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Indirectness in Discourse: Ethnicity as Conversational Style*

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This paper focuses on indirectness in discourse as a feature of conversational style. Reported research emphasizes social differences in expectations of indirectness in the context of conversation between married partners.

To discover patterns of interpretation, findings are drawn from (1) interviews with Greeks and Americans about their interactional experience and (2) a pilot study consisting of a questionnaire based on a conversation reported in (1) and including (a) paraphrase choices (b) short answers and (c) open-ended interview/discussions with respondents. Results suggest that Greeks are more likely to expect indirectness in the context presented, and that Greek-Americans who may not speak Greek have retained the influence of Greek communicative strategies.

Discussion of differences in interpretive strategies focuses on 1) the discourse function of questions and 2) the significance of ellipsis, yielding a *brevity effect*, associated for Greeks with an *enthusiasm constraint*.

Theoretical implications include an alternative to Bernstein's hypothesis about restricted and elaborated codes, such that restriction and elaboration are not monolithic. Rather, groups differ with respect to which contexts, channels, and cues require elaboration.

I once began a paper on misunderstandings due to differences in conversational style by referring to the following experience. While I was staying with a family on the island of Crete, no matter how early I awoke, my hostess managed to have a plate of scrambled eggs waiting on the table for me by the time I was up and dressed; and at dinner every evening, dessert included a pile of purple seeded grapes. Now I don't happen to like seeded grapes or eggs scrambled, but I had to

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eat them both because they had been set out—at great inconvenience to my hosts—especially for me. It turned out that I was getting eggs scrambled because I had asked, while watching my hostess in the kitchen, whether she ever prepared eggs by beating them, and I was getting grapes out of season because I had asked at dinner one evening how come I hadn't seen grapes since I had arrived in Greece. My hosts had taken these careless questions as hints—that is, indirect expressions of my desires. In fact, I had not intended to hint anything, but had merely been trying to be friendly, to make conversation.

As I demonstrated in the earlier paper (Tannen 1975), misunderstandings like these are commonplace among members of what appear to (but may not necessarily) be the same culture. However, such mix ups are particularly characteristic of cross-cultural communication. There are individual as well as social differences with respect to what is deemed appropriate to say and how it is deemed appropriate to say it. (See Gumperz & Tannen 1979 for discussion of levels of signalling on which individual vs. social differences occur).

The point of departure for much work in pragmatics has been Grice's (1967) conversational maxims which govern contexts in which talk is direct. In actual interaction, these maxims do not answer but rather set the questions: How much is "necessary"? Which words will be "clear"? What is deemed "relevant"? Recent linguistic theory has refocused on the formulaic nature of meaning in conversation, as seen, for example, in Chafe's (1970) notion of *idiomaticization* and Fillmore's (1972, 1976) *frame semantics*. Such approaches see meaning as conventionally associated with strings of words expected in certain social contexts. An understanding of indirectness in conversation builds upon this semantic framework.

John Gumperz (1977) demonstrates that paralinguistic and prosodic features, which he calls *contextualization cues*, signal how any conversational contribution is to be understood—that is, what speech activity is being engaged in, or, in Bateson's (1972) terms, what interpretive frame is operative. Conversational control mechanisms used in the process he calls *conversational inference*, Gumperz (1978) notes, "are learned in the course of previous interactive experience. To the extent that such interactive experience is a function of home background, and insofar as home background relates to ethnicity, knowledge of such rhetorical conventions is ethnically determined." Hence, research has shown that these subtly calibrated monitoring devices which make conversation possible, break down in interaction among speakers of different ethnic background.

It is the very sharing of conversational strategies that creates the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies and follows successful conversation: the sense of being understood, being "on the same wave length," belonging, and, therefore, of sharing identity. Conversely, a lack of congruity in conversational strategies creates the opposite feeling: of dissonance, not being understood, not belonging—therefore, of not sharing identity. This is the sense in which conversational style is a major component of what we have come to call ethnicity.

Conversational control processes operate on an automatic level. While everyone can easily see that different languages or different dialects have different words for the same object, ways of signalling intentions and attitudes seem self-evident, natural, and real. For example, Agrawal (1976) shows that speakers of Indian English use heightened pitch to signal that they want to take the floor, and are systematically misunderstood by speakers of British English as intending to show anger.

I have suggested (Tannen 1979, 1980c) that these and other features of talk—what people say and how they say it—constitute conversational style. Such features include use of pitch, loudness, and pacing; turn-taking mechanisms; storytelling, including when and how the story is introduced, what the point is, how it is revealed, and listenership; topic, including which are preferred, how they are introduced, and with how much persistence; humor, irony, and sarcasm; and so on. The seeded grapes and scrambled eggs example illustrates another key element in conversational style—the relative inclination to expect and use indirectness, that is, to look for, and give out hints, in particular contexts. That is the focus of the present paper.

Indirectness in Conversation

Much recent linguistic research has been concerned with the fact that the interpretation of utterances in conversation often differs radically from the meaning that would be derived from the sentences in isolation. Robin Lakoff (1973) observes that sociocultural goals, broadly called *politeness*, lead people to express opinions and preferences in widely varying linguistic forms. Lakoff's (1979) recent work demonstrates that characteristic choices with respect to indirectness give rise to personal style, and that an individual's style is a mixture of strategies which shift in response to shifting situations. Ervin-Tripp (1976) has shown the great variation in surface form which directives may take in American English. Brown & Levinson (1978) argue that the form taken by utterances in actual interaction can be seen as the linguistic means of satisfying the coexisting and often conflicting needs for *negative face* (the need to be left alone) and *positive face* (the need to be approved of by others). As a result, people often prefer to express their wants and opinions *off record*—that is, indirectly.

Indirectness is a necessary means for serving the needs of *rapport* and *defensiveness*, associated respectively with Brown and Levinson's positive and negative face. *Rapport* is the lovely satisfaction of being understood without explaining oneself, of getting what one wants without asking for it. *Defensiveness* is the need to be able to save face by reneging in case one's conversational contribution is not received well—the ability to say, perhaps sincerely, "I never said that," or "That isn't what I meant." The goals of rapport and defensiveness correspond to Lakoff's politeness rules "Maintain camaraderie" and "Don't impose."

In order to understand the uses of indirectness in discourse, it will be necessary to distinguish between individual and social differences. An individual certainly learns conversational strategies in previous interactive experience, but chooses certain and rejects other strategies made available in this way. The present analysis and discussion seeks to investigate social differences in expectations of indirectness in certain contexts by Greeks, Americans, and Greek-Americans, tracing the process of adaptation of this conversational strategy as an element of ethnicity.

Discussion will focus on findings from (1) interviews with informants about their interactional experience and (2) a pilot study consisting of a questionnaire based on a sample conversation reported in (1). Results of the pilot study include

1. A paraphrase choice,
2. short answers, and
3. open ended interview/discussions.

Clearly, self reports of past interaction and interpretations of a conversational segment presented in writing do not yield a model of discourse production. To know what people in fact say, one must record their spontaneous conversation, as has been undertaken elsewhere (Tannen 1979, 1980c). The questionnaire/interview approach employed here, following Gumperz, is designed to explore patterns of interpretation of meaning in conversation. The elicitation of responses from multiple informants to the same conversational segment elucidates interpretive patterns and makes possible cross-cultural comparison. The short answer and interview components make possible exploration in depth of interpretive strategies that are automatic and fleeting in actual interaction.

Self Reports of Interaction

Based on my experience living in Greece, it seemed to me that Greeks tended to be indirect—to communicate meaning and look for meaning through hints—more often and in different ways than I had learned to expect. The seeded grapes and scrambled eggs example was typical. Comments made by Greeks in conversation corroborated this impression.

For example, a Greek woman of about 65 told me that before she had married, she had had to ask her father's permission before doing anything. She noted that of course he never explicitly denied her permission. If she asked, for example, whether or not she could go to a dance, and he answered,

(1) *An thes, pas.* ('If you want, you can go.')

she knew that she could not go. If he really meant that she could go, he would say,

(2) *Ne. Na pas.* ("Yes. You should go.")

The intonation in (1) rises on the conditional clause, creating a tentative effect, while the intonation in (2) falls twice in succession, resulting in an assertive effect. This informant added that her husband responds to her requests in the sam way. She therefore agrees to do what he prefers without expecting him to expres his preference directly.

This example is of a situation in which interlocutors share expectations abou how intentions are to be communicated. Their communication is thus successfu To investigate processes of indirectness, however, it is useful to focus on interac tions in which communication is not successful (Gumperz & Tannen 1979). Suc sequences are the discourse equivalents of starred sentences in syntactic argumer tation. They render apparent processes which go unnoticed when communicatio is successful.

Elsewhere (Tannen 1975, 1976), I investigated differing uses of indirectnes among married partners. Interactions between couples reveal the effects of di fering uses of indirectness over time. People often think that couples who live to gether and love each other must come to understand each other's conversation styles. However, research has shown that repeated interaction does not necessa rily lead to a better understanding. On the contrary, it may reinforce mistake judgments of the other's intentions, and increase expectations that the other wi behave in a certain way—perhaps a way that is experienced as stubborn, irra tional, or uncooperative (Vassiliou et. al., 1972). Misjudgment is calcified by th conviction of repeated experience.

I began my systematic study of comparative communicative strategies by ask ing couples about experiences in which they became aware of differing interpreta tions of conversations. It became clear that certain types of communication wer particularly given to misinterpretation—requests, excuses, explanation: in shor verbalizations associated with getting one's way. One couple recalled a typical ar gument in which each maintained that they had not gone to a party because th other had not wanted to go. Both partners denied having expressed an disinclination to the other. A misunderstanding such as this might well g undetected between casual acquaintances, but because of the ongoing interactio between partners, such differences of interpretation often surface eventually. I this case, the mix-up was traced to the following reconstructed conversations:

Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?
Husband: Okay.
(Later)
Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?
Husband: Okay, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

The American[1] wife, in discussing this misunderstanding, reported that she ha merely been asking what her husband wanted to do without considering her ow preference. Since she was about to go to this party just for him, she tried to mak

[1]In this example the American wife was a native New Yorker of East European Jewish extraction. I is likely that this background influenced her preference for a seemingly direct style This phenomeno among speakers of this background is the focus of analysis in Tannen 1979.

sure that that was his preference by asking him a second time. She was being solicitous and considerate. The Greek husband said that by bringing up the question of the party, his wife was letting him know that she wanted to go so he agreed to go. Then when she brought it up again, she was letting him know that she didn't want to go, obviously changing her mind. He therefore came up with a reason not to go, to make her feel all right about getting her way. This is precisely the strategy reported by the Greek woman who did what her father or husband wanted without expecting him to tell her directly what that was. Thus, the husband in the party example was also being solicitous and considerate. All this considerateness, however, only got them what neither wanted because they were expecting to receive information differently from the way the other was sending it out.

A key to understanding the husband's strategy is the use of *okay*. To the wife, *Okay* was a positive response in free variation with other positive responses such as *yes* or *yeah*. *But the husband's use of anyway* is an indication that he is going along. Finally, the husband's intonation, or tone of voice, and nonverbal signals, such as facial expression and kinesics, would have contributed to the impact of his message. Nonetheless, the wife asserted that, much as she could see the reasoning behind such interpretations in retrospect, she missed the significance of these cues at the time. The key, I believe, is that she was not expecting to receive her husband's message through subtle cues. She was assuming he would tell her what he wanted to do directly. To the listener, a misunderstanding is indistinguishable from an understanding. One commits to an interpretation and proceeds to fit succeeding information into that mold. People will put up with a great deal of seemingly inappropriate verbal behavior before questioning the line of interpretation which seems self-evident. *Metacommunication* (Bateson, 1972) —discussion about communication processes—is not ordinarily regarded as an appropriate verbal strategy. Direct questioning about how a comment was meant is likely to be perceived as a challenge or accusation.

This example demonstrates, furthermore, the difficulty of clearing up misunderstandings caused by stylistic differences. In seeking to clarify, each speaker continues to use the very strategy that confused the other in the first place. Interaction is often characterized by what Bateson (1972) calls *complementary schismogenesis*. That is, each partner's characteristic style leads the other to apply increasingly extreme forms of the conflicting style. In the party example, the wife's strategy for clarifying was to go "on record," through a direct question, as inquiring about her husband's preference, and to ask her husband to go on record about his preference. Since the husband did not expect preferences to be directly expressed, his wife's second question seemed to him an even more recondite hint. He responded with an even more subtle use of indirectness, to allow her to get her way, and to offer a reason of his own in justification. Expectations about how meaning will be communicated are so compelling that information intended in a different mode is utterly opaque.

A key parameter here is setting. Does a participant define an interaction as one in which it is appropriate to hint? Numerous dicussions triggered by the presentation of these findings have suggested possible male/female differences among Americans in this regard. An audience member commented, "When I first started going out with my boyfriend, we never had misunderstandings about where we should go and what we should do. Now that we've been going together for two years, it seems to happen all the time. How come?" My hypothesis is that at the beginning of their acquaintance, both partners deemed it appropriate to watch out for the other's hints, to give options. However, as the relationship was redefined, the woman expected increased use of indirectness, reasoning:"We know each other so well, you will know what I want without my telling you." The man, on the other hand, expected less indirectness, reasoning: "We know each other so well that you will tell me what you want." They differed with respect to what they deemed appropriate as the context changed.

Another example reported in the earlier study follows.

Husband: Let's go visit my boss tonight.
Wife: Why?
Husband: All right, we don't have to go.

Both husband and wife agreed that the husband's initial proposal was an indication that he wanted to visit his boss. However, they disagreed on the meaning of the wife's question, "Why?" The wife explained that she meant it as a request for information. Therefore she was confused and frustrated and couldn't help wondering why she married such an erratic man who suddenly changed his mind only a moment after making a request. The husband, for his part, explained that his wife's question clearly meant that she did not want to go, and he therefore rescinded his request. He was frustrated, however, and resentful of her for refusing. In discussion, the wife, who was American, reported that she systematically confronted this strange reaction to her asking "Why?" The use of this question can certainly be either a request for information or an indirect way of stalling or resisting compliance with a perceived request. The key here is which meaning of "why" is likely to be used in the context.

The possibility of interpreting the question *Why?* as a challenge or expression of unwillingness to comply with a perceived request is widespread in conversation. It furnishes a crucial step in the analysis of therapeutic discourse by Labov & Fanshel (1977), and gives rise to their formulation of a Rule for Putting Off Requests (p.86). Everyone is capable of seeing both possible interpretations of *Why?*: this indirect one as well as the direct request for information. What differs is the likelihood of making one or the other interpretation in interaction; and this is context-sensitive as well as culturally influenced.

The sample conversation between a husband and wife about visiting his boss was included in the questionnaire presented to Greeks and Americans. Responses

show that whereas respondents from both groups interpreted the husband's suggestion as indicating that he wanted to visit his boss (76% of Americans and 71% of Greeks so indicated), Greeks were somewhat more likely to take the indirect interpretation of the wife's question *Why*? Twenty-five percent of Americans responding indicated they could not tell whether she wanted to go, and 72% were sure or pretty sure that her asking *Why*? showed she did not want to. Only 6% of Greeks responding said they couldn't tell what she wanted, and 89% said they were sure or pretty sure she did not want to go.

A number of couples reported misunderstandings involving exchange of gifts, which seemed to fall into the category *Birthday Present Routine* (Tannen 1975). The birthday present is a prime candidate for this sort of communication mix-up because one of the requirements of a birthday present, for most people, is that it not be directly requested. A partner must divine one's wishes from indirect communication, in order for the birthday present to be a testament to understanding, knowledge, and love. Anyone can give the right present if told directly what one wants. Thus there are pressures inherent in certain contexts, such as gift giving, making joint decisions, and hosting and visiting, which make indirectness more likely, and increases possibilities for misunderstanding.

Again, there are individual as well as social differences in patterns of indirectness. These and other examples, taken from interethnic marriages, always elicit responses from people who are married to spouses of the same nationality to the effect that they experience similar misunderstandings. In order to determine to what extent cross-cultural differences are operating in patterns of interpretation of indirectness, I undertook systematic questioning of Greeks and Americans. The remainder of this paper will report results of that research.

Pilot Study Results

A questionnaire was designed to tap interpretive patterns among Greeks, Greek-Americans, and Americans of non-Greek background, based on the party example presented and discussed above. (See Appendix for questionnaire). The conversation was presented in written form, stripped of crucial paralinguistic and non-verbal signals, to make possible a cross-cultural comparison. Furthermore, distilling the dialogue to verbal form only, focused interpretations on the key verbal and contextual elements.[2] Pilot study results are based upon small samples and are therefore not presented as proof but as an indication of patterns of interpretation. Following the presentation of statistical results, responses by subjects to short answer questions and then to open-ended questions will be discussed.

[2]My use of questionnaire and interview/discussion with a small number of respondents resembles the case study approach of Komarovsky (1962). I was not aware of her work when I did mine and am grateful to Don Forman for alerting me to it

TABLE 1
Respondents choosing 1-I (indirect)

Greeks	Greek-Americans	Americans
N=27	N=30	N=25
48%	43%	32%
(13)	(13)	(8)

Paraphrase Choice

The written questionnaire (see Appendix) begins by presenting the first part of the party negotiation:[3]

Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?
Husband: Okay.

Two paraphrases are then presented, and respondents are asked to indicate which they believe the husband meant when he said *okay*:

[I-I] My wife wants to go to this party, since she asked. I'll go to make her happy.
[I-D] My wife is asking if I want to go to a party. I feel like going, so I'll say yes.

The first choice, here referred to as 1-I (Indirect), represents roughly what the Greek husband reported he had meant by *okay*. 1-D (Direct) represents what the American wife reported she had thought he meant. A comparison of the percentage of respondents in the three groups who opted for Paraphrase 1-I turns out looking much like a continuum, with Greeks the most likely to take the indirect interpretation, Americans the least likely, and Greek-Americans in the middle, somewhat closer to Greeks.[4] (See Table 1).

[3]I added a third sentence to show that at this point the couple had decided to go: Wife: "I'll call and tell him we're coming." Few respondents commented on this sentence.

[4]The Greek sample was taken from native Greeks living in the Bay Area of California. Most were young men who had come to the United States for graduate study or women contacted through church organizations. Therefore, the age and educational levels differed sharply for men and women. In all cases, Greek respondents had been exposed to American communicative systems. The fact that differences emerged, nonetheless, is a testament to the reality of the effect.

Greek-Americans were contacted in New York City because it was not possible to find California Greek-Americans who had grown up in distinctly Greek communities. The fact that Greek-Americans from New York are compared with Americans from California is now seen as a weakness. Subsequent research (Tannen 1979) has indicated that New Yorkers are less likely to expect indirectness than Californians. Again, the fact that differences do emerge is testimony to the effect of ethnicity. Finally, Americans with Greek-born parents and grandparents are lumped together in this study. There is some indication that those with Greek parents show the effect of ethnicity more strongly than do those of Greek grandparents and American-born parents.

In this example, and throughout the present discussion, I refer to one interpretation as direct and the other as indirect. These labels reflect the two possible functions of the question: as a request for information (its literal sense), and as an off-the-record show of resistance (an indirect speech act). This is not to imply, however, that anyone's conversational style is categorically direct. As discussed above, no speaker is direct all the time. What is variable is modes of indirectness–when and how it is deemed appropriate to hint, that is, to signal unstated contextual and interpersonal information.

It has been suggested (Lakoff, 1975) that American women tend to be more indirect than American men. The present study, though based on small samples, and therefore not conclusive, supports this hypothesis—for Americans, but not for Greeks, nor for Greek-Amerians. As seen in Tables 2 and 3, percentages of respondents taking the indirect interpretation are more or less the same for Greek men and women, and for Greek-American men and women, while for Americans, separating male and female respondents yields quite different percentages, with fewer men and more women choosing Paraphrase 1-I. If these samples are representative, they are intriguing in suggesting a stylistic gulf between American men and women which does not exist between Greek men and women.

The questionnaire goes on to present the second part of the conversation:

(later)
Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?
Husband: Okay, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

Respondents are then asked to choose between paraphrases of the husband's second answer:

[2-I] It sounds like my wife doesn't really want to go, since she's asking about it again. I'll say I'm tired, so we don't have to go, and she won't feel bad about preventing me from going.
[2-D] Now that I think about it again, I don't really feel like going to a party because I'm tired.

TABLE 2
Male Respondents Choosing 1-I (indirect)

Greeks N=10	Greek-Americans N=9	Americans N=11
50%	44%	27%
(5)	(4)	(3)

TABLE 3
Female Respondents Choosing 1-I (indirect)

Greeks N=17	Greek-Americans N=21	Americans N=14
47%	43%	36%
(8)	(9)	(5)

TABLE 4
Percentages of respondents choosing 1-I and 2-I

Greek N=27	Greek-American N=30	American N=25
26%	20%	12%
(7)	(6)	(3)

These two paraphrases represent the respective interpretations reported by the Greek husband (here labeled 2-I, Indirect) and the American wife (here labeled 2-D, Direct) in the actual interchange.[3]

The choice of both 1-I and 2-I reveals the most indirect interpretive strategy, by which both the wife's questions are taken to indicate her hidden preferences—or at least that the husband's reply is taken to show that he interprets them that way. Again, results fall out on a continuum with Greeks the most likely to take the indirect interpretation, Americans the least likely, and Greek-Americans in between, slightly closer to the Greeks (See Table 4).

Quantitative results, then, tended to corroborate the impression that more Greeks than Americans opted for the indirect interpretation of questions, and that Greek-Americans were in between, slightly closer to Greeks. However, the pilot study questionnaire was not designed primarily to yield quantitative data. The main function of the paraphrase choices was to serve as a basis for short answers and extended discussion about the patterns of interpretation which prompted one or the other choice, and the linguistic and contextual factors influencing them. Results of the short answer and interview/discussion components follow.

Short Answer Results

Patterns of interpretation emerge from respondents' explanations of their choice of paraphrase and from alternative linguistic forms they reported would have led them to the other choice. Following the paraphrase choices, the questionnaire asked, "What is it about the way the wife and the husband spoke, that gave you that impression?" and then, "What would the wife or husband have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?" Differences in explanations of interpretations were systematic in reference to two aspects of the conversation: the wife's asking of questions, and the form of the husband's responses.

Paraphrase 1-I indicates that the wife's question means she wants to go to the party. The reasoning reported by Greeks to explain their choice of 1-I is that if the

[3]This highlights, as well, an aspect of the questionnaire which is different for male and female respondents. Women and men are both asked to interpret the husband's comments, while it is likely that women identify with the wife and men with the husband. Furthermore, the indirect interpretation is favored by the fact that the husband's response indicates that he took that interpretation.

wife didn't want to go, she would not have brought it up in the first place. Greeks, Americans, and probably members of any cultural group are capable of interpreting a question either as a request for information or as an expression of some unstated meaning. However, members of one culture or another may be more likely to interpret a question in a particular context in one way or another. Recently much research in pragmatics has elaborated on the indirect speech act function of questions as requests for action, or commands. Esther Goody (1978) set out to discover why natives of Gonja do not ask questions in teaching and learning situations. She concluded that Gonjans are "trained early on to attend above all to the command function of questioning. The pure information question hasn't got a chance!" (40). Similarly, I suggest, in the context under consideration, natives of Greece are more disposed to attend to the indirect request function of questions.

Enthusiasm Constraint

Respondents' comments explaining why they chose one or the other paraphrase often focused on the husbands's choice of *okay*. Americans who thought the husband really wanted to go to the party explained that *okay = yes* (24% of the Americans said this). If they thought the husband was going along with his wife's preference, however, the Americans still focused on *okay* as the cue. In this case, they explained that *okay* lacks enthusiasm (20% of the Americans said this).

The expectation of enthusiasm was stronger for Greeks than for Americans. Whereas 24% of the Americans pointed to the affirmative nature of *okay*, not a single Greek did so. In contrast, 50% of the Greeks who explained their choices referred to the fact that *okay* (in Greek, *endaxi*) was an unenthusiastic response. This is more than double the percentage of Americans (20%) who said this. The *enthusiasm constraint* is in keeping with findings of Vassiliou, Triandis, Vassiliou, & McGuire (1972), who conclude that Greeks place value on enthusiasm and spontaneity (as opposed to American emphasis on planning and organization). Vassiliou et al. observe that such differences in "subjective culture" may contribute to the formation of ethnic stereotypes.

Related to the enthusiasm constraint, another aspect of it perhaps, is the *brevity effect*. Many respondents referred to the brevity of the husband's response when they explained their paraphrase choices. However, if Americans made reference to his brevity, it was in explanation of their choice of paraphrase 1-D, the direct interpretation. Their reasoning was that brevity evidenced informality, casualness, and therefore sincerity. This explanation is based on a strategy which assumes that people will express preferences directly in this context. (28%, or more than a quarter, of the American respondents took this approach). In stark contrast, any Greeks who mentioned the brevity of the husband's answer *okay* (*endaxi*), pointed to it as evidence that he was reluctant to go to the party. To them, brevity is a sign of unwillingness to comply with another's perceived preference. This interpretation presupposes that resistance to another's preference, in this context, will nc be verbalized directly (20% of Greek respondents took this approach).[4]

The explanations given by Greek-Americans for their paraphrase choices wer a blend of typical Greek and typical American explanations. They explained tha brevity shows lack of enthusiasm whereas no Americans did, and they explaine that brevity is casual, whereas no Greeks did, in roughly the same proportion (23% and 20% respectively). Only two (7%) said that *okay = yes*, whereas n Greeks and 24% of Americans said this. Thus, Greek-Americans were closer t Greeks than to Americans in their interpretive style.

The brevity effect provides an interesting alternative to Bernstein's (1964) con troversial hypothesis about restricted and elaborated codes. Bernstein suggeste that working class speakers employ a restricted code, whereas middle and uppe class speakers employ an elaborated code. The brevity effect indicates that, rathe than preferring restricted vs. elaborated codes per se, groups of speakers may dif fer with respect to what message component, and what context, require elabora tion, as well as the form that elaboration or ellipsis should take. The present stud shows that a majority of speakers of American standard English who participate expected what might be called a restricted code, that is, a brief response, in th context given. Greeks, in contrast, expected more elaboration in expression o preferences in this context.

Sociocultural Expectations

Expectations about how others will talk are inextricably intertwined with thei expectations about how others will or should act. One Greek respondent commented, "Women generally want to go out but they ask indirectly rather than demanding." While the comment "women generally ask indirectly" is about conversational style (and corroborates the present hypothesis), the assumption that "they generally want to go out" is an expectation based on social rather than linguistic information. A similar analysis was explained with artful elaboration by

[4]An earlier study (Tannen 1976) presented two different versions of this conversation with a rating-scale questionnaire. The two English versions differed in that one presented the husband's first response as *okay*, while the other presented it as *yeah*. The two Greek versions, administered in Athens, differed in that one presented the husband's first response as *okay (endaxi)*, while the other presented it as the informal Greek *yes (ne)*. Whereas I had expected the shift to *yes/yeah* to produce more choices of the direct interpretation among both Greeks and Americans, I found that the substitution of *yeah* for *okay* made no difference in American responses, while the substitution of *yes (ne)* for *okay (endaxi)* did yield fewer choices of the indirect interpretation by Greeks. In other words, *okay* and *yeah* turned out to be equivalents for English, whereas *okay* and *yes* did not turn out to be equivalents for Greeks. This difference may be explained in part by the *yes/yeah* distinction in English, but I believe it is also attributable, in part, to the greater expectation among Greeks that objections will not be directly expressed. One must therefore attend to the indirect interpretation of *okay*.

another Greek respondent. Following is a translation into English of a segment of his comment.[7]

> She's in the house all week . . . Because if I'm married and my wife doesn't work, all day she's at home. If she has a child too, *all right?* she can't go out. She'll go to the store, she'll take the child too. She'll go to the grocer, she'll take the child too, and she'll take care to clean the house all day. This is a natural consequence, for her to be in the house all day. In the evening when I return from work, I'll go home tired, I'll sit there, I won't go out at all, because I'm tired, and this will happen every day. Therefore a woman has to go out. If not two days, one day a week. Okay? So. Let's go to the party, so my wife can enjoy herself.

This man explained his choice of the indirect interpretation not in terms of the words presented in the dialogue, but as a function of sociocultural knowledge brought to the task. In general, Greek respondents were more likely to assume that the wife would want to go to a party, and to refer overtly to this assumption in answering the questionnaire. The nature of the questionnaire/interview setting frames the speech event at hand. It may be that American respondents considered it appropriate to try to be as literal as possible in their responses. Greeks, on the other hand, showed readiness to personalize, and to answer in terms of their own past or projected experience.

The Greek respondent whose explanation is excerpted above was unmarried, but he instantiated the party conversation by projecting himself into it. He even went on to worry about who would baby sit for the child and whether or not he would dance with his wife at the party. These two styles: the Americans' tendency to try to be objective and answer in terms of the specific task at hand, and the Greeks' tendency to personalize and bring in contextual information, emerged in another study (Tannen 1980a) in which Greeks and Americans told what they had seen in a film. There, as here, the choice of one approach or the other represents conventionalized, situation-specific strategies which make up conversational style. I have suggested elsewhere (Tannen 1980b) that the patterns exhibited by Greeks and Americans represent conventionalization of strategies that have been associated with oral and literate tradition. For the present discussion, it is relevant that the dependence upon contextual information and interpersonal involvement which has been associated with oral tradition, also typifies the indirect interpretation pattern evidenced by Greek respondents.

Discussion/Interview Results

Further corroborative results came in the form of comments made by respondents following their completion of the questionnaire. For example, at a small informal meeting, Greek and Greek-American women had filled out questionnaires.

[7]Underlined words were spoken in English. Interviewed in Astoria, Queens, New York, this respondent was a monolingual Greek speaker, but his Greek showed evidence of the influence of English syntax and lexicon.

After collecting them, I explained the purpose of the study and its preliminary hypotheses. There arose a chorus of exclamations of recognition and agreement. An American-born woman's voice prevailed: "Boy, is that right. With Greeks no matter what they say, you never know what's going on up here." She poked her head with her index finger. A Greek-born woman objected: "But my husband doesn't do that. He always says what he means." "But you married a Greek-American," the first woman reminded her. "I married a Greek."

On another occasion, a Greek-born commentator reported that as she periodically returned to Greece for visits after she had moved to the United States, she became increasingly frustrated with her former compatriots. She found herself wondering, "What are they getting at?" or "Where are they getting that from?" This woman, a professional psychologist, was intrigued with the possibility of developing a conversational interpretation questionnaire to test assimilation, for she thought it would be more revealing than currently used tests which ask, for example, about church attendance, and which she reports have not turned out to be valid indicators.

It is possible that a good bi-cultural, like a good bilingual, sees both possibilities and code-switches. For example, an American-born woman of Greek grandparents said that she had to check both paraphrases on the questionnaire. She explained that if she projected herself into the position of the wife, she would take the indirect interpretation, but if she imagined her non-Greek husband asking, she would take the direct paraphrase. In other words, she was aware of both possible strategies. She commented that she tends to be indirect because she picked it up from her mother, who was influenced by her own mother (i.e. the grandmother born in Greece). In the same spirit, another Greek-American woman laughed when she read paraphrase 2-I, saying, "That sounds just like my grandmother."

It is far from certain, however, that awareness of the existence of differences in communicative strategies makes them less troublesome, since their operation remains unconscious and habitual. Again, a personal testimony is most eloquent: that of a professional man living in New York City, whose grandparents were from Greece. He seemed fully assimilated, did not speak Greek, had not been raised in a Greek neighborhood, and had few Greek friends. In filling out the questionnaire, he chose paraphrae 1-I, the initial indirect interpretation. In later discussion he said that the notion of indirectness "rang such a bell." He commented, "... to a great extent being Greek implies a certain feeling of differentness with regard to understanding others which I have some trouble with." He elaborated on what he meant: "I was trying to get at the idea of ... this very thing that we talked about [indirectness] and I see it as either something heroically different or a real impediment. ...Most of the time I think of it as a problem. And I can't really sort it out from my family and background. . . . I don't know if it's Greek. I just know that it's me. And it feels a little better to know that it's Greek."

Conclusion

This discussion has centered on one component of conversational style: modes of indirectness, examined in the context of a negotiation between husband and wife about whether to go to a party. The analysis has reflected conversational style as observed and reported, as well as interpretive patterns as tapped by a pilot study questionnaire and subsequent interview/discussion with respondents. These results indicate how respondents report they would interpret a conversation. In actual interaction, intonation, facial expression, past experience with these and other speakers, and a myriad other factors influence interpretation. Moreover, whenever people communicate, they convey not only the content of their message, but an image of themselves (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, my respondents must have referred in answering not only to their interactive experience but also to their notion of social norms. As a result, differences in patterns of interpretation, which emerged in the study, yield information about expectations and social norms. Eventually, such an approach must be combined with tape recording and video taping of actual interaction, to determine not only what speakers expect, but what they do.

Conversational style–the ways it seems natural to express and interpret meaning in conversation–is learned though communicative experience and is therefore influenced by family communicative habits. As the articulate Greek-American put it, one "can't really sort it out from . . . family and background." In other words, conversational style is both a consequence and indicator of ethnicity. Conversational style includes both how meaning is expressed, as seen in patterns of indirectness, and what meaning is expressed, as seen in the tendency to personalize. All of these conversational strategies create impressions about the speaker—judgments which are made, ultimately, not about how one talks but about what kind of person one is. Conversational style, therefore, has much to do with the formation of ethnic stereotypes.

Just as the couple in the party example, and numerous other couples, according to their self-reports, could systematically misunderstand each other, we may assume that repeated interaction does not necessarily lead to better understanding. On the contrary, it may reinforce mistaken judgments of others' personalities and intentions.

I suggest that conversational style is more resistant to change than more apparent marks of ethnicity such as retention of the parents' or grandparents' language. Seaman (1972) demonstrates that the modern Greek language is "practically extinct" among third generation Greek-Americans and will be "totally extinct in the fourth generation" (204). However, those very third generation Greek-Americans who have lost the Greek language may not have lost, or not lost entirely, their Greek communicative strategies. Understanding these strategies, and the patterns of their retention or loss, can offer insight into the process of cultural assimilation at the same time that it provides insight into discourse processes in a heterogeneous society.

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APPENDIX
QUESTIONAIRE

A couple had the following conversation:

Wife: John's having a party Wanna go?
Husband: OK.
Wife: I'll call and tell him we're coming.

Based on this conversation only, put a check next to the statement which you think explains what the husband really meant when he answer ed "OK."

___ My wife wants to go to this party, since she asked. I 'll go to make her happy.
___ My wife is asking if I want to go to a party. I feel like going, so I'll say yes.

What is it about the way the wife and the husband spoke, that gave you that impression? (Use the other side if you need more room to write).

What would the wife or husband have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?

Later, the same couple had this conversation:

Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?
Husband: OK, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

Based on both conversations which you read, put a check next to the statement that you think explains what the husband really meant when he spoke the second time:

——It sounds like my wife doesn't really want to go, since she's asking about it again. I'll say I'm tired, so we don't have to go, and she won't feel bad about preventing me from going.
——Now that I think about it again, I don't really feel like going to a party because I'm tired.

What is it about the way the husband or wife spoke that gave you that impression?

What would they have had to have said differently, in order for you to have checked the other statement?

Has the wife changed her mind about wanting to go to the party? ___
Your age ___ Sex ___ Have you ever been married or something like it? ___