INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS AS SOCIAL STRATEGIES: BUTLER STEVENS AND "THE FACTS OF LIFE"

Daniela Sorea

Abstract: The present paper provides an analysis of ISAs in two excerpts from Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* with a view to unveiling the way the character Stevens resorts to indirectness in order to maintain harmonious collaborative interactions with his interlocutors. Parameters governing indirectness such as power, higher status and expertise will be taken into account while discussing the relationship between indirectness and politeness. Apart from emphasising the reasons why Stevens prevalently uses indirectness when engaging in conversations with his superiors, the analysis equally intends to reveal how Stevens engages in self-effacement in order to prove those qualities that he regards as crucial in a butler: loyalty, dignity and restraint.

Keywords: ISAs, social status, expertise, politeness, Ishiguro

1. Introduction: On "dignity" and "greatness" in *The Remains of the Day*

In 1956, Stevens, an aging traditionally-minded English butler approaching the end of his career goes on a five day road trip at the suggestion of his new American employer, Mr. Farraday. Stevens drives across the country to visit Miss Kenton, a former co-worker, for whom he once harboured repressed romantic feelings. During his journey, Stevens casts ponderous retrospective glances on his thirty years of service at Darlington Hall, taking comfort in his having conducted himself with irreproachable loyalty to his former master, Lord Darlington. During the country drive that provides the structure for the novel, Stevens recalls his life as a butler, while he often stops to digress about those past occurrences that allow reinforcement of his definitions of the human qualities he holds in highest esteem: restraint, dignity and dedication.

Ishiguro uses two narrative voices compressed in one character: Stevens is both a narrator detached from the story he is recounting, and a protagonist acting within his own story. Stevens simultaneously emerges as both a paragon of virtue and a victim of historical or cultural circumstances lying beyond his control. His participative role dwindles at the end of the story, when Ishiguro subtly foregrounds the doubt that Stevens casts on his past actions, leaving room for regret and despondency.

The joint qualities of "dignity" and "greatness" are moral cornerstones for Stevens's beliefs and conduct throughout *The Remains of the Day*. Early in the novel, Stevens emphasises that 'dignity' is the essential ingredient of greatness as it "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits." Stevens's thoughts and actions are strictly confined to his professional code of ethics while his pursuit of dignity in his professional life completely takes over his personal life. Because he always dons the mask of an imperturbable butler, he necessarily denies—and therefore leaves unexpressed—his own personal feelings and beliefs, which prevents him from achieving genuine intimacy with another person.

In the pages to come, I will analyse two conversations in which Stevens participates. The analysis intends to highlight the essential role indirectness plays in Stevens's conduct towards his master, Lord Darlington, as well as towards an interlocutor of higher social status,

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

young Mr. Cardinal, in his constant attempt to prove loyalty, dedication, decorum and unobtrusiveness towards those he feels honoured to serve.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

With indirect communication, one illocutionary act is not exclusively performed via the semantic content or the locution of the utterances but, predominantly, via the contextually-relevant illocutions of the utterances in question (Culpeper 2005). Supplementing what is said by what is contextually implied yields an ISA (henceforth ISA):

> An ISA is defined as an U in which one illocutionary act (a 'primary act') is performed by way of the performance of another act (a 'literal act'). Hs are able to interpret ISAs by relying upon their knowledge of SAs, along with general principles of cooperative conversation, mutually shared factual information, and a general ability to draw inferences (Schiffrin 1994: 59)

Whenever an illocutionary act is performed indirectly, it involves performing some additional act, different from the locution carried out by the semantics of the utterance, which, sometimes, fails to reveal the intention, goal and force of the illocution. In a nutshell, what is meant is not solely determined by what is said. The problem arises whether speakers are solely aware of the ISA or they have access to both the direct speech act and the ISA and choose the ISA as being contextually the aptest. Searle (1969) maintains that speakers have access to both. In utterances such as:

(1) Can you pass the salt?
(2) I wish you wouldn't do that
(3) Aren't you going to eat your cereal?

In such situations, there are two speech acts available to the hearer: the *direct* or *literal* speech act and the *indirect* or *nonliteral* speech act. Appropriate understanding of the illocution of such utterances involves backgrounding the direct act and, consequently, foregrounding the indirect act. Thus, the request acquires primacy or salience in utterances (1)-(3) is paraphrasable as follows:

(4) Please pass the salt.
(5) Please don't do that.
(6) Please eat your cereal.

In Searle's view, ISAs work because they are systematically related to the structure of the associated direct speech act; more specifically they are tied to one or another felicity condition of the act. The above-discussed utterances work because they address the felicity conditions for requests. Thus, *Can you pass the salt?* addresses the preparatory condition (the hearer is able to perform the act). Next, *I wish you wouldn't do that* addresses the sincerity condition (the speaker wants the hearer to do the act). Finally, *Aren't you going to eat your cereal?* addresses the propositional content condition. On the other hand, an utterance such as

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

Salt is made of sodium chloride does not address any felicity condition for requests, therefore, will never be understood as an indirect request.

Expectedly, in an everyday situation, when dealing with an utterance such as *Can you pass the salt?*, the context will tell the hearer that the speaker should already know that s/he can pass the salt. Since one of the felicity conditions for a question is violated, the hearer is prompted into searching some other illocutionary point for the utterance and embarks upon a line of inferencing based on the assumption that if the utterance is not a genuine question, it must have some other illocutionary point. Bearing in mind that the hearer knows that a condition for requests is the hearer's ability to carry out the requested act, as well as that it is common knowledge to regard passing salt at meals as a widely used practice and as a reasonable goal entertained by the speaker, the hearer may justifiably infer that the utterance is likely to count as a request.

Gordon and Lakoff (1975) concur with Searle that stating or questioning a felicity condition of a Direct speech act will produce an indirect version. However, since formulations such as *Can you pass the salt?* reveal a remarkable degree of conventionality, they may be easily regarded as shortcuts in conversations. Such shortcuts are called conversational postulates and designate those rules that are likely to be followed whenever the hearer is encouraged by the conversational setting and by the conventionally acquired illocution of the respective utterance to search for an indirect meaning. If Searle regards inferencing as playing a crucial role in comprehending indirect intentions, Gordon and Lakoff (1975) prioritise conventions to the point of likening ISAs to idiomatic structures, learned as such by language users without spending time in inferencing their contextual meanings.

3. Interpersonal factors governing indirectness

While investigating the relationship between what is said and what is indirectly meant, Thomas emphasises that only intentional indirectness makes the object of pragmatics. She further argues that indirectness is costly and risky since "...indirectness occurs when there is a mismatch between the expressed meaning and the implied meaning" (Thomas 1995: 119). Moreover, language users should pursue some social or communicative advantage through employing indirectness, an advantage which may often be linked to politeness and face-saving phenomena. Frequently enough, language users tend to take extra pains in employing indirect strategies to avoid some supposedly negative consequences direct illocutions may risk bearing upon their interlocutors. Indirectness alleviates the bluntness of certain speech acts generally regarded as face-threatening, such as demands, reproaches, critical remarks, expressions of disapproval or discontent, to name just a few.

Far from being generalisable, preferring indirectness is an individual choice and strategy, while equally being a culturally-inculcated and context-bound verbal alternative. Nonetheless, scholars such as Spencer-Oatey (2000) maintain that, in most communities of language practice and amid the most diverse interaction strategies dictated by specific circumstances, the following factors govern indirectness in all languages and cultural communities:

(i) the *relative power* of the speaker over the hearer;
(ii) the *social distance* between the speaker and the hearer;
(iii) the *degree of imposition* entailed by the act in question;
(iv) the *relative rights and obligations* between the speaker and the hearer.

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

3.1 Power

Most social contexts, particularly institutional and hierarchical ones, require that speakers should use greater indirectness when addressing interlocutors who exert some power or authority over them (Thomas 1995, Culpeper 2005). Power granted by seniority and/or authority prompts language users to more frequently employ indirect formulations in hierarchical settings such as courts, military establishments, hospitals, church, workplaces, educational institutions, where relations of subordination (employer-employee) and/or of co-dependence based on knowledge and expertise (doctor-patient, priest-parishioner) are instantly acknowledged. Such acknowledgement takes into account the commonly shared assumption that superiors may exert either reward power (favourably influence their current and/or future situation, be it financially, medically or spiritually) or coercive power (detrimentally influence their current or future situation by way of sanction, restriction or imposition) upon subordinates.

According to Spencer-Oatey (2000), there are three types of power that impact upon the use of indirectness in conversations:

(i) *Legitimate power* may be exerted when one person has the right to utter certain requests, demands or orders by virtue of their social or professional role, age or status. For instance, Lord Darlington and Mr. Farraday may freely exert legitimate power over Stevens, as they are the employers in whose service he works as a butler. Within the work hierarchy at Darlington Hall, as a head butler, Stevens has legitimate power over his father, despite the latter's seniority and expertise and the former's boundless admiration and deference towards his parent.

(ii) *Referent power* is defined as the power held by one person over another by virtue of the respect or admiration inspired to that person. In *The Remains of the Day,* Mr. William Stevens has referent power over his son, who ceaselessly strives to become "the great butler" he was thought to have been. To Stevens, his father is a role model, the very embodiment of 'dignity' and 'greatness' any butler should aspire to attain.

(iii)) *Expert power* is the power conferred to a certain person owing to their special knowledge or expertise, which some other person may need. In addition to being Stevens's employer, Lord Darlington is the person to whom Stevens looks up because of his exquisite skills as a diplomat and his peerless gentlemanly behaviour. Stevens allots so much expert power and, consequently, such unquestionable trust to Lord Darlington that he comes to relinquish his right to personal opinions in favour of blindly endorsing the opinions of his master.

3.2 Social distance

As Thomas (1995) points out, power and social distance jointly foster the prevalent use of indirectness towards interlocutors one is socially distant from. When an addresser feels close to their addressee or when interlocutors acknowledge similarity in terms of age, status, ethnicity, concern, they tend to employ less indirectness than during exchanges with total strangers. More often than not, the feeling of "belonging together" or "solidarity" implies less indirectness than "social distance" does. On the other hand, exaggerated indirectness with peers may imply deliberate distancing and aloofness.

3.3 Size of imposition

The size of the imposition (potentially) brought about by an utterance may considerably contribute to the use of indirectness. An addresser is likely to use a higher degree of

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

indirectness in requesting their interlocutor to perform an effort- and time-consuming task (such as painting their house) than one carried out with minimal effort (lending a pen for the interlocutor to jot down a phone number).

Understanding the concept of "size of imposition" heavily relies on Goffman's (1976) notion of "free" and "non-free" goods. According to Goffman (1976), free goods are those that, in a given situation, anyone may use without permission. These range from benches in a park or salt in a restaurant, to things in one's house such as food, drink, books, which family members or roomies are entitled to share, yet which are not made available to any guest without the lodger's permission. Unless there is remarkable closeness between interlocutors requesting someone else's free goods requires a minimal degree of indirectness.

Gordon and Lakoff (1975) extend the concept of free/non-free goods to information by emphasising that certain topics – such as weather or comments on the beauty of the landscape – may be dealt with freely, unrestrictedly. On the contrary, other topics resemble non-free goods and may be labelled "none of your business" topics.

As I will further show when discussing the first excerpt from *The Remains of the Day*, Lord Darlington opts for a greater degree of imposition when asking Stevens to impart "the facts of life" to Sir David's son, Mr. Reginald Cardinal, considering that such a task not only fails to range among his obligations, but is also a taboo topic, to be delegated to a subordinate to carry out.

3.4 Rights and obligations

Indirectness may be regulated by the speaker's right to make a particular demand as well as by the Hearer's obligation to comply with that demand. One may use directness when addressing someone whose task or job description requires fulfilling that particular act in the normal course of events. On the contrary, if certain directives do not incur any social or professional or contractual obligation on the part of the addressee, the respective directive is likely to be enunciated in a more indirect formulation, by means of which the addresser may imply they are asking for a favour or they might acknowledge future indebting to the addressee.

3.5 Indirectness as a strategic advantage

Indirectness obviously adds intricacy to matters of communication and disentangling certain indirectly formulated utterances may encounter serious hindrances, most of which are not solely related to language use, but to use (and abuse) of social conventions, norms and what is allegedly regarded as common knowledge within a particular cultural community. Despite the effort incurred, indirectness permeates everyday language in a plethora of contexts, from highly formal meetings to street gang rows.

According to Thomas (1995) there are several reasons why language users may opt for indirectness. First, indirectness springs out of the *desire to make language more interesting*. For instance Stevens's second employer, Mr. Farraday includes bantering in his characteristic conversational style, consisting of ranges of indirect, seemingly derogatory, jocular remarks. Such instances of bantering arouse his butler's bafflement, who considers this form of interaction somewhat unworthy of gentlemanly conduct. Stevens yet marvels at Mr. Farraday's ability to banter, which he regards as an American import. Stevens's wooden attempts to engage in banter in order to comply with the conversational norms practised by Mr. Farraday only result in making jokes that sound too erudite and often puzzling, and which can only arouse polite laughter with the interlocutor.

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

Secondly, indirectness contributes to increasing the force of one's message because the hearer has to engage in further cognitive effort so as to infer the meaning of the message. Thirdly, indirectness is highly likely to occur when the speaker faces competing goals. In *The Remains of the Day*, when Lord Darlington asks Stevens to reduce his father's workload because of William Stevens's old age, Stevens has the duty to convey the message to his father, which conflicts with his desire to honour his father.

3.6 Being indirect and being polite

Indirectness lies at the crux of politeness phenomena, being closely related to the notion of "face", defined by Goffman (1981) as the public image an individual seeks to project. Indirectness ranks among the politeness strategies meant to provide language users with a favourable face or a positively assessed public image (Brown and Levinson 1987). Along the line of thought inaugurated by Goffman, Brown and Levinson discuss two components of face:

(i) "positive face", i.e. an individual's desire to seem worthy of acceptance and approval
(ii) "negative face", i.e. an individual's desire to act freely.

Mutual self-interest requires that participants in a conversation maintain both their own face and that of their interlocutor, since verbal exchanges may damage face in the following two ways:

(i) "threats to negative face" potentially damage an individual's autonomy. Such threats are likely to be conveyed by Speech Acts such as orders, requests, suggestions, advice. On the other hand, apologies or confessions may be regarded as self-face threatening.
(ii) "threats" to positive face potentially lower an individual's self-esteem and social prestige and are typically brought about by acts of disapproval, disagreement, criticism, accusation, interruption (Brown and Levinson 1987, Culpeper 2005)

With the aid of indirect strategies and the diplomatic weight conveyed by indirectly formulated utterances, politeness serves to diminish potential threats to both the addressee's and the addresser's positive and respectively negative, faces. Thus, negative indirectness diminishes the threat of orders and requests. On the other hand, positive indirectness attenuates the potential threat commonly provided by disagreements or interruptions.

3.7 Indirectness as a prevalent communicative strategy in *The Remains of the Day*

The analysis of ISAs in two excerpts from *The Remains of the Day* is intended to highlight the way the protagonist resort to indirectness in order to maintain harmonious collaborative interactions with his interlocutors, who are in both cases his superiors. In addition, the analysis endeavours to show how Stevens engages in self-effacement strategies as a means to exhibit loyalty and acceptance of subordination towards those acknowledged as entitled to exert power over him.

3.7.1 The "birds, bees" innuendo

During the hectic span of preparing an upcoming conference reuniting highly honoured worldwide renowned and revered guests at Darlington Hall, Lord Darlington assigns Stevens the uncanny task to inform young David Cardinal, who is twenty-three and engaged to be married, on "the facts of life". There are two verbal exchanges (one between Stevens and Lord Darlington, and one between Stevens and young Cardinal), which I will analyse in terms of indirectness and social parameters governing the use of indirect strategies.

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

"Oh, Stevens," **[U1]** He began with a false air of nonchalance, but then seemed at a loss how to continue. I remained standing there to relieve his discomfort at the first opportunity. His lordship went on fingering his page for a moment, leaned forward to scrutinize an entry then said:
"Stevens, I realize this is a somewhat irregular thing to ask you to do." **[U2]** "Sir?" **[U3]**
"It's just that one has so much of importance of one's mind just now." **[U4]**
"I would be very glad to be of assistance, sir." **[U5]**
"I'm sorry to bring a thing like this, Stevens. I know you must be awfully busy yourself. But I can't see how on earth to make it go away." **[U6]** I waited a moment while Lord Darlington returned his attention to *Who's Who*. Then he said, without looking up:
"You are familiar, I take it, with the facts of life. **[U7]**" "Sir?" **[U8]**
"The facts of life, Stevens. Birds, bees. You are familiar, aren't you?" **[U9]**
"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir." **[U10]**
"Let me put my cards on the table, Stevens. Sir David is a very old friend. And he's very invaluable in organizing the present conference. Without him I dare say, we'd not have secured M. Dupont's agreement to come." **[U11]** "Indeed, sir" **[U12]**
"However, Stevens, Sir David has his funny side. You may have notice it yourself. He's brought his son, Reginald with him. To act as secretary. The point is, he's engaged to be married. Young Reginald, I mean." **[U13]** "Yes, sir." **[U14]**
"Sir David has been attempting to tell his son the facts of life for the last five years. The young man is now twenty three." **[U15]** "Indeed, sir." **[U16]**
"I'll get to the point, Stevens. I happen to be the young man's godfather. Accordingly, Sir David has requested that *I* convey to young Reginald the facts of life." **[U17]**
"Indeed, sir." **[U18]**
"Sir David himself finds the task rather daunting and suspects he will not accomplish it before Reginald's wedding day." **[U19]** "Indeed, sir." **[U20]**
"The point is, Stevens, I'm terribly busy. Sir David should know that, but he's asked me nonetheless." **[U21]** His lordship paused and went on studying his page.
"Do I understand, sir," I said, "that you wish *me* to convey the information to the young gentleman?" **[U22]**
"If you don't mind, Stevens. Be an awful lot off my mind. Sir David continues to ask me every couple of hours if I've done it yet." **[U23]**
"I see, sir. It must be most trying under the present pressure." **[U24]**
"Of course, this is far beyond the call of duty, Stevens." **[U25]**
"I will do my best, sir. I may however, have difficulty finding the appropriate moment to convey such information." **[U26]**
"I'd be very grateful if you'd even try, Stevens. Awfully decent of you. Look here, there is no need to make a song and dance of it. Just convey the basic facts and be done with it. Simple approach is the best, that's my advice, Stevens." **[U27]**
"Yes, sir. I shall do my best." **[U28]**
"Jolly grateful to you, Stevens. Let me know how you get on." **[U29]**

U1 (*Oh, Stevens*) is an utterance devoid of semantic content, highly indicative of Lord Darlington's difficulty in initiating the conversation. Stevens waits patiently, until the opportunity comes to make his master feel at ease. In U2 (*Stevens, I realize this is a somewhat irregular thing to ask you to do.*), Lord Darlington is conventionally indirect because of anticipated imposition the upcoming request will encompass as he is about to assign his butler an 'irregular' task. Lord Darlington subtly admits that the mission he is about to entrust

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

Stevens with is not included in the rights and obligations of a butler. Under the circumstances, Lord Darlington's utterance is too intricately indirect for Stevens to comprehend and, for want of further specification, he awaits for his employer to convey him further information on the 'irregularity' of the ascribed duty (U3: *Sir?*). Instead of providing the missing piece of information, more precisely formulating his request in an unambiguous, fully informative and enlightening manner, Lord Darlington offers Stevens justification for the unusual nature of his request, while concomitantly letting Stevens know about the discomfort he experiences while tackling a taboo topic. Thus Lord Darlington threatens Stevens's negative face wants and compels him into making an offer. As usual, Stevens uses deference markers ("sir"), prompted by the mutually acknowledged social distance, followed by a commissive, undertaking responsibility to willfully engage in a future course of action (*I would be very glad to be of assistance, sir*.). He thus tries to minimize the imposition by letting his employer know that he would be extremely pleased if he could carry out his employer's wishes, whatever these may be.

In U4 (*It's just that one has so much of importance of one's mind just now.*) Lord Darlington indirectly avows uneasiness regarding the thorny topic making the object of the request. In U6 (*I'm sorry to bring a thing like this, Stevens. I know you must be awfully busy yourself. But I can't see how on earth to make it go away*) his Lordship opts for an indirect formulation of his request to Stevens, employing negative politeness strategies meant to emphasise acknowledgement of the butler's time and effort. In U7 (*You are familiar, I take it, with the facts of life.*) he designates marital ties and implicitly, intercourse, by euphemistically calling them 'facts of life', showing concern for his own face which he is unwilling to damage it by using too explicit formulations of topics usually eluded in public exchanges. He observes a negative politeness strategy by using a hedge (*I take it*) in order to announce the oncoming euphemism.

In U8 (*Sir?*) Stevens is astonished by his master's proposal and by deferentially appealing to his master by the usual address term, he subtly suggests that he needs further information to grasp Lord Darlington's innuendo. Stevens fails to decode Lord Darlington's hint and blames himself for such failure, deeming it unconceivable that his employer, a gentleman beyond reproach, could be alluding to a taboo topic. In U9 (*The facts of life, Stevens. Birds, bees. You are familiar, aren't you?*) Lord Darlington provides further, yet no less vague specification of the alluded topic, by inserting clumsy and ambiguous snippets of definitions for sexual intercourse, similar to those provided to children. His gauche innuendo is intended as a clue meant to enlighten Stevens on the topic of his request, since Stevens's deciphering of this innuendo could exempt him from engaging in a cumbersome explanation.

In U10 (*I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir.*) reveals that, despite his willing to relieve the strain governing the exchange and to exempt his master further effort to clarify upon a ticklish matter, Stevens dreads he has not grasped the hint and risks reaching a distorted understanding of his Lordship's intentions, which can only enhance the awkwardness of the situation. Realizing that using indirectness and ambiguity has proved to be risk-incurring and has not supplied Stevens with useful clues, Lord Darlington embarks upon a different course of action and recounts a synopsis of the story having led to his request. He confides his troubles and discontentment with Sir David to Stevens appealing to his butler's poignant sense of duty. The story-telling results in Stevens's involvement in the delicate issue in question, as Stevens is in a position when he feels morally compelled to take responsibility. By emphasizing that Sir David is a prominent figure in the context of the conference and that he is indebted to him, Lord Darlington intends to extricate himself from a delicate situation and to consequently hand it over to Stevens, whom he trusts completely.

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

In U21 (*The point is, Stevens, I'm terribly busy. Sir David should know that, but he's asked me nonetheless*) Lord Darlington threatens his own positive face by confessing inability to burden himself with further tasks, subtly suggesting that such tasks could be delegated to Stevens, whose competence and loyalty are unquestionable. This strategy proves to be 'costly' as it only triggers agreement on Stevens's part. Much later in the exchange (U22: Do *I understand, sir, that you wish* me *to convey the information to the young gentleman?*) Stevens finally deciphers his Lordship's request appropriately. He uses a question meant to verify whether he has correctly grasped his master's innuendo as well as to convey puzzlement aroused by the nature of such an unusual duty. Lord Darlington takes or pretends to take Stevens's question for an offer. In U23, U27 and U29, Lord Darlington admits having incurring a debt and thus threatening his own face, since he simultaneously shows relief at having been unburdened of an embarrassing task and having thus become indebted to his butler. He employs a plethora of expressives, because apart from the gratitude that he displays he also offers justification for his conduct. In U25 (*Of course, this is far beyond the call of duty, Stevens.*) Lord Darlington admits his request has trespassed the boundaries of Stevens's professional obligations, which may justify his excessive use of indirect strategies in an attempt to avoid damaging his employee's negative face.

Ironically enough, in U27 (*I'd be very grateful if you'd even try, Stevens. Awfully decent of you. Look here, there is no need to make a song and dance of it. Just convey the basic facts and be done with it. Simple approach is the best, that's my advice, Stevens.*), Lord Darlington advises Stevens not to opt for indirectness as he himself did, but to choose a more direct approach with the young Cardinal, thus admitting that indirectness may prove a risky infelicitous endeavour. Surprisingly, advice comes in direct formulations of do's and don'ts, meant to provide Stevens with a step-by-step guidance on his approaching young Cardinal with respect to the delicate matter in question. In U26 (*I will do my best, sir. I may however, have difficulty finding the appropriate moment to convey such information.*) and U28 (*Yes, sir. I shall do my best.*) Stevens uses commissives, meant to convey a promise to solve the problem, while indirectly suggesting likely failure in his audacious pursuit.

3.7.2 The "unassaulted" issue: indirectness as generator of verbal and situational ambiguity

As a result of the conversation between Lord Darlington and Stevens, the latter keeps his promise and initiates the fulfillment of the request, which results in a failed attempt to inform Reginald Cardinal on issues pertaining to sexual intercourse.

"Excuse me sir, but I have a message to convey to you." **[U1]**
"Oh, really?" Mr. Cardinal said eagerly, looking up from his papers.
"From father?" "Yes, sir. That is, effectively." **[U2]**
"Just wait a minute." The young gentleman reached down into the attaché case at his feet and brought out a notebook and pencil. "Fire away, Stevens." **[U3]** I coughed again and set my voice into as impersonal a tone as I could manage.
"Sir David wishes you to know, sir that ladies and gentleman differ in several key respects." **[U4]** I must have paused a little to form my new phrase, for Mr. Cardinal gave a sigh and said:" I'm only too aware of that, Stevens. Would you mind coming to the point?" **[U5]**
"You are aware, sir?" **[U6]** "Father is perpetually underestimating me. I have done extensive reading and background work on this whole area." **[U7]**
"Is that so, sir?" **[U8]** "I've thought about virtually nothing else for the past month." **[U9]**

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

"Really, sir. In that case, perhaps my message is rather redundant." **[U10]**
"You can assure Father I'm very well briefed indeed. This attaché case" – he nudged it with his foot-"is chocked-full of notes on every possible angle one can imagine." **[U11]**
"Is that so, sir?" **[U12]** "I really think I've thought through every permutation the human mind is capable of. I wish you'd reassure Father of that." **[U13]**
"I will, sir." **[U14]** Mr. Cardinal seemed to relax a little. He prodded once more his attaché case – which I kept inclined to keep my eyes averted from and said: "I suppose you've been wondering why I never let go of this case. Well, now you know. Imagine if the wrong person opened it." **[U15]**
"That would be most awkward, sir." **[U16]**
"That is, of course," he said, sitting up again suddenly, "unless Father has come up with an entirely new factor he wants me to think about." **[U17]**
"I cannot imagine he has, sir." **[U18]**
"No? Nothing more of this Dupont fellow?" **[U19]**
"I fear not, sir." **[U20]** I did my best not to give away anything of my exasperation on discovering that a task I had thought all but behind me was in fact still there unassaulted before me.

Having been assigned the mission to convey 'the facts of life' to young Mr. Cardinal, Stevens finds it appropriate to signal the delicacy of the topic to his young interlocutor and he begins the exchange by an apology (*Excuse me sir, but I have a message to convey to you*) Steven tactfully uses approval in U2 (*Yes, sir. That is, effectively*) in the hope that the delicate message may sound less awkward and weightier coming from Cardinal's father. In U3 (*Fire away, Stevens*) young Reginald employs a direct imperative, being less polite considering the relationship between the two: despite his age Stevens is only a butler and Mr. Cardinal treats him accordingly. In U4 (*Sir David wishes you to know, sir that ladies and gentleman differ in several key respects.*) Stevens uses the name of Sir David as an authority figure because he cannot take the liberty to convey the message as if it were on his own initiative. He is indirect despite Lord Darlington's having counseled him otherwise. His indirectness is dictated by several reasons: the relative power of Mr. Cardinal over him (although he is not Stevens's employer, young Reginald is the godson of his master), the social distance (they pertain to different social classes), the degree to which the topic of sex is rated an imposition in the British society of that time. All these reasons are more amply justified if Stevens's prudery is also taken into account. Stevens is deliberately ambiguous and vague, since it is difficult to put into words something that by its very nature is likely to cause an offence to his interlocutor.

Stevens's inquiry is either misunderstood by young Cardinal or rejected by his young interlocutor who will not admit not being knowledgeable about worldly matters. Mr. Cardinal feigns accusing Stevens of excessive vagueness of expression being noticeably sarcastic in U5 (*I'm only too aware of that, Stevens. Would you mind coming to the point?)* Despite the polite, elaborated formulation of the request for clarity, young Cardinal's repartee obviously shows irritation with the situation, especially because he seems to be cast the role of the ignorant and Stevens seems to be playing that of the expert, generating the risk of having him patronised. The next set of utterances are meant to assure Stevens that young Cardinal is knowledgeable about the matters under discussion and that he is annoyed by his father's underestimating his capacity to keep abreast with the latest developments. Obviously, vagueness of reference makes Stevens believe Mr. Cardinal declares himself familiar with the prospect of sexual encounters, while what the young interlocutor is keen on emphasising is that he is perfectly

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

capable of disentangling conference-related issues on his own, without seeking counsel from his father.

In U13 young Cardinal uses a directive and assigns Stevens the task of conveying the novel information to his father. The butler is increasingly astonished with Sir Reginald's statements and wrongly assumes that he has accomplished his mission. In U14 (*I will, sir*) the head butler uses a commissive, undertaking the task as promised. He reassures him that the news will reach Sir Cardinal only to put an end to a conversation which he finds irritatingly digressive from normally approved norms. Only in U19 (*No? Nothing more of this Dupont fellow?*) does Stevens realize that young Reginald is referring to a very different topic since there is a mismatch between Mr. Cardinal's utterance, regarding the diplomat Dupont and the issue of intercourse. In U19 Reginald employs a directive, as he is eager to banish his fears in relation to a facet of the conference that he ignores. Stevens's retort (U20: *I fear not, sir*.) is ambivalent since this is the first time that he understands what Mr. Cardinal has been talking about. He gives the appropriate and earnest answer to young Reginald's question, yet acknowledging that they have been talking about two different topics all along and that he must find some other way to convey his message. Consequently, his utterance is also an indirect expression of frustration regarding the ambiguous and socially inadequate nature of their verbal encounter.

4. Conclusions

The analysed verbal exchanges have revealed that indirectness is a strategic instrument often resorted to by Stevens. Its recurrent use reinforces Stevens's willful tendency to perpetually engage in the self-effacement, propriety and decorum required by a butler's position. Espousing indirectness as the most adequate verbal strategy during the verbal encounters with Lord Darlington delineates and strengthens the behavioural model of subservience and restraint regarded by Stevens as the ideal stance to be taken before his revered master. His behavioural model is hereditarily and culturally inculcated by his father, himself an exquisite butler once. Stevens constantly reminds both himself and his interlocutors of his father, whom he sees as the embodiment of dignity, dedication and craftsmanship in his self-effacing execution of his duties as butler. While following his father's footsteps, Stevens succeeds in achieving his parent's minuteness and devotion, as well as his rigidity and excessive formality in all interactions, two traits which hinder Stevens from experiencing personal growth and social ease.

Stevens intentionally espouses the confines of servitude to the point of turning socially awkward, unable to express or even to experience emotion, to establish personal relationships, or to judge his previous employer, Lord Darlington in the light of his Nazi sympathies and alleged involvement in political wrongs. Apparently, Stevens is the epitome of the staid English butler of the 1950s, reluctant to indulge in unfettered feelings: individualism, joy, and romance. What Stevens prizes above everything is loyalty, even if that loyalty blinds himself to the moral flaws of his master, Lord Darlington. The character of Stevens appears thus as a relic from the days of yore while his old-fashioned verbal mannerisms and address formulae strike the reader of the nineties as poignantly obsolete.

Hopefully, the analysis of the two conversations from Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* has pointed out how in using ISAs, interlocutors need to combine linguistic knowledge and contextual knowledge, meant to enlighten them on the participants' intentions, on the means employed by participants to achieve a particular intended illocutionary force, and on

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)

the variations of illocutions in compliance with social distance, power and last but not least, moral beliefs and codes of ethics presumably shared by participants.

Daniela Sorea
University of Bucharest
danasorea06@gmail.com

References

Brown, P. and Levinson, S. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Culpeper, J. 2005. Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The weakest link. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 35-72.

Goffman, E. 1976. Replies and responses. *Language in Society* 5: 257-313.

Goffman, E. 1981. *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gordon, D. and Lakoff, G. 1975. Conversational Postulates. In P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, 41-51. New York: Academic Press.

Schiffrin, D. 1994. *Approaches to Discourse*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spencer-Oatey. H. (ed.). 2000. *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport through Talk across Cultures*. London: Continuum.

Thomas, J. 1995. *Meaning in Interaction*. London and New York: Longman.

BDD-A9828 © 2009 Universitatea din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:19 UTC)