

7.2.1 Pragmatics Problems: Types of Communication

A. For each of the following sentences, state which sort of **non-literal communication** is intended.

1. **Suki**: Can I have your french fries?

Neko (angrily): Sure, you can eat my whole dinner while you're at it!

What kind of non-literal communication is Neko engaged in?

2. **Elvis**: I have to have my car's engine entirely rebuilt.

Rex: Man, that should cost a few bucks.

What kind of non-literal communication is Rex engaged in?

3. **Letitia** (after describing how hard it was to redecorate her room in the sorority house): "It took *forever* to finish it!"

What kind of non-literal communication is Letitia engaged in?)

4. **Elvis**: Jake accidentally stapled his hand to the roof with a staple gun.

Jack: I'll bet that stung a little!

What kind of non-literal communication is Jack engaged in?

5. **Suki**: Dr. Slim is a real weasel.

Trixie: That's the understatement of the century.

a) What kind of non-literal communication is Suki engaged in?

b) What kind of non-literal communication is Trixie engaged in?

6. Two students wake up in class in Rex's class a half-hour after everyone else has left.

First student: Damn, our professor is the sandman!

What kind of non-literal communication is the student engaged in?

7. **Kitty:** Uh, waitress, I'd like that coffee sometime today.

What kind of non-literal communication is Kitty engaged in?

8. (After Neko has *Feline Groovy* on repeat play for half an hour:)

Barbie (under her breath): Whoever wrote that song should be shot!

Rex: Neko, if you play that song one more time I'm gonna kill myself!

a) What kind of non-literal communication is Rex engaged in?

b) What kind of non-literal communication is Barbie engaged in?

9. **Letitia** (after finding that her sorority has won "Best School Spirit" for the sixth year in a row): I couldn't be more pleased!

What kind of non-literal communication is Letitia engaged in?

10. **Dora:** Why not use Jezebel as the undercover agent to trap the sommelier?

Dick: Eh – she's not the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree.

Dora: Well then, how about having Kitty deliver the briefcase full of cash?

Dick: Kitty? She's not exactly the most honest person in the world.

What kind of non-literal communication is Dick engaged in in his first reply?

What kind of non-literal communication is Dick engaged in in his second reply?

B. Answer each of the following questions about **literal/non-literal** and **direct/indirect communication**.

1. While planning the luau, Rex worries that it might rain.

Barbie shrugs and says: If it rains, it rains.

a) Does Barbie mean her sentence to be read **literally**? (That is: does Barbie believe that *if it rains, it rains* – or does she, on the contrary, believe that *if it rains then it won't rain*?)

b) If we translate “If it rains, it rains” into the formal language, what sort of formal sentence results? (What does the truth table for that sentence look like?)

c) Does Barbie intend some **further, unspoken message** as well? (If so, what?)

2. **Jack**: Hey, where's that tuna sandwich I just made?

(Neko shrugs and looks at the floor).

Jack: Well, it didn't grow legs and walk away!

a) Does Jack mean that last sentence **literally**? (That is: does he genuinely believe that *the sandwich didn't grow legs and walk away*?)

b) What second, **indirect claim** is Jack making by uttering this last sentence?

3. Kitty holds a pose for several minutes while Dr. Slim fiddles with his camera.

Finally **Kitty** says: “Hey, I'm not getting any younger here.”

a) Does Kitty mean this sentence **literally**? (That is: does she genuinely believe that *she's not getting any younger*?)

b) What second, **indirect claim** is Kitty making by uttering her sentence?

4. After Jezebel insists that she knows all about cultivating medicinal plants, **Jack** replies: “**If you’re an expert on botany, then I’m Albert Einstein.**”

a) While Neko believes the conditional she’s directly communicated, she is obviously communicating a second (indirect) message. What is Neko **indirectly** communicating (i.e., without saying it in so many words)?

b) Note that the sentence Neko indirectly communicated – the answer to (a) – doesn’t follow validly from the conditional she uttered. Find a **second (obvious but unstated) premise** (in the Common Ground) which, when added to the conditional, would **validly entail** the sentence she (indirectly) communicated.

That is: fill in the blank for Premise 2, to yield a **valid** argument.

1. If Jezebel is an expert on botany, then Neko is Albert Einstein.
2. [**Premise from the Common Ground**]

∴ [Sentence (from (a)) which Neko indirectly communicated]

5. **Dick:** Would you like another martini?

Dora: You read my mind.

a) Does Dora mean her sentence to be read **literally**?

b) Does Dora intend some **further, unspoken message** as well? (If so, what?)

6. After the man in front of her at the fish market takes several minutes making his selection, **Neko** says: “Hey mister, I don’t have all day to stand around.”

a) Does Neko mean her sentence to be read **literally**?

b) Does Neko intend some **further, unspoken message** as well? (If so, what?)

C. Answer each of the following questions about questions.

1. **Kitty** (*introducing Dr. Slim at an election fundraiser*): And who better than Dr. Slim to cure the ills of our current situation?

What is the intended answer to Kitty's question?

2. (*Trixie finds Jake reading a comic book instead of sweeping out the bar.*)

Trixie: Hey, who gave you the day off?

a) What is the intended answer to Trixie's question?

b) What further indirect message is communicated by that answer?

3. **Dr. Slim**: Do you like making money?

Elvis: Who doesn't?

a) Elvis intends his question rhetorically – that is, takes the answer to his question to be obvious. What is the **obvious answer** to Elvis's question?

b) Based on that 'obvious answer,' what is Elvis's answer to Dr. Slim's question?

c) Suppose Elvis has instead replied as follows.

Elvis: Doesn't everyone?

Would his intended 'obvious answer' be equivalent to the answer from (b)?¹

4. **Jack**: We should vacation in Arizona this summer – wouldn't that be fun?

Neko: Sure, if getting stung by scorpions and dying of heat stroke is your idea of fun.

Appealing to the Common Ground – concerning whether people typically enjoy getting stung by scorpions and dying of heat stroke – what answer does Neko intend to Jack's question?

¹ For further information see the discussion of quantifier negation in 5.5.

5. (Continuing the example from the previous problem): suppose Neko had instead phrased her reply as follows.

Neko: Only if getting stung by scorpions and dying of heat stroke is your idea of fun.

a) Recognizing “only if” as a conditional phrase, state the whole conditional that Neko intends.

b) Build an argument whose premises are the conditional from (a), and the fact from the Common Ground about how well people like getting stung by scorpions, etc.; and whose conclusion is Neko’s (final) answer to Jack’s question (from 4).

1. Neko’s Conditional

2. **[Premise from the Common Ground]**

∴ [Sentence from (4) which Neko indirectly communicated]

Is this argument valid?

6. **Jake:** Those chicks in the back of the room were talking all through your lecture today.

Rex: Yeah, and what else is new?

Rex asking “What *else* is new” suggests that *this event was new*; does Rex really (**literally**) mean to communicate that their talking in class was new? (Why?)