

Pretending to Communicate

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On Non-Serious Talk: Some Cross-Cultural Remarks on the (Un)importance of (not) Being Earnest

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The paper explores the notion of seriousness/non-seriousness in talk and characterizes non-playful and playful non-seriousness. The notion of "light talk" is proposed as illustrative of the non-playful non-serious talk. Indeterminacy of utterance, and easy-going-ness of beliefs, goals and attitudes is proposed as characteristic of non-serious talk. Teasing is examined as an ambivalent talk type in the playful non-serious domain where interactants' joint negotiation of import may be seen to occur. Comparison is made between *British* and *S. Italian (Naples)* cultural styles.

1. Introduction

One purpose of this paper is to explore how certain types or "forms of talk" (Goffman 1981) or "speech genres" (see e.g. in Wierzbicka 1990, 149ff), might be seen as "pretending to communicate". Intuitively I latched onto what I saw as a relevant and possibly clarificatory distinction between *seriousness* and *non-seriousness* in talk. But I found, that although "an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance" (Austin 1962, 9), the notion of seriousness is not a basic, simplex, and anyway clear, notion although it seems intuitively meaningful and has thus been used to clarify other notions within different disciplines (see e.g. Simmel (1911) 1961, 161; Huizinga 1949, 68; Chisholm/Feehan 1977, 151; Austin 1970, 261). Bateson (1953) and Austin (1962, 9–10) seem to tackle or question it more directly.

A further aim of this paper, then, is to suggest a tentative definition of seriousness/non-seriousness in talk. Furthermore, the use, importance and evaluation of serious and non-serious talk may differ culturally, reflecting/constituting local theories of reality (see also Geertz 1973; Duranti 1988, 15), "principles of interpretation" (Moerman 1987, 4), or, essentially, local theories of communication (see also Lindstrom 1992; Rosaldo 1982; Ochs Keenan 1976).

2. Some premises and attempts at definitions

2.1 Seriousness in talk can be seen (among other things) to involve speaker beliefs and intentions, as do “pretending” and “communicating”. *Pretending* is deceptive; however, I believe that non-serious talk need not always involve pretence or *deception* concerning one’s beliefs and intentions or goals¹. I want to show, given my (plausible, I hope) definition of non-seriousness, that deceptiveness or insincerity is not a distinguishing trait. Both *serious* and *non-serious* talk can be used either sincerely or not. The problem is that non-serious talk can give rise cross-culturally to misperception of (in)sincerity. This might derive, I suggest, from cultural differences in local epistemologies, where among other things, there may be different values assigned to literal truthfulness (see Vincent Marrelli 1989, 1992; George 1990).

2.1.1. In some previous work (Castelfranchi/Vincent 1979; Vincent/Castelfranchi 1981) we explored sincere and deceptive (verbal and non-verbal) moves in terms of goal-analysis. We defined sincerity, or a speaker as being sincere, as when a speaker intentionally communicates something *s/he assents* to, or consciously believes, i. e. believes *s/he* believes. And we defined pretending as an act of deception where a speaker or agent non-communicatively acts as if *s/he* assented to something (lying, for example, was a type of linguistic pretending). Acting we saw as the intentional communication of one’s pretending, i. e. as intentionally non-deceptive. Pretending and acting can be seen, respectively, as the covert and overt simultaneous entertainment/manipulation of two worlds, one considered true/real/authentic the other false/imaginary/fake.

For Austin, an “important feature of pretending”, “in classic cases, if not in all, (is) that the pretender is concealing or suppressing something” (1970, 260). So one has to consider “the pretence-behaviour” which serves to dissemble the reality “about which the audience is to be hoodwinked”. The pretender’s behaviour, however, is also simulating some “genuine-behaviour”, that which it is meant to resemble, and he will have to be simulating “genuinity” successfully, in order to achieve his aim of concealing or *dissembling* the reality. “Genuine” behaviour must not coincide with pretence behaviour or you end up really doing something, although you may not be doing it “seriously” (see Austin 1970, 260–261). This seems to connect the notion to intentions. In pretending, one could be said to be simulating seriousness.

¹ In this essentially inter-disciplinary approach I shall be using the terms intentions and goals synonymously (see Hobbs 1990, 446).

2.1.2. But what of seriousness? One could do worse than start with the range of meanings involved in the ordinary language use of the notion (as indeed is reflected in Bateson 1953). Dictionary and thesaurus entries in various languages (English, Italian, French, Spanish, German) seem to coalesce around three main cores: 1) gravity, non-playfulness, earnestness, solemnity; 2) sincerity, responsibility; 3) thought-out-ness or conviction (of beliefs and goals/consequences), intentionality.

2.1.3 For Chisholm/Feehan (1977:151), seriousness (and “solemnity”) is what characterizes “assertion”: “What one asserts is meant to be taken seriously”, and thus seriousness implies an “assuming of responsibility” in that, differently from statement which can be uttered non-seriously, i. e. when it is in play or in irony, an assertion carries by definition, an epistemic guarantee, a (communicated) guarantee of the speaker’s commitment to the truth of the proposition asserted and that he believes he is justified in believing that p and that he intends his hearer to believe that he believes that p.²

2.1.4 From another perspective (using hints from Bateson 1953 where he contrasts games and seriousness) we can also say that in pretending, the deceptive speaker (or agent) is “playing games with” the addressee, while, in acting, a speaker (or agent) is playing a game “together with” the interactant. Deceiving would be cheating with the hearer’s assumption that the speaker is being serious (i. e. “not playing”) or it could be seen as cheating in a game (albeit a mutable and negotiable one), e.g. pretending to be in a cooperative “game” when it really is a competitive one³.

² Lying, according to Chisholm/Feehan would *not* be “non-serious” since a liar is (apparently, or pretending to be) making an assertion (unlike playful or joking talk and irony where he manifestly is not), i. e. guaranteeing and justifying through assumed faith in him the truth of what he is saying: the “liar intends to contribute to D’s acquiring the belief that he, the liar, is now asserting something that he accepts” (op. cit: 153)

³ The cooperative principle is not necessarily a universal *default mode* of interpretation for all individuals nor, indeed, for all cultures. In Naples, for example, to quite a high degree, *diffidence*, with strangers, (doubting a speaker’s sincerity or motives) is considered wise by many Neapolitans. It is, indeed, with “furbizia”, “willingness, cleverness” one of the “common-places”/stereotypes of Neapolitans. It is particularly relevant to “sub-proletarians” (see Borrelli 1969, Allum 1973, for some socio-ethno-historical depth to S.Italian and Neapolitan culture using the “*gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*” distinction; see also Schwarz 1990 on *in-group* vs *out-group* solidarity). Blind trust and taking things at face-value denote “ingenuità”, (naivety) and that is something for which one will be, significantly, incessantly teased. The British are more squeamish about being strategic (hypocritical, the S.Italian would say); they tend to equate it with immorality or even evil (see Machiavelli’s enduring notoriety in Britain). Modern Machiavellians Dixit/Nalebuff (1991, 2), reporting the Hungarian humorist George Mikes’ quip, say: “‘Many continentals think life is a game; the English think cricket is a game’ We think both are right.” (Need I add that I am prototypically polarizing the two cultural/cognitive styles I am comparing, and many British and Neapolitan readers may not wish to recognize themselves here).

Seriousness then is “not-play”. Huizinga (1949, 68) also sees play as the unmarked prime concept and seriousness as simply its negation. Furthermore, “*Play* is of a superior order since ‘seriousness’ attempts to exclude ‘play’, while ‘play’ may well include ‘seriousness’” (my transl.). Indeed “we may classify many fundamental categories of life as non-serious, and which do not yet correspond to play.” (Huizinga, 1949, 22). Play creates a second imagined world beside the natural one, sometimes a secret mysterious one; play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. In play one “transfigures reality”. Disguise (‘travestimento’) combines the secretiveness and the ‘unusualness’ of play. “The disguised or masked person ‘plays’ at being another. He ‘is’ another” (31). Play is, indeed, “*illusion*” (viz. lat. in-ludere) (see Huizinga 1949, 17-31).

“Play” then shares many essential characteristics of pretending/acting, especially this Janus-like double-face. The player- and the deceiver- indeed, may take as their motto “I am not what I am” (as does Shakespeare’s Iago (Othello: Act I scene i verse 71), see e.g. Vincent 1982). The difference between them is merely the manifestness of the duplicity, the sharing of the secret, the sharing of the illusion.

2.1.5. So, the notion of seriousness seems to involve thus both intentions and beliefs of an action/utterance, as well as some characteristic to be defined on the dimension of performance of that action, for, if seriousness is not-play, not-pretending, not-acting, not-illusion, then it means matching performance or “*rappresentazione*” (both terms used in drama i. e. in the context of acting) with one’s belief of what is real: i. e. seriousness is representing what you believe you believe.

Non-seriousness is not necessarily “play”, however. Indeed, I want to examine the different types of non-seriousness here. The non-play type of non-seriousness, and then, the play type. But the above has served, I hope, to discern that, although these may be separated out, they are also closely connected, as, after all, the existence of a single lexeme implies.

2.2. One basic thing I shall need to do here, among others, is to weaken our previous stricter definition of sincerity, hoping to thus gain some width in perspective which might enable me to get some hold of the cross-cultural problem which has been bothering me for some time (see Vincent Marrelli 1989, 1992).

The first thing I think we need to do is re-instate a distinction in talk when communicating that *p*, between believing that *p*, and believing one believes that *p*, in other words between not-necessarily-*conscious* belief and conscious belief (see Mellor 1978). But, I think we also need to consider

degrees of certainty or definiteness of belief⁴ and to toy with the idea of easy-going *belief* (and with a who-cares?, or an it's-not-really-important-at-the-moment-is-it? attitude to truth of p).

We also, I suggest, need to assume that (similarly to types of entertainment of belief) a speaker may not have clearly defined or conscious goals. The goal level I am considering here is that regarding whether an interlocutor comes to believe p, (or that the speaker believes p) as a result of the action. A speaker may be *easy-going*, uncertain or *non-committal* about this *goal*. There may be an easy-going-ness (a conscious or unconscious it-doesn't-really-matter-either-way-whether B believes p (or believes I believe p)).

So, let me now propose, here, a tentative definition of seriousness based both on i) the difference between: a) believing that p and b) believing one believes that p; and ii) the difference between a) having non-committal goals, and b) having a clearly defined plan and/or end-goal. I shall call the actions based on the intersection of i-b) and ii-b) "serious talk", except when p and the *assent* to not-p are simultaneously communicated, and those outside this intersection set "non serious talk"; in this latter set are to be found types of talk which involve both superficial/non-conscious beliefs or goals (like what I shall call "*light talk*" and some forms of loose talk), and playful talk, (like joking and irony, and to some extent teasing) where p and the assent to not-p are simultaneously communicated. Joking or acting, indeed, can be seen as moves which communicate p, but, at the same time, communicate that the speaker does not believe that p, nor assent to p.

We can have sincere and insincere talk both in the serious and in the non serious domains, thus:

a) Insincere serious talk:

This is essentially intentional deception as we defined it in Vincent/Castelfranchi (1981:753). It can be summarized as follows: A deceptive move is one which has the definite, conscious, goal of getting the hearer to make a false assumption. A false assumption for A is one which he assumes and intends to be different from that which he believes he believes.

b) Insincere non-serious talk:

A deceptive move is one which has the conscious goal of getting the hearer to make a false assumption. A false assumption for A is one which he assumes and intends to be different from that which he believes.

⁴ Austin (1946) 1970, 81) was exploring, if I have understood him correctly, similar aspects of types of knowing and believing.

Note that the difference lies in the fact that in a) a speaker assents to *p*, and in b) he merely believes *p*. Furthermore, b) is different from A believing he has no beliefs about *p* or not *p*. This would still involve conscious consideration of one's beliefs and would therefore be "serious" and "insincere" if A conveys *p* to B as if he assented to *p*.

However, in a more general framework (or definition of seriousness), it's at levels of goals or intentions and at their manifestness (communicativeness), that we must look (see also Mizzau 1979, 27ff). One can have serious super-goals while using non-serious talk. Certainly the playful type of non-serious talk (like joking) and all other types of social or sociable talk (like 'gossip', so-called 'phatic communion', etc.) may have clearly defined super-goals, such as "making friends with so and so", or "breaking the ice" or "consolidating my role/identity as a wit", or "diffusing anxiety", "or seeing what so and so is like" etc. etc. Such social goals, of course can of course also be non-serious, not clearly defined, non-committal (it-doesn't- really-matter- how -things- turn- out).

I must just add that just as speakers can be more or less easy-going about beliefs and goals (communicative and/or social), although it may not be a totally separate element, they can be also more or less interested in the person they are interacting with. This may be often paramount to not caring about how things turn out but not necessarily. One can have serious goals when interacting with a stranger, especially if s/he is not a member of one's in-group, yet not care about the stranger nor what s/he thinks about you

Finally, we must see the communication process not simply in terms of speakers' beliefs, intentions, attitudes, but recognize that hearers together with speakers. determine the outcome of an interaction; they may be said to jointly construct and *negotiate* or define the *meaning of talk*.⁵

2.3. Let us now look at the two types of non-seriousness: non-playful and playful talk.

i) There are two sub-types of *non-serious non-playful talk*, what may be called *underdetermined* utterance (we would be therefore in the domain of

⁵ Note that my view of beliefs and intentions (inspired by insights from 'interpretive anthropology' and the Bakhtinian 'dialogic' perspective (see e.g. Duranti 1988, Goodwin/Duranti 1991)) implies a speaker's view of a hearer not as a projection of his/her wants or desires, nor as one whose job it is merely to understand what the speaker, as sole artificer of the meaning making process, "means"; rather, my speaker is aware from the start that a hearer may define or re-define, negotiate, jointly construct out of the potential meanings, the eventual meaning of the talk. Having said that, however, I do not believe that meaning is totally amorphous until a hearer ratifies or co-defines it. If a hearer had no beliefs or intentions of some sort when initiating an exchange, we could not sensibly consider the issue of sincerity or deception or strategic thinking, which, is surely not exclusive to the 'monologic' or 'personalist' type of cultural style.

linguistic meaning, cognitive goals, truth values, sincerity judgments and the like): a) what I shall call *light* or superficial talk (talk which involves superficiality of and/or underdetermined degrees of beliefs and intentions, I am thinking of the sense of Italian “leggerezza”), and, b) *loose* or vague⁶ talk (talk which involves underdetermined degree of *literalness* and degrees of resemblance to a speaker’s (and hearer’s assumed) thought (belief).

ii) We can then focus on the social and *affective* dimension of *sociable*⁷ talk (i. e. talk principally for bringing about *sociability* (see Simmel 1961), or *solidarity*, (or “comity” (see Aston 1990)), i. e. talk with primarily affective and social i. e. “interactional” goals (see Ciliberti/Aston 1990), rather than involving beliefs and cognitive goals or transaction of information: Tannen’s *rapport* talk (vs report talk) (1991, 74ff), indeed. Within this type I should like to look mainly at *playful* talk (and mainly at one of its more arguable sub-types- *teasing* (where hostility and friendliness, play and seriousness, are in the balance))⁸.

3. Discussion of some illustrative cases

3.1. *Loose Talk, Light talk*

As a long-term *British* expatriate living in Naples⁹ I have been privileged to participate in a culture that has enabled me (forced me) to constantly question many assumptions I would otherwise have taken to be “natural” or universally valid, concerning in particular the nature and function of language, and of social relationships in general (see also Vincent Marrelli 1989, 92).

3.1.1. My habit of regularly ordering by phone from my local grocer’s and greengrocer’s has provided me with some very tangible evidence of

⁶ I am therefore using loose talk in the sense of Sperber/Wilson (1986) 1991, rather than that of Gatewood 1983, where the latter used it to mean, for example, using a word without knowing its meaning (e.g. people may call something “indigo” in English (to sound smart perhaps) while knowing they don’t really know what colour it is)); indeed, I would call this “light” talk. However, calling reddish-brown boots: “red”, for example, may be seen as a loose use in my sense (and this type of looseness is very common among males in S. Italy (see Vincent Marrelli 1987)).

⁷ “Simmel included as inherently sociable those activities in which serious domains of social life were reframed and consciously indexed as nonserious replications of themselves, for example, play, games and flirtation.” (Schiffirin 1984, 315).

⁸ See also Miller (1986, 210) on the unstable nature of the frame “this is play” (Bateson 1972).

⁹ My parents are French, but I was born and brought up in S. Britain and have now lived as many years in Naples and S. Italy (from Rome to Calabria), the home-range of my in-laws.

the sort of misunderstanding that can come from the mis-matching of the a) type above. The following (reconstructed) example illustrates both loose and light talk (or rather loose interpretation and light talk by the Assistant (A), and her assumption that I (the Customer (C)) was using loose talk and light interpretation:

(C: customer A: assistant)

C: ... (at a point in listing) e poi una confezione di Acqua Vera¹⁰.
C'è?

A: sì, c'è.

C: ah bene, allora una di quelle per piacere, ...

(C: and then a pack of A.V., have you got any/is there any? A:
Yes, we have/there is. C: OK then please send me one of
those, ...)

What was delivered to me was however a six-pack of a different, although same-priced, brand of non-fizzy mineral water, which was no good to me since I had wanted Acqua Vera specifically in order to be able to enter my children for a competition which that particular (and no other) brand was sponsoring. I might also have wanted it for some other unique characteristic, but in ordinary (i. e. non-specified, *ceteris paribus*) circumstances, in Naples anyway, the use of a token label (e.g. a particular brand name) may legitimately stand for a type and thus be replaced by another token of the same type. This is not exclusive to *Neapolitan* discourse style of course but I do believe that it is much more regularly used here, indeed, perhaps for some speakers, often the default mode of interpretation, literal intent needing to be marked rather than the other way round. Certainly one would be considered over fussy to complain if the substitute token is "close enough" and "just as good". ("*è la stessa cosa*" (it's the same thing) is a typical often heard expression of easy-goingness)). In fact their act of sending the other brand is communicative in that it implies just this: that they see it, and mean it to be seen that they see it, as "the same thing". We would have here then cases of *loose* talk and *loose* interpretation, where a specific term is not taken literally, or seriously, and is interpreted, and usually meant, generally. One can also have the inverse where a general label is used to refer to specific referents when there is no felt need to be more specific. Again this has struck me as being much more common in S. Italy than in England. What I believe might be seen as further examples of loose talk usage but which involve degree of similarity rather than the use of hypo-, hyperonyms, or substitute synonyms come from my interaction with my regular green-grocer, again while phoning in orders. I

¹⁰ "Acqua Vera" (i. e. "True" Water), appropriately enough, is a brand name of mineral or natural spring water.

could have been tempted to think that the green-grocer was not listening to me or that he was simply trying to cheat me,¹¹ (that he was being insincere as a hearer- pretending that he didn't understand that I meant it seriously), but, since I am a regular and substantial customer, after all what did he have to gain? If he was knowingly or purposely sending me something I didn't want, I would have been expected to simply stop using his shop or to complain (there being no taboo on complaining, if done in the proper way¹²), but anyway it was my strong attachment to literalness rather than my assumption of a cooperative principle which undermined my confidence in his trustworthiness for sometime. I might ask for "una testa di aglio" ("a 'head' of garlic"), and I would get sent two; I might ask for "due peperoni" and might get three or four peppers. Once I got three large bottles of pear juice having asked for one large and six small (I hadn't explained why I needed six small bottles). When I finally got round to mentioning (nicely) this frequent discrepancy face-to-face he was amused at my "*pignoleria*" (indeed *fussiness*/literalness is one of the Neapolitan stereotypes of the English) and told me that if I really or seriously wanted only one or two or whatever of something "I simply had to say so" ("*me lo doveva dire*"), for example "*proprio uno*" or "*due, di numero*", were formulae he suggested. In fact we now have a running joke/game and he regularly asks me, teasingly, "*uno due proprio?*" ("really one/two?"). In other words I had to mark my utterance for literal interpretation, or indicate that I intended the amounts seriously, i. e. not loosely, otherwise they would be interpreted as "a few".¹³ In informal contexts I was alert to this looseness in general, but in the context of a service encounter where you are actually ordering goods and specifying the quantity you desire I would have expected a greater tendency to use more "serious", business-like, literal talk. What is also happening I think is that both he and the girl at the "*salumeria*" (assuming the solidarity derived from my being "*una cliente*" ("a regular, faithful customer")) are collaboratively interpreting the speaker's need, going beyond the literal expression (compare remarks in Clancy 1986). So if they haven't got what I actually asked for, they will send me what fits the need they have inferred empathetically from my utterance or from the assumed context. And if the greengrocer sends me

¹¹ But even if he is perhaps "trying it on" seeing how far he can push his luck and waiting for my reaction, he is still, in my definition, not being serious, insofar as his goals are easy-going, "let's just see what happens." ("*ci provo*").

¹² See also George 1990, on complaining, in a different service setting.

¹³ It must be said that "*due*" in particular is used very regularly in informal talk to mean just "a few", or "just a little" as in "*ne voglio solo due*" when a friend is serving you spaghetti and you aren't particularly hungry. Let me just mention though that in this context you can actually say "*proprio due*" and still only mean "really just a few". Clara Montella has pointed out to me that this is indeed the old "dual" for "more than one".

a different quantity it probably fits what he imagines I really need (using local judgments of normal quantity). He may also think I haven't thought it out enough: I'm always so busy and absent-minded. He is implying a) I was speaking lightly, or, b) he knows better than I do, c) he wants to help me, I will be pleased at his show of caring. A perlocutionary-like effect of this for many Britons would be feeling insulted since he is daring to a) not take you seriously or b) to imply you don't know what you're doing and is interfering with un-asked for help/interpretation of what you really want.¹⁴ Either way there is a cultural clash: between default linguistic interpretations or between interpersonal norms. To go back to the Acqua Vera example, now. We have looked at what I take to be loose talk (or the shop assistant's loose interpretation of what she took to be my loose talk). If we now look at what she answered when I asked her if there was any Acqua Vera, she replied, that there was ("sì, c'è"). In the light of the fact that she then sent me on something different (although in many ways similar), we might deduce one of the following: a) she was lying and didn't want me to have the Acqua Vera (for some reason, maybe she wanted the only pack left so she could enter the competition) and thought I wouldn't notice or wouldn't mind (since as far as she knew I had no special reason for wanting it specifically, and, if I knew she had, I would have readily let her have it); b) she couldn't be bothered to go and find out if they still had any left and, anyway I wouldn't mind if she sent me something else close to it; c) she thought there was but it wasn't particularly important to know precisely because anyway it didn't really matter, because I wouldn't mind etc.; d) there was some when I phoned but when they prepared my order it had run out and it didn't really matter, etc. Only a) would not be a case of light talk and light interpretation but would be "serious", intentionally deceptive talk: i. e. lying. So let us ignore that alternative here except to note that she might have been lying and yet not taking me seriously, therefore mitigating her wrong-doing in her eyes (because she interpreted me loosely and thought I wouldn't mind). In each of the four cases I have embedded her assumption I was talking loosely, her loose interpretation of the sort of mineral water I wanted and, if I am right, there would, therefore, be no serious deceptive intent there. Explanations b) and c) and, to some extent, d) of her use of "c'è" (that is replying that there was indeed some available, implying illocutionally that she would send it to me) are all however "light" talk. Because she would have been making in all cases an affirmation without the necessary epistemic certainty or conviction or thought-out-ness of factual backing for

¹⁴ See also Vincent Marrelli 1989, in press, for more specific attempts to link local practice to clusters of cultural values using distinctions such as the High, Middle, Low Context Cultures distinction (Hall, 1976), independence/interdependence, etc.

her assertion, and in the case of d), there was an implicit/indirect “light”, i. e. facile, commitment to send it to me. If she had been less light she would have made sure that there would be still some left, have them put it by, when they made up my order.

3.1.2. The following situations are also so typical that I cannot not mention them, despite dearth of space:

“*andate a letto adesso ragazzi!*” (“off to bed now, kids”)

S. Italian children, all things being equal, will tend to need to be “told” many more times than the equivalent class British children, who, even the more “disobedient”, seem to “jump to it” rather earlier, more meekly and readily. Indeed, it would seem that many Italian children, in the South anyway, do not necessarily take their parents’ utterances literally or, indeed, seriously. Not the first time anyway. *Reiteration* or *insisting* and thus negotiation seem to be necessary to mark the seriousness of intent. This is hardly surprising when they have been socialized through, among other things, forms of what look like deception¹⁵ and lying or irresponsible light talk, at least to an anglophone. Children are told that they are being taken somewhere or to see someone in particular just to get them to comply with leaving the house, or told that something they are insisting on, and have been told they can’t have, is finished “*è finito*” “*non c’è*”¹⁶, or they are “*promised*” something, again to stop them insisting on asking for something impossible (see also George 1990, 171ff) and/or “to make them happy”. We might say that they see their parents’ “no” as obviously negotiable. *Hic et nunc* happiness (especially of children, of whom it is also assumed that they will soon forget what was actually said, anyway) is more important than most things and certainly literalness. The (alter- and ego-) face-saving “white” or “social” lie to keep people “happy” is something which children will have witnessed their parents doing many times (e.g. in acceptance/refusal of invitations, excuses for missing dental appointments, etc.). They may also have witnessed how invitations or

¹⁵ See Goldman (1991, 663) for mention of “the expediency of deception” in caretaking or socialization; an important similarity between socialization in Melanesia and S. Italy perhaps.

¹⁶ Internalization of this may happen very early on: my daughter (19 months at the time) who had been spending a great deal of time with our “home-help”/babysitter’s family, recently produced her own “first lie” to staunch a confrontation, she was being got ready to go out to play-school but wanted to go to their house instead that morning, and when we tried to motivate her by saying all her friends would be waiting for her at play-school and she would find her favourite teacher there etc., she promptly answered “*non c’è*” (“She’s not there”, or “there’s no play-school today”). She was promptly rewarded with an appreciative laugh and “*ma sentite che furbal!*”. (“just listen to how clever/wily she is”).

commitments to future actions need confirmation/reiteration to be considered complete. They eventually internalize, among the other things, the important fact that to offer solidarity (or “truth of mood”) is more important (in their culture) than to offer literal “truth”. (see also E.M. Forster’s (1936) *A Passage to India*). But there may also be another factor at work (or play). For example, when a child or a ‘spouse’ (who, say, is playing or working on something) is called to the dinner table by “*è pronto, venite a tavola!*” (“it’s ready, come to the table”¹⁷) it is only natural that the appropriate response is “*arrivo*” or “*vengo*” (“I’m coming”) or “*ho finito*” (“I’ve finished”), and then take a full ten/fifteen minutes before appearing (and still find that dinner is not quite ready, least of all on the table). The extra factor (which helps in describing as “loose” the non literal use of “I’ve finished” or “I’m coming”) is the local conception of the time dimension (see Hall 1983), which, incidentally, would also explain the cross-culturally notorious looseness of “*domani*” or “*mañana*”.

Even official notices, signs and announcements are not always taken seriously by the Neapolitan public: “*Queste sono le date degli esami | gli orari delle lezioni:...*” (“The exam dates / lesson times are the following:”). Many students will come up individually for confirmation, after the public announcement. Moreover, if there is only a written notice on the notice-board, with say dates of exams, some students (especially those who live out of town) may even phone a lecturer at home for confirmation.¹⁸

“*Vietato fumare*” (“No smoking”). When I asked students in a lecture hall if they would please not smoke, because there were signs up, one answered, in English: “*but professoressa, this is Naples!*”¹⁹

3.1.3. In sum, then, one could say that within each of the two cultures I am considering different *communicative contracts* are stipulated between its

¹⁷ An English person would say at the same stage “dinner’ll be ready in five minutes!” or “how long before you finish? dinner’s almost ready”.

¹⁸ A part from showing the local non-neatness of division between the private sphere and the work sphere, and thus the non-linearity or polycronism mentioned by Hall (1983, 45–46), this last point is also connected perhaps to a preference in certain domains for the oral vs. the written mode or channel (like the Cree mentioned in Bennett/Berry 1991, 100–1, or the Greeks (see Sifianou 1989, notes 2,9), Neapolitans use the telephone, too, for many more functions than the British), out of a preference or trusting of personal rather than impersonal communication. This not taking notices seriously is also connected to the assumption that nothing is certain, and even that inefficiency is rife (e.g. an official notice may be out of date and someone didn’t bother to take it down).

¹⁹ It was only when I appealed (teasingly) to their social or personal side, rather than to the official aspect, and said that perhaps it was disturbing others and was me anyway, that they put out their cigarettes. And no-one else would have for fear of seeming silly (unless of course it had really bothered them). The official notice, in all this, had nothing to do with anything. It was irrelevant. And it was thought quaint of me to even mention it, an occasion for a playful teasing (socializing) retort like the one I received in reply.

members. These could be summarized by some of the local “common-places” or “clichés” (especially in the first case since it also typically consciously idealizes the superiority of its approach): “*Mean what you say and say what you mean*” or “*our word is our bond*”. Here the implicit *local theory of language* or, rather, of communication, seems to be that it is essentially a transaction of information, for the acquisition of knowledge (implying the assumption of a stable unambiguous reality or that through an imposed (moralizing) contract one can achieve this stability)²⁰, and that directness in the transmission of this information, i. e. literalness, is best since it eliminates the possibility of concealment. When knowledge or facts are assumed to be “free goods” one must not conceal them. The second, on the other hand, can be characterized, perhaps, by “*nothing is certain*” “*it is not wise to commit yourself, always leave possibilities open*”, “*things happen*”, “*go with the wind*” “*everything can be bartered, or negotiated, including meaning*”, (and in the extreme by the notorious dialectal saying “*accà niscium è fess*” (“here no-one is stupid’ don’t think you can fool me”)). To exaggerate somewhat the opposition, in the Neapolitan consciousness, sure/certain facts rarely exist, and when they do they may not necessarily be “free” (unless you are part of the High Context in-group with automatic access to them, you have to negotiate for them to deserve them- see Ochs (1976, 70) on an even more extreme case of the rarity, high value and thus non-freeness of information in Madagascar). In this second cultural order, talk seems to be both more casual in its content and yet more important in itself since *it* (rather than deeds or information) is the main vehicle for *rapport*, for defining and enhancing social relations. One could see the process as democratic, in that it allows for others’ freedom of interpretation, and “amoral”, since it assumes/admits people will/must negotiate for survival (or for the “I thrive” super-goal (Hobbs 1990, 445ff)) with whatever means they can muster in an assumed uncertain, probably hostile and anyway pliable or constantly re-definable world.²¹

²⁰ Indeed, we might glimpse this theme (obsession?) in the recurrence of attempts, more or less since the birth of protestantism and empiricism (see also George 1990, 180), in N.Europe and in England especially, to (re-)create a ‘perfect’, ‘real’ language, one which reflects reality accurately and thus allows clear thinking and the acquisition of true knowledge (see e.g. Vincent Marrelli 1990, 208ff). See also Lakoff/Johnson 1980, 185-ff for the contrast between *objectivism*, subjectivism and their ‘experientialist’ ‘alternative’. It seems pretty easy to discern the ‘objectivism’ in the British ethno-theory of language, (including its innate (and dangerous) sense of its own superiority in its refusal to see itself as a myth or metaphor, i. e. as only one of many possible conceptual orders).

²¹ If the British mode tends to be ‘*objectivist*’ (in Lakoff/Johnson 1980 terms), I don’t think that we can necessarily simply equate the Neapolitan one I am describing with its opposite the ‘*subjectivist*’ or ‘romanticist’. If anything, it seems to fit many aspects of their ‘*experientialist synthesis*’, (see e.g. 229–230: “It focuses on constant interaction with the physical environment and with other people. It views this interaction with the environ-

3.2. Playful non-serious talk, *teasing*

3.2.1. Now I want to look at the playful, or potentially playful non-serious types of talk. I shall look especially at teasing, because of its inherent ambiguity of *potential* meanings, where sociability/aggression, friendliness/hostility, seriousness/humour are in the balance.

The double-face is also characteristic of teasing. Teasing is a non serious simulation, for example, of insulting or criticism or even of *argument* (indeed, one can tease by pretending to be arguing, or discussing something seriously²²). However it is not only the fact that an argument is not seriously a fight, or a tease not seriously an insult, or whatever, that makes it non-serious in my terms. In *S. Italy*, anyway, something else may be happening. Interactants may argue, or tease or joke but they may well not actually care about the issues involved. Or it may be that, if a serious, though sociable argument (see Schiffirin 1984) occurs where they are considering their beliefs at all, and they care about the issue and/or the person they are interacting with, they are still aware that there are different

ment as involving mutual change. You cannot function within the environment without changing it or being changed by it. Within the experientialist myth, understanding emerges from interaction, from constant negotiation with the environment and other people.”). Duranti (1988) also puts forth an essentially similar critique to the prevailing view of communication as governed by a personalist and realist view of meaning and intention. His ethnographic data from Samoa (although there are many important differences in the Samoan and Neapolitan cultural worlds) also suggests that one cannot apply the Western-based model of communication as if it were universally valid for describing communication everywhere, as if it were more than an ethnocentric description of the local theory of language typically operative in Western societies (op. cit. 14). His description of the Samoan theory (as “strikingly” similar to “hermeneutic philosophy” (op. cit. 31)), has several points in common with how I think the traditional Neapolitan cultural cognitive style or theory of interpretation works: the importance of negotiation and joint construction/interpretation of meanings (at least in the more complex speech genres such as teasing), and the view that intentions may be less than fully defined in a speaker’s mind before the act of speaking (Duranti 1988, 14).

²² This, in particular, has often totally caught me out personally (with friends or family, but mainly with friends of friends or of family). I may get earnestly and passionately involved, even angry (since the trick is to argue for something the “victim” has already indicated s/he is strongly against (see also Drew 1987 on “sequential environment”)), however absurd or unlikely it is that someone would openly voice, say, outlandishly strong sexist or racist views. The victim or recipient either assumes that people wouldn’t say these things if they didn’t mean them, and/or, if s/he suspects something, s/he may infer: “but they can’t be not serious, because what is there to laugh at?” Morgan (1990, 193) assumes that failing transparency (of irony or pretence) through manifest means, the outlandishness of having certain beliefs will convey the sham. This is not always so in cross-cultural interaction, or between people who do not know each other very well (although they may be affiliated to the intimate network), since you can never be sure that it would be, for *them*, an outlandish idea. Anyway, the “falling for it” and the earnestness in discussion then typically becomes the contents of some follow-up explicit teasing.

truths (see also George 1990, 181), and they simply want to make sure that their interactant doesn't get the better of them in the game they are playing together. Again, therefore, it may be just sociable exchange of talk for the sake of interacting, (just as teasing and joking among friends, and between adults or older siblings and very young children may be often seen to function²³).

In the typical "*joking relationships*" (as described in anthropology and sociology (see overviews in Apte 1983, Fine 1983, respectively)), teasing, *joking*, general *jollity* may have other functions, such as relieving boredom at work, overcoming embarrassment in uncomfortable enforced relationships (e.g. between in-laws), affirming your personal identity, as against a mere official or business positional role²⁴. Indeed, it is traditional to say with sociable talk that it is the *meaning of the talk* (see Schiffrin 1984), rather than the meaning of the propositions uttered, which are its communicative intent, and thus that its social rather than cognitive function is prioritarian. But this does not mean that the propositions expressed have no relationship to the function the talk is addressing. Indeed, with family, children and foreigners, where *socialization* is an important function, and between friends, where group cohesion is important, the content as well as the process of teasing have socializing import. Teasing, like *humour*²⁵ in general, may have potential functions for conflict (e.g. provoking someone you want to have a show-down or break-up with) and control (e.g. shaming towards group conformity), and these may be seen to be serious and conscious social goals. However, not all teasing will be so easily definable in terms of clear social goals, nor, as I have mentioned, need the proposition expressed be one that is at all relevant or believed.

²³ "the content was usually less important than simply having the interaction" (Eisenberg, 1986, 196). See also in Klein (1990, 219ff) where her teenage Neapolitan informants report that "*sfroccolare*" (Neapolitan: "teasing") or "*punzecchiare*" ("needling") one of your friends (triggered by some chance remark of theirs, perhaps as the group stands around deciding what to do for the evening), is just a way of passing the time, of being together, and is in fact one of the things that you end up doing (just standing about, kidding around.).

²⁴ In our PIXI project data from public service encounters (in English and Italian book-shops) (see Aston ed. 1988, Gavioli/Mansfield 1990) we found that there was more overt jollity, joking or other comity producing talk, by the British assistants when dealing with customers, than between Italian assistants and customers (see e.g. Vincent 1988, Gavioli 1990). Ciliberti (1992) links this to their being more at ease with their positional roles as assistants, and, not having thus to redefine or indeed negotiate their status, they can relax and be themselves. Furthermore, from our unexpurgated tapes (not in our published corpora), one can see a great deal of banter between assistants (cf. Bradney 1957) in both cultures. The Neapolitan "speciality", however, is the "joking relationship" between assistants (often in a group) and regular clients. (PIXI= Pragmatics of Italian-English X-cultural Interaction.).

²⁵ See, e.g., Martineau (1972) on the social functions of humour.

Anyway as I see it, with teasing we are communicating a *double message*: i) (the text or proposition): I am saying that p about you, R (the Recipient), (and you can take it or leave it), and, ii) (the act or performance): I am teasing — therefore implying (a) intimacy, (b) that I think that saying p implies my attribution of some deviance to you — (and you can take it or leave it). In teasing, furthermore, we have to consider who says what to whom, how, when/where (e.g. in front of others?) and why? We must also consider recipients' reactions and responses, and these may depend on some of the parameters just mentioned, as well as on some other even more general one, for example, to what extent they take themselves or any of their various skills/ identities, seriously (see also Drew 1987). While with light talk it was a question of (not) *taking words seriously*, with teasing it is the *taking of oneself seriously* that is mainly/also at issue.

One can thus see (at least) the following different types of teasing attitude in terms of seriousness of speaker goals, beliefs, and attitudes (others only need to be expanded out): a) conscious belief in truth of p about R + caring about p, and about truth of p about R + clearly defined social/affective goal (caring about how R takes it); b) conscious belief in truth of p about R + conscious caring about p and about p of R + not bothered about how things turn out, or about how R takes it; c) not really bothered about whether p is true or not of R + nor about p + not bothered either way how R takes it; d) not really bothered about truth of p about R nor about p + but do have some goal (even though perhaps only vaguely defined) and do care about how R takes the teasing.

I want to submit that, in S. Italy anyway, it is very often the case that an initiator of a tease will have attitudes as described in c) and d). This is consistent I think with the type of light talk I was describing earlier as characteristic in some cases. Moreover, to the extent that speakers from different cultures hold seriousness in talk and seriousness of self to be (un) important, then one may expect cultural differences in teasing attitudes, teasing design and teasing function. Furthermore, since speakers and hearers from the same culture will naturally share assumptions, we can also expect cultural differences in reception of teasing. Naturally also we can expect cross-cultural clashes. If the first type of non-serious talk we looked at, light talk, generates, in cross-cultural clash: a) perception of insincerity or b) *fussiness*; this second type, teasing, generates: a) perception of rudeness or b) *touchiness*, depending on the cultural perspective of the hearer. Indeed the a)'s are how the British typically perceive the S. Italian use of language, and the b)'s how the S. Italians typically perceive the British use or reaction.

Considering teasing in co-text and context (its "sequential environment" (Drew 1987) including the context of previous interactions with a person), allows us to see how teasing design is sensitive to a potential victim's self-

image and self-importance. The more you take yourself seriously, and display this through, say, bragging, holding forth, too much earnestness, too much outrage (see also Drew 1987, 243), the more you can expect to be teased. This is also true in England (and probably everywhere), but I believe that, while a serious “po-faced” response seems to be acceptable in England (it is recognized as “fair enough”, a legitimate defence of one’s self-image), and the interaction would normally stop at that (as far as I can see from Drew’s data, and from my own experience in Britain), S. Italian teasing interactions, on the other hand, tend to go on for much longer, if the recipient does not display uptake (this then could be the subject of the new tease), and even more if s/he persists in serious defence. The teasing is usually amicable whether the defence is humorous or seriously po-faced and continues until the recipient gives in by giving up or eventually agreeing, or even, (the most appreciated outcome) joining in with self-deprecation. S. Italians typically insist/negotiate until the comity/togetherness — enhancing response they favour is forthcoming. Recipients may also respond with banter that is by matching tease for tease, Drew has no examples), and this is greatly appreciated too. The joining in with self-deprecation is very “rare” in Drew’s data, as he stresses. On the other hand, it seems to me to be a very common response in Naples, and one not necessarily forced out of recipients; they will often give it as their first response. Indeed they may even initiate humorous talk with it themselves (see Anderson/Vincent 1990).

3.2.2. The following (reconstructed) exchange is a typical example of a R joining in non-seriously with the tease (even providing the opening for it). It took place between old and newly incorporated (A and her husband) friends (all upper-class Neapolitans) at a dinner party; I remember feeling both embarrassed and amazed at the time:

A guest, R, who had been living in England has brought an “exotic” dessert (an apple crumble) she has made. (A,B: other guests, C:host, R:Recipient):

“A: (to husband, seriously, after having tasted it) *senti, forse non ti piacerà, ti conviene provare quest’altro* (“listen, I don’t think you’re going to like it, you’d better try this other sweet”), R: *che fai, lo vuoi proteggere? fa tanto schifo* (“are you trying to protect him, or something? is it that disgusting?”), All: (laughter), A: *no, bè, so che non gli piacciono questo tipo di cose* (“no, well, I know he doesn’t like this sort of thing”), (couple of seconds silence, eating), B: *ma che c’hai messo, la segatura?* (“what have you put in it, sawdust?”), All: (general laughter), R: (laughing) *sì* (“yes”), All: (chuckles,

more eating), *C*: *ma non ci dovrebbero essere le mele?* ("but shouldn't there be apples in here?") *R*: (laughing) *sì, mi sono scordato* ("yes, I forgot?"), *All*: (laughs), *R*: (still laughing — to husband of *A*): *senti, ma questa è molto meglio di quella dell'altra volta* ("listen, this one's much better than the last sweet I made?"), (to hosts): *vi ricordate come Adriana diceva che si era sentita male dopo?* ("remember how Adriana said she'd felt ill afterwards?"), *C*: *sì, sì, mi ricordo, faceva proprio schifo, poverina.* ("yes, I remember, poor thing, it really was disgusting"), ...

Obviously one does not know whether *R* is really feeling easy-going or just putting on a brave face, but she certainly cannot be described as "po-faced".

Now, if a friend does *take offence* and becomes touchy or aggressive, this is particularly open to be commented on and ridiculized; with irony and mounting sarcasm, and even aside comments such as "*ma guarda che scemo*" ("what an idiot!") or "*ma sei scemo?!*" ("are you stupid or something?!"), and it may develop into an argument. (The initiator at that point, since the recipient is "holding on to the truth", or seriousness, of what he was saying and refusing to re-define or tone down his serious *self-image*) may decide that he will re-define his attitude to *p* seriously, to match his interpretation of the talk to that of the recipient, and may decide that *R* now does get on his nerves. In the end, anyway, the insisting, (essentially a reiterated invitation to not only not take oneself seriously, but to see the interaction also as simply fun, and that the initiators and other participants who had joined in don't think it is important or worth taking seriously), or the argument (if one had developed) stops, in perhaps a cold or embarrassed silence. There may follow attempts at reconciliation (not necessarily apologies) but it may also be considered best to ignore the whole business, although the evening will have been possibly spoilt.

The point I want to stress is that, if anything is taken seriously in that context, it is that you mustn't take yourself too seriously, and you mustn't undermine group cohesion and sociability or comity. I also have some support thanks to Drew's data, for the complementary view of the British touchiness. His subjects' reactions, holding out on their truth, and resisting group pressure, are also neatly illustrative of the British style I have described elsewhere (1989; in press).

3.2.3. Teasing is very salient in interaction with *S*. Italian children. It seems to have an important role in socialization²⁶ (as it seems to have with new members of a group or, indeed, with foreigners). This can quite normally

²⁶ On socialization and teasing, see e.g., the three contributions by Schieffelin, Eisenberg and Miller in Schieffelin/Ochs 1986.

take the form of threats, arguments, insults, often laughingly framed, but just as often, also delivered in mock seriousness. Children very soon learn to play with this themselves. The following routines are typical (ritualized?) and very frequent in interactions between my daughter (B) (from when she was about 15 months old) and (A) my (proletarian) "home-help" and/or my 7 and 10 year-old-sons, B's brothers.

- a) *A: ti picchio! ti dò le botte!* ("I'll hit you, I'll spank you") *B: io (ti picchio)* ("no you won't") *I("ll hit you")*), etc.
- b) *A:* (snatching her toy away) *è mio, è mio!* ("it's mine, it's mine"), *B: è mio, è mio* (no) it's mine, it's mine"), etc.
- c) *A: sei brutta!* ("you're ugly") *B: (no), tu (sei brutta)!* (no), you('re ugly)), etc.
- d) *A:* (out of the blue- mock-serious) *non voglio un bacio! niente bacio! brutta!* ("I don't want a kiss. no kiss. ugly") *B: sì bacio bacio* (laughing) ("yes, kiss, kiss") *A: niente bacio!* ("no kiss")! *B: niente bacio, brutto!* (mock serious- "no kiss, ugly!") accompanied by clambering up onto her brother's lap and forcing a kiss on him).

At 20 months of age she now prompts or initiates taunts and teasing herself with all of us:

B: è mio, è mio *A:* (displaying non-uptake): "*sì?, piccola* ("yes, little one, what is it?"), *B: dai Papà* (c'mon Dad): *è mio, è mio*, *A:* (laughs) *no, è mio, è mio*, *B:* (mock seriously) *no, è mio (etc. etc.)*.

I want to suggest that children are socialized through both the process and contents to both the process and contents. To the importance of not taking yourself seriously: good-natured acceptance of teasing, or banter response is encouraged. Moreover, (like with the "promise") when the contents of (even what seems a serious threat) are continually not followed through, the non-seriousness of the tease becomes pretty predictable. Socialization to other serious aspects of cultural values also takes place indirectly through this, for example, through the implication that looks are somehow a cultural concern, or that affection and the showing of it is important, or that a family member is allowed to be personal and/or coercive, or that you must not be possessive and must share your things, or, alternatively, you must learn to defend yourself, etc. (Note the close parallels with Eisenberg's Mexicano data (Eisenberg 1986, 188)).

Interculturally, again one can have problems of misperception or misinterpretation. In inter-cultural interaction between S.Italian and English speakers: a) Italian non-serious teasing or intentionally friendly teasing can be misinterpreted as serious taunting, criticism or as intentional insulting or offending (for a variety of reasons, e.g. from not recognizing metacom-

municative signals or “contextualization cues” which would “frame” the talk as non-serious (see Bateson 1955, Goffman 1974, Gumperz 1982, 130ff): e.g. widening of eyes rather than smiling; b) it can of course also be the case that although a foreign recipient of a tease guesses/imagines that something is meant to be a tease, that it is meant to be funny or friendly, this nonetheless has the effect (an unintended perlocutionary effect) of hurting or offending, and R may find it very difficult not to display offence.

There is probably also some other component of the teasing which is clashing culturally. Of the “who says, what, to whom, how, when, where and why” it may be the “what” which is offending (e.g. the English do not like to be teased for inefficiency, or for their personal appearance or for their accents. A foreign accent is often echoed back to a speaker (even to a foreign guest on a TV show)). But the offended non-native may miss the point that the speaker doesn’t actually think there’s anything wrong with having a foreign accent or may even find it endearing, and the speaker will have no idea that to manifest this is patronizing (or, rather, that being patronizing may itself be negatively evaluated by the foreigner’s culture). We British tend to interpret as intentionally rude, or anyway as hurtful, any hint that we are not super-efficient at what we do, or any personal remark about something we can’t help, and we are often “*po-faced*” at best, but usually quite touchy.

The “*touchy*” (and the “*fussy*”) foreign friend or family member in S. Italy undergoes a gruelling (though loving) socialization process until s/he learns that there is more to life than being earnest.

4. Concluding remarks

We might well now ask: is non-serious talk (light talk, teasing), genuine or real or full communication? Or is it pretending to communicate? If I don’t care about or don’t intend to explore my beliefs, or can’t be bothered to formulate a clear goal, am I not thereby violating some very basic interaction or communication principle. Wouldn’t it imply that I don’t *care about* the person I am interacting with? Aren’t I pretending to care and therefore pretending to communicate?

Well to start with, in any particular instance, there is a difference between not caring about an issue and not caring about a person (e.g. the teasing about cooking skills example). And, secondly, there are certainly degrees of not-caring, between easy-goingness and not-giving-a-damn. Next, one would have to consider the communicative contract assumed to be “in force” in a particular context: if the default mode is “be serious”, then non-serious talk would violate the contract, and vice versa of course.

Communicative contracts may vary, as I hope I have shown, across different cultures and also, of course, across different contexts within any given culture. Moreover, some cultures (like S.Italy) may have a wider range of contexts where non-serious talk could be assumed to be the default mode. Problems arise, as we have seen, when in interaction these do not match (or when consciousness of it is unequally distributed and is manipulated deceptively by only one interactant—something we have not been able to go into here except for fleeting mention of *bearer-insincerity*). Communicating means letting your intent to communicate be manifest, but pretending to communicate can occur when this mismatch in caring is casually, lightly ignored (pretended away).

Pretending to communicate is pretending to care.

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