

“WHY IMPLY SOMETHING WHEN YOU COULD SAY IT EXPLICITLY?”
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Our project has two aims: (a) to investigate Pinker and colleagues’ recent proposal that considerations of plausible deniability, rather than politeness, underlie English speakers’ choice of expression in socially contentious situations; and (b) to investigate the cross-linguistic validity of this proposal by comparing questionnaire data from speakers of British English and Iberian Spanish.

During my visit to Cambridge from November 15-20, I met with my two collaborators, Napoleon Katsos, and Jessica Soltys, and we discussed the next steps in our project focusing on publication plans. Some of the issues we discussed were:

- a) the distinction between sanctioned and non-sanctioned acts, and the extent to which this has been addressed in the im/politeness literature; we felt that this was not done until recently, with the rise of impoliteness research. However, the kind of non-sanctioned act that Pinker and his colleagues focused on (threats, seduction, bribes) is in need of further elucidation and we discussed various possible definitions that capture such acts across cultures.
- b) Pinker and colleagues’ prediction that there is a crucial discontinuity between politeness and deniability as motivations for off-record indirect speech; we distinguished their position from that of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, who assume continuity between the two, associating both with a single underlying motivation, namely face; we discussed to what extent deniability can be distinguished from face, and neighboring notions, such as reputation.
- c) we identified some shortcomings in Pinker and colleagues’ experimental design that may be responsible at least in part for their findings regarding discontinuity, namely, i) the fact that they did not manipulate values of Brown and Levinson’s three sociological variables, Power, Distance, and Ranking of the imposition for the non-sanctioned acts that they investigated, such that they were not able to observe the effect of these variables on the degree of indirectness used; ii) the fact that they provided ready-made answers to their subjects instead of allowing them to phrase their replies iii) the difficulty in comparing the degree of indirectness that results from concatenating on-record (conventionally) indirect expressions, with a shorter but semantically more opaque one; experimental study of the distinction between politeness and deniability and the extent to which they are distinct must tackle these issues first.
- d) the challenge that non-reflective (spontaneous) off-record indirect speech acts of the kind observed between intimates or by very young children pose for either of the two proposed explanations for indirect speech (politeness and deniability); we

also discussed whether ‘indirect’ is still the best name for these non-reflective speech acts, and the possibility to distinguish consistently between reflective (strategic) and non-reflective speech acts.

We composed several drafts of a chapter outline that addresses these issues. The chapter will be submitted to a volume of selected papers from the conference on “Experimental and empirical approaches to politeness and impoliteness” that took place at the University of Illinois, August 29-31, 2012.

During my visit, I also gave a talk on “exploring a multi-component theory of indirect speech” to a combined audience of undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and visiting scholars, and met individually with undergraduate students working on shorter projects on face and indirect speech.