

7.2. Types of Communication

We review here the various effects which context can have on our use and understanding of sentences. We present these as a series of decisions a listener must make about the proper interpretation of the speaker's intention when the speaker utters a sentence in a particular context.¹

1. The Sentence Communicated. The simplest, and perhaps most obvious effect of context on a particular utterance of a sentence is to fix various terms appearing in that sentence. For instance, Jake may utter the following string of words when observing Elvis perform a faro shuffle.

(1) He's really good at doing that.

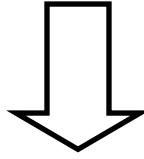
In this context the word "he" refers to Elvis, and "doing that" means performing a faro shuffle. So uttering (1) expresses the same claim as an utterance of Sentence (2) would.

(2) Elvis is really good at performing a faro shuffle.

The effect of context here is to pin down what is meant by highly variable words and phrases such as "he" and "doing that". In other contexts an utterance of Sentence (1) might be used to express a quite different point – for example, that Jack is good at air reverses, when said within eyeshot of Jack performing an air reverse.

So when hearing (or reading) a sentence in a particular context, the first decision the audience must make is how to fix the meaning of variable terms such as the pronouns "he" and "that," and 'pro-verbs' such as "do" and "do so". That decision yields what is being said – more specifically, what is being said **on the face of it**, i.e., if the words are taken at face value. So, taking the words "really good" according to their dictionary sense, and "he" as referring to Elvis and "doing that" to performing a faro shuffle, (1) is expressing just what (2) does, 'on the face of it' – that is, if the sentence is taken at face value.

¹ Following the model of communication presented in (Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish 1984: 401ff.).

*First Step in Interpreting an Utterance***The Sentence Uttered****What Claim is This Utterance Communicating “On the Face of It”**

2. Literal vs. Non-Literal Interpretation. What a string of words says, if taken ‘at face value’ is the **literal interpretation** of those words. So once we’ve pinned down the meaning of pronouns and pro-verbs, and used that and the dictionary meaning of words and grammatical structure to figure out the meaning of the whole sentence, we’ve settled on the **literal** meaning of the sentence.

But in actual conversation the literal meaning of a sentence isn’t the only one possible, and often not the one intended.

That might seem absurd, for a simple reason: if we’re free to mean something by words other than what they mean literally (following their dictionary definitions), then it seems we can just mean any old thing by a string of words. Under those conditions, communication would be impossible. Specifically: the person hearing those words wouldn’t know how to interpret them.

The trick to using words to mean something other than their face-value meaning – to **communicating non-literally** – is that we’re not free to mean just any old thing by those words, but – based on the literal meaning of the sentence – only a small range of possible (non-literal) messages. If all language users share a common stock of moves for using sentences non-literally, and the speaker can count on her audience to know she intends one of these non-literal uses, the audience can successfully figure out what message the speaker intends to communicate through non-literal use of the sentence uttered.

Here we set out a little catalog of some common non-literal uses.²

(a) Irony. The speaker utters sentence S, but intends the opposite.

Example:

Jack: Rex locked himself out for the third time this week.

Neko (shaking her head): That guy's a real genius.

Reading Neko's sentence literally, she's claiming that Rex is a genius. But in a context where Rex has done something as dumb as locking himself out several times in one week, the literal meaning of the sentence obviously clashes with the facts at hand. In this context it's clear that Neko means the opposite of what she's said: she doesn't intend to praise Rex for his genius, but rather to criticize him for being stupid.

Neko (non-literally) communicates that Rex is stupid, by stating that's he's smart.

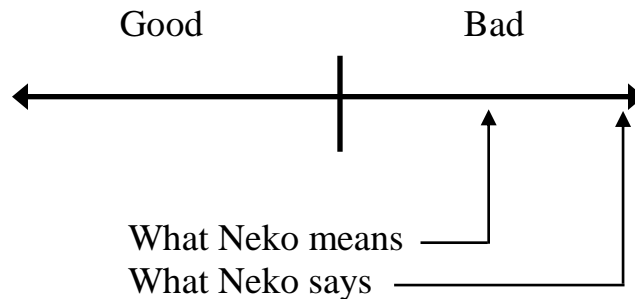
(b) Exaggeration (Overstatement). Communicating that something falls on one side of a range of possibilities, by stating that it falls on the extreme end of that side.

² The different types of non-literal speech are sometimes called “**figures of speech**”; and non-literal speech is then called “**speaking figuratively**” because it uses such figures of speech.

Example:

Neko: That was the worst sushi ever made in the history of the universe.

Here the sushi Neko ate falls somewhere on a range of values, from very good to very bad. And Neko communicates that it falls on the bad side of the scale, by (non-literally) stating that the sushi is the worst ever made.



Neko (non-literally) communicates that the sushi is bad, by stating that the sushi is on the extreme end of the bad range.

Here the speaker is **exaggerating** (or “**overstating**”) the badness.³

(c) Understatement. This is the reverse of the previous type of non-literal communication. Here the speaker communicates that something falls on **extreme end** of a range of possibilities, by stating that it one that **side** of the range.⁴

Example:

(Background: After drinking an entire bottle of tequila, a student strips naked, jumps through the window, and runs down the street screaming.)

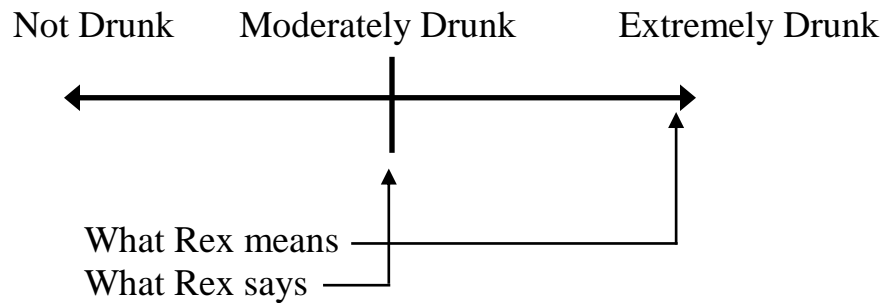
Jake: What’s the matter with him?

Rex: He was a little drunk.

³ A fancier name for overstatement is “**hyperbole**”.

⁴ Adapting an example from Grice (XX:yy).

Given the behavior that's unfolded before speaker and hearer, it's obvious that the person was much more than just "a little drunk". So Rex here communicates that the person was very drunk (at the extreme end of the scale) by merely stating that the person was on that side of the scale ("a little drunk").



Rex (non-literally) communicates that the student was very drunk, by just stating that he was on the drunk side.

(d) Metaphor. Pointing out that something has a feature like certain type of object, by stating that it is such an object.

Example:

Jack: Neko's a regular Power-Vac when it comes to sushi.

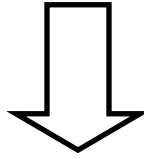
Jack (non-literally) communicates that Neko is in certain ways *like* a vacuum cleaner – say, in quickly taking in objects – by stating that Neko actually **is** a vacuum cleaner.

In each of these cases, the context of utterance – the situation before the audience, and background knowledge in the Common Ground – makes clear that the sentence utterance shouldn't be read literally. For example, locking oneself out repeatedly is not considered intelligent; so we suppose that Neko **shouldn't be read literally** when she says Rex is a genius. Likewise, we

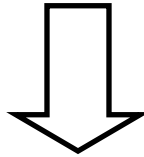
know that Neko isn't a vacuum cleaner; so we read Jack **non-literally** when he says that she is one.⁵

Second Step in Interpreting an Utterance:
Interpret this Literally or Non-Literally?

The Sentence Uttered



What Claim is This Utterance Communicating (if Read Literally)?



Was the Sentence Meant Literally or Non-Literally?

3. Indirect Communication. Even after a decision is made on interpreting an utterance literally or non-literally, there is a further question whether what the sentence communicated (literally or non-literally) is the **only** message the speaker intended to communicate.

The example from the previous section illustrates this point: while the speaker is sincere in reporting that his car has a flat tire – so the sentence “My car has a flat tire” is read literally – the speaker intends a second, unspoken message as well. When speaking to traffic police he intends to communicate that he can't help being in a No Parking zone; while in the tire store he intends to communicate a request for help fixing his tire.

⁵ So the difference between **simile** and **metaphor** is the difference between **literal** and **non-literal** speech. If Jack utters the **simile** “Neko's like a vacuum cleaner when it comes to eating sushi” he's making a **literal** claim about a similarity between Neko and a vacuum cleaner. But if Jack **metaphorically** says “Neko is a regular Power-Vac when it comes to sushi,” the literal reading of that sentence is that Neko **is** a vacuum cleaner – whereas Jack intends only to (**non-literally**) communicate a similarity.

Such a second, unspoken message, communicated along with what the intended reading of the sentence spoken, is **indirect communication**. By contrast, the intended meaning of the sentence spoken is what's **directly communicated**.

In the flat tire example, the same words are uttered in both cases (and intended literally in both cases). So what was **directly communicated** is the same in both scenarios. What varies from one context to the other is what's **indirectly communicated**: the second message intended, beyond the report of the flat tire.

Context 1: In No Parking Zone:

Directly Communicated: My car has a flat tire

Indirectly Communicated: I can't help being in this No Parking zone.

Context 2: In No Tire Store:

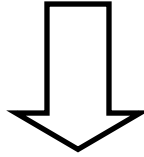
Directly Communicated: My car has a flat tire

Indirectly Communicated: I request help fixing my flat tire.

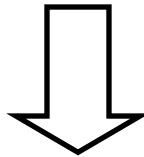
The decision whether there is such indirect communication, beyond what was directly communicated in words, marks a further interpretive decision.

Third Step in Interpreting an Utterance:
Is There Additional, Indirect Communication?

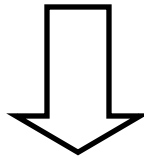
The Sentence Uttered



What Claim is This Utterance Communicating (if Read Literally)?



Was the Sentence Meant Literally or Non-Literally?



Is a Further, Indirect (Unspoken) Claim Being Communicated?

Note that an utterance can exhibit **both** non-literal and indirect communication – as in the following example.

Mother (to child): I'm sure the cat likes having its tail pulled.

From our background knowledge of cats – in particular, that they generally don't like having their tail pulled – we read this sentence **non-literally**. And of course the speaker isn't (non-literally) communicating the cat's dislikes simply as a matter of trivia, but in order to communicate a second (indirect) message: Stop pulling the cat's tail. The order to stop pulling the cat's tail is thus a piece of **indirect** communication, delivered via a piece of **non-literal** communication.

[4. Conclusion.] As it turns out, detecting non-literal and indirect speech is something we do so quickly and naturally that often the hardest part of pinning down the literal meaning of a sentence, and what the sentence is **only** communicating directly, is reining in our immediate reflex of reading non-literally, and attributing a further, indirect message to the speaker. So, for instance, there's a temptation to view the message "Stop pulling the cat's tail" as the only meaning of the sentence uttered (rather than a second message, accompanying the non-literal interpretation of the sentence uttered).

This sort of reaction is familiar from formal logic, when translating an English sentences into the formal language. For instance, we encountered the following sentence in practicing formal translation.⁶

Dr. Slim is a weasel who isn't a weasel.

This sentence was read as a **contradiction** (equivalent to the more obviously contradictory "Dr. Slim is a weasel but Dr. Slim isn't a weasel"). That is: we saw the same sentence, "Dr. Slim is a weasel" appearing twice here (the second time negated).

Yet students often want to read this instead as a case of equivocation, where two different messages are intended by the two utterances of "Dr. Slim is a weasel" – say, reading the words the first time as (non-literally) communicating that Dr. Slim is dishonest, and the second time as (literally) claim that Dr. Slim is a long, ferret-like mammal. In that case the sentence communicated would be the (entirely consistent) claim that Dr. Slim is a dishonest person who's not a member of the genus *Mustela*.

Once again formal logic pushed us to resist such natural inclinations, and to take the sentence at face value – that is, to read it literally. And once again this yields as result an understanding of the (literal, direct) interpretation of the words, stripped of contextual influence.

It wouldn't be fair to say that formal logic is thereby distorting the facts. For as we've seen, there is such a thing as the literal interpretation of a sentence, and that's what we focused on in formal logic. But we can say that formal

⁶ In 2.4.1 Problem C1.

logic treated sentences in a vacuum, yielding an idealized treatment of sentences that's in the same league as the frictionless plane or extension-less point-mass of intro Physics.]

[Can make point about context and unacceptable interpretations (explications): if we judge the literal claim that Neko is a vacuum cleaner to clash with the facts, we object all the moreso to the claim that Dr. Slim literally is a member of the genus *Mustela* and also isn't. Since that sentence is a contradiction, false in every possible situation, it's bound to be true in the actual context of utterance.]

[Added: question is whether to read "weasel" equivocally. If it's read univocally, on either reading the sentence is a contradiction. So to avoid contradiction we need to choose different interpretations of "weasel".

Further question: is the "'weasel'-as-dishonest-person' reading a non-literal reading of 'member of genus *Mustela*', or a literal reading of an idiomatic definition of 'weasel'? But can put that off for later. Reading has to be equivocal to avoid contradiction.]