

Essay

“*Saan ka na? Papunta na.*”: The Indirectness of Filipino Communication

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Saan ka na? Papunta na.

Anong ulam? Masarap.

Kain tayo? Busog pa ako.

Anong oras na? Maaga pa.

Tara, gala? Marami pa akong kailangang gawin eh.

Saan tayo kakain? Kahit saan.

This is how Filipinos usually reply to simple questions. Did you notice anything? *Ang labo nating mga Pilipino!*

We answer a “where” question—like *Saan ka na?*—not with a place, but with a vague remark. We answer a question that clearly asks for what we’re about to eat with whether the food is delicious or not. We unnecessarily answer a question that only requires a simple “yes” or a “no” reply—like *Kain tayo?*—with something beyond what is asked.

After discovering this phenomenon, I started to intently observe how vaguely I talk to other people. I caught myself on the act when I answered my mom’s question “*Alis ka na?*” with “*Kain muna ako.*” Before ending our exchange, I wondered why I replied so vaguely. And so I decided to repeat and revise my answer: “*Hindi pa. Kakain muna ako.*” I then went out of the room and into the world full of conversations yet to be made with the mind of a linguistics student, challenging myself to answer more clearly and still failing. It is either the circumstances do not permit me to do so, or it just simply does not feel right nor natural. Thinking about each instance I fell victim to this habit, I realized that I almost always do not mean for my answers to miss the mark. In fact, my brain deems it perfectly rational and logical to reply that way.

So *bakit ganun?* Well, *ganun talaga.* Kidding aside, I will now face the question at hand: *bakit ang labo nating sumagot?* In more formal words, why does Filipino communication tend to be indirect?

Linguists will say that this is a matter of pragmatics, which is the study of how context contributes to meaning. In other words, meaning that is being conveyed can go beyond the sentence spoken because of context. Under pragmatics, there is such a thing

as a speech act. A speech act is the type of “action” done by a speaker with a certain utterance—like requesting, commanding, informing, and questioning (Yule, 2010). For example, “Give me the plate!” is a command. “Can you lift a chicken?” is a question. But what about “Can you pass me that plate of chicken wings?” Yes, this statement is in the form of a question; but when you hear this, you do not say “Yes, I definitely can.” Rather, you will give the speaker the said plate of chicken wings. This “question” turns out to be a command.

The seemingly confusing line earlier is an example of an indirect speech act, which is defined to be an utterance in which one speech act is performed indirectly by performing another. In the case of the plate of chicken wings, the statement intends to act out a command but is spoken as a question. In the Filipino context, “Saan ka na?” without context sounds like an inquiry. However, if this is asked to you by a peer while you are running late for your meet-up, then the question might probably carry a different meaning such as “*Dalian mo,*” a command. Feeling the sense of urgency, you then respond with “*Papunta na.*” to offer some relief to your friend and to portray yourself to be more thoughtful and responsible than you actually are. As you can tell from this, the reply actually holds some reason.

This Filipino practice of indirect communication can be owed to our desire to be polite. According to Levinson (1987, as cited in Boonkongaen, 2013), politeness is seen as conflict avoidance. This definition assumes that each of us has a “face” or a public self-image (Boonkongaen, 2013; Yule, 2010). If you say something that threatens another person’s face (i.e., “*Dalian mo.*”), then what you performed is a face-threatening act. If you say something that minimizes the threat to another person’s face, then you just carried out a face-saving act. You might have exhibited this when you answered “*Kain tayo?*” with “*Busog pa ako eh.*” because you did not really feel like spending time with the person you were talking to. Through an indirect speech act, you were able to lighten the burden of rejection and save the other person from embarrassment.

But what about the times where the situation calls for no risk of incriminating oneself nor offending someone? Why did I answer “*Alis ka na?*” with just “*Kakain pa ako?*” Why do we sometimes respond to “*Anong ulam?*” with only “*Masarap?*”? What do the speakers or the listeners benefit from not replying straightforwardly? As I reflect upon my own speech actions, I observed that indirect yet detailed answers are a result of my tendency to short-circuit what I want to say. Here, short-circuit does not equate to straightforwardness. On the contrary, I unconsciously aim to skip over potential follow-up questions by just glossing over any necessary explanations in my response. Going back to my conversation with my mother, I intended to remove her need to follow up “*Alis ka na?*” with “*Bakit hindi pa?*” by saying “*Kakain pa ako.*” instead of the too-simple “*Hindi pa.*” In lieu of responding “*Anong ulam?*” with what we are going to eat, we just simply say “*Masarap.*” since our brain short-circuits to the assumption that what really matters here is whether eating will be enjoyable or not.

More than just pondering over the reason behind this habit, I was also amazed at how these roundabout replies come so naturally to me and even the people around me. Simply accepting the answers, the listeners also do not often complain about the speakers’ indirectness. A study by Munalim et al. (2022) explores this more in the context

of Filipino faculty meetings. This work confirms that native Filipino speakers in the Philippines do belong to a high-context communication style, with which people are often expected to read between the lines and capture more meaning through surrounding context. (In informal wording, I guess we were just built to be indirect, carrying subtleties everywhere we go.) This style is said to be inherently marked with digression, indirectness and circumlocution which occur in any discussion. This is why the questioning party can usually just have a face-saving “let it go” attitude to indirect answers—which it already considers to be a legitimate response—and why my mother never questions my lack of straightforwardness and excess of descriptive ability.

However, in institutional settings like a school, the intention behind roundabout answers may not be to avoid offending another, but something else: to dishonestly attempt to gain approval by reflecting a deceptive verbal description of reality (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, as cited in Munalim et al., 2022). This reminds me of my Shark Tank-like class in technopreneurship, where our professor would usually scold students whenever they try to answer his difficult questions with totally unrelated answers to make up for what they do not know and what they have not done:

Professor: *Kaya ba ng app ninyo mag-detect ng red tides?*

Student: *Kaya po ng app namin i-map 'yung mga shorelines sa Luzon.*

Professor: No, that's not what I'm asking.

We have seen that there are different intentions behind one's imprecision: it may be due to being polite, short-circuiting, deceiving for approval, or maybe even something else. Indirectness is truly a nuanced aspect of Filipino communication. It is not bad, but it can be—just like how replying to “*Saan tayo kakain?*” with “*Kahit saan.*” can be cute at first, but annoying when everyone is hungry for clarity.

References

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