

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 Dr. Slim perform a faro shuffle.

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

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

(2) Dr. Slim 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 Jake is good at counting cards, when said within eyeshot of Jake winning at blackjack.

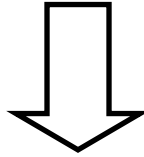
So when hearing (or reading) a sentence in a particular context, the first decision the audience must make is how to fix the meaning of variable terms such as the pronouns "he" and "that," and 'pro-verbs' such as "do" and "do so". That decision yields what is being said – more specifically, what is being 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 Dr. Slim and "doing that" to performing a faro shuffle, (1) is expressing just what (2) does, 'on the face of it'.

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

[Taking the words in a sentence “at face value” is interpreting that sentence **literally**.]

First Step in Interpreting an Utterance

The Sentence Uttered



What Claim is This Utterance Communicating (“On the Face of It”)?

Note that our practice, in formal logic, of replacing pronouns and ‘pro-verbs’ when building translation keys is performing just this task – the result being a sentence that can be understood without relying on the background context of utterance. And that’s typical of our approach in logic: striving to make each sentence understandable free of any background context is just one example of formal logic’s attempt to abstract away from pragmatic factors such as context.

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 use that and the dictionary meaning of words 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 is not the only one possible, and often not the one intended.

That might seem absurd, and for a simple enough reason: if we were 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. A speaker might utter the words “Hi, how’s it going?”, but intend them to mean “Look out! A piano is about to fall on top of you!” 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 mean any old thing by those words, but only a small range of possible (non-literal) messages. If all language users share a common stock of moves for using words and sentences non-literally, so that a speaker can count on her audience to know she's applying one of these non-literal uses, then her audience can successfully figure out what that speaker intends to communicate non-literally. Here we set out a little catalog of these non-literal uses.

(a) Irony / Sarcasm. 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 this context (where Rex has done something as dumb as locking himself out several times in one week), it's clear that she means the opposite. She doesn't intend to praise Rex for his genius, but rather to criticize him for being stupid.

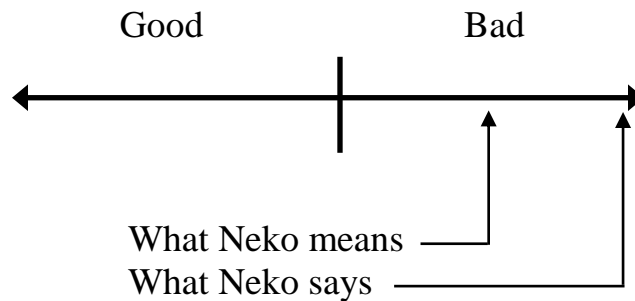
Neko (non-literally) communicates that Rex is very stupid, by stating that's he's very smart.

(b) 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.

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.



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

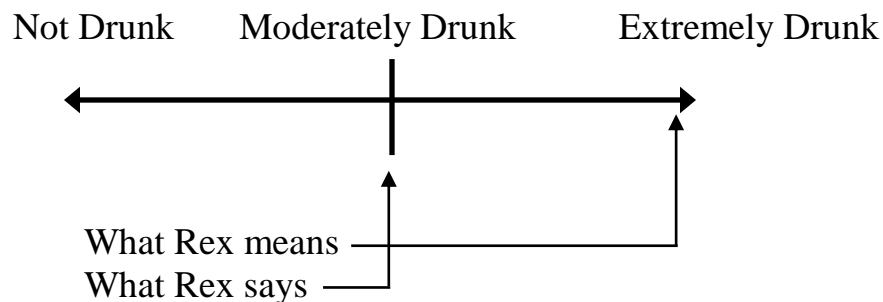
(c) Understatement. Communicating that something falls on extreme end of a range of possibilities, by stating that it one that side of the range.²

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.



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

² Adapted from Grice (XX:yy).

(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 is a regular Power-Vac when it comes to sushi.

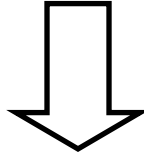
Jack (non-literally) communicates that Neko is in certain respects like a vacuum cleaner – say, in quickly taking in objects – by stating that Neko *actually is* a vacuum cleaner.

In each of these cases, the context of utterance – the situation before the audience, along with 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.³

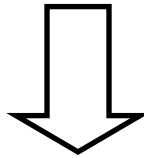
³ So the difference between **simile** and **metaphor** is the difference between **literal** and **non-literal** speech. If Jack utters the simile "Neko is like a vacuum cleaner when it comes to eating sushi" he's making a literal claim about a similarity between Neko and a vacuum cleaner. But if Jack 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 intended only to (non-literally) communicate a similarity.

***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?

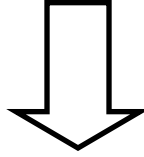
3. Indirect Communication. Even after a decision is made on interpreting an utterance literally or non-literally, there remains the further question whether what the sentence communicated (literally or non-literally) is the *only* message the speaker intended to communicate.

The example from the previous section illustrates what's being asked here: 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, the speaker intends to communicate that he can't help being in a No Parking zone; while in the tire store the speaker intends to communicate a request for help fixing his tire.

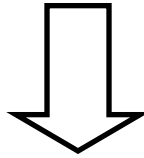
Such a second, unspoken message, communicated by what was spoken, is **indirect communication**. The decision whether there is such indirect communication, beyond what was directly communicated in words, marks a further interpretive decision.

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

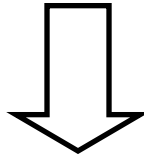
The Sentence Uttered



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?

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) stating the cat's dislikes as a mere bit of trivia, but in order to communicate a second 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.

As it turns out, detecting non-literal and indirect speech is something we do so quickly and so 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 meaning of the sentence uttered (rather than a second message, accompanying the non-literal interpretation of the sentence uttered).

[This is a familiar occurrence in formal logic, when translating an English sentences into the formal language. Consider the following, for example.

Elvis is a performer who isn't a performer.

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