

Unit 3

Sophisticated Interpretation of Arguments

Introduction

The arguments we have looked at so far have been fairly simple. But the arguments people make in everyday speech and in everyday writing are often not so simple. If this course manual will help you get better at critical thinking, then it will have to teach you how to interpret and evaluate arguments of the sort that people really use, not just arguments of the sort that fit neatly into textbook theories. In this section you will learn about how to interpret arguments that are not as simple as those you have seen so far. But while you are thinking about all these complexities, keep in mind the most basic interpretative strategy of all. When trying to understand another person, it often helps to put yourself “in that person’s shoes.” Imagine that you yourself, in that context, had said (or written) those words. What would you have been thinking? Would you have been attempting to convince people by presenting them with supporting evidence? Would you have chosen these words because you wanted to express this idea or that one? Would you have asked this question because you did not know the answer or because you wanted people to see what the obvious answer was? Would you have meant this sentence to be part of the support for your point, or would it have been just a further thought you had? And so on. Thinking from the perspective of the arguing person is often just as helpful an interpretative technique as anything else this course can teach.

Learning objectives

When you have completed this unit you should be able to:

- identify indirectly expressed and implicit premises and conclusions;
- state premises and conclusions in the clearest ways; and
- express the theory of subconclusions and recognize these in arguments.

Assigned reading

None.

How to proceed

1. Read the study notes for unit 3.
2. Do the self-test exercises as you come to them. Answers are in the Answers to practice exercises section.

Study notes

Indirect and implicit premises and conclusions

Premises and conclusions are always most clearly expressed using complete statements. And so far, every argument we have considered has had a complete

sentence expressing each premise and the conclusion. This has been simple, but it is not realistic. People do not ordinarily to use complete sentences every time they want to get their ideas across, but this does not mean that they are not arguing. As long as a person is trying to convey an idea, and is also trying to put forward some reason for believing the idea, there is an argument. If full sentences are not used, this makes it harder to figure out what argument is being made, but it does not change the fact that there is an argument.

Here is an example. “Dogs” cannot be the clearest way to express a premise or a conclusion all on its own, because it is not a complete sentence. It could, however, suggest a premise or conclusion, such as “Dogs were the first domesticated animals.” Consider the following argument:

What animals were domesticated first? Dogs. So dogs have evolved together with humans longer than any other animal.

This should be interpreted as follows:

Premise 1 Dogs were the first domesticated animals.

Conclusion Dogs have evolved together with humans longer than any other animal.

What makes this the right interpretation of the premise? The person who made the argument was trying to convey the idea that dogs were the first domesticated animals. In order to express this idea, the person could have just said “dogs were the first domesticated animals,” but for whatever reason, the person did not choose to do so, instead chose to ask a question and then tell us the answer. But this technique conveys exactly the same idea. And since, when interpreting an argument, what we care about is the idea, and not how it was expressed, we take this question and answer and turn it into a single, clear sentence. Here is another example, on the same theme.

You know what the best animal in the world is? The dog. You know why? Unconditional love.

Some people might be tempted to interpret this argument as follows:

Premise 1 You know why? Unconditional love.

Conclusion You know what the best animal in the world is? The dog.

This, however, would be a mistake. First, premises and conclusions are clearest when presented as statements, not questions. Second, premises and conclusions are not clearly stated unless one uses complete sentences, not bits of sentences (“unconditional love,” “the dog”). A better interpretation would go as follows:

Premise 1 Dogs give unconditional love.

Conclusion The dog is the best animal in the world.

As the last example suggested, just as “dogs” cannot be used to state a premise or conclusion, “do you like dogs?” is likewise problematic. A question cannot be believed or disbelieved, after all, only answered or ignored, and so it cannot be a premise or a conclusion. The same is true for commands: “Take your dog for a

walk” cannot be a premise or conclusion because commands can only be obeyed or disobeyed, not believed or disbelieved. As has been said before, anytime you are going to state the premises and conclusion of an argument in the clearest form possible, you must use declarative sentences. Even so, this does not mean that other people will always use such sentences. People often argue using questions and commands in order to get ideas across indirectly, rather than stating them directly. This can make interpretation more challenging. But it generally remains possible to understand what a person really means, if you just ask yourself *why* a person is saying what he/she is saying. If the purpose is to convince you of a point by providing what is supposed to be evidence, then there is an argument, no matter how little it looks like a clear, reconstructed argument from a course manual. A premise or conclusion that is put across indirectly, through the use of questions or commands or exclamations, is *implicit*, implied but not stated openly. Here is another example:

Is the U.S. government behind the political troubles of Mexico? How can we doubt it when we think of its involvement in the troubles of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Chile in the years since 1970?

This is a good example of an argument with implicit premises and an implicit conclusion. The speaker tries to get the listener to believe that the U.S. government is behind the political troubles of Mexico—that is the speaker’s conclusion, but does not state the U.S. government is responsible. The speaker is just asking a question. Even so, it is clear that the speaker does not wish the listener to answer the question: the question is purely rhetorical, and the answer the speaker would give is made clear by the context. The same is true of the premises. Once again, they are put in the form of a question, but the question makes it clear what the speaker takes as evidence—the fact that the U.S. has been involved in the troubles of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Chile since 1970. Thus, the best interpretation of the argument would look like this:

Premise 1 The U.S. government has been involved in the troubles of El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Chile in the years since 1970.

Conclusion The U.S. government is behind the political troubles of Mexico.

There is a fine line between implicit premises and conclusions on the one hand, and things the author/speaker clearly believes but is not actually putting forward as premises or conclusions on the other hand. In general, it is best to be cautious about attributing implicit premises or conclusions to a person. After all, if the person wants you to accept some conclusion badly enough, he/she will probably come out with an explicit argument eventually.

As a general rule, do not attribute an implicit premise or conclusion unless the speaker/author says something explicit that suggests the implicit premise or conclusion. Asking a rhetorical question thus counts, as do statements ending in ellipsis (“So clearly we have no other choice but ...”), single words that are clearly standing in for full sentences, and the like. Things that the speaker believes, and which might be helpful to the argument, but to which the speaker does not allude explicitly are best thought of as part of the speaker’s background beliefs. These beliefs might be part of what makes it rational for the speaker to accept the

conclusion (if it *is* rational to do so) but they are not thereby made part of the argument.

Humour

One other point is worth making in this section. Sometimes, people use humour to make an indirect argument. The words the person actually uses say one thing (something humorous), but what the person making the argument really means is something else (something not particularly humorous). Sometimes, this is a matter of exaggeration:

ABC made a very smart move in buying Disney. Disney controls the minds of every six-year-old on the planet!

In this case, the actual argument being made is more like the following:

Premise 1 Disney is very influential with young children.

Conclusion ABC made a very smart move in buying Disney.

In interpreting the argument, it is necessary to take into account the fact that, although the person making the argument says something pretty extreme, that is not really what the person is trying to get across. The extreme statement is made only for humorous effect. What the person is really trying to get across is something more like Premise 1. And since arguments are made up of the ideas people try to get across, not the specific words they use to do so, it is necessary to see through the actual words to what is meant in order to interpret the argument correctly.

On other occasions, irony is used to make a point. That is, the person making the argument says the *opposite* of what is meant. Sometimes irony is obvious, but sometimes you have to know a little about what a person really thinks in order to guess that the person is being ironic, so this can be a tricky matter for an interpreter of an argument. Here is a simple example:

Oh yes, I think people should be allowed to carry handguns for self-defence. But let's remember who gets physically attacked most often: school children. And if everyone at risk of violence should be allowed to carry a gun, school children should be allowed to carry handguns too. Maybe .22 calibre pistols—nothing too heavy, or they won't be able to aim. But then, it is hard for young children to aim any sort of firearm, so maybe they should be allowed weapons that require less aim, like hand grenades or flame throwers. A great idea, right? After all, we all need to be able to protect ourselves!

It is tricky to figure out exactly what argument is being made here, but the conclusion is definitely the opposite of what is actually said in the first sentence. A good interpretation of the argument might look something like this:

Premise 1 School children are physically attacked more often than adults.

Premise 2 If everyone at risk of physical attack should be allowed to carry a gun, then school children should be allowed to carry handguns.

Premise 3 It would not be good for school children to carry handguns or other weapons.

Conclusion People should not be allowed to carry handguns for self-defence.

Whenever humour is used to make an argument, you must be careful in your interpretation of the argument. Humour often makes it hard to pin down *exactly* what a person means, because the person does not say exactly what he means, instead making a humorous remark that only *suggests* the actual thought. This puts you in a tricky situation. Still, there is nothing wrong with an argument that uses humour. It just makes your life, as the interpreter of the argument, a little tougher.

Choosing the right words

Even once you understand what argument is being made, there are a few more things that you need to keep in mind in order to communicate your understanding to other people.

Every premise and conclusion can be put in the form of a statement, but statements can be more or less complex. Suppose Dale makes an argument to Cynthia in which the following statement appears: “If you loved me you wouldn’t yell at me, but you keep yelling anyway.” Should you regard this as a single premise:

Premise 1 If Cynthia loved Dale, she wouldn’t yell at him, but she keeps yelling anyway.

Or should you regard it as two premises?

Premise 1 If Cynthia loved Dale, she wouldn’t yell at him.

Premise 2 Cynthia keeps yelling at Dale.

This is a tricky question, and there is no one best way to answer it—the best answer depends on what techniques you plan to use to analyze the logical relations among the premises. For the purposes of this discussion, break up premises into as many distinct statements as you reasonably can, without changing the meaning of what is said. In the case of the above example, then, it would be better to see Dale’s claim as involving two premises rather than one.

This example also illustrates another feature of word choice in argument interpretation. When stating someone else’s argument, it is generally clearest if you substitute the referents of pronouns for pronouns when this helps to keep things clear, and in general try to make the statement of the argument as clear as possible. That is, when you are reporting an argument between Dale and Cynthia, it is generally best to use names rather than words like “you” and “me”. The point was made once before, the first time argument interpretation was discussed, but it always bears repeating. Here is an example. Suppose George says the following:

There is a long line to see *Casablanca*. I was just there and saw it.

The best analysis of George’s argument would look something like this:

Premise 1 George was just at the movie theatre.

Premise 2 George saw there was a long line to see *Casablanca* at the theatre.

Conclusion There is a long line to see *Casablanca* at the theatre.

This reconstruction, though wordy, has the advantage that it makes clear everything that can be made clear in George’s argument.

Clarity sometimes means changing words. It also sometimes means leaving some words out. Sometimes a person will make two separate statements in an argument, though they both mean the same thing (roughly), and are intended to contribute to clarity, or provide emphasis. In such cases, it is best to reconstruct the argument using only one, or using some third phrase, which makes clear what both the others have in common. For example:

You should always look before leaping. The other day a friend lost a thousand dollars when the company in which he had invested went broke. He didn't have a clue his money was at risk, because he hadn't bothered to check his investment out carefully. It just goes to show that: you have to think carefully before doing something like that.

Premise 1 The other day a friend of the speaker's lost a thousand dollars when the company in which the friend had invested went broke.

Premise 2 The friend didn't have a clue his money was at risk, because he hadn't checked his investment out carefully.

Conclusion One ought to think carefully before taking a potentially risky action.

The person making the argument begins with a statement of the conclusion ("you should always look before leaping"), and finishes with another statement of it ("you have to think carefully before doing something like that"). However, neither of these are as clear as possible. The first sentence is not meant literally, and the last involves a demonstrative ("that"), which might not be clear. The conclusion as given in the analysis solves this problem by being literal and clear, without changing the meaning in any significant way.

Another related complication is that sometimes information will be provided that is the background to an argument, but not part of the argument itself. For instance:

Some people think that Elvis is dead. But hundreds of people have reported seeing Elvis since his supposed death, and they can't all be wrong. So I think Elvis is alive.

The structure of this argument looks like this:

Premise 1 Hundreds of people have reported seeing Elvis since his supposed death.

Premise 2 The people who have reported seeing Elvis since his supposed death can't all be wrong.

Conclusion Elvis is alive.

The original argument begins with the sentence "Some people think that Elvis is dead." But this is not part of the argument itself.

Stating beliefs in arguments

An important variation on this theme, which was just illustrated, is that people will often say or write "I think that...", "I believe that...", "it is clear to me that...", and so on, when putting forward a premise or conclusion that has nothing to do with the persons *thoughts*, but everything to do with *what* the person thinks. For example:

Many people have seen Elvis recently. So I think Elvis is alive.

Here is the correct interpretation:

Premise Many people have seen Elvis recently.

Conclusion Elvis is alive.

What makes this the correct interpretation? Well, the speaker says “I think Elvis is alive,” but that is not the conclusion. If it were, who could argue with it? After all, if the speaker tells me that is what is believed, how could I doubt *that the speaker believes it*? Clearly, the conclusion of the argument is not that the speaker has a particular belief, but that what the speaker believes is true—namely, that Elvis is in fact alive. So although the speaker says “I think Elvis is alive,” her conclusion is that Elvis is alive.

Sometimes, it must be said, a person *will* try to argue a certain belief. A person might say “The crazy thing is that I *do* believe that John hates me. I know it’s irrational, but just look at how I break out in a sweat every time he comes near. I must believe that he has something against me. I think the belief comes from the fact that he looks a little like my horrible step-father.” Usually, however, when a person says “I think that...” in an argument, or other phrases with similar significance, the “I think that” is not part of a premise or a conclusion.

Practice exercise 5

Read over the following arguments, and identify the premises. State them as clearly as possible, taking into account everything just covered in the previous two sections. Answers are in the Answers to practice exercises section.

- a. How can anyone deny that Jimi Hendrix is the greatest guitarist ever? Even his version of “The Star Spangled Banner” was brilliant. And I think his own compositions were better still.
- b. People never listen to George. But believe George when he tells you that alcohol is the great deceiver. Alcoholics are always the last to know they have a problem, and alcohol makes people think that bad ideas are good ones.
- c. You shouldn’t count on Franz to help you out in a fight. He’s so weak that babies take candy from *him*.
- d. Go out this very minute to buy the new Dodge Viper! Everyone knows that the old Viper had uncomfortable seats and was less than fully impressive at high speeds. But that is now irrelevant. The new Viper continues to be fast, fast, fast, plus it also has a new, comfortable interior, and great acceleration up to its insanely high top speed. You will not be happy with any other car!
- e. Politicians should not select any person whose job it is to monitor them for ethical behaviour. After all, corrupt politicians would naturally choose corrupt monitors, and there is no point in having corrupt ethical monitors. Basically, it makes about as much sense to have politicians choose ethical overseers as it does to have Satan choose the next Pope.

- f. What are the right flowers to send to a funeral? I would say that lilies are the right flowers to send. They are traditional. Or would you send something romantic like red roses?
- g. Will the miniskirt ever really be out of fashion? Yes. It was never in fashion until the late 1960s, and fashion is so changeable that eventually we must return to the idea that the mini is inappropriate. Or we will conclude that it is dull, at least.
- h. Sue wants me to come to the John Cage concert. And I like her. But I would rather have rats devour both my eyes than listen to two hours of John Cage's "music." So on balance, it seems that I shouldn't go.
- i. The origins of Halloween are pagan, but even under Christianity it was long thought to be a day when the dead walked among the living. These days, though, Halloween is a commercial rip-off. Flimsy, one-use costumes cost \$20 and there is pressure to put up decorations that just get thrown away after a few days.
- j. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a better program than its spin-off, *Angel*. The first time a group of friends goes around hunting demons and vampires, it's something new. But how original is it to have the second group go hunting demons and vampires? Just making the second group wear more black clothing does *not* count as originality.

Subconclusions

A complication in the very structure of argumentation is the fact that some arguments contain other arguments nested inside them. When this happens, there will be an overall argument, with a conclusion that can be called the *main conclusion*. As part of the argument for the main conclusion, there will be one or more *subconclusions*, reached as the result of arguments nested inside the larger argument. These subconclusions serve as premises for the main conclusion. For example:

Caitlin says that Dylan hates me. Since Caitlin likes me and doesn't like Dylan, she has no reason to lie, so probably Dylan hates me. But if Dylan hates me, then he'll tell Justin about what happened at the dance. So Justin knows.

A reconstruction of this argument will look something like the following:

Premise 1 Caitlin says that Dylan hates me.

Premise 2 Caitlin likes me.

Premise 3 Caitlin doesn't like Dylan.

Subconclusion 1 Caitlin has no reason to lie.

[Supported by Premises 2 and 3 together.]

Subconclusion 2 Probably Dylan hates me.

[Supported by Premise 1 and Subconclusion 1 together.]

Premise 4 If Dylan hates me, then he'll tell Justin about what happened at the dance.

Conclusion Justin knows what happened at the dance.

[Supported by Premise 4 and Subconclusion 2 together.]

Subconclusions are like main conclusions, in that they are things you are offered reasons to believe. They are also like premises, in that they are offered to you as reasons to believe the main conclusion. So which are they, premises or conclusions? The answer is that they are both. But they need some name, and so they will be called “subconclusions” here.

A complex example

To finish off this unit, another more complex example may also be helpful in giving you the general idea. Consider the following argument:

Think about hallucinations. When you hallucinate, say, pink elephants (like Dumbo), you see something that is pink and shaped like an elephant. But there is nothing in front of you that is pink, or elephant-shaped, much less a real pink elephant. So what you see during hallucination must be something in your mind, not something outside your mind.

Here is an interpretation of this argument, going step-by-step through the reasoning process used in interpreting it:

An argument is being presented: there is something the author wants me to believe, and reasons are presented for believing it.

The first sentence, “Think about hallucinations,” is not part of the argument—it is just a suggestion to the reader, something to get the reader ready for the argument that follows it. Because it is a command, rather than a statement, it is fairly obvious that it is not a premise or a conclusion (though it might have suggested an implicit premise or conclusion).

Conclusion What one sees during hallucination must be something in one’s mind, not something outside one’s mind.

This is clearly the conclusion. The word “so” introduces the conclusion, which is a strong hint. But also, it is clear from context that this is what the author wants me to believe. I have replaced “you” with “one” to make it clear that the author’s point is perfectly general—it is not meant to apply to just one person or group of people.

Premise 1 When one hallucinates, say, pink elephants, one sees something that is pink and shaped like an elephant.

Premise 2 When one hallucinates, say, pink elephants, there is nothing in front of one that is pink, or elephant-shaped, much less a real pink elephant.

These two premises were a little trickier. No words make it particularly obvious that these statements are intended as support for the conclusion. However, the fact that they are so intended is clear from context. After all, if the speaker is trying to put forward a claim, some evidence is needed, and these statements look like the sort of thing that might be intended as evidence by the speaker. The premises have been divided into two rather than one since they appear as separate sentences in the original, and since they express distinct ideas. No further division would leave full sentences behind.

Practice exercise 6

The following arguments all contain subconclusions. Some also contain the sorts of complications under discussion in sections 3.1 and 3.2. Once again, your job is simply to interpret these arguments. What are the premises? What are the subconclusions? What are the main conclusions?

- a. I think we can safely say that rap music will be the dominant form of popular music from now on. From this it follows that rap artists will eventually be recognised as great artists, equivalent to Beethoven or Mozart, and so we should not be putting them down the way some people do these days.
- b. People protest against the World Trade Organization. No one protests over nothing. So the WTO must be doing something to make people angry. But the protesters are mostly hippies and punks, I guess. So the WTO is probably doing something wrong, but not too wrong.
- c. Human beings are basically a type of ape. After all, at a biological level we have more in common with chimps than chimps have with gorillas. So do we have any justification for saying we're very special? Hardly.
- d. Coffee is addictive, so you need to drink more over time to get the same effect. Heroin is also addictive, so again you need to use more over time to get the same effect. It just goes to show that all aspects of our society, both legal and illegal, are built on ever-increasing consumption.
- e. Many drug-manufacturing companies engage in what they call "patent busting" research. In this form of research, the company identifies a profitable drug made by a rival company and attempts to find a very closely related drug, having similar effects, that is not covered under any existing patent. Patent-busting research is cheaper than purely original research, since it involves less guessing. It also has predictable returns, since the nearly-copied drug is already known to have a certain market and profitability. However, the benefits to the consumer of developing nearly-copied drugs is very small, since the new drug has almost the same effects, and is sold at almost the same cost. This just goes to show that sometimes what is efficient for the market is not what is best for the consumer.
- f. Contrary to what most people think, hunter-gatherer societies are not naturally in tune with nature. The arrival of human beings in North America coincides with the extermination of most large mammals that were here at the time. But was it just a coincidence? I doubt it, and so there was at least one large collection of hunter-gatherers who wiped nature out rather than living in harmony with it. The same goes for Australia, where again a mass extinction coincides with the arrival of the first human beings. There is also evidence that these first humans hunted by setting fire to the forests, and so created the massive desert that fills the middle of that continent.
- g. There is no room in business for ethical behaviour. In a competitive society the weak businesses get wiped out—POW!—gone. After all, when someone wins the competition, someone else has to lose it. Trying to be ethical means being

weak, because it means accepting limitations on how you will compete, and accepting limitations means not competing as effectively as possible.

- h. Does reducing the number of handguns owned by honest citizens increase or decrease handgun-related crime? Well, in general, the easiest way for a criminal to get a handgun is to buy one that has been stolen from an honest citizen. So any decrease in honestly owned handguns will bring about a decrease in the number of handguns owned by criminals. So you shouldn't listen to people who say that if we make guns illegal, only criminals will have guns.