

Psychological Distance in Direct and Indirect Speech: A Cognitive and Emotional Model of Empathy, Responsibility, and Memory

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ABSTRACT: Language not only transmits propositional content but also structures psychological distance, emotional engagement, and responsibility attribution. This paper reconceptualizes direct and indirect speech as cognitive-emotional strategies rather than purely grammatical transformations. Drawing on psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, Construal Level Theory, narrative theory, and memory research, the article proposes the Speech Distance Processing (SDP) Model. The model offers a theoretical account of how reported speech modulates empathic engagement, emotional intensity, and memory reconstruction. Direct speech is conceptualized as a mechanism of emotional simulation, reducing psychological distance and enhancing affective resonance. Indirect speech is framed as cognitive mediation, increasing distance and supporting emotional regulation and responsibility modulation. The paper formulates experimentally testable hypotheses and proposes a mixed factorial design to evaluate these predictions. The framework aims to contribute an interdisciplinary conceptual contribution linking grammatical form to cognitive and affective processing.

KEYWORDS: Construal Level Theory, Direct Speech, Emotional Regulation, Empathy, Indirect Speech, Memory Reconstruction, Psychological Distance, Responsibility Attribution.

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1. Introduction

Reported speech has traditionally been examined within the domains of grammar, syntax, and stylistics, where the distinction between direct and indirect speech is treated as a matter of formal transformation, tense alignment, and pronominal reference. Within this classical linguistic perspective, the choice between speech types is typically explained through rules of subordination, sequence of tenses, and syntactic embedding. While such analyses offer valuable structural insights, they remain insufficient for explaining why speakers systematically prefer one form over the other in real communicative contexts.

Empirical observation of everyday discourse reveals that speakers do not select direct or indirect speech randomly or on purely grammatical grounds. Rather, this choice is deeply influenced by emotional context, interpersonal intentions, communicative risk, and cognitive demands. Speakers appear to intuitively adjust their use of reported speech depending on whether they seek emotional involvement or detachment, empathy or neutrality, accountability or mitigation. These patterns suggest that reported speech functions not only as a linguistic device but also as a psychological strategy for managing internal experience and social interaction.

This article argues that direct and indirect speech should be conceptualized as distinct cognitive-emotional strategies rather than merely grammatical alternatives. By integrating linguistic theory with psychological constructs such as psychological distance, empathic engagement, emotional regulation, and memory reconstruction, the paper aims to develop a theoretical framework the Speech Distance Processing (SDP) Model that accounts for how reported speech operates at the intersection of language and mind. The present contribution is explicitly theoretical in nature: the empirical study proposed here has not yet been conducted, and the hypotheses and methodology outlined in later sections are intended to provide a basis for future experimental work.

1.1 Critical Review of Relevant Literature and Research Gaps

Recent research in cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, and social neuroscience has emphasized the embodied and affective dimensions of language processing. Studies on narrative transportation, mental simulation, and perspective-taking demonstrate that linguistic form can modulate empathic engagement and emotional immersion. Kidd and Castano (2013) showed that reading literary fiction enhances theory of mind performance, suggesting that the perspective-taking structures embedded in narrative language have measurable cognitive consequences. Willems et al. (2016) extended this line of inquiry by demonstrating that linguistic prediction during natural language comprehension recruits neural systems extending beyond classical language areas, indicating that language processing is inherently coupled with simulation mechanisms. Van Krieken et al. (2017) specifically examined narrative perspective and its effects on empathy and memory, finding that first-person framing increases emotional engagement relative to third-person narration a finding with direct implications for understanding direct versus indirect speech.

However, a critical limitation of these narrative studies is that they examine perspective primarily at the discourse level, treating shifts between first- and third-person narration as the unit of analysis. They do not systematically isolate the grammatical distinction between direct and indirect speech as an independent variable, leaving open the question of whether the empathy-enhancing effects of first-person framing operate at the level of utterance quotation as well as at the level of narrator perspective.

Within the field of reported speech, contemporary work has largely remained within discourse-pragmatic or interactional frameworks. Buchstaller (2014) analyzed quotation as a form of stance-taking, showing that speakers use constructed dialogue to position themselves relative to narrated events. Holt (2016) examined quoting as an evidential practice through which speakers signal the degree of epistemic commitment to reported content. Clift (2018) offered a cognitive pragmatic account of how direct and indirect speech differ in their epistemic and affective implications. These are valuable contributions, but they do not address the measurable cognitive-emotional consequences of grammatical form selection that is, they describe what speakers do with reported speech socially without modeling what happens psychologically in the listener.

The most significant theoretical gap, however, lies in the failure to connect reported speech to Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010), which is arguably the most comprehensive psychological framework for understanding psychological distance in language. CLT proposes that objects and events can be mentally represented at high or low levels of abstraction depending on their perceived psychological distance along temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical dimensions. High-level construals are abstract, schematic, and decontextualized; low-level construals are concrete, contextual, and experiential. Critically, CLT demonstrates that linguistic framing influences the level of construal adopted by a perceiver, which in turn affects judgment, memory, and emotional response. Despite this rich theoretical apparatus, CLT has not been systematically applied to the grammatical distinction between direct and indirect speech. The SDP Model proposed in this paper is the first to integrate CLT with a model of reported speech processing, arguing that direct speech promotes low-level, psychologically proximal construal while indirect speech promotes high-level, distal construal. This integration addresses a gap at the intersection of psycholinguistics and social cognition that existing frameworks have not filled.

Neuroscientific research on perspective-shifting and self-distancing (Kross et al., 2014; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019) further suggests that linguistic framing can alter emotional regulation and neural activation patterns. Kross et al. (2014) demonstrated that self-distancing through third-person self-reference reduces emotional reactivity and facilitates adaptive self-reflection. This finding is directly relevant to the present model, which proposes that indirect speech functions as a structural analog of such distancing at the grammatical level. Immordino-Yang et al. (2019) identified neural correlates of social-emotional engagement that are sensitive to the vividness and immediacy of described experiences, providing a neurocognitive foundation for the hypothesis that direct speech elicits greater affective activation. Taken together, these findings identify a convergent set of mechanisms that the SDP Model seeks to integrate: CLT-based construal distance, embodied simulation, narrative perspective effects, and neurocognitive indices of emotional engagement.

2. Psychological Distance and Type of Speech

Psychological distance refers to the perceived closeness or remoteness of an event, emotion, or agent relative to the speaker's present self and the listener's perspective. As theorized within CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), this distance is not determined solely by objective temporal or spatial factors but is actively constructed through cognitive and linguistic choices. Reported speech plays a central role in this construction, functioning as a tool that modulates emotional intensity, immediacy, and involvement.

CLT identifies four dimensions of psychological distance: temporal (past/future vs. present), spatial (near vs. far), social (self/ingroup vs. other/outgroup), and hypothetical (certain vs.

uncertain). Each dimension affects how abstractly or concretely an event is mentally represented. The present model argues that the grammatical distinction between direct and indirect speech maps systematically onto these dimensions: direct speech reduces distance along all four axes by preserving the original speaker's voice, temporal anchoring, and experiential texture, while indirect speech increases distance by introducing syntactic embedding, tense backshift, and the mediating presence of a reporting agent.

2.1 Direct Speech and Emotional Proximity

Direct speech reproduces the original utterance with minimal linguistic transformation, as in:

"I failed the experiment," he said.

By preserving the first-person pronoun, the present tense, and the expressive characteristics of the original utterance, direct speech minimizes the psychological distance between the listener and the reported speaker. The listener is positioned, in Clark and Gerrig's (1990) terms, as a direct witness to the original communicative act rather than as a recipient of its interpretation. Within the CLT framework, this corresponds to a low-level, concrete construal: the listener accesses contextual, experiential information rather than abstract summaries.

This structural immediacy has measurable psychological consequences. Psycholinguistic research supports the view that vivid linguistic representation promotes embodied simulation, whereby listeners internally recreate aspects of the described experience (Barsalou, 2008; Niedenthal et al., 2005). Direct speech, by maintaining the phenomenological texture of the original utterance, provides richer input for such simulation than indirect speech, which abstracts away from experiential detail.

2.2 Indirect Speech and Psychological Distancing

Indirect speech reformulates the original utterance through syntactic embedding and temporal adjustment:

He said that he had failed the experiment.

This transformation increases psychological distance by removing the first-person anchoring, introducing a reporting verb that foregrounds the act of interpretation, and backshifting the verb tense to signal temporal remoteness. Within CLT terms, indirect speech promotes a high-level construal: it presents the content of the original utterance as already processed and schematized rather than as an ongoing experiential event.

Indirect speech thus introduces interpretative mediation between the original experience and its reception. The listener is not positioned as a witness but as a recipient of a cognitive summary. This distinction has significant emotional consequences: whereas direct speech invites immersion and affective participation, indirect speech encourages analytical distance and emotional moderation, which may serve important self-regulatory functions for both speaker and listener.

3. Direct Speech, Empathy, and Simulation

Direct speech plays a central role in the activation of empathic processes, as it closely approximates the structure of lived communicative experience. Unlike indirect speech, which abstracts and reframes content, direct speech preserves the phenomenological qualities of the original utterance, thereby facilitating cognitive and emotional alignment between speaker and listener.

3.1 Empathy Activation and Embodied Simulation

Empathy relies on the capacity to mentally simulate another individual's internal state, including emotions, intentions, and perspectives. Direct speech enhances this simulation by maintaining several critical features of first-person experience: preservation of original deixis and personal pronouns; retention of emotional and prosodic cues; and activation of auditory and situational imagery. By reproducing the speaker's words in their original form, direct speech minimizes interpretative interference and allows the listener to access the emotional texture of the original moment.

From a neuroscientific perspective, studies indicate that richly contextualized language may engage neural systems associated with action understanding and affective mirroring. Mar et al. (2017) demonstrated that exposure to narratively rich language is associated with neural activity in regions linked to social cognition, including temporoparietal junction and medial prefrontal cortex. Neuroimaging studies more generally indicate that perspective-taking and emotionally vivid narrative processing activate structures associated with affective evaluation and theory of mind. It is theoretically plausible though requiring direct empirical verification that direct speech, due to its preserved first-person framing and simulation-inducing structure, preferentially engages these networks compared to indirect speech. The present framework proposes this as a testable hypothesis rather than an established finding.

3.2 The Effect of Presence in Language

One of the defining psychological effects of direct speech is the creation of a sense of co-presence. Through the preservation of temporal immediacy and expressive detail, direct speech allows the listener to experience the reported utterance as though it were unfolding in real time. This effect collapses the psychological distance between the original event and its narration, fostering heightened involvement.

Indirect speech, by contrast, frames reported content as already processed and cognitively mediated. This distinction has been noted in the context of narrative perspective research (van Krieken et al., 2017) and aligns with CLT's prediction that low-level, proximal construals produce stronger affective responses than high-level, distal ones. The presence effect of direct speech is particularly salient in narrative discourse, testimony, and interpersonal storytelling, where emotional authenticity and engagement are central to communicative success.

4. Indirect Speech as a Cognitive and Emotional Defense Mechanism

While direct speech amplifies emotional involvement, indirect speech often serves the opposite function. Rather than reenacting the original experience, it transforms that experience into a cognitively organized and emotionally regulated account. This section conceptualizes indirect speech as a psychological defense mechanism that enables speakers to manage emotional risk, responsibility, and cognitive overload.

4.1 Responsibility Reduction

Consider the contrast between the following utterances:

- “I made a mistake.”
- He said that he had made a mistake.

The indirect form introduces a layer of narrative distance between the speaker and the event. Responsibility is no longer enacted in the present moment but is instead reported as a past

cognitive act. This shift diffuses agency by transferring ownership from the speaking self to a narrated self, weakening emotional identification with the action, and transforming lived experience into informational content. From a psychological standpoint, this transformation allows individuals to communicate accountability while simultaneously protecting their self-image and emotional stability.

4.2 Trauma, Emotional Regulation, and Clinical Implications

Research in trauma psychology consistently shows that individuals who have experienced distressing events often rely on linguistic strategies that increase psychological distance (Fivush et al., 2018; D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2019). These include the use of third-person self-reference, syntactically embedded constructions, and emotionally neutral language. Such patterns suggest that indirect speech functions as a form of self-regulation, enabling speakers to recount events without fully reactivating their emotional intensity.

The clinical implications of this observation are significant and represent the most practically developed dimension of the SDP framework. In trauma-informed therapeutic contexts, the grammatical form of reported speech may serve as a clinically meaningful indicator of a client's current emotional readiness and degree of psychological integration. A client who consistently employs indirect speech when recounting traumatic events may be using this structure defensively maintaining coherent narrative while limiting emotional exposure. Conversely, spontaneous shifts toward direct speech in later sessions may signal increased psychological safety, reduced avoidance, and greater willingness to emotionally re-engage with the traumatic material.

Clinicians working within evidence-based modalities such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) already attend carefully to the language clients use to describe traumatic events. The SDP Model offers these practitioners a principled linguistic framework for interpreting grammatical variation in client speech. Therapists might track shifts in reported speech form across sessions as a complementary, non-intrusive index of therapeutic progress, alongside established measures such as PTSD Checklist (PCL-5) scores or subjective distress ratings.

It should be noted, however, that the relationship between indirect speech and emotional regulation is not unidirectional. Overuse of indirect speech may also indicate emotional numbing, dissociation, or avoidance rather than adaptive coping clinical presentations that require differentiation and careful assessment. The SDP Model predicts that therapeutic movement is associated with gradually increasing use of direct speech and first-person narration, but this prediction requires longitudinal empirical testing before it can be applied in clinical practice. Future collaboration between psycholinguists and clinical psychologists will be essential to validate these applications.

Within this framework, repeated use of indirect forms may also contribute to the transformation of emotionally charged episodic memories into more schematic and less affectively loaded representations over time (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) a process that may underlie one mechanism of long-term emotional adaptation following trauma.

5. Memory Reconstruction and Speech Framing

Memory is not a passive record of events but a reconstructive process shaped by linguistic framing (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). The form in which

an experience is encoded influences both its emotional intensity at encoding and the vividness of subsequent recall.

Direct speech preserves perceptual and affective markers of the original utterance, supporting vivid mental simulation. By maintaining voice, deixis, and expressive immediacy, it enhances episodic detail and the subjective quality of reliving. Indirect speech, by contrast, restructures experience into syntactically mediated representation. This transformation increases cognitive processing and reduces emotional immediacy, facilitating reflective distance rather than immersive recall.

Thus, speech type does not merely report experience it reorganizes how that experience is encoded, consolidated, and later reconstructed. Within the SDP framework, linguistic form operates as a modulatory factor in memory vividness and emotional retention, a prediction that aligns with D'Argembeau and Van der Linden's (2019) findings on emotional distancing and memory representation.

5.1 Theoretical Novelty of the Present Study

The novelty of the present paper lies in its reconceptualization of reported speech as a psychological distance regulation mechanism. Existing linguistic models treat direct and indirect speech as structural transformations governed by syntactic rules. Discourse-pragmatic accounts frame quotation primarily as stance-taking or rhetorical positioning. The SDP Model proposes three theoretically motivated extensions of these frameworks:

- It integrates Construal Level Theory with a grammatical distinction that CLT has not previously addressed systematically, proposing that direct and indirect speech instantiate psychologically proximal versus distal construal modes.
- It connects reported speech to memory reconstruction processes, proposing that grammatical framing may influence the long-term transformation of episodic memory into schematic representation.
- It identifies clinical applications in trauma-informed therapy where the grammatical form of reported speech may serve as an observable index of therapeutic progress.

These are theoretical propositions that require empirical validation. They are presented as the basis for a research programme rather than as demonstrated conclusions.

6. The Speech Distance Processing (SDP) Model

To integrate the cognitive, emotional, and linguistic observations discussed above, this paper proposes the Speech Distance Processing Model (SDP Model). The model conceptualizes reported speech as a dynamic processing system through which speakers regulate psychological distance from events, emotions, and social agents. Rather than treating direct and indirect speech as static grammatical categories, the SDP Model frames them as endpoints on a continuum of cognitive-emotional processing that is grounded in Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) and embodied simulation accounts (Barsalou, 2008).

At its core, the model assumes that every act of reported speech involves an implicit negotiation between emotional involvement and cognitive control. The choice of speech type reflects the speaker's need to balance empathic engagement, emotional safety, social positioning, and responsibility management. In this sense, reported speech functions as an interface between internal psychological states and external communicative demands.

6.1 Core Components of the SDP Model

The SDP Model consists of four interrelated components:

Component	Description
Emotional Load	The intensity of affective involvement associated with the reported event, including emotional arousal and valence.
Cognitive Effort	The degree of linguistic and conceptual transformation applied to the original utterance during reporting.
Social Distance	The perceived interpersonal proximity between speaker, listener, and the reported agent.
Responsibility Attribution	The extent to which agency, accountability, and ownership are assigned to the speaker or reported subject.

Table 1. Core Components of the SDP Model

These components interact dynamically. For example, increased cognitive effort in indirect speech is typically associated with reduced emotional load and altered responsibility attribution. Similarly, heightened emotional load in direct speech tends to correspond with reduced social distance and increased empathic engagement. The model thus predicts systematic covariation among these dimensions rather than independent effects.

6.2 Model Dynamics and Predictions

Based on these components, the SDP Model generates the following broad predictions:

- Direct speech is associated with high emotional load, low cognitive mediation, increased empathic engagement, reduced psychological distance, and heightened responsibility attribution. It promotes experiential recall, emotional presence, and interpersonal attunement.
- Indirect speech is associated with reduced emotional load, increased cognitive effort, greater psychological and social distance, and attenuated responsibility attribution. It facilitates emotional regulation, narrative control, and self-protective distancing.

The model also predicts that individual differences in trait empathy, emotional regulation capacity, and habitual construal level will moderate these effects. Participants with high trait empathy and low distancing tendency may show stronger differentiation between direct and indirect speech conditions on emotional measures.

7. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions and hypotheses are proposed to ground the SDP Model empirically. These reflect a planned study that has not yet been conducted.

7.1 Research Questions

RQ1: Does the use of direct versus indirect speech influence perceived emotional proximity between the speaker, the listener, and the reported event?

RQ2: Does direct speech elicit higher levels of empathic engagement in listeners compared to indirect speech?

RQ3: Is indirect speech preferentially selected and interpreted as a psychological distancing strategy in emotionally demanding or sensitive contexts?

RQ4: Does the choice of reported speech affect responsibility attribution toward the speaker or reported agent?

RQ5: Does repeated exposure to indirect speech lead to changes in memory vividness and emotional intensity over time?

7.2 Hypotheses

Based on the SDP Model and the CLT framework:

H1: Statements presented in direct speech will be rated as emotionally more intense than equivalent statements presented in indirect speech.

H2: Direct speech will elicit significantly higher levels of empathic engagement in listeners compared to indirect speech.

H3: Indirect speech will be associated with increased perceived psychological distance between the listener and the reported event.

H4: In emotionally sensitive contexts, participants will judge indirect speech as indicating lower personal responsibility on the part of the speaker.

H5: Repeated indirect reporting will result in reduced memory vividness and emotional recall compared to repeated direct reporting.

Note: These hypotheses are derived theoretically from the SDP Model and from CLT predictions. Empirical confirmation awaits the experimental study described in Section 8.

8. Proposed Methodology

The following section outlines a methodology for empirically testing the SDP Model. This is a planned research design; no data have been collected to date. The design is intended to operationalize the model's core hypotheses in a manner suitable for experimental validation.

8.1 Research Design

The proposed study adopts a mixed factorial experimental design with speech type (direct vs. indirect) as the primary independent variable and emotional valence (neutral vs. emotionally charged scenarios) as a secondary independent variable.

Independent Variables: (1) Speech Type (Direct vs. Indirect); (2) Emotional Valence (Neutral vs. Negative/High-Arousal).

Dependent Variables: (1) Perceived Emotional Intensity; (2) Empathic Engagement; (3) Psychological Distance; (4) Responsibility Attribution; (5) Memory Vividness (delayed recall condition).

Control Variables: trait empathy (Interpersonal Reactivity Index), emotional regulation style, language proficiency, and narrative transportation tendency.

8.2 Power Analysis and Sample Size

An a priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1) will be conducted assuming a medium effect size ($f = .25$), $\alpha = .05$, and power $(1 - \beta) = .80$. Preliminary estimation suggests a minimum sample of $N = 128$ participants for a 2×2 ANOVA design. Recruitment will target $N = 150$ to account for potential exclusions.

8.3 Participants

Participants will be adult native or near-native English speakers (aged 18–50 years), recruited via university subject pools and online research platforms. Inclusion criteria: no diagnosed neurological or language impairments; fluent reading comprehension in English. Exclusion criteria: failure on attention checks; completion time below a minimum threshold. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants will provide informed consent.

8.4 Materials and Stimuli

A corpus of 24 short narrative stimuli will be constructed. Each scenario will exist in two grammatically equivalent versions (direct and indirect). For example:

Direct: "I ruined everything," she said.

Indirect: She said that she had ruined everything.

Stimuli will be matched for lexical frequency, sentence length, syntactic complexity, emotional valence, and thematic content. A pilot study ($N \approx 30$) will validate baseline emotional intensity, comprehensibility, and perceived naturalness before the main experiment.

8.5 Procedure

Participants will be randomly assigned to condition (Direct or Indirect). They will complete a self-paced reading phase followed by an immediate rating phase. An optional delayed recall phase will follow a 10–15-minute filler task. After each stimulus, participants will rate on 7-point Likert scales: emotional intensity, emotional proximity, empathy toward the speaker, perceived responsibility, and vividness of mental imagery. Memory assessment will include a free recall task, a vividness rating, and an emotional recall intensity rating.

8.6 Measurement Instruments

Empathy will be measured using the adapted Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Psychological distance will be assessed via an adapted self-report scale measuring closeness, immediacy, and identification. Emotional load will be assessed using the Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) for arousal and valence. Responsibility attribution will be measured with a custom agency attribution scale (to be validated in the pilot study). Memory vividness will be assessed using a modified Autobiographical Memory Vividness Scale. Internal consistency will be assessed via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$ acceptable threshold).

8.7 Statistical Analysis Plan

Primary analyses will include: 2×2 ANOVA (Speech Type $\times$ Emotional Valence); mixed-effects linear modeling with random intercepts for participants and items; post-hoc Tukey

corrections; and effect sizes (η^2p , Cohen's d). Secondary analyses will include mediation analysis to test whether psychological distance mediates the relationship between speech type and empathy, and moderation analysis to test whether trait empathy or emotion regulation style moderate the effect of speech type. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance will be tested, and non-parametric alternatives will be applied where necessary.

8.8 Self-Report Limitations

A significant methodological limitation of the proposed design is that all five dependent variables rely on self-report measures. This introduces several overlapping sources of potential bias that deserve systematic consideration rather than cursory acknowledgement.

First, self-report measures of emotional intensity and empathy are susceptible to demand characteristics: participants may infer the study's hypotheses and adjust their responses accordingly, particularly given that the manipulation (direct vs. indirect speech) is relatively transparent on close reading. This concern is amplified in within-subjects designs where the same participant encounters both speech type conditions.

Second, introspective accuracy is limited for affective states. Research on affective forecasting and emotional reporting consistently shows that individuals are imperfect reporters of their own emotional experiences, particularly under low-arousal conditions such as reading written vignettes (rather than experiencing live speech). The emotional contrasts generated by the speech type manipulation may be subtle and difficult to detect through explicit rating scales.

Third, responsibility attribution measured via self-report may be contaminated by social desirability biases, particularly for stimuli involving morally charged scenarios in which participants may be reluctant to assign low responsibility to speakers who have caused harm.

Fourth, self-report measures of memory vividness are subject to metacognitive distortions: participants may confuse the vividness of their memory for the original text with the vividness of the event described in the text, and may be influenced by confidence rather than actual mnemonic detail.

To mitigate these limitations, the proposed methodology includes multiple steps: attention checks and response time thresholds to identify disengaged participants; behavioral measures of memory accuracy (free recall) alongside subjective vividness ratings; and between-subjects comparisons where possible to reduce demand characteristics. The neurocognitive extension described above would complement self-report data with psychophysiological and neuroimaging measures. Future replications should incorporate implicit measures of emotional processing, such as reading time, pupillometry, or skin conductance, to triangulate self-report findings.

9. Theoretical and Practical Implications

9.1 Implications for Psycholinguistics

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the SDP Model contributes to a growing body of research that views language not only as a representational system but also as a regulatory tool. The proposed framework challenges models that treat syntax as emotionally neutral and supports the view that linguistic form interacts dynamically with affective processing. By linking direct and indirect speech to theoretically grounded predictions regarding empathy, emotional intensity, and memory reconstruction, the model opens new avenues for experimental research on how grammatical choices shape language comprehension and production in real time. It

also encourages psycholinguistics to more fully integrate construal-level variables into models of sentence processing.

9.2 Implications for Clinical Psychology and Trauma-Informed Practice

The SDP Model's most developed practical application lies in clinical psychology, particularly in trauma-informed therapeutic contexts. As elaborated in Section 4.2, the grammatical form of reported speech may serve as an observable indicator of psychological distance from traumatic material. This has several concrete implications for clinical practice.

In assessment contexts, systematic variation in a client's use of direct versus indirect speech when recounting distressing events may offer clinicians an additional, low-inference measure of emotional processing. Unlike self-report scales, grammatical form is less susceptible to deliberate impression management and may reflect spontaneous regulatory processes. A client who consistently reformulates self-referential statements in the third person or uses syntactically embedded indirect forms may be exhibiting structural distancing rather than integrated processing.

In treatment contexts, clinicians trained in narrative approaches may use the speech distance framework to guide graduated exposure to traumatic memories. In the early stages of treatment, the therapist's acceptance of indirect forms may communicate safety and allow the client to approach difficult material at a comfortable distance. As therapy progresses and the therapeutic alliance strengthens, gentle encouragement toward first-person, direct speech formulations may support the consolidation of a coherent trauma narrative. This approach is consistent with existing trauma-informed models that emphasize narrative integration as a treatment goal (Fivush et al., 2018), and extends them by providing a specific linguistic marker to track.

From a supervisor and training perspective, the framework could inform how therapists are taught to attend to their clients' language. Including instruction on the clinical relevance of reported speech form in psychotherapy training programs may enhance therapists' sensitivity to a subtle but theoretically grounded indicator of emotional readiness. It is important to emphasize, however, that these applications are prospective rather than evidence-based at this stage. Validation of the SDP Model's clinical utility will require collaboration between psycholinguists and clinical researchers, with studies designed to test whether therapist attention to reported speech form predicts therapeutic outcomes above and beyond established predictors.

9.3 Implications for Discourse Analysis and Social Interaction

The SDP Model provides a systematic account of how reported speech shapes responsibility, agency, and social positioning. The choice between direct and indirect speech influences how speakers assign blame, claim authority, or distance themselves from contested statements. This has implications for political discourse, legal testimony, media reporting, and institutional communication, where reported speech is routinely deployed to manage accountability and persuasion. By framing reported speech as a psychological distancing tool, the model offers a theoretical basis for analyzing how empathy is strategically invited or withheld through grammatical form.

9.4 Implications for Education and Communication

In educational and communicative settings, the SDP Model highlights the importance of emotional framing in information delivery. Teachers and communicators may consciously or unconsciously choose between direct and indirect speech to modulate students' emotional engagement and empathy. Understanding these dynamics can inform pedagogical strategies,

particularly in subjects involving sensitive content or moral complexity. The model also underscores the role of language choice in shaping how information is emotionally experienced, remembered, and acted upon.

10. Limitations and Future Research

10.1 Limitations

- **Sample characteristics:** The proposed design relies on adult native or near-native English speakers. Results may not generalize across languages, cultures, or age groups, where grammatical structures and emotional norms vary substantially.
- **Ecological validity:** Narrative vignettes are necessarily simplified and controlled relative to real-life conversational speech. Written stimuli lack prosodic and para-linguistic cues that would accompany direct speech in face-to-face interaction, potentially underestimating the effects of speech type in authentic communication contexts.
- **Self-report reliance:** As discussed in detail in Section 8.8, all five dependent variables depend on self-report, introducing risks of demand characteristics, introspective inaccuracy, social desirability bias, and metacognitive distortion. This is a substantive design limitation that future studies should address through behavioral and physiological measures.
- **Short-term assessment:** The optional memory task examines recall over a period of minutes. Long-term effects of repeated speech-type exposure on memory reconstruction, identity integration, and emotional adaptation remain unexamined.
- **Theoretical scope:** The SDP Model draws principally on Western psychological frameworks. The extent to which CLT-based construal distance mechanisms, and the emotional consequences of direct versus indirect speech, generalize across cultures with different norms of face-saving, indirect communication, and relational distance is an open empirical question.

10.2 Future Research Directions

- **Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies:** Investigate whether SDP Model predictions hold in languages with substantially different grammatical conventions for reported speech, and in cultures where indirect communication is the normative default.
- **Neuroscientific validation:** Employ fMRI, EEG, or psychophysiological measures to directly examine neural correlates of empathy and emotional engagement in response to direct versus indirect speech. EEG components such as the Late Positive Potential (LPP) and N400 modulation would be particularly informative, as would fMRI contrasts targeting medial prefrontal cortex, temporoparietal junction, and amygdala activation.
- **Longitudinal and clinical designs:** Examine how repeated exposure to direct or indirect speech affects long-term memory, identity integration, and emotional adaptation; and test whether grammatical form variation in therapy sessions predicts therapeutic outcomes.
- **Applied contexts:** Explore implications in legal testimony, media reporting, and educational settings to assess real-world relevance.

- Individual differences: Investigate how personality traits, attachment style, emotional regulation capacity, and habitual construal level moderate the selection and processing of reported speech

11. Conclusion

This paper has argued that direct and indirect speech should be understood not merely as grammatical alternatives but as psychologically meaningful choices that shape emotional experience, empathic engagement, responsibility attribution, and memory reconstruction. By grounding this argument in Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) and embodied simulation accounts, and by reframing reported speech as a tool for managing psychological distance, the study contributes a more integrated theoretical understanding of language as both a cognitive and emotional system.

The proposed Speech Distance Processing (SDP) Model offers a theoretical foundation for future interdisciplinary research at the intersection of linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, and clinical practice. By highlighting the psychological consequences of grammatical choice, the model invites scholars to reconsider the role of syntactic form in emotional regulation, autobiographical memory, and social interaction. The clinical implications developed in this paper particularly regarding the use of reported speech form as an indicator of therapeutic progress in trauma-informed therapy represent the framework's most immediately applicable contribution.

As a theoretical paper, the SDP Model presents testable propositions rather than demonstrated conclusions. The methodology outlined in Section 8 provides a basis for empirical evaluation, and the model's validity must ultimately be judged on the results of that programme of research. Nevertheless, the theoretical integration proposed here linking a well-established psychological distance framework to an underexplored dimension of grammatical choice opens productive new directions for research on language and mind.

Ultimately, this framework underscores a central insight: the way we report speech not only reflects how we understand experience but actively shapes how that experience is felt, remembered, and integrated into the self. Language, in this sense, is not simply a medium of communication but a mechanism of psychological processing.

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