Literally speaking

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Abstract

Modern uses of the word *literally* are surveyed, and the solecistic misuse of this word as an expression of speaker commitment is shown to be a natural semantic extension of its basic metalinguistic meaning. The development appears to be typical of a large class of intensifiers, though it is argued that *literally* itself is only in the early stages of such an evolution. Aspects of this development are observed to run counter to well-known tendencies for meaning change to involve subjectification, and it is suggested that subjectification itself may be a special case of the ways in which originally pragmatic meanings can become conventionalized properties of a form's lexical semantics. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. A scandal and a paradox

Sometime in the late nineteenth century, the word *literally* began to be used in a way strangely at odds with its literal meaning. The use was quickly denounced, and has flourished since. These days, it may be heard even among the most educated speakers. The examples in (1) are typical.[1]

(1) a. In the 1930′s, cures for the Depression literally flooded Washington. [BR].

b. In fact, the Reagan administration was literally driven underground by the population. [PC: Noam Chomsky, in an interviewed with Bill Moyers].

c. Thai cuisine, I never been really fond of that stuff. You talk about spicy, that'll, that'll literally blow your head off, it's so hot. [SWB].

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[1] Data for this study come from the Brown Corpus [BR], the Switchboard Corpus [SWB], the Oxford English Dictionary Online [OED], and an ad hoc personal collection of examples compiled from print, radio and conversation [PC].

Such examples seem strangely self-contradictory, insisting on a literal interpretation where clearly a figurative one is intended. The effect is striking, and often amusing, and the usage is traditionally considered a deplorable solecism (cf. Fowler, 1926).

There is an intriguing paradox here. The misuse of *literally* is quite widespread, and clearly is not confined to some pocket of speakers who never learned the difference between literal and figurative meaning. Most of the people who so misuse the word easily recognize, and even smile at the peculiarity of examples like those in (1). The mystery is, if everyone knows what literal meaning is, why do they persist in using *literally* in a way so clearly contrary to that notion?

Of course, as the contributions to this volume make clear, what literal meaning is is less than obvious. Expert opinion is divided, and while non-experts may regard it as a matter of common sense, it is unclear just what that common sense consists in. Given this perplexity, we may do well to pay attention to the strange and contradictory ways people use the word *literally*, for these may reveal a great deal about their common sense folk models of literal meaning.

In this paper, I examine the modern use of *literally* as a case of semantic change in progress. I begin, in section 2, with a sketch of the word's orthodox usage—the use in which it enjoins a literal interpretation of the words with which it appears. The pragmatics of this usage set the stage for *literally's* modern extensions, which I consider in detail in section 3. As I will argue, the word's notorious misuse actually marks a natural development from its orthodox usage: people use the word in this way precisely because they do understand the notion of literal meaning, and they associate it, naturally enough, with plain speaking and honest expression. *Literally* seems to be following a well-traveled path which has taken words like *really*, *truly*, and *very* from early metalinguistic functions to later expressive functions. *Very* has completed this path to become a full-fledged scalar intensifier; *literally* still has a long way to go.

Finally, I consider the development of *literally* as a case of subjectification in meaning change (Traugott, 1989, 1995; Langacker, 1990). As with all semantic change, *literally's* various extensions involve both processes of pragmatic strengthening and semantic bleaching. While these processes function regularly by promoting pragmatic features of a word's use into conventional features of its meaning, they do not uniformly result in subjectification, at least not in the sense of an increase in the expression of speaker involvement.

2. The literal meaning of *literally*

At root, the words *literal* and *literally* are really about letters. The literal meaning of a word is the meaning inherent in its letters: it is the 'plain' meaning of a text, opposed to 'figurative' senses requiring a richer mode of interpretation. The notion, apparently, has its roots in medieval traditions of Biblical exegesis, and dates back at least to the fourteenth century. The quotations in (2), taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, illustrate this basic sense:

(2) a. Holy scripture hath iiij vndirstondingis; literal, allegorik, moral, and anagogik. [Wyclif, 1382].

    b. All those passages are not to be literally understood. [H. More, 1664].

    c. If you mention the Golden Age to him, he understands it in a literal sense. [*Freethinker*, 1718].

While the notion of literal meaning has its roots in expert theories of interpretation, it has worked its way into popular views on language and meaning. Experts may worry about the details, but most educated speakers of English (at least) regard it as self-evident that words have a unique literal meaning from which other, figurative meanings are derived. If anything, the division between semantics and pragmatics is stronger in popular wisdom than it is in analytic philosophy.

By the late seventeenth century, the notion of literal meaning was enough a part of common lore that the word *literally* could be used reflexively, as a way of qualifying the interpretation of one's own utterance. Earlier, the word would occur only in those rare contexts, as in (2), where meaning itself is the object of discussion. The examples in (3), again from the OED, show *literally* freed of this narrow referential function in its new role as a metalinguistic operator:

(3) a. My daily bread is litt'rally implor'd. [Dryden, 1687].

    b. Every day with me is literally another yesterday for it is exactly the same. [Pope, 1708].

    c. He had the singular fate of dying literally of hunger. [Hume, 1762].

In this usage, *literally* adds no content to a sentence, but simply regulates its interpretation. In (3c), for example, *literally* does not denote a manner of dying; it just means that the phrase *dying of hunger* should be understood here to mean, precisely, 'dying of hunger'.

Kay (1997), in his insightful discussion of the English hedges *technically* and *loosely speaking*, argues that the use of such expressions depends on a folk theory of language and meaning. The same is clearly true for the metalinguistic use of *literally*. Here, the crucial notion seems to be just that words have an inherent meaning, independent of and prior to the complex meanings which speakers may express with them. To speak literally, in this sense, is just to mean what one's words themselves say. *Literally* says, in effect, 'I mean what I'm saying: to understand me correctly you need add nothing to the meaning of my words'.

In fact, this is a rather odd thing to say. After all, the default assumption has to be that speakers do, in fact, mean what they say, and that they express themselves in such a way as to make their meaning clear. These are the essentials of Gricean cooperativeness. As such, they normally go without saying. In principle, it seems, a word that says such things should be vacuous. In practice, given the nature of the Gricean maxims, such a word cannot fail to be pregnant with implicatures. By its very nature, the metalinguistic use of *literally* flouts the Maxim of Quantity, saying more than is (or more than ought to be) necessary. Basically, to insist that one means what one says is to acknowledge that it might not sound believable, and so, to emphasize that it is remarkable. The effect is particularly clear in the modern examples below:

(4) a. We got this tree for $18 that literally would have been $40 [anywhere else]. [PC].

b. Most of these kids cannot think, they literally cannot come in out of the rain. [SWB].

c. There are houseboats which are literally homes afloat, accommodating whole families in comfort and convenience. [BR].

The orthodox use of *literally* in these examples involves at least four essential properties: (i) *literally* collocates with an expression which lends itself, in context, to multiple interpretations; (ii) at least one of these interpretations is figurative, typically either metaphorical or hyperbolic; (iii) the figurative interpretation is likely to be seen as more plausible than any literal interpretation; (iv) the use of *literally* commits the speaker to the truth of a literal interpretation. Technically, perhaps only the last of these is actually an entailment, but without the first three, the use of *literally* will be at least pragmatically anomalous.

Other features which are not themselves essential to the orthodox use will nonetheless commonly co-occur with it. Among other things, the use of orthodox *literally* may suggest: (i) that the speaker considers what is being said especially remarkable; (ii) that the speaker is committed to the strongest possible interpretation of his or her words; (iii) that the speaker considers this particular choice of words especially fortuitous; or (iv) that the speaker considers these words the best way of expressing what she has to say. In general, the orthodox use of *literally* may invite any or all of these inferences.

While all of these inferences started out as conversational implicatures of *literally's* orthodox use, they are, by now, at least loosely associated with the word itself. In the following section, I consider a range of contemporary uses in which such inferences play a particularly prominent role, and in some cases seem to entirely eclipse *literally's* orthodox meaning. The examples show *literally* serving a variety of textual and expressive functions, all of which underscore, in one way or another, the speaker's commitment to what is being said. For the purposes of this paper, I remain neutral as to whether these functions should be treated as distinct senses in a polysemy network or as pragmatic instantiations of a more general procedural meaning. Either way, the important point is that these meanings, which once were only incidentally associated with the use of the word, have now been systematically incorporated into the literal meaning of *literally*.

3. Varieties of speaker commitment

One common use of *literally* is to draw attention to an apt or clever choice of words— occasionally even where the intended meaning of those words is not strictly speaking literal. In the following examples, *literally* does not block an expression's idiomatic interpretation, but rather emphasizes the peculiar suitability of a given choice of words for the described situation.

(5) a. [In his music videos he] literally brings words to life: one of his favorite techniques is to superimpose song lyrics on a background image. [PC; SF Chronicle].

b. At first [Elizabeth, a fictional rape victim] suffers in silence (literally, since in her grief and humiliation she gives up singing)... [PC; *New York Times*].

In (5a), for example, the song lyrics do not *literally* come alive, but they are animated, and in this sense the choice of words is strikingly apt. *Literally* highlights the fact that the idiom means more here than is customary, even if the meaning is, strictly speaking, less than fully literal. In (5b), the writer does not intend the words *suffer in silence* in their most strictly literal sense: that is, Elizabeth does not live in a world without sound. The expression is, however, poignantly apt, since there is more to her silence than just secrecy. It is telling that both of these examples resort to paraphrase in order to explain exactly why the highlighted choice of words is so apt; but, of course, the need for paraphrase itself suggests that the intended meaning does go beyond what the words themselves may literally suggest.

While the examples in (5) involve a choice between two distinct, but equally figurative meanings, *literally* may also, occasionally, arbitrate between interpretations which are both perfectly literal. The example in (6) is particularly striking in this regard:

(6) [At Dallas Marriot Suites] ...receive a certificate for a free weekend night... Then enjoy the extra room (literally), the two telephones with call waiting...two televisions... [PC; advertisement, *Southwest Airlines Inflight Magazine*].

The ad plays on the count and mass noun readings of the word room: apparently, the hotel offers not just more space, but actually an extra room. The use of *literally* makes the offer seem somehow unexpectedly generous — it gives the appearance of increasing the offer ('we'll give you more room, and in fact, we'll give you more **rooms**') even as the offer is made. While neither reading is any more literal than the other, the 'literal' count noun reading is, at least, stronger, since more rooms seems to imply more space, but not vice versa.

This power of *literally* to strengthen the force of an utterance appears to have become a conventional feature of its use, and now *literally* often appears in contexts where it is difficult to discern anything but a single literal reading. The examples in (7) are a case in point:

(7) a. You wouldn't understand. I don't mean that as an insult, I mean it literally. [PC].
    b. Sometimes I've literally said 'with friends like these who needs enemies.' [PC].
    c. I had to make a real commitment to the child inside myself...to say, 'What do you need today? What can I do to make you feel safe?'... I had to make a literal commitment to do that. [PC].

The use of *literal* and *literally* in these examples does not depend on the different meanings a word can have, but rather on the different ways speakers might use their words to perform acts. This is particularly clear in (7a), where *literally* does not affect the interpretation of the sentence itself, but simply marks its illocutionary

point: it is not an insult, but merely an assertion. The other two uses are similar, if perhaps more subtle. In (7b), *literally* emphasizes that the speaker is not just using a bland cliché: the proverbial words, in fact, have been sincerely uttered. In (7c), the use of *literal* in the final utterance emphasizes the speaker's seriousness in making a commitment: it does not merely form an intention, it actually makes a vow to carry the intention out.

In a sense, the examples in (7) seem unexceptional: the intended meaning is, after all, literal and not figurative. But *literally* has undergone a significant shift from a textual, metalinguistic function to an expressive, metaperformative function. Where earlier it served to arbitrate between ways of interpreting a sentence, now it marks the seriousness with which a sentence is used.

From here it is a small step, or perhaps no step at all, to those notorious uses in which *literally* fails to cancel a figurative reading, but rather emphasizes the seriousness with which a figurative expression is used. In a sense, its function is much the same—the expression of a speaker's commitment to what is said—but now, rather than marking a commitment to a narrowly construed sentence meaning, *literally* marks the speaker's commitment to the intended utterance meaning.[2] The examples in (8), like those in (1), are typical:

(8) a. All of eastern Massachusetts revolves around Boston, literally. [PC].

b. In 1985 crack cocaine enters the scene, literally, with a vengeance. [PC].

c. Corn is one of perhaps not more than fifteen species of cultivated plants...-which quite literally stand between mankind and starvation. [PC, SF Chronicle].

d. One of the reasons why she had to go to the nursing home, is that she was literally driving him nuts in his later years. [SWB].

The word *literally* seems to clash in these examples, and this clash naturally arouses the scorn of language purists. But the clash itself is incidental to the usage. In (9), where there is no salient figurative meaning and hence no clash, *literally* sounds unexceptional, but it serves precisely the same role as in (8) of emphasizing the speaker's commitment to the utterance:

(9) a. [Trump] felt that baldness is a sign of weakness and I think he felt literally that he could control it. [PC].

b. [In the diary-novel, S. Updike] really manages to convince you all the way through the book that this is literally a woman [writing]. [PC, New York Times Book Review].

c. Although I absolutely reject the Platonism of it, I have literally squealed with delight at the imperturbable perfection with which the position is laid down... [BR].

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[2] One might analyze uses such as these along the lines of what Ziv (1998) proposes for the Hebrew discourse marker *kaze* 'like,' as reflecting a distinction not in lexical meaning but rather in syntactic scope, with *literally* applying to the utterance as a whole rather than just to a particular sentence constituent. Either way, however, these uses involve a new convention for the interpretation of *literally*, and so it seems appropriate to speak here of a semantic extension

In both (8) and (9), *literally* signals that the described situation is, in fact, precisely as it is described. It makes no difference whether the language used is figurative or not—the point is that the language used is perfectly suited to express the speaker's meaning, and that the speaker is strongly committed to the truth of that meaning.

Literally has effectively shifted in these examples from a textual to an expressive use, but the folk model of literal meaning seems to be unchanged. In both cases, literal meaning is associated with directness, plain speaking, and, fundamentally, with truth. The shift itself seems to reflect little more than an equivocation between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. This sort of shift is, in fact, quite common with modal expressions whose basic function is to emphasize the fit between reality and the way it is described, and the examples in (10) show uses of *really* and *truly* which closely parallel the use of *literally* in (8):[3]

(10) a. Her guacamole is truly out of this world.
     b. She really pulled the wool over our eyes.

As Brugman notes, the adverbs here effectively signal "that the conventionalized nonliteral meaning [of a figurative expression] ... is being used in a strict sense" (1984: 34).

Literally appears to be following the same semantic path which has led modal expressions like *really* and *truly* to their modern uses as intensifiers (cf. Bolinger, 1972; Klein, 1998). But *literally* is not yet an intensifier. Strictly speaking, an intensifier is a form which narrows the denotation of a scalar predicate to the high end of a scale. True intensifiers force a scalar reading even where none seems to be available: expressions like *very married* or *very pregnant* force a construal in which pregnancy and marriage are viewed as scalar properties. This sort of accommodation simply does not happen with *literally*. Nor, indeed, does *literally* reliably encode any sort of scalar semantics. While it works well to emphasize that a scalar assertion is not an exaggeration, as in (11a), it cannot be used to intensify the scalar predicate itself, as in (11b):

(11) a. Marlene is literally the tallest girl I've ever seen.
     b. Marlene is very/really/truly/*literally tall.

Literally cannot be used to express an objective judgment about the degree to which a predicate holds; rather it seems to require a more subjective sort of judgment about the appropriateness of describing the world in a particular sort of way.

There is, however, a natural link between these two sorts of judgment: often what makes a particular predicate particularly appropriate is precisely that it holds to a high degree. If, for example, I insist that Marlene is tall, my insistence itself may invite the inference that I consider her not just tall, but very tall. The examples in

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[3] This sort of semantic extension appears to be be quite common, at least in European languages. Similar examples might include Latin *vero*, Dutch *echt* and *beslist*, German *wirklich* and *wahr*, and French *vraiment*, among others

(12) suggest that such an inference may sometimes be associated with the use of *literally*:

(12) a. In south Louisiana at the end of the War there was a literal rebirth of Cajun music and Cajun culture. [PC: *Fresh Air*, on National Public Radio]

b. [Academic women] eschew color (even as accents); instead they favor 'low keyed earth tones' or 'frumpy beige.' Says one female professor, some are 'literally slovenly'—a cardinal sin in the business world. [PC: *Lingua Franca*].

c. "[The book] is literally filled with rhymes, tongue-twisters, puns, jibes, riddles etc.... from the length and breadth of Britain. [PC: *NY Times*].

In (12a), the use of *literal* suggests not just that *rebirth* is the best word for what happened, but also that the rebirth was itself substantial. In (12b), by insisting on the word *slovenly* as a fitting epithet, *literally* also effectively intensifies the force of the adjective. And in (12c), where the word *fill* does not seem all that figurative to begin with, the effect of *literally* is precisely to emphasize the extent to which the book is filled. But while *literally* does offer intimations of intensification (by conversational implicature), its essential semantic function in these examples still seems to be largely expressive: it is the speaker's expressed commitment to the words used which generates the scalar inference here, and the expression of such commitment itself remains an indefeasible feature of *literally's* meaning in such examples.

4. Subjectification and literal meaning

The early shifts in *literally's* evolution are a paradigm case of subjectification in meaning change. First, the shift from a purely referential use, as in (2), to the modern metalinguistic uses in (3 and 4), illustrates the tendency for meanings "based in the described situation [to shift to] meanings based in the textual situation" (Traugott, 1989: 34). And the gradual shift from a metalinguistic function to the more expressive, metaperformative uses in (7-9) shows how meanings may "become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the situation" (Traugott, 1989: 35).

Interestingly, however, the final shift, from an expressive use to a scalar intensifier, is a clear case of desubjectification. *Literally* itself has not yet made this shift, but such shifts appear to be common (again, cf. *really*, *truly*, *very*, etc.), and the examples in (12) suggest that it may be on its way. In a certain sense, this sort of shift is no different from the earlier ones: a meaning element, in this case a scalar judgement, starts off as a frequent conversational implicature, gradually comes to be associated more and more strongly with the word itself, and finally eclipses the word's earlier conventional meaning, in this case, the expression of speaker commitment. We are dealing here, in other words, with a normal case of pragmatic strengthening and semantic bleaching. Only here the result is that the meaning shifts from expressing a subjective attitude about the described situation to an objective judgment about the scalar properties of a referent.

Apparently then, subjectification—that is, the strengthening of speaker involvement[4]—may be no more than an incidental feature of pragmatic strengthening. The essence of the process is the systematic semanticization of meanings which begin life as conversational implicatures. But what is strengthened in this process is not the implicature itself, but rather the reliability with which it is associated with a given construction. The strengthening of implicatures about speaker attitude creates the effect of subjectification. But the same process may produce the opposite result where expressions denoting a speaker's attitude toward what she is talking about trigger inferences about the thing itself: evidently, this is what happens in the shift from modal to intensifying meanings. The ongoing odyssey of *literally*—from its orthodox use as an operator on sentence meaning, to its modern uses as an operator on speaker meaning, and next, perhaps, to a new use as a scalar intensifier—demonstrates the open-ended and cyclical nature of this process. Each new use sets the stage for yet newer implicatures, which may, in turn, become semanticized, and so themselves lead again to new implicatures.

There is a certain irony in this process as it applies to *literally*, for the history of this form seems to undermine the very folk theory which has driven its development. The folk theory associates literal meaning with the true meaning of a word, from which it follows that to say something literally is to say precisely what one means. But as soon as one insists that one is saying what one means, one inevitably says more: the literal meaning of *literally* turns out to be inherently unstable. The word itself presupposes that words have meaning prior to and independently of the speakers who use them; but the word's current uses show that literal meaning is also always driven forward by the particular pragmatic ends it can serve. As it turns out, the meaning inherent in the letters of *literally* cannot be easily separated from the meanings we derive from its use in context. And so, the very word which profiles the objectivity of semantics reveals in its uses the fundamental subjectivity of linguistic meaning.

Acknowledgements

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[4] There are, of course, other conceptions of subjectification, and the shift from expressive to intensifier does seem to be a case of subjectification as that term is understood in Langacker (1990, p.c.). Basically, the idea as it applies to *literally* is that a meaning element formerly profiled by the word, and so objectively construed, has faded from prominence and become a sort of background for the new profiled meaning: where it serves as a scalar intensifier, the expression of speaker involvement is itself subjectively construed relative to its former status as the semantic profile of the word. On this view, as Traugott (1995: 48) emphasizes, subjectification is understood as a special case of semantic bleaching, and so need not involve the sorts of strengthening of speaker involvement normally associated with the notion of 'increased subjectivity'.

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