I would like to thank Steven Pinker for commenting on my discussion note of Pinker et al. (2008) and Lee and Pinker (2010) and I am indeed delighted to discover new points of contact in our thinking about indirect speech, notably regarding the fundamental nature of locutionary cooperation, and the prospect of a multi-component theory of indirect speech. Below, I address a couple of points that remain controversial, in the hope that by clarifying my position I can also point to some useful directions for future research on indirect speech.

It is true that in suggesting two types of counter-example to the general idea that deniability, whether real or pretend, always underlies indirect speech I did not go into detail. So let me try to rectify. The first type of counter-example is indirect speech between intimates. That indirect speech is often used in such situations is hardly new. In an early analysis of American English directives, Ervin-Tripp (1976:44) provides the following example:

(1) [Husband to wife]  
'There's a wine tasting tomorrow night.'  
(i.e. serve dinner early, pick up au pair at night school) (= Ervin-Tripp's (93))

She continues that:

"Hints appear to be prime examples of the kind of communicative abbreviation which appears in high solidarity, closed networks of communication. Unlike the case in task-centered groups in offices and laboratories, where explicitness and clarity have a value because of the focus on task, in families and compatible living groups the personal relationships are central. High frequency of communication results in shared knowledge and the possibility both of highly conventionalized forms which on the surface appear to be indirect, and of novel or humorous directives resting on shared knowledge about norms, beliefs, habits, events, and personal motives." (Ervin-Tripp, 1976:44)

Highlighting how much information can already be available in the context, including the interlocutors' shared interactional history, Ervin-Tripp concludes that "the work of the hearer need not begin with the utterance, […] the set or priming of the hearer can be so great that a nod is a directive" (1976:59; cf. Ervin-Tripp, 1977:167–168).
Approaching the matter from a rather different, modeling, perspective, Hawkins and Smith (2001) discuss how, for instance, ‘I don't know’ may be conveyed “perfectly adequately by means of a rather stylized intonation and rhythm, with very weak segmental articulation, something like … [əʊə]” (2001:170), an utterance verbally akin to Ervin-Tripp’s “directive nod”. “This type of utterance”, they continue, “could allow successful communication between relaxed family members, for example when A asks B where the newspaper is, and B does not know, but does not feel that she needs to stop reading her book in order to help find it” (2001:170). Like Ervin-Tripp, Hawkins and Smith accord a great deal of importance to the context in which such an utterance can be used successfully and emphasize the amplification of the speaker’s message in this context beyond the utterance’s straightforward denotative meaning: “When B says [əʊə], A learns a great deal more than simply that B does not know where the newspaper is. Equally, because A sees that B is deeply involved with her book, he will be less likely to interpret her [əʊə] as a sort of dysarthric grunt preparatory to a more helpful utterance” (2001:171).

What these examples (as well as (1) from my original note) show is that lack of explicitness on the part of the speaker does not always spring from a strategic desire to avoid going on record for the sake of (immediate or future) deniability. Instead, indirect speech can sometimes be convenient shorthand for an entire array of meanings that may be too cumbersome, or even impossible, to spell out fully. This is especially true between intimates, when the hearer can be counted on to arrive at a lot of those meanings alone based on his/her shared stock of assumptions with the speaker. Thus, “There’s a wine tasting tomorrow night” can convey There is a wine tasting tomorrow night and I want to go to it and for that reason please serve dinner early and pick up the au pair at night school because I will not be able to pick her up myself as I normally do; and mutatis mutandis for Hawkins and Smith’s “[əʊə]” and “The baby is going to the other room” (= (1) in original note). Each time, the hearer does more than simply recover the speaker’s intended meaning(s): s/he actually contributes additional meanings that the speaker may reasonably have intended under the circumstances, making meaning emergent between speaker and addressee (Arundale, 2008), and conversation the kind of joint project that Clark (1996:191ff.) talks about. Moreover, speaking indirectly on these occasions is not a covert attempt at renegotiating one’s relationship with the addressee (pace Lee and Pinker, 2010:802). Rather, by couching the form and/or the content of his or her utterance in the set of assumptions that s/he shares with the addressee due to their existing relationship, the speaker compels the hearer to refer to that relationship in order to interpret the utterance correctly, and so re-affirms rather than changes it.

A parallel occurs during language acquisition, when young children use hints to generate meanings they are not yet in a position to specify explicitly. According to Ervin-Tripp, “children used statements of condition frequently, possibly because small children do not at first have a well-articulated sense of what they have to do to relieve discomfort, and they rely on their caretakers to find the solution” (1976:42). Examples include:

(2) a. My nose is bleeding (2:6) (= Ervin-Tripp’s (79))

b. I hungry (2:11) (= Ervin-Tripp’s (80))

‘Need’ or ‘problem’-statements such as these are among the earliest directives that children produce, even before age 2, alongside bare imperatives (Ervin-Tripp, 1977:174–175) typically reserved for communication with other children (1977:183–184). Notably, “the greater the intimacy of the addressee, the greater the frequency of hints, which identified an obstacle, need, or desire […] The less familiar the adult addressee the more likely were polite modifiers” (Ervin-Tripp, 1977:185). So, like adults, young children rely on their intimate relationship with the addressee to fill in information missing from their utterances. While the fact that children produce ‘need’-statements a year before they are able to understand them as hints (Ervin-Tripp, 1977:178, 182) suggests that such statements are different from full-blown ‘adult’ hints, they are nevertheless their likely precursor. By being themselves attuned to hearing such utterances as hints and reacting to them as such (Ervin-Tripp, 1977:172), adults help children construct a cognitive shortcut from the utterance to its indirect interpretation, removing any need for the direct meaning to figure as a necessary step in children’s interpretation process. This is important because it raises the possibility that indirect speech between intimates has a different ontogenetic origin from the kind of strategically motivated indirect speech studied by Pinker and his colleagues.

Similar explanations have been proposed for the emergence of some indirect speech acts common in the West today. Comparing these with table manners and habits surrounding personal hygiene, where the trend since the 16th century has been toward increasingly restrained behaviors, Elias proposed that their emergence owes more to processes of social inclusion/exclusion than to hygienic or other ‘rational’ motivations 20th-century observers usually associate with them (1939/2000:97–98). His argument flies in the face of accounts that take direct speech as their starting-point and seek rational motivations for departing from it in politeness (Searle, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987) or relationship negotiation (Pinker et al., 2008; Lee and Pinker, 2010). Such “rationalizing” accounts work as post facto models of indirect speech but they are not necessarily faithful to how indirect speech historically evolved. Instead, what the record suggests is that certain behaviors were directly associated with the social rewards that they helped reap without any concern for the “literal” (hygienic) meaning of those behaviors. This parallels the direct association of ‘need’-statements with the perlocutionary effect of having one’s needs met without the necessary mediation of the utterance’s direct meaning that we also saw in child language acquisition.

Bax (2002) puts forward a related argument albeit on a much grander scale. Drawing on an impressive array of data from Middle Dutch literary works all the way back to the Iliad and the Old Testament, he suggests that off-record indirect speech or inferential indirectness (Searle, 1975) is a relatively recent (post-1400) invention. Nevertheless, that does not mean that
other indirect modes of communication did not exist before that. Bax identifies a qualitatively different type of indirectness in pre-combat rituals found in several unrelated literary traditions in pre-modern times. Relating these pre-combat rituals to iconic threat displays found in prehistoric human custom and non-human aggression display alike (2002:72) and evolutionarily serving to avert violence among conspecifics (2002:85), he suggests that this alternative mode of ritual indirectness is different from the inferential kind inasmuch as the actual words uttered (a request for the other party to identify themselves) cannot be explained by an argument that builds on preserving the pretense of equality, as suggested by Pinker (this issue).

My explanation departs considerably from previous accounts of indirect speech, including Pinker and his colleagues’. Those accounts treat direct speech as a cognitive baseline, a kind of default from which the speaker must have a reason to depart. The most common reason previously proposed was politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987; Leech, 1983), to which Pinker and colleagues add relationship negotiation (Pinker et al., 2008; Lee and Pinker, 2010). However, that is only a partial explanation of the phenomenon of indirect speech. Direct speech may be a logician’s default but that does not ipso facto make it a cognitive or “natural default” (Pinker, this issue). Once speech is considered in its social context, there is no universal (direct or indirect) baseline. Direct speech does not occur before indirect speech in acquisition (Ervin-Tripp, 1976, 1977) and likely did not pre-date indirect speech in evolution (Bax, 2002). Rather, these two modes of conversational interaction emerge simultaneously and which of the two (or any point between them) constitutes the “natural default” varies widely depending on the situation and culture at hand. Contrary to the alleged “inefficiency of indirect speech” (Pinker, this issue), the phylogenetic and ontogenetic evidence discussed above supports the idea that indirect speech can be an efficient means of putting forward what we might call a ‘proto-meaning’, that is, a meaning which is not yet complete (and so could not in principle have been expressed directly) until processed and acted upon by the hearer (Terkourafi, forthcoming). If that is correct, then a complementary motivation for indirect speech lies in its potential to enable the mutual shaping of meaning between speaker and hearer in ways that could have never been possible with direct speech. Paying attention to the unique properties of indirect speech thus affords us with a more comprehensive account of this time-honored pragmatic phenomenon.

References