

How Listeners Infer Meaning from Indirect Responses in Movie Dialogues

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how listeners infer meaning from indirect responses in the film *The Maze Runner* (2014). Using a descriptive qualitative approach, six scenes were analyzed to examine how characters reply in ways that do not directly address preceding questions yet still convey intended meanings. The analysis draws on Searle's theory of indirect speech acts, Grice's cooperative principle, and contemporary research on pragmatic inference. Findings show that indirect responses function to regulate emotional tension, control access to knowledge, reinforce hierarchical relations, and maintain narrative suspense. Listeners rely on contextual cues, shared assumptions, and situational urgency to interpret meanings that are not explicitly stated. The inferential process involves assessing literal meaning, detecting pragmatic mismatch, and reconstructing speaker intention. The study concludes that indirect responses operate as strategic communicative mechanisms shaping character dynamics and narrative progression. Future research may compare indirectness across genres or explore its role in institutional and high-stakes settings. In addition, the study highlights that indirect responses are closely linked to the survival-based environment of the film, where uncertainty and restricted knowledge influence how characters communicate. The consistent use of indirectness demonstrates that meaning is not solely derived from linguistic form but from the interaction between context, intention, and interpretation. These findings emphasize the importance of pragmatic competence in understanding communication within complex narrative settings and contribute to broader discussions of meaning-making in film discourse.

Keywords: *pragmatics, indirect speech acts, inference, implicature, movie dialogue, The Maze Runner*

INTRODUCTION

Human communication often goes beyond literal meaning. Speakers often express themselves in ways that do not convey their meaning directly in language. Therefore, listeners need to have contextual understanding and pragmatic competence in order to understand what the speaker means correctly. This phenomenon is especially visible in indirect responses. Even though the structure does not always match the previous question, this kind of response still carries an understandable meaning. In such situations, the literal form of the utterance alone is not enough, so the listener must rely on context, past knowledge, and reasoning to interpret the true meaning. Because meaning is not always conveyed directly through words, understanding indirect responses is very dependent on the listener's ability to capture the implied information behind the utterance.

The speech act theory (Searle, 1979) provides an important theoretical foundation to explain how language performs actions. According to Searle, the force of an utterance may be different from what is suggested by its form. In indirect speech acts, speakers perform one speech act using another type of utterance, such as reassuring people without answering questions directly. Therefore, interpreting utterances cannot be done solely based on the form of

language but must involve understanding the intentions of speakers along with contextual elements. This theory explains why indirect answers require audiences to draw inference beyond their form especially in situations where emotional conflict exists or complete information is unavailable and cannot be provided directly because of social restriction. Listeners abilities to make inferences are also emphasized in theories and research on pragmatics because indirect language use is driven by communicative functions specific to contexts.

With this approach, the cooperative principle of Grice (1975) explains why a listener infers a hidden meaning from a conversational maxim being violated. If a reply does not provide a direct answer to the posed question, a listener makes an assumption about a continuing cooperativeness of the interlocutor and draws some implications for ensuring the relevance. Modern cognitive and pragmatic studies also suggest that listeners engage in systematic inference (Bendtz et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2025). Essentially, they evaluate the meaning literally, and only then, if it does not meet the expectations of the context, infer the meaning of the speaker. The mentioned facts suggest that understanding indirect replies relies mainly on rational mechanisms of inference.

Film dialogue is a rich source for studying these inferential mechanisms. Film narratives often rely on hidden information, emotional tension, and hierarchical power structures, with indirect reactions being a strategic narrative device. In *The Maze Runner* (Ball, 2014), characters often avoid direct explanations, especially when faced with fear, danger, or power. As a result, characters and the audience must be able to understand incomplete or evasive answers. These models show how deception functions not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a narrative device that shapes audience interpretations and character dynamics, making film an appropriate context for examining how audiences infer meaning from indirect responses.

Most previous research has examined indirect speech acts in films (Rahayu et al., 2024; Nisa and Naomisa, 2025). However, most of this research focuses primarily on categorizing speech acts rather than examining how listeners infer meaning from indirect responses. In this context, the cognitive processes that create value in response to non-explicit answers, especially in narrative context involving uncertainty and information hiding, have been widely researched. Given this research gap, this study aims to analyze the way film characters and film audiences interpret indirect answers in the context of *The Maze Runner*. To guide this investigation, this research addresses the following question: How do listeners infer meaning from indirect responses in film dialogue?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysis of indirect responses forms a part of pragmatics, which involves the study of how meaning is created apart from the conventional meaning of an utterance in linguistics. The speaker uses implicit language in most instances, requiring the listener to draw conclusions based on context and inference in the communication process. This is especially clear in the context of films, whereby dialogue not only communicates meaning linguistically but also provides information about relationships and intentions of characters. The use of indirect responses as a means of communication serves to regulate emotions, control information, support hierarchies, and maintain suspense in the narrative. In order to analyze meanings generated from indirect responses, the current paper makes use of theories of indirect speech by Searle, Gricean theories of cooperation and implicature, among others.

Speech Act Theory and Indirectness

Searle (1979) argues that understanding language requires identifying the illocutionary forces behind utterances, because meaning is associated with the actions performed, not with the surface form. Indirect speech acts occur when what is said literally does not directly indicate the speaker's true intentions. In other words, there are differences in terms of the form of speech that is visible on the surface and the actual purpose of communication, so this is an important basis for understanding how meaning is not directly understood in interaction. According to Searle (1979), an utterance can convey certain intentions in an indirect way, so the listener needs to understand the true meaning not only of the words used, but also of the context of the situation in which the utterance is delivered. This theory states that indirect speech acts usually occur when there is emotion and sensitivity involved. In emotional or sensitive communication context situations, people tend to choose to use indirect forms of communication to achieve their communication goals without having to say anything directly. Thus, this theory is important to explain how meaning can be obtained from utterances that do not completely follow the syntactic structure of sentences.

Gricean Implicature and Inferential Meaning

According to Grice (1975), the meaning of communication in conversation arises based on the principle of cooperation in accordance with conversational maxims. When there is a violation of one of the conversational maxims by the speaker, the listener cannot interpret the message in a literal sense and conversely, the listener will infer the speaker's intended meaning. Indirect responses do not always follow the question, so the listener must infer the speaker's meaning. Therefore, the listener attempts to find an implication that connects the message with the purpose of the conversation. This involves interpreting the meaning of the speaker's words based on the context. In films and daily conversations, indirect communication can be used to control emotional reactions, avoid conflicts, and protect confidential information. Hence, inference-making skills are vital in understanding indirect replies.

Cognitive Processing of Indirect Replies

Neurocognitive studies (Bendtz et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2025) show that understanding indirect replies requires deeper interpretive processes than direct responses. The listener not only accepts the literal meaning, but also assesses whether there is any inconsistency, then interprets the actual meaning to fit the context of the conversation. Research conducted by Kristoffer Bendtz and colleagues shows that comprehension develops gradually, starting with an assessment of whether the literal meaning fits the conversational context. In cases where literal understanding does not work for a person, he or she will initiate the second stage of interpretation, which involves inferring implied meaning based on the context and assumptions made by the interlocutor. Likewise, the results obtained in research conducted by Wei Feng show that indirect answers can trigger more mental activity in the addressee because they involve the integration of the form of language used with the expectations related to the situation.

Indirect Communication in Film

Research on cinematic discourse (Rahayu et al., 2024; Nisa and Naomisa, 2025) shows that indirect speech functions narratively to build tension, manage hierarchies, and hide information. However, detailed attention to listeners' inferential mechanisms is limited, and this is a contribution of the present study. Previous analyses of films such as *Heidi*, *Aquaman* and *The Lost Kingdom*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Love, Simon* show that indirect responses often emerge in situations shaped by fear, uncertainty, or shifting power relations. These studies show that indirectness plays an important role in establishing story pacing and developing character by limiting the information conveyed directly. However, that research has not discussed much about how character or audiences interpret indirect replies through understanding context. Therefore, this research specifically highlights inferential processes in situations full of tension and strategic ambiguity in *The Maze Runner*, where indirect responses are often key in shaping character understanding as well as the way the audience interprets the story.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive method, which is suitable for analyzing how meaning can be derived from context. It is suitable since qualitative research allows the investigation of speech as it occurs in natural narratives, especially those that occur in emotionally charged and knowledge-deficient contexts as demonstrated in *The Maze Runner* (Ball, 2014). Qualitative research is appropriate because interpreting indirect responses does not only involve linguistic form but also contextual features that cannot be fully grasped using quantitative techniques.

The data consists of four samples of *The Maze Runner* dialogue (Ball, 2014), and the answers do not necessarily directly answer the previous questions. Data collection requires viewing the film several times and analyzing the official screenplay to get the right answers. The following data are selected when the answer is not directly derived from the words in the question, when the understanding relies on inference in relation to the context, and when the exchange of information contributes to emotional regulation, power relations, suspense, or plot development. This needs to be done to ensure the relevance of the data to the topic being discussed, namely understanding how inferential meaning is constructed in conversation.

The methodological foundation involves many theories. The core idea is connected to the idea of indirect speech acts proposed by Searle (1979), as it allows the distinction between literal words and the actual intentions of the communicator. Another relevant theory is Grice's (1975) cooperative principle which can help understand whether conversational maxims are deviant or not, and whether responses can be called irrelevant or incomplete. Recent studies related to pragmatic inference analysis (Bendtz et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2025) can provide information on the interpretation of literal statements and the identification of pragmatically inappropriate parts, while the overall process

includes the reconstruction of the intended meaning based on contextual data. In each case analyzed here, there are certain steps to be taken to understand an indirect statement, including recognition of its literal meaning, determination of its illocutionary function, identification of maxim violations, reconstruction of the intended meaning based on contextual data, and assessment of the indirect response in the context of the entire narrative. Based on these findings, this research proves that indirectness functions as a communication technique that is widely used in suspense or survival films.

DISCUSSION

In the four scenes being discussed, the application of indirectness in the film *The Maze Runner* becomes a conscious pragmatic device that functions as a mechanism for creating communication procedures, managing emotions, managing knowledge, and tension in the story. Indirect replies are not failures of communication but rather conscious actions that lead to the meaning-making process. In other words, those who take part in any dialogue are meant to draw conclusions from what is said in it. In this research, we highlight four main pragmatic functions of indirect speech acts followed by observer inference strategies.

Emotional Regulation



No	Data	Indirect Response Strategy	Inferred Meaning
1	Duration: 0:04:18 – 0:04:32 Thomas: “I, uh, I can’t remember anything?” Alby: “It’s okay. Hey, relax. It’s normal. It happens to us all.”	Emotional Regulation	The listener infers that the situation is distressing, information is withheld, and emotional stability is prioritized over explanation.

In this case, the concept of relevance is completely ignored. Thomas asks several causal questions regarding forgetfulness and hopes for adequate and clear answers to these questions. However, Alby did not provide a causal or factual response. He answered positively to Thomas' statement but emphasized that the problem was quite normal because everyone here felt the same way. This difference indicates a clash between the meaning of the question itself and the form of response to it, thus indicating that the main purpose of communication is to persuade. Alby uses emotional language which helps reduce stress and avoid further damage to the emotional state. Thus, it can be assumed that this is a deliberate manipulation of language to address emotions rather than share knowledge.

Listener infer:

- 1) The situation is disorienting and potentially distressing.
- 2) Full information is either unavailable or intentionally withheld.
- 3) Emotional stabilization is prioritized over explanation.
- 4) The response functions as an affective strategy rather than an informative one.

Such an effect arises because the literal meaning of the answer contradicts communication expectations, thereby encouraging the listener to search for the hidden meaning behind it. Throughout dialogue, messages should not be communicated directly. Rather, meaning is inferred based on the circumstances in which communication occurs and the speaker's goals (Azhari et al., 2025). In a glade scenario, the newcomer will feel confused, scared, and mentally handicapped due to his or her memory problems. Providing a complete explanation of the situation will only increase panic and negative attitudes. Therefore, Alby's answer functions as a pragmatic response strategy in which emotional stability is more important than factual correctness. This approach is in accordance with Searle's understanding of indirect speech acts, which distinguishes between intent and literal forms of speech.

Control of Knowledge and Authority



No	Data	Indirect Response Strategy	Inferred Meaning
2	Duration: 0:04:43 – 0:04:49 Thomas: “ <i>What is this place?</i> ” Alby: “ <i>Let me show you.</i> ”	Control of Knowledge & Authority	The listener infers that knowledge is controlled, must be experienced, and the speaker holds authority

Information exchange reflects the ability of indirect communication to organize knowledge and establish authority in the social structure of the class. Thomas asked about the situation directly and hoped to get an explanation. However, Alby rejects direct explanation, instead directing his discussion into understanding experience. As a consequence, communication becomes pragmatic, when responses no longer correspond to information demands, and the learning process shifts from verbal description to observation.

The answer given by the author does not mean disruption of the communication process. However, on the contrary, the communication process was deliberately reorganized. Alby refused to provide any explanation and stated that a person can control the time and method of access to information. These indirect actions reveal that information within the Glade is distributed in certain patterns determined by those of higher status. As a result, the language used in the classroom creates and maintains a hierarchical system.

Listeners infer:

- 1) Information is controlled by experienced members of the group.
- 2) Understanding must be gained through observation or participation.
- 3) The speaker holds a higher position within the social hierarchy.
- 4) The delay in explanation reflects a system of structured initiation.

According to the pragmatic approach, this is in accordance with Searle's idea of indirect speech acts, because responses, not answers, are commands that will help Thomas learn through experience. From a Gricean perspective, a lack of directness leads the recipient to assume that the speaker wants to cooperate and that the speaker follows the

constraints of the context such as hierarchy. The narrative effect here is a slow reveal, making it easier for the characters and the audience to gain knowledge from Thomas' point of view.

Management of Fear and Narrative Suspense



No	Data	Indirect Response Strategy	Inferred Meaning
3	Duration: 0:31:01 – 0:31:05 Thomas: “What happens if they don’t make it?” Newt: “They’re gonna make it.”	Management of Fear & Suspense	The listener infers that the real outcome is dangerous, but the speaker avoids stating it to reduce fear.

This dialogue violates the quantity rule because Thomas wants an explanation of the likely outcome if the runner does not return home and asks if there is a problem. However, Newt doesn't give a direct answer, giving Thomas a short answer that isn't very informative. Thus, there is a mismatch between the expected reaction and the actual reaction, which implies that the purpose of communication is to persuade someone.

The exchange violates the quantity principle. Thomas asked for an explanation of the consequences if the runner did not return, and he wondered what possible bad consequences could arise. However, Newt avoids answering questions directly but gives short answers that lack relevant details. This results in a gap between the expected answer and the actual answer, implying that the goal of communication is to persuade, not to inform.

Listener infer:

- 1) The actual outcome is dangerous or fatal.
- 2) The speaker avoids stating the truth to reduce fear.
- 3) Emotional comfort is prioritized over factual disclosure.
- 4) Meaning is constructed through what is left unsaid.

In terms of pragmatics, the excerpt is congruent with the indirect speech act idea by Searle, which sees the answer as a directive for Thomas, leading him to learn through experience. In the context of the Gricean theory, the lack of directness implies cooperation, and hence the listener understands that the speaker is subject to certain contextual factors, such as power and hierarchy. From the point of view of narration, this technique allows for slow disclosure, whereby the audience gradually gains insight into the perspective of Thomas.

Prioritization Over Explanation



No	Data	Indirect Response Strategy	Inferred Meaning
4	Duration: 0:07:56 – 0:08:00 Thomas: “<i>Why not?</i>” Chuck: “<i>I don’t know. I just know what I’m told.</i>”	Prioritization over Explanation	The listener infers that knowledge is limited, rules dominate, and authority overrides explanation.

The answer takes the focus away from logic and places it on agreement. This shows that not all forest regulations are understood, but these regulations are obeyed because they are very important for the continuation of life. This form of deception is not simply the result of ignorance but is a practical approach to living in a world of little knowledge. Through this approach, the speaker emphasizes the importance of following the explanation.

These reactions suggest that, in cases of information scarcity, lying constitutes an epistemic limitation and highlights the supremacy of rules over explanations. Thomas asks questions that require logic and causation to be justified by the reasons behind prohibiting certain actions. Instead, Chuck doesn't offer any explanation but instead emphasizes ignorance and the importance of following the orders of authorities. This creates a gap between the expected response and the actual response, thus proving that an explanation may not always be necessary in this scenario.

Listener infer:

- 1) Knowledge is limited and unevenly distributed.
- 2) Rules are followed even without full understanding.
- 3) Authority structures override individual inquiry.
- 4) Survival depends on adherence rather than explanation.

From a pragmatic point of view, this finding is in line with the principle put forward by Grice that answers may appear irrelevant, but are relevant in relation to the context in which they are made. The speaker provides the most appropriate answer, given the limited information. At the same time, these statements relate to the theories proposed by Searle, in the sense that indirect speech acts not only signal a lack of knowledge, but also serve to confirm social conventions.

Overall Interpretation Process

In the process of interpreting indirect answers, the traditional strategy followed by listeners involves a number of steps in the inference process. In the first step, a literal inference is carried out as to whether the form and meaning of the answer given is in accordance with the question asked. If the answer does not provide the desired information, then there is a pragmatic mismatch between the question and the answer.

Then, it must be understood from an analytical perspective. Listeners can use various elements such as affect, the relationship between interlocutors, the context of speech acts, background information, and the formation of discourse to understand the speaker's true intentions. Thus, context provides the primary basis for analyzing responses that do not directly answer the question asked by the speaker. Finally, speech acts are understood in the context of their social structure and affective setting. In Glade, the analysis of speech acts becomes highly dependent on the positions, roles, power relations, and anxieties involved.

Alternatively, it can be understood not as a failure of communication but as a tactic shaped by dynamics of power, emotion, and survival. This provides the basis for dealing with uncertainty, resolving relational disputes, and maintaining dominance in dangerous environments. On the other hand, the audience is encouraged to understand the story through inference, thereby becoming part of the story and enhancing the depiction of mystery and danger in the film.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

So, it can be seen that the use of indirect speech in *The Maze Runner* occurs in a methodical form, as a conscious strategy, not randomly. This study reveals that indirect communication serves as an important method in the survival setting of *The Maze Runner*, through which characters are able to control their influence, control information exchange, maintain hierarchy, and maintain tension. By using context clues and identifying pragmatically contradictory statements, listeners are able to understand the meaning of what the speaker wants to convey in a logical manner. Thus, indirect communication acts as a method for Glade members to maintain stability, control fear, and regulate the flow of information, especially when there is uncertainty and limited knowledge. However, the burden of interpretation for the listener is also in accordance with Thomas' epistemology which makes the meaning of the film dependent on interpretation.

Based on these findings, future studies could explore differences in the use of indirectness in various genres of films and consider the effect of emotions on pragmatic comprehension. Another line of inquiry might involve indirectness in organizational contexts where social dynamics play a role in influencing communication. A combination of sociolinguistic and cognitive psychological perspectives is expected to shed more light on how people comprehend indirect speech acts. In addition, the historical study of indirect communication might benefit from expanding the corpus to cover wider collections of texts, including film series and published works.

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