

How to Make Requests That Overcome Obstacles to Compliance

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Speakers who request information from others often face potential obstacles to getting that information. Their addressees may not know the information, may be unwilling to give it, or may not remember it. In three experiments we show that speakers estimate the greatest potential obstacle to compliance and try to overcome it through their choice of indirect, or conditional, request. If speakers thought addressees might not remember the time of a concert, they could make their request conditional on the addressees' remembering the time and choose *Do you remember what time the concert begins tonight?*, meaning "Do you remember what time the concert begins, and if you do, please tell me." In selecting their request, speakers in most situations try to pinpoint the obstacle as specifically as they can. © 1985 Academic Press, Inc.

There are many ways of asking for information. Anne could get a telephone number from Bernard by asking him directly, as in *What is Nancy's telephone number?* or *Tell me Nancy's telephone number*, or indirectly by means of another question, as in *Would you be willing to tell me Nancy's telephone number?* or *Do you happen to know Nancy's telephone number?* The dozens—even hundreds—of forms Anne could use vary in what on the surface she seems to be saying (Clark, 1979; Gordon & Lakoff, 1971; Morgan, 1978; Searle, 1975), but the forms are not interchangeable (see Gibbs, 1981). As a request for Bernard's middle name, Anne might ask *Would you be willing to tell me your middle name?*, but hardly *Do you happen to know your middle name?* How do speakers choose which form to use when? In this paper we propose an answer to this question and report research in its support.

Our proposal is this: Speakers design re-

quests to overcome the *greatest potential obstacle* they see to getting the information they want. Suppose Anne wants to know the time of a lecture announced in the newspaper that morning; and suppose she thinks her friend Bernard would be perfectly willing to tell her the time if only he had seen the announcement. She would judge this to be the greatest potential obstacle to him giving her the time and ask *Did you happen to read in the newspaper this morning what time the governor's lecture is today?* She wouldn't ask, for example, *Do you want to tell me what time the governor's lecture is today?*, which presupposes, contrary to her assumptions, that he knows the time but may be unwilling to tell her.

The obstacle Anne must overcome arises from the preconditions to her getting the information she wants from Bernard. The most important preconditions (see Searle's 1969, 1975, preparatory conditions for requests) belong to one of two broad categories: *ability* (Bernard must be able to give Anne the information) and *willingness* (Bernard must be willing to give Anne the information). Anne evaluates these preconditions from a point of view, or *perspective*, that she takes on the current situation. She bases this perspective on her beliefs about

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her relation to Bernard, where and how people acquire information, Bernard's habits, and so on. She can then evaluate the question: From my perspective, what is the greatest potential obstacle to getting the information I want?

An effective way for Anne to overcome the obstacle is by making a *conditional request*—a request that is conditional on the absence or elimination of the obstacle—and one way of doing this is with indirect requests (Clark, 1979). When Anne asks Bernard *Did you happen to read in the newspaper this morning what time the governor's lecture is today?*, she means, in effect, "Did you read about the lecture time, and if you did, what is it?" If Bernard's answer to the direct question is yes, he will tell her the time. If it is no, he will take Anne's request for the time to be null and void. Indirect requests have two features that make them especially appropriate for Anne's purpose: they are conditional requests (*if, or because, p, do q*); and they focus attention on the condition (*p*) and not the request itself (*do q*).

How specific should Anne be in describing the obstacle? How specific she *can* be is limited by her knowledge of the situation. If Anne in our example had been unsure whether the obstacle was Bernard's finding out the information, remembering it, or being allowed to tell it, her best description of the obstacle was that he was not able to tell her the lecture time. If she had narrowed the obstacle down to his perhaps not having read the announcement in the morning's newspaper, she could be more specific. These variations lead to a gradient of specificity:

- Can you tell me when the governor's lecture is?
- Do you know when the governor's lecture is?
- Do you happen to know when the governor's lecture is?
- Did you happen to see an announcement of when the governor's lecture is?
- Did you happen to read in the newspaper this morning when the governor's lecture is?

In this list each direct meaning is presup-

posed by the one below it. So the more Anne can pinpoint the obstacle, the more specific her request can be.

But how specific *should* Anne be? There are two reasons for being as specific as possible (within reason). First, whenever Anne assesses the greatest obstacle accurately, she helps Bernard find a way of answering the question. In our example Bernard needs to recall information from the morning newspaper, and she gives him an idea of how best to search for it in memory. The second reason is politeness. Many indirect requests are polite because they give the addressee ways of opting out of them (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Clark & Schunk, 1980; Lakoff, 1973, 1977). If so, a request should be more polite the more specific that option is. It seems more face-saving for Bernard to admit that he had not seen the announcement than simply that he was not able to tell Anne the lecture time. So the more Anne pinpoints the difficulty, the more easily Bernard can find a face-saving way out.

There are special situations, however, in which a speaker should not be very specific. If Anne thought it would be embarrassing for Bernard to admit he had not read the morning newspaper, she could be more polite by not being so specific, by using *Do you happen to know?*, which gives him an alternative way out. So precisely how she overcomes an obstacle should also depend in part on whether she can deal with the obstacle head on or only indirectly.

Experiments 1 through 3 were designed to test two notions. The first is that people design requests to overcome the greatest obstacles. The second is that people design more specific direct meanings the more closely they can pinpoint those obstacles.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Students listened to short tape-recorded descriptions of everyday situations in which they were to imagine asking for in-

formation from another person. At the end of each scenario, prompted by *What would you say?*, they spoke out loud a request for information.

There were 24 scenarios, each with two versions. In one version, an obstacle to getting the information was relatively *high*, and in the other it was relatively *low*. For example:

At breakfast, you are talking with your roommate (who plays the violin in the orchestra), and you want to find out the time of the next orchestra concert. What would you say?

In the high-obstacle version, without the phrase in parentheses, it is unclear whether the roommate would have known about the concert. But in the longer low-obstacle version, he or she probably would have known about it and so could furnish the needed information. In all cases with higher obstacles, we expected speakers to use more indirect requests—and more specific indirect requests—to overcome these obstacles.

The 24 scenarios consisted of 12 ability scenarios, 8 willingness scenarios, and 4 memory scenarios. The ability scenarios, as in the concert example, dealt with addressees' ability to provide the requested information: whether they had ever acquired the information, or could remember it, or could find it out easily. In the willingness scenarios, speakers requested information that addressees clearly had but might be reluctant to give, information that was personal or tedious to repeat. An instance of this type is:

You are talking with a friend about family life, and you want to find out from him *whether his parents were divorced* (where he grew up). What would you say?

With the italicized phrase instead of the phrase in parentheses, the speaker would be less certain about the addressee's willingness to provide the information, and so the obstacle was relatively high.

The four memory scenarios questioned the speaker's memory for past events related to the request for information. They

were written to elicit forms such as *Have I already asked you?* and *Did you tell me?* For example,

You're trying to start a conversation with your younger sister's boyfriend, who is sitting nervously in the living room waiting for your sister to come downstairs. You've already asked him about his family, his friends, and his favorite books, so you decide to ask him about his schoolwork (but you've forgotten if that's already come up in conversation, too). What would you say?

When the phrase in parentheses is included, the speaker's uncertainty about what has already happened in the conversation creates a greater obstacle.

We devised two matched lists of 24 scenarios. For each scenario, we put one version (high- or low-obstacle) into List A, and the other into List B. Each list had 12 high-obstacle versions (6 ability, 4 willingness, and 2 memory) and 12 low-obstacle ones. The scenarios in each list were recorded in random order, the same order for both lists, with four warm-up scenarios added at the beginning.

Each student sat with the experimenter in a small room, listened to each scenario, responded immediately taking as long as needed, listened to the next scenario, and so on. The responses were tape recorded and later transcribed. The 30 students were Stanford University undergraduates participating for course credit or pay. Half heard List A, and the other half List B.

Results and Discussion

The first prediction of the obstacle model was that speakers should use fewer direct requests when they have obstacles to overcome. Table 1, which lists the percentage of direct requests for each obstacle type and level, shows that this is exactly what happens. In the high-obstacle versions of the scenarios, only 35% of the requests were direct, whereas 49% were direct in the low-obstacle versions (min $F'[1,29] = 46.90$, $p < .001$). The requests had first been pared down to requests-proper by

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF DIRECT REQUESTS-PROPER

Scenario type	Number of scenarios	Obstacle level	
		High	Low
Ability	12	25	37
Willingness	8	34	54
Memory	4	68	82
Mean		35	49

Note. Each percentage is based on 15 requests per scenario.

omitting prefaces (*Hi; Excuse me*), justifications (*I'm really in a hurry*), and obligations (*I'll do the same for you sometime*). These tend to make the request more polite, but can be analyzed separately (Schunk & Clark, 1984).

The second prediction was that speakers would choose indirect (conditional) requests that described the potential obstacle as specifically as possible. To test this prediction we needed a measure of specificity for each request produced, and for that we turned to Experiment 2.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

In this experiment we asked a new set of students which of the forms produced in Experiment 1 seemed more direct and which others seemed designed to overcome very specific obstacles. First we listed all the request forms used in both versions of each scenario from Experiment 1, between 5 and 14 forms per scenario. Then we chose the version of the scenario that best accommodated the pooled request forms. Except for the divorce scenario mentioned earlier, we used the high-obstacle version, since many of the questions were designed for specific obstacles. Each scenario and its request forms went on one page of a booklet. Ten students were asked to rank the requests on each page for directness, using 1 for most direct.

TABLE 2
FREQUENCY OF REQUEST FORMS IN AN ABILITY SCENARIO ("TIME")

You see a student sitting at a table outside Tresidder, and you notice that
 he is clearly not wearing a watch [High obstacle]
 he is wearing a watch [Low obstacle].
 You want to ask him the time.

Request form	Obstacle level	
	High	Low
1. What time is it? (1.0)	0	2
2. Do you know what time it is? (3.0)	4	2
3. Could you tell me what time it is? (3.4)	0	5
4. Do you have the time? (4.2)	1	6
5. Do you happen to know what time it is? (4.5)	4	0
6. Do you have any idea what time it is? (6.0)	2	0
7. You wouldn't happen to know the time, would you? (6.7)	2	0
8. Do you happen to have a watch, or know what time it is, or anything? (7.3)	1	0
9. Do you know if there's a clock anywhere around here? (8.8)	1	0

Note. Numbers in parentheses are directness scores; 1.0 is most direct.

Results and Discussion

We averaged the rankings for each request form to yield a directness score and tagged each request produced in Experiment 1 with its directness score. As expected, the greater the obstacle, the less direct the request. For high-obstacle scenarios, the mean directness score was 4.09, compared to 3.64 for low-obstacle scenarios (min $F'(1,48) = 4.59, p < .05$).

These differences are illustrated for one of the ability scenarios in Table 2. Here we list the nine request forms ordered from most to least direct, and beside each form the frequency with which it was produced in Experiment 1 for each version of the scenario. The table shows, first, how the nine forms vary in directness. *What time is it?*,

the only direct question in the list, was judged most direct; then came *Do you know?* and *Could you tell me?*; and at the bottom was the highly specific *Do you know if there's a clock anywhere around here?* As requests described the obstacle more specifically, they were judged to be less direct. The table also illustrates how high- and low-obstacle conditions differ in directness. The speakers in the low-obstacle condition used only the four most direct forms. Only 5 of the 15 speakers in the high-obstacle group chose those forms; the remaining 10 used less direct, more specific requests that *none* of the speakers in the first group used.

The directness scores, however, tell only part of the story. The two versions of each scenario also differed dramatically in the *content* of the request forms produced. There were similar qualitative differences from scenario to scenario. We found that speakers chose request forms that dealt with the obstacles particular to each scenario. To describe this finding, we group the scenarios according to their characteristic obstacles.

1. *Do you know?* In the high-obstacle versions of scenarios 1 through 5, speakers were depicted as uncertain whether their addressee knew, or could figure out, some fact (e.g., when the next orchestra concert is). As expected, more of the high-obstacle responses (77%) than of the low-obstacle responses (25%) were requests mentioning that knowledge, such as *Do you know?*, *Do you happen to know?*, and *Do you have any idea?*

2. *Do you remember?* In scenarios 6 and 7, speakers could assume that their addressee had come across the information at some time in the past but might not be able to recall it now. The speakers faced with that obstacle used forms that mentioned the addressee's memory, like *Do you remember?*, 20% of the time, compared to 13% for the low-obstacle version. The only other scenarios in which these forms occurred are the next group.

3. *Did you see/hear/notice?* In scenarios

8 through 10, the addressee, to provide the wanted information, had to have noticed and remembered the right source of information. In the high-obstacle versions, he was likely not to have noticed the source, which should lead to questions like *Did you see in the paper what time the governor's lecture is?* The low-obstacle version carried the assumption that he had noticed the information but might not be able to recall it, so that the appropriate question became *Do you remember?* In these scenarios, even the low obstacle is substantial, so speakers could use indirect requests for both versions. As expected, *Did you see/hear/notice?* was used more often for the high obstacle (42%) than for the low (31%). (Request forms like this were used nowhere else in our scenarios.) Correspondingly, *Do you remember?* occurred more often for the low obstacle (31%) than for the high (11%).

4. *Are you allowed?* Scenarios 11 and 12 were written to be borderline cases between ability and willingness. They depicted addressees who had the information, but were unable (or unwilling) to divulge it because doing so would violate a set policy. Some speakers faced with this obstacle avoided mentioning it and, instead, explained their own need for the information and hoped for the addressee's help. So speakers used forms like *Could I get?* more often when the obstacle was high (37%) than when it was low (17%). (These forms occurred nowhere else but in the willingness scenarios, and even then only 2% of the time.) Many other speakers asked whether the addressee was allowed to give the information with requests like *Could you give me?*: 47% in the high-obstacle condition and 67% in the low-obstacle condition. Here is a case, then, where speakers attended to the greatest potential obstacles but were less specific in mentioning the obstacle the larger it loomed. They shrewdly avoided mentioning that the information they wanted might be forbidden to them.

5. *Would you?* Scenarios 13 through 20 were written to set up obstacles in which the addressee might be unwilling to give the

wanted information. Speakers used fewer direct requests here the greater the potential obstacle. Many other speakers used *Can you?* and *Could you?*, by which they asked whether the addressee would allow himself, that is, be willing, to give the information. These forms were used 30% of the time in the high-obstacle condition, and 26% of the time in the low-obstacle condition, not a substantial difference. Note that speakers in these scenarios could have chosen requests like *Would you?* and *Would you mind?*, with the modal verb *will* and its variants, and yet only 7 and 2% did in the high- and low-obstacle versions. We shall return to this point in Experiment 3.

As in scenarios 11 and 12, many speakers in these scenarios dealt with the addressee's potential willingness by sidestepping the obstacle. They used one of two strategies. Either they volunteered personal information about themselves, hoping the addressee would reciprocate, or they introduced a related topic, trying to steer the conversation toward the information they wanted. In one scenario, speakers trying to find out if a friend's parents were divorced asked *Where do your parents live?* or *Is your family still living together?* Overall, 23% of the speakers used such strategies when the obstacle was high, compared with 9% when the obstacle was low. These strategies were never used in the ability scenarios, where they would have been of little use. When the obstacle is the addressee's potential inability to recall the wanted information, the speaker is better off using a good retrieval cue like *Did you see?* than an oblique mention of the obstacle.

6. *Have I asked you?* In scenarios 21 through 24, the obstacle was the speaker's memory. When the obstacle was high, 27% of the speakers mentioned their faulty memory. When the obstacle was low, only 5% of them did so. These forms never appeared in any other scenarios.

The findings so far can be summarized as follows. The smaller the potential obstacle to a request for information, the more likely the speakers in Experiment 1 were to

choose direct questions (such as *What time is it?*) and the more direct their requests were likely to be. Moreover, the requests those speakers designed were tailored to the specific obstacle they faced—*Do you know?* if knowledge was in doubt, *Do you remember?* if memory was in doubt, and so on. Speakers are highly sensitive to the obstacle they need to overcome, and in most cases they deal with it as specifically as they can.

EXPERIMENT 3

In Experiment 1, we had expected speakers to match their request type to the scenario type (ability, willingness, or memory). Often they did, but there were some apparent oddities. Most strikingly, *Can you?* and *Could you?* were preferred to *Would you mind telling me?* and *May I ask you?* in nearly all of the willingness scenarios. We had expected *Can you?* and *Could you?* to be good all-purpose requests, because they may address either ability or willingness. But the absence of *Would you?* was surprising, since it had been rated close to *Can you?* and *Could you?* both in politeness and conventionality (Clark & Schunk, 1980).

In Experiment 3, then, we had students listen to the Experiment 1 scenarios and rate several request forms for appropriateness. We expected to find that *Would you?* is recognized as appropriate by speakers even though they might not use it themselves; other forms such as *Have I already asked you?* remain inappropriate except when the speaker's memory is an obstacle; *Can you?* and *Could you?* are appropriate across many scenarios.

Method

Eighteen students who had not participated in the other experiments heard the same tape-recorded scenarios used in Experiment 1, nine hearing List A and nine List B. This time the students were given five possible request forms for each scenario. Using a 7-point scale, they rated each request form according to how appro-

appropriate it would be for the speaker to use it in that situation. There were three ability forms (*Do you know X*, *Can you tell me X*, and *Could you tell me X*), one willingness form (*Would you mind telling me X*), and one memory form (*Have you already told me X*). The continuation X was written for each scenario, and usually was the same for both high- and low-obstacle versions, e.g., *Do you know when the next orchestra concert is?* (The exception was the divorce scenario, as mentioned in Experiment 2.) The order of the five request forms was randomized for each scenario.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, people preferred each request in the corresponding type of situation ($\min F'[1,27] = 76.96, p < .001$).¹ Detailed ratings are shown in Table 3. When the three ability forms are classed together and the difference between high and low obstacle is ignored, students rated the ability requests *Do you know?*, *Can you?*, and *Could you?* higher for ability scenarios (a mean rating of 5.26 out of 7) than for willingness (4.03) or memory (4.33) scenarios. Similarly, the willingness request *Would you mind?* was more appropriate in willingness scenarios (5.61) than in ability (4.68) or memory (3.44) scenarios, even though speakers in Experiment 1 didn't choose it often. And the memory request *Have you told me?* was rated higher for memory scenarios (4.16) than for ability (1.88) or willingness (2.25) scenarios.² Students often

¹ We thought that the students, in rating the five request forms for each scenario, might have let their rating for one form influence the others. If so, the ratings are not independent, and a simple contrast of means—for willingness scenarios, say, across the third and fourth rows of the table—is inappropriate. Instead, we did the appropriate contrast for individual students' ratings in each scenario.

² In the memory scenarios, the three ability requests appear more highly rated than the memory request (4.33 vs 4.16). This may be due to obstacle level: *Can you?* and *Could you?* are appropriate at either obstacle level, whereas *Have you told me?* becomes inappropriate when the memory obstacle is low. However, we have too few ratings to test this formally.

commented on how strange *Have you told me?* was for most of the scenarios. But that strangeness alone cannot account for the results. Even when the memory scenarios are omitted and the memory request ignored, ability forms are most appropriate in ability scenarios and willingness forms in willingness scenarios ($\min F'[1,23] = 21.82, p < .001$).

The two forms *Could you?* (ranging in appropriateness from 4.56 to 5.49) and *Can you?* (4.19 to 5.33) were preferred to the other three forms as general ways to make polite requests ($\min F'[1,38] = 139.62, p < .001$). One reason, predicted by the obstacle model, is that these conditional requests state only very general conditions—in the case of *Could you?*, that the addressee may somehow be unable or unwilling to give the information. Hence, they are applicable in many situations. Perhaps it was this broad applicability that led, historically, to their use as conventional, or pro forma, polite requests (see Clark, 1979; Morgan, 1978). Yet an indication that the forms do still specify these general conditions is that they are actually *less* appropriate when the speaker must overcome a specific obstacle. *Can you?* and *Could you?* were rated less appropriate for high obstacle scenarios than for low obstacle ones ($\min F'[1,34] = 12.02, p < .001$).

The ratings of these five requests complement the freely produced utterances in Experiment 1. One form not spontaneously used in the first experiment (*Would you mind?*) was still recognized as appropriate, even though speakers in Experiment 1 tended to use *Could you?* or to sidestep. *Have you told me?*, a restricted form rarely produced, was also considered appropriate when memory was an obstacle. So the forms not produced in Experiment 1 are considered legitimate, given the corresponding potential obstacle.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These experiments support the obstacle model for designing requests. Speakers

TABLE 3
MEAN APPROPRIATENESS RATINGS FOR FIVE REQUEST FORMS AND TWO OBSTACLE LEVELS

Type of scenario	Question				
	Ability			Willingness	Memory
	Do you know?	Can you tell me?	Could you tell me?	Would you mind?	Have you told me?
Ability					
High obstacle	5.52	5.26	5.12	4.29	1.78
Low obstacle	4.85	5.33	5.49	5.07	1.97
Willingness					
High obstacle	2.46	4.19	4.56	5.50	2.15
Low obstacle	2.79	5.03	5.14	5.72	2.35
Memory					
High obstacle	3.50	4.58	4.72	3.30	5.25
Low obstacle	3.61	4.75	4.81	3.56	3.06
Mean	4.06	4.96	5.06	4.78	2.38

look for the greatest potential obstacle to getting the information they want and design requests to deal with it. When they find no particular obstacle, they make unconditional requests, like *What time is it?* and *Tell me what time it is*. When they discover a specific obstacle, they deal with it in one of three ways.

One way is to design an indirect request conditional on the absence or elimination of the obstacle, and the more specific the obstacle, the more specific the condition. When Anne asks Bernard *Did you happen to see what time the concert begins?* she creates a scene in which Bernard would tell her the time if only he had "happened to see what time the concert begins." With this request Anne accomplishes two things. She helps Bernard find the information in memory efficiently. Also, if Bernard doesn't know the time, she gives him a face-saving way out—he didn't happen to see what time the concert began. Suppose she had asked *Don't you want to tell me what time the concert begins?* With this she would have created a scene in which Bernard would tell her the time if only he "wanted to tell her the time," which wouldn't offer him a face-saving way out. Indirect requests have been found to vary

in perceived politeness on just these grounds (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Clark & Schunk, 1980; Lakoff, 1973, 1977). In the right situations, then, conditional requests are both effective and polite.

A way to overcome a general or ill-specified obstacle, on the other hand, is through more broadly applicable conditional requests. When Anne asks a stranger for route directions, she cannot know what the greatest potential obstacle might be. But she can create a scene in which the stranger would give her the directions if only he were able to and would allow himself to, which leads to *Can you tell me?* or *Could you tell me?* As we noted earlier, this fallback perspective is so broadly useful—it covers both ability and willingness—that it has become conventional, or pro forma (Clark, 1979; Morgan, 1978). Still, it is a useful convention, since Anne remains polite by offering the stranger a broad range of graceful excuses.

Finally, a way of overcoming an obstacle too sensitive to mention is to approach it sideways. If Bernard seems unwilling to give Anne the information, she can ask for related information that he *is* willing to divulge. This way Anne remains polite, since she does not force Bernard to admit his un-

willingness. But she is also effective. While Bernard might refuse a direct request, this tactic may lead him to greater and greater disclosures. Whether Anne chooses to mention or to sidestep the obstacle, her general strategy is the same: to design a request that best overcomes the greatest obstacle to compliance.

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