

On the Roles of Context and Literal Meaning in Understanding

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In my recent defense of literal meaning (Dascal, 1987), my main concern was to show that such a theoretical construct is "psychologically real". At least in one sense, Gibbs (1989, p. 249) grants this point. For he acknowledges that the meanings I call "literal" are among the "variety of *products* that result from language understanding," and adds: "Nobody disputes this as an aspect of psychological reality." What he disputes is that there is anything special about these products, which would grant them a privileged status (a) as being somewhat "basic" or "primary," (b) as being the output of a unique cognitive process, and (c) as playing some necessary role in the processes involved in engendering the other, nonliteral, products of language understanding. Gibbs argues against (b) and (c), and concludes that (a) cannot be the case. I will try to show that:

1. The new empirical evidence mentioned by Gibbs does not support his denial of (c);
2. On Gibbs's own assumptions, it is necessary to assign special properties to the processing of literal meaning; and consequently,
3. It not only makes sense, but is also necessary to claim that, in the process of understanding, literal meaning occupies a distinct, "basic" position.

REACTION TIME, PARALLEL PROCESSING, AND THE SUBTLETY OF LITERAL MEANING EFFECTS

As stressed by Gibbs, the time parameter is crucial in a debate that centers around processes. All his experimental evidence consists in data about reaction times (RT) for comprehension of literal and nonliteral sentences, with or without context. The average RTs reported by him and others are of the order of two seconds for comprehension and an additional two seconds for

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paraphrase judgments. No data are supplied about what happens in the course of this very long (processually speaking) span of time. And yet, conclusions are drawn about what has putatively happened "from the first moment" (Gibbs, 1986, p. 14).

Fortunately, there are some data about what goes on during comprehension, if not in the first moment, at least very close to it (e.g., Marslen-Wilson, 1984; Swinney, 1979). What these data clearly show is that:

1. At first, *all* lexical meanings of a word are accessed, regardless of the presence of a biasing context which favors only some of them;
2. This activation occurs even prior to the complete perception of the stimulus word; and
3. Contextual pressure for selection of an "appropriate" meaning also operates very quickly, with the result that the inappropriate meanings are inhibited a few hundred milliseconds after their onset.

The picture of comprehension that emerges is that of a bottom-up, automatic, context-independent, initial access to lexical meanings, quickly followed by its assessment in the light of top-down contextual information. The specific models proposed to account for these facts differ *en detail*, but they converge *en gros* (see also Forster, 1981; Kintsch, 1988).

Unfortunately, the data just mentioned refer only to lexical meanings. Obviously, these are important components of sentence meaning, and their unmistakable context-independent activation directly supports some of the contentions of moderate literalism. Indirectly, it also suggests an explanation for Gibbs's and others' findings concerning the lack of significant *global* RT differences in understanding literal and nonliteral meanings of utterances in context. Just as a word is (tentatively) recognized and its lexical meanings are activated before its full sensory input is processed, so too a sentence is (tentatively) processed before its complete uptake. Such a processing includes, very early, contextual selection pressures. In this sense, the processing of sentence, utterance, and speaker meanings (see Dascal, 1983) runs in parallel, being eventually completed almost simultaneously. Once the system settles for a speaker's meaning, the sentence and utterance meanings that were instrumental in the process of interpretation are rapidly inhibited (though there is reason to believe it remains stored for a while in a "shallow" memory), especially if the speaker's meaning turns out to be nonliteral. This is why they are less easily accessible than the speaker's meaning *after* understanding is achieved. Clear-cut contextual bias can even shorten the processing time, by allowing an earlier choice of a single interpretation, which is what the subjects' pressing of the bar for "understood" signals.

But none of this proves that the direct or literal meaning was not processed at all, nor that the whole process is not driven or "kept on track"—to use Paivio's (1979, p. 170) apt term—by the activated literal meaning(s). Does

this imply that the hypothesized role of literal meaning is "so subtle as to be undetectable," as claimed by Gibbs (1989, p. 248)? Certainly not. It only means that more sensitive experiments should be designed to tap what kinds of meaning, in addition to the lexical ones, are activated *in the course of* the process of utterance interpretation, rather than immediately *after* its completion.

RECOVERABILITY AND CONTEXTLESS INTERPRETATION

Even what occurs immediately *after* the process of utterance interpretation may eventually serve as evidence for the early presence of literal meaning in the process. The evidence for this is the easiness and rapidity of the recovery of latent, especially literal, meanings. This phenomenon has been documented for indirect requests (Blum-Kulka, in press), for repairs (Fox, 1987), and I believe it can also be found in the understanding of jokes, metaphors, irony, and other forms of indirectness. Gibbs (1989) dismisses this kind of evidence on the grounds that the seemingly *recovered* meaning is no less *constructed* than the meaning it comes to replace. His opposition to the idea of *recovery* (naturally suggested by the uncontested rapidity of the process) is, of course, essential to sustain his contextualism. But *this* is certainly a tendentious argument for dismissing the evidence in question, and—as far as I can see—Gibbs offers no other argument. He contends, for example, that the humor in jokes lies not in the text but in the (mis)interpretations of the speakers' intentions. Yet, widely different readers/listeners of a joke understand it similarly, which proves that it is the text that reliably induces the relevant (mis)interpretations. Furthermore, it does so in such a way that the disfavored interpretation can nevertheless be quickly *recovered* at the end, which shows that it must have been activated and preserved, *in spite of contextual pressure against it* (see Dascal, 1985, 1987), much as the concept "river" is activated even when the context clearly favors the other reading of *bank* (Swinney, 1979).

In fact, the problem arises in a sharper form in the understanding of utterances in what experimenters call a "no-context" situation. In these cases, utterances *are* understood, and—what a coincidence!—it is their literal or direct interpretations that subjects tend to choose. Gibbs (1989) deals with these cases by assuming that, even here, "context" is at work, though "perhaps [a] so widely shared [one] that there *seems* to be no context at all" (p. 246). Isn't *this* making *context* an entity "so subtle as to be undetectable" (p. 248), just for the sake of preserving the contextualist dogma? Moderate literalism, by contrast, deals with such cases by claiming that those "widely shared contexts," effortlessly evoked by the use of a sentence in any *non-special* context, are part and parcel of the frames or scripts standardly associated with these forms of words, and hence belong to their "literal meaning".

Recoverability—and its *immediate recognition*—is also essential for indirectness to fulfill some of its functions, for example, permitting a possible line of retreat. The speaker who uses indirectness counts on the listener's ability to recognize, from the outset, this possibility, usually afforded by the literal reading of the utterance. I wonder why Gibbs (1986a), who offers an elaborate account of how *speakers* carefully plan their indirect requests in order to meet anticipated potential obstacles for compliance, seems to assume that *listeners*, when understanding such utterances, need not immediately process, in order to be able to recognize and eventually recover, the alternatives underlying all such planning. People not only identify the content of a metaphorical remark, they identify it immediately *qua* metaphorical, that is, as contrasting with a possible (or impossible) literal reading. A theory that views this identification as a *post factum judgment*, and the alternative reading as a late *product* separated from the main understanding process, is both unparsimonious and unable to explain the special *communicative* efficacy of indirectness in general, which lies precisely in its immediately recognizable ambivalence.

COMMUNICATING OR GUESSING?

There is much more to be said in the present dispute, but I want to conclude by speculating about the deeper divergences that may be at stake. They lie—so it seems—in our different conceptions of what is distinctive of linguistic communication. On the contextualistic view, context so powerfully constrains interpretation *in advance*, that the actual speech stimulus is largely redundant. At times, Gibbs is close to moderating in his contextualism; for example, when he talks about the *conventionalized* meanings of indirect requests, for whose quick understanding *typical* contexts of use are necessary (Gibbs, 1986a). Both notions, convention and typicality, refer in fact to different aspects of my broadened notion of literal meaning. For the most part, however, he leans toward a more radical version of contextualism, which denies the existence of a “putative semantics of the sentence in a null context,” (Gibbs, 1986b, p. 14) and places *all* the burden of interpretation on the context.

In my moderate literalism view, listeners do indeed try to predict what may come at the next stage of the interaction, but what actually comes is not redundant, because it may or may not fit the prediction. This is only possible because the linguistic sign has some “autonomous” power of its own, bestowed upon it by sedimented conventions and habits, by virtue of which it can trigger, redirect, and guide the interpretive process. This power is its “literal meaning.” Though it falls short of being a complete and well-defined entity (as in traditional literalism), its role is not negligible. To be sure, semiotically speaking, the received signal or stimulus is always a sign in con-

text. But it is the special stability and salience of the linguistic (or other semiotic) sign, in the midst of the ever-flowing context, that lets us convey and understand fairly precise messages.

In both views, the aim of understanding is to recognize speakers' intentions. In the contextualistic view, this is achieved in a rather direct way. It is as if each time an expression is used, one has to guess from context alone what it may possibly mean. From that standpoint, the success and precision of linguistic communication is nearly miraculous. On the moderate literalism view, previously crystallized communicative intentions, available through linguistic conventions, are the usually—though not invariably—reliable mediators of such a mundane, yet always remarkable feat.

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