

Distancing: Softening what you say

from *English Practical Usage*, by Michael Swan (with a few changes)

161. distancing

Certain structures can be used to make a speaker's requests, questions or statements seem less direct, more 'distant' from reality—and therefore more polite and pleasant. (But these structures are useless if the tone of voice isn't pleasant.)

1. requests and statements as yes/no questions

We usually make requests less direct by putting them in the form of yes/no questions. This suggests that the hearer can choose whether to agree or not.

Could you tell me the time, please? (much more polite than *Please tell me the time.*)

Expressions of opinion can also be made less direct by turning them into questions. Compare:

It would be better to paint it green. (direct expression of opinion)

Wouldn't it be better to paint it green? (persuasive question - less direct)

Would it be better to paint it green? (open question - very indirect)

2. distancing verb forms

We can make requests (and also questions, suggestions and statements) even less direct (and so more polite) by using verb forms that suggest 'distance' from the immediate present reality. Past tenses are often used to do this.

*How much **did** you want to spend, sir?*

(meaning 'How much do you want to spend?')

*How many days **did** you **intend** to stay?*

(meaning '...do you intend...')

*I **wondered** if you **were** going to be free this evening.*

Progressive forms can be used in the same way. They sound more pleasant and less definite than simple forms, because they suggest something temporary and incomplete.

*I'm **hoping** you can lend me £10.* (less definite than *I hope...*)

*What time are you **planning** to arrive?* (more attention to the speaker than *Please let us know what time you **plan** to arrive.*)

*I'm **looking** forward to seeing you again.* (more pleasant than *I **look** forward...*)

*I'm afraid we must **be going**.*

Past progressives give two levels of distancing.

*Good morning. I **was wondering** if you had two single rooms.*

***Were** you **looking** for anything special? (in a shop)*

*I **was thinking**—what about borrowing Jake's car?*

Another way to distance something is to displace it into the future. *Will need/have to* can be used to soften instructions and orders.

*I'm afraid you'**ll need** to fill in this form.*

*I'**ll have to** ask you to wait a minute.*

And *will* is sometimes used to say how much money is owed.

*That **will** be £1.65, please.*

Future progressive verbs are often used to inquire politely about people's plans.

*Will you **be going** away at the weekend?*

3. *would*, *could* and *might*

The modal verbs *would*, *could* and *might* also make questions, requests and suggestions less direct.

*I thought it **would** be nice to have a picnic.*

*Hi! I thought I'**d** come over and introduce myself. My name's Andy.*

***Could** you give me a hand?*

***Could** I ask you to translate this for me?*

*We **could** ask Peter to help us.*

*I was wondering if you **might** be interested in a game of tennis.*

*'I came in and ordered some shoes from you.' 'Oh yes, sir. When **would** that have been, exactly?'*

Would is very often used to form requests and offers with verbs like *like* and *prefer*.

*What **would** you **like** to drink?*

Note the common use of *would* before verbs of saying and thinking, to make a statement sound less definite.

*I **would say** we'd do better to catch the earlier train.*

*This is what I **would call** annoying*

*I **would think** we might stop for lunch soon.*

*I'm surprised you didn't like the film. I **would have thought** it was just your kind of thing.*

4. conditional and negative expressions

Another way of distancing suggestions from reality is to make them conditional or negative.

*It would be better **if** we **turned** it the other way up.*

*What **if** we **stayed** at home for a change?*

***Suppose** I gave Alice a call?*

***If** you **would come** this way. . .*

*I wonder **if** you **could** lend me \$5?*

*I **don't suppose** you want to buy a car, do you?*

*You **wouldn't like** to come out with us, by any chance?*

5. softening expressions, etc.

A further form of distancing is the use of softening expressions like *kind of*, *sort of*, etc. And yet another is to talk about planning or beginning things instead of about actually doing them. The following sentence (which could easily be heard at an English party) means 'I want to go', but distances the message in six different ways.

I'd like to sort of start thinking about going.

6. one

In middle- and upper-class British and American speech, *one* is sometimes used instead of *I* or *we*. This makes a statement sound less personally assertive.

*'Hello, Charles. How's It going?' 'Oh, **one** can't complain.'*