when B is thinking of including the literal move anyway. That is, the predictions based on politeness of the literal move should merely modify the predictions based on conventionality that we just presented.

Finally, there is the ellipsis of the response. A complete sentence like *It is up the street* is ordinarily deemed more polite than an incomplete one like *Up the street* (see Experiment 2). If people trying to be polite know this, then they ought to turn incomplete sentences like *Up the street* into complete ones like *It is up the street*.

Method

Thirty Stanford University undergraduates were each given 54 requests paired with responses that provided only the information requested. Example:

- A. Can you tell me where your parents are sitting?
- B. They're in the front row.

For half the students, all of B's responses were expressed in complete sentences, as in this example. For the other half, all of them were expressed in fully appropriate but incomplete sentences, such as *In the front row*. The students were asked simply to revise each response to make it more polite and to write their revision on the blank line below B's response. The 54 requests were the same as those used in Experiments 1, 3a, and 3c. They were typed, in the format just given, six to a page on nine mimeographed sheets in random order, and the nine pages were given to each student in a random order.

Results and Discussion

The most obvious outcome was that there was an almost universal tendency to fill out the information requested. Fully 92% of the incomplete sentences given to the one group of students were turned into complete sentences. And although the complete sentences given to the other group of students could have been turned into perfectly acceptable incomplete sentences (by revising, for example, *They're in the front row* to *In the front row*), only 2% of them were. Indeed, the sentences for both groups of students tended to be filled out with material that was redundant with the request. Pronouns tended to be turned into complete noun phrases, as when *They're in the front row* was revised to *My parents are in the front row*, and missing verb phrases tended to be filled in, as when *My roommate did* was revised to *My roommate cut my hair*. There was a strong consensus that to be more polite, one should be clearer and more explicit about the information provided. Otherwise, the two groups of students didn't differ reliably, and so for the remaining discussion they will be lumped together.

Although the bare responses presented to the students did not contain literal moves, many of their revisions did. Each of the 1620 revisions was checked for this feature, and the percentage for each request type is shown in Table 7. These percentages provide rather striking confirmation of our predictions. First, there was a 0.57 correlation between the percentages of literal moves in Table 7 and the conventionality ranks of each request type from Experiment 3a (Table 4). This correlation accounted for a highly significant proportion of the variance among the percentages in Table 7, $F(1,42) = 11.72, p < 0.005$. Second, there was a -0.24 correlation between these percentages and the politeness ratings of the corresponding literal moves from Experiment 3b (Table 5). This correlation, however, is spuriously low because of the correlation between conventionality and politeness themselves. With conventionality partialled out, as our prediction requires, the correlation between the percentages in Table 7 and the politeness ratings of the literal move rises to -0.50 . This too accounts for a significant proportion of the variance, $F(1,42) = 6.08, p < 0.05$. The variance not accounted for by these two factors is not significant, $F(15,42) = 1.23$. In short, the less conventional the request, the more literal moves were added, and then the more polite the literal move, the more often it was added.

There was other evidence that the students were sensitive to the literal meanings of the requests, some of it so obvious that it hardly needs to be pointed out. In Table 7 are listed the most frequent half and full literal moves that turned up in the revisions. These show that the literal moves the students selected were selected because they were appropriate to the literal meanings of the requests. Consider the half moves first. Most of the requests — 13 of them — were answered with *yes* or *sure*. The five that were answered *no* were just the ones for which a negative answer was appropriate. And among these five, only *Would you mind?* and *Would it be too much trouble?* were provided with *Not at all*, which wouldn't have been appropriate as literal answers to the other three. Then consider the full moves. In them the use of *can*, *may*, *will*, *do*, *didn't*, *haven't*, *wouldn't*, and *shouldn't* were always appropriate to the literal question asked. *May I ask you?* was answered with *you may* and not / *will*, while *Will you tell me?* was answered with / *will* and not *you may*. Yet the auxiliary verb in the question — *can*, *may*, *haven't*, and the like — is not always appropriate for a literal move of compliance.

Accordingly, *Might I ask you?* was answered with *you may*, not *you might*, and *Would you tell me?* with */ will*, not *I would*. The students didn't turn the literal questions into answers by a mechanical algorithm. They chose literal moves appropriate to what they intended to convey.

Table 7. *The most frequent literal moves and the percentage of people supplying a literal move in responding to 18 types of requests (Experiment 4)*

Category	Request type	Most Frequent Literal Moves		Percentage Literal Moves
		Half	Full	
Permission	May I ask you?	Sure.	Yes, you may.	49
	Might I ask you?	Sure.	Yes, you may.	56
	Could I ask you?	Yes.	Yes, you can.	41
Imposition	Would you mind?	Not at all.	No, I wouldn't.	51
	Would it be too much?	Not at all.	Of course, it wouldn't.	82
Ability	Can you tell me?	Sure.	Sure I can.	48
	Could you tell me?	Yes.	Yes, I can.	33
	Can't you tell me?	Sure.	Sure I can.	68
	Do you know?	Yes.	Yes, I do.	52
Memory	Have I already asked you?	No.	No, you haven't.	64
	Did I ask you?	No.	No, you didn't.	66
	Have you told me?	No.	No, I haven't.	67
	Do I know?	Yes.	Yes, you do.	54
Commitment	Will you tell me?	Yes.	Yes, I will.	47
	Would you tell me?	Sure.	Sure, I could tell you.	48
	Won't you tell me?	Sure.	Sure, I'll tell you.	52
	Do you want?	Sure.	Yes, I do.	56
Obligation	Shouldn't you tell me?	Yes.	Yes, I should.	59

This conclusion is even more evident in the literal moves not listed in Table 7. Consider those for the permission requests. Generally, it isn't terribly polite to assert "You may ask me where Jordan Hall is". To soften its authoritarian tone, the students used marks of reassurance — *of course*, *certainly*, and *sure* — fully 64% of the time. Nor is it very polite, for the memory requests, to assert "I haven't told you where Jordan Hall is". To soften *this* move, the students often used such hedges as *I may have forgotten to*, *I don't think I have*, and *I'm not sure*. These relieve the implicit criticism that is otherwise conveyed by a bald *no*. For the imposition requests, on the other hand, it is all right to assert "It wouldn't be too much trouble to tell you where Jordan Hall is", but even better to be more insistent, as many students were in such moves as *No trouble at all*, *Certainly not*, and *Of course not*. The critical point is that there are several ways of hedging, softening, and strengthening literal moves, and they are not inter-changeable. Which way is appropriate depends on the meaning of that particular literal move.

These findings argue even further for a multiple-meaning process, since the literal meaning of the request was used in so many ways. It was used initially by the students in deciding whether or not to make a literal move. Then it was used in selecting the right form of that move and in deciding how to strengthen or soften that move appropriately. It seems difficult to account for this constellation of decisions with a process that used the indirect meaning and nothing more.

General Discussion

It is time now to draw out the three main threads that have been running through these experiments: the politeness of requests, the politeness of responses to requests, and understanding indirect requests.

The politeness of indirect requests

The politeness of an indirect request, we have argued, springs principally from its literal meaning. The theory we have drawn on, Brown and Levinson's face-work theory of politeness, predicts that a request is polite to the extent that it increases the benefits, or lowers the costs, to B. The request itself costs B something, since he is being asked to do something for A. A can compensate by various symbolic means. She can subordinate herself to B by asking permission to make her request, as in *May I ask you?* She can offer B the authority to say that the request is too imposing, as in *Would you mind?* She can give B the chance to say that he is unable to carry out

the request, as in *Can you tell me?* And so on. These devices are graded in their costs and benefits, and their politeness follows suit.²

This neat picture is complicated by conventionality. If literal meaning were the sole determinant of politeness, then *Can you tell me?* and *Are you able to tell me?*, whose literal meanings are roughly synonymous, ought to be equally polite. But they aren't. While both of them ask B whether or not he has the ability to give the wanted information, *Are you able to tell me?* signals that A more likely intends the question to be taken seriously and expects B to respond with a literal move (Clark, 1979, Experiment 3). A's literal meaning is a deliberate request for another piece of information, which should cost B something. So *Are you able to tell me?* should be slightly less polite than *Can you tell me?* Similar logic applies to the other categories of request types too.

In an informal experiment similar to Experiment 1, we asked ten students to rank order for politeness the following indirect requests (each of which was completed with *where Candlestick Park is*):

1. May I ask you'? (2.2)
2. Will you permit me to ask you? (3.4)
3. Would you mind telling me? (2.3)
4. Would you object to telling me? (4.7)
5. Can you tell me? (3.5)
6. Are you able to tell me? (4.9)
7. Shouldn't you tell me? (7.0)
8. Aren't you obligated to tell me? (8.0)

The mean ranks, shown in parentheses next to each request, confirm that conventionality matters: 1 was more polite than 2; 3 more polite than 4; 5 more polite than 6, and 7 more polite than 8. For the last three pairs, nine out of ten students agreed on the ordering; for the first pair, seven out of ten did. As predicted, *Can you?* was more polite than *Are you able?*

So in the limited domain in which we have been working, politeness is determined by at least two factors: (1) the literal meaning of the indirect request, and (2) the seriousness with which that literal meaning was intended.' Although seriousness is determined in our last examples by how conventional the request is, it is more generally determined by a number of factors of which conventionality is only one (Clark, 1979).

The politeness of responses

The politeness of a response to a request, we have argued, is governed by the attentiveness hypothesis, which is itself derived from Brown and Levinson's face-work theory. It is this: The more attentive B is to all aspects of A's request, within reason, the more polite he is. The two main aspects he should be attentive to are the indirect meaning and the literal meaning.

The indirect meanings we have examined have all been requests for information, like "I request you to tell me where Jordan Hall is". To be particularly polite B should do these things. (1) *Precision*. He should give as precise information as A requires, as in *Up the street* instead of *Nearby*. This is a factor we didn't study. (2) *Clarity*. B should express this information fully enough to be comprehended with certainty. Complete sentences like *It's up the street* are generally more polite than incomplete ones like *Up the street* (Experiments 2 and 4). On the same grounds, fully spelled out expressions, as in *Jordan Hall is up the street*, are generally more polite

than their abbreviated forms, at least within reason (Experiment 4). (3) *Seriousness*. B should be more certain to supply the wanted information the clearer it is that A is making a request — that is, the more conventional a form the request takes (Experiment 3). (4) *Apologies*. If B won't provide the information, he should apologize, as with *I'm sorry* (Experiment 2). (5) *Reasons*. If B won't provide the information, he should explain 'why' (Experiment 2). All these, and there are probably more, are ways B can show his concern with what he is actually being requested to do.

It is the literal meaning that we have been most concerned with. When A makes her request with, say, *Do you know where Jordan Hall is?*, she literally means "I ask you whether or not you know where Jordan Hall is". To be particularly polite then, B should do these things. (1) *Completeness*. He should deal explicitly with the literal meaning too, as in *Yes, it's up the street* (Experiments 2 and 3). (2) *Clarity*. He should express this literal move clearly, to show that he is explicitly responding to the literal meaning, as in *Yes, I do — it's up the street*. (3) *Seriousness*. He should give the literal meaning more attention, responding to it oftener, the more clearly A intended it to be taken seriously, as when she uses a less conventional form of request (Experiment 4). (4) *Implications*. Nevertheless, he should make the literal move less often, or he should soften or hedge it more often, the more it would cost A if he made it (Experiments 3 and 4). In response to *Do I know where Jordan Hall is?*, he will be more polite if he omits the literal move, as in *It's up the street*, or if he hedges it, as in *Oh! I forgot to tell you — it's up the street*.

Clark (1979), in a study of indirect requests, proposed a model of how B selects his response to a particular request. According to that model, B's choice depends on how conventional the form of the request is, how transparent what is being requested is, whether special markers like *please* are present, how plausible the literal meaning is, and what A's plans and goals are thought to be. The factors we have just introduced are meant to complement this model.

Understanding indirect requests

What about understanding indirect requests? In the introduction we laid out two broad classes of comprehension processes — the idiomatic processes, which create the indirect meaning and nothing more, and the multiple-meaning processes, which create both the literal *and* the indirect meaning. The indirect meaning is computed in both types, so the question was whether the literal meaning is computed. Mounting evidence suggests that it is, at least in a significant proportion of situations.

The first evidence turned up in Experiment 1. There politeness varied from request to request, not arbitrarily, but according to the literal meaning as predicted by the face-work theory. It might be proposed, as an alternative, that associated with the *form* of each request, as part of its indirect meaning, there is a conventional value for politeness. This alternative isn't plausible for several reasons. First, the fit between politeness and literal meaning seems too exact. Second, offers that take the same *form* as our requests appear to convey quite different amounts of politeness.

The rest of our evidence, in Experiments 2, 3, and 4, was that people consistently took account of literal meaning in judging or composing responses to indirect requests. In Experiment 2, they preferred as polite responses ones that included literal moves. In Experiment 3, they generally preferred literal moves that were explicit over ones that were incomplete - full over half literal moves. However, they modulated these judgments by what the literal moves - responding to the literal meaning would actually mean when asserted. In Experiment 4, to be polite, they created literal moves, but held back on them, or hedged them, when they would exact too much cost from the requester. In all three experiments, people kept close track not merely of the literal *form* of the indirect request, but also of its literal meaning.

Not all of this evidence, however, seems to require a multiple-meaning process on each and every occasion. In Experiment 4, it could be argued that the revisions without literal moves - 45% of the total — were at least sometimes composed by people who had not computed the literal meaning. On these occasions, the requests were understood in the same idiomatic way we suggested *How do you do?* is ordinarily understood.

The critical question for indirect requests, then, is under what conditions could an idiomatic process be used. Such a process requires two things. First, it requires the form of the indirect request to be conventional enough to be recognized as a request. This requirement is satisfied by many indirect requests (see Clark, 1979). Indeed, the same requirement is needed in a multiple-meaning process to account for how seriously the literal meaning is to be taken. Second, it requires that, on the occasion on which the request is uttered, politeness and other things associated with the literal meaning do not matter to the listener. For indirect requests, it isn't obvious whether this second requirement is ever satisfied.

Politeness almost always matters — if only by default. In our experiments, it mattered a great deal since that was what the students were asked to judge. But in ordinary circumstances, it matters too. People appear to have strong expectations in each kind of circumstance about the forms of request A would ordinarily use. When asked for the time, for example, B might expect the highly conventional *Can you tell me the time?*, which asks about his abilities. When A uses a form he does *not* expect, regardless of how conventional it is, he takes her as signalling, by her contrast in form, a contrast in meaning. If she had used *Would you tell me the time?*, querying his conditional intentions instead, he should see that she had perhaps expected him to tell her the time and was wondering why he hadn't. Unlike the contrast in meaning between the idioms *Hi* and *How do you do?*, the contrast here is signalled by the difference in literal meaning. Our conjecture is this: Any contrast with the default, or expected, form of request indicates a contrast in meaning; if B is ever to recognize that contrast, it must be on the basis of the literal meaning via a multiple-meaning process.

Even aside from politeness, highly conventional forms of indirect requests are not interchangeable from one situation to the next. In asking B for his middle name, for example, A could use the highly conventional *Could you tell me your middle name?* but not the equally conventional *Do you know your middle name?* The second request is odd because of its literal meaning, which supposes that B might not know his middle name. There are probably subtle contrasts like this between virtually any two indirect requests that can be made in a particular circumstance. To show that B uses an idiomatic process in any of these circumstances, we would have to show that he is indifferent to subtle distinctions conveyed by the literal meanings — for example, that he isn't stopped for even the slightest moment by the oddness of *Do you know your middle name?* Such a hypothesis should be difficult to prove.

Thus, the idiomatic processes, however promising they look at the outset, should not be assumed too readily. In one field experiment (Clark, 1979, Experiment 1), 50 merchants were telephoned and asked *Could you tell me the time you close tonight?* Only four of them, or 8%, included a literal move in their response. One might be tempted to conclude that the other 92% had used an idiomatic process. Yet in another field experiment (Munro, 1977), students on the UCLA campus were approached and asked *Could you tell me the time?*, virtually the same request. Of these, 57% included a literal move, presumably because the face-to-face situation led them to be more polite. One might now be tempted to conclude that people use an idiomatic process except when they anticipate they will have to be particularly polite. But if politeness is an inherent part in every interchange of this sort, as it seems to be, it is more parsimonious to conclude that people use a multiple-meaning process regardless.

Notes:

¹ In all our experiments we used Stanford University undergraduates, who are drawn from all over the United States. While there may be dialectal variations in the phenomena we are studying, our data should be fairly representative of middle class American speech. In any case, our general conclusions, especially those about comprehension, shouldn't be affected by any variations that do exist.

² The request forms we used, of course, can take on ironic, sarcastic, or even impudent meanings when uttered in just the right contexts. In assuming requests among acquainted peers, the students in our experiments appear also to have assumed ordinary contexts in which the requests have their usual meanings. It is an important question, however, when and how these requests take on ironic, sarcastic, or impudent meanings.

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Resume

Les demandes indirectes peuvent etre formulees de facon plus ou moins polie. Par exemple "Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is?" (Pouvez-vous me dire oil se trouve Jordan Hall?) est plus poli que "Shouldn't you tell me where Jordan Hall is?" (Ne devriez-vous pas me dire oil se trouve Jordan Hall?). Une approche theorique propose que plus le sens litteral de la demande implique d'avantages personnels pour l'auditeur, dans les limites du raisonnable, plus polie est la demande. Cette prediction est confirmee par l'Experience 1.

Les reponses aux demandes indirectes varient aussi en politesse. Pour "Can you tell me where Jordan Hall is?" (Pouvez-vous me dire ou se trouve Jordan Hall?) la reponse "Yes, I can — it's up the street" (Oui, je peux vous le dire, il se trouve en haut de la rue) est plus polie que "It's up the street" (C'est en haut de la rue). Une

extension de la theorie permet de predire que plus celui qui repond fait attention a tous les sens impliquees par la requete, plus la reponse est polie. Les Experiences 2, 3 et 4 confirment cette prediction.

Avec ces preuves, nous proposons que les gens calculent les sens directs et indirects des demandes indirectes. Cela est necessaire pour reconnaitre quand le locuteur est poli ou ne l'est pas, et pour pouvoir repondre poliment, impoliment ou de facon neutre.