

Henry James's *Washington Square*. A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract

Generally speaking, identity is revealed not only in the actions and attitudes of characters, but also in their conversations and, what is more, especially in the things that they do not say but can be inferred, rather than in what they say. This paper looks precisely at the indirectness expressed in a conversation by its two protagonists, an elderly man and his daughter's potential, mercantile suitor, in a fragment from Chapter nine of Henry James' "Washington Square". Due to the numerous subtle allusions and implicit meanings, the conversation has the value of a battle confrontation, in which the combatants establish their positions and convey them clearly to each other, although what they literally discuss has the appearance of an inconsequential chat. We analyze mainly the differences that occur between the real and intended speech acts, as well as the way politeness hides a wide array of illocutions, from irony to threats. As a result of the analysis, the identities and power relations of the characters are pinpointed, both between themselves and before the reader.

Keywords

pragmatics, identity, indirectness, politeness, irony.

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to once more reveal that an apparently simple conversation may hide a considerable amount of extra literal meaning conveyed by indirectness – implicatures, politeness and impoliteness strategies, as well as irony. I have chosen this excerpt from Chapter nine of Henry James' *Washington Square* because it represents suitable material for the aim of this paper, as Henry James is well-known for his concern with subtlety and indirectness in the linguistic interactions that take place between his characters. The text under analysis is a fragment from a conversation between Dr. Sloper, a wealthy man, the heroine's father, and her greedy, sly, hypocritical but intelligent suitor, Morris Townsend, who is interested in marrying Catherine for money. It is an exchange of witty replies, during which Dr. Sloper is trying to uncover Morris as a heartless schemer, while Morris is attempting to gain the other's acceptance and even help. It reveals the hostile relationship between them, which is otherwise very well masked by politeness and sometimes visible through irony. To ease reference, I have numbered the (bits of) utterances under analysis.

2. The confrontation

The “social distance” (Brown and Levinson 1996: 74) is very marked between Dr. Sloper and Morris Townsend. Dr. Sloper is a distinguished representative of the successful layer of the society’s elite, potent enough to offer Morris a “position”, be it a job or a place in his family, whereas Morris Townsend is merely the “applicant” and, moreover, one suspected of unclean intentions and mercantilism. The doctor’s “relative power” (*Ibidem*) resides in his superiority in both social and financial statuses and in his having authority to decide over Catherine and implicitly Morris’ lives. Both characters are aware of their positions and prove it by acting according to their status, Morris being humble and polite as a general line (but also indolent) and the doctor being ironic and exploiting his advantage to extract information. From the very beginning, we have two layers of meaning, two levels of interpretation: Morris is simultaneously inquiring about a job and about his chances of becoming Catherine’s husband.

In the first part of their conversation, Dr. Sloper’s replies are often performed in such a way as to show his intentional care not to offend Morris, not because he truly respects him, but as a strategy to determine Morris to be more confident in openly expressing his thoughts. Dr. Sloper hopes that in this way his interlocutor would reveal his hidden intentions and that he would be able to enter Townsend’s mind in order to understand better both the extent to which he can be an intelligent, calculated schemer and the strategy he intends to apply in pursuing his goals.

Dr. Sloper’s first question is a “directive”, a request for information (Searle 1976: 12), marked by the use of a polite form expressed through the verb “prefer” and meant to protect the hearer’s “positive face” (Brown and Levinson 1996: 61) wants, since the “implicature” (Grice 1975: 43) is actually inquiring about what Morris is good at:

[1] ‘What sort of thing should you prefer?’

[2] ‘Do you mean what I am fit for? [3] Very little, I am afraid. [4] I have nothing but my good right arm, as they say in melodramas.’ (James 1901: 69)

Consequently, the answer it elicits is a potential FTA (Brown and Levinson 1996: 65), an admittance of weak points – and therefore likely to damage the need of being admired. The polite manner in which the question is formulated diminishes the attack at the “negative face” (*Ibidem*: 61) wants too, since Morris’ answer necessarily implies a narrowing of his autonomy by admitting that his skills are limited and consequently that he is only fit for certain positions.

However, Morris spells out the implicature showing himself as fully cooperative, not only at the linguistic level but also at the level of the speaker’s goals, in accordance with the Perlocutionary Cooperative Principle (Attardo 1997). He is not in the least reluctant to admit that he has picked up the implicature and that he does not feel offended. Moreover, he performs in 3 a self-FTA directed at his positive face that can be related to the “Politeness Principle” maxims (Leech 1983: 79), namely the “Modesty Maxim” (he maximizes “dispraise of self” in an

assertive speech act) (*Ibidem*: 136). Morris is over polite and humble; at this first stage of their conversation, both men avoid displaying their arsenal of witticism because they are merely exploring the ground before launching their attacks at the opponent. An illuminating metaphor for this situation is the two characters being enemies in a game of chess while each of them intends to first find out his adversary's strategy.

Utterance 4 is a case of "violation" (Grice 1975: 49) of the "quantity maxim" (*Ibidem*: 47) because Morris performs this "representative" assertive speech act (Searle 1976: 10) not to bring along any necessary missing piece of information (since the utterance brings nothing new to the interlocutor's universe of knowledge), but to soften Dr. Sloper and gain his sympathy – it exploits the "Sympathy Maxim" (Leech 1983: 138). By referring to melodramas, Morris means to subtly create a sympathy bond between himself and Dr. Sloper by appealing to his sentimental nature and also by constructing an identity for himself (the good-natured, hard-working but poor and therefore unfavoured by fate young man – a romantic cliché) which in fact stands in opposition to his true vicious, conniving, greedy nature of an individual interested not in work but in easy-come material gains. Therefore, this utterance is a case of violation, because there is a transparent intent to deceive from Morris' part. Townsend lies two times here: firstly, by creating a false image of himself and, secondly, by wanting to give the impression that he intends to make his fortune by working his way up, when in fact all he wants is to find the easy way of amassing money which involves no effort from his part, namely by marrying Catherine. The implicature is that in fact a "good right arm" should be enough to occupy a good position.

Utterances 5, 6 and 8 are "expressives", compliments (Searle 1976: 12) and "bald on record" statements meant to bring repairs to the damage done to Morris' positive face by his own humble remarks:

[5] 'You are too modest', said the doctor. [6] 'In addition to your good right arm you have your subtle brain. [7] I know nothing of you but what I see; [8] but I see by your physiognomy that you are extremely intelligent.'
 'Ah', Townsend murmured. [9] 'I don't know what to answer when you say that. [10] You advise me, not to despair?' [...]
 [11] 'I should be very sorry to admit that a robust and well-disposed young man need ever despair. [12] If he doesn't succeed in one thing, he can try another. [13] Only, I should add, he should choose his line with discretion.'
 [14] 'Ah, yes, with discretion', Morris Townsend repeated, sympathetically.
 [15] 'Well, I have been indiscrete, formerly; [16] but I think I have got over it. [17] I am very steady now.' (James 1901: 69-70)

The "illocutionary point" or purpose (Searle 1976: 3) of these utterances is to flatter Morris and keep a polite relation at the linguistic level with the adversary. This is part of Dr. Sloper's strategy, who wants, on the one hand, to put Morris at ease, so that the young man should let his guard down and give himself away (this being the expected effect, the perlocution) and, on the other hand, to dissimulate, hiding from Morris the fact that he himself has a very intelligent mind which he intends to use to the end of finding out Morris' plans.

Utterance 7 comes to support more the dissimulation tactics that Dr. Sloper uses, and which include lying, as, by this remark, again a representative assertive speech act, he violates the “quality maxim” (Grice 1975: 47), as he actually does know more about Morris’ intentions than he lets to be visible and he wants to fool Townsend into believing that he does not. It is again a strategy to make Morris relax and no longer be on guard with what he says in the hope that he will eventually speak his mind.

9 is an assertion and a fake modesty piece of discourse. It is the only right reaction that Morris could have had if he wanted to be consistent with his previous assertions, among which the one where he claims he is modest. Naturally, being modest would determine him to be embarrassed or at a loss as to what attitude to adopt in case he were praised.

All Dr. Sloper’s sly praising replies have the desired perlocution, as Morris decides to finally lay the cards on the table and direct the conversation to its real purpose. Utterance 10 marks therefore a turning point in the dialogue. It is a directive, a request for information and the implicature is that Morris is asking for more than just Dr. Sloper’s opinion – he actually implies that he is expecting an offer from the latter. At this moment the politeness strategies that Morris used in the first part of the linguistic interaction between the two men are left aside or at least back-grounded. This utterance is in fact interpretable as an instance of “negative impoliteness” (Culpeper 1996: 356), an attack at Dr. Sloper’s negative face wants, since it is an invasion of his space (metaphorically speaking) from Morris’ part and an imposition that the doctor take action where Morris’ interests are concerned. The illocution is both to determine Dr. Sloper to come up with an offer, and of course to save time, to cut a long, probably meandered dialogue to the point (that would have been reached anyway, but much later and with more psychological strain).

The perlocution, however, is not the one Morris would have wished for, since Dr. Sloper formulates his answer in such a way as to remind Morris of the social distance between them. He replies with a very general remark, 11, as the personal pronoun “you” that he used previously, while attempting to repair Morris’ positive face, has turned into the generic description “a robust and well-disposed young man” (James 1901: 70) and the generalized reading is reinforced by the use of the adverb “ever”. This utterance equates a metaphoric pushing away of Morris who dared get too close and too personal as to utter an impositive remark. Dr. Sloper refuses to cooperate, in the sense that he denies having picked up Morris’ implicature – in other words, he “plays dumb”. Flouting a maxim means to “blatantly fail to fulfil it” (Grice 1975: 49), whereas the manner maxim refers to making “it clear what contribution [...] [one] is making” (*Ibidem*: 47). Utterance 11 is an example of flouting of the manner maxim, as Morris’ question was a request for information, namely the interlocutor’s opinion on his particular case, and the doctor is ambiguous, as he gives his account on young men in Morris’s situation in general. Dr. Sloper is being obscure intentionally for the same reasons that I have mentioned above; nevertheless, 11 may constitute an indirect offer of assistance, a commissive (Searle 1976: 7) if we are optimistic (from Morris’ point

of view) in interpreting it. Utterances 11 and 12 could be considered floutings of the “relation maxim” (Grice 1975: 47) as well, as Dr. Sloper avoids answering straight to the point and resorts to general remarks that might be deemed as irrelevant.

Utterance 12 is a warning in the shape of an assertion. Dr. Sloper warns Morris not to be overconfident that his attempt to get his hands on the doctor’s fortune and daughter will be successful. He subtly suggests to Morris that this is just a possible evolution of the course of events and not an imminent ending, an idea that is reinforced by the use of the conjunction “if”. This speech act could be perceived as more than a warning – possibly a threat, as the doctor’s implicature might be also read as a manifest intention to protect his “possessions” (including Catherine) from Morris at any cost. Utterance 13 is a directive, a piece of advice combined with a tinge of irony. The implicature is that Morris’ greedy attempts have been too transparent, lacking any subtlety or finesse. The irony is therefore directed not only at Morris’ conduct, but also, implicitly, at his mental capacities, as a man that cannot handle his affairs in a subtle manner presumably lacks intelligence. Dr. Sloper performs a FTA that can be read both as negative impoliteness (as it is a means to belittle the other) and as “sarcasm or mock politeness” (Culpeper 1996: 356), as it is hidden under the cover of insincere politeness achieved by the use of a generic pronoun – “he” being the anaphor of “a robust and well-disposed young man” (James 1901: 70) – whose referent might be Morris or any other young man in a similar situation. Therefore, Dr. Sloper’s ironic advice to be discrete is presumably directed at Morris or any young man in general.

The two characters’ dialogue so far has been symmetric. They both began with instances of polite replies that suited their status: Morris – humble, performing FTAs at his own positive face, and Dr. Sloper being polite enough as to repair them by counterbalancing the damage with praises. Then Morris attacked the doctor’s negative face wants by performing an indirect request (10) and thus invading his interlocutor’s space. The perlocution of this act was a warning-threat and irony under the mask of politeness performed by Dr. Sloper, who re-establishes in this way the distance, in terms of the power, hierarchical relationship between them, and consequently summons to respect.

Morris accepts to stand rebuked (assertive 14), which shows his having listened to Dr. Sloper and his willingness to accept his advice as valid. In 15, he performs a FTA directed at his own positive face. However, Morris is sly, as he wants to give the impression that he is humble again, but after having feigned a back-away attitude, of acknowledgement and respect of distance, he boldly attacks again. These opposing attitudes are marked at the level of the text by the conjunction “but”, which introduces utterances 16 and 17 – “conventional” implicatures (Grice 1975: 45) that are rehabilitations of Morris’ positive face and show a progression in Morris’ self-esteem and confidence. He passes from humbly expressing an opinion of himself, using the modality verb “I think I have got over it”, to a boastful attitude reinforced by the adverb “very”: “I am very steady now” (James 1901: 70).

These assertions are preparatory for the indirect request, the directive in 18, expressed under a polite mask (the past tense and the adverb “kindly”) but

actually constituting an instance of negative impoliteness or sarcasm (if we choose to validate Morris' polite words as insincere):

[18] 'Were you kindly intending to propose something for my advantage?' he inquired, looking up and smiling.

[19] 'D-n his insolence!' the doctor exclaimed, privately. But in a moment he reflected that he himself had, after all, touched first upon this delicate point, and that his words might have been interpreted as an offer of assistance. [20] 'I have no particular proposal to make', he presently said, [21] 'but it occurred to me to let you know that I have you in my mind. [22] Sometimes one hears of opportunities. [23] For instance, should you object to leaving New York – to going to a distance?' (*Ibidem*)

The perlocution is Dr. Sloper's anger, manifested in a "performative" act of cursing in 19, which is part of "behabitives" – acts that "have to do with attitudes and *social* behavior" (Austin 1962: 151). He is obviously angry and retracts the possible implicature-offer from 11 in utterance 20 – a representative, an assertion. Then, through the intermediary of the conjunction "but", he reintroduces the possibility that he might have an offer after all. Utterance 21 is a commissive, a promise not to forget about Morris' interests, and the implicature of utterance 22 is pretty much the same. Dr. Sloper executes a kind of game, asserting or implying something just to negate it afterwards. He plays with his adversary's horizon of expectations in order to keep him in a state of uncertainty, to exhaust his nerves, to make him tired so that he should make a mistake and reveal his true nature openly.

23 is a request for information, a representative disguised under the mask of a commissive – an offer which is thrown as bait. Dr. Sloper implies that he might have some position available outside New York just to see from Morris' reaction whether the latter is really looking for a job to "turn an honest penny" (James 1901: 69) as he previously declared, or he is bent on only one goal, namely dowry hunting and marrying Catherine, in which case he would object to leaving the city. The doctor deliberately makes his speech very obscure and ambiguous. 22 and 23 are examples of violations of the manner maxim, his intention being that of misleading his interlocutor to the purpose of obtaining evidence to support his suspicions of Morris' perfidious nature. Here, Dr. Sloper is working like a detective.

Sloper obtains the effect that he wants and therefore his piece of evidence as Morris declines what he has picked as an implied offer in utterance 24 – an indirect, polite refusal:

[24] 'I am afraid I shouldn't be able to manage that. [25] I must seek my fortune here or nowhere.' [26] 'You see', added Morris Townsend, 'I have ties – I have responsibilities here. I have a sister, a widow, from whom I have been separated for a long time, and to whom I am almost everything. I shouldn't like to say to her that I must leave her. She rather depends on me, you see.'

[27] 'Ah, that's very proper; [28] family feeling is very proper' said Doctor Sloper. [29] 'I often think there is not enough of it in our city. [30] I think I have heard of your sister.'

'It is possible, but I rather doubt it, she lives so very quietly.'

'As quietly, you mean', the doctor went on, with a short laugh 'as a lady may do who has several young children.'

'Ah, my little nephews and nieces – that's the very point! I am helping to bring them up', said Morris Townsend. 'I am kind of an amateur tutor; I give them lessons.' (*Ibidem*: 70-71)

He admits to his determination to seek his fortune in New York or not at all in utterance 25, the implicature of which is that he will not give up his plans and possibly that he is not afraid of Dr. Sloper. Consequently, his answer can be perceived as a subtle warning which will trigger a series of warnings from Dr. Sloper as well, under the cover of mere assertions, in the following part of their conversation.

Starting with utterance 26, Morris launches himself in a series of assertives, which are apparently only sentences meant to fill in a possible space gap in the conversation, but which in fact have a very complex illocutionary content. By saying that he is the only one on whom his sister can depend with the raising of her children, Morris actually justifies his refusal to leave New York, suggesting to the doctor in this way that a generous impulse and not his ambition might be the reason for his determination not to leave the town. Secondly, Morris offers a positive image of himself as a family man and a thoughtful, caring, sensitive fellow, through which he not only violates the quality maxim (as he is lying upon giving his sister's needs as motivation for his obstinacy to find a position in New York and nowhere else, while in fact he stays because he wants to marry Catherine), but also works upon his positive face needs, seeking approval for his attitude (in the sense expressed by the Sympathy Maxim), knowing that Dr. Sloper is animated by a strong "family feeling" too, i.e. an overprotective attitude towards his daughter Catherine. In other words, Morris praises himself, his own abilities.

Dr. Sloper acknowledges Morris' face needs and therefore utterance 27 is an expressive, an act of congratulating Morris. Also, it is speaker-oriented – Dr. Sloper evaluates Morris by resorting to his own beliefs, which include taking care of Catherine, even excessively. Had Dr. Sloper failed to say something to show his approval after Morris' self-praising discourse, he would have committed an act of "withhold politeness" (Culpeper 1996: 357). Nevertheless, the doctor knows how to suggest to Morris that his politeness is only apparent, i.e. ironic praise (28) meant to convey his true feelings. Utterance 28 also has an implicature, namely that believing this, he will do everything in his power to protect Catherine of anything and anyone, including Morris, an idea that is reinforced in utterance 29. Here, he suggests again that one can never be too careful when it comes to protecting his family, and that he is cautious enough and will be watching Catherine closely, trying to remove any potential threat to her. Thus, utterance 28 may be a case of warning under the mask of an assertion, while utterance 29 is obviously over informative and constitutes a case of flouting of the quantity maxim.

If we pursue this line of interpretation, namely that Dr. Sloper is continuously trying to warn Morris in one way or another that the young man will have to fight the father before marrying the daughter, then we may see utterance 30 as a warning as well, in the sense that Dr. Sloper wants to emphasize that he has done some research on Morris and that, since he knows so much about his family, he probably knows more about his character and intentions too. The implicature, as well as the literal act (the assertion in itself, without any implicature attached) contradict Dr. Sloper's statement that I have discussed in utterance 7, in which he affirms he knows nothing more about Morris than what he can see. So, what the doctor is doing here is intimidating his adversary.

The conversation continues with Morris' self-praising, which again triggers the doctor's congratulations but also his irony, namely sarcasm, in utterance 31, introduced by the conjunction "but, which diminishes up to annulling the flattering effect of the previous speech act:

'That's very proper, as I say; [31] but it is hardly a career.'

[32] 'It won't make my fortune', the young man confessed.

[33] 'You must not be too much bent on a fortune', said the doctor. [34] 'But I assure you I will keep you in mind; [35] I won't lose sight of you.' (James 1901: 71)

As Dr. Sloper notices that tutoring his sister's children is hardly a career to Morris, the young man shows himself as cooperative and humble, admitting that this indeed will not make his fortune (utterance 32), in which he also hints at the way he still needs to look for his fortune some place other than in tutoring lessons and, implicitly, that he will still be pursuing Catherine.

As Morris actually indirectly declares again his intentions with the last utterance, the perlocution is that Dr. Sloper restates, himself too, his position, in utterance 33, which is a warning masked by a piece of advice, a directive. The first reading of utterance 34 indicates a promise, a commissive, but when we read speech act 35, which we clearly perceive as a threat, we realize that the former is at least a warning, if not a threat too.

3. Conclusions

The whole conversation proves that both Morris and Dr. Sloper are brilliant, witty and capable of using language as a weapon. Morris' status forces him to be humbler and bring prejudice to his face wants to mask his impositions, but does not prevent him from indolent remarks. Dr. Sloper never shows that he actually loses his temper, he is the perfect gentleman and the one that steers the conversation, a sort of "ringmaster", who nevertheless does not refrain from ironic remarks and warnings, hidden, of course, under the same politeness strategies that Morris uses. As a general conclusion, it would be interesting to notice how language enables two characters who are in fact at great enmity to clearly state their positions and convey their true feelings through an exchange of apparently amiable replies.

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