

The demise of a unique concept of literal meaning

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Abstract

Literal meaning has been defined as linguistic meaning, i.e., as nonfigurative, coded, fully compositional, context-invariant, explicit, and truth conditional (Katz, Jerrold J., 1977. Propositional structure and illocutionary force. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell). Nonliteral meaning is seen as its counterpart, i.e., as extralinguistic, figurative, indirect, inferred, non-compositional, context-dependent, and cancelable. I argue that the requirements made on literal meaning conflict with each other (e.g., coded vs. truth conditional; figurative vs. coded; inferred vs. literal). I then propose to replace the one concept of literal meaning with three concepts of minimal meanings. Each, I argue, reflects a different respect in which a meaning can be minimal. A meaning can be minimal because it is coded, compositional, and context-invariant—the linguistic meaning. A meaning can be minimal because psycholinguistically it is the one foremost on our mind—Giora's (Giora, Rachel, 1997. Understanding figurative and literal language: The graded salience hypothesis. *Cognitive Linguistics* 8: 183–206.) salient meaning. And a meaning can be minimal because it is the privileged interactional interpretation communicated, namely what the speaker is seen as bound by, what constitutes her relevant contribution to the discourse (Ariel, Mira, 2002. Privileged interactional interpretations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, in press). © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Literal and nonliteral meaning: An introduction

Literal meaning was originally assumed to be coded, compositional, context-invariant, sentential, and truth-conditional. However, problems arose regarding many of these (and other) features of the definition. As a result, various modifications have been proposed to the classical concept of literal meaning. For example,

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some researchers now include context-dependent interpretations in their notions of literal/minimal meaning, while others argue that literal meaning need not specify all the truth conditions of the proposition expressed. Some have given up on word and/or phrasal literality, others on sentential literality, etc. As a result of these modifications, there are now many different concepts of ‘literal meaning’, rather than one. But the fact that we can define ‘literal meaning(s)’ in a variety of ways does not mean that each definition actually characterizes a coherent and significant meaning concept. I will argue that not all the concepts of ‘literal meaning’ in the literature are justified.

My main proposal is that we maintain the basic motivation behind the search for ‘literal meaning’ and continue to look for some rudimentary type of meaning. Given this goal, I suggest we recognize (at least) three ways in which a meaning can be basic or minimal: linguistically, psycholinguistically and interactionally. Since the classical concepts of literal meaning, and some of the modified ones, do not correspond to any of these types of minimality, I will conclude that they are unjustified.

1.1. *Defining (non)literal meaning*

Literal meaning has primarily been defined as a type of pre-theoretical semantic or linguistic meaning. According to the classical definition (see Katz, 1977; Searle, 1978; Dascal, 1987), linguistic meaning is direct, grammatically specified, sentential, necessary, and context-free (as defined by Katz’s, 1977: 14 ‘anonymous letter criterion’). It is, therefore, assumed to be invariant in all contexts. Linguistic meaning is generated by linguistic knowledge of lexical items, combined with linguistic rules. It is determinate, explicit, and fully compositional (e.g., Matthews, 1997: 211). However, literal meaning is also ‘what is said’ (Grice, 1978).¹ It should then be capable of determining the truth conditions of the proposition expressed (should the utterance express a truth-conditional proposition). Two extralinguistic interpretative aspects were then added on: reference and ambiguity resolution (although these are, of course, context-dependent rather than context-invariant). A literal meaning is in principle uncancelable (the speaker is absolutely committed to its content), but when ostensibly implausible in the specific context, it can be eliminated in favor of a nonliteral meaning (most notably in cases of irony). In such cases, the literal meaning contributes to the establishment of the final interpretation, although it does not actually form part of it.

Nonliteral meaning is the sharply distinguished complement of literal meaning. It is considered pragmatic (extralinguistic), it is associated with the utterance and the speaker (rather than the sentence), and it is non-conventional and non-compositional. Nonliteral meaning is indirect. It is derived by combining literal meaning and general cognitive inferential processes (e.g., the Gricean maxims, Optimal Relevance), and applying these to assumptions made available in the specific context. Hence, it is dependent on the literal meaning. Since it is generated as a conversa-

¹ Grice (1975: 44) actually said that ‘what is said’ is “closely **related** to the conventional meaning of words” (emphasis added).

tional implicature, it is also open-ended to some extent and cancelable (i.e., the speaker is not absolutely committed to its content). Classical nonliteral meanings are metaphors and ironies, indirect speech acts, and conversational implicatures in general.

While not part of the classical definition, other properties are commonly associated with literal and nonliteral meanings. Literal meaning is automatic and obligatory, whereas nonliteral meaning is nonautomatic and optional (Grice, 1975). Literal meaning is the unmarked meaning, or the norm (The OED; Bach and Harnish, 1979; Bartsch, 1996; Lewis, 1983: 183; Searle, 1978), and it is the meaning frequently used (Rumelhart, 1979). This was also the view endorsed by philosophers of law and judges (see Bowers, 1989: 115). Nonliteral meaning is generated only when the default literal meaning is implausible; it is therefore marked and relatively rare. For linguists especially, an evaluation then follows, viewing only the literal as “the indispensable sacred rock that forms the bulk of our language and thought”, while taking the nonliteral to be “dispensable”, a mere “embellishment”, etc. (Lakoff, 1986: 291). The psychological implications of the last differences are that literal meaning is accessed fast and first, while nonliteral meaning takes longer to access, and that literal and nonliteral meanings result from different processing procedures. Those of nonliteral meaning are ‘specialized’.

Note, however, that researchers do not agree on all these aspects of the definitions, nor do they necessarily agree on which interpretations are to be classified as literal and which as nonliteral. For Searle (1978), for example, illocutionary force does not form part of literal meaning, because it can diverge from the literal meaning, as in indirect requests, for example. For Bach and Harnish (1979), indirect and nonliteral meanings are distinguished. Implicatures are indirect, but figurative language is direct. Bach (1994c) recognizes degrees of literalness. For Katz (1977), literal meaning is fully truth-conditional, while for Searle (1978, 1980), the same literal meaning can make different contributions to the actual truth conditions. Researchers define literality for words, for phrases, and for sentences, but what counts as figurative for a word may count as literal for the sentence (Bach, 1994c; Récanati, 1995). Also, while some researchers discuss ‘literal’ meaning, others (also) discuss related (but not identical) concepts such as ‘what is said’ (Récanati, 1989), or the proposition expressed/the explicature (Carston, 1998; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995), or ‘what is strictly expressed’ (Bach, 1994a). Moreover, although Récanati (1993, 1995) and Carston (1988, 1998) are in agreement that some, but not all, pragmatic interpretations should form part of ‘what is said’, they reach opposite conclusions about the status of the chronological ordering interpretation in sentences such as *She handed him the key and he opened the door*. (It is an aspect of ‘what is said’ for her, an implicature for him). It is even a linguistically driven inference according to Asher (1999: 25) (see also Bach, 1994a: 137).²

² Récanati (1989) also thinks that some cases which are taken by relevance theorists as cases of strengthening (i.e., enriching an already complete proposition) may actually be analyzed as instances of saturation (filling out linguistically specified slots), in which case they will count as part of a more minimal meaning.

Lakoff (1986) notes that the concept ‘literal’ has several different and contradictory meanings in the literature (see also Gibbs et al., 1993; Vicente, 2002, this issue). He argues that the assumption that all ‘literal’ features converge into one concept relies on an oversimplified theory of language. Indeed, the requirements placed on literal meaning (as listed above) are too heavy and render the classical concept an impossibility. For example, literal is naturally seen in opposition to figurative (e.g., metaphoric or ironic—see Bach, 1994a: 127; Récanati, 1989; Saeed, 1997: 15–17). However, it is also taken to be conventional, i.e., in opposition to indirect or inferred (Lewis, 1983). The problem is that it has become clear that some figurative language (hence, nonliteral in one sense) is conventional (hence, literal in another sense), e.g., dead metaphors (Dascal, 1987). And some nonfigurative meanings (hence, literal in one sense) are inferred (hence, nonliteral, in another sense), e.g., cases of sense constructions (Récanati, 1995) and conversational implicatures (see also Bach, 1994a: 135). Being truth-conditional does not completely overlap with conventionality either: Some coded meanings do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the propositions expressed (Grice’s so called conventional implicatures), and some inferred meanings do contribute to the truth conditions of the propositions expressed (Wilson, 1975). No wonder linguists have, in fact, given up the search for literal meaning.

In the following, I first discuss problems with the classical definition of literal meaning (Section 1.2). In Sections 2 and 3, I describe researchers’ responses to the arguments against the classical definition, where they propose various weakenings or alternatives to the classical notion of literal meaning. In Section 4, I argue that these modified versions of literal meaning still do not support one unique concept of literal meaning. In Section 5, I argue that the more abstract idea behind the concept of literal meaning is that sentences carry some basic, privileged, and necessary meaning. However, a meaning can be minimal or basic in a variety of ways: Linguistically, psycholinguistically and interactionally. I will therefore suggest that (at least) three concepts of minimal meaning replace the one concept of ‘literal meaning’: (1) linguistic meaning, (2) salient meaning, and (3) privileged interactional meaning.

1.2. Problems with positing one concept of literal meaning

Recent research has convincingly shown that literal and nonliteral meanings, at least as initially defined, cannot always be distinguished from each other. Claims have been made that (1) literal meaning may require contextual support (just like nonliteral meaning), (2) the processing procedures for deriving both types of meaning are not so different, because literal meaning requires inferencing sometimes (just like nonliteral meaning), and nonliteral meaning is sometimes automatic (like literal meaning), (3) linguistic forms are not at all obviously classified into those requiring a literal interpretation versus those requiring a nonliteral interpretation. I briefly present these claims in this order below.

Recall that context-dependence is the hallmark of pragmatic meaning. If literal meaning is semantic/linguistic, it should be context-free. The facts seem to be different sometimes, as Searle (1978) was the first to point out. For many sentences,

argues Searle, the ‘null context’ condition is inapplicable, because different contextual applications yield different truth conditions (beyond reference and ambiguity resolutions). The only reason we seem to think that sentences are sometimes interpreted without reference to the context is that the contextual assumptions relied on are so fundamental that they seem transparent. And these background assumptions are indefinite, and they vary from one sentence to another. Dascal (1987), Gibbs (1984, 1994), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995, 1986/1991), Récanati (1995), Clark (1996), and Carston (1998) agree with Searle that context determines ‘what is said’, and not just what is conversationally implicated. Sperber and Wilson, Carston, and Récanati list a few aspects of ‘what is said’ (in addition to reference and ambiguity resolutions) which require contextual assumptions, such as sense construction (as in *Iddo’s shirt*—the shirt he bought? sewed? designed?). Carston (1998) mentions concept narrowing and strengthening (e.g., ‘The steak is raw’, understood as ‘not cooked enough’, rather than as ‘uncooked’). In addition, Searle (1978) and Gibbs (1994) show that conventionality (literality) and context-dependence (nonliterality) are not mutually exclusive. Some indirect requests (nonliteral) are conventional, e.g., *can you pass me the salt*, but it still requires a context where the request for salt is relevant, rather than the ability to pass it.³ In fact, with the exception of Katz (1977) and Berg (1993, 2002, this issue), the recent literature is in agreement that literal meanings require contextual support not only for reference and ambiguity resolution.

Next, the assumption that literal meaning is accessed automatically, whereas nonliteral meaning is derivative of it and requires more (complex) processing, has been criticized. Some psycholinguists, cognitive linguists (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and relevance theory pragmatists have forcefully argued that the processing procedures involved in the production and comprehension of literal and nonliteral meanings are not significantly different. This follows mainly from their conviction that heavy inferencing is already involved in generating ‘what is said’ anyway.⁴ In both literal and nonliteral interpretations we undergo hypothesis formation and testing (Rumelhart, 1979). Relying on experimental data, Gibbs (1984, 1994) argues that, although the products of literal and nonliteral language use may perhaps be different, the processes leading to their generation are essentially the same (see also Gibbs, 2002, this issue; Ortony, 1979). Processing nonliteral language is not deviant or difficult, it does not require special mechanisms (see also Rumelhart, 1979), and it does not slow addressees down. Moreover, nonliteral meaning is not dependent on literal meaning. The literal meaning of an utterance need not even be processed at all. No violation of a Gricean maxim by the literal meaning is a prerequisite for the generation of a nonliteral meaning; and in fact, literal meanings involve violations of Gricean maxims too (Giora, 1988).

According to relevance theory (Blakemore, 1992; Carston, 1988; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995, 1986/1991; Wilson and Sperber, 1981, 1993; Yus Ramos, 1998), the similarity between the processing of ‘what is said’ and what is implicated is due

³ See also Nemo (1999: 365) for a view that some meanings are both conventionalized and contextual.

⁴ Carston (1998) suggests that linguistic systems are essentially underdeterminate, because they have evolved based on an already developed inferential capacity.

to the fact that both ambiguity and reference resolutions (part of literal meaning) and the generation of conversational implicatures (nonliteral meanings) are inferential (performed in line with the principle of relevance). It is no wonder, then, that the same mechanisms are used (see also Clark, 1996: 143–146). Wilson and Sperber (1981) also point out that cancelability, initially taken as an indication of nonliteral meaning, is not only characteristic of implicated ('nonliteral') meanings. Disambiguations and reference assignments are cancelable too, even though they are considered part of 'what is said'. For example, when in a context where John is playing the violin in front of us someone says *John plays well*, the utterance (explicitly) expresses something like 'John Smith—plays the violin well'. However, aspects of this proposition are cancelable, as when the speaker says *John plays well - he just doesn't play the VIOLIN well*.

The following is an attested example, where the intended referent (an aspect of literal meaning) is arrived at in two stages, which seem identical to the processing stages assumed for nonliteral language: First, the Biblical Mordechai is picked out as the referent of *Mordechai*, and then it is rejected, and the then candidate for prime minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, is selected as the intended referent:

(1) The merchants said that this year it's a mitzva ['good deed'—M.A] to beat not only Haman, but also **Mordechai** (Originally Hebrew, *Haaretz*, 3.5.1999).

Some researchers (e.g., Rumelhart, 1979; Sperber and Wilson, 1991; Bates and MacWhinney, 1989: 20; Gibbs, 1984: 298; Gibbs et al., 1993; Saeed, 1997: 16) have further argued that linguistic **products** are actually not at all easily classified into literal and nonliteral ones (Yus Ramos, 1998 rejects the literal-nonliteral dichotomy distinction in favor of a continuum, but see Récanati, 1989: 108). Traditionally, nonliteral language examples were drawn from high literature, where they were especially creative, and hence hard to process, and sometimes only weakly suggested. But once one recognizes the perhaps not so highly creative, but nevertheless rampant, use of nonliteral language in everyday discourse, one recognizes its centrality, as well as its lack of uniqueness. This uncertainty about the distinction between literal/direct and nonliteral/indirect meanings is shared by the analyst and the naive subject. Sadock (1979), for example, argues that it is hard to tease apart the linguistic and the implicated aspects of *fail*. He reaches a different conclusion from Karttunen and Peters (1979) (see also Ariel, 1998). Bach (1994a), on the one hand, and Carston (1998) (and Groefsema, 1995a and Vicente, 2002, this issue), on the other, consider roughly the same pragmatically induced interpretations as implicatures (i.e. implicit meanings) and as explicatures (i.e., explicit meanings) respectively.

Lee's (1990) findings can explain the difficulty in distinguishing between literal and nonliteral meanings. Lee found that words become more polysemous as a function of their 'age', as well as frequency. Words tend to integrate some of their contextually derived meanings (above 'what is said') into their linguistic (literal) meaning in the course of their history. Now, such a process must be gradual, and hence the difficulty of teasing apart implicated and semantic meanings (in some cases).

What is intriguing about Lee's findings is that such contextual extensions, which are later seen as conventional literal meanings, are not restricted to metaphorical extensions (see Heine et al., 1991 and Sweetser, 1990 about the pervasive conventionalization of metaphorical meanings into lexical, literal meanings). In fact, Lee found that contextual extensions of abstract words (nonmetaphorical in nature) are more prevalent than contextual extensions of concrete words (which are metaphorical). In other words, conventional meaning extensions result from the addition of contextual meanings to the lexical meaning of the word, and this applies equally to literal and nonliteral extensions.

The conventionality of some nonliteral language motivated Bach and Harnish (1979) to argue for 'standard nonliterality', as in *I've eaten breakfast* (understood as 'I've eaten breakfast **today**', see also Berg's, 2002, this issue, 'loose semantic content'). These are cases where speakers may not even be aware of the assumed literal meaning ('I've eaten breakfast at some point in my life'). Rumelhart (1979) points out that metaphors are pervasive in language. Thus, when we talk about abstract concepts (the brain, for example) we routinely refer to different, concrete domains in order to describe them. Are these literal uses of language? Is *cold* in *John is a cold person* literally or figuratively used?⁵ Clark (1991) discusses the following example (see also Clark, 1996: 144 about *do a Napoleon*):

(2) Is the delivery boy **porching** your newspaper now?

Note that *porch* does not have a linguistic meaning as a verb. A verbal (truth-conditional) literal meaning has to be created on the spot. What is crucial, however, is that this literal meaning is an inferentially derived meaning ('throw the paper up to the porch', not 'shape your paper into porch form'). Such uses are not rare. Here are two similar examples from Thompson and Hopper (2001). Note how the meaning of *sample* is innovative, and in two different ways, even though the context seems quite similar:

(3a) We can't **sample** you (said by a nurse-practitioner to a patient, meaning that she couldn't give her any samples of a specific medication, Thompson and Hopper's ex. no. 42).

(3b) Have they **sampled** you yet? (said by a nurse-practitioner, meaning 'Have they taken a sample from you yet?', Thompson and Hopper's ex. no. 43).

A more complicated innovative use occurs in (4), which is part of a cartoon:

(4) Ani yaxol le + hazbir (Hebrew, *Achbar Hair* cover page 11.6.1998)
I can explain/**zebra**.

⁵ Lakoff has taken a product-orientation view, so for him, conventional, and not only novel metaphors, are nonliteral. Others view conventional meanings, figurative ones included, as literal.

Hebrew ‘explain’ (*lehasbir*) is commonly pronounced *lehazbir* (due to a voicing assimilation that native speakers are not aware of), although it is spelled *lehasbir* (the verbal root is *sbr*). The imaginary animal uttering the sentence above is addressing his spouse (presumably), while hiding a zebra (Hebrew *zebra*) in his bed. Now, Hebrew regularly creates verbs out of nouns by conjugating the consonants of the noun (in this case, *z,b,r*, from *zebra*) in a conventional verbal paradigm (in this case, *le + haCCiC*). This is the case here. So, is the literal meaning intended here ‘do something with zebra’, or is it, ‘explain’? Both meanings are inferentially arrived at and equally intended (by the cartoonist).

Sperber and Wilson (1986/1991) forcefully argue that nonliteral language is actually a kind of ‘loose talk’, which is, in turn, pervasive in so-called ordinary, literal communication (see also Lasersohn, 1999). It is certainly not restricted to figurative language. Thus, if Mary says to Peter in London that she lives in Paris, when in fact, she lives in a suburb of Paris, she literally utters a false proposition. But just like in metaphorical cases, the addressee is expected to derive contextual implications from her utterance up to the point where he has reached optimal relevance. In the case of loose language (metaphorical or otherwise), only some of these implications are guaranteed to be true (e.g., that she leads an urban life style, perhaps). Rumelhart (1979) likens native intuitions about the difference between literal and nonliteral meanings to judgments about formal and informal language. In other words, while judgments in clear cases are reliable, the differences between literal and figurative language show them to be positions along a continuum rather than dichotomous opposites. Shen (1995) even draws a literality distinction between two supposedly idiomatic, i.e., nonliteral meanings. He contrasts *kick the bucket*, where the literal meanings of *kick* and *bucket* play no role in the total idiomatic meaning, with *beat about the bush*, which “does convey obliquely, in a vivid and striking way, some indirectness of approach, meant to be signified by the whole idiom” (p. 575).⁶ Gibbs (1994: 27) argues that “the idea of literalness varies considerably according to culture, individuals, context, and task”. It is not a fixed concept, then (see Gibbs et al., 1993). Bach (1999: 79) argues that even when speakers describe their usage as literal (using the term itself in their speech), their use may be nonliteral (see also Ariel, in press, and Israel, 2002, this issue).

Most of the researchers discussed in this section have argued that literal and nonliteral meanings, as classically defined, cannot always be kept distinct. Although context is the hallmark of only nonliteral meaning, it is certainly used in generating literal meaning as well. Although inference is supposed to be restricted to generating nonliteral meanings, we have seen that inferencing is involved in generating literal meaning as well. Finally, it is not always easy to determine whether a given meaning is literal or not. Thus, if we insist on positing a single notion of literal meaning, we are left with two options. One option is to give up the conflicting requirements and hence relax the definition of literal meaning (Bach, 1994a, 1999; Berg, 1993; Dascal, 1987; Searle, 1978). I discuss such proposals in Section 2. Another option is to give

⁶ See the discussion of transparency and compositionality of idioms in Gibbs (1994) and Nunberg et al. (1994).

up the literal/nonliteral distinction altogether and to offer alternative distinctions between more minimal and more maximal meanings (Section 3).

2. Weakening the concept of literal meaning

The common response of scholars to the obvious problematicity of postulating an absolute dichotomy between literal and nonliteral meaning based on the classical parameters, has often been to try to modify the definition of literal meaning. Since aspects of the definition obviously clash with each other, researchers have selected various aspects of the literal-nonliteral dichotomy as targets for relaxation: full truth-conditionality, context-independence, and full compositionality, for the most part. However, different researchers have relaxed different requirements imposed on literal meaning, and also to different extents.

2.1. Giving up full truth-conditionality

Searle (1978), Récanati (1989), Berg (1993, 2002, this issue), and Bach (1994a, 1999) are exceptional in remaining relatively faithful to the classical notion of literal meaning (to different degrees). Literal meaning is fairly linguistic (semantic) for them. But unlike the classical definition, it is only partly truth-conditional. All concede that characterizing the complete set of truth conditions pertaining to the proposition expressed requires heavy contextual inferencing, which they are not willing to introduce into the representation of literal/minimal meaning. Searle (1978, 1992) distinguishes between literal meaning and literal interpretation, and only the latter is truth verifiable. Bach proposes that the ‘minimal proposition expressed’, that which is strictly, explicitly, and literally ‘said’, includes, in addition to linguistic meaning (a propositional radical for him), reference, ambiguity resolution, and in general, local completions of underdeterminate lexical items. Berg and Récanati employ a theoretically appealing criterion to exempt reference and ambiguity resolution from the ban on contextual reliance in generating literal meanings. Literal meanings are composed of linguistic (coded) meanings plus all those inferences dictated by the grammar, i.e., those cases where the linguistic form specifically instructs the addressee to complete the proposition by using inferential processing (Récanati’s, 1989 ‘saturation’, and Bach’s, 1994a: 133 ‘completions’, following Kaplan, 1977).⁷ Carston (1998: 117) refers to this criterion for distinguishing between inferences as ‘the linguistic direction principle’. This principle guarantees the completion of grammatically deleted sentential parts as well as the finding of the intended referents of referring expressions. Bach (1994a, 1999) thinks that these enrichments rely on a very narrow type of context, which can be clearly delimited. Berg (personal communication), however, is more restrictive. Grammatically induced completions

⁷ For Bach, once these mandated completions have been made, as well as expansions (pragmatically rather than grammatically mandated processes), a different, higher-level meaning is reached—the implicature (which is comparable to Sperber and Wilson’s, 1986/1995 explicature—see Section 3.1).

count as part of the literal meaning only if they have a uniquely and grammatically determined interpretation (as in deletions under identity).

The most radical criticism of identifying literal meaning with truth-conditional meaning comes from Lakoff (1987), who has argued that our pervasive and systematic reliance on metaphoric interpretations severely undermines the conception of meaning as based on truth conditions. Thus, in order to interpret *I wasted a lot of time today*, for example, one would need to invoke a metaphorical concept of ‘time’. According to Lakoff, the meaning of such a sentence does not depend on its matching reality in any sense, but rather on the way it structures reality.⁸

Récanati, Berg, and Bach are more than willing to concede that literal meaning, thus defined, may not be very functional in actual communication. It is a subconscious interpretative level for Bach, Récanati hardly mentions it, and Berg (1993: 410) says: “What we understand from an utterance could... never be just the literal meaning of the sentence uttered”. Thus, by lowering their expectations about literal meaning (e.g., admitting that it does not represent all the relevant truth conditions and that it is not necessarily a significant level of meaning), Récanati, Berg, and Bach manage to defend the original definition of literal meaning. It remains to be seen whether this definition of literal meaning is really coherent and functional in any way (cf. Section 4).

2.2. Giving up context-independence

As mentioned above, Searle (1978) weakens the requirement that literal meaning (or rather, literal interpretation, see Searle, 1992: 181) must be context-independent. Literal meaning is necessarily relativized to a set of background assumptions, although these do not form part of the literal meaning itself (the background is nonintentional and nonrepresentational). Bach (1994c) and Récanati (1993) agree that the null context definition of literal meaning is inapplicable. Searle, however, is quite minimalist in modifying the original concept of literal meaning, in that he distinguishes between default, implicit background assumptions against which literal meaning is applied and more specific contextual assumptions. The use of the former, in fact, constitutes part of our linguistic competence (Searle, 1978: 222). The latter do not take part in the establishment of literal (or normal) understanding. Their role is considered ‘special’, and it is reserved for nonliteral meanings, including conversational implicatures. Thus, Searle only rejects the no-context-whatsoever aspect of the definition of literal meaning. He does not abolish the distinction between literal and nonliteral meaning (literal and metaphoric or ironical, direct and indirect speech acts), nor the assumption that the literal meaning is linguistic meaning and its application defines the truth conditions of the proposition.

2.3. Giving up full compositionality

Bartsch (1996) notes that compositionality is not always preserved in literal meaning, because it is not always possible to determine what the literal meaning of a

⁸ I thank Michael Israel for drawing my attention to this point.

word is. *Cut* in *cut a cake*, for example, is different from, and irreducible to, a general meaning of *cut* which would also account for *cut in cut parsley*, etc. “A common aspect of a subset of these [meanings] is a **secondary, artificial** abstraction or generalization over contexts” (Bartsch, 1996: 8, see also Rice, 1992; Sandra and Rice, 1995; Thompson and Hopper, 2001). It is not even reconstructible in every case. Bartsch, therefore, argues that the compositionality criterion imposed on literal meaning should be less strictly applied. Instead of combining the meaning of single words (or morphemes) into a whole (proposition), the meaning subjected to the principle of compositionality is the meaning of a larger unit. In the case of *cut*, for example, it is the verb plus the object. *Cut*, then, is associated with slightly different meanings, all of them equally literal, depending on the object being cut. And these context-dependent meanings are all listed in our mental lexicon. “The notion of ‘the literal meaning’ of *cut* becomes obsolete. It is merely the invention of linguists and philosophers of language” (1996: 8).⁹ There seems to be some support for this position: *Red*, *on*, and *white*, for example, are interpreted differently according to what they modify (e.g., *red skin*, *red hair*, *red potato*—see Clark, 1991 and Hörmann, 1983 cited therein; Gibbs, 1994: 39; MacWhinney, 1989). However, while independently justified in many cases, this is a very minor modification, in that the same problems of literal meaning may arise, only at a higher level.

Récanati (1989) does not completely reject the postulation of a literal propositional meaning, but he emphasizes its limitations. Récanati (1995) argues that even if there is a proposition that is literally expressed, it is not actually always computed by the addressee. Like Bartsch, Récanati proposes to weaken the notion of literal meaning concerning compositionality, but whereas Bartsch found word-level literal meaning problematic but proposition-level literal meaning unproblematic, Récanati has no problem assuming literal word and phrase-level literal meanings. According to Récanati, although constituents do have literal meanings, which are accessed before their nonliteral meanings are, the whole sentence may not have a unified stage where all of its constituents are interpreted literally (see also Carston, 1998: 57, 72; Gibbs, 2002, this issue¹⁰). Récanati argues that sometimes (though by no means always), there can be a decision to reject the literal meaning of one constituent in favor of a nonliteral interpretation of it, before the complete **literal** meaning of the sentence as a whole has been computed. In fact, Récanati shows that the literal meaning (e.g., of possessive ‘s) may depend on the **nonliteral** meaning of the possessor (as in *the lion’s sword*, where *the lion* is metonymically interpreted as ‘the warrior’, and the sword in question has to be related to the warrior rather than to a physically present lion). Thus, the literal meaning of the part (e.g., *the lion*) may not play a role in the literal interpretation of the whole.

2.4. Giving up total convergence of literal meaning features

Whereas the researchers above chose to modify the definition of literal meaning by rejecting or relaxing one of its features (full truth-conditionality, context-indepen-

⁹ But see Searle (1980) and Nemo (1999: 360–361) for a different view.

¹⁰ But Gibbs (2002, this issue) is not even confident that word-level literal meanings are necessary.

dence, compositionality), Dascal's (1987) 'moderate literalism' leaves intact all the features distinguishing between literal and nonliteral meaning (see also Dascal, 1989). Dascal, however, argues that not all the criteria have to be met simultaneously for a meaning to count as literal. His goal is to provide a relevant characterization of literal meaning instead of a strict definition, and he wants to remove the "excessive demand placed upon the notion of literal meaning" (1987: 264). For him, the classical conditions placed on literal meaning should not constitute necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, it is enough that a significant number of them converge on determining a specific meaning as literal. Thus, standard scripts (i.e., context) can be used in generating literal meanings, the literal meaning need not arise in every context—it is, therefore, not necessarily context-invariant (in fact, literal meaning is defined per utterance, rather than per sentence), it does not necessarily provide all the relevant truth conditions, it is enough that the literal meaning merely contributes towards their specification. Compositionality can be violated as well. Moreover, hints, suggestions, and emotive meanings, which do not contribute truth-conditional meanings to the proposition expressed but otherwise do comply with the conditions of literal meaning (conventionality), are also considered part of the literal meaning.

3. Rejecting and replacing literal meaning

All the researchers to be discussed in Section 3 argue that concepts of meaning other than literal meaning are necessary and (more) theoretically sound.¹¹ Three criticize literal meaning, as classically defined, and argue that it does not actually constitute a significant meaning level (relevance theoreticians, Gibbs, and Giora). Two (Bach and Récanati) do not necessarily reject the classical literal meaning.

3.1. *From dichotomy to trichotomy: Linguistic meaning, 'what is said', and implicature*

Whereas the classical definition of (non)literal meaning distinguishes between two types of meanings (literal and nonliteral), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), Récanati (1989, 1993), and Bach (1994a) distinguish between (at least) three levels of meaning.¹² Sperber and Wilson, for example, first posit a level of purely linguistic, i.e.,

¹¹ Note, however, that while relevance theoreticians reject the classical literal meaning and while they offer other meaning levels, they do not explicitly offer any one of the meaning levels they analyze as a substitute for the original literal meaning. I do, however, consider them as potential candidates for minimal meanings.

¹² Récanati (1989, 1995) mentions, in addition, a level of literal propositional meaning as the basis for generating conversational implicatures, but not nonliteral meaning (see again Section 2.3). Bach (1994a) does assume an additional literal meaning level, that of the minimal proposition—see Section 2.1 again. See Bezuidenhout and Cutting (2002, this issue) for experiments with it, and Vicente (2002, this issue) for criticism of Bach's proposals.

coded meaning: Logical Form, or LF (a propositional radical for Bach, sentence meaning for Récanati), which is a mere skeleton of the actual meaning conveyed. ‘What is said’ (or later, ‘what is expressed’, the implicature for Bach), the closest to the classically defined literal meaning in Sperber and Wilson’s theory, is the explicature. The explicature is a full (truth-verifiable) proposition, which results from enriching an incomplete LF by pragmatic meaning(s) until a determinate proposition is generated. Note that this enrichment goes beyond grammatically induced enrichments, but it is considered explicit (hence the choice of term ‘explicature’).¹³ Thus, the explicit information conveyed contains a substantial amount of information which is pragmatically required and inferred, rather than grammatically decoded or induced. Its generation is not different from that of conversational implicatures; both are inferential and similarly constrained by the principle of relevance. Explicatures are truth-verifiable, and we rely on them for drawing further inferences (implicatures). Much more than Searle (1978), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), Récanati (1989), and Bach (1994a) argue that ‘what is said’ involves a development of the semantic representation beyond reference determination and disambiguation, based on a rich concept of context.

Positing a linguistic-extralinguistic distinction, however, does not mean that there are no distinctions between types of extralinguistic meanings. The distinctions are drawn elsewhere. Sperber and Wilson caution that there are pragmatic meanings (conversational implicatures) that we, as speakers, may wish to dissociate ourselves from, or at least not take full responsibility for (see also Carston, 1988). They do not therefore simply lump together all extralinguistic/inferred meanings (see also Bach, 1994a; Récanati, 1989, 1993). In contrast to Grice (1975), who equated all inferred meanings, Sperber and Wilson argue that explicatures and implicatures are not equal. Explicatures ‘equal more’ in what is explicitly said, although they are derived from inferences, just like conversational implicatures are. Explicatures are necessary for completing a propositional form (see the example of *John plays well* above). They consist of enrichments, i.e., **additions** to skeletal linguistic meaning. Implicatures, on the other hand, are logically independent. They involve the formation of hypothetical premises and conclusions where explicatures merely serve as starting points.

At the same time, it is no trivial matter to establish which contextual enrichments are integrated into the more minimal ‘what is said’ as explicatures, and which should be assigned the status of the less minimal implicatures (see also Katz, 1972: 449). Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and Carston (1988, 1998) even argue that we cannot claim that developing an LF representation up to truth-verifiability solves the definitional problem, because some incomplete explicatures actually specify a complete set of truth conditions, as in *The park is **some** distance from here*, i.e., ‘there’s a certain distance between here and the park’. Surely this complete and trivially true proposition is not the proposition intended by the speaker, however. The explicature for such an utterance, they argue, is actually ‘The park is further away than might be

¹³ For Bach, however, such enrichments are implicit, and this is why he chooses the term implicature.

expected' (the inferential process involved here is referred to as 'strengthening' by Récanati, 1989, and as 'expansion' by Bach, 1994a). Carston (1988, 1998) proposes that a putative inference (rather than an implicature) is part of the explicature if it falls under the scope of logical operators and is not independent of the proposition expressed. If it entails the proposition expressed or if it is entailed by the proposition, it is an explicature. An implicature cannot entail an explicature. The two have to be independent of each other (as when, in response to A's question *Did you read Susan's book?* B answers *I don't read autobiographies*, thereby implicating 'Susan's book is an autobiography' and 'I didn't read Susan's book').

Récanati (1989) proposes the availability principle, which dictates that we rely on speakers' intuitions (rather than theorists') in defining 'what is said', because these are amenable to conscious accessing (unlike semantic meanings). These intuitions are supposed to distinguish between conversational implicatures and pragmatic enrichments constituting part of 'what is said'. For example, in contrast to the Gricean assumption that scalar implicatures (e.g., the understanding that 'Jane has **exactly** 5 balls' from *Jane has 5 balls*) are (generalized) conversational **implicatures**, speakers' intuitions, claims Récanati, are that these inferences form part of '**what is said**'.

However, although relevance theorists (and others, e.g., Récanati, 1989) offer a way to distinguish between explicatures and implicatures, neither explicatures nor implicatures are actually all of the same cut. Explicatures can be more or less explicit, depending on the relative contribution of inferencing (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995: 182). Some implicatures are fully determinate, and entirely under the responsibility of the speaker, "as if she had asserted them directly" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995: 195; Carston, 1998: 242). Others are not necessarily intended by the speaker, are more vague, or part of a range of possible implicatures, and are generated at the addressee's responsibility entirely. "There may be no cut-off point between assumptions strongly backed by the speaker, and assumptions derived from the utterance but on the hearer's sole responsibility" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995: 199). Hence, implicatures vary in strength, depending on how manifest the intention to communicate them is, how necessary they are in order to view the speaker as relevant, and how small or large the set of possible implicatures is. Thus, although the relevance position assumes a three-way distinction between linguistic meaning, explicature, and implicature, it does recognize the richer variability in statuses of meanings in discourse.¹⁴ This is highly relevant for the concept of privileged interactional interpretation (see Section 5.2.3 and Ariel, in press).

In general, then, the relevance theory position is that there is no literal meaning in the classical sense. Instead, proponents of relevance theory posit a linguistic meaning, an explicature, and some continuum of speaker explicitness and commitment to other inferences (conversational implicatures). In fact, while Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) considered some nonliteral meanings (e.g., metaphors, ironies) as

¹⁴ In the relevance theory spirit, Yus Ramos (1998) downplays the literal–nonliteral distinction. He offers instead three continuums which together determine how literal an interpretation is: the intentional–unintentional continuum, the verbal–nonverbal continuum, and the explicit–implicit continuum.

implicated rather than explicated in their earlier writings, lately, their position has changed, so that metaphors (but not ironies) are explicated (see Wilson, 1995; Carston, 1996, 1998).

3.2. Psycholinguistic approaches to (non)literality

Recall that psycholinguistically, classical literal meaning is predicted to be that meaning which is accessed initially and automatically. Since it has become clear that literal meaning, as classically defined, is not always retrieved (at all, or initially, or automatically—see Gibbs, 1984 and onwards), some psycholinguists have rejected the classical notion of literal meaning and have offered other alternatives as minimal meanings. Gibbs offers ‘what is said’ (Section 3.2.1), while Giora (1997 and onwards) suggests replacing the concept of literal meaning with the concept of salient meaning.

3.2.1. Gibbs’ direct access approach

Following Rumelhart (1979), Gibbs (1984) challenges the assumption that sentences have well-defined, literal meanings. Moreover, he argues that even if there is such a level of meaning, it is not a very useful one (see also Jackendoff, 1981: 425). Gibbs cites an experiment by Clark (1979), where store owners who were asked an indirect question (*Would you mind telling me what time you close?*) chose to respond to the indirect question (supplying the closing time) rather than to the direct question (whether they would mind telling..., since they prefixed their informative response by ‘yes’ rather than ‘no’). Gibbs then argues that speakers do not, in fact, find literal meanings per se relevant but rather contextually appropriate meanings; and in this case, these meanings happen to be nonliteral. The main thrust of Gibbs’ research (Gibbs, 1984, 1994, 2002, this issue, Gibbs and Moise, 1997) has been to prove that people do not need to compute the literal meaning of an utterance in order to then tap its nonliteral meaning: “there is no reason for viewing literal meaning as a special and obligatory part of understanding linguistic utterances” (Gibbs, 1989: 245). Depending on context, addressees are seen as arriving at nonliteral interpretations directly. This seems to correspond to Sperber and Wilson’s notion of explicature.

Indeed, Gibbs and Moise (1997) asked subjects to decide what interpretation best captured **what the speaker said**. In each case (e.g., *She gave him her key and he opened the door; It will take us some time to get there*), both the linguistic (literal) meaning (taken as ‘She gave him her key and he opened the door’; ‘The time between our departure and our arrival is unspecified’) and the pragmatically enriched, nonliteral meaning (‘She gave him her key and **then** he opened the door’; ‘It will take us a fairly long time to reach our destination’) were presented as options. Subjects overwhelmingly chose the enriched interpretations as best capturing what the speaker said (87–95% of the time).¹⁵ Most intriguing is a further experiment, where, after the

¹⁵ I here ignore the case of possession, which came out insignificant, probably because Gibbs and Moise used one sentence with an inalienable possession (a finger), which encourages a possessive interpretation, and 3 alienable possessions (e.g., a house), which discourage such an enrichment (as noted by Nicolle and Clark, 1999).

subjects had been taught the Gricean distinction between ‘said’ and ‘implicated’, they still opted for the enriched meaning when asked to choose the paraphrase that best reflected what they thought represented the ‘said’ meaning. There was only a slight decrease in the percentages of cases where the enriched version was chosen as the ‘said’ meaning (78–91%). In other words, teaching subjects the Gricean distinction did not alter their intuitions about ‘what was said’.¹⁶ Pragmatically derived assumptions, then, play a significant role in ‘what is said’. This is very much in line with the relevance theoretic position, as well as with Récanati’s (1989) availability principle.

At the same time, Gibbs and Moise also showed that subjects did not simply opt for the most enriched meaning. Subjects did reject the possibility that a highly relevant conversational implicature (‘Jane is married’ from *Jane has 3 children* in a context where this was an answer to a question whether Jane is single or not) constituted ‘what the speaker said’. In fact, in a third experiment, Gibbs and Moise showed that minimal (literal) meanings (e.g., ‘Ralph has two rakes and is likely to have more than two’ for *Ralph has two rakes*) were just as context-dependent as enriched meanings (‘exactly two rakes’). Either of these two types of meaning seems to be taken as the ‘said’ meaning when contextually appropriate. Gibbs and Moise’s findings confirm the explicature/implicature distinction, and, therefore, while Gibbs argues strongly against the classical (and psycholinguistic) notion of literal meaning, his position can be seen as a proposal to replace literal meaning with Sperber and Wilson’s (1986/1995) explicature.

3.2.2. Giora’s salient meaning

In a series of articles, Giora (1997, 1999a, 2002, this issue, in press; Giora and Fein, 1999b) has suggested substituting the classical, ahistorically defined notion of literal meaning with the concept of ‘salient’ meaning. Giora is interested in establishing what the **processing stages** are for lexical meanings. She assumes that different meanings are differently stored in our mental lexicon, and hence are differently retrieved by speakers.¹⁷ The minimal meaning she is interested in is the meaning foremost on our mind. Salient meanings, she claims, are accessed automatically. They cannot even be blocked by contextual factors indicating that they are irrelevant (in a specific context). However, salient meanings have to be suppressed sometimes, so as to give way to less salient or nonsalient (sometimes nonliteral) meanings, or they can serve as the basis for deriving nonsalient (sometimes nonliteral) meanings. Thus, while salient meaning is crucial in explaining **processing procedures**, mental representations of salient meaning as such do not necessarily carry much weight in interaction.

¹⁶ Nicolle and Clark (1999), however, argue that Gibbs and Moise’s subjects were actually encouraged to reject the Gricean ‘said’-implicated distinction.

¹⁷ The mental lexicon presupposed by Giora is not the one assumed by all linguists, however. It is more in line with the cognitive linguistics view, which does not distinguish between linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge stores.

Note the following examples (Jabotinsky and Bialik are both important historical figures in Israel, which is why streets were named after them. It so happens that these streets intersect):

(5) Jabotinsky and Bialik are looking out at the view from the first floor/Jabotinsky and Bialik meet at the shopping center (street billboard ads for an apartment building, May, 1998, originally Hebrew).

Despite its contextual implausibility, the first interpretation that comes to mind is that *Jabotinsky* and *Bialik* refer to the (dead) people by those names (the verbs require human agents). The subsequent interpretation is that the reference is to the streets by those names. If the minimal interpretation is the one that comes to mind first (the psycholinguistic concept), then this interpretation is clearly distinct from the classically defined literal meaning, which, by definition, must contain the proper references, regardless of when they are accessed.

Giora's salient meanings, are, first of all, conventional (i.e., lexically specified for words, but see again note 17). As such, they can be literal or nonliteral in the absolute ahistorical sense (e.g., the idiomatic meaning of *see the light* is its salient meaning). Words may, of course, have more than one conventional meaning. However, based on her own research and research of others (see Giora, forthcoming), Giora argues that some linguistic meanings are more salient than others; and just as there are processing differences between conventional and inferred meanings, there are also differences between the accessing (and retaining) of different conventional meanings. Salient meanings are hence not only coded, but they can also enjoy prominence due to their frequency, familiarity, and prototypicality. For example, Giora and Fein (1999b) argue that both the metaphorical and the literal (nonfigurative) meanings of familiar metaphors are automatically accessed, regardless of context, because of their salience (measured out of context).

Note that while Gibbs and Giora agree that the literal-figurative dichotomy is not crucial, their positions are quite contradictory. Both base their claims on psycholinguistic experimentation, but Gibbs finds support only for a contextually enriched meaning (the explicature) as a minimal meaning, whereas Giora argues that some context-invariant meanings are primary, despite their contextual inappropriateness. Gibbs' explicatures are a later product, she argues.

4. Problems with the weakened and alternative notions of literal meaning

4.1. Problems with distinguishing between two types of inferences

The classical, as well as the slightly revised, definitions of literal meaning (Bach, 1994a; Berg, 1993, personal communication; Searle, 1978) tend to distinguish between certain contextually based inferences considered to be part of literal meaning and certain others assumed to be excluded from it. In fact, there are problems in

such a distinction. First, it is not clear that inferences defined as grammatically induced are indeed such. They often seem conceptually or pragmatically, rather than grammatically, induced (Section 4.1.1). Second, it is not clear that this distinction between types of inferences is psychologically justified in terms of the processing involved (Section 4.1.2). If these two arguments are correct, the distinction between the two kinds of inferences is simply *ad hoc*.

4.1.1. Grammatically versus conceptually induced inferences

The first problem with selecting only some particular inferences as generators of literal meaning or ‘what is said’ is that it is not always obvious what guides researchers in their choice of ‘allowed’ versus ‘disallowed’ contextual enrichments for literal meaning. The distinction is not always derived from the legitimate distinction between obligatory/grammatically triggered processes versus optional/extragrammatically triggered processes. I suspect (though I cannot yet fully support this) that there is a bias towards inferences that develop the linguistic meaning into a fully determinate proposition and yield all the entailments from the proposition expressed, since this is, in fact, the definition of Logical Form for semanticists (see Harnish, 1976; Kempson, 1977).¹⁸ For example, Davidson (1967a) proposes that, since it is logically necessary for *breaking* to entail something that breaks, the LF of *There was a breaking* specifies an object that was subject to the breaking even if the linguistic expression itself does not refer to such an object.¹⁹

The requirement for full propositionality imposes a ‘logical’ criterion on grammar, which is unwarranted. The reason for this conflation of grammaticality and full propositionality is the assumption that there must be a connection between linguistic semantic meanings (coded meanings) and referential semantic meanings (truth-conditional meanings) (see Carston, 1999; Fodor, 1987). The assumption is that “semantics with no treatment of truth conditions is not semantics” (Lewis, 1972: 169). Since Frege, understanding a sentence has been seen as knowing the conditions under which the proposition it expresses would be true.²⁰ But semanticists have sometimes reversed the research procedure, and turned to the depicted reality for specifying the linguistic meaning.²¹ Du Bois (1998) has called the assumption behind this second procedure ‘the video translation theory of linguistic meaning’. This is where linguists/philosophers examine the reality behind a sentence and deduce that

¹⁸ Note, however, that Récanati (1993: Chapter 13) discusses a counter-example to the assumption that grammatically induced material is truth conditional. *But*, according to Ducrot’s (1980) analysis, **grammatically** triggers an inference that does not contribute to the truth conditions of the proposition expressed, and thus should not form part of ‘what is said’.

¹⁹ Note, however, that anaphoric options do distinguish between explicit and implicit antecedents, so we cannot follow *There was a breaking* with *It was expensive*, *it* referring to the object broken. Including logically necessary inferred entities in the **linguistic** semantic representation might therefore be misleading.

²⁰ A sentence → reality direction, whereby the sentence determines what aspects of reality are to be checked (see Davidson, 1967b).

²¹ A reality → sentence direction, whereby elements of reality are imposed on the sentence linguistic meaning.

since reality cannot but be a certain way (the video film way, which includes all the details of objective reality), it has to be so grammatically too. His point relates to referential uses of definite NPs.^{22,23}

Indeed, to what extent does grammar absolutely instruct the addressee to perform reference resolutions and identify a referent in the world for nonspecialized referring expressions? One wonders, for example, what the reference resolution of *the key* in (6) might be:

(6) She gave him **the key** and he opened the door.

The key here is certainly referential (i.e., would be picked by the video camera). But do we really perform a true reference resolution (i.e., identifying the key in the world) in this case? Even full reference determination is not a fixed task, but is, rather, dependent on circumstances. As Du Bois (1998) argues, reference determination up to truth-verifiability (fully identifying the referent) is not always a requirement. Indeed, in the example above, it is perhaps enough to identify the key as the key to the door. There is no need to actually be able to identify it in the world. The same applies to stereotypically identified referents (see Prince, 1978). Note, moreover, that grammar cannot actually dictate that every definite description will receive a unique referent, because some definite descriptions are used generically, attributively, etc. Relevance-based (i.e., extralinguistic) considerations help the addressee decide whether a unique referent is to be retrieved, and if so, which one it is. But some instances are vague as to the referentiality involved. The following example shows an indefinite NP, as well as two zero pronouns anaphoric to it, which simultaneously refer to a specific person (Isaac Mudai) and to an imaginary generic person:

(7) But I_i insisted then. A person $j_{??}$ devoted two months and a half, $0_{j_{??}}$ built a whole program, $0_{j_{??}}$ took care of a budget, it is not as if Minister Katzav gave me_i, I_i took care, I_i went... (Isaac Mudai, TV interview, 2.11. 1998, originally Hebrew, from Rieder and Mulokandov, 1998).

Since literal meaning requires reference determination, it would seem that an indefinite NP should trigger reference resolution here. Recall in this connection *Jabotinsky and Bialik* (ex. 5 in Section 3.2.2) and *Mordechai* (ex. 1 in Section 1.2). Is it **grammatically** specified that we seek to replace the referents initially selected for the above referential forms because our **extralinguistic knowledge** tells us that they are dead, and cannot meet each other, or be beaten? Probably not. Thus, if literal meaning is restricted to grammatically specified instructions to draw contextual inferences, it is not clear whether many intended reference resolutions will actually

²² Nemo (1999: 360) points to a similar problem, namely the commonplace conflation between what X means (a linguistic question) and what X is (an extralinguistic question).

²³ Récanati (1993: 259/60), discussing ‘what is said’ (rather than linguistic meaning), is quite explicit about using the described situation in imposing meaning on the utterance.

form part of literal meaning, as is assumed in the literature, for they are made by using definite descriptions (and sometimes even indefinite NPs). There is no grammatical rule that identifies only their referential uses. Possessive NPs require inferencing about the nature of the relation between the referents as well. The gap between the complete set of truth conditions and those included in literal meanings must, therefore, be significantly wider than is envisioned by many.

Moreover, although disambiguation is included as a contextual process forming part of literal meaning, I see no justification for assuming that grammar forces a decision between ambiguous meanings of words. Grammar is best seen as neutral with respect to ambiguous words. Otherwise, communicative intentions are ascribed to grammatical forms. I suspect that only the wish to have the literal meaning be a specific propositional form is what motivates researchers to include disambiguation as a ‘legal literal inference’.

Next, consider cases like *she ate/read*. Does the grammar instruct the addressee to supply an argument here? Levin (1993: 33) notes that this is undecided in the literature. I think these verbs could also be intransitive verbs (Du Bois, personal communication; Payne, 1997; Thompson and Hopper, 2001).²⁴ My point, however, is that most probably, if the relevance of the direct object in the particular context is high, it will be reconstructed and incorporated into the proposition nonetheless, as in *When I was a kid, I was in love with Anna Karenina and carried it with me everywhere. I would read for hours* (i.e., ‘I would read *Anna Karenina* for hours’).²⁵ Note that the completed object is not some general ‘book’, but rather a specific book. Does that mean it is grammatically induced here after all? While I find a distinction between mandatory and optional contextualizations based on grammatical coding significant (e.g., VP deletions are linguistically coded triggers for contextual completions), some authors are tempted to distinguish between mandatory and optional contextualizations based on whether a complete semantic proposition results with or without the contextualization (see Groefsema, 1995b).

Consider, in this connection, Récanati’s (1995) cases, which, analyzed as **grammatically** induced completions, require what he calls ‘sense construction’. I believe that his analysis of aspectual verbs (e.g., *finish*, *start*), for example, assumes completions more for conceptual semantic reasons than for grammatical reasons. Grammatically induced completions should be marked linguistically (as with VP deletions, pronouns, etc.). The completed material should also be uniquely determined, and the completion should be mandatory in each occurrence of the verb. Aspectual verbs, however, do not meet the first criterion, and whereas example (8a)

²⁴ We should then distinguish between linguistically intransitive verbs (*eat* in this case) and verbs **grammatically** specified for arguments which are nevertheless sometimes omitted, as in the originally Hebrew example (its (non)acceptability out of context is equivalent to the English translation): i. They were four, they held my arms, one raped me, one hit [dative *me* omitted], the others kissed [accusative *me* omitted] (*Haaretz* 4.14.99).

²⁵ Indeed, Thompson and Hopper (2001), argue that the boundary between one-participant and two-participant predicates is very fluid in English talk-in-interaction, and that the extent to which a predicate seems to be imaginable in terms of ‘participants on stage’ at all is a function of frequency. Fillmore (1986), however, argued that verbs are lexically specified for missing arguments.

meets the second requirement (I have italicized the source of the completion), this is not invariably so. In examples (8b and c), where the only completions possible are vague predicates such as *doing/using*, these seem rather forced, and thus, the third criterion is not met either:

(8) a. JOANNE:... he *holds his own* meetings,
and,
(H) He set up his- -
started his own meeting in Hollywood.²⁶ (Du Bois 2000: Deadly)

b. JOANNE:... when he **started** his courtship thing, (Du Bois 2000: Deadly).²⁷

c. A: Want some coffee?
B: Great idea.
A: Oops! I finished the coffee yesterday. Sorry! (constructed)

Carston (1998: 96) quotes Deirdre Wilson, noting a difference between explicating X and reporting that the speaker said X. Indeed, while we may say that in some cases the speaker explicated the enriched version, we probably could not say that ‘s/he said the enriched version’ here (?? *A said that she finished using the coffee yesterday*). Grammatically induced completions can be reported as what the speaker said more comfortably, usually.

The truth is that grammar is not necessarily dedicated to expressing full propositions (as Bach, 1994b fully acknowledges). Certain content elements are needed for the generation of a full proposition, but the grammar does not specify these, so they do not constitute part of the privileged, explicit interpretation (see Carston, 1998 on the strong underdeterminacy position). Below is an example similar to *she ate*, where in reality, there necessarily is another participant (a sex partner), who is not mentioned explicitly:

(9) Lewinsky: ... I never had sex with him....
Tripp: What is—what is the definition of sex?
Lewinsky: Intercourse.
Tripp: Oh, well, Yeah. Ok.
Lewinsky: I never **had intercourse**. I did not **have a sexual relationship** (*New York Times* 10.4.1998).

Now, in order to verify whether Lewinsky is telling the truth, it is clear that the person to be checked with on the matter of sex is President Clinton, who constitutes

²⁶ In fact, the completed and noncompleted versions have slightly different meanings: The non-completed one presents the meetings as a future institutionalized activity.

²⁷ Du Bois’ (2000) transcription system has been slightly simplified. Mostly, overlaps with speech not here presented are not marked. Text line: intonation unit; (H): in-breath; []: overlapping speech; @: a pulse of laughter; ...: pause; ::: short pause; ,: continuing intonation; .: final intonation; ?: appeal intonation; -: truncated intonation.

a highly accessible entity in this conversation. However, I believe Lewinsky **chose** not to mention him— not because of his high accessibility, but because **she** wanted to focus on herself (the issue being whether she is telling the truth when denying having had sex with him). So, while the reality is ‘Lewinsky’s sex (or no sex) with Clinton’, I claim that the message is about ‘Lewinsky’s sex (in a specific situation)’. In other words, we can choose to code an event which necessarily involves more than one participant with only a one place argument even when the ‘missing’ participant is a specific, given entity (unlike the prototypical object of *ate*). Most importantly, there is no automatic instruction (grammatical or otherwise) from the speaker to the addressee to add on a representation of the ‘missing participant’. This is so despite the fact that a grammatically specified argument is missing (I assume that *have intercourse/have sex* are lexically specified for an oblique object in their occurrences above²⁸). By definition, any grammatical sentence is (linguistically) semantically complete (i.e., it codes all the linguistically necessary meaning bearing elements), even though it may be incomplete in terms of referential semantics (in fact, more often than not it is an incomplete proposition). While I do not consider the above arguments at all conclusive, I suggest that linguists and philosophers should be very cautious before they assume grammatical triggering of pragmatic enrichments, because grammar (linguistic semantics) is not committed to coding full propositions, even though this is crucial for conceptual semantics.²⁹

4.1.2. Psychological reality: On the similarity between allowed and disallowed inferences

A second problem with ‘approved’ inferences is that even if they are clearly grammatically induced, it is not obvious that they are different from pragmatically or conceptually induced ‘nonapproved’ inferences in terms of the processing involved and the products they help create.

First, recall that Searle (1978) attempts to restrict the inferences allowed in forming literal meaning to typical contextually-driven inferences. As Gibbs (1984, 1994) argues, and, in fact, as Searle himself admits, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear boundary between default contextual assumptions, and other contextual assumptions (but see Carston, 1998: Chapter 4). Moreover, the ‘typical’, or ‘standard’ literal meaning which Searle includes as part of his notion of literal meaning (which, in fact, is linguistic) is not necessarily linguistically significant. So-called typical meaning may simply be the result of frequent contextual enrichments of linguistic meaning. In this case, it is more a generalization on the **circumstances** of our interactional life than on linguistic meaning. Rumelhart’s (1979) example *The policeman raised his hand and stopped the car* illustrates why ‘typicality’ cannot substitute for ‘literality’. Rumelhart argues that the normal (literal) interpretation of

²⁸ If the predicates above were truly intransitive, present perfect, rather than simple past, would have been used, or else, a time adverbial would have been included.

²⁹ A ‘compromise’ resolution of the issue could be that representations are enriched to include inferred entities, but as non-profiled entities (see Langacker, 1987), the point being that they are not assigned the same status as explicitly mentioned entities.

this sentence would involve a traffic cop signaling to a driver to stop. However, if it was known that the cop is actually Superman in disguise and the car is driverless, our immediate (literal) interpretation would be drastically different: Superman would be envisioned as physically stopping the car. Hence, our literal interpretations are indeed context dependent, and the same utterance can have different **literal** interpretations under different (typical or nontypical) circumstances.

Second, cases where conceptual completions are necessary are not so different from cases where completions are grammatically mandated. Both contribute equally to the development of a verifiable proposition (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). Completions of fragmentary utterances vary considerably among addressees, and are not, therefore, grammatically induced. Similarly, even when fully propositional, the uttered proposition may not be the one intended by the speaker (e.g., *Mending this fault will take time—time*, in this context, suggesting ‘more time than might be expected’. See Carston, 1998: 19). In such cases, inferences are called for in order to enrich or alter the linguistic meaning. The fact that such inferences are not grammatically mandated, but rather pragmatically motivated, does not render them different in nature. They are context-dependent—relevance-oriented—and the addressee can never be as confident about their content as s/he can be about coded meanings. Still, if we (rightly) do not assume that such sentences contain hidden variables, and if only grammatically induced inferences are allowed into **literal meaning**, a verifiable proposition cannot be derived as a literal meaning for the above, as well as for very many other sentences.

A long philosophical tradition presupposes an unquestioned division between indexical reference and ambiguity resolution on the one hand, and other pragmatic processes on the other (see Grice, 1975; Kasher, 1991: 390/1; Berg, 1993, 2002, this issue; Bach, 1994a.; Segal, 1994). But in fact, even if we could clearly delineate grammatically triggered enrichments such as references and ambiguity resolutions, would there be any justification for granting these the status of ‘allowed exceptions’ to context insensitivity? I agree with Carston (1988) that a decision to stop inferencing after one has reached a minimal truth-bearing proposition is arbitrary.³⁰ The similarity between the processing procedures involved in grammatically induced inferencing and conceptually induced inferencing (see Section 1.2 again) renders literal meaning, as classically defined (i.e., linguistic meaning plus reference and ambiguity resolutions, but not other inferences) an unrealistic processing stage. In terms of processing, the relevance position, which takes the original Gricean position one step further, seems correct: we should distinguish between all decoding and all inferring, and not between decoding + some inferencing to the exclusion of some further types of inferencing. Reference (and ambiguity resolution) are never just coded. They always rely on inferencing.

In addition, ‘what is (literally) said’ may actually depend on the application of Gricean maxims (see Katz, 1972: 449; Walker, 1975)—that is, on contextual inferencing. As Clark (1996: 144) argues, disambiguation—a literal meaning decision—

³⁰ Récanati (1989: 102) too finds the minimal proposition approach arbitrary, but nonetheless, he is not confident that it should be rejected.

sometimes depends on implicatures— nonliteral meanings. Thus, deciding whether British English *garage*, in Grice's famous example, means 'a service station' or 'a parking structure' depends on whether one is replying to a question about a gasoline station or a statement about being illegally parked. This means that literal meaning is dependent on a nonliteral implicature (for the disambiguation), but in terms of processing, the former is supposed to precede the latter! Hence, the only way the classical definition of literal meaning can remain intact is with an ad hoc addition that inferencing for deletions, references, and ambiguity resolutions count differently from other inferential processes, even if they are identical processing-wise, and even if they depend on the other types of inferencing. Given the psychologically ad hoc nature of this definition, the classically defined literal meaning can only be justified if it is nonetheless functional as a final product.

Finally, the completions allowed into literal meaning produce a meaning level which is not functional in other, nonpsychological ways either (see Carston, 1998: 118). Gibbs and Moise's (1997) experiments show that speakers are interested in pragmatically richer meanings. I believe that the philosophers (Katz, 1977; Searle, 1978; Berg, 1993; Bach, 1994a, 1999) try to keep literal meaning too close to linguistic meaning on the one hand, while at the same time hoping that their literal meanings will be able to provide some essential truth conditions, so that they are semantically significant as well, justifying the term 'what is said'. Katz (1972), for instance, adopts court interpretations as defining 'what is said'. It is quite clear, however, that such interpretations are not composed of just the enrichments allowed by Bach, Berg, or Searle. Modern legal interpretations consider contextual factors, speakers' intentions primarily, and these can override linguistic/literal meaning³¹. But literal meaning captures 'too little' meaning. I think that the philosophers underestimate how short their concept of literal meaning falls of anything useful for speakers. First, since so much is not coded, much more information is recruited by the addressee via inferences in order to arrive at a propositional (truth-conditional) meaning.³² Second, context searches are not at all as trivial as the philosophers envision, even for the minimal completions they require. The assumption seems to be that context is simply given, and thus contextual interpretations of grammatically specified elements almost resemble decoding (see Perry, 1997).^{33,34}

Summing up, I see Berg's, Searle's, and Bach's weakened literal (or minimal) meanings as cognitive hybrids that serve no discourse function. If we want literal

³¹ See Bowers (1989), various authors in Bix (1998) and Barak (1995) about legal interpretations

³² Even more so, since reference determination and disambiguation should be recognized as full-fledged inferentially derived meanings.

³³ Consider the case where a music teacher was accused of having sex with two of his students **at the same time** (*Yediot Achronot*, an Israeli daily, 1.25.1996). It is crucial to narrow down the meaning of 'at the same time', for it seems to be worse if he had a threesome in bed. As it turns out, 'at the same time' here refers to the same 'dating' period. Is this a trivial minimal contextual inference? I doubt it.

³⁴ See Asher (1999), Atlas (1977), Bach (1994a), Barwise and Perry (1983), Carston (1998), Fauconnier (1997), Récanati (1989), Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), Stainton (1997), and Travis (1991) about the extent of the problem in view of the underdeterminate nature of the linguistic code. See Turner (1999: 7) about the problematicity of deciding which minimal indices one should presuppose for contextually dependent aspects of what are routinely taken to be part of literal or semantic meaning.

meaning to reflect some linguistic ability, then only coded meanings should count, and all contextual enrichments should be excluded (Carston, 1998: 114; Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995). For this purpose, the classical definition of literal meaning captures ‘too much’ meaning. The same is true if I am right and speakers do not always opt for a full proposition (see Ariel, in press). If, however, we want literal meaning to be some kind of privileged meaning, say the one adopted by courts in interpreting the law, then that **use** should form the basis for defining literal meaning (see Section 5.2.3 and Ariel, in press). Berg (personal communication) claims that he is interested in literal propositional meaning, because of his (certainly justified) interest in (in)valid relations between premises and conclusions. But it is obvious that, for these last two kinds of meaning, weakened literal meanings capture ‘too little’ meaning.

4.2. Problems with giving up compositionality

Recall that Bartsch (1996) offers a modified definition of literal meaning, in which the compositionality requirement is relaxed and words are assumed to be represented in the lexicon as whole polysemic complexes. The addressee then is assumed to search the mental lexicon according to verb-object combinations and other types of combinations. This is what Amelia Bedelia fails to do in example (10):

(10) **Change the towels** in the green bathroom... Amelia Bedelia got some scissors. She snipped a little here and a little there. And she **changed those towels**. (Peggy Parish, 1963/1992. *Amelia Bedelia*. USA: Harper Trophy, pp. 16–18).

Interestingly, the book cover describes Amelia Bedelia as “a **literal-minded** house-keeper” (emphasis added), implying that Amelia Bedelia is being literal by **ignoring** lexical phrasal combinations, as Bartsch would dictate. However, the situation is actually more complex, since *change clothes*, *change linens*, *change towels*, etc. share the same meaning, indicating that phrasal meanings require abstractions as well.

Note, however, the following example, where the addressee has to inferentially supply the object of *give* (it is implicit in the previous context and explicitly stated only for the verb *mail*, even though grammatically, there is no indication that *give* would take the same object):

(11) REBECCA: .. (H) What I have to do is,
submit all of this to our accounting department,
RICKIE: [Okay].
REBECCA: [and they] **give** you ... the,
.. they’ll mail you **the .. reimbursement** (Du Bois, 2000: Tell the Jury That).

Thus, even the decision as to what to search for in the mental lexicon (*give the reimbursement*) may be inference-driven.³⁵ In the next example, the missing object

³⁵ Alternatively, one should not at all be able to interpret *give* in *and they give you... the* because it is an incomplete false start.

for *give (how much)* appears a few intonation units back, but even that is not enough, because the addressee has to infer that money is what is being talked about:

- (12) PATTY: **how much** are we going to take from (H) the uh,
 .. so called really wealthy,
 who's the only people that's going to be touched by this budget,
 LINDA: @Yeah,
 @how @nice. (MANY LAUGHING)
 PATTY: And .. all of these things,
 and **give** to these poor. (Du Bois 2000: Howards)

Lexical look-ups as envisioned by Bartsch may, then, depend on inferencing, a pragmatic (nonliteral) process par excellence.

Finally, consider the case of *open a restaurant* and *take aspirin*. Does *open a restaurant* really have the following three entries in the lexicon: (1) Open the door of the restaurant (with a key), (2) Prepare the restaurant for guests, as in *She goes in half an hour earlier to open the restaurant*, and (3) 'Start up a new restaurant', as in the following example:

- (13) ALINA: ... he wants to **open his own restaurant** someday, (Du Bois 2000: Cuz).

While it is not impossible in theory to hypothesize such multiple meanings for *open a restaurant*, it is hard to assume that all the inferentially possible interpretations of *open a restaurant* are lexically specified (see Frazier and Rayner, 1990; Frisson and Pickering, in press, and see again the two differently novel meanings of *sample you* from Thompson and Hopper's 2001, mentioned in Section 1.2). Note also that Bartsch's solution would not explain the possibility of the following (attested) example, where the first *take the aspirin* means actually 'swallow it', whereas the second one means 'brought it with me':

- (14) A: Have you taken the aspirin?
 B: No, I haven't taken it, but I've taken it (from Carston, 1998: 244).

While I agree with Bartsch that many more word combinations than have been assumed by linguists may actually be listed as entries in the lexicon, it seems more reasonable to derive many appropriate meanings by relying on contextual assumptions rather than by listing all in the lexicon and then choosing one according to the specific context. I don't doubt that other **literal** meanings can be derived for 'open a restaurant', in fact. Hence, the polysemy solution for a literal meaning for constituents is not always an attractive option. Indeed, Clark's (1991) main point is the futility of specifying long lists of word combinations in the mental lexicon (e.g., 'red' when applied to 'skin', as opposed to 'red' when applied to 'car').

Récánati's (1995) proposal is also problematic. First, I agree with Bach (1994a) that Récánati's 'local mechanism' of accessing a nonliteral interpretation without

using inferencing is implausible (Récanati proposes that nonliteral interpretations are generated by a spread of activation). It is unlikely that the interpretation of *ham sandwich* consists of 2 interpretations: (1) a sandwich containing ham, which by an automatic spread of activation also activates (2) the customer who ordered a ham sandwich (the first interpretation is taken to be more accessible, however). This solution is appropriate only for conventionalized figurative speech. Novel nonliteral interpretations must proceed from the literal to the nonliteral by inference. Still, there is no reason to assume that inferential processes are never initiated before a complete literal proposition has been accessed. Thus, Récanati's point about the non-obligatoriness of an interpretative stage of a complete literal proposition may be correct after all, at least in some cases (see also Gibbs, 2002, this issue).

However, Récanati's claims about the accessing of various interpretations are unconvincing in the absence of psycholinguistic experimentation. The following quote characterizes his logical, rather than psychological approach: “**There is no particular reason** why the process of nonliteral interpretation should proceed serially through computing the literal interpretation of the sentence” (p. 230). Indeed, it may even be a waste of time in certain cases. But the fact that there may not be a **logical** reason for it does not mean that there is no **psycholinguistic** motivation behind it. Evidence in Giora and Fein (1999a) and Giora et al., (1998) attests to the contrary. It shows that potentially ironic utterances, embedded in ironically biasing contexts, are initially processed only literally. Moreover, they retain their literal interpretation long after the whole sentence has been processed (1000–2000 ms after offset of the target sentence). Findings in Williams (1992) demonstrate that this is also true of metaphor-based polysemies. Such data show that irrelevant literal meanings are nonetheless accessed, and moreover, they remain accessible long after Récanati's local processes would have had them disappear.

4.3. Problems with ‘moderate literalism’

As Gibbs (1989) argues, the main problem with Dascal's (1987) proposal of ‘moderate literalism’ is that it is vague. While vagueness may not actually be a disadvantage for characterizing minimal meanings in the sense of privileged interactional interpretations (see Section 5.2.3 and Ariel, in press), it is problematic as an analytical tool defining a unique level of meaning. It is not clear what we should pick as a moderate literal meaning when criteria clash, and they definitely do clash. As Gibbs (1989) notes, compositionality may clash with conventionality, and the understanding of hints (part of the literal meaning for Dascal) requires contextual support, which is not necessarily widely shared and effortless (i.e., not the restricted context which is supposed to be used for generating literal meaning). The first objection (the clash between compositionality and conventionality) can perhaps be dismissed by taking a synchronic linguistic criterion of conventionality (where *kick the bucket* has both the idiomatic and the compositional meaning listed in the lexicon), rather than an absolute ahistorical view of literality. However, like Searle (1978), Dascal is committed to a distinction between different kinds of context retrievals (general schemata versus other context retrievals). It is not clear that a

sharp line can be drawn here. Last, Dascal may have been too hasty when he concluded that the rejection of a concept of literal meaning commits us to retreat to ‘radical contextualism’, where the grammar is actually superfluous, since meaning can simply be deduced from context. This conclusion would only follow from abandoning a level of **linguistic** meaning (see Section 5.2.1).

In sum, I am sympathetic to relaxing the notion of literal meaning, perhaps in the spirit of Dascal (1987). However, I see problems with all of the modified characterizations of literal meaning, if we are to assume just one type of minimal meaning. While I accept some of the claims of Bartsch (1996) and Récanati (1995) about relaxing compositionality, I do not think they solve the problems of the classical concept of literal meaning. I mostly disagree with Berg’s (1993) and Bach’s (1994a) adherence to the original concept of literal meaning. I have argued that in order to maintain that concept, our expectations from literal meaning are lowered to a point where the concept is rendered dysfunctional. It is not the linguistic meaning exactly, it is psycholinguistically implausible, and as a product it is not discursively useful. I therefore see no justification for assuming such a concept of literal meaning.

4.4. The status of the alternatives for literal meaning

For the most part, I fully accept the arguments for postulating all the alternative concepts of literal meaning discussed in Section 3. I believe we must assume a linguistic level of interpretation, as is proposed in theory (see also Ariel, 1998), a distinction between salient and nonsalient meanings, as is proposed by Giora, and some enriched linguistic interpretation (e.g., explicature, or ‘what is said’). Each of these is fully justified, although differently so (see Section 5). Accepting the validity of all three notions of minimal meaning entails the rejection of any proposal to replace classical literal meaning with any one of them alone. Instead, we should make sure that these three concepts of minimal meaning, unlike the conflicting parameters of classical literal meaning, are compatible with each other. And indeed, they are. Relevance theory and Giora’s theory are compatible with assuming a number of minimal meanings. It is quite compatible with relevance theory that there is also a psycholinguistically primary meaning (the salient meaning), and it is equally compatible with Giora’s theory that we have linguistic meanings as well as explicatures.

Gibbs’ direct access position is the only one that requires the rejection of classical literal meaning and its replacement by a single level of enriched minimal meaning (the explicature). Gibbs specifically rejects the assumption of an initial literal/salient level (certainly at the proposition level, but he is quite skeptical about the word level too) which gives way to a more contextually appropriate derived meaning (for figurative expressions). He also rejects the possibility that the enriched meaning level, which speakers are aware of interactionally, can include conversational implicatures (Gibbs, 1999). I will not argue here against these two positions. Giora (Giora et al., 1998; 1999a, in press, Giora and Fein, 1999b, Peleg et al., 2001) has provided ample evidence for assuming a psycholinguistic level of rudimentary rather than enriched

meaning, the salient meaning, which is automatically activated, even if it has to be suppressed shortly afterwards. And in Ariel (in press), I argue that in actual interactions, speakers' relevant interpretations (privileged interactional interpretations) are not consistently of the same type. While these are often **explicatures**, there is discourse evidence for **conversational implicatures** ('too much enrichment' according to Gibbs), as well as contextually irrelevant **linguistic meanings** (ones that should have never arisen according to Gibbs' direct access approach) as privileged interactional meanings. Nonetheless, I consider his work (Gibbs and Moise, 1997; and see also Nicolle and Clark, 1999) extremely important in providing evidence for a concept of interactional privileged interpretation.

5. Conclusions: Linguistic, psycholinguistic, and interactional perspectives on minimal meanings

5.1. *Relevant and irrelevant features of classical definitions of literal and nonliteral meanings*

Now, what are we left with after so many arguments and counter arguments have been raised about literal meaning? I actually tend to accept many of the arguments, as well as many of the counter arguments I alluded to above. For example, I agree with Rumelhart (1979) that the distinction between literal and nonliteral language (the products) is not at all sharp, and with Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and Gibbs (1989: 244, 2002, this issue), that nonliteral meanings do not necessarily involve special or different cognitive mechanisms from those involved in processing literal ones. I agree with Gibbs (1984, 1994) that literal meaning is not very significant. While I am not sure we always opt for a full proposition (the explicature, see Ariel, in press), I believe that there is some level of interactional meaning (privileged interactional interpretation) which approximates this at least. I therefore accept Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) and Gibbs and Moise's (1997) conclusion that people assume that some pragmatic information plays a crucial role in the determination of 'what is said'. Based on Gibbs and Moise (1997), Nicolle and Clark (1999), and Bezuidenhout and Cutting (2002, this issue), it seems that more often than not, context determines 'what is said'. I also find Sperber and Wilson's suggestion that implicatures vary in status due to their relevance very plausible. In fact (contra to Gibbs and Moise's findings), I even agree with Nicolle and Clark, as well as Bezuidenhout and Cutting, that conversational implicatures too may sometimes be conceived as 'what is said'.

Still, in seeming contradiction to the convictions above, I also believe that there is a processing difference between interpretations of 'more minimal' (salient) and 'less minimal' (nonsalient, inferred) meanings. Also, although interactionally there is no difference of status between literal and nonliteral meanings as products per se, there is a psychological asymmetry between them: the latter are derived from the former. Only the former are automatically and obligatorily retrieved, regardless of contextual appropriateness. The list could go on.

How can I accept so many assumptions about literal, or minimal meanings, when they have been convincingly shown to contradict each other?³⁶ First, as mentioned earlier, I propose to replace the one concept of literal meaning with three distinct types of minimal meaning, each reflecting a different motivation behind the original concept of literal meaning. Thus, if we view what various researchers have said about the one literal meaning as characterizing a few types of minimal meanings, then what seem to be contradictions in one concept of literal meaning can be taken as legitimate differences between different concepts of minimal meaning. Second, I suggest that we do away with some dichotomies included in the classical definition, at least as criteria for distinguishing between literal, or rather, more minimal, meaning and nonliteral, or less minimal, meaning. In fact, once our goal is to define three and not one concept of minimal meaning, we can even select different features/dichotomies for the definition of each concept.

The absolute, ahistorical distinction between literal and nonliteral, qua figurative versus nonfigurative, should be abandoned, because figurative meanings may very well be lexicalized through semantic change, while novel literal language may involve processes similar to novel figurative language (e.g., Giora, 2002, this issue). Context-dependent inferencing must be recognized as functional for both non-figurative and figurative interpretations: Both (innovative) metaphors (ironies, etc.) and explicatures (nonfigurative) are interpreted by contextual inferencing. The same applies to truth-conditionality and cancelability. Both literal (or minimal) and nonliteral (nonsalient, enriched) meanings may or may not be truth-conditional. Although to different extents, both minimal and enriched meanings are also cancelable. Thus, the features +/- figurative; +/- truth-conditional; and +/- cancelable of the original definition of literal meaning cannot be definitional, although there are no doubt significant correlations between minimal meanings and nonfigurativeness and noncancelability.

Recall that once we adopt three rather than one concept of minimal meaning, different features may play a role in defining each of them. Indeed, of the classical definition of literal meaning, the features linguistic/encoded (conventional), compositional, obligatory, and context-invariant are relevant for linguistic meanings. Automatic, conventional, obligatory, and fast to retrieve are relevant for salient meanings.³⁷ Relevant inferencing, a feature which does not figure in the classical

³⁶ Meant here is mainly the contradiction between the view of literal meaning as acontextual meaning, as in Sperber and Wilson's coded meaning and Giora's salient meaning, and the view of literal meaning as 'what is said' as contextually derived, à la Gibbs and Moise (1997) and Nicolle and Clark (1999).

³⁷ Note that conventionality is relevant for both linguistic and salient meanings, but Giora's notion of conventionality, as well as lexicality, is different from mine. As Lakoff (1986) notes, there is some vagueness in our use of the term conventionality. Thus, an indirect meaning Y (e.g., *Can you...* interpreted as a request rather than a question) may be conventional (and hence constitute a salient meaning according to Giora) if there is a customary way of using expression X to convey Y, even if Y is not X's lexical meaning (see originally Morgan, 1978). I believe that conventional *uses* determine meaning salience according to Giora, but lexicalization determines linguistic status. Of course, the two concepts of conventionality are related because conventional contextual uses/interpretations often become linguistically conventional as well, through lexicalization.

definition of literality, is only relevant for privileged interactional interpretation (see Section 5.2.3 and Ariel, in press).

5.2. Three types of minimal meanings

The main problem with the literal meaning debate is that the classical definition attempted to satisfy too many goals at the same time. While each goal in itself may be reasonable, expecting all of them to be realized by one and the same concept is not. The correlations between the different senses of literal meaning are far from perfect. Thus, expecting literal meaning to be lexical (or linguistic) yet fully truth-conditional is unrealistic. Similarly, expecting linguistically coded meanings to also represent a significant meaning as a product is an unrealistic aspiration in view of the fact that they are so obviously conceptually incomplete. This explains why many aspects of 'literal' meanings had to be derived by inference, rather than by decoding. Because of constant (but gradual) lexicalization, it is also unrealistic to expect figurative meanings to always be inferentially derived rather than retrieved lexically (conventionally). Finally, while the literal (or salient) meaning may not be relevant to speakers in discourse, only psycholinguistic experiments can attest if it is nonetheless accessed by addressees. I therefore do not see much point in debating whether we need or do not need a level of 'literal' meaning, because it depends on what literal meaning one means. Instead, we should clarify what it is that we wish to conceptualize using such a term, or terms, actually. The recent literature on literal meaning takes the significance of literal meaning as self-evident, even though it is no longer equated with either linguistic meaning or with full propositionality (e.g., Berg, 1993; Dascal, 1987). As I have mentioned above, I see at least three different motivations behind the classical concept of literal meaning: linguistic, psycholinguistic, and interactional.^{38,39} I believe all three perspectives on literal meaning are valid, because meanings can be basic/minimal/privileged in (at least) these three different respects.

³⁸ Of course, other concepts of literality may be functional too. Lakoff (1986) chooses an ahistorical dichotomy between literal and figurative as the crucial distinction, his assumption being that all figurative meanings (regardless of conventionalization) are interpreted in the same fashion by reference to another (literal) domain/meaning. Speakers' usage of *literal/ly* points to yet other related concepts of literality, such as 'exact/ly' in (i) and 'direct, basic' in (ii) (both uttered by David Uttal, at the CSDL conference, 5.13.2000): i. Maps are not a **literal** copy of the world. ii. **Literal** similarity...See Israel (2002, this issue) for the uses of the linguistic expression *literally*.

³⁹ Now, although the first perspective is linguistic, the second psycholinguistic, and the third philosophical/sociological, I am not claiming that linguists have necessarily adopted the linguistic perspective of literal meaning, psycholinguists the psycholinguistic perspective, and philosophers the philosophical/sociological perspective. Rather, linguists, psycholinguists and philosophers alike have tended to refer to more than one type of basis for literality in their arguments for positing a certain literal meaning. Most shared the belief that at least a few, if not all, aspects of minimal meaning converge in the one concept of classical literal meaning. It was **philosophers** — Frege (1892), Katz (1977)—who initially defined literal meaning as **linguistic**; Dascal (1987), a **philosopher**, attempts to define a literal meaning which is **linguistically** and **psycholinguistically** real; and Gibbs and Moise (1997) and Noveck (2001), **psychologists**, experiment with what I would call a basic-level **interactional** meaning, rather than with the initial salient meaning processed.

I proceed to briefly describe each of these perspectives on minimal meaning. Linguistic meaning does not need much elaboration, since it is a common concept in linguistics (even if researchers do not completely agree on the details of its characterization). For further information about salient meaning I refer the reader to the works by Giora (1997, in press, 2002, this issue). Finally, to better understand my proposal for a privileged interactional interpretation, see Ariel, in press).

5.2.1. *Literal₁: The linguistic perspective on literal meaning*

Since I am suggesting that we define meanings relative to their function, or rather, functions, I believe that one minimal meaning we should recognize is the encoded, linguistic meaning. This meaning is a significant level, since it characterizes the native speaker's competence in her language. Indeed, the wish to define linguistic meaning has been a prominent motivation behind the original concept of literal meaning: Searle (1978), Berg (1993, 2002, this issue) and most notably, Katz (1977, 1980) are interested in defining semantic meaning, by distinguishing between linguistic and extralinguistic competencies.⁴⁰ This is also what motivates Chomsky (1975), Levinson (1983), and Gibbs (1984). Even in the late 80s and 90s, people equate linguistic and literal meanings, and pragmatic/extralinguistic and nonliteral meanings (see Bach, 1994c; Dascal, 1987; Farmer and Harnish, 1987: 547; Gibbs, 1989; Hanks, 1996: 232, 265).⁴¹ As I have argued earlier, while the classical definition of literal meaning cannot in fact accurately define linguistic meaning, the need to define linguistic meaning is still valid.

This linguistic meaning actually meets many, but not all, of the criteria of the classical literal meaning. It does not necessarily provide all, nor only truth conditionally relevant aspects of the meaning, nor is it always nonfigurative. It obeys compositionality, but it accommodates grammaticized noncompositional meanings (as in idioms and collocations). I believe that while some of the researchers attempted to abolish the existence or importance of this level, it is cognitively real. As has been amply argued by relevance theorists, linguistic meaning involves a code, and decoding is quite distinct from inferencing. This is a meaning level which is unaffected by context, it is obligatory and automatic: It is not necessarily a (fully) conscious level (Récanati, 1989). However, it does not only characterize the native speaker's implicit knowledge. It is sometimes crucially functional in interactions. While **bare** (unenriched) linguistic meanings normally carry only little interactive significance (see Gibbs and Moise, 1997), we shall see (in Section 5.2.3 and in Ariel, in press) that sometimes, when speakers choose to be what I term wise-guys, they do insist on bare linguistic meanings. The reason we can identify these meanings as **bare** linguistic meanings is that they are actually contextually

⁴⁰ Berg (P.C) therefore distinguishes between a "character" literal meaning (basically a propositional linguistic meaning) and a content literal meaning.

⁴¹ Interestingly, this connection is maintained regardless of the position adopted re the status of the semantics-pragmatics distinction. Thus, Dascal (1987) wishes to preserve it, while Gibbs (1989) wishes to abolish it.

inappropriate (unlike the minimal meanings accepted as ‘what is said’ in Gibbs and Moise’s last experiment). Speakers can sometimes insist on selecting these inappropriate meanings as their interpretations just because the linguistic code is considered an uncontroversial source for interpretation.

The first perspective on a basic-level meaning is then linguistic, or rather, linguistic semantic in nature. Linguists must determine which aspects of an interpretation are linguistic (coded), and should, therefore, be accounted for by the lexicon and a linguistic semantic theory, and which aspects are better off relegated to an extralinguistic inferential competence. A linguistic type of literal meaning (literal₁) is, therefore, one candidate for the status of minimal meaning. Inferred meanings are its nonminimal counterpart.

5.2.2. *Literal₂: The psycholinguistic perspective on literal meaning*

A second motivation behind the concept of literal meaning (literal₂) is psycholinguistic in nature. Such a perspective takes into consideration the dynamic construction of meaning in context in real time. Psycholinguistic research aims to uncover that basic meaning which is obligatory and accessed automatically and swiftly (Giora, 1997, in press; Swinney, 1979), and/or that meaning which is arrived at via default, noncostly processing mechanisms (Gibbs, 1984; Rumelhart, 1979). Different patterns of suppression of contextually irrelevant meanings may also point to a distinction between more and less basic meanings. The relevant literal meaning in terms of processing is the most salient meaning (I here adopt Giora’s, 1997, forthcoming concept). In a series of experiments, Giora has convincingly argued that there is a stage in processing where some but not all the meanings of an expression are accessed, and these may be contextually inappropriate even. Note that this meaning is not necessarily identical with linguistic meaning, because the criterion here is being foremost on our mind (as reflected in speed of accessing) rather than conventionality (alone). Although on the whole, linguistic meanings are accessed faster than inferred meanings (see Giora and Fein, 1999b, but see Peleg et al. for a different view), not all linguistically specified meanings surface at the same time (see Giora et al., 2001; Peleg et al., 2001; Giora, in press, Chapter 3 for reviews). Giora has argued that some may be more salient than others, and hence are accessed more quickly. For example, *a drop* has (at least) two lexical meanings, ‘a tiny amount’ and ‘the act of falling’, but the first one is more salient. This is the source of the difficulty in understanding the following joke (the audience took a while before they laughed), where the **less** salient meaning turns out to be the contextually appropriate one:

(15) Tour guide at Bryce Canyon: We call that rock there [pointing to a protruding rock at Bryce Canyon] Poison Rock. You know why? **One drop** of that rock and you’re dead (6.19.2000).

Giora and Fein (1999b) found that the activation of the figurative meaning of familiar idioms (a conventional, salient meaning) was stronger than their literal (compositional) meaning, regardless of context, even though both are literal₁. Here

are a few examples from Hebrew and English, showing that figurative (i.e., classically nonliteral) meanings may be more salient (hence, minimal) than literal (non-figurative) ones. Note that Hebrew *have big eyes* has both a compositional meaning (as in English) and an idiomatic meaning ‘be greedy’. Both are lexically specified (hence, literal₁), but it seems that the idiomatic one is more salient (literal₂). Since Iddo (8 years old) is interested in the compositional meaning, he hastens to cancel the more salient, idiomatic one:

(16) Iddo: He has big eyes, not in the sense...

Mom: Laughing

Iddo: He has big eyes like this (demonstrates with his hands) (Originally Hebrew, 9.28.1998).

Much the same point is made in the following, also originally Hebrew, rhyming ad. Note that ‘nonsense in tomato juice’ is an idiom meaning ‘bullshit’. However, it **also** has a very marked compositional meaning, which takes addressees a while to get:

(17) Heinz, Heinz

Heinz Ketchup

All the rest are nonsense

All the rest are nonsense

PAUSE

In tomato juice (A TV advertisement, 10.10.1998).

The next examples are from English. Note that the more salient meaning of *out to lunch* is the idiomatic rather than the compositional meaning. In the second example, the idiomatic meaning could not even be relevant. The compositional meaning is dubbed the literal meaning by the speakers (since it is not figurative), but it is actually the less salient one, since they need to specify that it is the meaning they intend:

(18) a. A: I’m sorry,

he appears to be out to lunch.

(PAUSE)

(LAUGH)

I mean that in the literal sense (Phone conversation, 5.4.1999).

b. They didn’t touch him. He was literally out to lunch (Movie: Three days of the Condor).

That we should distinguish between the processing view of minimal meaning (literal₂) and the ‘product’ view of literal meaning (the classical definition, literal₁ and literal₃) is supported by the difference between ambiguities and polysemies, all of which are, no doubt, linguistic meanings (literal₁). Equally salient meanings of

ambiguous words are all initially accessed, regardless of the context. Fairly quickly, the irrelevant meaning is suppressed, so that the classically defined literal meaning (as well as the explicature, or the privileged interactional meaning—literal₃) is unambiguous (recall that literal meaning was supposed to reflect a post-disambiguation phase). However, Williams (1992) found that unlike ambiguity cases, the contextually irrelevant meanings of a polysemous word remain active for quite a long time, and Giora and Fein (1999a–c) and Giora et al. (1998) showed the same for so-called irrelevant meanings of metaphors and ironies. While these irrelevant meanings are **psychologically** real (literal₂), one would want to discount them for the minimal meaning ‘product’ definition (literal₃, see Section 5.2.3 below). In addition, the psycholinguistic concept must distinguish between central (frequent, for the most part) and noncentral meanings of polysemies (both literal₁). The latter prime the former much more than the other way round (Williams, 1992). The central ones are, therefore, more salient (literal₂) perhaps than the noncentral ones, even though both are linguistic (literal₁).

Indeed, Giora has argued that infrequent meanings may not be accessed as fast as frequent meanings. This is a case where one linguistic meaning (literal₁) is more salient (literal₂) than another linguistic meaning (literal₁). Moreover, if historical semantic change amounts to freezing a contextually derived aspect of meaning, then some highly frequent but nonobligatory implicatures (nonliteral₁) may be accessed as fast as conventional meanings (literal₁), and even faster (thus constituting salient meanings—literal₂) just before they conventionalize (and become obligatory, i.e., literal₁). But one would need to conduct experiments with potential lexicalizations to see whether this hypothetical case ever occurs.

Summing up, literal₂ adopts the psycholinguistic motivation behind the distinction between literal and nonliteral meanings, which classifies meanings with regard to retrievability. It rejects the absolute figurative-nonfigurative distinction in favor of a (graded) distinction in salience, in view of the fact that some figurative meanings are highly salient, and some nonfigurative interpretations bear only a low or even no degree of salience. Literal₂ is distinct from both literal₁ (linguistic meaning) and literal₃ (privileged interactional interpretation): It may be only a subset of the linguistic meanings (i.e., less than the complete linguistic meaning) of a form, it can be a conventional use, rather than a lexical meaning (i.e., more than linguistic meaning), and it does not necessarily constitute part of the final, contextually-appropriate interpretation (literal₃).

5.2.3. *Literal₃: An interactional perspective on literal meaning*

Finally, we may wish to characterize a meaning which is **interactionally** the most basic level communicated meaning, a minimal **contextual** meaning, which (1) the speaker is minimally and necessarily committed to (its truth or sincerity), and which (2) constitutes her relevant contribution to the ongoing discourse (literal₃). This might be the meaning that courts take as binding the speaker, for example. Although defining an interactionally significant meaning was never a stated motivation behind the definition of the classical literal meaning, I believe this perspective on literal meaning is reflected in the original definition in the insistence that literal

meaning specify all and only the truth conditions of the proposition expressed. The distinctions drawn between ‘what is said’/explicature—a full proposition, and linguistic meaning on the one hand, and between ‘what is said’ and ‘what is implicated’ on the other hand, are similarly motivated. I am suggesting that imposing a clearly conceptual criterion— full propositionality— on literal meaning on the one hand, while excluding meanings the speaker is not necessarily committed to (implicatures) on the other, derives from a wish to characterize the ‘significant content’ of the sentence, its unquestioned contribution to context.⁴² Hence the ongoing debates between researchers on how much pragmatic enrichment is to be included in the literal/‘said’ meaning.⁴³

But how minimal is ‘minimal’/interactional interpretation (literal₃)? It is not at all consistently predetermined for the interlocutors, I claim. Indeed, although Récanati (1989) believes that ‘what is said’ can be established by relying on speakers’ intuitions (the availability principle) and on the scope principle, he himself admits that intuitions may be fuzzy and conflicting (p. 108) and that the scope principle may be complicated in application (p. 114). Note that, in view of the psycholinguistic findings that both explicatures and implicatures are taken as ‘what is said’,⁴⁴ there does not seem to be a unique meaning representation which invariably functions as the interactionally relevant ‘what is said’. A variety of pragmatically derived interpretations may (or may not) be taken by the interlocutors as the relevant privileged interactional interpretation.

I, therefore, argue (see Ariel, in press) that we do not actually have one uniquely identifiable interactional privileged meaning. I propose to describe (rather than define) possible privileged **interpretations** based on attested speakers’ interpretations. These show that privileged interactional interpretations are negotiated and even fought over by interlocutors. General contextual circumstances, personal interests, and a tendency for playfulness affect people’s conceptions of what the privileged interactional interpretation is in specific cases. I cite examples from natural discourse where speakers treat as the privileged interactional interpretations (literal₃) a variety of meaning types. The linguistic one is one of them. Others include various degrees of enrichments of it (explicatures, and even implicatures).

(19) exemplifies what I term a wise-guy privileged interactional interpretation. In such cases, speakers adopt a **linguistic meaning** that is inappropriate in the current discourse as the privileged interactional interpretation (see Ariel, in press, for additional examples):

⁴² See, for example, Perry’s (1997: 590) characterization of ‘what is said’ as “[t]he **official content**’ of a statement... what we would take the speaker as having asserted or said” (emphasis added).

⁴³ On the ‘what is said’/implicature distinction, see Bach (1994a), Carston (1998), Récanati (1989), Searle (1978, 1992), and Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995).

⁴⁴ For some of the relevant findings, see Bezuidenhout and Cutting (2002, this issue), Gibbs and Moise (1997), Nicolle and Clark (1999), and Noveck (2001). Similar cases in attested discourses are discussed by Ariel (in press).

- (19) S: Tire, ani **hitxalti** ita lifney xamesh shanim
 Look, I started with/made a pass at her five years ago...
- M: Ata hitxalta ita o she...
 You made a pass at her or...
- S: Lo...
 No... (Lotan, 1990: 3/4).

The previous context makes it very clear that when S uses the linguistically ambiguous *hitxalti ita*, he means ‘started working with her as my lawyer’ and not ‘made a pass at her’. Since literal meaning is supposed to be the product of disambiguation, M’s contribution (contextually interpreted as ‘you made a pass at her’) shows that the classical literal meaning is not necessarily the interpretation that interlocutors work with. Note that M is certainly being a wise-guy in choosing to take S as intending the collocational meaning of ‘start with her’ rather than the contextually appropriate enriched meaning. But his interpretation cannot be dismissed as some totally irrelevant meaning would have been (cf., *You started with her* with ‘You like her friends’...). Note that S hastens to specifically deny it. Since M’s minimal interactional interpretation is **linguistically** justified (literal₁), it has a discursive standing despite the fact that it reflects a definitely uncooperative interpretation on M’s part. For examples showing literal₃ as increasingly richer interpretations, see Ariel (in press).

Literal₃ is distinct from the classical literal meaning, as well as from literal₁ and literal₂ [even though any one of them may be selected as the privileged interactional interpretation, as in (19)]. Although for this minimal meaning (literal₃), truth conditions, in fact full propositionality, may be highly relevant, I see no evidence that the classical literal meaning, which is only partially truth-conditional, enjoys a self-evident or a privileged status for speakers (see Ariel, in press). At the same time, this literal₃ meaning cannot serve as a cognitively basic level of meaning (literal₁ or ₂), since it is in principle a cognitive hybrid (combining decoding with inferencing). It is more often than not a conscious meaning level, unlike literal_{1&2}, which are often subconscious.

To clearly see the differences between the three concepts of minimal meanings I am proposing (literal_{1,2&3}), consider the meaning of numbers. There has been a considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes the linguistic (or literal), the implicated and/or the ‘said’ meanings of the numbers (for discussion and references see Ariel, in press). Following Carston (1990/1995), I am suggesting (see Ariel, in press, for supporting evidence) that *five*, to pick an example, **linguistically** (literal₁) means ‘five—in general’. Its **salient** meaning (literal₂), however, is ‘exactly five’ (this is its most frequent interpretation, i.e., when used **conventionally**, or prototypically). Its privileged interactional interpretation (literal₃) is still (partially) different. It is any one of the following: ‘exactly five’; ‘about five’; ‘at least five’; ‘at most five’.

Summing up, I have argued that, since the requirements made on the classical literal meaning rendered it dysfunctional, we should abandon it altogether, but retain

three of the motivations behind defining meanings which are minimal. These yield three distinct concepts of minimal meanings: linguistic, psycholinguistic (salient), and privileged interactional. It is my hope that a recognition of the existence of (at least) three different minimal meanings will render the research on literal and non-literal language more fruitful. Conflicting claims, arguments, and experimental results should be compared and evaluated only if they refer to the same concept of 'literal' (or 'nonliteral') meaning. I am confident that at least some of the disagreements regarding literal meaning will evaporate then, although some will remain and require further study (most notably, the direct access versus the graded salience views of lexical accessing).

Nonetheless, the fact that we can define minimal meanings in a variety of ways does not mean that we should actually do it. The three minimal meanings I have proposed, as well as other concepts of literal or minimal meaning, are only justified to the extent that they are motivated, and backed up by empirical evidence. It seems to me that the philosophers are interested in a minimal meaning that is different from the above three, the meaning which represents the objective content that the proposition expresses. I doubt, however, that any meaning can be guaranteed as the context-less content of a proposition except for its coded meaning(s). This meaning, the philosophers rightly feel, is too incomplete for their needs. I therefore suspect that the philosophers will simply have to give up on the idea that natural language sentences can (alone) provide the propositions they need for their calculations of (in)valid logical inferences.

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