

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

“I Hear the Cry, but I Do Not See the Tears”: Indirectness in Bribery Negotiations

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Received: 17 July 2024 | Revised: 29 June 2025 | Published: 15 August 2025

Reviewing Editor: Dr. Theophilus Adedokun, Durban University of Technology

Abstract

There is a relationship between crime and language, particularly crimes such as bribery, which are perpetuated through the use of language. These language-based crimes are often articulated indirectly to afford the interlocutor's denial should such a need arise. This paper aims to comprehend the role played by language in bribery negotiations by exploring the actual utterances used by interlocutors involved in bribery negotiations and the linguistic features portrayed in these utterances. Informed by interview data (obtained from motorists) interpreted through the pragmatic act and speech act theories, the study reveals several indirect utterances such as 'I hear you cry but I do not see your tears', 'Put down,' 'Do a drink,' 'Ostrich feathers are the ones that can work in this situation,' 'make a strong tea...' which are characterised by declarative and imperative statements, semantic shift and informal expressions. Indirect speech acts play a significant role as a resource used to veil unethical practices from being revealed in the courts of law. Therefore, it is recommended that the expertise of language specialists should be used in the courts of law to interpret language-related crimes such as bribery.

Keywords: bribery; language; linguistic features; pragmatic act; indirect speech act

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in certain crimes. Some of these crimes that are perpetuated through language include offering bribes, threatening, soliciting an illegal act, defamation, and conspiracy (Tiersma and Solan, 2012). With other forms of crime, such as rape, murder, beating, and theft, the criminal physically harms the victim. However, crimes that are linguistically oriented have no physical harm but are all about illegal speech acts (Shuy, 1993). These language crimes share one common attribute: they are mainly articulated through indirect speech acts. In particular, bribery is one form of language crime that commonly uses indirect speech acts. For instance, one of the slang words in Mexico and Spain for a bribe is *la mordida* (the bite). In Germany, bribes are often called *schmiergeld* (the grease on the meal). Drinks often become part of the vocabulary used; for example, in China, they use the phrase *chaqian* (a cup of tea) or *gaseoso*, meaning a soft drink in Portugal and Mozambique (Cohen, 2023). Cohen further alludes to the fact that companies that make huge amounts of money through bribes resort to courtesy bribery terms such as “chocolate” and “newspapers.” Instead of addressing the negotiation directly and calling it what it is, interlocutors find different terms and expressions that help them hedge the direct speech. Proverbs and idioms, which are clear examples of indirectness, have been formulated about bribery in some languages. Some of these idiomatic expressions include ‘You scratch my back, and I will scratch yours,’ ‘Showing one’s face, waiting patiently,’ ‘Don’t come on foot, come with your hands/use your hands,’ ‘feed one another,’ to indirectly address bribery (Assefa, 2023). These expressions seem to encourage and condone bribery as a normal practice in which interlocutors can engage.

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Language-based crimes such as bribery are often articulated indirectly because they are criminal acts, and stating such acts indirectly assists culprits in avoiding prosecution. It has to be made clear, though, that not all forms of bribery are illegal (Dumbili and Sofadekan, 2016), e.g., a boy promising to share sweets with his brother on condition that they are willing to do a favour in return. This kind of bribery is usually direct and does not have a deeper-lying meaning attached to the string of words used. Indirect bribery negotiation can reasonably be denied; it allows the corrupt person to accept the bribe while the law-abiding one would not have adequate evidence to take further legal measures against the offeror (Shuy, 2013). Pinker *et al.* (2008) provide a scenario of bribing a police officer, of whom one is uncertain if they are honest or corrupt. A veiled bribery language, in this instance, would benefit the offeror in that if the officer were corrupt, they would accept the bribe, and no traffic ticket would be issued. However, if the officer were honest, an indirect bribe would hinder the officer from arresting the driver or escalating the matter to court, as the bribery would not be so clearly articulated that the law-abiding officer would indisputably prove that a crime has been committed. Irrespective of the kind of police officer (corrupt or honest) the motorist meets, indirect bribery utterance acts as a protective device for the offeror. Another reason for interlocutors to opt for indirect speech acts is politeness, considering the face of the listener, their self-esteem, and public image (Fathi, 2024). Based on relational work theory, people not only use language to convey information, but they also use it to negotiate relationships with others, hence the need to save one's face in communication (Locher, 2004). A direct proposal may potentially forfeit the aspect of maintaining and negotiating relationships. Indigenous languages in the African context are referred to as "reader or hearer-responsible languages" because of the enormous responsibility they place on hearers and readers for the utterance to be well understood. The listener is expected to infer meaning from context as opposed to "speaker-responsible" languages, where the speaker is expected to provide explicit information. The reliance is heavily on shared cultural context, which the hearer/reader must be conversant with to interpret utterances correctly (Makalela, 2018: 823). Meanings are consciously expressed indirectly, and it is the responsibility of the readers and hearers to find the implicature behind the uttered string of words.

Research on bribery from a linguistic perspective seems neglected despite the critical role played by language when requesting, offering, and accepting bribery. Few scholars, such as Al-Gburi (2019), Igaab and Al-Gburi (2021), Kamtchueng (2015), Pinker *et al.* (2008), Tiersma and Solan (2012), and Waskita (2014), report on how language works in such cases. For example, Tiersma and Solan (2012), on the one hand, surveyed American jurisdictions to find common characteristics found in crimes that are perpetrated through language; these are crimes such as solicitation, conspiracy, perjury, threatening, and bribery. They found that these crimes share common characteristics; they involve different speech acts ranging from promises to orders, and they are communicated through indirect speech. Waskita (2014), Igaab and Al-gburi (2021), and Kamtchueng (2015), on the other hand, studied linguistic expressions and codes that interlocutors use, their characteristics as well as different languages that are commonly used to negotiate bribes. Waskita (2014) found that the perpetrators use some particular codes to communicate, while Igaab and Al-buried (2021) found that bribery is expressed by different linguistic structures, which are often indirect. Kamtchueng (2025) also found that bribe offerors use incomprehensible metaphors that can only be understood by people who are familiar with them. Pinker *et al.* (2008) studied the rationale behind the use of indirect language during bribery negotiations and found that this is done to save the interlocutor's face and to prevent being accused of committing a crime. Furthermore, a few studies have studied court cases that dealt with bribery (Assefa, 2023; Momeni, 2011). While Assefa (2023) identified several linguistic features such as verb tense usage, social introductions, and pronoun usage, which help in the linguistic interpretation of the bribery case, Momeni (2011) found that bribery has five stages when it has occurred successfully: problem, illegal proposal, perlocutionary act, completion, and extension. Scholars have said very little about how bribery language works in the Southern African contexts where bribery seems rampant and is nearly becoming a norm despite it being declared illegal (Department's Office of Investment Affairs, 2023). This inadequate documentation leads to limited knowledge and understanding of the role that language plays in bribery negotiations. This paper aims to explore the use of language in bribery negotiations. The paper, therefore, seeks answers to the following research questions:

- i. What linguistic utterances are used by interlocutors in the bribery negotiations?
- ii. What linguistic features characterise these utterances?

This section has discussed different forms of language crimes and bribery as one form of crime. It has further dealt with the rationale for the indirect use of language during bribery negotiations. Section 2 discusses the bribery concept at length, providing the context for the paper and dealing with the speech acts, relational work, and

pragmatic act theories as theoretical frameworks that inform this paper. Section 3 discusses the focus group interviews and other methodological concepts, whereas Section 4 presents the findings and discussion on bribery utterances interlocutors use and their linguistic features. Section 5 provides conclusions drawn from the findings.

Literature Review

Bribery that constitutes a legal trespass is an act of giving an official person money or a valuable item with the intention of convincing them to act in a particular way in their official capacity. Shuy (2013) defines bribery as a corrupt payment and receipt or solicitation of a private favour for official action and is considered a criminal offense in most jurisdictions. It is regarded as a social disease that violates social values and negatively impacts the public welfare and public administration of a state (Igaab and Algburi, 2021). For these bribery speech acts not to misfire, it is important that the felicity conditions are fulfilled by the interlocutors: the person accepting bribery must be a public officer with specific powers or authority, and the act to be done should be within their capacity. Both parties must be cognisant of the illegal act of bribery they are indulging in, yet the intention is to complete the deal to the end (Austin, 1962).

This paper is informed by the Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT) proposed by Mey (2001) and the Speech Act Theory (SAT) by Searle (1979). PAT takes a socio-cultural approach to language. According to Mey (2001), the theory puts emphasis on the environment surrounding the utterances that are produced and understood and how such an environment has the capacity to influence what can be said and what cannot be said, as well as the meaning ascribed to such utterances. In other words, the context controls the content; word meaning is determined by the situation in which it is uttered. Kecskes (2010) asserts that the setting or context and extra-linguistic elements (not words), such as gestures and intonation, define pragmatic acts. The theory posits that, to a certain extent, the correct interpretation of any message depends on the correct understanding of the words used; however, comprehension of these words, their literal meaning, their construction in a sentence, and their pronunciation cannot convey the complete message the speaker wants to convey. The environment in which these words are used becomes the main interpreter of the intended message. Kecskes (2010) further elaborates that understanding a message according to this theory is more than a verbal matter. Thus, speech acts have to be interpreted within the environment in which they are used.

The unit of analysis for PAT is a pragmeme, which Mey (2010: 2884) defines as “general situational prototype [pragmatic] acts” that can be executed in a particular situation or cluster of situations. Pragmemes are realised through ‘Practs’, which Mey (2001) defines as specific recognitions of a pragmeme or particular instantiations of a pragmeme. In a nutshell, Mey (2001) advocates for an outside-in approach that focuses on the context or environment in which an utterance is produced and considers it a predetermining factor of what can and cannot be said, that is, instead of interpreting an utterance on the basis of the words used and their meaning, the environment or situation in which these words are used should be invoked to attain the complete meaning of the utterance (Mey, 2006). In the current paper, PAT is used to describe bribe offerors’ utterances. The theory helps determine the pragmemes that surface as interlocutors negotiate bribery. It is also used to explain the participants’ adherence to the situational context, which limits what can and cannot be said. The environment in which bribery utterances are articulated is important for the accurate interpretation of such utterances, hence the relevance of this theory as it places emphasis on the significance of situational context as a meaning determinant.

The Speech Act Theory (SAT) is also a relevant theory to inform the findings of this study. The indirect nature of bribery negotiations necessitates the depiction of the speech act theory proposed by Searle (1979). The theory is grounded on two key components: locutionary act, which refers to the literal meaning of an utterance, and illocutionary act, which refers to the intended meaning or function of an utterance. An indirect speech act falls within an illocutionary act; it has the locutionary meaning communicated through the uttered string of words and the illocutionary meaning, which is the actual meaning the speaker intends to convey. As Searle (1979) correctly puts it, one speech act is performed indirectly by performing another. These speech acts fall under the five main types of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Souri and Merç, 2020). As with the pragmatic act theory, context (setting, participants, social norms, and background information) plays a crucial role in interpreting indirect speech acts. Based on this theory, speech acts are considered direct (locutionary) when the form of utterance directly and bluntly communicates what the speaker intends to convey. However, they become indirect (illocutionary) when there is a difference between what is literally uttered and what is implied (Al-gburi, 2019). Searle (1979) asserts that with indirect speech acts, the hearer must dig deep into what the speaker intends to communicate, as the speaker usually states way more than they are literally saying. Based

on the shared background and context, the hearer is expected to comprehend the implied meaning of utterances. These indirect speech acts are expressed through communicative strategies such as metaphors, innuendoes, euphemisms, proverbs, circumlocution, and evasion (Ad-Darraj *et al.*, 2012). The choice of this theory is based on the fact that indirect speech acts are a common phenomenon among interlocutors. People do not explicitly blurt out what they mean in their utterances, but often insinuate their intent indirectly. Importantly, this veiled communication is particularly common in contexts where the key discussion involves threats, sexual harassment, polite requests, and bribery prosecution (Pinker *et al.*, 2008). It is, therefore, expected that the findings will reveal several indirect utterances that would require the use of the SAT for accurate interpretation.

As with many countries that have seen a rapid increase in the use of bribery, Lesotho (a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa) has also seen a rampant bribery situation among its citizens. According to the Department's Office of Investment Affairs (2023), Lesotho has regulations, laws, and even penalties intended to combat the corruption of its public officials. The Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offenses (DCEO) is the main anticorruption organ that examines corruption complaints against officials in the public sector. The DCEO encourages companies to establish internal codes of conduct that, among other things, prevent bribery of public officials, and most have complied. Nonetheless, some officers continue to engage freely in corrupt acts like bribery. Afro Barometer (2023) indicates that corruption is found to be the highest among police and business executives, and these reports are hardly ever reported due to fear of being threatened by the perpetrators. This is further confirmed by Rakolobe (2019), who reports that Lesotho scored 42 in the 2017 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which indicates that corruption is rampant in Lesotho's public service. Rakolobe (2019) further argues that the instances of corruption in Lesotho range from grand to petty and that petty corruption mostly involves police officers who solicit bribes from motorists.

Methodology

The research design for this study is qualitative; the research questions guiding the paper are explorative in nature (Creswell, 2014). The questions aim to comprehend, describe, and interpret meanings expressed in participants' responses on indirect language expressions uttered by interlocutors during bribery negotiations and the peculiar features of these expressions. The qualitative design allows the researcher to comprehend the Basotho nation, their kind of society, and the cultural practices in which they are working. The population for this study comprised ten motorists, particularly the taxi drivers in Maseru, Lesotho. These agreed to participate in the study and signed off on the consent forms, which were distributed by one of the drivers whom the researcher was able to get hold of. The respondents were initially fifteen, but five could not be found in time to sign their consent form and were therefore excluded from the study. The study adopted purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014). It purposefully selected motorists engaged in public transport because they regularly interact with traffic police officers, who in the study area are said to be notoriously known for taking bribes (Rakolobe, 2019). The assumption is that these specific respondents would have rich data on bribery negotiations between themselves and the traffic police officers. An attempt was made to collect data from the police officers, but in vain. In the Lesotho context, traffic officers seem to target and stop taxi drivers mainly on the road. They are often requested to produce permits that allow them to take passengers, driver's licenses, and road-worthy certificates for the taxis they drive, which are usually old and not roadworthy. These items that are requested often have expiry dates, and it is usually a struggle to renew them due to long queues and poor service delivery. It was, therefore, necessary to find out how the drivers often overcome their daily confrontations with police officers.

Sets of data were collected through individual interviews. Even though the study navigates bribery through the linguistic lens, the bribery topic is a sensitive one, which requires the utmost protection of participants. Individual interviews will, therefore, ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the shared information as it will be between the participant and the researcher. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using a virtual social forum called WhatsApp. This kind of interview facilitates a flexible yet focused approach to data collection, enabling participants to provide detailed insights while also allowing the researcher to probe further into specific areas of interest (Creswell, 2014). The researcher added the WhatsApp number of each participant to enable data collection. Following Gill and Baillie (2018), the ongoing evolution of digital technologies such as online forums has become resourceful in data collection. It appeared difficult to have in-person interviews as the participants were usually very busy with passengers during the day. Using WhatsApp for communication seemed the best alternative for them as they all had the application on their phones. The participants' task was to provide the researcher with the utterances that they came across during bribery negotiations with the officers, and the questions were the

same for everyone. Each participant was interviewed once, and they were expected to share their experiences with police officers regarding offering and accepting bribes. Following the interview, participants were allowed to communicate any bribery encounter they came across, but they were not allowed to engage the officers purposefully to elicit such utterances; they would only report coincidental occurrences. Discussions and responses to the interview questions were mostly made after working hours, when participants were a bit relaxed and ready to engage in discussion. However, during the day, some participants who had already been interviewed would immediately send the audio message after their encounter with the police officer. They would send information on what actually transpired, words that were used to negotiate the bribe. This was done without any mention of the officers' names. The main questions that these participants had to respond to were: Have you ever had an encounter where a police officer indirectly or directly asked for a bribe? Can you describe how the conversation started? Do drivers also negotiate a bribe? What kinds of words and phrases do police officers/drivers use when hinting at a bribe? Do they use direct language such as 'I need a bribe'? If the language used is not direct, how do you know that the words used imply bribery seeking? Are there common euphemisms or metaphors used in these conversations? Can you provide examples? Is there a difference in language use when the officer initiates the bribery conversation versus when the driver does? How do drivers usually respond when they suspect a police officer expects a bribe? Do you think there are unwritten rules about how bribery conversations should be conducted? If so, what are they? Some follow-up questions (based on the response given), such as 'How did you understand what they meant by this utterance? Or 'How did they understand the implied meaning of your utterances?' The entire interview was conducted in Sesotho, their native language.

Data for this study were analysed through thematic analysis. This enabled a complete exploration of the linguistic expressions that are uttered by interlocutors in bribery negotiations and their peculiar features. The first step taken was to transfer the text and audio messages shared through the WhatsApp chat box to the laptop. These were transcribed and translated from Sesotho to English. The transcription exercise was very lengthy; however, the exercise afforded an opportunity to comprehend the data better. Braun and Clarke (2006) correctly assert that spending time in transcription facilitates close reading and interpretive skills required for data analysis. The transcription was done manually; the researcher played small sections of the audio and typed what they heard. Pauses and rewinding were frequently done to ensure accuracy. Where a voice or phrase was unclear, it was marked 'unclear' for later review. Each speaker was consistently labelled 'Driver' or 'Interviewer'. The transcription was then followed by the repetitive reading of data for a thorough comprehension of the content, context, and other features of the data. The next step involved data coding, which was done based on the primary question guiding the study. Thematic coding, which groups data into broader themes, was applied. The codes used were common expressions, failed bribery utterances, commissives, directives, bribery refusals, semantic shifts, and informal expressions. The patterns that emerged were highlighted, sorted, and collated according to their potential themes. Many of the codes were turned into themes. The identified themes were accompanied by the translated extracts. The analysis was inductive and afterward interpreted further according to the two theories. These theories became significant in producing reliable knowledge of the matter being investigated.

Findings and Discussion

The online (WhatsApp) interviews conducted with taxi drivers revealed several expressions used by interlocutors involved in bribery negotiations. The majority of these expressions are indirectly uttered and their meanings are hidden; one would need to understand the environment in which they are uttered and the underlying pragmemes associated with bribery in the Lesotho context. These utterances are categorized based on the following themes: commonly used bribery utterances, threatening expressions, inadequate bribes, and bribery refusals. Each category is discussed below. The findings reveal utterances that are commonly used during bribery negotiations. These were found in almost every compilation of utterances by each respondent. Table 1 shows such utterances.

Table 1: Commonly used bribery utterances

Bribery expression	Literal translation
<i>O ka etsa tirinkinyana</i>	You can make a small drink
<i>Etsa lunch</i>	Do some lunch
<i>Tabola</i>	Tear up
<i>Bontsha</i>	Show
<i>Sello kea se utlwa, empa dikgapha ha ke di bone</i>	I hear the cry, but I do not see the tears
<i>Nku ha e tswa terateng e siya boya</i>	When a sheep passes through the fence, it leaves the wool behind

<i>O ka nhlatswa mahlo</i>	You can wash my eyes
<i>Ke tla o fuparisa</i>	I will make you hold
<i>Ke ne ke re re buisane ka mokgwa o mong</i>	I was saying we should talk in another way
<i>Fana ka smoothie</i>	Give a smoothie
<i>O ka bona feela na o nnyekisa jwang</i>	You will just see how you make me lick
<i>Ke kopa ho fana ka kgothaletso ya mosebetsi</i>	I would like to give some encouragement for your work
<i>O so re ha hona ntho e nngwe eo re ka e etsang mongaka?</i>	Sir, you mean there is nothing we can do?
<i>Masiba a dimpshe ke ona a sebetsang boemong bona, ha o nahane?</i>	Ostrich feathers are the ones that can work in this situation, don't you think?

Table 1 provides a variety of common expressions uttered by the Basotho taxi drivers during bribery negotiations. Based on pragmatic act theory, these expressions are alternately labelled pragmemes of bribery, the general situational prototype acts that are used in bribery situations in Lesotho. As the table indicates, all these expressions are indirect speech acts and seem to have nothing to do with money. Expressions such as *tabola* (tear up), *bontsha* (show), *Masiba a dimpshe ke ona a sebetsang boemong bona* (Ostrich feathers are the ones that can work in this situation) seem to have nothing to do with bribery when interpreted outside the context they were uttered. Of particular interest is the utterance *Sello kea se utlwa empa dikgapha ha ke di bone* (I hear the cry, but I do not see the tears). This statement is used in a situation where the motorist is innocently trying to negotiate forgiveness from the police officer regarding an offense, such as an unrenewed license. However, the officer realises that the request is only verbally stated without any intention to give a bribe, hence the utterance “I hear the cry, but I do not see the tears.” When interpreted literally and outside of context, these utterances seem to have nothing to do with bribes. However, all these expressions imply that money should be given in order for the traffic officer to disregard the misconduct. This calls for a pragmatic act tenet that asserts that, irrespective of how well words are chosen, correctly joined, and well pronounced, they do not convey the complete meaning, but context does; it plays an inevitable role in interpreting meanings attached to utterances such as the ones used in bribery negotiations.

The interlocutors also seem to have a tendency to use well-known Sesotho figurative expressions such as *nku ha e tswa terateng e siya boya* (when a sheep passes through the fence, it leaves the wool behind), whose implied conventional meaning is that for one to be successful, they should make some sacrifices. Other idiomatic expressions they use are *ho hlatswa mahlo* (to wash one's eyes) and *masiba a dimpshe* (ostrich feathers). These are all illocutions under the category of directives; the speaker indirectly attempts to get the hearer to pay bribes by uttering these figurative expressions. The commonly known meaning of this expression is that when one has found something valuable that people have been searching for, the person who finds it should be thanked by being offered some money or gifts. In this case, the expression could imply that the traffic police officer has found some illegal occurrences, which the driver must thank them for (by paying a bribe) as they do not intend to escalate the matter any further. Bribery negotiators seem comfortable using these figurative expressions because they are already implied and require less effort to look for hidden expressions. The indirect expressions used in this study correlate with previous studies (Igaab and Algburi, 2021; Shuy, 2013; Tiersma and Solan, 2012) that confirm indirect communication commonly found in bribery negotiations.

Although most of these expressions are indirect ways of requesting bribes, it is never a struggle for interlocutors in this context to understand the implied meanings of these utterances due to shared context and culture. The pragmatic act theory requires knowledge of the context; the situation in which the words fit has to be invoked to explain expressions uttered by bribe offerors and recipients (Mey, 2001). The interlocutors are able to interpret the situation with ease because the conversation rules in this situation are subconsciously understood. Utterances with implied meanings are, therefore, appropriate and most relevant for bribery negotiations where speakers find it necessary to strictly use indirect speech acts (illocutions) that they can easily deny should such a need arise. Thus, the indirect speech acts seem to be convenient in hedging the intentions of those involved in bribery.

Instances of failed bribery

Bribe offerors sometimes fail to meet the expectations of the bribe recipients. This is necessitated by prices that are usually not discussed due to the secretive and hurried nature of the interaction, which is dictated by the fear of being caught, as these interactions occur in a public space. It is, therefore, usually the discretion of the bribe offeror to decide on the amount to be given. This gives birth to another indirect speech act that requires more bribery money. These speech acts appear to be in the form of directives that are either commands or requests, for

instance, the bribe recipients use expressions such as *Ako etse tee e loileng, ena ya hao e metsi* (Could you make a strong tea, this one is watery) or *Etsa tee e nang le lebese* (Make tea with milk). In a bribery situation, the strong tea and tea with milk are illocutions that mean adding more to what is already given, and due to the speech that is in a way prescribed for this particular bribery situation (Mey, 2001), the bribe offeror finds it easy to detect that an extra amount of money should be paid. As Pinker (2008) indicates that veiled bribery negotiations benefit the offeror in two ways: acceptance of the bribe, and no traffic ticket issued only if the officer is corrupt; a veiled bribe would hinder an honest officer from arresting the offeror or escalating the matter to court, since there is no proof beyond a reasonable doubt that the bribe offeror committed a crime. Thus, bribery in this country seems to have reached a point where its negotiators have found ways with language to negotiate better pay safely.

Commissive utterances

The findings further indicate that traffic wardens also use commissive utterances to indirectly negotiate bribes. They threaten taxi drivers by promising to take drastic measures in response to the offense committed. Participants interpret these threats as a strategic way that the traffic wardens use to extort bribes from them because any bribery suggestion put forth after these threats is usually appreciated by the officers. They use expressions like “I will arrest you and take you to the cells, and you cannot be released now because the magistrate is busy with other important cases,” or “It’s Friday today, when I lock you up in the cells you will stay there the whole weekend because the courts of law do not open on weekends; how then do you feel?” Based on speech act theory, these are promises the speaker commits to perform should the bribe offeror not comply with the indirect demand for bribery. Unlike indirect utterances, which are usually correctly interpreted due to conversational context, this type of communication is tricky. Respondents state that one needs to have had several encounters with the officers to understand how they operate in matters regarding bribery and to understand what these commissive utterances mean. They claim that a newcomer may fail to understand that the threat by the officers means that one must bribe the officer. In this instance, the meanings of words used are inadequate to convey the intentions of the speaker; the outside-in approach, as emphasised by the pragmatic act theory, becomes a determining factor that ascertains the correct interpretation of the officers’ intended message. The indirectness could be regarded as a convenient hedge that interlocutors employ to shape their identities and save their almost tarnished image of themselves (Locher, 2004). Literature indicates that threats are usually hedged, and this is the case even outside bribery situations. Expressions such as ‘You better watch your back’ or ‘You are going to pay for this’ are commonly used as indirect speech acts meant to threaten others (Shuy, 2013).

Bribery refusals

Although the majority of bribery utterances are meant to negotiate a bribe, data further uncovers utterances used in rare situations where a traffic police officer refuses to take a bribe. Examples of the expressions they use are: “Excuse me, sir, I do not work this way; I am not the type of police officer that takes a bribe,” or “What is this now? Are you giving me a bribe?” The study provides only two utterances that forbid bribery, while the rest of the utterances used provide different ways that bribery is negotiated. The fewer utterances prohibiting bribery could mean that this is not the route that police officers usually take when handling issues related to breaking traffic laws, but often handle violations of the law by breaking the law (indulging in bribery). These few utterances imply that despite the common tendency for traffic cops to take bribes, there are still a few individual police officers who respect the law and conduct themselves accordingly. Looking closely at these utterances, one observes that, unlike the expressions that negotiate bribery, which are mostly indirect, these two utterances are locutions; they convey the literal meaning of the words used. They specifically use the term “bribe” and show a clear abhorrence for taking bribes or even engaging in such communication. The choice of direct language has the effect of threatening the offeror’s positive face. The projected image the officer wants to portray is that of shaming the act of bribery as well as the offeror. The shade of relational work it produces is impoliteness (Locher and Watts, 2005). The officer is determined to right the wrong at all costs, even if it embarrasses or tarnishes the hearer’s self-image, hence the use of the usually hedged word “bribe.” Earlier research seems to have mainly recorded instances of indirect bribery utterances (Al-gburi, 2019; Igaab and Algburi, 2021; Kamtchueng, 2015; Pinker *et al.*, 2008). This implies that bribery cases are rampant, and indirectness is the situational language used.

Linguistic Features Characterising Bribery Utterances

This paper has identified peculiar linguistic features in the utterances of bribe negotiators. The indirect nature of these utterances has further revealed other language attributes that contribute to the success of the utterances. The following are the identified linguistic features that go along with indirect language during bribery negotiations.

Directives and commissives

Directives in the form of commands and commissives characterised by promises seem to play an important role during bribery negotiations. The table below shows commands made by the officers and promises made by the taxi drivers.

Table 2: Officers' commands vs drivers' requests

Officers' commands	Drivers' promises
Put down	I will make you hold
show	I will thank you
Tear up	I would like to give you some encouragement for your work
Do some lunch	Let me know what I can do and I will do it

The proposal for a bribe is negotiated by either party; some of these utterances are made by the bribe offeror or offeree, in this case, the taxi driver and the traffic police officer. Those uttered by the traffic cop are characterised by commands; the taxi driver is ordered to "put down", "show", "tear up", or "do some lunch". Interpreted without context or literally, it becomes unclear what one must "put down", "tear up", or "show". However, for speakers and hearers involved in bribery negotiations, it is easy to interpret it; they understand that their language usually deviates from day-to-day use of language, as the main purpose of their language is to convey a message that will help them get what they want without incriminating themselves. As Mey (2001) indicates in pragmatic act theory, the language used in this environment is somewhat prescribed, though there are no formal written rules. These short commands reflect how the officers want to construct their identity as they relate to those they are superior to. As is the case in this study, speech act theory stipulates that commands are produced by speakers who have some degree of control over their addressees (Souri and Merç, 2020). They (commands) constitute the more straightforward or less mitigated way of speaking. In the context of bribery negotiations, it seems normal for the police officer to instruct the taxi driver because the officer holds more power than the driver; they can punish the offender by giving a fine for the offense committed. They can, therefore, use an authoritative voice, a less mitigated approach in the form of commands. The relative power of the speaker over the hearer determines how polite the speaker can be and the extent to which one participant can impose their will over the other (Searle, 1976).

Contrary to commands made by the officers, the bribery proposal by the taxi drivers is known by commissives in the form of promises. They utter expressions such as "I will make you hold", "I will thank you", and polite requests such as "I would like to give some encouragement for your work", and "Let me know what I can do and I will do it." With regard to speech act theory, commissives are produced when speakers commit themselves to perform or refrain from some future actions (Searle, 1976). In this study, they are used as a promise to the officers that they would be 'thanked' for the act of favour they demonstrate. Locher (2004) asserts that commissives are more hedged because the face-threatening act of telling someone what they should do is downplayed by means of making promises, offers, or vows. As shown by the promises made to the bribe offeree, the offeror holds less power and is at the mercy of the traffic cop not to offer a ticket for his offense; hence, a more polite approach is administered.

Semantic shift

The semantic shift is another main feature that characterises the linguistic utterances used during bribery negotiations in the Lesotho context. The semantic shift is a process where a word loses its original meaning and acquires a new meaning (Kouega, 2000). Based on the presented data, police officers require the taxi drivers to "do some lunch," "give a smoothie," "wash their eyes," "put down," "show," "make strong tea" or "tea with milk," and "show their tears" for them to disregard violation of the law. All the italicized words and phrases have shifted from their standard literal meanings that appear in dictionaries and have acquired a new meaning, which is a bribe. Bribery is illegal, and those who indulge in it are aware that they are breaking the law hence, they make efforts such as twisting the meanings of words to ensure that their intentions are not explicitly realised in their utterances. Based on the pragmatic act theory, the environment influences this semantic shift; it dictates how one should

interpret an utterance, that is, whether the utterance should be interpreted literally or a new meaning should be attached based on the context. In this study, the environment does not call for literal meanings but implied ones due to the insecurities associated with bribery negotiations. Bribe participants understand the complexity of their negotiations; they know what can be said and what cannot be said to avoid incriminating themselves and therefore adhere to the pragmemes used in this context. This finding is similar to earlier findings that showed that bribery language is characterized by a shift in the meanings of words (Al-gburi, 2019; Igaab and Algburi, 2021; Kamtchueng, 2015).

Informal expressions

Informal language is another peculiar aspect observed among the utterances of bribe negotiators. Each utterance appearing in Table One bears some characteristics of informal expressions. The utterances are characterized by short and incomplete sentences with obscured clarity in meaning. This is prototypically evidenced by the following utterances: "I will make you hold," "Do some lunch," "You will just see how you make me lick," and "Give a smoothie." These examples are distinguished by short and incomplete sentences with deeper meaning. Informal sentences foster a relaxed tone and a warm, friendly atmosphere, encouraging open communication that should not be taken too seriously. The establishment of rapport through the use of informal language may be the more appropriate approach to bribery negotiations, considering how sensitive and potentially embarrassing the conversation is should it not go according to plan. It is, therefore, important that negotiators maintain a friendly and less serious atmosphere to negotiate their intentions. As Locher (2004) asserts, in relational work, there is no faceless communication; people project an image they wish to portray in an interaction; they can be rude, impolite, normal, polite, refined, snobbish, or affectionate. In this instance, the bribe negotiators seem to make an effort to maintain positive politeness and avoid face-threatening situations that can damage their self-image, hence the use of informal language characterizing a friendly tone. Even when they know that their utterances violate ethical standards and should correctly be rebuked, they still want to be appreciated and treated with respect; hence, the use of polite and relaxed language that can represent their intentions. Literature shows informal expressions and phrases commonly used to negotiate a bribe. Utterances such as 'Don't worry, just put fuel in the car..', 'Your application needs wheels', and 'Move your hand to make me move' are clearly indicative of the informal utterances that often characterise bribery negotiations (Algburi, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper provides examples of indirect language in its different forms as used in bribery negotiations in Lesotho. It further analysed other peculiar linguistic features that characterize bribery language. The findings reveal several indirect language expressions commonly used among bribery negotiators as well as other linguistic features that characterise utterances in bribery situations. The findings further show different forms of indirect language used in situations such as when the bribery recipient feels that the offer is inadequate and when they are unwilling to accept bribery. Features such as imperative and declarative statements, semantic shifts, and informal expressions are also reported. The paper concludes that despite the efforts made by the country to implement the law against bribes, bribery is a common phenomenon, with the prevalence of various indirect expressions used in different bribery situations. Indirect language, as one of the linguistic strategies accessible to speakers, plays an important role in protecting unethical behaviour from being revealed and punished by courts of law. The hidden meanings attached to bribery language imply that misconduct will probably prevail unabated, as it is easy to deny allegations based on indirect language. However, the limitation of this study is that the results may not be generalisable as the sample size was small, informed by the qualitative nature of the study, but this exploration will pave the way for more research to follow. Based on the findings, the study recommends that since bribery is a crime committed through the use of language, linguists schooled in conversational analysis and pragmatics should be hired by courts of law to semantically and pragmatically interpret language-related crimes such as bribery. Discovering all the language clues is an important task that linguists are trained to do; hence, linguistic analysis can play a much-needed role in language-related law cases such as bribery. Future research on bribery and language could focus on non-verbal communication used in bribery negotiations.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article intersects the fields of linguistics, criminology, and law. It dwells deep into bribery, one of the crimes perpetuated through language. It draws on linguistic theories to analyse real-life

language use in bribery negotiations, a form of non-violent crime. By examining how language is strategically used to conceal illegal activity, the study highlights the critical role of linguistic expertise in legal settings. It thus bridges theoretical linguistics with practical legal applications, suggesting that collaboration between linguists and legal practitioners is essential for addressing language-related crimes.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi), literature review (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi), methodology and analysis (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi), investigation (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi), drafting and preparation (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi), review and editing (Mabena and Khotso Khanyetsi). Both authors have read and approved the final published version.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

Funding: The authors' institutions (University of Johannesburg and University of the Free State) paid the article processing charges.

Availability of Data: All relevant data are included in the article. However, more information is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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