Defending Literal Meaning

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1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of literal meaning was once so unproblematic that it would easily fit Arnauld's description: it was one of those notions that are "so clear that they cannot be explained through others, because there are none which are clearer and simpler than them." But in our century, its fate has not been different from that of so many other notions previously presumed to be "fundamental," and it has been severely challenged.

Literal meaning has come under attack in successive waves. First by philosophers, then by linguists and, more recently, by psychologists. Having discussed elsewhere some of the philosophically and linguistically based attacks against literal meaning, I will address myself here to a recent psychological argument that purports to provide empirical evidence to the effect that literal meanings play no role in the process of language comprehension and hence cannot be claimed to have "psychological reality" (Gibbs, 1984).

Since there is no way to disentangle completely conceptual and empirical issues, it will be necessary first to sketch an alternative conception of literal meaning (Section 2) which will be able to cope with most of the theoretical points raised by Gibbs and others against literal meaning (Section 3). Then, I will consider the empirical evidence that allegedly shows that this notion has no psychological validity and try to rebuff this allegation (Section 4). The next step will be to provide some positive evidence for the "psychological reality" of literal meanings (Section 5). I will conclude by outlining the implications of the discussion for such issues as the theory of metaphor and the distinction between semantics and pragmatics (Section 6).

2. AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF LITERAL MEANING

Few if any authors have given a set of sufficient and necessary conditions for defining literal meaning. An exception to this rule is Katz's well-known...
"anonymous letter criterion" (Katz, 1977, p. 14). This criterion stresses that literal meanings, whatever they are, should be absolutely context free. That is to say, they consist in those aspects of meaning of an utterance that a speaker is able to detect exclusively by virtue of her knowledge of the rules of language without any additional contextual information. I believe this criterion can be defended from some of the criticisms that have been leveled against it (e.g., Gazdar, 1979, pp. 3-4; see Dascal, 1983, p. 168). I also believe it can be useful in the characterization of literal meaning in a generalized form, which I call the "principle of invariance of meaning" (see Dascal, 1983, pp. 28-29). But this is only possible if one hedges the principle so as not to make it an absolutely necessary condition for something to be a literal meaning. In particular, one must allow for the possibility of "neutralization" of certain features of literal meaning in certain contexts and co-texts so that, so to speak, they do not necessarily show up in every possible context (see Dascal, 1983 p. 29).

The preceding move illustrates the general approach I will take to characterize an alternative view of literal meaning, the view I have called "moderate literalism" (Dascal, 1981a). This approach consists in giving up the attempt to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a literal meaning. Instead, a number of conditions and the corresponding criteria are described which are semantically relevant to the characterization of the notion of literal meaning so that, when a large number of these conditions are satisfied, an aspect of meaning can be reliably seen as belonging to literal meaning, but no single condition is strictly necessary in the sense that its absence would ipso facto prevent that aspect of meaning from being so described.

Besides the problem of having used a single criterion as both necessary and sufficient for characterizing literal meaning, traditional accounts have also run into difficulties by putting excessive demands on the jobs that should be performed by literal meaning. For example, the Fregean tradition has tended to require that literal meanings should be able to determine the truth conditions of a sentence or, more generally, the satisfaction conditions of sentences. It is not difficult to show that sentences alone can rarely, if ever, be able to satisfy such a requirement. Not only the well-known phenomenon of deixis indicates the need for contextual information in order to fully specify truth and satisfaction conditions for utterances, but there are also many other ways in which contextual information is required for that purpose (see Dascal, 1983, pp. 20-27). Hence, if such a criterion were applied, the notion of literal meaning would turn out to be empty, which is indeed one of the consequences of Searle's (1978) criticism. A more

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1 This possibility takes care, among other things, of the objection raised by Allwood (1981) against the view that the literal meaning of a sentence is that which is common to all contexts of use.

2 For the notion of semantic relevance here employed see Achinstein (1968).
modest view of the role of literal meaning, which would not claim that it determines truth or satisfaction conditions, but only that it somehow contributes to their determination, would overcome such obvious difficulties. On the other hand, this would enable one to eventually include in the literal meaning of sentences aspects of meaning such as hints, suggestions, emotive meaning, and so forth (see Dascal, 1983, pp. 25ff.) which are not truth- or satisfaction-relevant, but nevertheless comply with other criteria for literal meaning (e.g., that of being "conventionally" attached to certain expressions).

Other notions that have been used in characterizing literal meaning should undergo a similar treatment. For example, the notion that the literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meaning of its component morphemes and by the syntactic rules of composition—an idea which is in fact the main culprit in Gibbs’s attack against literal meaning. Though compositionality is no doubt relevant to the determination of meaning (for otherwise one would have to assume rote learning of huge lists of interpretations), it must also be acknowledged that in many cases such a rote association of a meaning to composite expressions (e.g., formulaic expressions, idioms, frozen metaphors, etc.) does in fact often occur. Also, there are so to speak holistic properties of sentences (e.g., stress and intonation) which cannot be ascribed to any single component and which do not easily fit the notion of syntactic combination. What this shows is that the idea of a complete determination of literal meaning by compositional means is unwarranted, but this fact does not show that compositionality as such should be entirely rejected as a factor in the determination of literal meaning.

The notion of cancelability used by Grice in order to distinguish what belongs to an account of the meaning of an expression and what is only pragmatically derived from it, can be handled in a similar way.

* Sadock (1978) has shown that cancelability is not a clearcut criterion. In fact, it can be argued that cancelability is a matter of degree (see Dascal, 1983, pp. 26-28). But this fact, though not allowing for the use of this notion as a necessary condition, does not preclude its use as one of the factors that help to sort out literal meaning from other aspects of meaning, namely by claiming that the easier it is to cancel some aspect of meaning the less literal it should be assumed to be.

The upshot of these suggestions is that literal meaning should be seen as pertaining to those aspects of meaning in which a large number of the above mentioned criteria (compositionality, context invariance, non-cancelability, conventionality, etc.) converge. It is along these lines that I would develop

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* According to Grice, an implication conveyed by an utterance is cancelable in the sense that it can be denied without contradiction. Hence, for him, it does not belong to the "meaning" of the sentence uttered. For example, one can say: "They had many children and got married, but not in that order!". The temporal order is only suggested or implied by the order of the conjuncts.
the position I called "moderate literalism" (for more details see Dascal, 1983). I think it rather unfair to describe this position—as Gibbs does—as being "just a defense of the traditional view" (pp. 278–279).

One important consequence of this position, which we should retain for the subsequent discussion, is that the literal meaning need not be a part of the final interpretation of any given utterance (i.e., of what the addressee decides to be its speaker’s meaning). In many cases its contribution is entirely absent from the final interpretation (e.g., in some cases of irony; see Dascal, 1981b). In other cases, it hardly contributes any "content" whatsoever to the speaker’s meaning (e.g., when someone utters in an appropriate context a series of nonsense sounds). Yet, no matter how minor is its contribution to content, it seems to play a crucial role in the process of interpretation, namely the role of leading the hearer to the identification of the relevant items of contextual information which have to be used in order to come up with an interpretation.¹

3. THEORETICAL CRITICISM OF LITERAL MEANING

The first theoretical objection raised by Gibbs is specifically addressed against speech-act theory. Following Levinson (1981), he contends that the theory assumes a one-to-one correspondence between illocutionary acts and sentence types. In other words, a part of each sentence meaning consists in the specification of its unique illocutionary force, assigned to it on the basis of its performative prefix, its sentence mood, or some other indicator. He points out the well-known fact that there are many more speech-acts than sentence moods (and presumably also more than distinct performative prefixes) and that many sentence types bear no direct correspondence to specific illocutionary acts. He argues that speech-act theory's only way of dealing with this discrepancy is by invoking the very powerful mechanism of conversational maxims through which indirect speech-acts would be generated and understood. But this, he claims, does not fit the facts:

For example, when merchants were asked over the phone: Would you mind telling me the time you close? They sometimes responded: Yes, we close at six. Searle would say that the callers' utterance is literally a question as well as a request. His hypothesis would predict that if the merchants responded on the basis of literal meaning they should have said "No, we close at six". The fact that people usually begin their verbal responses with Yes, instead of No, suggests once again, that the literal meaning hypothesis, is simply not an accurate account of what goes on in using speech-acts. (Gibbs, 1984, p. 282).

¹ The rather subtle nature of this control or guiding role may well be responsible for some of the empirical difficulties in detecting the "presence" of literal meaning in certain experimental studies.
It is not my intention here to defend speech-act theory and to evaluate the correctness of Gibbs's description of its claims. It is only fair to say, however, that some of his allegations reveal a certain basic misunderstanding of the theory's aims, at least in its later developments. Basically, speech-act theory is a theory of certain types of acts and not a theory of certain kinds of linguistic expressions. As such, it provides a conceptual framework rich enough to accommodate a very large number of different speech-acts described in terms of a complex set of parameters (see Vanderveken, 1985). It can be further inquired how such different acts are realized by linguistic means, but the theory need not commit itself to the claim that there is a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic means of performance of certain speech-acts and the speech-acts themselves. In particular, it is no conceptual problem for the theory to admit that not only performative prefixes and mood are instrumental in indicating the speech-act performed, but that this role can be fulfilled by a variety of other linguistic means (e.g., intonation, hedging, special kinds of particles, etc.) as well as by contextual means (see Katriel & Dascal, 1984).

The claim that illocutionary forces should be specified "solely on the basis of the literal meaning of a sentence" (Gibbs, 1984, p. 283)—if put forth by anyone—is only a further illustration of the tendency to make excessive demands of the construct "literal meaning." Within the framework of moderate literalism sketched in the previous section, this demand is naturally and easily dropped and one can accept without qualms the idea that the force of a speech-act is only "tentatively linked" to the sentence actually uttered. Some sentences may be very explicit in their specification of the speech-acts they are used to perform whereas others can only offer very general suggestions as to the possible types of speech-acts performed through their use, suggestions that must be completed by contextual information in order to produce an assignment of illocutionary force. Furthermore—and in this I entirely agree with Levinson's suggestion mentioned by Gibbs—this determination doesn't require the use of conversational maxims but is rather performed at the level of determination of what I call "utterance meaning." (Dascal, 1983) by means of a set of principles that can be compared with those used in the determination of the reference of deictic expressions. In so far as Searle overlooks the role of this intermediate level of "utterance meaning" and operates exclusively with the dichotomy sentence meaning/speaker's meaning, he has no choice but to invoke the conversational maxims and to describe a large number of speech-acts as involving indirectness. In so doing, he certainly overloads both the notion of sentence meaning and the pragmatic devices used for conveying indirectness, and he thus becomes vulnerable to the criticism just mentioned. Yet, as I said, there is no intrinsic necessity for his theory to adopt this posture. In fact, a reformulation of the distinction Searle makes on other occasions be-
tween context and background would allow him to acknowledge the intermediate level of utterance meaning in which a specific kind of use is made of contextual information and thus to overcome such criticisms.

The other difficulty pointed out by Gibbs in speech-act theory is also due to an excessive demand placed upon the notion of literal meaning. This is the demand that sentences used in indirect speech-acts “retain their literal meaning as part of what the speaker means” (Gibbs, 1984, p. 282). As already pointed out (Section 2), literal meaning need not be retained as a part of speaker’s meaning. All that is required is that it play a role in the determination of that meaning. Once this is acknowledged, the objection in question just vanishes. Incidentally, in the example quoted above (Would you mind telling me what time you close?), the unlikely assumption is made that addressees respond to the literal meaning of indirect speech-acts rather than to their actually conveyed point. This assumption is at odds with the more general principle that addressees respond to what they perceive as being the speaker’s meaning of an utterance which is what sets up for them what I have called a “conversational demand” (see Dascal, 1977).

The undisputed fact that there are certain formulaic expressions such as the directive Get in whychnu? which are not interpreted by expanding them to their full grammatical forms but rather in a more or less direct way is also of no consequence whatsoever for the present discussion. The claim that such expressions as well as idioms “do not have literal meanings” (Gibbs, 1984, p. 283) only makes sense on the assumption of an absolute compositionality principle for all literal meanings. But looking for compositionality in these cases would be tantamount to viewing, as some schizophrenic patients do, the meaning of words like repartee as having something to do with tea. The fact that formulaic expressions and idioms are understood directly as well as the fact that they have a fairly restricted, almost ritualistic, range of use rather indicates that they have a very definite conventional, that is, literal, meaning and not that they lack it.

Another point raised by Gibbs is the inadequacy of the distinction between background and context as drawn by Searle (1980). Background assumptions are very general shared knowledge, which it would be somewhat absurd to miss. For example, when a speaker says: Give me a hamburger, medium rare, he expects the hamburger to be of medium size and not contained in a solid lucite cube. This is precisely the kind of assumptions that, if not provided, impair significantly the ability of a computer program such as Abelson’s (1975) “Ideolog” to “understand” language as well as the program’s ability to “reason” sensibly. Thus, having been provided with general ideological principles but not with very basic “knowledge of the world”, the program reasoned that “since Latin American radical students have thrown eggs at Nixon it was quite plausible that Fidel Castro might throw eggs at Taiwan” (Abelson, 1975 p. 274). Contextual assump-
tions, on the other hand, are according to Searle, those involved in interpreting particular utterances as ironical, metaphorical or otherwise indirect. I agree that this is far from satisfactory by way of accounting for the multiple kinds and roles of context in the interpretation of utterances. Elsewhere (see Dascal & Weizman, in press), a three-tiered organization of context and co-text into a specific, a shallow, and a background level has been proposed in order to account for the various roles of co-text and context in the determination of both speaker's meaning and utterance meaning. In addition to this, the phenomenological literature contains a number of distinctions such as topical versus non-topical relevance, focus and horizon, etc., which can and have been employed to elucidate the different types and functions of context (see Dascal & Katriel, 1977, 1979).

But the gist of Gibbs's arguments is not against this or that particular way of defining the various types and roles of context. It is rather directed against the assumption that there is some fixed sequential order in which they become operative in the process of interpretation: "Searle suggests that one kind of knowledge (background) is evaluated before another (context) in understanding a speaker's utterance meaning" (Gibbs, 1984, p. 285). As opposed to this, Gibbs suggests that "knowledge from various sources is used simultaneously in comprehension," and concludes that "understanding can be accomplished without the construction of a literal meaning, regardless of whether it is context free or not" (p. 286). To support this claim he points out that "given the presence of common ground people will understand directly what speakers mean without any analysis of a sentence's literal interpretation" (p. 287).

As far as sequentiality goes, I am quite prepared to accept a model that postulates parallel or interactive processing. In fact, the model alluded to above does not assume strict sequentiality. In some cases people can guess what the interlocutor is going to say even before he opens his mouth. But even though some hearers would stick to their guesses, no matter what they come to hear later, I would say that in most cases what they actually hear is going to be used at least as providing some means to check the correctness of their guess. And the phrase "what they hear" does not refer exclusively to the sounds they hear but to the sounds with their literal meanings. If there are any rules of interpretation (and I believe there are) they are not algorithmic in nature but rather heuristic. This means that though they may stipulate a preferred order of consultation of the various elements (literal meaning, different types and levels of context) that will finally yield an interpretation, this order can be in some cases overruled by other considerations (for an example of a possible heuristics, see Dascal, 1983).

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6 This proposal overlaps in some respects with that of Clark and Carlson (1981).
4. Alleged Empirical Evidence Against Literal Meaning

We come now to the core of Gibbs’s arguments, namely his alleged psychological evidence against literal meaning. A number of experiments are reported in which it is shown that the processing of the non-literal interpretation of utterances (presented in an appropriate context) took no longer than that of their literal interpretation. For example:

Subjects read stories, one line at a time, on a CRT, ending in either indirect requests, such as Must you open the window? (meaning Please leave the window closed), literal uses of the same sentences that were considered to be literal questions in their contexts, and direct requests, such as Do not open the window. After each story subjects made a paraphrase judgment for that story’s last line. . The results of these studies showed that indirect requests took no longer to read than either literal sentences or direct requests, when these sentences were read in appropriate context. Without any preceding context, subjects took much longer to read and make paraphrase judgments than they did for literal sentences. (Gibbs, 1984, pp. 287-288)

Similarly, Gibbs reports to have found that people take much less time to read and make paraphrase judgments for conventional, idiomatic uses of expressions, such as He’s singing a different tune (meaning He has now changed his mind), than to process literal uses of the same expressions. (p. 288)

In another experiment,

subjects heard stories containing conventional and literal uses of idiomatic expressions. Later on, subjects were presented with recall prompts and asked to remember the target expressions. The results showed, among other things, that subjects’ recall of literal uses of idioms was facilitated when they heard idiomatic prompts. Thus cues like reveal secret facilitated subjects’ recall of literal uses of expressions, such as You can let the cat out of the bag. (p. 293)

Another series of experiments was conducted in order to show that, besides the fact that literal meanings are not involved in the processing of non-literal meanings, so as to cause eventual delays in the latter, they are not processed at all, not even marginally. This is shown by the fact that there is no facilitation effect for subjects’ subsequent responses to literal paraphrase sentences (Gibbs, 1983). It was found that facilitation in some cases occur rather in the opposite direction:

Subjects’ sentence/nonsentence judgments to targets that paraphrase the indirect, nonliteral meanings of sentences like Can you pass the salt? were facilitated when they read literal uses of these sentences (in this case something like Are you capable of passing the salt?). Subjects most likely first analyzed the
conventional, indirect meanings of these sentences before deciding that their literal meanings were appropriate. (Gibbs, 1984, p. 293)

Unfortunately, all these experiments make use of conventionalized indirect speech acts, or idiomatic expressions or else frozen metaphors. They only show that a highly restrictive notion of literal meaning, namely one which assigns to compositionality a key role, is probably wrong. On the other hand, they provide excellent evidence for the fact that another semantic feature of the notion of literal meaning, namely conventionality, is rather important. Instead of suppressing the notion of literal meaning, these experiments therefore lead to the conclusion that such conventionalized (wrongly called non-literal) meanings of many utterances are in fact the literal ones. This is the conclusion which Gibbs himself—half ironically—in effect draws (p. 293).

In order to convincingly show that literal meanings are unnecessary one would have to devise experiments which prove that they play no role in the interpretation of such clearcut cases of indirectness as conversational implicatures, radically novel metaphors, and so on. Since irony is often also mentioned as a clear case of indirectness, I turn now to Gibbs's discussion of this topic.

First, he points out that a rule stating that in interpreting irony one is to interpret an utterance as meaning the opposite of its literal meaning could hardly be followed systematically, since the notion of an “opposite” is obscure. Sometimes, he argues, the opposite may be semantically or logically related to the literal meaning, but most of the time it may be only pragmatically, i.e. circumstantially related to it. This is no doubt true, and indeed there is no need to phrase the rule in question with the definite description “the opposite,” suggesting a unique candidate, logico-semantically determined, for this role. As already noted, pragmatic rules of interpretation are heuristic devices. What this putative rule should say, therefore, is something like “If you have any reason to suspect that an utterance is ironical, then try to find an opposite to its literal meaning, along some dimension of opposition suggested by the context of utterance.”

What happens with irony, in this respect, is quite similar to what happens with the interpretation of connectives such as but. Here too the notion of an “opposition” or “contrast” between the two conjuncts is present. Yet, unlike what some semantic accounts of the functioning of this connective have assumed, the contrast in question need not be “semantic” at all, as is illustrated by sentences such as He is a politician but he is honest. What the semantics of but (in one of its senses) tells us is that one must look for the relevant contextual dimension with respect to which the contrast between the two conjuncts conjoined by but is to be construed. In the example above, the dimension in question might be, for example, reliability: the first conjunct suggests unreliability, the second reliability, and the overall “argu-
mentative” weight of the utterance would favor the latter (for details, see Dascal & Katriel, 1977). On such a view, the interpretation of a but utterance would require a search of the context in order to “fill in” the contrastive slots provided by the literal meaning of the sentence. Such an analogy between the workings of but and of irony suggests that there may be more “literalness” in irony than is usually believed (see Weizman, 1984; Dascal & Weizman, in press).

Gibbs reports that he found that sarcastic indirect requests took much less time to process than literal uses of the same sentences or non-sarcastic indirect requests. The example he gives is Why don’t you take your time getting the ball? meaning Hurry up and get the ball (p. 290). He also reports another experiment which shows that people remember sarcastic utterances better than non-sarcastic ones (p. 291). I don’t know the details of these experiments, so far unpublished. But I would conjecture that the former finding might be explained by the fact that the relevant “opposite” or “contrast” was particularly perspicuous or salient in the context provided for in the sarcastic indirect request. As for the latter finding, it could be a result of the fact that irony is a pronouncedly marked rhetorical device, a point that could be eventually related to the fact that people tend to recall better and more easily draw negative rather than positive conclusions of syllogisms (cf. Pollard & Evans, 1981). It is also possible that better recall for ironic utterances has to do with the very indirectness of the interpretation of such utterances: since an ironical interpretation is, in a sense, a construction, almost entirely contributed by the hearer, of the speaker’s utterance, the hearer should better recall the wording of the utterance, for further checking of the correctness of his interpretation. Whatever the explanation, these findings certainly do not warrant the conclusion that there is no role for literal meaning in the interpretation of irony. In particular, it is hard to believe that the lexical meaning of the word fine plays no role whatsoever in the determination of the ironical interpretation of an utterance of A fine friend you are, no matter how “directly” such an interpretation is reached in any given context.

To sum up this section, I would say that the empirical evidence presented by Gibbs shows at most that strictly compositional meanings are not usually “computed” by listeners in understanding a rather limited number of more or less “frozen” linguistic expressions. On a less restricted view of literal meaning, which considers not so much compositionality, but stresses conventionality as one of the semantically relevant features of this notion, the very same evidence turns out to support, rather than to go against, the existence of literal meanings. Therefore, these findings do not warrant the claim that such a notion is useless in a psychological (or other) account of language use. Instead, they suggest ways of refining and elaborating this notion, which will be needed, in any event, to account for those uses of language which go beyond the exploitation of frozen composite expressions.
5. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY OF LITERAL MEANING

Leaving aside the attempts to disprove the existence of literal meanings, let us consider now uses of language which, though certainly peculiar in many ways, seem to provide—on their standard accounts—positive evidence for the “psychological reality” of those elusive entities. The uses of language to be considered here, namely, in jokes, in hypnosis, and in dreams, offer a broad sample of aspects of language-use, since they involve communicative (jokes, hypnosis) and non-communicative (dreams) uses, as well as “normal” (jokes) and “altered” (hypnosis, dreams) states of awareness.

5.1 Jokes

Consider first the ability of practically any normal speaker of a language to understand jokes (as well as puns and other manifestations of verbal humor). To be sure, as in any other field of psychology, one cannot say that there is only one, universally accepted account of the mechanism underlying such an ability. Nevertheless, Freud’s pioneering work in the field is still widely accepted by both psychologists and linguists, and can accordingly be relied upon for the present purposes. The most relevant feature of this account, for our purposes, is the claim that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for a story to be understood as a joke is that it should operate at least at two detectable levels of meaning.1 Essentially, a joke consists in a piece of discourse having at least two quite distinct and opposed “meanings”. The audience is cleverly led to interpret the story as having one of the meanings (and, thus, to “forget” at least temporarily the other), while in the end it turns out that the “correct” interpretation was the other one. I have analyzed this process elsewhere (Dascal, 1985). For our purposes here, however, I will rather rely on Fonagy’s (1982) account of some jokes and their underlying mechanism.

Among the ways in which the required “double meaning” can be generated, Fonagy mentions the following:

(a) “Two circles of ideas can be brought together by the same word, making use simultaneously of its primary and secondary meaning” (Fonagy 1982, p. 37). Here is an example of this procedure

In Vienna before the First World War, a dashing young Austrian officer tried to obtain the favours of a fashionable courtesan. To shake off this unwanted suitor, she declared that “her heart was, alas, no longer free”. He replied politely: “Mademoiselle, I never aimed as high as that”.

1 To this, Freud adds a third, deeper level, of which neither the joke-teller nor the addressee must be aware. This is the level of the “hidden” or “unconscious” motives of the joke, which are casually responsible—according to Freud—for the release of psychic energy characteristic of the burst of laughter. But this level, being detectable only by the psycho-analyst, need not concern us here.
According to Koestler, the joke depends upon the fact that "high is bi-
sociated with a metaphorical and topographical context. The coat is turned
first metaphorically, then literally." That is to say, in order to be able to
understand the joke, in the fraction of a second he is allowed to "process"
it and laugh or smile, the "literal" or "primary" meaning must be available
to the hearer, though the "metaphorical" meaning is dominant (in the con-
text of the story). This does not show, of course, that the metaphorical
meaning is computed out of the literal meaning, but it surely shows that the
literal meaning has "psychological reality" and must be at least "in the off-
ing" for ready usage by the listener.

Another way of generating double meaning is this:
(b) "Double meaning may be the consequence of a simultaneous synchronic
and diachronic (etymological) analysis of an expression. The first reading is
based on the actual semantic value of the expression, it is followed by a sec-
ond reading which re-evaluates the original meaning of the components" (Fonagy 1982, p. 38). An example of this is one of the many Jewish jokes
discussed by Freud:

The first Jew asks: Have you taken a bath? The second replies asking the other
in return: Why? is there one missing? (Freud 1905, p. 49)

Though Freud points out the shift in contrastive stress (from bath to taken),
and Fonagy speaks of diachronic and synchronic readings, the example
does not differ essentially from the preceding one: the "primary" meaning
of the expression must be available, even though its "secondary" meaning
has become conventionalized into an idiom. This case is particularly relevant
for it bears much resemblance to Gibbs's examples, discussed in section 4. Another case is this:
(c) "The ambiguities of grammatical surface structure are a permanent po-
tential source of double meaning provided that the context does not exclude
either of the two possible interpretations" (Fonagy 1982, p. 38). Example:

A Lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army asks a private: Now tell me,
Bacharach, why should a soldier gladly offer up his life for his king?—You're
absolutely right, Sir! Why should he?

The question can be either interpreted as a real wh-question or else as a rhe-
torical question (a negative assertion), though the context favors the first
interpretation. Here again, though the secondary meaning (rhetorical ques-
tion) is the one immediately detected, the primary meaning must remain
available for the listener to understand the joke.

*I have argued (Dascal, 1985) that it must be "located" in his or her "horizon of
attention" or in his or her "shallow memory."
An important feature noticed by Fonagy in this example—but also present in the others—is that the context cannot be such as to exclude the unfavored interpretation. For the same reason, it cannot be such as to convey the favored interpretation in an entirely explicit and definitive way (see Dascal, 1985).

Finally, consider the following type of case:

(d) "A sentence without being idiomatic may have both a general and a restricted meaning, the latter due to the frequent use of the sentence in a typical, recurrent situation. The latent double sense may become apparent in jokes playing on the contrast of the restricted and the general meaning of a statement such as "I cannot complain," implying either that one has no reason to complain (restricted meaning) or that one must not complain (general sense)" (Fonagy 1982, p. 40). Example:

An immigrant has come to France from a country having a tough dictatorial regime. Here is why he emigrated:
- Was the living standard so low?
  - No, I couldn’t complain.
- Were the housing conditions so bad?
  - No, I couldn’t complain.
- Was unemployment so high?
  - I couldn’t complain.
- Why did you come to France then?
  - Because here I can complain.

Though there are other mechanisms involved in joke understanding, the devices exemplified above account for a large number of the most effective jokes, and they certainly require a distinction between a conventionalized, more or less compositional, more or less context-free reading of an expression, and a reading that is conveyed in a more indirect way, though eventually grasped more immediately.

5.2 Hypnosis

Some uses of language in hypnotic condition may be brought as further evidence for the "psychological reality" of literal meaning. According to one widely held conception, hypnosis is a special "state of mind" or condition. In such a condition, the individual operates at the level of basic processes. And one of these basic processes consists in understanding linguistic expressions on the (almost exclusive) basis of their literal meanings. Let me
first give some examples, and then proceed to discuss their significance in the eyes of experts, and their implications for our purposes here.

Hilgard (1968) devotes an entire chapter to what he calls "distortions of meaning," thus characterized:

There are distortions of meaning, when all the "givens" from the stimulus may be accurate; although there is no distortion of shape, or contour, or color, there is distortion of reference, so that, for example, a clearly perceived object may not be recognized for what it is, or may be given a wrong name. (p. 192)

The cognitive distortions of this kind investigated by him (with subjects in hypnotic state) include agnosias (losses of ability to recognize familiar objects) and aphasias (disturbances in the use or understanding of speech), and they involve both the denotative and the connotative components of meaning. As it turns out, agnosias and aphasias could not be clearly distinguished in Hilgard's experiments, since disturbances in speech tended to spread and become losses of the ability to handle familiar objects. Let us examine his examples.

(a) Subjects were given the following suggestion:

When I reach the count of five, and after that until I tell you otherwise, you will no longer know what the word house means. It will be as if you had never heard the word before. When you hear the word house you will have the same feeling you would have if you saw or heard a foreign word with which you had no familiarity or knowledge. It will mean absolutely nothing to you! (p. 197)

They were then tested in two ways. The hypnotist showed them six pictures, and the subjects were requested to point to the relevant picture as the hypnotist named them, one at a time. Passing the test meant being unable to point to the picture of the house upon hearing the word house. Only 9% of the "high" (i.e., highly hypnotizable) subjects pointed promptly to the appropriate picture, and 11% after some hesitation. That is to say, 81% of these subjects "passed" the test, i.e., lost the ability to understand the word house. The effect was less pronounced in "medium" (29%) and "low" (around 6%) subjects, but it was still present. In high subjects, the effect also spread to a related word, home, for which 9% of the subjects passed the test. In the second part, the hypnotist pointed to the pictures (one at a time), and the subjects were asked to name them. Only 5% of the high subjects used the word house; 14% completely failed to name the picture; the rest used alternative words (e.g., home, building). Though the suggestion referred only to the "loss of meaning" of house and not to the inability to recognize the object, the latter was also present to a surprising degree in the high subjects, though not the medium and low ones. These, however, also avoided the use of house (50% of the medium subjects, and around 20% of the low ones).
(b) A similar test was conducted with the word scissors. Here, in addition to the ability to recognize the named object and to name it upon presentation (for these tasks results were similar to those with house), subjects were asked to show how to use the object with paper. This was intended to check "how literally the subject took the loss of a name," since the suggestion said nothing at all about use of the object (p. 198). The result showed that "many took the loss of name to be general loss of familiarity with scissors, and showed great awkwardness in trying to use the scissors (nearly half of the high subjects). Many of them tried to use the scissors "as a dagger, or pencil, or in some way other than cutting" (p. 199).

Hilgard draws, among other things, the following conclusion from these experiments:

The hypnotic subject is said to be very literal-minded, interpreting a suggestion for exactly what it is; this is true in some sense, in that suggestions tend to be little criticized, but in another sense it is not true, for the subject readily imposes his own interpretation upon a suggestion in accordance with the kind of behavior he perceives the hypnotist as having in mind when he gives the suggestion. (p. 193)

In a sense, the generalization of the loss of meaning to a loss of familiarity indicates—as suggested by Hilgard—that subjects did not take the instruction to forget the meaning strictly literally. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, the results testify to a striking influence of literal meaning. If we assume that the "meaning" of scissors involves in one way or another a functional characterization such as "used to cut," then "losing the meaning" implies losing such a functional characterization of the object referred to by the word. The categorization afforded by the (literal) meaning of an expression is not confined to the linguistic level, but serves also as the basis of handling (recognizing, using) the objects in the world, at least to some extent. In this sense, the subjects took the instructions very literally indeed, for they forgot the meaning in the broadest sense of the term.

(c) The distortion of "affective" meaning was tested by presenting the subjects with a "joke" that was not funny, after the following suggestion:

I am going to read you a very funny statement. I think after you hear it you will agree that it is very funny and humorous, the kind of statement that gives people a good laugh. I hope very much that you will enjoy it to the fullest. (pp. 193-4)

The "joke" was: "The whale is undoubtedly one of the largest mammals alive today." Surprisingly, 93% of the high subjects either smiled or chuckled! (The results are inconclusive, though, since some nonhypnotized subjects also laughed because of the incongruity of the whole situation.) Assuming that the result is reliable, one could say not only that subjects followed "literally" the instruction to laugh, regardless of the value of the
but also (and more significantly) that, being deprived of the ability to detect indirect or implicit meanings (which is, as we have seen, a necessary condition for understanding jokes), they are unable to understand a joke and have to rely entirely on the hypnotist’s judgment on this matter. In order to substantiate this claim, one would have to investigate whether hypnotized individuals show significant difficulties in understanding jokes.

(d) A subject reports that, when told by the hypnotist that she had no hands, she actually felt she didn’t: “My silly-looking long sleeves with only circles at the end where the hands would be. Only those ridiculous ruffles were there” (Hilgard 1970, p. 37). And yet, she was also aware this was not true: “Somewhere else I absolutely know I have hands. I know they’re not cut off. I’m exploring the sensation of not having them. There’s no anxiety” (p. 37). She compares hypnosis with “dreaming when you know you’re dreaming”: “Nothing is really wrong because some part of you is always aware that it’s hypnosis though you don’t verbalize it at all, not even to yourself” (p. 36). Hilgard comments on this as follows:

This complex participation of the hypnotic subject in his own performance, even though it follows very literally the suggestions by the hypnotist, is one of the puzzling aspects of hypnosis, including as it does this continued limited awareness of the observing ego that what is perceived as real is in some sense not real (p. 36)

Such a description of a double awareness applies straightforwardly to example (e) below. It would seem that the “literalness” is what commands the “automatic” performance, while the non-literal or other interpretations remain at a level of awareness that does not exercise effective control over behavior and feelings.11

The above examples do not address themselves directly to the question of whether in presence of an utterance that would normally be understood non-literally, a hypnotized subject interprets it literally. In order to investigate this possibility, a few experimental sessions were conducted. The results have not been tested statistically or otherwise. Here is an example: (e) In an experimental session conducted by Varda Dascal, two subjects, male and female, were hypnotized. Upon the instruction “You will raise your arm over her” (in Hebrew: Ata tarim et hayad aleia), the male subject slowly and gently raised his arm over her head. After the session, he reported that he clearly understood the “metaphorical” sense of the expression (= 

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10 In this, by the way, they could be simply said to be willing to comply with the hypnotist’s request—a phenomenon well documented by other experimenters.

11 This may be related to Hilgard’s suggestion, following Miller, Galanter, and Pribram (1960), that the hypnotist, through assuming control of verbalization, controls also the subjects’ “talking to oneself”, which has what Luria calls a “regulative function” in directing behavior.
beating), and nevertheless he felt that his arm rose, automatically as it were, with no violence whatsoever in his movement. Alongside with cases such as these, which suggest that literal meaning is operative under hypnosis, there were also results which apparently go against such a conclusion. For instance, when one of the subjects was asked "Do you have cigarettes?" he immediately offered to the hypnotist his pack of cigarettes, and so did the other subject, who was not even addressed. That is to say, both "understood the hint," and interpreted the speech-act immediately as a request, rather than as a question. Unfortunately, no experiments have been conducted (as far as I know) in order to check whether hypnotized persons understand implicatures of a less conventionalized nature, so that the results on this issue remain inconclusive.

5.3 Dreams
One of the main characteristics of the use of language in dreams is the fact that the linguistic material is treated by the "dreamwork" with much less regard for the normal constraints imposed by the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of language use. Among other things, this allows for the reliance upon word associations or "puns" which disregard semantic content (being just phonologically or even graphically based), syntactic composition, etc., (cf. Dascal, 1985). In many dreams, formulaic expressions, idioms, or slang, which have a conventionalized global meaning, are used on the basis of constructing usually, but not always, by pictorial means—an alternative "literal meaning" for such expressions, based on the meanings of their components. For example, a dream may be about a cancelled cricket match, whereby it expresses the feeling that something was "not cricket"; or a dream depicting a bare chest may express the idea of "getting something off one's chest" (Faraday 1976, p. 95). In order to be able to build such "literal" pictorial interpretations of conventionalized expressions, through which the dream in fact conveys their conventional meanings, both ways of construing the meanings of these expressions must be somehow available to the dreamer (and not only to the interpreter of the dream), and hence both must have some kind of "psychological reality."

The uses of language in dreams, jokes, and hypnosis deserve much more attention than I could afford here. But enough has been said, I trust, to indicate that the role of literal meaning cannot be easily ignored in such uses.

6. SEMANTICS, PRAGMATICS, AND METAPHOR
Gibbs draws two main theoretical conclusions from his criticism of literal meaning: (a) current accounts of metaphor, which make use of the distinction between literal and non-literal meaning, are on the wrong track; and (b)
the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, also based on the ability
to distinguish between literal and non-literal meaning, should be aban-
doned, for there is "little motivation in a psychological theory for making a
separation between semantics and pragmatics"; it should be replaced by some
"interactive-parallel" theory of language processing (pp. 298–299).

Such conclusions indicate that, although his evidence only shows that
there are cases of language understanding in which a putative stage of
"computing the literal meaning" is not detectable, and hence that such a
stage is not an obligatory one (cf. p. 287), he is willing to go beyond this,
and to dispense with the notion of literal meaning altogether. Were it not for
this clearly detectable trend in his argument, I would—and should—not be
motivated to launch a defense of literal meaning. But such a trend leads to
the highly objectionable position of "radical contextualism" (cf. Dascal,
1981a), a view that has not so far been articulated so as to present a viable
account of the majority (and not merely of a few) of the uses of language.
Were literal meanings (in some reasonable version of this construct) to be
totally ruled out, then all of our understanding of language would have to be
accounted for by "context" alone. But the context is potentially infinite
and indefinite as a source of possible "meanings." The denial of the existence
of a more restricted set of meanings, which serves either a base or as a frame
of reference for the subsequent search of meaningful aspects of context,
seems to preclude the possibility of developing a satisfactory psychological
account of the process of comprehension. At any rate, the failure of the
behavioristic program in providing an account of meaning in these terms is
perhaps a good indication of the difficulties—if not sheer impossibility—
facing any approach of this kind.

Once such a possibility is left aside, what has to be done is to reformulate
the notion of literal meaning, so as to eliminate the drawbacks due to both
its characterization in too restrictive and in too ambitious terms. This, in
turn, allows for a new, principled demarcation between semantics and prag-
matics, employing a three-fold distinction between sentence, utterance, and
speaker’s meaning (cf. Dascal, 1983, pp. 32ff). Among other things, this
move does not restrict the scope of semantics to an account of relatively
context-free and conventionalized sentence-meanings, but permits also the
inclusion in it of specific kinds of context dependency. This opens the way
to integrating into semantics, in a very natural way, phenomena such as the
reliance upon general schemata (Rumelhart, 1979, p. 85) in the comprehen-
sion of utterances (see Dascal, 1983, p. 36). In such a way, one introduces a
differentiation of the roles of "context" which gives to this notion more
specificity and consequently a higher explanatory power. Within this frame-
work, there is no need to assume an invariable "bottom up" order of pro-
cessing, and to exclude cases of "top down" or "parallel processing,"
though I would think that there might be alternative heuristics or strategies
of comprehension, one of them being a “bottom up” one, which would start from sentence meaning (as some of the examples of section 5, as well as of normal language use, suggest). What must not be overlooked, however, is that, even when a “top down” strategy is used, at some point literal meanings are likely to be needed in order to complete and/or check the tentative interpretation.

A discussion of the implications of such a reformulation of the notion of literal meaning for the theory of metaphor lies beyond the scope of the present paper. But some remarks are in order. Gibbs defends the elimination of the distinction between the metaphoric and the non-metaphoric, but in fact his arguments are directed only against a certain conception of metaphor which relies upon that distinction. They don’t have, therefore, the punch he believes they have. The theory in question assumes that a metaphorical interpretation of an utterance is generated whenever the sentence uttered violates some semantic rule or, more generally, when it is semantically ‘anomalous’. Against such a theory, Gibbs mentions an experiment about the understanding of the sentence Some jobs are jails (p. 294). In this experiment it was found that, even though the subjects decided correctly that the sentence was literally false, the fact that it also had a true metaphorical interpretation (something like: “many persons feel restricted by their jobs”) led to a significantly higher reaction time in the subjects’ response, as compared to cases in which no true metaphorical interpretation was immediately available (Glucksberg et al., 1982). His conclusion is that:

Any theory which asserts that metaphorical meaning is computed on the basis of a failed attempt to compute a literal meaning cannot explain why metaphorical meaning should interfere with processing when only a literal interpretation is required. (Gibbs 1984, p. 294).

I have no idea how Gibbs and other psychologists are able to establish that the factor responsible for the delay is the existence of the true metaphorical interpretation. One could as well suggest that the reason is the difficulty in determining what does the sentence literally mean, which is a necessary condition for assessing its truth-value. Such a difficulty, in turn, might be a consequence of a lack of match between the predicate and the subject of the sentence, which is not far from a semantic ‘anomaly’. But even if Gibbs’s account is correct, one could imagine that, although the subjects have been told to pay attention only to the literal meaning, they automatically generate or infer also a metaphorical interpretation, precisely because of the difficulty of generating a literal reading in the first place.

If it were established that the theory of metaphor against which Gibbs argues is indeed incorrect, this, in itself, would not justify the suppression of the distinction literal versus metaphoric, since that theory is nothing but an application of this distinction. Other theories of metaphor, e.g., the
interaction theory (which Gibbs seems to favor), are not only compatible with the distinction in question, but even require it, at least in the modified version of 'literalness' I have proposed (see Dascal, 1983, p. 154).

The excessive emphasis on the undeniable similarities between our understanding of metaphorical and literal expressions leads Gibbs and others to underestimate the differences, no less undeniable, and to postulate that the two types of interpretation of an utterance are rather a matter of degree and not of kind (p. 297). In order to explain, with the help of such an axiom, the fact that people are able to tell, correctly and without difficulty, whether a sentence is used metaphorically or literally, Gibbs resorts to a notion of familiarity with the context:

What often appears to be a literal meaning of a sentence is just an occasion-specific meaning where the context is so widely shared that there doesn't seem to be a context at all. (Gibbs 1984, p. 297)

In addition to the exclusion of the "context" in all that regards semantics and literalness—a view I have already criticized—Gibbs's claim implies that if the sentence *He is a lion* were used referring (in a context) to an example of courage recognized by all participants in the exchange, they would have to classify it as literal rather than as metaphorical, a prediction which, I believe, would prove to be false.

The similarities between literal and metaphorical interpretation loom large if one considers—as does Gibbs—frozen metaphors. But, instead of justifying the abandonment of the distinction literal versus metaphoric, what this suggests is the need to characterize such a distinction in such a way as *not* to confuse frozen and creative metaphors. According to the broader conception of literal meaning sketched above, the conventional meaning of frozen metaphors is 'literal', precisely because of its conventionality. Its description, therefore, belongs to semantics, and its understanding does not require the intervention of the powerful devices of pragmatics such as are the conversational maxims. Such devices—or possibly other pragmatic means—are required only for creative metaphors. In this way, there would be difference of kind and not only of degree in the understanding of these two types of utterance. Rumelhart's (1979, p. 79) suggestion, mentioned by Gibbs, that

The classification of an utterance as to whether it involves literal or metaphorical meaning is... a judgement that can be reliably made, but not which signals fundamentally different comprehension processes,

amounts to a suppression of any *psychological* basis for such judgements.

When Gibbs goes on to specify more precisely how intuitions of literalness and non-literalness are to be distinguished, he in fact reverts to a distinction of principle, and not of degree, between literal and metaphoric. He
makes use of Ortony's (1979) distinction between "high-salient" and "low-salient" predicates associated with a concept. The sentence *Encyclopedias are like dictionaries* is a literal comparison because there are high-salient predicates of the second term (*dictionaries*) which are also high-salient predicates of the first (*encyclopedias*). But the sentence *Encyclopedias are like gold mines* is a metaphorical comparison because the high-salient predicates of *gold mines* are only low-salient predicates of *encyclopedias*. In both cases the comprehension process should be the same, on this account, since it is always a question of determining whether the high-salient predicates of the second term (the 'vehicle') are high or low-salient predicates of the first (the 'topic').

One should observe, first, that the distinction between the two types of predicate corresponds to a fashionable version of the distinction between essential and accidental properties, without, of course, the rigidity such a distinction had in traditional logic and metaphysics. In Achinstein's (1968) terminology, they correspond, respectively, to predicates which are "semantically relevant" and just "relevant." Such a distinction is heir of what remains of the analytic/synthetic opposition after the liberalization of the notion of literalness is achieved. Hence, the notion of 'literal meaning,' which corresponds quite precisely to the set of high-salient predicates, is necessary for Ortony's account of metaphor. Among other things, what metaphor does is to assign saliency to some predicates of the topic which, under normal circumstances, are low salient. That is to say, metaphor momentarily modifies the hierarchy of predicates associated with a term, a process that obviously requires the previous existence of such a hierarchy. Secondly, concerning the process of comprehension, one may suppose that a comparison (or any other form of predication) is normally understood as establishing a relation between the high-salient predicates of the two terms compared. Only when the establishment of such a relation fails, at the level of high-salient predicates, one tries to establish it in terms of low-salient predicates of the topic. We have here, therefore, not only two different processes of understanding, but also a new version of the semantic anomaly theory, rejected by Gibbs.

One should abandon the practice of stressing either the continuity (e.g., Rumelhart 1979, p. 80) or the discontinuity between metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses of language, depending on one's *parti pris* on the literal meaning dispute. Both aspects should rather be acknowledged: without continuity, one could hardly account for both the ontogenetic and the diachronic process of constant generation and shift of literal meanings, whereas without discontinuity one would be unable to explain the fact that metaphorical language is not only just "understood," but is also perceived and marked as "different," in much the same way as irony is so perceived (see section 4). It may be true that, as claimed by Rumelhart (1979, p. 80), the
child, when acquiring language, understands in the same way the metaphoric and the literal. But it is no less true that the child learns, at some moment in its linguistic career, to distinguish between them, and from that moment onwards the two are interpreted in ways that are essentially distinct.

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