

## **The gradable concepts of communicative (in)directness and strength/weakness**

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‘Indirect communication’, ‘communicative indirectness’, ‘covert communication’ and related terms are often used without explicit theoretical content. For example, Hendry and Watson (2001: 2) informally answer the question of what is meant by communicative indirectness by describing it as ‘the communication of thoughts not directly, straightforwardly or unambiguously, but in a manner which to some degree or another deliberately obscures, hides or “wraps” the message.’ They observe that different modes of indirect communicative behaviour ‘can in fact be ways of covertly conveying specific ideas and sentiments to a recipient’ and suggest that indirectness serves a range of social aims, such as: ‘to avoid giving offence or, on the contrary, to give offence but with relative impunity; to mitigate embarrassment and save face; to entertain through the manipulation of disguise; for aesthetic pleasure; to maintain harmonious and social relations; to establish relative social status; to exclude from the discourse those not familiar with the conventions of its usage and thereby to strengthen the solidarity of those who are.’ These authors also point out that, from an anthropological perspective, there are three interesting sets of issues relating to indirectness:

1. Under what circumstances do individuals resort to indirection; in what domains; among whom and on what occasions; what is its general incidence within the society?
2. What are the forms that indirection takes; how can the characteristics of each form be distinguished and the connections between them identified?
3. How do we recognize and interpret the communicator’s intention in indirection? For example, how do we recognize the speaker’s intention to make an allusion, a hint, etc.? (Hendry and Watson, 2001: 3)

In this lecture I try to show how the technical terms ‘direct vs indirect’ communication’ and ‘overt vs. covert’ communication’ can be given theoretical content within the framework provided by Relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson (1986; 1995) in a way which makes it possible to address questions (1) to (3) fruitfully.

