

SUMMARY

- ◆ Examines research to suggest how editors can balance clarity and politeness in interactions with native and nonnative speakers
- ◆ Asserts that results of linguistic research can increase the effectiveness of editor-writer communication

The Technical Editor as Diplomat: Linguistic Strategies for Balancing Clarity and Politeness

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INTRODUCTION

An essential component of technical editors' work is to convey to writers how their documents would benefit from revision. This task is potentially sensitive, given writers' intellectual and emotional investment in the documents they have created. The sensitive nature of the editing process is clear in Rude's (2001) advice to students of technical editing: "[A]void words that suggest inappropriate editorial intervention, especially *change*" (p. 43).

Rude's advice suggests an awareness of the difficulty inherent in imposing oneself into the creative process of another person. Because of the defensiveness they might encounter in writers, editors must be cognizant of *how* they carry out their job—the language they use to convey necessary changes to writers' documents. The language editors use can either facilitate good working relationships with writers or degrade those relationships.

Editors, then, must carry out two tasks at once. They must *be clear* in conveying how a document should be changed, but they must also *be polite* to maintain good working relationships with writers. Managing these two needs—clarity and politeness—means managing the **directness** with which an editor states a writer's obligation to change a document in some way. Linguists have for a long time noticed that, with a few exceptions, being less direct and more indirect in what one says generally makes one more polite (see, for example, Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983). For editors, this phenomenon leads to a "directness dilemma"—the need to be direct or clear in conveying a writer's obligation to make a particular change, while at the same time using indirectness or politeness to maintain a good working relationship with that writer.

This directness dilemma becomes even more complex when editors work with writers who are nonnative speak-

ers, and these interactions are becoming more and more common. According to recent National Science Board statistics, for example, foreign citizens earned over 30% of master's degrees awarded in the U.S. in engineering, computer science, and mathematics (National Science Board 2000). Thus, it is clear that editors will increasingly work with a nonnative speaker at some point during the document creation or review process.

Interactions with nonnative speakers are even more complex than those with native speakers because, as Thonus (1999) writes, nonnative speakers "are more likely to misinterpret speech acts that do not map directly between linguistic form and function"—that is, indirect speech acts (p. 259). Thus, nonnative speakers may benefit from increased clarity in editorial interaction with them, but they of course respond positively to politeness as well.

This article examines linguistic research to suggest how editors can best negotiate the directness dilemma by balancing clarity and politeness in their interactions with both native speakers and nonnative speakers.

THE EDITOR AS DIPLOMAT

Editor-author relationships in technical editing have received increased attention in the past 10 years or so, with books on editing often including a section on how editors can improve their interpersonal relationships with writers. Several analysts have acknowledged the initial defensiveness and even hostility that authors may bring to the table, in anticipation of having their work criticized.

For example, Grove (1990) observes that "it's common for authors and editors to see each other as adversaries" (p.

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235). Alley (2000) claims that “the most challenging part of editing is working with authors, especially defensive authors” (p. 65). A case study by Gerich (1994) included one author who “rarely used an editor to review his writing because of a ‘bad experience’ in the past when he felt ‘the editor took control’ of his paper” (p. 63).

Along related lines, Walkowski (1991) surveyed software engineers about their experiences with technical writers and found that engineers “appreciate writers who have the patience to work with them. They detest a condescending attitude toward engineers who don’t write well” (p. 66; see also Doumont 2002; Lee and Mehlenbacher 2000). Thus, the very nature of the editor-writer relationship, coupled perhaps with negative associations about past editing experiences, may well put writers on the defensive even before they interact with an editor about their writing.

To allay writers’ defensiveness, editors are frequently advised to hone their interpersonal skills. Mancuso (1992) writes, “The technical editor must be a diplomat in addition to being a language craftsman” (p. 32; see also Tarutz 1992, p. 42). Some of the studies reviewed by Speck (1991) liken the editor more to a therapist: an empathetic listener who acts as a sounding board for the writer’s concerns and thus empowers the writer to find solutions to problems (p. 306).

While these “diplomat” and “therapist” metaphors are in some ways quite different, they do share common ground: both place the editor in more of a cooperative, advisory role than an authoritarian one. For both practical and humanistic reasons, the editor must convince through tact and reasoning (rather than dictate through force and belittlement), and must take into account the writer’s personal stake in both the writing process and the written product. Of collaboration in general, Sopensky (1994) writes that “Collaborators do not need to be friends or even to like one another to produce a quality product. However, they *do* need to cultivate and maintain mutual respect, tolerance, and trust in working together. There is no room for someone demanding a single solution or course of action” (p. 711). Mancuso sums up this view by saying that the editor must “always remember to be a facilitator, not a dictator” (p. 111).

These sources acknowledge the conflicting challenges that editors face and the different types of skills needed to meet these challenges. However, it is somewhat harder to find advice to editors that offers both principled guidelines and specific examples of the form that editor-writer communication should take. Yet such advice is crucial to the editor who needs not just to identify weaknesses in the writer’s draft but also to communicate with the writer in a way that will lead to the strongest final document—while maintaining the writer’s goodwill for future projects.

A useful discussion of strategy comes from Mancuso (1992), who lists interpersonal qualities for which editors

should strive—for example, “Be assertive, never aggressive”—and offers a series of sample quotations by editors to illustrate the desired tone—for instance, “*I think we might rephrase this to bring it more in line with the overall tone of the document. How does this sound?*” and “*Commas aren’t crucial, but they do help the reader move through a document more quickly*” (pp. 108–109). Tarutz (1992) takes a similar approach, advising editors to “Give constructive, not negative, criticism” such as “*This chunk interrupts the flow. I’d prefer to leap right into the stuff in Section 1.2*” and “*This is getting redundant. How about . . .*” (pp. 56–58).

Although such examples are helpful, they often require the reader to infer *why* they are effective—that is, to infer the linguistic patterns and principles that skilled editors follow when communicating with writers. Thus, a less experienced editor, or one with a less-than-intuitive “ear” for effective interpersonal communication, might benefit from a more formulaic approach that lays out more detailed guidelines about how to phrase criticism and suggestions.

This is where **pragmatics** can be of use. Briefly defined, pragmatics is the branch of linguistics concerned with how language use and interpretation are affected by specific contexts. Context includes variables such as the identity of the speaker and listener (for example, their relative social status), the speaker’s intent in producing a particular utterance (for example, whether the speaker is trying to inform or to persuade), and the linguistic conventions associated with particular intents (for example, the various ways in which requests are typically phrased). Intercultural pragmatics extends this area of study to comparative analyses of language use in different cultures (for instance, how the phrasing of requests might differ in Eastern and Western cultures). Because it emphasizes speaker-listener interaction, pragmatics in general—and intercultural pragmatics in particular—can help editors communicate more effectively by using specific linguistic strategies to balance clarity and politeness.

EDITING AS A FACE-THREATENING ACT

Central to the analysis of politeness strategies is Goffman’s (1967, 1974) notion of **face**, or self-image. People have two competing face needs—**negative** and **positive face**. In their seminal work on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) equate negative face to the need for self-determination and independence, that is, the need not to have one’s will imposed on (p. 62). In contrast, they equate positive face to the need to be liked by and connected to others, that is, the need for social approval (p. 101). Being polite, then, means meeting the negative and positive face needs of the people with whom we interact—their conflicting desires to be, at once, left alone and included.

TABLE 1: LEVELS OF DIRECTNESS FOR CONVEYING A DIRECTIVE

Level of directness	Example
A. Direct	You should include a table in this section.
B. Conventionally indirect	You could include a table in this section.
C. Nonconventionally indirect	Graphic aids create interest.

However, people cannot always avoid utterances that impede others' freedom or that cast doubt on others' decisions. In fact, an editor who requests changes to a writer's work threatens the writer's negative face by impinging on the writer's autonomy. Likewise, an editor who implicitly or explicitly criticizes a writer's work threatens the writer's positive face by casting doubt on the writer's worthiness as a member of a particular discourse community.

Of course, these **face-threatening acts** do not occur inside a vacuum. As Holmes (1995) writes, "Politeness is always context dependent" (p. 21). The preexisting relationship between an editor and a writer will play a role in the degree to which face-threatening acts need to be mitigated for a good working relationship to hold. Editors who have established a high level of rapport with certain writers may feel that less mitigation of their face-threatening acts is required—that is, the editors may feel that they can be more direct because a strong sense of rapport already exists.

However, even an editor who knows a writer well must balance directness with politeness; the difference between a relationship with a high level of rapport and a relationship without it lies in where this balance stands on the directness-politeness continuum. Moreover, research on the level of politeness required by different relationships (for example, relationships between intimates, coworkers, acquaintances, strangers) suggests that people are often more polite with people they know but with whom they are not especially close—including coworkers (Wolfson 1988).

In short, editors routinely commit face-threatening acts when they convey to writers how documents should be changed for improvement. To maintain good working relationships even while committing face-threatening acts, editors must employ politeness, and being polite in this context generally means using indirectness to mitigate or soften more direct face-threatening acts.

LEVEL OF DIRECTNESS: AN OVERVIEW

An editor who wants to convey the need for some change in a writer's document can choose from a variety of strat-

egies that use varying levels of directness to form an **utterance** (linguist-speak for something someone says). Underlying each strategy is the same idea—an **underlying directive** (that is, a statement intended to change the hearer's actions), such as *Include a table in this section*. This underlying directive assumes the writer's obligation to change the document in a particular way, in this case by including a table. Table 1 illustrates the three main levels of directness for conveying an underlying directive, based on research by Blum-Kulka (1989).

Strategies for conveying a directive can be distinguished by how clearly they convey a hearer's obligation to carry out an action. **Direct strategies** clearly convey a hearer's obligation. In other words, direct strategies are unambiguous in meaning because they retain the obligation inherent in the underlying directive.

Conventionally indirect strategies are less clear in conveying the hearer's obligation to carry out the underlying directive. Rather, they introduce ambiguity by introducing another potential meaning: the speaker could mean to convey either a mandate (that the hearer must carry out the action) or a possibility (that the hearer has the option of carrying out the action). Thus, conventionally indirect utterances create **pragmatic ambiguity** because they have two potential meanings.

Nonconventionally indirect strategies, also called **hints**, are the least clear of all three categories. These strategies change the surface meaning, or **semantic content**, of the utterance to such an extent that the utterance could be interpreted in multiple ways. Thus, nonconventionally indirect utterances create **pragmatic vagueness** because they have multiple potential meanings, not just two.

The extent to which a hearer must travel through a speaker's indirectness and the ambiguity or vagueness it generates to infer a speaker's meaning is called the **length of inferential path** of an utterance (Blum-Kulka 1987). When speakers use indirectness to convey an underlying directive, they increase the distance their hearers must travel along the inferential path from what they *say* to what they *mean*.

TABLE 2: LEXICAL AND PHRASAL DOWNGRADERS

Type of downgrader	Example
Subjectivizer	<i>I think</i> you should include a table in this section.
Hedge	<i>Maybe</i> you should include a table in this section.
Downtoner	You should <i>possibly</i> include a table in this section.
Appealer	You should include a table in this section, <i>OK?</i>
Cajoler	<i>You know</i> , you should include a table in this section.
Understater	You should <i>just</i> include a table in this section.

FINE-TUNING INDIRECTNESS

The general categories just described classify directives based on the level of directness with which they are conveyed. Complicating these categories, though, are words and phrases that can mitigate an underlying directive. These **downgraders** can be used with any strategy for conveying a directive. Table 2 charts the types of downgraders found in English as well as some examples (based on Blum-Kulka 1989, pp. 283–285).

Downgraders fine-tune the level of indirectness of a directive. They can be thought of as a secondary way to decrease directness because their appearance in an utterance doesn't require modifying the utterance's syntax. Rather, they can be "tacked on" at multiple points in an utterance. Table 3 shows how direct, conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect strategies for conveying a directive can be mitigated (or further mitigated) with downgraders.

Downgraders can also be used multiple times in a single utterance, as in the directive *I think you should possibly include a table in this section, OK?* Stacked one on top of the other, downgraders mitigate the force of an utterance cumulatively, so that an utterance with two downgraders is less direct than an utterance with only one.

The next three sections describe in more detail direct, conventionally indirect, and nonconventionally indirect strategies for conveying a directive. They also examine relevant research on pragmatics to suggest to editors the most effective ways to maintain clarity while using politeness to maintain good relations with writers.

DIRECT STRATEGIES

As stated previously, the most direct strategies for conveying an underlying directive, such as *Include a table in this section*, convey a hearer's obligation to carry out an action.

That is, the hearer's inferential path from the speaker's stated utterance to the directive underlying that utterance is a short one.

Even though direct strategies create short inferential paths, there are further differences in how much each direct strategy conveys the hearer's obligation to carry out the action. Stated another way, direct strategies differ in the extent to which they convey the **force** of the underlying directive. Table 4 shows the three direct strategies commonly recognized in pragmatics: **bald-on-record**, **locution derivable** (active and passive voice), and **opinion** (see, for example, Blum-Kulka 1989; Brown and Levinson 1987). Each of these strategies is also discussed in greater detail.

Bald-on-record strategy

Description of the bald-on-record strategy The most direct way an editor can choose to convey the writer's obligation to carry out an action is to state the underlying directive as an unmitigated imperative. This structure is also known as a bald-on-record utterance; it is "bald" because it is unmitigated, and it is "on-record" because it is explicitly stated. Bald-on-record utterances such as *Include a table in this section* retain both the semantic content of the underlying directive as well as its syntactic structure. Therefore, they retain the force of the underlying directive. Because they retain this force, bald-on-record utterances are the clearest of all strategies.

Relevance of the bald-on-record strategy for editors

Editors should be aware that using a bald-on-record directive will make it very clear that the writer's freedom to control the text is being imposed on. For this reason, bald-on-record directives have traditionally been analyzed as forceful threats to a hearer's face (for example, Brown

TABLE 3: DIRECT, CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT, AND NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES WITH AND WITHOUT DOWNGRADERS

Category of strategy	Example without downgrader	Example with downgrader
A. Direct	You should include a table in this section.	<i>Maybe</i> you should include a table in this section.
B. Conventionally indirect	You could include a table in this section.	You could <i>possibly</i> include a table in this section.
C. Nonconventionally indirect	Graphic aids create interest.	<i>You know</i> , graphic aids create interest.

TABLE 4: DIRECT STRATEGIES WITH AND WITHOUT DOWNGRADERS

Strategy	Example without downgrader	Example with downgrader
Bald-on-record	Include a table in this section.	Include a table in this section, <i>OK?</i>
Locution-derivable—active	You should include a table in this section.	<i>You know</i> , you should include a table in this section.
Locution-derivable—passive	A table should be included in this section.	<i>I guess</i> a table should be included in this section.
Opinion	I would include a table in this section.	I would <i>possibly</i> include a table in this section.

and Levinson 1987, p. 69). Moreover, bald-on-record directives could be interpreted as ostentatious displays of the editor's greater power—or at least, expertise—in the relationship. Using a bald-on-record directive is also more face-threatening if the editor is suggesting a substantive change or one that casts doubt on the writer's judgment or ability (for example, *Include a table in this section*) rather than, say, simply alerting the writer to a mechanical requirement (such as *Start each section on a new page*.)

There is research to suggest, however, that the effect of bald-on-record strategies is even more complex. For example, observations of tutors and writers in university writing centers suggest that bald-on-record directives do not necessarily harm a working relationship. Young (1992) found that Taiwanese writers actually *preferred* bald-on-record utterances because they were maximally clear and more closely matched the pragmatics of their culture.

However, Young did not quantify tutors' use of bald-

on-record strategies in relation to other, less direct strategies. It is likely that bald-on-record strategies did not make up a substantial number of the suggestions offered to the writers. If tutors had used repeated bald-on-record utterances, writers might have evaluated them less positively. Thus, it remains unclear how advisable it is for an editor to simply state a directive bald-on-record, without any mitigation such as a downgrader (such as *Maybe include a table in this section*) for the sake of politeness.

Research on tutor-writer interactions has suggested other possible ways to mitigate bald-on-record utterances. Thonus (1999) found that tutors are likely to mitigate bald-on-record utterances with compliments. For example, after stating *Set it up* to a writer, a tutor mitigated the face threat by stating *I think that's a very good move on your part* (p. 271). The tutor's compliment helped to compensate for the earlier negative face threat.

This strategy can help editors take advantage of the

clarity of bald-on-record forms while lessening their face-threatening qualities. For example, an editor might say to a writer *This passage is really clear, but include a table in this section.* Of course, editors cannot generate compliment after compliment to mitigate each face-threatening act they must carry out. Even if they could, the writers they work with would soon see these voluminous compliments as rote and insincere. Still, compliments can be used occasionally to mitigate bald-on-record utterances.

Another option for editors is to combine a bald-on-record utterance with a justification or “payoff” statement, making explicit the benefit of complying: *Include a table in this section. That will help your reader keep track of the data.* Combining a bald-on-record utterance with either a payoff statement or a compliment would allow an editor to be maximally clear while preserving good relations with the writer.

Based on the available research findings, then, we make the following recommendations to editors:

- ◆ Mitigate bald-on-record utterances with downgraders.
- ◆ Combine bald-on-record utterances with compliments.
- ◆ Combine bald-on-record utterances with a justification or “payoff” statement.
- ◆ Otherwise, avoid unmitigated bald-on-record utterances, unless it is apparent that the writer does not understand the mitigated directive.

Locution-derivable strategy (active and passive voice)

Description of the locution-derivable strategy One way to be nearly as direct about conveying an underlying directive is to use a locution-derivable strategy. The phrase “locution-derivable” means that the inherent obligation of the underlying directive, the locution, can be derived by the hearer. In this strategy, the obligation of the underlying directive is conveyed with a **high-value modal verb** that expresses obligation—*should, will, or ought*.

Locution-derivable strategies can be carried out in two ways, as Table 4 shows. The utterance can be stated in the active voice, in which the hearer is directly invoked through the pronoun *you*: *You should include a table in this section.* Or the utterance can be stated using the agentless passive voice so that the hearer is no longer directly invoked: *A table should be included in this section.*

Because locution-derivable utterances stated in the agentless passive voice obscure *who* is doing the action, they are slightly less direct and consequently slightly more polite than their active voice counterparts (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 194). In other words, the hearer must travel a slightly longer inferential path to the underlying directive if the speaker uses an agentless passive.

Relevance of the locution-derivable strategy for editors Because locution-derivable utterances are quite direct, they carry with them the risk that the hearer will consider them to be impolite. However, this risk seems lower when they are used with nonnative speakers from some Eastern cultures than with nonnative speakers from Western cultures.

For example, Masuda (1989) found that, in Japanese culture, offering advice is interpreted as showing interest in another’s well-being. Similarly, Hinkel (1994) found that statements of advice such as *You should drive more carefully* and *You should learn how to play basketball better* are not considered face-threatening in some cultures (especially Korean culture) but are instead interpreted as rapport-building strategies. These studies suggest that some nonnative speakers may be less likely than others to interpret such utterances as negative face-threatening acts. Such research, in turn, suggests that editors working with these writers may need to be less concerned about mitigating underlying directives than those working with writers who are native speakers.

A distinction between active and passive voice must also be made when weighing the advantages and disadvantages of locution-derivable strategies. Research on second language acquisition (for example, Pienemann 1984) has quite clearly demonstrated that active-voice utterances are easier for both native speakers and nonnative speakers to comprehend because such utterances follow canonical word order by putting the agent of the sentence in subject position.

More recent research by Hinkel (2002) has also shown that because many nonnative speakers’ native languages tend to put an animate noun in subject position, nonnative speakers have even greater difficulty than native speakers in comprehending passive sentences. English passive sentences, because they place the recipient of the action in the subject position, often violate the expected subject-animacy connection and make comprehension more difficult. Thus, research suggests that editors working with nonnative writers will enhance comprehension if they avoid passive-voice utterances.

As with bald-on-record strategies, there are a few methods with which to counterbalance the potential impoliteness of locution-derivable directness. Editors could, at times, use compliments to mitigate the coerciveness of the underlying directive: *The idea in this passage is really clear, but you should use a table in this section.* Once again, however, this strategy can be used only sporadically because its mitigating effects soon wear off. Editors could also employ justification or “payoff” statements, such as *You should use a table in this section. That will keep your reader’s interest.*

Based on the available linguistic research, then, we

TABLE 5: CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES WITH AND WITHOUT DOWNGRADERS

Strategy	Example without downgrader	Example with downgrader
Preparatory—active	You could include a table in this section.	<i>I think</i> you could include a table in this section.
Preparatory—passive	A table could be included in this section.	<i>Maybe</i> a table could be included in this section.
Interrogative	How about including a table in this section?	How about <i>possibly</i> including a table in this section?

make the following suggestions to editors:

- ◆ Avoid passive-voice locution-derivable utterances.
- ◆ Avoid unmitigated active-voice locution-derivable utterances.
- ◆ Mitigate active-voice locution-derivable strategies with downtoners.
- ◆ Combine active-voice locution-derivable strategies with compliments.
- ◆ Combine active-voice locution-derivable strategies with justification or “payoff” statements.

Opinion statement strategy

Description of the opinion statement strategy The third direct strategy—an opinion statement—conveys a hearer’s obligation to carry out an action as well: for instance, *I would use a table in this section*. Opinion statements retain the semantic content of the underlying directive but shift the focus of the utterance to the speaker and the speaker’s subjective opinion. With bald-on-record and locution derivable strategies, the hearer’s obligation is conveyed as truth, something beyond question; in the case of opinion statements, it is stated as truth *from the speaker’s point-of-view*, which limits the scope of the obligation.

By limiting the scope of the hearer’s obligation to carry out the action, the speaker diminishes the face threat of the directive being conveyed and, consequently, increases the speaker’s politeness. This limitation in scope slightly lengthens the inferential path a hearer must take to infer the speaker’s meaning beyond that of the other direct strategies. Even so, the force of the underlying directive—its sense of obligation—is still conveyed.

Relevance of the opinion statement strategy for editors Because opinion statements convey obligation yet soften the face-threatening act by presenting the underlying directive as a subjective opinion, they are an effective strategy for editors trying to balance clarity and politeness.

Opinion statements accomplish three goals for negotiating clarity and politeness. First, they maintain the semantic content of the underlying directive. Second, they take the focus off the writer as the “doer” of the action. Third, they reinforce the editor’s role as an advisor or coach. For these reasons, we recommend the following:

- ◆ Use opinion statements to mitigate directives.

CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES

Conventionally indirect strategies, in contrast to direct strategies, are characterized by ambiguity in the intended force of an utterance. For example, a writer could interpret the conventionally indirect utterance *You could include a table in this section* to be a directive, stated indirectly for the sake of politeness. However, the writer could also interpret this utterance to mean that he or she has a choice of whether to include a table. As shown in Table 5, there are two conventionally indirect strategies: **preparatory strategies** (active and passive voice) and **interrogatives**.

Preparatory strategy (active and passive voice)

Description of the preparatory strategy Preparatory strategies refer to some condition that must be true for the hearer to be prepared to perform a directive; for example, the hearer must be able to perform the requested action. Like locution-derivable strategies, preparatory strategies may be stated in either active or passive voice. In both cases, pragmatic ambiguity exists because the speaker could intend to convey *possibility* rather than obligation. The potential for possibility is conveyed through **low-value modal verbs**—*can* and *could*—that convey possibility.

Relevance of the preparatory strategy to editors The warning about passive voice utterances, stated previously in the discussion of locution-derivable strategies, applies here as well. Hearers may not comprehend passive-voice

preparatory utterances as easily as those stated in active voice.

Editors should also be aware that the low-value modals used in preparatory strategies will create ambiguity about the speaker's intent. Because preparatory strategies create ambiguity between obligation and possibility, editors who use preparatory strategies to convey underlying directives risk losing a substantial amount of clarity in their utterances. For this reason, we make the following suggestions:

- ◆ Avoid preparatory strategies if the intent is to convey obligation.
- ◆ Reserve preparatory strategies to convey possibility or options.

Interrogative strategy

Description of the interrogative strategy Interrogatives can take a variety of forms. For example, interrogatives can be stated with high- or low-value modal verbs, as in *Should you include a table in this section?* or *Could you include a table in this section?* Variations in modal verbs are likely to have little effect on a hearer's ability to interpret a speaker's meaning.

No matter how an interrogative is stated, it is less direct than a preparatory utterance. This lack of directness results from the fact that an interrogative's ambiguity is not just between obligation and possibility, as is the case with preparatory utterances, but also between an assertion of obligation and a real inquiry about the hearer's opinion. Thus, not only does the speaker suggest possibility, he suggests that it is the hearer who should make the decision. For example, an editor's intention in *Could you include a table in this section?* is ambiguous between the underlying directive *Include a table in this section* and a real request for information that could be answered with a "yes" or "no."

Relevance of the interrogative strategy for editors

Because interrogatives are even more indirect than preparatory utterances, editors who use them risk even more misunderstanding. Research on cross-cultural pragmatics suggests that this risk is especially possible when working with nonnative writers.

For example, in a study of conventional requests, Blum-Kulka (1989) discusses how the past tense modal *could*, just as the present tense modal *can*, creates pragmatic ambiguity in English, as in the interrogative *Could you please clean up a little?* In contrast, she says, the past tense equivalent of *could* in Hebrew, *yaxol*, makes the interrogative that contains it unambiguous, making the utterance a factual question about past events. Her finding suggests that Hebrew native speakers may be more likely to interpret interrogatives stated with *could* as real inquiries. Thonus (1999), studying native-speaker tutor and non-

native-speaker writer interactions, relates how a tutor's interrogative *Do you have someone that can read through this?* led to a misunderstanding. The nonnative speaker replied *Do I have a friend who can read? What do you mean?* The nonnative speaker's response shows that using an interrogative (being indirect) rather than a more direct strategy can complicate communication rather than aid it. Indeed, Thonus writes, "Perhaps by being less polite and more direct (more comprehensible), [the tutor] might have avoided distress" (p. 270).

Likewise, in his study of Spanish request strategies, le Pair (1996, pp. 651–652) discusses an instance of misunderstanding brought about by an invitation conveyed with conventional indirectness. The native speaker asked *¿Por qué no te quedas y cenamos juntos?* (*Why don't you stay and have dinner with me?*). Rather than understanding the question to be an invitation, the nonnative speaker interpreted it as a literal question—a request that she provide a reason for not staying. The nonnative speaker answered *Porque . . . no sé . . . porque creo que voy a casa* (*Because . . . I don't know . . . because I think I'm going home*).

Hyland and Hyland (2001), studying language instructors' written comments on students' papers, make a similar observation about nonnative speakers' interpretations of interrogatives. They find that interrogatives can to be counterproductive in that they often fail to convey the point the instructor is trying to make and often are "reinterpreted by students according to their own writing concerns and agendas" (p. 206).

Thus, while it is true that not every interrogative will lead to miscommunication, it is also true that every interrogative that is not actually intended to elicit information does risk miscommunication because the writer may misinterpret it as a genuine question. For this reason, we recommend the following to editors:

- ◆ Avoid interrogatives when obligation is intended.
- ◆ Reserve interrogatives for real inquiries.

NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES

Nonconventionally indirect strategies are characterized by a substantial change in the semantic content of the underlying directive. For example, an editor could say *This section has a lot of numerical data in it* to convey the underlying directive *Include a table in this section*. In this case, the term *table* is dropped. More importantly, the idea of *changing* the text in some way (by including a table) is no longer present. Instead, an observation about the content of the section is stated. Because nonconventionally indirect strategies change semantic content, thereby obscuring the underlying directive, these strategies are also called hints.

Hints create a longer inferential path because they are subject to multiple interpretations, as opposed to only two, as is the case with conventional indirectness. Thus, they are

TABLE 6: NONCONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT STRATEGIES (HINTS) WITH AND WITHOUT DOWNGRADERS

Strategy	Example without downgrader	Example with downgrader
Strong hint	This section has a lot of numerical data in the text.	<i>I think</i> this section has a lot of numerical data in the text.
Mild hint	Graphic aids can help the reader understand data.	<i>You know</i> , graphic aids can help the reader understand data.

characterized by pragmatic vagueness rather than simply by pragmatic ambiguity (Blum-Kulka 1989, p. 45). For example, a writer could interpret the remark *This section has a lot of numerical data in it* as a positive comment, meaning that the section does a good job of providing specific evidence to back up a general claim. The writer might further interpret the remark as a suggestion to include numerical data in other sections of the paper. Nonconventionally indirect strategies are generally subdivided into two categories: **strong hints** and **mild hints**, as shown in Table 6.

Strong hint strategy

Description of the strong hint strategy Strong hints consist of an observation about some feature of the writer's text, without specific reference to a recommendation for changing the text. Strong hints require a hearer to travel a long inferential path to the underlying directive because the semantic content of the directive is not apparent in the utterance.

Weak hint strategy

Description of the weak hint strategy Weak hints also require a hearer to travel a long inferential path. In contrast to strong hints used in interactions about writing, though, weak hints tend to be stated as "general rules" for writing. For example, an editor might say *Graphic aids can help the reader understand data*. In stating this, the editor does not explicitly refer to the writer's text or to the action in the underlying directive (including a table). For these reasons, weak hints create the longest inferential path that a writer could travel in trying to determine an editor's underlying meaning.

Relevance of the strong and weak hint strategies to editors Research on hinting suggests that the neat, inverse relationship between level of directness and level of politeness breaks down or is complicated by hints. Several studies have indicated that hints are *not* considered more polite than conventional indirectness (Blum-Kulka 1987;

Weizman 1989).

Blum-Kulka (1987) found that on a scale of politeness, conventionally indirect strategies (not hints) were rated most polite. Based on this finding, she suggests that a certain amount of clarity is necessary for an utterance to be considered polite. More recently, Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999), studying both hints removed from their context and naturally occurring hints, found that participants rated the decontextualized hints as less polite than conventionally indirect strategies, thus corroborating Blum-Kulka's finding. Thus, we suggest the following:

- ◆ Avoid nonconventional indirectness (hints).
- ◆ Especially avoid strong hints, which tend to be criticisms.

CONVEYING POSSIBILITY RATHER THAN OBLIGATION

Throughout this discussion of the directness dilemma that editors face in balancing clarity and politeness, the idea of length of inferential path has been critical. We have discussed how different strategies create shorter or longer inferential paths to an underlying directive and the sense of obligation that is inherent in that directive. So far, we have discussed the directness dilemma in terms of an editor whose intent is to convey a directive such as *Include a table in this section*.

However, editors *do not* always intend to change a writer's behavior in one particular way or another. Rather, an editor could intend to convey a possibility or option. For example, an editor who says *You could include a table in this section* may in fact mean that including a table is simply a possibility that the writer may or may not act on. Research suggests that editors who do intend to convey possibility rather than obligation have an option in how to best negotiate clarity and indirectness.

Thonus (1999) found that tutors working with nonnative writers often used what is called an **illocutionary force-indicating device** (see also Austin 1975). Such a device makes an overt statement about the speaker's intent in another utterance. For example, a speaker might say *You could include a table in this section. That's just a sugges-*

TABLE 7: SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategy	Example	Recommendation
1. Opinion	<i>I would increase the size of the typeface in these headings.</i>	◆ Use if intention is to convey obligation.
2. Derivable—active	<i>You should probably increase the size of the typeface in these headings.</i>	◆ Use if intention is to convey obligation. ◆ Use with a downgrader. ◆ Combine with a compliment. ◆ Combine with a “payoff” statement.
3. Bald-on-record	<i>Increase the size of the typeface in these headings. That will make it easier for the reader to differentiate the headings from the body text.</i>	◆ Use if intention is to convey obligation. ◆ Use with a downgrader. ◆ Combine with a compliment. ◆ Combine with a “payoff” statement.
4. Preparatory—active	<i>You could increase the size of the typeface in these headings. That's just a suggestion.</i>	◆ Use if intention is to convey possibility/option. ◆ Use with an illocutionary force-indicating device.
5. Interrogative	<i>Could you increase the size of the typeface in these headings?</i>	◆ Use if intention is real inquiry.
6. Derivable—passive	<i>The size of the typeface in these headings should be increased.</i>	◆ Avoid passive voice derivable utterances.
7. Preparatory—passive	<i>The size of the typeface in these headings could be increased.</i>	◆ Avoid passive voice preparatory utterances.
8. Hint	<i>Using typeface size to differentiate between headings and body text aids the reader's comprehension.</i>	◆ Avoid hints.

tion. Although the first statement is a conventionally indirect utterance, and therefore ambiguous, the second statement resolves the ambiguity by canceling one of the possible meanings. Editors can thus use an illocutionary force indicating device to clarify that a conventionally indirect utterance is intended as a suggestion, not as a mandate.

It is important to point out that this strategy is not nearly as effective for negotiating clarity and politeness if the speaker's intent is to convey obligation rather than possibility. If an editor were to use an illocutionary force-indicating device to make obligation clear (for instance *I'm telling you that you have to include a table in this section*), the direct statement would be particularly face-threatening

because of its directness.

In summary, then, we suggest that editors who genuinely wish to convey possibility or options do the following:

- ◆ Use active voice preparatory strategies.
- ◆ Use illocutionary force-indicating devices.

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND CONCLUSION

Based on research in pragmatics, we have reviewed strategies for balancing clarity and politeness. Table 7 ranks these strategies by the strength of our recommendation of them. In the case of strategies 1–5, we also list the conditions under which we recommend their use.

Our aim has been to show how linguistic research on

politeness may help editors recommend changes to a writer's document in a clear yet polite way. For editors who already have good instincts about how to balance these conflicting goals, linguistic research offers principles that confirm those instincts and explain why they work. For editors who seek more explicit guidelines about which specific forms most effectively balance clarity and politeness, linguistic research offers advice about the structure and content of such forms. And for editors seeking to communicate clearly yet politely with nonnative speakers, linguistic research offers findings about how such speakers are likely to interpret various forms.

We hope that editors can use these suggestions to increase the effectiveness of their interactions with writers. **TC**

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