

**THE PRAGMATICS OF NEGATIVE SPEECH ACTS: INDIRECTNESS STRATEGIES  
IN REFUSAL, EVASION, AND DISAGREEMENT**

**FERUZA SIDAMATOVNA KHOLTODJIEVA**

English Teacher, Diplomat University, Uzbekistan

[fholtodjjeva@gmail.com](mailto:fholtodjjeva@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This article explores the concept of speech acts of negative reaction, focusing specifically on refusal, evasion, and disagreement in communicative exchanges. It distinguishes between direct and indirect forms of these speech acts, examining how speakers use indirectness as a strategic tool to mitigate face-threatening situations and maintain politeness. The article discusses various indirect strategies, such as providing reasons, offering alternatives, delaying a response, and using vague or hedging expressions. It also emphasizes the role of these speech acts in both cooperative and non-cooperative communication contexts, highlighting how they are employed to manage social relationships and navigate conflicts. Through the lens of linguistic pragmatics, the paper illustrates how individuals use indirectness to soften disagreement or refusal, reflecting broader socio-cultural norms and the dynamics of power and solidarity in conversation. The study concludes by underscoring the importance of understanding these strategies for a deeper appreciation of the complexities of human communication.

**Keywords:** Speech Acts, Negative Reaction, Refusal, Evasion, Disagreement, Communication, Social Interaction, Face-Threatening Acts, Cooperative Communication.

**Introduction:** Communication is a complex process of interaction between people. As A.A. Leontiev rightly points out, there are a vast number of conflicting definitions of this concept in contemporary communication studies. This is due to the polysemous and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. Scholars from various fields—philosophers, psychologists, linguists, sociologists, cultural scholars, and others—address communication issues. Another term used to describe communication is "communication" (from Latin *communicatio*, *communico* – ‘to make common, to connect, to communicate’)—the exchange of opinions, information, ideas, etc.—which represents a specific form of human interaction during their cognitive and work-related activities. The study of communication is particularly explored within the framework of linguistic pragmatics.

Linguistic pragmatics is a promising and relatively new field in contemporary linguistics. It integrates many achievements from rhetoric, stylistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and other subfields. Linguistic pragmatics is closely related to speech act theory and the latest developments in communicative technologies. It investigates language use taking into account the age, gender, social status, and professional characteristics of communicators, as well as the specific conditions and goals of a speech act.

Effective speech communication refers to the achievement of an adequate interpretation of the transmitted message and the accomplishment of the communicative goal. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to exert a certain speech influence on the recipient. In speech communication, the communicative goals of the speaker and the recipient may not align, in which case counteraction may arise.

In a strict sense, speech counteraction, as defined by A.S. Cherenkov, refers to speech tactics that oppose the speech intentions of the communication partner, both in propositional (e.g., refutation), illocutionary (e.g., illocutionary mismatch), argumentative (e.g., counter-argumentation),

interpersonal (e.g., ad hominem attacks), and discursive (e.g., ignoring the speaker, silence, refusal to answer, interruption) aspects.

Thus, speech counteraction refers to any speech act by the recipient that completely or partially obstructs the realization of the speaker's communicative intent. Let us now examine direct and indirect speech acts.

**Main part:** In direct speech acts, the illocutionary goal of the speaker is expressed through linguistic markers—illocutionary indicators. The goal of a direct speech act is to influence the interlocutor directly, either through performative lexical-syntactic constructions (e.g., "I demand," "I order," "I request," etc.) or the imperative form of a lexical verb (e.g., "do it," "listen," etc.). In an indirect speech act, the true communicative intent of the speaker is implicitly expressed, meaning the communicative act—both verbal and non-verbal—has an illocutionary goal that is not explicitly stated.

As A.G. Pospelova correctly notes, indirect speech acts are used to soften an intention and reduce the categorical nature of the speaker's objection. The use of rhetorical questions, for example, is common in indirect speech acts when challenging or refuting the interlocutor's opinion (e.g., "Why should I ...? How could I ...?").

Disagreement with an interlocutor's opinion may be expressed in a less categorical form using phrases such as 'I think', 'I don't think', 'I hardly think so', 'I'm afraid', and others. Another form of soft disagreement involves appealing to what has already been said ("Don't you think...? Isn't it...?"). Another soft form of disagreement is a clarification question, which often carries an emotional component. These forms of disagreement, which soften the communicative intention, are often found in indirect speech acts.

For example:

"I had a really good performance last night..."

"Oh, I don't think that it was so brilliant as you see it. You can act better."

This exchange between two friends, who are on equal social-status terms, illustrates a mild disagreement. The second speaker uses a softening phrase ("oh") and a positive judgment to preserve the interlocutor's face.

Indirect forms of refusal typically involve an explanation of the reasons for refusal and an expression of regret about the refusal, often accompanied by an alternative suggestion. Indirect responses to requests tend to feature vague and indefinite expressions. For example, an indirect refusal to fulfill a request might be:

"And I wondered could you run a small errand for me?"

"I'm not sure," I say discouragingly, "I'm a bit tied up here."

In this case, a wife indirectly refuses her husband's request, using hesitation and referring to being busy as the reason for her refusal. This indirect refusal is supported by the adverb "discouragingly," which reflects the speaker's reluctance to provide a direct refusal.

In cooperative communication, indirect expressions of intention hold great significance. However, in non-cooperative communication, negative responses in the form of speech acts of negative reaction occur.

A speech act of negative reaction is a reactive act expressing a negative attitude toward the actions or statements of the interlocutor. It may take the form of informative, evaluative, or imperative statements, and has a certain manifestation in speech. Speech acts of negative reaction include refusal, evasion, disagreement, and others.

It should be noted that Y.V. Borger does not categorize evasion from answering as a speech act of negative reaction. Nevertheless, evasion, as part of communicative tactics, serves as a way to manage the conversation and control the discourse. Linguists categorize different tactics for evasion from answering, such as:

1. Referring to a third party
2. Redirecting the question
3. Claiming the speaker's own awareness
4. Requesting a delay or promising to provide information later
5. Expressing doubt about the necessity of providing information
6. Asking a counterquestion
7. Providing an incomplete or evasive answer
8. Generalizing
9. Changing the topic
10. Pointing out the irrelevance of the question
11. Criticizing the questioner
12. Engaging in "intelligence-gathering," where the speaker gauges the level of insincerity in the response

In indirect evasion, the tactic of question clarification is often employed. This technique can include emotional or expressive components, such as surprise bordering on irony or irritation. Intensifiers such as 'such', 'so', 'quit', or adverbs like 'awfully' or 'terribly' can amplify the response.

Thus, speech acts of negative reaction are manifested through refusal, prohibition, disagreement, and evasion. These acts may be expressed both explicitly and implicitly. In English, indirect forms of negative reaction are more commonly used than direct ones.

In direct evasion, the speaker clearly signals their unwillingness to answer. The most telling example is "silence". For instance:

"What kind of sick?"

No answer.

In this example, the son asks his mother if she went to work, and when she responds that she is ill, she evades answering the follow-up question about the nature of her sickness by remaining silent. The silence indicates her superior social status, as she avoids further engagement.

Another example of direct evasion occurs when someone explicitly states that they are not supposed to answer:

“What’s your next destination?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you.”

Here, a military officer is explicitly refusing to answer because the information is classified.

In indirect evasion, the speaker does not break the rules of politeness, and yet creates a situation where the first communicator continues to expect a response.

One tactic for indirect evasion is the use of cliché responses:

“Are you happy?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ!”

Here, the husband avoids a direct answer to his wife’s question, instead using a cliché to express his attitude toward the question.

Another form of indirect evasion is a sharp topic shift. For example:

(“Right. What a shame.”)

“Why?”.

“Who is your favorite singer, then?”

In this dialogue between two interlocutors with unequal social statuses, the adult switches the topic from football to pop music. This demonstrates that in phatic communication, maintaining contact is more important than the topic being discussed. The linguistic means of verbal counteraction in this case is the counterquestion, i.e., responding to a question with another question. This tactic reflects the second communicator's intention to dominate the dialogue. Typically, a counterquestion is posed on a topic that is already being discussed; however, in the context of phatic communication, the unity of the topic is less significant than the imperative to maintain verbal contact at all costs.

Direct disagreement is where the interlocutor clearly expresses their disagreement, often using negation words such as no or not. For example:

“You don’t want him around. One lousy week he’s with us. And it’s too much for you.”

“That’s not true. And it’s not fair.”

In this exchange between a husband and wife, the husband accuses his wife of not wanting to see his son and being unable to tolerate his presence for even a week. In response to this statement, the wife, as a communicant equal in terms of status and role, expresses direct disagreement. She uses the particle not to assert the falsehood of the husband's statement, while also offering an ethical evaluation of his claim (not fair).

Indirect disagreement often serves to maintain face and politeness. Indirect expressions of disagreement refer to situations in which the communicant's face is preserved, and the principle of politeness is maintained. In indirect disagreement, the interlocutor typically does not outright deny the first communicant's statement but instead subtly adjusts or supplements it. The following

example illustrates an instance of indirect disagreement in verbal counteraction in the form of a reproachful hint:

“Lucy Doll’s costume change can wait until after dinner.”

“Well, someone got out of bed the wrong day.”

This is a dialogue between a stepfather and his stepdaughter, communicants with unequal status and role relationships. The stepfather is upset by the girl's constant preoccupation with her toy and believes that the doll's costume can wait. The girl disagrees with this opinion (for her, changing the doll's dress is an urgent matter). She expresses her disagreement through a reproachful hint, using the indefinite pronoun someone instead of a personal one, thereby avoiding direct intrusion into the interlocutor's personal sphere.

Direct refusal is relatively rare in the examples we studied. For instance, a direct refusal to an offer is:

“Do you want me to help you up?”

“Of course, I don’t want you to help me up, you silly bloody woman” (11, 18).

In this dialogue, the wife, the first communicant, offers her assistance to her husband, the second communicant. In his response, the second communicant sharply rejects the offer in a negative manner, using expressive intensifiers (Of course I don’t) and an obscene expression (bloody). This response undermines the face of the interlocutor. The communicants have equal status and role relationships.

Another form of indirect refusal is using delay tactics or deflecting the request, which avoids a direct confrontation.

For example:

“Can we discuss the issue later?”

“I’ve got an urgent task to finish. I’ll let you know when I have time.”

In this instance, the speaker avoids a direct refusal by implying that the issue will be dealt with at a later time.

**Conclusion:** In summary, speech acts of negative reaction, such as refusal, evasion, and disagreement, are key components of communication, particularly when the interlocutors are attempting to influence one another’s communicative goals. While direct forms of these acts are often clear and categorical, indirect forms are commonly used in everyday speech to maintain politeness, soften disagreement, or delay refusal. Indirectness can be achieved through various rhetorical strategies, such as providing reasons, asking counter-questions, offering alternatives, or introducing vagueness. These strategies allow speakers to navigate potentially face-threatening situations and maintain social harmony.

In the framework of linguistic pragmatics, understanding these tactics of indirectness, evasion, and refusal is essential for analyzing how communication functions in real-world settings. The interaction between direct and indirect speech acts reveals not only the linguistic mechanisms behind communication but also the socio-cultural norms that guide how people engage in conversations, resolve conflicts, and negotiate their positions within social hierarchies.



The strategies of indirectness and softening (including the use of hedges, delays, and polite formulations) are especially prominent in cooperative communication, where the emphasis is placed on mutual understanding and the preservation of relationships. However, in non-cooperative communication, the more direct and confrontational tactics may come to the fore, where speech acts of negative reaction serve as a form of resistance or challenge. This dual nature of communication—cooperative vs. non-cooperative—provides rich material for linguistic study, particularly in understanding how language functions within different social, cultural, and interpersonal contexts.

Through such an analysis, we gain a deeper appreciation for the nuances of human communication and the various strategies that individuals employ to navigate their interpersonal relationships. From direct confrontation to subtle evasion, the array of speech acts available in communication reflects the complexity and richness of human interaction.

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