On Our Mind: A Critical Review of Rachel Giora’s Most Recent Work
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Rachel Giora’s latest book collects the author’s theoretical and experimental studies in recent years, in which she has focused mainly on the notion of ‘salience’ in discourse.

Salience can be characterized as the way a word’s (or an expression’s) particular meaning ‘leaps to the fore’, irrespective of literal meaning and sometimes even independently of context. The theory thus places itself in the center of the age-old dispute on how we understand language and, in particular, how we come from the said to the meant, from the literal to the non-literal meaning. Being an experimental psycholinguist, the author checks her theorizing against laboratory experiments and provides continuous evidence for the plausibility of her hypotheses.

The main interest of Giora’s work lies in the ways she combines theory and practice, hypotheses (which are formed in order to capture some observations) and experiments (in which the author’s hunches are subjected to psycholinguistic testing). Especially for a pragmaticist, Giora’s book provides a welcome antidote against the commonly held view that ‘the context is everything’ (sometimes called ‘pancontextualism’) — an adage that would have to be corrected, in the spirit of the book, to: ‘the context is everything, provided one can properly deal with its salient elements’.

The way Giora structures her arguments is standard in psychology and psycholinguistics research work: first presenting the data informally, then forming some hypotheses, which are tested in a laboratory setting with a large number of subjects; following that, the results are tabulated and discussed, to be followed up by a general conclusion based on the confirmed findings.

In the present case, the hypothesis that salient meanings always carry precedence when we have something ‘on our mind’, is borne out (albeit with some reservations) by the experiments. Giora concludes that we have to rethink our position vis-à-vis the processing of figurative language in general (including irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, jokes, and other kinds of non-literal language). This rethinking will take into account the fact that salience can neither be pinned down to the surface form of a word or expression, nor to its syntactic function alone (e.g., salient items will often be noun phrases, but this is by no means an exclusive relationship). Neither can salience be connected to a particular semantic property or feature. One could perhaps say that salience, insofar as it depends on the user’s intentions, has a contextual and pragmatic aspect. Salience can only be realized in context, but its effect is not uniquely dependent on context, let alone context-determined: rather, we should say that salience, when it is optimally
realized, depends on the interplay between one user (who intentionally creates, or capitalizes on, salience) and (an)other user(s), who recognize the salient item as such, and structure their response in relation to this uptake, and thus, more generally, demonstrate “the effect of accessible meanings on speech production and comprehension” (p. 9).

The book consists of a Preface, followed by nine chapters. Chapter 1, entitled ‘Prologue’ (pp. 3–12), introduces the reader to the problem by means of a couple of anecdotes and jokes, showing how we, for instance, in interpreting a joke, access the salient meaning of the punch word or line first, and only afterwards adjust our interpretation so as to fit the appropriate, joking context (puns and ‘garden path’ stories belong here, too—as when we realize that the ‘baby snatchers’ we hear about are not the snatchers of babies, but instead the baby counterparts of some adult snatchers; p. 7).

The main question here is about the role of the context: will it constrain a particular interpretation of an utterance or word sufficiently to rule out all other meanings (including the salient one)? Giora’s answer is clearly in the negative; and exactly what (kinds of) effects “accessible meanings [have] on speech production and comprehension”, and how these effects operate, is defined as the goal of the book itself (p. 9).

In the remainder of the chapter, Giora details three models describing the role of context in speech comprehension and production: the ‘interactionist’, the ‘modular’, and the ‘graded salience’ model. The interactionist model (subscribed to by most theorists) says that we access meaning directly, depending on the context. If the context is sufficiently rich, there will be no, or only one, choice; in an ironic context, the utterance ‘Thank you for your help’ would only be interpreted ironically, not literally.

In contrast, the modular model assumes that we access all meanings of an ambiguous expression simultaneously, and then proceed to filter out the incompatible ones, by ‘revisiting’ the scene of the crime and adjusting our expectations (more or less as we are supposedly doing when handling conversational implicatures).

Finally, under the graded salience hypothesis we do indeed access the lexicon directly upon encountering an item in our discourse chain, ‘top down’; but at the same time we access meanings ‘bottom-up’ (pp. 11–12), as in the modular model. However, the access is not random or across the board, but ‘graded’: the degree of salience of the proposed occurrence determines our first choice of meaning. This access is not dependent on context, but runs in parallel with it (ibid). So, even non-salient, low accessibility meanings are always available (and sometimes accessed) when needed. For instance, in advertisements for ‘computer literacy’ (“Who is afraid of this mouse?”) the non-salient meaning of ‘mouse’ (the animal) is reinforced by a picture of a mouse-like tail extending from the computer device called ‘mouse’.

Chapter 2, ‘Salience and context’ (pp. 13–38) looks into the role of context versus salience in comprehension and production of language. In processing incoming speech, we most often prefer the immediately accessible interpretation (‘what’s on our mind’) to an interpretation which contextually would be more appropriate, as when we resolve anaphora by ‘backtracking’.

Salience is, first and foremost, a ‘graded’ concept: it is not ‘all or nothing’. Its degrees depend on a variety of factors: frequency of occurrence, familiarity, conventionality, or proto- or stereotypical character; the more the meanings present in the mind of an
individual or a community exhibit these characteristics, the more salient the information will be (p. 15). Salient meaning elements do not always guide us towards the meaning of the whole; in particular, compositional meanings may assume a life of their own, as in the case of idioms (the salient meaning of ‘bucket’ in ‘to kick the bucket’ is not helpful for our understanding of the idiom). However, the opposite may also occur: an intended compositional meaning may be difficult to understand because the meaning relies on a less salient aspect of one or more of the components. Hence, it seems safe to conclude that salience should not be construed as belonging exclusively to lexical items; on many occasions, the meaning of the concept, not the word as such, is the ‘salient’ part of the expression. On the other hand, context plays an important role: “salience affects ambiguity resolution vis-à-vis contextual information, that is, how we home in on the contextually appropriate meaning” (p. 24).

Chapter 3, ‘Lexical Access’ (pp. 39–60), attempts “to resolve the lexical versus context effects debate” (p. 40). The question is whether one “can really constrain context to the extent that it would affect comprehension entirely so that only relevant meanings would be processed, neither more nor less?” (p. 39)

As the hedge (“really”) indicates, Giora is not inclined to answer this question with a straight ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. The issue is a complicated one, as she illustrates by discussing several models of lexical access. The direct access (or ‘context takes all’) model fails to account for the fact that salient meanings escape the constraints of contexts. The exhaustive access model (a variant of Fodor’s, 1983, modular-based model) lets salient meanings be accessed independently of context. This model is minimally consistent with Giora’s approach, but it is unable to explain the ‘graded’ character of salience. The ordered access model similarly maintains the independence of the lexical processes, but allows for salient meanings to be accessed faster than less salient ones (p. 40); however, even when access is ordered, “salient information cannot be bypassed” (p. 52). In the selective access model, both the lexicon and the context are activated simultaneously, and contextual information blocks contextually inappropriate meanings (p. 42), even if they happen to be salient. The means thus selected exclude other, less appropriate meanings: “… heavily weighted contextual information interacts with lexical processes very early on and activates contextually appropriate meanings exclusively” (ibid). However, while such contextual influences cannot be denied (they are to some degree confirmed experimentally; p. 48), the graded salience hypothesis, with its two independently operating mechanisms: lexicon and context, is to be preferred. In any case, it behooves us “to look more carefully into effects on comprehension of weighted contextual information… and location in the sentence context” (p. 50).

In the remainder of the chapter, the author discusses the influence of syntax on disambiguation. Earlier, the current account was that syntax steered this process by referring to tree-like structures. However, syntactic ambiguity may depend on the availability of lexical alternatives; here, the more frequent (hence salient) interpretation prevails (p. 56). While there thus seems to be “some evidence suggesting that syntactic ambiguity resolution is, at least in part, a function of meaning salience” (p. 58), more research is needed to tease out the different explanatory strands. Also, the automatic character of ‘salience-based retrieval’ need not imply that the lexicon acts like a robot, or even that the
mind is inherently ‘stupid’. Automatic access of salient information is a “rational” process”: the lexicon has “a mind of its own” (p. 50).

The next chapters apply the theory of ‘graded salience’ to some concrete linguistic phenomena, in particular figurative language. Chapter 4, on ‘Ironic’ (pp. 61–102), first discusses various theories, such as the ‘echoic mention’ theory of irony, due to Wilson and Sperber (1992, 1993). As experiments by Gibbs (1986) have shown, processing time for echoic irony is less than for non-echoic irony. A previous, non-ironic mention of the (sense of the) utterance to be processed reduces processing time for the ironic utterance that follows (the “priming effect”, p. 65). But this can only be the case if the processing still has access to the “salient, literal meaning of irony” (ibid).

In her discussion of another model, the ‘allusion-pretense’ view, Giora mentions “social norms or expectation” as typical ‘situational’ features, influencing the interpretation of ironic utterances (p. 65). Unfortunately, Giora does not refer to the literature dealing with situational irony, where it is claimed that irony depends on an ironic situation: verbal irony is only a derivative phenomenon, as I have claimed (Littman and Mey, 1991); a renewed interest in situation irony is evidenced in Shelley’s work on the ‘bicoherence theory of irony’ (2001).

The next two models both assume an initial processing of literal meaning as indispensable for the activation of a subsequent ironic meaning. The ‘standard pragmatic model’, due to Grice and Searle (among others), sees understanding nonliteral language as involving a sequential process, where “the first stage is literal and obligatory, and the second is nonliteral and optional” (p. 66). This model not only implies longer reading times for nonliteral than for literal meanings (as borne out by experimental findings), but also presupposes a “suppression process” which “has not gained empirical support” (p. 66). The same two-layered communicative act is at the basis of another model, called ‘joint pretense’ (due to Clark, 1996; Clark and Gerrig, 1984). Here, irony is placed in an active setting: “joint pretense is conceived of as a staged communicative act” (p. 67), reminiscent of what I elsewhere have called a ‘pragmatic act’ (Mey, 2001: 212–229). This model comes close to Giora’s own assumptions about “retention of the contextually incompatible literal meaning” (p. 68); it includes “an initial phase, involving meanings accessed directly or made available by a strong prior context . . . and an immediately subsequent phase of integration of activated information with contextual information” (p. 69). When we process an unfamiliar irony, the salient, literal, and incompatible meaning is activated in all circumstances, mostly even before accessing the contextually compatible, ironic meaning; hence, in an ironic context, an ‘adjustment’ will be necessary. In contrast, when we are dealing with a familiar irony (e.g., ‘big deal’ for something unimportant), both meanings (literal and ironical) are activated (since they are both salient), but the ironical reading will prevail, and no adjustment is necessary (pp. 70–71).

After these theoretical speculations, the second part of the chapter discusses various empirical findings. The two main parameters in this experimental research are reading time (utterances take longer to read when embedded in irony than in a literal context; p. 74) and response time (a subject’s reaction to a test word is an indication of salience; p. 77). Here,

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1 Fodor’s (1983) expression, quoted p. 60.
the author (and her readers) come up against a crux: it is very difficult to separate the two parameters. For instance, Gibbs (1986) found that “irony (sarcasm) did not take longer to read than its literal ‘counterpart’” (p. 75); on the contrary, nonsarcastic utterances took longer to read than the ironic, sarcastic ones (e.g., ‘You are not helping me’ versus ‘You are a big help’; p. 77)—all of which seems to contradict Giora’s hypothesis. The author explains this apparent contradiction in terms of “discourse well-formedness”: the nonsarcastic utterance being less ‘well-formed’ than the literal one, it takes longer to process (ibid); I find the use of this term not convincing as an explanatory device. The same goes for the ‘retention hypothesis’, by which “a meaning activated initially is retained for further processes if it is instrumental in constructing the intended interpretation”, and its counterpart, ‘suppression’, by which “a meaning, regardless of contextual compatibility, is suppressed if it interferes with the process” (p. 87). These mechanisms of retention versus suppression would have done well with a stronger theoretical underpinning (especially considering the author’s earlier remark on suppression as not “having gained empirical support”; p. 66).

In the chapter’s penultimate section, entitled ‘What does irony mean?’, Giora casts her net wider. Irony is not just a matter of interpretation in accordance with a particular hypothesis—the question is what we mean when we are being ironic (p. 93). If we simply mean the opposite of what we say, why could not we then just say the opposite? Merely claiming that in irony, we dissociate ourselves from someone’s utterance, or that we say something that we really disapprove of, in order to distance ourselves from what is alluded to, explains only a small part of the process called irony. What is really at stake, and where the salient literal meaning can help us find our feet, is the fact that “irony functions as a reference point relative to which the ironicized situation is to be assessed and criticized”. In other words, it is not just a matter of criticizing an utterance; rather, what salience does is to keep us in touch with a situation. The examples from real live texts that the author adduces in the sequel of the section show that hypotheses such as the ‘echoic mention’ cannot do justice to the situational character of irony. For instance, when cruelty is displayed as an ironical criticism of the cruelty inherent in patriarchal society, the reference point is precisely the ‘literal’ meaning of the cruel words and deeds attributed to the protagonist of the novel Dolly City (Castel-Bloom, 1992), in which a woman physician is dissecting her son—for his own good.

Chapter 5 (pp. 103–166) deals with ‘Metaphors and idioms’, and specifically with the “context and privileged meanings” that “play [a role in] shaping our linguistic behavior” (p. 103). Giora observes that the current debates on the understanding of metaphorical expressions have focused on literality, but that “the variable of familiarity . . . has been largely overlooked” (p. 106). Familiarity is prominent in interpreting metaphors: while familiar metaphors have the same reading times for metaphorical and literal readings, unfamiliar metaphors will take longer, as “the metaphoric interpretation does not hinge on the salient interpretation of its components, and will require extra processing time . . .” (p. 107). Familiarity also affects reading times for idioms: irrespective of context, familiar idioms are always read faster.

An often heard objection to experimental psycholinguistics is that the laboratory conditions hardly are conducive to a natural use of language. Giora obviates this criticism by including a long stretch of conversation in her discussion of metaphor comprehension
As expected, metaphors are abundant in natural conversation; but moreover, interlocutors actually respond to metaphors in ways that support the graded salience hypothesis. In particular, salient literal meanings of familiar metaphors are retained and made available for further elaboration by appealing to (or ‘resonating with’) the literal, salient meaning of the original metaphor; of the total of 120 metaphors used in this half hour long conversation, only 20 are less familiar ones, and of these only one third are not resonated with (p. 131). Similar hypotheses were tested and confirmed for written discourse (pp. 134–136). Giora convincingly concludes that the graded salience hypothesis provides us with a better understanding of how people spontaneously create coherent discourse, both orally and in written form. This section may well be the most original and appealing of the whole book.

As to idioms, the same or similar findings were reported as for metaphors, except that in the case of highly standardized idioms, the less salient, literal meaning was more difficult to elicit, and the idiomatic meaning, because of its higher salience, “might be difficult to suppress even when inappropriate or unintended” (example: ‘having cold feet’ in the literal meaning, rather than in the idiomatic one of ‘having second thoughts’; p. 138 and cf. p. 14). The author concludes that “the relevant factor determining differences or similarity in early processes is not the literality of nonliterality of the utterances in question but rather their degree of familiarity” (p. 140).

At the end of this chapter, Giora discusses the familiar adage ‘the lexicon proposes and the context disposes’ (p. 147). While she agrees with the first part of the sentence, she reminds us that the lexical ‘proposing’ does not just happen across the board but is salience-ordered. As to the context, it does not always ‘dispose’ (in the sense of ‘dispose of’): rather, it selects critically, by retaining e.g., literal meaning of metaphors when they are useful for further processing (as in the case of ‘resonance’). Furthermore, “some highly salient meanings resist suppression even when contextually irrelevant” (pp. 147–148), as in the case of idioms; while this procedure may seem wasteful, it serves a good purpose. The mind has an economy of its own, in which parsimoniousness (‘economy’ in the ‘vulgar’ sense; Mey, 2001:179–181) is not always the positive flip side of being wasteful.

In the short chapter 6 (pp. 167–175) on ‘Jokes’, the theory of graded salience is applied to a related domain, that of the joking utterance. The usual explanation (and one that at first blush appears most plausible) is that “jokes involve entertaining two incompatible interpretations” (p. 167). Such an explanation involves what is called ‘frame-shifting’; this would also explain why jokes take longer to process than do normal utterances. But it is not enough to observe an incompatibility in meanings; we have to be more specific and ask what kind of meanings are retained, what kind suppressed; and the answer is, not surprisingly: we have to look at their salience (p. 168).

In respect to salience, jokes do not differ from other non-literal language (such as metaphor) in the initial phase of processing; in fact, “[m]ost jokes make up a discourse that best exposes our tendency to opt for the salient interpretation first”. What happens at the punch line (the point called the ‘disjunctor’ by some) is that “a sudden incongruity forces reinterpretation” (pp. 168–169). The context may either promote or weaken the salient interpretation which is activated initially and subsequently retained. Overall, the graded salience hypothesis is better suited to explain what happens at the ‘disjunctor’ point; in jokes, we not only ‘reshuffle salience’, but actually suppress a non-suitable meaning.
However, as Gernsbacher (1990: 173) has pointed out, such a suppression is more costly, and the additional cost is reflected in extra processing difficulty for jokes, as opposed to metaphors and the like.

Not least thanks to the many jokes used as examples, this chapter reads very well (it ends with a joke that has to be read twice to be understood—extra processing time required!).

In the likewise brief chapter 7, ‘Innovation’ (pp. 176–184), Giora proposes an original hypothesis, ‘optimal innovation’, to deal with the observation that innovative use of language, or creativity, is most pleasurable when it allows us to recognize the familiar (in accordance with Freud; p. 176). Just like salience, creativity is a graded concept; and in order to be optimal, creativity requires a change in salience. This change has to be such that it “allow[s] for the recovery of the salient meaning from which that meaning stems, in order that the similarity and difference between them may be assessable” (ibid). Thus, while pure innovation may create novelty, it is not always pleasurable, and even may be less pleasurable because it does not allow us to retrieve the original meaning. Indeed, the more salient meanings are often the ones that get most easily re-novated, because they happen to be ‘on our minds’. Incidentally, this is also the reason that the technique of ‘bestrangement’ (ostranenie, originally due to Shklovsky; see Mey, 2000:254) is such a successful innovative device: it de-familiarizes the familiar, the salient. To borrow the author’s pithy formulation: “It is not the most familiar, then, that is least enjoyable, but rather the most novel that is least pleasing. Pleasure, however, resides half way between high salience and high novelty.’” (p. 182)

In addition, there is a political aspect to innovation: it may be the expression of a ‘bestrangement’ in yet another sense, namely, the dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in society. In this way, innovation has always been the realm of the revolutionary. The feminists have been particularly active in creating novel, ‘politically correct’ terminology, with varying success and pleasurability. The danger of a dialectic development lurks right around the corner, though: innovative expressions (such as ‘his/her’) may themselves become familiar, and open to innovative attacks by the ‘opposition’, and thus in the end do more harm than good.

The two final chapters are entitled ‘An overview’ (chapter 8, pp. 185–195) and ‘Coda: Unaddressed questions. Food for further thought’ (chapter 9, pp. 196–199). The former of the two merely restates the findings obtained in the preceding chapters and reconfirms the author’s conclusion: anything the others can do, the graded salience hypothesis can do better. The chapter’s section 3, ‘On the superiority of the salient meaning: The case of literal language’ discusses important work by Gerrig (1984) on degrees of salience. Also Gerrig, when dealing with literal language, contrasts other models of sense creation (or ‘error recovery’; p. 192) with a parallel-process model. Gerrig’s studies “support the view that salience plays a major role in language comprehension [as such; hence not only of metaphorical or other figurative language, JM]” (p. 194)—a finding that well could have been placed earlier in the book, e.g., after the chapter on ‘Jokes’.

The ‘food for further thought’ in Chapter 9 consists mostly of tantalizing previews of interesting questions, such as whether literality is linguistic or conceptual, and whether metaphor is necessarily linguistic. While the latter question seems resolved in the negative sense, the former is still being debated: is literality based on the “resemblance obtaining between a propositional form of an utterance and the thought it represents?”
Similarly, the jury is still out on questions having to do with nonverbal irony and its relation to literal or figurative language (p. 198).

Another interesting development is signaled on pp. 198–199: learners of a second language may have trouble processing the salient meanings of what is called ‘situation-bound utterances’ and instead, fall back on the expressions’ literal meanings, thus missing out on their pragmatic functions (Kecskés and Papp, 2000). Apparently, to those speakers, the literal meanings appear to have been more salient.

Salient meanings, because of their availability (‘they spring to’ and are ‘on our’, mind), are difficult to ignore. Giora suggests that this is why we are so comfortable in our prejudices, and insists, with Reinhart (2000), that “deautomatizing salient meanings, concepts and ideas is . . . one of the most important roles of art and science” (p. 199). On the other hand, contextual information is not automatic, either, and cannot “dominate our thinking entirely”. Between being trapped in salience and being totally contextualized, we must make a reasoned choice, allowing us to “keep an open mind in face of biasing or manipulative information.” (ibid)

Before ending this review, I want to point to a few less fortunate aspects of Giora’s work. Apart from the occasional typo and the less-than-complete legend for the transcript of the conversation on pp. 148–166, a more serious, and also persistent, problem concerns what I would call the ‘context-lessness’ of much psycholinguistic research. The experiments are strictly designed to show what they should show, and this is how it should be; but sometimes one wonders if a less discipline-oriented or -limited approach would not have resulted in alternative, more plausible explanations. Take for example the case of the married couple conversing on p. 40, where the husband interprets the word ‘jeans’ as ‘genes’, even though the context for the latter is wholly inappropriate. It belongs to the story (as Giora points out) that the husband is interested in genetics, and (presumably) not in repairing his daughter’s jeans. To me, this is a case of what a cognitive linguist would name the ‘grounding’ or ‘embodiment’ of a concept. Thus, for a geneticist, the most salient meaning of the word [ji:nz] is not a piece of apparel, but something to do with genetics; this belongs to his or her mental make-up. I do not think that the reasoning behind Giora’s rejection of grounding in connection with salience is altogether compelling. Salience could be based on grounding, and salient meanings could be embodied without the graded salience hypothesis losing any of its ascendancy and scope; in addition, our view of the process of lexical access would perhaps become more balanced.

Concluding this review, it needs to be said that Rachel Giora’s book is a most important contribution to the study of the relationships between mind and language, meaning and context, human and environment. Giora’s ‘graded salience’ hypothesis provides us with a new angle on the old question of how language is processed. Her approach is not one of mere theorizing, but of experimentally testing her hypotheses, mostly with positive results (when the results are not entirely satisfactory, we are told this right away). An additional advantage of the book is that there is room for human aspects, including the use of poetry and humor (motivated by the subject matter, but at the same time making for refreshing breaks from the purely psycholinguistic and linguistic reasoning).

Giora endeavors (in my opinion, successfully) to modify the way we think, and do experiments, about language comprehension (and to a lesser degree, also production). She has single-handedly lifted a current paradigm out of its hinges and placed it on a new
footing, by drawing attention to the overriding role played by salience in language comprehension, in particular with regard to figurative (non-literal) language. Despite the many technical explanations, the book is easy to read and the experiments are (even for one who is not an experimental psychologist) easy to follow. The well-argued plausibility of Giora’s model is at least an eye-opener, if not a refreshing alternative, for people subscribing to different paradigms and who are being helped not least by the pleasant light-heartedness which is an overall positive feature of Giora’s book, making it a good read, even for non-professionals.

References