

DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN THE STORY *TELL THE TRUTH ...* BY NICHOLASA MOHR

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Abstract. The story *Tell the Truth...* is part of the book *el Bronx Remembered* which was written by Nicholasa Mohr, the first Nuyorican woman who had her literary works published in the United States of America. *El Bronx Remembered* was first published in 1975 and it draws attention to the ‘Great Migration’ of Puerto Ricans to New York in the 1950s. The stories reflect the hardships of Puerto Rican migrants through the eyes of characters who are children, teenagers and young adults. The story *Tell the Truth...* depicts a conversation between a lawyer, Mr. Crane, and Vickie, a 13-year-old teenager. The purpose of this article is to identify the type and structure of the directive speech acts that the lawyer uses strategically in order to persuade the teenager to confess to her mother’s alleged involvement in illegal activities. Bach and Harnish’s (1979) classification of speech acts will be taken into account in the methodology, as well as Blum-Kulka and Olshtain’s (1984) description of the linguistic realization patterns of requests. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory is taken into consideration, too. Supportive moves (Placencia, 2020) and hedges (Fraser, 2010) are identified in the conversation as well. Moreover, the analysis also reveals if adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007) are formed through the teenager’s answers. Mr. Crane uses requestives, questions and requirements in his initiating interventions. He resorts to directives in the form of *yes/no* questions and he also uses negations in their structure. He uses multiple directives that follow one another so as to put pressure on the teenager. The lawyer threatens the teenager’s negative face, while the teenager threatens the lawyer’s positive face. It can be noticed that he can rarely assign her the turn, so the adjacency pairs *question-answer* and *request-granting/rejection* are seldom formed. The story *Tell the Truth...* could be considered a story in which both characters do not tell the truth, as various speech acts infringe on the sincerity condition.

Key words: pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, directive speech acts, Nuyorican literature, locution, illocution

INTRODUCTION

Directive speech acts have been widely studied in recent years in various languages and from diverse perspectives. By way of illustration, requests have been analyzed from the perspective of the relationship between interlocutors (Placencia, 2008; Craven and Potter, 2010), from the perspective of subtitling (Pedersen, 2008), in

film discourse (de Pablos Ortega, 2020), as well as in a variety of other types of discourses. Their realization patterns have been analyzed from a cross-cultural point of view (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Márquez-Reiter, 2000) or within the framework of interlanguage pragmatics (Schauer, 2006). Dixon (2015) focuses in his study on how children use strategies to obtain and keep objects in play areas. The story *Tell the Truth...* has been selected for this case study because it reveals how an adult uses strategically different directive speech acts in order to obtain information from a child.

Nicholasa Mohr is a Nuyorican writer who was born and raised in el Barrio (New York). She is part of the Nuyorican movement which was promoted by Puerto Ricans who were poets, musicians, writers and artists and who were born or who had come to New York at a young age. The movement flourished in the 1970s as it decried the social, economic and political issues with which Puerto Ricans were confronted in the United States (Online 1). She militates against racial discrimination, but also against certain Puerto Rican cultural aspects which are oppressive to women. She is renowned for her books dedicated to young adults. *Nilda* (1973), *el Bronx Remembered* (1975), *In My Own Words: growing up inside the Sanctuary of my Imagination* (1994) and *A Matter of Pride and Other Stories* (1998) are just some of her best known writings (Online 2). Puerto Rico has been an unincorporated territory of the U.S. since 1899. Its official denomination is the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. It had been earlier a Spanish colony (1493-1898).

El Bronx Remembered (1975) comprises 11 stories and a novella in which the experiences of Puerto Ricans living in New York in the 1950s are described. New York had been a melting pot for Italians, Jews, Armenians and Irish immigrants. Puerto Ricans were enduring hardships and were struggling to survive. In these stories, children and young adults learn how to face challenges and prove to be resilient (Online 3). After the mass migration that occurred in the 1950s, '[...] Puerto Ricans have so outnumbered all other Latinos as to have served the prototype (or archetype, but certainly the stereotype) of Latino/Hispanic/Spanish New York' (Flores, 2000: 141). The story *Tell the Truth...* describes a conversation between Mr. Crane, a lawyer, and Vickie, a thirteen-year-old Puerto Rican teenager. He tries to persuade her to confess to having seen a package of drugs in her family's apartment. Mr. Crane's real purpose is to bring charges against her mother, although he pretends to represent their interests.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze within the framework of pragmatics and Conversation Analysis the directive speech acts performed by Mr. Crane, the lawyer, through which he specifically tries to elicit information from the teenager about the deeds of her mother. The lawyer performs directives in initiating interventions that try to obtain the confession of the teenager in reactive interventions. Since the topic is very delicate, how does he articulate directive speech acts in order to be persuasive? How are they structured? Firstly, the type of

directive speech act will be identified according to the taxonomy of directive speech acts drawn by Bach and Harnish (1979: 47-49). Secondly, the structure of the speech acts which are requests will be analyzed depending on the level they are performed (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984: 201). This paper also engages with the following research questions: (1) Do the performed directive speech acts contain any mitigating linguistic features? (2) Are directives preceded or followed by other speech acts that act as supportive moves? (3) Do the initiating interventions that contain directives have the desired perlocutionary effect so as to cause the expected reactive interventions? (4) Do they form adjacency pairs? (5) Do the characters use any politeness strategies?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Within the field of pragmatics, the act of saying implies also carrying out an action. Language is action. Every day we perform actions such as promises, requests, apologies, etc. We perform speech acts. Throughout time, various classifications of speech acts were made. Austin (1962: 150) was the first philosopher of language to make a classification of speech acts according to their illocutionary force. He divided them into verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives. Austin (1962: 108) also differentiated between the locutionary act (the propositional content with sense and reference), the illocutionary act (the force of the speech act such as informing, warning, etc.) and the perlocutionary act (the effect that is achieved by saying something: convincing, deterring, etc.). Later, as illocutionary categories overlapped in Austin's classification, Searle (1979: 12-20) refined it by dividing speech acts into assertives (representatives), directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. However, in our analysis, the taxonomy drawn by Bach and Harnish (1979) will be taken into consideration, as they refine even more the category of directive speech acts by providing sub-categories. They classify illocutionary acts in terms of expressed attitudes. Bach and Harnish divide communicative illocutionary acts into constatives, directives, commissives and acknowledgements. 'Directives express the speaker's attitude toward some prospective action by the hearer and his intention that his utterance, or the attitude it expresses, be taken as a reason for the hearer's action' (ibid.: 41). They divide directives into the following sub-categories: requestives, questions, requirements, prohibitives, permissives and advisories. The classification distinguishes directives which are requestives (requests) from directives which are questions. 'Questions are special cases of requests, special in that what it is requested is that the hearer provide the speaker with certain information' (ibid.: 48).

'[...] Illocutionary intents are fulfilled if the hearer recognizes the attitudes expressed by the speaker, types of illocutionary intents correspond to types of expressed attitudes' (ibid.: 39). However, the speaker might occasionally not have the attitude expressed and may not be sincere. Nevertheless, insincerity

does not hinder illocutionary or communicative success (ibid.). In the story *Tell the Truth...*, the lawyer is not sincere when he performs certain speech acts.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984: 202) request strategy types will be taken into consideration in the analysis of the directives performed by the lawyer that can be classified as requests. In their article, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 201) note that requests are performed on three levels: the explicit level (the most direct one by way of imperatives), the conventionally indirect level (for example, through reference to contextual preconditions for the realization of the request) or on the nonconventional indirect level (by partial reference to the object or reliance on some contextual clues). By comparing requests in various languages, they identify various types of request strategy types. Directives are classified into nine types in accordance with the strategy the speaker turns to. According to their findings, requests are mood derivable ('Leave me alone'), scope stating ('I really wish you'd stop bothering me'), locution derivable ('Madam, you'll have to move your car') or they can be carried out through explicit performatives ('I'm asking you not to park the car here'), hedged performatives ('I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier'), language specific suggestory formula ('How about cleaning up?'), reference to preparatory conditions ('Could you clean up the kitchen, please?') or through making strong hints ('You've left this kitchen in a right mess') or mild hints ('I'm a nun') (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984: 202). Hints can be understood within the context in which they are performed. It would be interesting to see if the lawyer prefers certain types of request strategies. Searle (1975: 64-67) illustrates various groups of sentences that are conventionally used in the performance of indirect directives.

Directive speech acts threaten the *face* of the interlocutor. Face is 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). According to Brown and Levinson (ibid.), there are two types of face: *negative face* (it is related to personal preservation, freedom of action and freedom from imposition) and *positive face* (the desire to be approved of and appreciated by other interactants). Sociological factors such as relative power, social distance and the ranking of the imposition determine the level of politeness involved in performing a face-threatening act (ibid.: 15). By making requests to the teenager, the lawyer threatens her negative face. Directives are face-threatening speech acts because they make an imposition on the interlocutor.

During their conversation, the lawyer tries to give the turn to the teenager. Each turn is represented by an intervention that comprises various utterances. The latter contain speech acts (Briz, 1998: 52). Initiating interventions that contain directive speech acts try to trigger the next turn. The adjacency pair is composed of two turns, it is performed by different speakers and the two turns are relatively ordered and they are placed one after the other (Schegloff, 2007: 13). There are *first pair parts* such as questions, invitations, requests, offers, etc. and *second pair parts* such as rejections, agreements, acknowledgements, etc. 'Adjacency pairs

compose pair *types*; types are exchanges such as greeting-greeting, question-answer, offer-accept/decline and the like' (ibid.). An acceptance of an invitation is considered to be a preferred response in an adjacency pair, while a refusal is considered to be a dispreferred answer. Dispreferred answers are unexpected answers (Félix-Brasdefer, 2019: 134).

In the analysis, both the structure of the directive speech acts and their interaction with other speech acts will be taken into consideration. Supportive moves (Placencia, 2020) and hedges (Fraser, 2010) will be identified as far as requests are concerned, as they contribute to the persuasion of the hearer when the speaker performs directive speech acts. Requests are head acts and they are sometimes preceded or followed by supportive moves. Speech acts that indicate justification and gratitude are some of the supportive moves given as examples in Placencia's study (2020: 11). She points out that in many cases the supportive moves also act as argumentation mechanisms (ibid.). Hedging is a rhetorical strategy that may signal the lack of commitment towards the semantic value of an expression or towards the force of a speech act (Fraser, 2010: 15). Various linguistic elements may become hedges depending on the context. Hedging is also a strategy of negative politeness.

Ultimately, since the lawyer appeals to tag questions, the speech functions of tag questions will also be taken into consideration. Kimps (2018) points out in her book *Tag Questions in Conversations. A Typology of their Interactional and Stance Meanings* that tag questions may realize questions, statements, commands, offers, but also statement-question blends. At the semantic-pragmatic level, statement-question blends imply '[...] the creation of a new meaning involving both giving of information by the speaker from a knowledgeable status (typical of statements) and expecting a response which levels the knowledge imbalance (typical of questions)' (Kimps, 2018: 104).

The book *el Bronx Remembered* was a finalist in 1976 for the National Book Award for Children's Literature in the United States. The pragmatic approach in this article enables an understanding of the linguistic features that are used by the author in order to render a conversation that can be considered mimetic of the use of language in society. Certain linguistic features are also used by the author for stylistic and rhetorical reasons in order to build up pressure in the dialogue.

METHODS

Through close reading, only the directive speech acts performed by the lawyer that make reference specifically to the deeds of the teenager's mother were extracted. They appear in bold in his initiating interventions during his turns. The analysis comprises the following steps:

- 1) the identification of the type of selected directive speech acts according to the classification of Bach and Harnish (1979: 41);

- 2) the description of the linguistic realization pattern of the selected directive speech acts which are requests (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984: 202);
- 3) the identification of the supportive moves that back the selected requests;
- 4) the identification of hedges and of other linguistic features that are part of the structure of the selected directive speech acts.

The analysis also reveals which structures lead to a response on the part of the teenager, that is a reactive intervention, leading thus to the formation of adjacency pairs of the type *question-answer* or *request-granting/rejection*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conversation in the story takes place between an adult, Mr. Theodore M. Crane, and a teenager, Victoria Vargas, in Mr. Crane's law office in New York. Mr. Crane is an attorney-at-law, with various diplomas and certificates. Vickie is thirteen years old and she is a Puerto Rican second-generation migrant. The teenager's mother is detained. The two interlocutors have different social backgrounds in society. It can be said that he has the upper hand in their interaction.

The following initiating interventions were extracted from the story. They all contain directive speech acts which refer to the deeds of the teenager's mother. The directive speech acts are emphasized in bold below and henceforth:

- (1) [...] Mr. Crane hesitated. 'Listen to me. Your mother deals with numbers. **Isn't that the truth?** What you people call *The Bolita?*' Mr. Crane stopped speaking and waited for her to respond. (Mohr, 1993: 38-39)

Mr. Crane performs the directive speech act 'Isn't that the truth?' which is a question. In this case, Vickie does not respond to the lawyer's question, so the adjacency pair question-answer is not formed. The interventions of the lawyer are usually very long; they are asymmetrical compared to the very short interventions of the teenager. It can be said that they reflect the imbalance of power and the high social distance between the interlocutors. The verb in the question is negated, projecting the assumption that what is said is actually true.

- (2) '**Doesn't your mother work for some bad people?** Who make her sell drugs? Now, we know she is not the bad one. It's the others who are bad...I don't mean the numbers; we know all about that. In fact' – his voice softened to a whisper – 'these are the nice people who want to help your mother. They are the ones who want to take care of her.' He paused, sighing, and spoke in a loud tone. 'Everyone knows what your mother does, and that's not important... **But if you tell me the truth about the drugs and let me know who some of**

these bad people are, it will help your mother. Make it easier on her. Understand?’ (Mohr, 1993: 40)

In this complex initiating intervention, Mr. Crane formulates another directive speech act in the form of a question. The verb in the question is negated once again. According to Fraser (2010: 24), a negative question conveys a positive hedged assertion. It reveals that he does think that she works for some bad people. He resumes his turn and makes a conventional indirect request: ‘if you tell me the truth about the drugs and let me know who some of these bad people are [...]’. According to Searle (1975: 66), one of the groups of indirect directives comprises sentences concerning reasons for doing an action. In this case, the commissive act ‘it will help your mother’ acts as a supportive move. Another commissive speech act strengthens, even more, the request: ‘Make it easier on her’. The mentioned commissive speech acts are promises. Vickie does not reply to the directive speech acts from this intervention either. The lawyer has to start another initiating intervention:

- (3) **‘Answer me, please.** Your mother is the one who is going to get into serious trouble **unless we know the absolute truth about the drugs**, so we can help her [...].’ (Mohr, 1993: 40)

‘Answer me, please’ is a directive speech act that can be interpreted as a requirement. ‘[...] In requirements S’s expressed intention is that H take S’s utterance as a reason to act, indeed as sufficient reason to act’ (Bach and Harnish, 1979: 48). In the aforementioned quote, S refers to the speaker, while H refers to the hearer. The lawyer resorts to the use of the imperative in the requirement. Its illocutionary force is hedged by ‘please’, which indicates negative politeness. ‘Unless we know the absolute truth about the drugs’ is another conventional indirect directive speech act. The lawyer performs two commissives as supportive moves: ‘your mother is the one who is going to get into serious trouble’ (a threat) and ‘so we can help her’ (a promise). There is no reactive intervention on Vickie’s part. The lawyer cannot assign her the turn.

- (4) ‘[...] Your mother will be involved unless she comes clean.’ Mr. Crane was almost shouting by now [...]. **‘Why don’t you make it easier for your mother? I’ll tell you what: Just admit that you saw the package in the house.** The one containing that white powder... wrapped up in a plastic bag...’ (Mohr, 1993: 44)

‘Why don’t you make it easier for your mother?’ is a rhetorical *Wh* question. Afterwards, the lawyer performs a requestive speech act which is a mood derivable request: ‘Just admit that you saw the package in the house’. ‘Just’ is a hedge

that can be used to show warmth and indicate rapport with the interlocutor (Fraser, 2010: 32). Another commissive act which is a threat acts as a supportive move: 'Your mother will be involved unless she comes clean'. His initiating intervention receives a reactive intervention on Vickie's part: "I don't know," she said' (Mohr, 1993: 44). She rejects his request. Thus, the adjacency pair is formed through a dispreferred answer.

- (5) 'You don't want to be the one responsible for your mother's trouble, **do you?** You will send her to jail for twenty years! **Do you want that? Do you? Answer!**'
'No', she said. (Mohr, 1993: 45)

'You don't want to be the one responsible for your mother's trouble, do you?' contains an anchor and a tag question. The latter is a requestive speech act. The polarity is a negative-positive one. It can be considered that this tag question has a statement-question blend speech function because it indicates that the speaker already knows the information. Nonetheless, the speaker also demands confirmation on the part of the interlocutor. The speaker acts as if he was the primary knower '[...] putting forth a factually-oriented proposition or an evaluation' (Kimps, 2018: 104). Moreover, since the anchor contains a negation, this could also indicate the loading of the proposition toward negativity (ibid.: 103). According to Schegloff (1974: 718), the tag question is an exit technique for a turn. Tag questions make relevant the start of the turn of the next speaker upon their completion. Furthermore, the effect of pressure is built by the *yes/no* questions: 'Do you want?' and 'Do you?' which are also requestive speech acts. The repetition of 'do you' creates a rhetorical effect. The repetition of the directive speech act 'Answer' is noticed. At this point in the conversation, this requirement is not hedged anymore. The teenager gives a preferred answer to the question by saying 'No', so an adjacency pair is formed again. The lawyer puts pressure on the teenager by performing various directive speech acts that follow one another.

It can be seen that the lawyer resorts to various types of directives in order to elicit the information that would incriminate the teenager's mother. He uses requestives, questions and requirements. However, in the previously mentioned quotes, he does not manage to obtain the teenager's confession. It is interesting to notice that he uses at first the hedge 'please' in his requirement 'Answer me, please!'. Afterwards, as he fails to be persuasive, he decides to perform the requirement without any hedge ('Answer!'). He threatens in this way her negative face. The lawyer appeals to requirements as the last resort. His positive face is threatened by the fact that most of the time the teenager does not cooperate during the conversation. She does not always react to his inquiries.

The requests that the lawyer makes are mood derivable and conventionally indirect according to the request strategy types described by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 202). This could be explained by the fact that he wants to express himself as clearly as possible in front of the teenager. He does not use any hints, which are specific to off-record politeness strategies.

The questions which contain negations and the tag question imply that the speaker already assumes the truth of his utterances. Their use is strategic because they encourage the teenager to confirm propositional content that has been already asserted.

The narrator describes how Mr. Crane changes his tone from a friendly one into threatening as he realizes that he cannot get the teenager to confess to her mother's deeds. The conversation gradually transfers into an interrogatory as he tries to exert power over her. *Yes/ no* questions are used to put pressure on her. Pressure is built up by the use of multiple directives that follow one another.

CONCLUSIONS

Mr. Crane uses in his initiating interventions the following types of directives: requestives, questions and requirements. He struggles to assign the turn to Victoria, as she does not wish to cooperate.

'If the hearer forms a corresponding attitude that the speaker intended him to form, the speaker has achieved a perlocutionary effect in addition to illocutionary uptake' (Bach and Harnish (1979: 38). In this story, the desired perlocutionary effect of the directive speech acts is not achieved as the teenager grasps the intentions of the lawyer, but she does not form the corresponding attitude desired by the speaker. Commissive speech acts such as threats and promises, which act as supportive moves in the case of requests, do not influence the teenager. Therefore, adjacency pairs are seldom formed.

Since the topic is delicate, it can be noticed that the lawyer resorts to negative politeness strategies because he performs conventional indirect directive speech acts and because he resorts to hedges. He uses hedges such as 'please' and 'just' that soften the impact of the performed directives. He threatens her negative face, while she threatens his positive face.

Vickie's silence plays an important part. By not answering, she refuses to accept the turn. The lawyer is forced to keep the turn because she is silent. In this story, silence is a means of defense.

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