

## On Suggesting\*

Patricia Lee

It has been suggested by Heringer 1971 that speech acts can be performed indirectly by reference to certain participant-based felicity conditions on those speech acts. Heringer's proposal is that some conditions on the speaker's psychological state are essential to the performance of particular illocutionary acts, and that such essential conditions can be either asserted or questioned to perform those acts indirectly. Suggestions provide an excellent opportunity to test this hypothesis because there is a great variety of ways to perform indirect suggestions. I will attempt to show that a large number of such indirect illocutionary suggestions can, as Heringer predicted, be derived from certain essential felicity conditions on direct suggestions.

Before going into these conditions, I would like to make a few comments on direct suggestions. They are a type of speech act which can be called impositive, to use Green's term; that is, like commands, requests, warnings and pleas, they are attempts to get the hearer to do something. Suggestions differ from other impositives in the relation that holds between the speaker and the hearer; for a command to be felicitous, the speaker must be in some position of authority over the hearer, while for requests and pleas, the opposite is necessary--that is, the speaker must be at least assuming a position inferior to that of the hearer. This is basically the same thing as saying that the speaker is showing deference toward the hearer. Suggestions, on the other hand, have no such requirement. For conversations in which suggestions occur, the speaker and hearer have equal status.

Suggestions also differ from most other impositives in that, for the most part, what the speaker is trying to get the hearer to do is to consider or think about a particular proposition. In other words, the perlocutionary effect of suggestions is to make the hearer think about the proposition being suggested. Furthermore, it seems that this perlocutionary effect is crucial to the performance of suggestions. In the broadest possible sense of the term 'suggestion' then, anything which serves to make someone think of something is a suggestion.

If what we're interested in is indirect illocutionary acts, we must be able to distinguish such illocutionary acts of suggesting from those acts which are suggestions only by virtue of their perlocutionary effect. The sentences (1)-(6)

- (1) It's time to go.
- (2) Well, Josie, it's about that time.

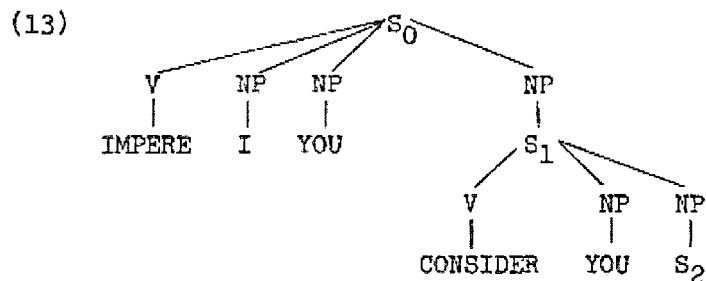
- (3) You haven't eaten your spinach.  
 (4) There's rice to be cooked yet.  
 (5) Did you clean up your room?  
 (6) Should you do that?

are perlocutionary suggestions only; they cannot be predicted systematically from the semantic structure or felicity conditions of direct suggestions.

One way of distinguishing such perlocutionary suggestions from indirect illocutionary suggestions is in terms of what type of responses are appropriate to them. True indirect illocutionary suggestions may be responded to by remarks that make reference to either the act of suggesting or a felicity condition on that act. Responses like (7)-(12)

- (7) That's a good idea.  
 (8) That's a lousy idea.  
 (9) That's a possibility.  
 (10) That's worth {thinking about},  
   considering  
 (11) I'll keep that in mind.  
 (12) That's a fine suggestion you just made there.

are not appropriate to the perlocutionary suggestions (1)-(6), but are to the indirect suggestions discussed below.



There is a condition on CONSIDER in this structure that the speaker believe that the hearer has not already considered the embedded proposition, that is  $S_2$  in the diagram (13). This is actually just a specific instance of a more general condition on imperatives, that the speaker does not attempt to get the hearer to do something which he has already done. According to Heringer's proposal, this condition may be either asserted or questioned to perform, indirectly, the act of which it is a condition (namely, the act of suggesting). Sentences (14)-(20)

- (14) You haven't considered Jeremiah's doing it.  
 (15) You don't seem to have thought about my going to Detroit.  
 (16) Have you considered taking Kalanianole?  
 (17) How about a cup of coffee?

- (18) What about visiting your in-laws?
- (19) Are you aware that you could grow soy beans?
- (20) You don't seem to be aware of the possibility of hiring women.

are examples of indirect suggestions based on this condition; (14), (15), and (16) are relatively straightforward, but (17) and (18) are more complicated, and there are differences between them that I won't go into here. Basically, the how about and what about questions ask for opinions on the matter being discussed; since it is necessary to have thought about something to have an opinion on it, (17) and (18) function as indirect suggestions by causing the hearer to consider the proposition in order to give an opinion. These questions are, as are all sentences that can be indirect illocutions, ambiguous between a literal reading, in which the speaker assumes the hearer has considered the proposition (and so, the speaker is not suggesting anything), and an indirect suggestion sense, where the speaker assumes the hearer has not considered the proposition.

These sentences indicate that not only can conditions of this type be asserted and questioned, but also they can be used as presuppositions upon which questions are based, and these questions can perform the indirect illocutionary act. That this is actually what's going on here is not certain; it may be that how about and what about questions are idiomatic in this respect.

The sentences (19) and (20) are also complicated; they may even be too indirect for everyone to agree that they are actually suggestions. The complexity of these sentences arises from the fact that they are based on a condition of a condition (namely, that in order to consider something one must be aware of it); in addition, these sentences involve a second condition on suggestions concerning the possibility of the proposition being suggested. I will return to this condition on possibility in a moment. First, I would like to point out that another aspect of suggestions is illustrated by (19) and (20): as far as the hearer is concerned, these sentences are suggestions if he was actually unaware of the possibility mentioned. Thus, if the speaker's and hearer's beliefs do not coincide, what may be a suggestion in the speaker's opinion may not be one in the hearer's opinion.

Returning to the condition on possibility: this condition is that the speaker believe that the proposition being suggested is possible. (21)-(23)

- (21) You could eat liver.
- (22) It wouldn't kill you to wash your feet.
- (23) Maybe she could take you to school.

assert this condition and (24) and (25)

- (24) Could we move that thing?
- (25) Is it possible to turn the radio down?

question it. It might be noted here that understanding (22) also requires the commonly held assumption that those actions which result in one's death are not to be considered legitimate possibilities.

I consider recommendations to be a special type of suggestion. They have the same semantic structure as suggestions, and both conditions mentioned so far also hold for them. In addition, they have the condition that the speaker believe that the action indicated in the proposition is in the best interest of the hearer, or is desirable for the hearer to do. Some indirect recommendations based on this condition:

- (26) It would be nice if you visited your mother.
- (27) He should learn to drive.
- (28) You should read Tolkien.
- (29) Shouldn't you try sketching first?
- (30) It wouldn't hurt you to straighten up your desk once in a while.

Sentence (30) is complicated in the same way as (22) is, with the additional element of sarcasm being supplied by the speaker's assumption that the reason that the hearer hasn't done the recommended action is that it would in some way be harmful to his health or well-being.

There is another condition specifically on recommendations, no doubt related to the previous one: the speaker must believe that there is a good reason to do the action mentioned in the proposition. From this condition the following indirect recommendations result:

- (31) There's at least one good reason to impeach the president.
- (32) We'll make a lot of money if we sell now.
- (33) You'll live longer if you practice yoga.
- (34) Why don't we go horseback riding?
- (35) Why not buy the Bishop Estate?

It is necessary to point out that there are some apparent paraphrases of (34) and (35) that do not seem to be indirect suggestions, for instance:

- (36) Isn't there some reason to go horseback riding?
- (37) What's the reason for not buying the Bishop Estate?

It may be that (36) does suggest indirectly, but it certainly is not as clearly a suggestion as (34). And (37) seems only to have its literal, information-seeking sense, and not to be a suggestion at all. I don't know why this should be so, but I strongly suspect it is related to the fact that stress (and ultimately, deletion) also play a part in indirect illocutions. If there is extra stress on don't in (34) the suggestion reading is lost and, of course, the reduction parallel to that exemplified in (35) cannot take place. It seems

as if there may be certain stress rules (and possibly other sorts of phonological rules) whose applicability correlates with the illocutionary force of such an utterance, and questions like (36) and (37) do not undergo such rules. The matter certainly warrants further investigation.

There is one more condition on the type of suggestion I have been discussing that I would like to mention; it is similar to the last condition given on recommendations, but more general in nature: the speaker must believe there is no reason not to do the action specified. This condition is exemplified by the following indirect suggestions:

- (38) There's no reason not to have a party.
- (39) There's nothing preventing us from making fudge.
- (40) I see no reason not to drink wine.
- (41) Is there any reason not to invite Yuriko?
- (42) Does anyone have anything against eating now?

One category of suggestions has been ignored so far in this paper--those beginning with let's, as in (43) and (44).

- (43) Let's think about why we're here.
- (44) Let's stay for the forum at 5:00.

I believe these suggestions are basically different from the more common ones discussed above. The let's suggestions are not necessarily attempts to get people to consider things, specifically, as were the others; rather, they are attempts to get people to do things in general (and, of course, what they try to get people to do may be to think about something, as (43) does). They have the same semantic structure as impositives that are not suggestions (that is, a structure different from the one shown in (13) in that instead of CONSIDER as the first embedded verb, this more general suggestion simply has DO as the predicate in  $S_1$ ). These let's suggestions are distinguishable from other impositives in that the relation between speaker and hearer is not one of ascendancy, as it is in commands and requests. For the let's suggestions the conversational participants must have equal status, just as for other suggestions. I think it likely that the form of the suggestions beginning with let's is a consequence of this equal status condition, although I don't see how. It may be that this status condition needs more precise formulation, or it may just be that suggestions of this form are entirely idiomatic. Any suggestions on this matter will be welcome.

#### Note

\*Paper read before the 1973 summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

## References

- Green, Georgia M. Ms. How to get people to do things with words.
- Heringer, James T. 1971. Some Grammatical Correlates of Felicity Conditions and Presuppositions. Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University. In: Working Papers in Linguistics 11.iv-110, Ohio State University.