

2.2. Types of Communication

Here we review 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 uttering 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, Ace may utter the following string of words when observing Rex perform a flawless K-turn.

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

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

(2) Rex is really good at performing a K-turn.

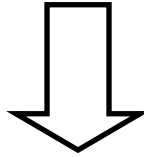
The effect of context here is to pin down what is meant by highly variable words and phrases such as "he" and "doing that". In other contexts an utterance of Sentence (1) might be used to express a quite different point – for example, *that Ace is good at playing darts*, when said within eyeshot of Ace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

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". That decision yields what is being said – more specifically, what is being said *on the face of it*, if the words are taken at face value. So, taking the words "really good" according to their dictionary sense, and "he" and "doing that" as referring to *Rex* and *performing a K-turn*, (1) is expressing just what (2) does.

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

First Step in Interpreting an Utterance

What's Said



What This Communicates (“On the Face of It”)

(Note that our practice, in formal logic, of replacing pronouns and ‘pro-verbs’ when building translation tables is performing just this task – the result being a table that can be understood without knowledge of the context of the original utterance, or even of the larger sentence that the subject matter sentence was a part of.)

2. Literal vs. Non-Literal Interpretation. What a string of words says, if taken “at face value,” is the **literal interpretation** of those words. And we bother with this finicky way of putting the point because taking words at face value – reading them literally – is not the only way of interpreting them.

That might seem absurd, and for a simple enough 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. 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) meanings. 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 is non-literally intending to communicate. 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 and rolling her eyes): That guy's a real genius.

Taking Neko's words at face value, 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.

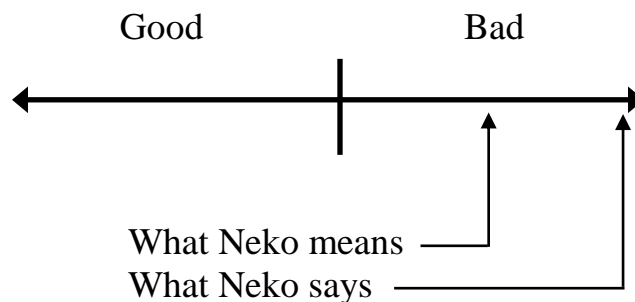
Neko (non-literally) communicates that Rex is very stupid, by stating that's he's very smart.

(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.

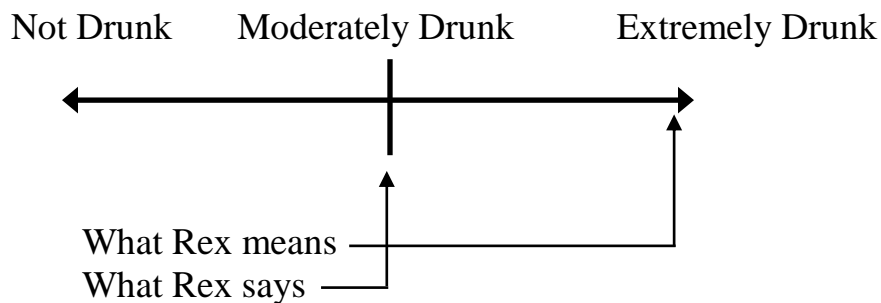
(c) Understatement. Communicating that something falls on extreme end of a range of possibilities, by stating that it one that side of the range.

Example:

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

Ace: 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.

(d) Part-for-Whole. Making a claim about an object, by referring only to a part of that object.

Example:

Suki: The all-you-can-eat buffet is \$20 a head.

Suki (non-literally) communicates that the buffet is \$20 per person, by stating how much it costs for a person's head.

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

Example:

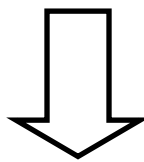
Jack: Neko is a regular Power-Vac when it comes to sushi.

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.

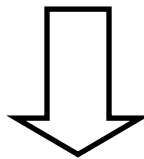
In each of these cases, the context of utterance – the situation before the audience, along with common knowledge in the Conversation Background, makes clear that the sentence utterance shouldn't be read literally. For example, locking oneself out repeatedly is not considered intelligent; so we suppose 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 don't read Jack literally when he says she is one.

So even after the literal, 'face value' meaning of the utterance is pinned down, we must still decide whether to accept that sentence at face value, or instead to interpret it as non-literal communication.

What's Said



What This Communicates ("On the Face of It")



Literal or Non-Literal Interpretation of What's Said?

Second Step in Interpreting an Utterance: Literal or Non-Literal?

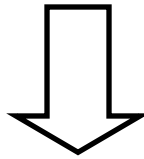
3. Indirect Communication. Even after a decision is made on interpreting an utterance literally or non-literally, there remains the further question whether what the sentence communicated (literally or non-literally) is the *only* message the speaker intended to communicate.

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.

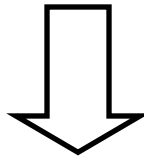
Such a second, unspoken message, communicated by what was spoken, is **indirect communication**. The decision whether there is such indirect communication, beyond what was directly communicated in words, marks a further interpretive decision.

Third Step in Interpreting an Utterance: Indirect Communication?

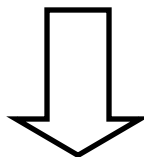
What's Said



What This Communicates (“On the Face of It”)



Literal or Non-Literal Interpretation of What's Said?



Further Indirect (Unspoken) Communication?