

Interpreting standardized indirect requests from a Relevance theoretic perspective

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1. Introduction

In English, the most straightforward and, arguably, pragmatically unambiguous way to ask someone to close a door would be to utter the imperative sentence in (1).

(1) Close the door.

In the case of (1), the request is said to be “direct”. Nonetheless we can easily imagine the same request being performed *indirectly*, by means of an interrogative sentence such as (2) or a declarative one such as (3).¹

(2) Can you close the door?

(3) You can close the door.

The examples in (2)-(3) are prototypical of what Bach and Harnish (1984) have called “standardized” indirect requests (see also Bach 1998). In the literature, indirect speech acts (ISAs) like (2)-(3) are also frequently referred to as “conventional” (e.g. Searle 1975, Morgan 1978). According to Searle (1975), the utterances in (2)-(3) are “conventional” for the performance of requests inasmuch as they share regularities of form that are typical of such indirect requests (IRs); (2) and (3) respectively are tokens of *Can you do A?* and *You can do A* constructions. Morgan (1978) is more explicit than Searle on the kind of convention involved in (2)-(3): the convention amounts to the knowledge that these constructions can be employed for certain purposes, i.e. directive purposes. By contrast, Bach and Harnish (1984) prefer the general concept of “standardization” since the diversity of sentences used in ISAs in general, and IRs in particular, suggests that we cannot explain their performance by a unique convention. An IR is considered to

2 Nicolas Ruytenbeek

be standardized if the sentence used to perform it (*Can you_?/You can_*) has been regularly associated in some contexts with a specific meaning that is not the meaning encoded by the linguistic form of the utterance or its literal meaning. For Bach and Harnish (1984), the inferential path leading to the identification of the illocutionary goal has been compressed due to the frequency of use of (2)-(3) as requests. This, however, does not imply that using *Can you_?* and *You can_* can no longer perform literal SAs.

In order to support the thesis that *Can you_?* can be either used to ask a question or to perform a request for action, I will consider empirical data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). I examined in this corpus whether the sentence *Can you stand up?* was able to perform the question and request SAs in distinct contexts of utterance.² After analysis of the linguistic and situational contexts, I found three tokens of *Can you stand up?* with a “question” meaning and seven with a “request” meaning (including two tokens of *Can you stand up, please?*). This suggests that, although the request interpretation of *Can you stand up?* is more frequent in this corpus, the same sentence can also serve to ask a question. To give another example, *Can you_?* sentences including *please* appear to make the illocutionary force of a request even more salient, as (4) illustrates.

- (4) “Do you speak TransCom?”
“Yes” I said.
“Good. Can you please tell me your names and ages?”
“Miroslaw Jaworski. This is my sister, Irenka. I’m eleven, she’s four.”
(Torgersen, B. R., 2010, *Outbound*. COCA)

In this context, everyone would expect Miroslaw to provide the speaker with the requested information, because this information is normally part of his knowledge of the world. Therefore, as predicted by Clark (1979), the probability that H (Miroslaw) will consider that S intended the literal, “question” meaning of the utterance seriously is very small. As a consequence, Miroslaw should provide the requested information without (necessarily) responding to the literal meaning of the utterance.

In the Relevance theoretic framework (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 1997; Wilson & Sperber 1995), relevance is defined as the balance between processing costs and cognitive effects. Utterance interpretation, Relevance Theory (RT) claims, is oriented towards the maximization of relevance. Hence, extra effects should compensate additional interpretative effort; if it is not the case, the utterance would not be relevant enough to deserve the interpreter’s attention in comparison with more relevant alternatives. Speakers thus should prefer the stimulus with

the smallest costs-effects ratio, as long as this stimulus suits their capacities and purposes. The main purpose of this article is to examine whether the Relevance theoretic account of standardized IRs is plausible both from an empirical and an experimental perspective. I will argue that, in some situations, standardized IRs impose extra processing effort relative to imperatives — *ceteris paribus* — because they make the “request” meaning less explicit, while yielding the same effects. Hence, the “costs-effects ratio” principle would not systematically apply when such a standardized utterance is produced.

The questions I would like to deal with in this paper are the following. First, I will briefly discuss why the “request” assumption conveyed by a standardized utterance is best described as an explicature (section 2). Second, I will investigate whether direct and indirect standardized requests differ as to the processing costs they impose on H (section 3). In that line of thought, I will address possible effects associated with IRs (section 4) and the role of speakers’ preferences in the choice of standardized IRs (section 5). In the concluding section, I will propose the view that experimental investigation is required to test the claims defended in this paper and verify whether the RT analysis of IRs is tenable or not.

2. Standardized IRs and explicatures

Interpreting an utterance involves two processing modules operating in parallel (Wilson & Sperber 1993). The syntactic module is devoted to the decoding of the logical form (LF) of the sentence; with the LF as input the pragmatic module infers which content is communicated. At the level of pragmatic processing, two sorts of inferred assumptions are distinguished, explicatures and implicatures. Explicatures result from pragmatic enrichment, and / or modulation of the LF. By contrast, implicatures do not build on the modulated / enriched LF only, but they need contextual background to be inferred; a mutual adjustment between explicatures and implicatures is expected. Let us assume that the standardized IRs (2)-(3) receive as interpretation the “request assumption” in (5).

(5) The speaker is telling the addressee to close the door.

Is (5) conveyed as an implicature or an explicature of (2)-(3)? The most natural option is that (5) is a *higher-order* explicature of the utterance, resulting from the enriched LF. Once references have been fixed, the LF of (3), <You can close the door>, possibly yields a *base-level* explicature like (6) or (7) depending on the reading of the modal *can*.^{3,4}

4 Nicolas Ruytenbeek

(6) H is able to close the door.

(7) H is allowed to close the door.

Contrasting with base-level explicatures, higher-order explicatures consist in the optional embedding of the proposition under a higher-level description (Wilson & Sperber 1993: 5). For instance, (5) is a higher-order explicature in terms of a speech act. Obviously, (5) cannot be inferred solely on the basis of the explicatures in (6)-(7), which are not relevant enough for H to stop processing the utterances in (3). As I have assumed, that H is able or allowed to close the door is, in many situations where (2)-(3) are uttered as a request, mutually manifest to S and H. But, according to the presumption of Relevance, since (6)-(7) do not satisfy H's expectations of relevance, after having inferred (6)-(7), and having rejected them, H will have to resort to other implicated premises so as to derive (5). What these premises exactly consist in is open to debate.

3. Standardized IRs and the costs-effects ratio

This section is dedicated to the RT principle according to which addressees assume that speakers should use the most relevant stimulus available, that is, the stimulus that maximizes cognitive effects for H while minimizing H's processing effort. I will show how this "costs-effects ratio" principle applies to standardized IRs. For the sake of exposition, I will assume contexts where interlocutors are in a very close relationship and equal in power, in which speakers have no preference for direct or standardized indirect requests, and in which it therefore matters very little whether a request is performed directly or with a standardized indirect utterance.⁵ On the one hand, I will consider the pragmatic differences between direct requests and standardized indirect ones, and I will compare how the request assumption is made accessible in both cases. On the other hand, I will consider processing costs associated with the parsing of the sentences used in direct vs indirect requests.

3.1. *Pragmatic differences*

It is important to recall the way RT accounts for the interpretation of an imperative request like (1), before we compare the interpretative processes RT postulates for both types of utterances.

(1) Close the door. (repeated)

According to RT, the imperative mood encodes two propositional attitudes: "the belief that a certain state of affairs is potential, and the belief that it is desirable"

(Wilson & Sperber 1988: 12; see also Carston 2002: 120). The semantic interpretation of an imperative sentence leads H to recognize that the state of affairs depicted by the sentence is potential and desirable. This incomplete interpretation serves as input for the pragmatic interpretation that resolves the semantic indeterminacy. Faced with requests like (1), H understands that the represented state of affairs is desirable to S, from S's perspective.⁶ In other words, H infers the explicature that <<"the door will be closed immediately" is desirable to S and potential>. The imperative in (1) can thus make manifest the higher-order explicature in (8), or the one in (5).

(8) H's closing of the door is potential and desirable.

Endorsing this view amounts to saying that, in cases like (1), the imperative mood provides indication as to which higher-order explicature is communicated; it guides H's search for relevance. Yet it does not encode the "request" assumption itself.

The question now is whether in utterances like (1) the imperative mood facilitates the directive interpretation relative to other types of sentences or, in other words, whether non-imperative utterances make the "request" less accessible than imperative utterances do.

Wilson and Sperber's (1988) analysis of the interrogative mood seems capable of shedding light on the understanding of requests performed with sentences like (2).

(2) Can you close the door? (repeated)

In their view, the interrogative mood encodes the representation of desirable thoughts, that is, answers to interrogative sentences that are relevant to the addressee's cognitive environment. They thus consider that interrogative sentences are interpretively used to convey another utterance or thought that is similar in content. For instance, (2) would convey the assumption that "<<H can (immediately) close the door> is potential". But here, inferring the relevant answer would not suffice to access the directive assumption communicated, if (2) is to be interpreted as a request: more inferential work is needed.

Groefsema's (1992) Relevance theoretic account of IRs involving the modal *can* implicitly assumes that non-imperative requests require more inferential work than imperative ones. According to Groefsema (1992, 1995), the "request" meaning of *Can you_?* is a direct development of the unitary meaning of *can*, guided by the Principle of Relevance. Following Wilson and Sperber's (1988) analysis of the interrogative mood, Groefsema (1992: 131-2) conceives of the utterance of (2) as communicating that the thought <The addressee can close the

door> would be relevant if true. In a situation where it is mutually manifest that P is relevant if true, the logical form of (2) is (9).

- (9) S is asking whether $\langle_p \langle_Q$ H closes the door $_y \rangle$ is compatible with the set of all propositions which have a bearing on Q \rangle .

She points out that it is mutually manifest too that H can perform the action in question, and, as a consequence, that (2) cannot be about H's physical ability to perform this action but "achieves relevance as an instantiation of [his] ability". She thus implies that a possible interpretation of (2) would be discarded as contextually inappropriate; this suggests that the discarded meaning and the correct, "request" meaning compete at the semantic level of interpretation. Groefsema (1992: 131-2) further argues that the only "relevant" enrichment of the LF of (2) in the present context would be that the instantiation of H's ability be immediate.

I agree with Groefsema that requests like (2)-(3) need not be considered as "indirect" in order to be properly understood. However, Groefsema's (1992) analysis of *Can you_?* IRs is very close to the kind of inferential reasoning postulated by Searle (1975); as a result, Groefsema's argument that *Can you_?* requests are "direct" is weakened.

It thus seems that for RT, inferring the "request" meaning of the interrogative sentence (2) is less straightforward than in the case of the imperative (1) and that the interrogative mood is a weaker indication of the request meaning of the utterance relative to the imperative mood.

Now, let us examine how a request performed with the declarative sentence in (3) would be understood for RT. In contrast with the imperative and the interrogative moods, the declarative mood does not encode desirability, let alone potentiality. The idea that the thought expressed by means of the declarative sentence in (3) is potential would stem from the lexical meaning Groefsema (1992) defines for *can*, rather than from any feature of the sentence-type used. After all, it is not part of the declarative sentence mood to ask for an answer, whether an information or an action. Since it is the interrogative mood rather than the declarative mood that encodes desirability, there would be extra cost associated with the declarative request in (3) in comparison with the interrogative one in (2), and therefore relative to the imperative request in (1).

To sum up, in this section, I have argued that both an interrogative IR and a declarative IR would impose extra pragmatic cost relative to an imperative, direct request. Now I turn to parsing differences between imperative and non-imperative requests.

3.2. *Parsing differences*

At first glance, (2)-(3) would require more decoding effort than (1). A *Can you...?* or *You can...* sentence is longer and syntactically more complex than an imperative sentence like (1), whose linguistic content is included in (2)-(3), the consequence being that reading times or listening times should be longer for (2)-(3) than for (1). However, I agree that in this case the *ceteris paribus* condition is not fulfilled, unless we add to the imperative sentence *please* or a vocative — which could bias response times as well. Sperber and Wilson (1987: 747) regarded parsing as being part of the overall costs of utterance interpretation: they claimed that it is not only the inferential effort occurring *after* decoding that affects the relevance of the utterance, “it is that of the whole processing of the utterance, including decoding”. Contrasting with this view, Sperber and Wilson (2002) consider that the parsing and the pragmatic modules are two autonomous modules involved in the global comprehension of utterances and that decoding occurs *automatically*, independently of the search for Relevance associated with the pragmatic module. Although from the latter perspective it is unclear whether more decoding effort would decrease the relevance of an utterance, from the former perspective standardized IRs such as (2)-(3) would involve more parsing cost, hence extra processing effort relative to imperative requests.

3.3. *Potential objections*

Relevance theorists could object to my argumentation that the “standardized” form of IRs provides a probabilistic indication that they convey a directive assumption and that inferring the request therefore involves a short-circuited process (cf. Searle 1975, Morgan 1978). The idea is that the linguistic form of standardized IRs would trigger the intended directive interpretation. Within the Relevance theoretic framework, Vega Moreno (2007: 116) argues that “recurrent selective processing of a familiar stimulus may lead to the development of a more or less automatic cognitive procedure or inferential route to process this stimulus”. Her notion of “pragmatic routine” reinterprets Bach and Harnish’s (1984) standardization as a reduction of the inferential steps necessary to understand the utterance (2007: 116-9).⁷ However, this does not refute the thesis that standardized IRs might be costlier than their direct counterparts, if one assumes that measures of reaction times are not sufficient to evaluate processing costs, and that “higher processing cost” can also refer to “more brain activity” (cf. Gibbs and Colston 2012: 126). I agree with Vega Moreno (2007) that processing efforts can be reduced because of the frequency of use. But there would still be parsing, if not pragmatic, imbalance between (1), and (2)-(3).

Whereas I do agree that the familiarity of an expression such as *Can you_?* or *You can_* and the frequency with which it is uttered as a request may reduce processing cost, it is not necessarily true that inferring the request meaning in standardized IRs is as straightforward as in direct requests. After all, resolving the pragmatic indeterminacy of (1) by finding out to whom the closing of the door is desirable is not the same as deciding whether either the ability question for (2) / the assertion for (3), or the request meaning is the intended meaning of the utterance.

At this stage it is worth mentioning the existence of empirical evidence supporting the idea that, even when the “ability question” meaning of *Can you_?* is not the intended meaning, addressees may nevertheless refer to it in their responses, which would not be possible if the literal meaning of the utterance is completely bypassed. For instance, Munro (1979) asked people the time and collected observational evidence showing that IRs can activate both the literal and the indirect meaning of an utterance in H’s mind. Crucially, all the people interrogated were wearing a watch, and would have assumed that the speaker (Munro) noticed this fact. Munro collected two kinds of responses: on the one hand, “one answer responses”, consisting of just saying what time it was, and, on the other hand, “two-answer responses”, consisting of an affirmation followed by a report of the time. Half of the people who responded to IRs provided “two answer responses”. A possible explanation of the proportion of “two answer responses” is that the affirmation was a response to the literal meaning of the IR for the time, which was an ability question.

In a nutshell, three theoretical options are available regarding the competition between the literal meaning and the indirect, request meaning of standardized utterances like (2)-(3). In the first option, endorsed by Relevance theorists, both interpretations of a standardized utterance are inferred in parallel; this implies that IRs are costlier than imperative requests because a decision must be made to know which interpretation is the correct and the most relevant one. In the second, gricean-like option, the “question” interpretation of (2) and the “assertion” interpretation of (3) are default, which still entails extra cost for the standardized (2)-(3); the inadequacy of this model has been experimentally demonstrated (e.g. Gibbs 1979, 1983, Shapiro & Murphy 1993, Holtgraves 1994). The third option amounts to considering that the directive meaning is the default. For instance, Terkourafi and Villavicencio (2003) argue that standardized IRs of the interrogative sentence-type provide, in some contexts, a default directive illocutionary force that can be overridden by another, inferentially derived force.⁸ In this case, the directive interpretation would not involve more effort than the corresponding imperative. However, a possible prediction of this view is that the

“question” meaning would non-literal, hence costlier than the request meaning, which is rather counterintuitive. This third option is closely related to views held by researchers in grammaticalization, who consider that the literal meaning of a given construction can be replaced over time by another literal meaning; this process is called “pragmatic enrichment” (e.g. Traugott 1988, Traugott and Dasher 2002).⁹ It seems, however, that this phenomenon did not apply to standardized IRs, because for *Can you _* and *You can _*, both meanings still are available (and common) in contemporary English.¹⁰ But I acknowledge that experimental evidence is welcome to verify e.g. whether, when a question is asked with *Can you _?*, the “request” meaning may also be activated in H’s mind.

3.4. *Provisional conclusion*

To summarize the argument, it is possible that IRs such as (2)-(3) are less relevant than other, alternative utterances since they would impose additional syntactic and pragmatic effort relative to imperative requests. However, at this point nothing entails that standardized IRs violate the Relevance theoretic “costs-effect ratio” principle. In order to verify that this principle applies to standardized IRs, I propose to consider whether, while standardized IRs would be costlier than their direct counterparts, they would yield more cognitive effects as compensation. This hypothesis will be discussed in the next section.

4. **Politeness and impoliteness: possible compensations?**

Social considerations such as politeness are sometimes conceived of as reasons for opting for IRs. Could indications of politeness constitute extra cognitive effects, which, in turn, would offset additional processing cost? According to Brown and Levinson (1987), if S wants to avoid emotional cost for H, while at the same time making her communicative intention clear enough, she should prefer standardized IRs like (2)-(3) instead of using (1).

- (1) Close the door. (repeated)
- (2) Can you close the door? (repeated)
- (3) You can close the door. (repeated)

A natural intuition is that in standardized IRs, a higher degree of politeness would justify the overall extra processing of the sentence in comparison with the imperative in (1). This would be true for impolite utterances as well: consider

(10), which can receive a rather impolite reading, e.g. implying that H is non-cooperative.

(10) Can't you close the door?

Yet the general problem with this line of reasoning is that if politeness or impoliteness is not intended by S, nor inferred by H, it does not compensate for extra processing cost. In other words, to be a potential compensation to extra cognitive cost, politeness would have to be systematically associated with standardized IRs, which I claim is an untenable position.

As Jary (1998b: 2) points out, very often politeness does not attract attention, so that it would be difficult to maintain, like Brown and Levinson (1987: 95) do, that there is a level of meaning in which politeness is communicated. Arguing that, in many cases, politeness does not belong to the intended message, Jary (1998b: 13) refuses to attribute to linguistic politeness the status of a conveyed propositional content. It amounts to saying that (2)-(3) do not always communicate politeness or impoliteness assumptions and, therefore, that their contextual effects for H do not suffice to compensate additional effort required to process them.

Opposing with Jary (1998b), Escandell-Vidal (1998: 52) analyses the politeness assumption communicated as a higher-level explicature such as *S told me to close the door, and she did it politely*. Alongside the decoding and the inferential modules Escandell-Vidal (2004: 358-361) proposes a social module that yields a set of representations on socially accepted behaviour, while operating an online analysis of perceived pieces of behaviour. From her viewpoint, an utterance that is neither polite nor impolite could thus be considered as communicating a higher-level explicature such as *S told A to close the door, and she did it neither politely nor impolitely*, the second part of the explicature seeming neither relevant nor necessary.

To elaborate my argument, I have assumed since the onset of this paper the existence of contexts in which the interlocutors are in a very close relationship, and in which it matters little whether they use (1) or (2)-(3). This sort of context, with specific values of power, distance and ranking of the imposition, can be non-technically referred to as socially "neutral". I will argue that, in such a context, both S and H do not consider any of the forms in (1)-(2)-(3) as more or less polite than the other.

In agreement with Jary (1998b), I propose that, in such "neutral" contexts, (2) and (3) are best situated on the zero of a scale ranging from impolite (-1) to polite (1) (cf. Ide *et al.* 1992). Forms like (2)-(3) are *generally* non-polite and

non-impolite, so that the politeness value that should be associated with them is “zero” of the politeness scale.

Terkourafi (2008: 57) argues that politeness is a second-order notion ranking over behaviours (e.g. linguistic behaviours). A politeness or impoliteness assumption can — but need not — be achieved as a consequence of S’s utterance (Terkourafi 2003). In the same vein, Escandell-Vidal (1998: 52) claims that politeness is rarely communicated, although inferential judgments of (im)politeness can occur for every utterance. Thus, following Escandell-Vidal, whereas the social processing of a particular utterance is mandatory, the resulting politeness or impoliteness assumption need not be. The social system is always active during online processing, whether an utterance is perceived as polite, impolite, or neither. This accords very well with my claim that standardized IRs can be used to perform requests without any (im)politeness effect being triggered.

To sum up, the considerations of this section support the thesis advocated in section 3. The upshot is that, since the effects associated with standardized IRs are optional rather than mandatory, these potential effects will not always compensate for extra processing cost. I now address in more detail the issue of the speakers’ preferences and abilities and the relevance of these notions for the present discussion.

5. Relevance, preferences and abilities

A central tenet of Relevance theory is that communicative stimuli are intended to achieve the optimal ratio between cognitive effects and processing costs. For speakers, optimizing relevance amounts to choose a stimulus that matches as much as possible their preferences and their abilities. However, in “neutral” contexts of utterance that I have considered in this paper, where social considerations matter little or not at all, it is plausible that speakers do not make any principled choice between imperative and non-imperative requests.

But, according to Mark Jary (personal communication), inferring from the analysis above that standardized IRs violate the “costs-effects ratio” principle would be a hasty conclusion. Contrary to imperatives, they allow S to avoid communicating that she is superior to H and that her desire is a sufficient reason for H to comply (Jary 1998a: 160). It would therefore be false to assume that they are less relevant than the alternative imperatives. Underlying Jary’s approach is the idea that indirect directives are preferred to imperatives, because they match S’s abilities and preferences better than imperatives would (Sperber & Wilson 1995, §3.3). For imperative requests, Jary argues, in order to access

the intended interpretation H must recognize the premise that “in communicating her desire, S makes manifest her belief that this desire is relevant for H”.

However, this explanation is not strong enough to discard the possibility that, in some situations, standardized IRs would violate the “costs-effects ratio” principle. The reason is that H’s compliance with a standardized directive like (2)-(3) implies that S’s desire is relevant to H, just as it is when the imperative *Close the door* is uttered. So S’s desire will be relevant whether the sentence is imperative, interrogative, or declarative. In all cases, understanding that a request has been issued implies that the desire has been perceived as a reason to obey.

Thus Jary’s argument, and Relevance theoretic literature on politeness in general, do not show that standardized IRs impose no extra costs relative to their imperative counterparts. Worse, the costs issue is left unexplored by available RT research. It appears, then, that no systematic cognitive effect associated with standardized IRs can counterbalance likely extra processing of the utterances. As a consequence, if my claim that, on the one hand, there are situations where speakers have no preference for direct or indirect requests and, on the other hand, my thesis that standardized IRs are costlier than imperative requests, are both verified, the Relevance theoretic account of IRs would be difficult to maintain.

6. Conclusion and perspectives

Since the higher-order explicature of request seems to be less accessible in IRs in comparison with imperatives, I suggested that, in “neutral” contexts where politeness and preferences for direct or indirect requests do not matter, standardized IRs might constitute a serious problem to the Relevance theoretic account of utterance interpretation, according to which the most relevant stimulus should be selected. More processing effort (although not necessarily more processing time) would be needed to infer the “request” explicature from the standardized utterance, which implies that the most “relevant” stimulus — the imperative request — was not chosen. Taking into account, on the one hand, the syntactic complexity of IRs compared to imperatives, and, on the other hand, the differences in the pragmatic interpretation of imperative vs non-imperative requests, I put forward the thesis that the RT “costs-effects ratio” principle may sometimes be violated. I have considered possible objections to this argument while trying to integrate them into my account.

It is reasonable to believe that the questions addressed in this paper cannot be answered solely on the basis of a theoretical and empirical discussion. I believe that experimental work is required for at least two reasons. First, a difference in

processing costs could be assessed by measuring brain activity and response times instead of response times only. According to the analysis developed in this paper, imperative requests would not necessarily be processed faster than standardized requests or vice versa, but brain activity recordings could provide indication of increased activation for IRs (see for instance Coulson & Lovett 2010, van Ackeren *et al.* 2012). Second, experimental work on politeness and utterance interpretation is necessary to confirm that in interactional situations, where there are no differences of power, status and hierarchy between the interlocutors, standardized IRs do not yield more effects than the corresponding imperatives.

Notes

¹ This assumption is reasonable for many other European languages as well, such as Dutch, French, Italian and Spanish. However, in this paper I focus on English data only.

² Eighteen tokens of “Can you stand up” were displayed, only ten being relevant to our issue and unambiguously analysable.

³ By proposing only two readings of *can*, I do not mean that they are the only ones available.

⁴ My account contrasts with Groefsema’s (1992), according to whom the modal *can* has a “direct” request interpretation in (2)-(3). However, Groefsema assumes that H would understand that his ability to close the door should be instantiated immediately, which amounts to say that (6) is derived and enriched, resulting in (5) as the most relevant assumption S is taken to communicate. The problem is that, as a consequence, the “request” meaning of *can* is not as direct as Groefsema claims it to be.

⁵ This hypothesis will be addressed in more detail in section 5.

⁶ For an exhaustive discussion of the Relevance theoretic notion of “desirability”, see Dominicy & Franken (2002).

⁷ A similar view is endorsed by Construction Grammar; for instance Stefanowitsch (2003) claims that for an indirect request like *Can you pass the salt?*, no complete “gricean” inference is required, the directive meaning being “directly” accessed.

⁸ By contrast, dual accounts have been developed (Asher and Lascarides 2001, Copestake and Terkourafi 2010).

⁹ This definition of “pragmatic enrichment” should not be confused with the Relevance theoretic one.

¹⁰ A complete diachronic analysis of why *Can you_?* and *You can_* sentences have come to be used in the performance of requests is beyond the scope of the present paper. For a recent cross-linguistic study of how directive constructions emerge, see Mauri and Sansò (2011).

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