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Common Sense and 'Literal Meaning'

Michael Israel, Department of English
University of Maryland, College Park

Words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity.

Evelyn Waugh (quoted in Aitchison 1994).

1. First Principles

Things which are commonsense, almost by definition, do not bear comment: one never has to articulate what one may everywhere assume. 'Literal meaning' is a commonsense concept—a sort of first principle of meaning itself. It is the simplest sort of meaning: direct, original, unembellished and unadorned, opposed to all varieties of figure, derivation, or stylization. It is the sense one gets by taking words "in their natural or customary meanings, and applying the ordinary rules of grammar" (OED). It requires no fancy inferences, no imaginative leaps, no feats of insight. Literal meaning resides, so to speak, in the words themselves—both theoretically, as the coded semantic contents of linguistic forms, and figuratively, via a chain of associations running from the (literal) letters of a word to the sounds and ideas they represent. As a common sense concept, 'literal meaning' seems not just familiar, but somehow necessary. Without some notion of literal meaning it is unclear what it would mean for anyone to mean what they say, or how anyone else could ever understand them.

'Literal meaning' has been a concept at the heart of English literacy for almost as long as there has been an English literature. At least for the last four hundred years, literate speakers of English have used the words *literal* and *literally* to talk about linguistic meaning. Nowadays, a basic ability to distinguish between various sorts of "literal" and "figurative" meanings is essential to the careful reading of most English texts—novels, plays, poems, history, scripture, statutory law, and almost anything that might count as literature. Children as young as six years old may grasp the essential distinction here, and by adolescence many, if not most, students will have received explicit instruction on the distinctions between literal meaning and figures like metaphor, hyperbole, and irony. In this context, one comes to count on a notion without even thinking about it. With 'literal meaning' what we count on is a way of

understanding what we are doing when we read, write, and speak to one another—it is a basic part of our commonsense frame for communicative events.

Still for all that, 'literal meaning' is not an easy notion to define. Common sense can be problematic, and even at its best, it is rarely fully explicit. If we are truly interested in the literal meaning of *literal,* in the meaning associated directly with the word itself, where then are we to find this elusive kernel? My strategy in this quest is metalinguistic: to identify a concept of 'literal meaning', I will examine the ways speakers of English actually use the words *literal* and *literally*. These words are not and never have been especially frequent in colloquial speech (though they are probably more frequent now than ever before); but they have been widely used, in a number of related senses, by speakers and writers spanning several centuries and many disciplines.

Historically, these words have been taken very seriously. The basic distinction between an original, literal meaning and various sorts of derived meanings goes back at least as far as Augustine and the early church Fathers, and some notion of 'literal meaning' plays a foundational role in fields ranging from theology and philosophy, to psychology, linguistics, and the law. At the same time, one can still count on the average reader of the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* to have a clear idea of what they mean when they talk about 'literal meaning'.

My purpose in this essay is not to promote or defend any particular theory of literal meaning, but rather just to understand where this notion comes from, and how it came to be such an integral part of the way we talk and think about language. I will take an historical and descriptive approach, examining both the the ways the words *literal* and *literally* have been used since Early Modern English (roughly, from 1600 to the present), and some of the theories that have been built around these words over the ages. Not all theories agree on what 'literal meaning' is, and many simply don't discuss it. Typically, monographs on formal or grammatical semantics make little or no use of the word *literal*. But a large class of theories share a commitment to some sort of primary, original or direct meaning, whether or not it goes by the name "literal meaning," and I will argue that this sort of notion provides the basis for a great deal of both popular (folk theoretic) and expert thinking about what meaning is and how it works.

The plan of the paper is as follows. Section 2 examines the status of 'literal meaning' as a concept in contemporary theories of meaning, and considers both why many experts are now openly skeptical of its usefulness, and why the concept nonetheless seems secure in commonsense and expert theorizing. In section 3 I survey

the major uses of the words *literal* and *literally* themselves, distinguishing descriptive from performative uses of these words, and tracing the development of the latter from earlier metalinguistic uses, to later, more purely expressive and emphatic uses. I will argue that these various uses form a coherent natural category grounded in a commonsense understanding of communicative events. Section 4 traces the origins of this common sense with a brief natural history of 'literal meaning' from its early sources in classical Latin and the Roman Catholic Church, to its modern emergence, starting in the 17th century, in secular theories and ultimately in colloquial English. Section 5 concludes with some thoughts on the apparent naturalness of 'literal meaning' both as a matter of common sense, and as a metaphysical principle in the philosophy of language.

2. Commonsense and its Critics

The concept of 'literal meaning' may be a matter of common sense, but it is also an object of expert theorizing. Ultimately, it is impossible to disentangle the two. Expert theories are often inspired by commonsense notions, and commonsense does what it can to keep up with expert opinion.

There is now a substantial literature in the cognitive sciences—in philosophy, psychology, and linguistics, among others—concerned with the question of literal meaning (Searle 1978; Rumelhart 1979; Dascal 1987; Giora 2002; Recanati 2003; this volume; *inter alia*). The problem is that there are beginning to be almost as many theories of literal meaning as there are theorists, and in this context it becomes easy to be a skeptic (Gibbs 1984; Lakoff 1986; Turner 1991; Ariel 2002). While some theorists continue to take 'literal meaning' seriously as a semantic-pragmatic category (e.g. Berg 1993; Bach 1999; Lasersohn 1999), their proposals are often more counter intuitive than commonsensical. This might not be such a bad thing, since many people seem to doubt that ordinary speakers can correctly judge what is and is not a "literal meaning" (cf. 3.1 below).

In this context, the interesting question is not so much who has the right idea about literal meaning, or even what that idea really is, but why so many such serious scholars are so deeply concerned with such a seemingly simple concept in the first place?

Of course a theory of meaning need not make any systematic mention of "literal meaning"—the term is mostly absent, for example, from Montagovian semantics and even from most Gricean and Neo-Gricean pragmatics. But these sorts of theories often depend on similar distinctions with different names—for example, the distinction

between entailments and implicatures, between what is said and what is conversationally implicated.

2.1. Skeptical Perspectives

The commonsense notion of literal meaning fits into a larger folk-theoretic understanding of the relations between language, thought and reality. Turner (1991) provides a pithy, if somewhat unsympathetic summary of this view:

> The real world is exhaustively literal: literal language refers to it; literal concepts mirror the literal world; literal language evokes literal concepts... Separate from all this, so the folk theory runs, there are mental imaginative connections that are false; they are expressed in figurative, non-literal language or literally false language; we must transform the meaning of this language in order to arrive at interpretations of it that can be literal and true. (Turner 1991: 147)

Turner probably finds this view unsympathetic because it ignores the role of the imagination in ordinary everyday meaning construction, and it assumes a rather stark opposition between truth, reason and literality on the one side, and fancy, figuration, and falsity, on the other. But the assumption and the folk theory are in fact quite widely held, and they have deep roots in the philosophy of language and mind.

Lakoff & Johnson (1999) refer to theories like this as "literalist theories of meaning," and they cite Aristotle as the first to articulate such a theory. In a literalist theory, terms designate ideas, ideas characterize essences in the world, and literal meaning itself consists in the use of terms "to properly designate what they are conventionally supposed to designate" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 382).

The three-way relation that connects the structure of the world (essences) to the structure of the mind (ideas) through the structure of language (terms, or signifiers generally) provides the foundation for a great deal of both folk theoretic and expert thinking about language and thought. The commonest assumption is that the relations here are all direct, transparent and transitive—that language accurately conveys our thoughts from one speaker to another, that our thoughts accurately reflect the structure of the world, and that the world is truly described by language.

As Locke (1997 [1690]) points out, it is easy to imagine that if such direct relations between language, thought, and reality did not hold, then communication itself might be impossible:

> And hence it is, that Men are so forward to suppose, that the abstract Ideas they have in their Minds, are such, as agree to the Things existing without them, to which they are referred; and are the same also, to which the Names they give them, do by the Use and Propriety of that Language belong. For without this double Conformity of their Ideas, they find they should both think amiss of Things in themselves, and talk of them unintelligibly to others. (*Essay* II.xxxii.8)

This "double Conformity of ideas" is fundamental to any correspondence theory of truth, and it provides a very good foundation, since to deny its assumptions is tantamount either to denying that people understand each other when they speak, or that our understandings stand in any constant relation to the objective world. Locke himself rejected the double conformity, and so concluded against common sense, that ordinary speakers regularly do fail to communicate (Taylor 1992). Nonetheless, one needn't be either a communicational skeptic or a radical relativist to realize that the connection between words and reality is often convoluted and indirect: any cognitive psychologist or lexical semanticist can tell you that.

The fact is that many of our most commonplace conceptual categories are figuratively structured—most commonly by metaphor or analogy. This is why we can talk about and understand things like atoms in terms of solar systems (Gentner 1982), verbal arguments in terms of sports or war (Grady, Taub, and Morgan 1996), and time in terms of motion through space (Lakoff 1993). It is often assumed that the sorts of metaphors one finds in everyday language are somehow frozen or inert—that they are "dead", and hence cut off from speakers' minds. For example, the Greek word *theorein,* from which descends the English *theory,* originally meant 'to gaze upon'. That association is not available for most speakers of English, but the visual metaphor which originally motivated it persists in modern English colloquialisms like *see what I mean* and *look at it this way.* Similar examples may be adduced more or less *ad libitum: comprehension,* from Latin *comprehendere* 'to embrace, to grasp'; *insist* from the Latin. *insistere* 'to stand on'. Moreover, it remains quite systematically true for speakers of English that theories are things we *look at*; that understanding may involve *grasping something* or *getting it*; and that insisting is often a matter of *holding one's ground.*

It is tempting to dismiss such examples as simple "figures of speech", as superficial linguistic phenomena which neither affect nor interact with actual thought. But this poses a problem if one hopes to understand why such metaphorical extensions

are so pervasive in both lexis and grammar in all human languages (despite their notorious absence from almost all artificial and formal languages).

One possible answer is that the mind itself is analogically structured, so that even when we use apparently "literal" language, we may still be engaged in essentially metaphorical kinds of thinking. But just because thought itself is fundamentally imaginative and metaphorically structured, that hardly precludes some notion of 'literal meaning' from playing a role in a theory of meaning. In fact there are several roles it might play.

Lakoff (1986) analyzes 'literal meaning' much the way Lakoff (1987) analyzes 'mother': as a complex category organized around a cluster of prototypically co-occurring properties. As he notes, one expects the literal meaning of a text to be: (i) objectively true or false; (ii) non-metaphorical; (iii) directly meaningful; (iv) conventional; and (v) fully compositional. In the ideal case, all these properties pattern together, so that any one of them might be taken as a diagnostic of literal meaning. But often these properties come apart: metaphorical expressions may be directly meaningful, conventional, and capable of being true or false (e.g. *we are out of time*); conventional expressions may have non-compositional semantics (e.g. *he flew off the handle*); metaphorically structured constructions (e.g. *grasp* = 'understand') may combine compositionally with other constructions (e.g. *grasp the idea*); and things which are non-compositional, metaphorical or both might still be perfectly direct (e.g. *take a hike* or *buzz off* as used in a direct request to be left alone).

The point of Lakoff's deconstruction is not that 'literal meaning' is somehow defective or incoherent. In a way, Lakoff's whole argument depends on the fact that 'literal meaning' does exist as a commonsense category, and that it is structured the way commonsense categories commonly are. As he saw it at the time, concepts and the lexical categories which denote them consist of radially structured, metaphorically and metonymically inter-connected frames. But one can choose one's favorite theory of conceptual contents. It's only a problem if one assumes that the complex commonsense category denoted by *literal* can fit into a unique set of necessary and sufficient conditions.

When Ariel (2002) surveyed the literature at the end of the millennium she found it impossible to find any widely agreed upon criteria for 'literal meaning' as a theoretical construct. The problem is that 'literal meaning' means so many things to so many people that there is no single criterion that can define them all. The most popular candidates are things like truth conditionality, context-independence, and full compositionality, but in recent years it has become clear that there simply is no level

of linguistic meaning where all three of these hold. Since she cannot have one notion of 'literal meaning', Ariel proposes three: the linguistic, the psycholinguistic, and the interactional. The linguistic literal meaning is encoded and conventional: it is the inherent semantic content of a linguistic construction, unaffected by context or pragmatics. Psycholinguistic literal meaning is the meaning which is measurably the most salient: the one which subjects most rapidly access in processing a text. And interactional literal meaning is what the speaker is "minimally and necessarily committed to" in making her contribution to an ongoing discourse: roughly, what is said plus implicatures. All three of these notions share a sense of primacy, and all three are opposed to various secondary or derived meanings. But the existence of all three also means that there is no single thing one could call the literal meaning of a sentence.

As commonsense concepts go, literal meaning appears to be an easy target—or at least, it is fairly easy to show that literal meaning cannot at once do all the things it is supposed to do and remain a coherent concept. But then, why is some concept of 'literal meaning' so persistently postulated and presumed in discussions about meaning? And if linguists and philosophers cannot agree among themselves what literal meaning is, why do so many of them persist in using words like *literal* and *literally* as if they had some plain and simple sense?

2.2. Basic Necessity

Common sense only gets to be common if it is genuinely effective—it has to work in some way for most people and on most occasions. If 'literal meaning' is part of common sense, it is only because people find it useful. The best reasons for believing in some notion of 'literal meaning' have to do with the way any verbal message—in fact, any utterance of any length—may be systematically subject to multiple interpretations. The literal meaning of a novel, for example, might be the story or stories which it narrates, as distinct from any moral, political, aesthetic or other symbolic associations it might convey. Wherever one deals with meaning, new interpretations regularly arise as enrichments of older interpretations. In this context—the proverbial "neutral context"—the 'literal meaning' of an expression is its original meaning, the one it has before it gets interpreted, its interpretation prior to re-interpretation.

Some such notion of literal meaning seems necessary just to describe the regular patterns of polysemy one finds in common lexical roots, where, typically, words with vividly embodied meanings are used to denote more abstract types of processes (see,

for example, Stern 1937, Ullmann 1964, Sweetser 1990). For example, verbs of perception are often used in reference to other sorts of cognitive events. Thus the English words *see, hear, taste, touch,* and *feel* regularly have their denotations extended to things like comprehension (*I see what you mean, I hear you),* preference (*she has good taste in music),* emotional experience (*your words touched me),* and belief (*I have a feeling about this*). While these sorts of examples may illustrate the pervasiveness and systematicity of conceptual metaphors in our understanding of many basic cognitive domains (e.g. those having to do with time, cognition, or communication), they also depend on some distinction between metaphorically structured target domains (e.g. time, ideas, understanding, emotion) and more directly experienced and construed source domains (e.g. motion through space, manipulation of physical objects, visual experience, and tactile experience).

Phenomena of this sort seem to require a basic distinction between original and derived meanings—between the meaning one starts with "in the word itself" and the meaning or meanings one draws from the original meaning. This basic distinction operates at every level of interpretation—from word and sentence to text and discourse, and even, ultimately one might say, from phonetics to phonology.

The proverbs in (1) are normal sentences of English, each of which supports both a literal and a figurative reading, the latter analogically derived from the former. In these examples, both readings are strictly conventional: the literal reading employs the words "in their customary meanings" and combines them according to "the ordinary rules of grammar"; but the sentence as a whole is customarily used to convey the figurative reading.

(1) a. When the cat's away, the mice will play. ('When no one else is watching, people behave badly')
b. That dog won't hunt. ('Your claim won't fly')
c. You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs. ('Rough stuff has to happen if you want to achieve results')

Quite commonly, the figurative meaning of an expression will override its literal interpretation. The examples in (2) also support at least two readings, one literal and one figurative, both of which are conventionally associated with the forms in these sentences; here however, only the figurative readings really "make sense", as the literal readings each clash in some way with our common sense understanding of the world.

(2) a. You are the cream in my coffee.
b. This chocolate is out of this world!
c. His heart flooded with emotion.
d. There's a scandal brewing in the law offices.

Generally speaking, the addressee of a speech act will not be an instance of 'cream' (2a); specific referents (like *this chocolate*) can not be 'out of this world' (2b); hearts do not actually contain 'emotions', and emotions, *a fortiori,* cannot 'flood' hearts (2c); and scandals are not the sort of thing which ever actually 'brews' (2d). Again, in order to understand how these examples (and a large class of idiomatic expressions) actually make sense, it seems essential to distinguish between a literal, compositional meaning and a derived, figurative meaning.

In some cases, a figurative use of an expression can grow so conventional and automatic that its original "literal" meaning becomes difficult to discern. This can be seen in the examples in (3), illustrating colloquial formats for spoken requests in English.

(3) a. Can you give me a hand?
b. Do you have a minute?
c. Could you pick me up at six?

Speakers of English know that sentences like those in (3) are conventionally used not just to elicit information, but actually to request action. Most of the time, speakers who use such sentences will not even be aware (at least not in the moment of speaking) that they are saying something which might lend itself to multiple interpretations: that (3a), for example, could be construed as a question about the addressee's ability to supply a certain type of body part; or that (3c) might be used to inquire at what time of day an addressee would be able to lift the speaker off the ground. Such "strictly compositional" meanings may strike many as rather bizarre, but few readers of English will have any trouble recognizing them as possible (if not very cooperative) readings of these sentences. Even where the literal meaning of a text is patently absurd, speakers can still, with some reliability, recognize the same absurdity as a literal meaning.

But in fact, the literal meaning of a text need not be cancelled for figurative meanings to arise. Even if all the words in a sentence are construed without metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, or any other figure one might think of, the interpretative process may be carried on indefinitely. This, in fact, is the fundamental fact about the interpretive process: interpretations are always provisional and subject to further

interpretation, and the interpretation of an interpretation can always serve as the input for a new act of interpretation. This is a basic fact in the economy of Saussurean signs: signifiers evoke signifieds, which in turn may suggest and signify further signifieds, essentially *ad libitum*. The process is endless in principle, but common sense dictates that it must start somewhere: the idea of literal meaning is always an idea about where meaning begins.

3. The lexical root *literal* in Present Day English

Folk theories of meaning typically start off simple, and then get more complex as they insist more and more that the whole thing really is perfectly simple. Nowadays one can hardly mention the word *literally* without risking a certain sort of exasperated groan. The word has become something of a joke in the English speaking world, so that before one can really take the word seriously, one must first expose certain myths about its meaning and modern use. As we will see in section 4 below, these myths are deeply rooted in the study of English letters, and are an integral part of our modern folk theories of meaning, but they also make it harder somehow to see what people are actually doing when they use the word *literally* in everyday discourse.

3.1. Abuses of *literal* meanings

The problem with *literally* is that people regularly use this word to qualify what seem to be obviously figurative uses of language—in a way, that is, which is, or which would appear to be, exactly contrary to the word's own literal meaning. The examples in (4) illustrate some of the humorous effects that may be achieved in this way.

(4) a. I wonder , a lot of times , you know , people , I mean , a lot of times people **literally** tear apart their own schools. [SWB]
b. 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]
c. In the 1930's cures for the Depression **literally** flooded Washington. [BR]
d. The senator was **literally** buried alive in the Iowa primaries. (RHD)

While examples like these may be scorned as an abuse of common sense, they also represent a venerable and thoroughly conventional way of using the word *literally*. Similar uses have been attested since at least the first half of the nineteenth century

(see 5, below), and style manuals have been fulminating against them since at least the 1920s (e.g. Fowler 1926; Collins 1952; Safire 1980; cf. WDEU). These fulminations became tedious a long time ago. As Follett remarked in 1966, "writers are so often besought by rhetoricians not to say *literally* when what they mean is 'figuratively' that one would expect them to desist in sheer weariness of listening to the injunction." One reason why writers do not so desist may be that they really do, in some sense, mean what they are saying. The examples in (5), gathered from the OED and from WDEU, show that for a long time now, both more and less careful writers have used the word *literally* in the offending fashion. I note in passing that some of these might be construed as ironic, or otherwise self-conscious, uses of the word—abusive uses of language (catachresis) are figures of speech too.

(5) a. 'Lift him out,' said Squeers, after he had literally feasted his eyes in silence upon the culprit. [Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* 1839, WDEU]
b. ... yet the wretch, absorbed in his victuals, and naturally of an unutterable dullness, did not make a single remark during dinner, whereas I literally blazed with wit. [W. M. Thackeray, *Punch,* 30 Oct. 1847, WDEU]
c. For the last four years ... I literally coined money. [Fanny Kemble, 1863, OED]
d. And with his eyes he literally scoured the corners of the cell. [Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading,* 1960, WDEU]

By now the catachrestic use of *literally* is well enough established that there is a fairly consistent convention for its definition in contemporary English and American dictionaries. The most common way of describing this usage is to say that *literally* here expresses the opposite of what it really means. This is apparent in Follett's assumption that what speakers mean by *literally* is 'figuratively.' In the same vein, Merriam-Webster, Simon & Shuster, and Random House (RHD, WNUUD, and W3NID) all offer *virtually* as a gloss for this usage. Other proposals include *in effect, in a manner of speaking,* or even, as in CED, just the label "intensive". All of these dictionaries concur that the usage runs counter to the true meaning of the word, and all except Merriam-Webster (W3NID) include a note on the incoherency of this usage.

The consistency among modern lexicographers in these definitions belies a striking incoherency in the glosses they propose. On the one hand, there appears to be a consensus that *literally* functions as a kind of "intensifier"; on the other hand, the most frequent glosses given for this usage (*virtually, figuratively, in effect, in a manner of speaking*) are all hedging expressions, "qualifiers" which mitigate the force of the

expressions they modify. None of the dictionaries or manuals I have consulted seem aware of the fact that these two claims contradict each other. *Literally* really is an intensifier: it strengthens the appropriateness or applicability of the word or phrase it modifies. More precisely, in these uses *literally* is an emphatic discourse particle. Its closest synonyms are expressions like *truly, really, in fact, indeed, totally,* and *absolutely*. *Virtually* and *figuratively* are qualifiers: they place limits on the appropriateness or applicability of the words they modify, and put rhetorical distance between a speaker and his or her choice of words. Their nearest synonyms are expressions like *a sort of an X, the so-called, the soi-disant, the alleged;* and *as it were, so to speak,* and *in a manner of speaking*.

The problem is not that a semantic extension from one meaning to its opposite is in any way unheard of. This sort of extension is quite common in the evolution of negative expressions. Many speakers of American English, for example, use the phrase *I could care less* to express a lack of interest in a topic—to convey, that is, that it would be impossible to care less. Similarly, the Jespersen cycle regularly leads words denoting minimal units but with essentially positive meanings to evolve into negative quantifiers: the process is evident in Romance forms like French *rien* 'nothing'(> L. *rem,* 'thing'); Spanish *nada* 'nothing' (> L. *res nata* 'a born thing'); Catalan *mai* 'ever' (>L. *magis* 'more').

But there is no sense in which the modern uses of *literally* can be said to denote the contrary of what the word used to denote. While it is true that an earlier element of meaning has been bleached from uses like those in (4-5), where *literally* functions as "a mere intensifier," the element of intensity which the word has gained was already implicit in its earlier uses. As the editors of *AHD3* note, the abuse of *literally* "stems from ... a natural tendency to use the word as a general intensive...where no contrast to a figurative sense is intended" (AHD3, 1996). This "natural tendency" is evident in many apparently unobjectionable uses of the word. Those in (6-7), from the OED and the Switchboard corpus respectively, may sound less self-evidently self-contradictory than those in (4-5), but the basic function of *literally* is much the same in all these cases.

(6) a. My daily bread is litt'rally implor'd. [Dryden 1687, *OED*]
b. Every day with me is literally another yesterday for it is exactly the same. [Pope 1708, *OED*]

(7) a. and they were doing an overview of Los Angeles , uh , from an area that was up higher and you literally could see the band of smog. (SWB)

b. how much ash would fall and , and how it would essentially literally destroy the world , you know . (SWB)

The use of *literally* here is both expressive and metalinguistic: to say the word is to express an attitude toward the words one is saying. A well-placed *literally* emphasizes a speaker's commitment to the truth and aptness of her words—both to the proposition they denote, and to the way they express it. The examples in (4-5) are special only because the conventional meanings of the words chosen in these cases are themselves metaphorically structured.

The emphatic use of *literally* is easily disparaged as a "meaningless filler" or a "mere intensifier," but intensity and the expression of intensity are healthy, even vital linguistic phenomena. They are neither unnatural, nor, for that matter, uncomplicated in their grammatical intricacies (cf. Bolinger 1972; Brugman 1984; Klein 1997; Israel 2001). The meaning of *literally* in examples like (4-7) is quite different from that of an ordinary intensifier. Words like *very*, *awfully,* or *especially*, for example, modify gradable predicates (e.g. *tall, clever, poor*) and narrow their profile to the high end of a scale. Emphatic *literally* does not normally combine with ordinary, unmarked predicates, gradable or otherwise, precisely because its basic function is to signal that an exceptional, marked choice of words is contextually appropriate.

In fact, emphatic *literally* is not semantically a modifier at all, but a discourse marker (cf. Schiffrin 1987; Blakemore 2004). Modifiers are constructions which compose with the denotations of their heads. Discourse particles are constructions which regulate the actual performance of a linguistic communicative act. Unlike modifiers, which contribute directly to the referential content of a sentence, discourse particles qualify the use of a sentence in an actual utterance. They fulfill performative, metalinguistic, or metadiscursive functions, marking things like a speaker's attitude to the words she is using or to the content she intends to convey.

The example in (8) shows how far *literally* has come as a discourse marker. Here the word does not qualify any particular choice of words, but rather attaches to a whole utterance, really a mini-narrative, and emphasizes the speaker's commitment to the truth of what she says.

(8) I have friends and family who order from them because you can , you can **literally** , I 've heard stories where you can **literally** buy something from them one year , wear it for a year and a half , and even after , like eighteen months of , you know , reasonably satisfactory use , they will accept it in any condition and they will gladly , no questions asked , take it back if for some bizarre reason you decide you do n't want it

anymore . Uh , they 'll , they 'll actually do things like this . I mean they 're really , they , they go- , bend over backwards servicewise for you. [SWB]

What has happened to *literally* here is by no means unusual. A word that originally functioned as an identifier has become an intensifier (a pattern familiar from Bolinger 1972), shifting from a basically metalinguistic (textual) function to a metadiscursive, expressive function (the pattern of subjectification: cf. Traugott 1989; Langacker 1990). The tendency toward intensive, and particularly discourse intensive uses is characteristic of words denoting 'truth', 'identity,' and 'reality'. This results from an equivocation inherent in the very act of saying that one means what one says, that one's words are meant truly and that they describe the world as it really is. In an ideal Gricean world—or even one where just the maxim of quality is in effect—one would never need to say such things. So when speakers use sentence adverbs like *literally, really, truly, in fact,* and *honest to God!* to emphasize their true and literal use of language, they inevitably convey more than they literally say: they also signal how remarkable they consider what they are saying to be, and how much they expect that they might not be believed.

The examples in (9-10) show how *truly* may be used to much the same emphatic effect as *literally* is in (4-8). The examples in (9) were found in written American English (BR); those in (10) are taken from conversational American English (SWB).

(9) a. Most mail these days consists of nothing that could **truly** be called a letter.
b. Please do put more pictures and articles in about Liberace , as he is **truly** one of our greatest entertainers and a really wonderful person.
c. The church **truly** is not a rest home for saints , but a hospital for sinners.
d. The Bible is as obviously and **truly** food for the spirit as bread is food for the body.

(10) a. really , I mean , really and **truly** we just don't have a quarterback.
b. but , I , uh , I 'm **truly** enough , you know , I 'm **truly** an intellectual snob.
c. But for the most part I **truly** believe that the parents would be better if they were with the children.

Several of the written uses in (9) are palpably figurative. If it is "truly" the case that the church is a hospital, or that the Bible is a kind of food, then it can only be in some special, spiritual sense of the word *truly*. The basic function of *truly* in these examples

is not to emphasize the referential function of language, but rather to highlight the speaker's commitment to the ideas she is expressing. This is particularly clear in the spoken examples from the Switchboard corpus. Here the function of *truly* is not so much metalinguistic as metadiscursive: it is a way of emphasizing the speaker's basic illocutionary claim that she does in fact mean what she says. Similar stories can be told for other common intensifiers like *real* and *very* (cf. Austin 1961; Brugman 1984).

As intensifiers go, *literally* is hardly unusual. But if this development is so natural (and indeed there is little more natural in language than the growth of a new intensifier) why has it caused so much concern among careful speakers and writers of English? The worry seems to be that *literally* will become, as William Safire puts it, "a Humpty Dumpty word, meaning whatever the speaker chooses it to mean" (1980: 154). The word *literal* is in some sense (in a deep sense) a synonym for words like *straightforward, plain-spoken, direct*, and *honest*. If words like these are used in ways contrary to their basic sense, what can one hope for more modest words? As Fowler (1926) ominously intoned, "Such false coin makes honest traffic in words impossible."

As it happens, honest traffic in words has not entirely stopped, and the reason is that the modern use of *literally* is much more regular (and much less remarkable) than it might appear. *Literally* has shifted from a metalinguistic function—denoting a relation between a speaker/writer and the words she uses—to an essentially expressive function—denoting a relation between an author and what she intends to express by a text. Its function, in other words, has gone from that of an identifier to that of an intensifier (Bolinger 1972). This is the common metyonymy of the Saussurean sign, which connects linguistic forms (or signifiers generally) to conceptual contents (signifieds), and which allows one to exchange linguistic forms for meanings, and meanings for forms.

3.2. The communicative ground of literal meaning

Words like *literal* and *literally* (and like *true* and *truly*) are special because their meanings involve a notion of meaning itself. As such, their description depends on a commonsense model of language and meaning—what I will refer to as the *communicative event frame*. This basic frame governs communicative uses of language (as opposed, for example, to pure self expression or self address) and non-linguistic forms of communication. Its major activities include reading, writing, speaking, signing, translating and interpreting. Communicative acts are joint acts (Clark 1996): they require two or more people (or other conceptualizers) to work

together to coordinate their joint attention. The primary participants in a communicative event are interlocutors—people who express their own and interpret each other's thoughts. A communicative act occurs when one interlocutor (S) produces a sign or a complex text (T) with the intention that the other interlocutor (H) will interpret T as having a particular meaning (M) and that H will recognize M as a result of recognizing S's intention to communicate it. One might legitimately question whether any such event ever really takes place—that is, whether S and H can share precisely the same M; the claim here, however, is only that the schema for such a successful event is part of our general frame for communication, and that this schema, or something very like it, is shared by S's and H's everywhere.

As envisioned here, the communicative event frame governs essentially all sorts of communicative behavior. As such, and to the extent that I have described it correctly, it provides the conceptual background for defining all sorts of lexical constructions having to do with communication and verbal behavior. Thus, for example, among verbs we may distinguish those which profile a relation between S and T (*say, utter, pronounce, transcribe...*); those which profile a relation between S and M (*mean, predict, swear, suggest...*); those which profile a relation between H and T (*hear, read, parse, interpret...*); those which profile a relation between H and M (*understand, admit, accept, deny...*); and those which profile a relation between S and H (*address, apologize, ask, answer, respond...*).

The communicative event frame provides the background not just for the meanings of lexical constructions like *speak, read* and *write,* but also for the actual performance of communicative acts themselves. Indeed, its primary importance is not that it provides a way to talk about meaning and communication, but that it provides the framework for talking in the first place.

Morphologically, the most frequent use of the word *literal* in Present Day English is as the lexical root of the adverb *literally*. The British National Corpus (BNC) has 509 matches for the word *literal,* and 1,920 for *literally*. The most frequent head nouns combining with *literal* in the BNC are: *sense* (69), *meaning* (72), *translation* (33), *interpretation* (19), *rule* (13), and *truth* (15). These collocates clearly reflect the word's roots in the Communicative Event Frame. The adverbial *literally,* on the other hand, with 1,920 BNC matches, is much less consistently (or at least less explicitly) collocated with words denoting elements of communication. Some of its most frequent collocates are: *hundreds* (40), *thousands* (39), *means* (34), *true* (18), and *nothing* (10). As far as I can tell, the difference here reflects the fact that the word *literally* is most

often used performatively rather than descriptively—not to describe an act of communication, but rather to modify the actual performance of a communicative act.

In purely descriptive uses, the word *literally* highlights a relation between a text of some sort (a word or a phrase or a whole story) and an interpretation. In performative uses, it can be used to highlight either a speaker's commitment to her choice of words, or a speaker's commitment to the truth of what she says (i.e. the relation between S and T, or the relation between S and M). Usually, of course, speakers are most committed to their choice of words when they are most committed to the meanings they express, and it is this link which leads from metalinguistic to discourse emphatic uses.

Literally is one of many sentence adverbs which support both descriptive and performative uses. The adverbial discourse particles in (11) all serve similarly performative functions, marking various relations among the participants — S, H, T and M — in a communicative event. These include things like: (a) a speaker's emotional attitude to what she says; (b) a speaker's intentions to her audience in saying it; (c) a speaker's warrant for saying what she says; and (d), hedges like *literally* which mark a speaker's attitude to the way she says what she says—that is, to the relation between T and M (cf. Lakoff 1972; Kay 1983).

(11) a. *incredibly, hopefully, happily, luckily, fortunately, sadly, surprisingly*
b. *frankly, confidentially, honestly, sincerely, with all due respect*
c. *apparently, evidently, from what I can tell, (as) they say, (so) I hear, in my experience, the way it seems to me, plainly, clearly, obviously*
d. *sorta, so to speak, as it were, loosely, technically, you might say, you could call it, really, seriously, strictly, truly*

Powell (1992) argues that both colloquial and literary uses of words like *literal* are characterized by a type of attitude to one's own words, what she calls "a literal stance." She proposes that a basic function of *literally* is to mark the aptness of a given linguistic expression for some communicative purpose. Aptness is a relation between a linguistic construction and a context, that is, an occasion of use: the more ways a given construction can be felicitously construed in a given context, the more apt it will be; and the more ways a construction can be readily misconstrued in a context, the less apt it will be. To say something "literally" is thus (i) to use words that truly describe the world, (ii) to view one's choice of words as strictly appropriate, and (iii) to feel strongly commited to one's choice of words.

In its descriptive uses, *literally* modifies the semantic content of a word or phrase; in its performative uses, it modifies the actual utterance of a word or phrase in a

particular communicative context. If one is looking for examples of words like *literal* and *literally* used descriptively, a good place to start is with linguists and lexicographers, since it is the ordinary business of such people to describe the meanings of words. The definition in (12) is taken from a pedagogical, on-line glossary of linguistic terms which uses the word *literal* descriptively to denote a meaning relation of particular interest to translators and lexicographers:

(12) Definition: The literal meaning is used to give the glosses of the individual components of a multi-morpheme expression, such as a compound or an idiom, where the meaning of the whole is different from the sum of its parts. (Loos et al. 1999)

It is worth noting that 'literal meaning' here depends on a Building Block metaphor of compositional semantics (cf. Langacker 1987), according to which the literal meaning of a complex expression is a (presumably unique) composite meaning predicted solely on the basis of its component parts.

The examples in (13) provide a wider sample of *literally*'s descriptive uses. In such uses *literally* functions syntactically as a VP-adverb which modifies verbs of signification or interpretation (e.g. *mean, translate, take, interpret, understand,* etc.) and profiles the relation between a word or phrase and an interpretation (i.e. the relation between T and M in a communicative event). As Powell notes, such uses are particularly common in folk definitions (13a), and word for word translations (13b), but they also occur more generally wherever speakers make overt reference to the meanings of words (13c, d).

(13) a. The word “inhibit” **literally** means to stop, prevent, prohibit, restrain. [cited in Powell, 1992]
b. Tommy , of course , had never heard of a kotowaza , or Japanese proverb , which says , `` Tanin yori miuchi " , and is **literally** translated as `` Relatives are better than strangers.” [BR]
c. The Presto Ma non assai of the first trio of the scherzo is taken **literally** and may shock you, as the real Allegro con Spirito of the finale is likely to bring you to your feet . [BR]
d. This was a china warehouse indeed, truly and **literally** to be called so. [**1719** DE FOE *Crusoe* II. xiv. (1840) 286, OED]

In performative uses there is typically no overt reference to an interpretive scene or a communicative event. The word *literally* adds no denotations of its own, but guides the interpretation of the text it occurs with, highlighting aspects of word choice which

make that text particularly apt for expressing one's particular thought. Aptness may be of several sorts. For example, in (14) *literally* highlights the appropriateness of a target expression's etymological meaning.

(14) a. The apostolic community was **literally** an elite: chosen by Christ himself . (BR)
b. I would guess that our genetically near cousins, the chimpanzees, don't do ultimatums, though they apparently get up to other kinds of machiavellian tricks. In human societies, ultimata are **literally** the ultimate stage in the step-by-step process of going to war. [3/28/03 posting on Critical Discourse List, *CRITICS-L@NIC.SURFNET.NL*]

In the examples in (15) *literally* is used in a way that is pointedly self-conscious, as a way of calling attention to some hidden layer of significance in a well-turned phrase. Prototypically, this use involves an actual pun, as in (15a), where the phrase *bring home the bacon* is used in both its idiomatic sense (e.g. 'to provide for one's family') and its literal, compositional sense ('to transport pig meat to one's domicile'). Most often, however, the meaning which *literally* highlights in this use is not the first or the most basic interpretation one might expect.

(15) a. Family survival on our own Western frontier, for example, could quite **literally** depend on a man 's strength and ability to bring home the bacon. [BR]
b. At first [Elizabeth, a fictional rape victim] suffers in silence (**literally**, since in her grief and humiliation she gives up singing)... [*New York Times*]
c. This he did by using utterly literal means to carry the forward push of the collage (and of Cubism in general) **literally** into the literal space in front of the picture plane . [BR]
d. **Literally** Alive products essentially bring literature to life by mining a precious resource — a child's imagination. Books **literally** spring to life as the story unfolds with the support of five various art forms: music, art, dance, puppetry and storytelling. [http://literallyalive.com/about/]

The only clear constant in these examples is the presence of a pregnant second sense in addition to *whatever* is naturally construed as the primary sense. The overall pattern has an idiomatic figurative expression (typically, one with a metaphoric or hyperbolic interpretation) used in a context where both literal and figurative interpretations are somehow appropriate. But, as I have suggested before (Israel 2002), there are many ways a given expression may count as "literally" appropriate. In (15b) the phrase

suffers in silence is especially appropriate because Elizabeth both does not tell anyone of her ordeal, and she gives up singing, though there is no hint that she actually ("literally") goes mute or lives in a sound proof world. In (15d) books are described as "literally" springing to life because of the multi-media resources which animate them, though again, there is no suggestion here that these books are literally endowed with life, at least not any more than any cartoon character could be.

Performative uses of *literally* divide in two large classes. On the one hand, there are uses as in (14-15), where *literally* is a meta-textual operator, indicating an author or speaker's attitude toward the language she uses in a communicative act (i.e. as a relation between S and T). On the other hand, as in (4-8), it can also be used meta-discursively, as a particle marking S's attitude toward the meaning she expresses in a communicative act (i.e. as a relation between S and M rather than S and T). This extension is based on a natural equivocation between T and M in any communicative event. One uses one's words in order to say something, and although actually saying something requires more than a mere recitation of words, we tend to think of this extra something, the meaning itself, in terms of the words we use to express it.

In metadiscursive uses, *literally* signals one's commitment not just to the truth of what one says, but also to the justice of putting what one says in the strongest possible terms. This is why some of *literally*'s most frequent collocates are terms denoting prototypically large quantities: *millions, billions, nothing, everything*, or, as in (16a), *terabytes*.

(16) a. Around the world, biology laboratories are now pumping out **literally** terabytes (trillions of bytes) of information every month, swamping themselves in a sea of indigestible data. [*The Economist Technology Quarterly,* June 21-27, 2003, p. 14)]

b. You know , that 's , that 's no kind of deterrent because we , we 've got **literally** hundreds of people on death row , and , and many of them who have been there for **literally** for ten or fifteen years. [SWB]

And this is also why *literally* is used with words like *slovenly* and *filled* in (17a-b), or with other implicitly superlative adjectives (e.g. *excellent, ancient, freezing, famished, exhausted*), but it does not (or not normally) qualify the use of ordinary, unmarked and unremarkable high frequency adectives (*good, old, cold, hungry, tired).* The example in (18) provides a rare exception to this constraint, but it is precisely the rareness of such examples that shows how far *literally* still is from a modifiying intensifier like *very*.

(17) a. [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. [*Lingua Franca*]

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

(18) A: How ya doin?
B: Man, I am **literally, literally** tired. [overheard, emphasis in original]

There are still real constraints on the use of *literally*. *Literally* is commonly used to highlight an interpretation, either of a linguistic form or of an actual speech act, or even, as in (8), a short narrative, but some sorts of interpretation are easier to highlight this way than others. In general, more highly grammaticized constructions—those which have higher frequencies and more abstract (or just more variable) semantic contents—are less amenable to modification by *literally*. One usually will not bother to insist that one's use of a determiner or a preposition or of a verb like *get* or *take* or *make* (or of an affix or a clitic) is "literal" and not "figurative." It is not that such words lack figurative extensions. They often have many—scores even—but these mostly occur in rote-learned expressions which are so familiar as to be invisible. One can only *get* a joke, or *take* a walk, or *make* an effort in some figurative sense of the words *get, take* and *make*, but one is still unlikely to notice, much less want to comment on, the figurativity or literality of such expressions.

If literal meaning is opposed to figurative meaning in general, then we might expect literally to be used as an all-purpose hedge to cancel or suspend all sorts of rhetorical figures. The word can be used to cancel several different types of figurative interpretation: among others, hyperbole (*literally millions*), meiosis (*literally just a drop*), metaphor (*literally floating on air*), and metonymy (*the coroner literally gave us a hand*). And just by emphasizing the aptness of one's words, the use of literally effectively expresses a lack of irony, insincerity, jocularity, or general looseness in speech or writing.

There are, however, many figures which cannot be cancelled by the performative use of *literally*. Most obviously, all figures of form—alliteration, assonance, rhyme, polysyndeton, hendiadys, haplology, among others,—are always immune. Formal figures usually do not need any extra devices to stand out, and while they can be either cultivated or carefully shunned, they can never be cancelled. The performative function of *literally* also prevents it from use with deliberate sorts of indirection.

Hinting and innuendo, for example, depend on a tacit understanding: one cannot openly call attention to such an act without thereby dissolving it.

Really what *literally* does is the opposite of hinting: it highlights the form of what is said and calls attention to the act of saying it. For this reason, as Powell (1992) points out, the emphatic use of *literally* cannot, and never does occur with truly novel metaphorical expressions: this is because (i) it would be absurd to self-consciously use a novel metaphor and simultaneously to deny its use, and (ii) an emphatic particle can only emphasize meanings which are conventional features of the expressions it modifies—otherwise it would not be a "mere" intensifier.

People these days do not often think of *literally* as a word whose ordinary use reflects the systematic functioning of grammatical principles. The conventional wisdom is rather the opposite: that modern usage is a symptom of barbarism and linguistic decay. But the conventional wisdom has, in this respect, seriously understimated the wisdom of common sense. The various uses of *literally*—as a descriptive adverb, a metalinguistic operator, and an emphatic discourse particle—are connected by a natural chain of associations in the communicative event frame. These are the very associations which link the language we use to the thoughts we express and to the world we presume to describe. And while it may well be that this double conformity of language to thought and reality is something of an illusion, it is the sort of commonsense illusion which seems to make communication possible.

In this sense, the everyday uses of *literally* may in fact tell us more about the nature of linguistic meaning than any expert theory of 'literal meaning' ever could; however, one must be careful at this point. While some notion of 'literal meaning' may be common sense these days, that notion is in fact the product of a particular literary tradition in a particular cultural context with its own particular philosophical baggage.

4. A natural history of 'literal meaning'

One might easily imagine that 'literal meaning' has been around forever. As one 20th century handbook puts it, "since earliest times rhetoricians have distinguished between the use of words in their literal sense and words in their figurative sense" (Hughes and Duhamel 1962: 437). And this does have the ring of truth. After all, the allegorical interpretation of stories is a common practice in many literary traditions, and rhetoricians as far back as Aristotle and the Stoics have been cataloguing tropes and figures. But the earliest uses of a word denoting 'letters' to refer to a type of meaning seem to have occurred somewhere in Europe or the Levant around the

beginning of the common era. Already in late classical Latin forms of the word *littera* were used in reference to graphic symbols (*a, b, c...*), written documents, literacy, litterature and at least occasionally to a particular kind of meaning (OLD). What that meaning is and how it relates to other sorts of meaning has changed considerably over the years. In order to understand why 'literal meaning' now seems like such a necessary and natural concept, it may be useful to consider the contingencies of its history.

One of the earliest writers to discuss a notion of 'literal meaning' was Augustine, who wrote his *De Genesi ad Litteram* in 390 (ce) as an attack on the Manicheans. Augustine's ostensible purpose was to explain what the author of Genesis intended to say about the creation, but in doing so he was perfectly willing to look beyond the most obvious interpretations. As Taylor (1983) notes in his introduction, Augustine holds that:

> "the days of creation .... are not periods of time but rather categories in which creatures are arranged by the author for didactic reasons to describe all the works of creation, which in reality were created simultaneously. Light is not the visible light of this world but the illumination of intellectual creatures (the angels). Morning refers to the angels' knowledge of creatures which they enjoy in the vision of God; evening refers to the angels' knowledge of creatures as they exist in their own created natures."

Obviously, this is not the sort of thing that most people nowadays would recognize as literal interpretation. Nor in fact is it clear precisely where Augustine thought literal meaning stopped and other kinds of meaning began. And while he held that Scripture was (necessarily) literally true, his goal was not so much to fix a single interpretation, as to urge readers on to a deeper engagement with the text itself.

This sort of deep engagement with the text of Scripture dominated thinking about language and meaning for roughly the next millenium. By the time of the scholastics the literal meaning of a text was regularly distinguished from three kinds of "spiritual" meanings: the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogic. This tradition of "four-fold interpretation" went back at least to the 6th century, and by the High Middle Ages it had been more or less codified in the *Summa Theologicae of* Thomas Aquinas. As he explains it:

> That first meaning whereby the words signify things belongs to the literal sense... That meaning, however, whereby the things signified by the words in their turn also signify other things is called the spiritual sense; it is

based on and presupposes the literal sense (super litteralem fundatur et eum supponit). (Aquinas 1964: 38-9)

Note that here, unlike in more modern conceptions of the literal-figurative divide, the different levels of meaning are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other. Allegorical, moral and anagogical meanings are built on top of the literal meaning (*super litteralem fundatur)*: far from cancelling the literal meaning of a text, they represent its deeper significances. A true scholastic understanding of any biblical passage (and, in practice, of all sorts of other texts) depends on recognizing all four levels of meaning at once.

Interestingly, in this scheme of things the literal meaning of a text—what it says about what happened—can be, and often is, metaphorically expressed. For Aquinas, "words can signify something properly and something figuratively," and thus "when Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making" (1964: 41).

The tradition of four-fold interpretation provides the necessary background for understanding the import of *literally* in Early Modern examples like those in (19).

(19) a. Allthough it were **literalye** fulfillyd in the childern of Israell..yet was yt allso ment & verified in Christ hym sellfe. (**1533** FRITH *Answ. More's Let.* C3b,OED)
b. They interprete **literally**, which the doctors did write figuratively.(**1579** FULKE *Heskin's Parl.* 105, OED)

Already, by the late 16th century, the term was used in at least two quite distinct ways. The example in (19a) shows *literalye* in true scholastic form: the 'literal fulfillment' referred to here is the fact (or claim) that what the text depicts is in fact what came to pass—true, that is, in so far as the facts. The example in (19b), on the other hand, reflects the status of 'literal meaning' as being only the first, and the most superficial sort of meaning which a text may have.

It is in the 17th century that the word *literally* and the notion of 'literal meaning' really take hold in English speech and writing. While the words *literature* and *literal* are both recorded in English as far back as the late 14th century (and were current in French and Latin well before that), it is not until the 16th century that the literal root, *litera-,* denoting 'letter' and related notions, seems to really take hold in the English lexicon. Starting in the early 1600's the OED shows a string of new forms appearing almost at once: *literated* in 1611, *literati* in 1621, *literalness* in 1630, *literalist* in 1640, *literatim* in 1643, *literalism* in 1644, *literality* in 1646, and *literatist* in 1660. Not all of

these have fared equally well in posterity. The sudden currency of so many coinages based on a low-frequency Latin root may be due, in part, to the period's penchant for elaborate latinate neologism (so-called "Inkhorn" vocabulary), but it also suggests a certain reflexive awareness of the role of letters and literacy in the life of the times.

By the end of the 17th century, advances in printing had made written texts more widely available, and the arts of reading and writing were slowly spreading to a wider class of people. In the years between William Caxton's introduction of the printing press to England, in 1476, and the publication by King James of an authorized version of the Bible, in 1611, speakers of English had grown more literate, and more self-conscious about their own literacy than they had ever been before. The period saw the publication of the first monolingual English dictionary in 1604—Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetically* — and in 1653 the appearance of the first English grammar, John Wallis' prescriptively latinate *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*. (The first English grammars actually written in English did not come until a century later, with independent efforts by Robert Lowth and Joseph Priestley in 1752). By the end of the century, John Locke, Robert Boyle and other members of the Royal Society were publishing the results of empirical studies in English, and Daniel Defoe had begun an unsuccessful effort to establish an English Academy on the lines of those recently established in France, Italy, and Spain.

In questions of language a dominant concern of the age was one of correctness. There were, then as now, diverse notions of what language is, where it comes from, and how it works, but there was a general consensus that if English were to be viable either as a modern literary language or as a language of science, it would require both improvement and regulation. Thus it was that Locke devoted consecutive chapters of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* to "the Imperfection of Words", "the Abuse of Words," and "Remedies of the foregoing Imperfections and Abuses" (III.ix-xi). And it was in much the same spirit that in 1712 Jonathan Swift called for "Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Language".

This is the context in which our modern folk and expert concepts of literal meaning were forged and welded to the word *literal*. By the end of the 17th century, the scholastic model of four-fold interpretation was, if not forgotten, largely irrelevant to the more secular concerns of the Royal Society. And by this time, most of the modern features of 'literal meaning' were in place, and many of its modern expressions were already in use. For better or worse, the linguistic prejudices of men like Wallis, Locke and Swift remain the common prejudices of educated English speakers, and especially writers, throughout the world. First among these is the idea of linguistic

objectivisim—the belief that language, and individual languages, exist independently of their users. Closely allied to objectivism is a belief in linguistic essentialism—the idea that words have unique, inalienable (i.e. literal) meanings. In large part it was these beliefs, along with a general optimism for human improvement, that allowed people like Locke and Swift to believe that languages could be corrected and improved by explicit deliberation.

More generally, the conception of 'literal meaning' that emerges in the beginning of the modern period reflects a collection of basic folk beliefs about language. It depends crucially on both the conduit metaphor for communication and the building block metaphor for compositionality: it is the meaning which inheres in the words themselves, the semantic content out of which complex compositional meanings are built. Literal meaning provides the direct link between language and reality which makes communication possible. It is the simplest form of meaning—simplistic even, unmediated and artless: a *literalist* is someone who sees only the surface meanings of words, and never their deeper significances or playful ironies. On the other hand, 'literal meaning' is also the deepest meaning, since it provides the foundation for all further interpretations, and so when it is mentioned, it is often in reverent tones, emphasizing the connection between a word or phrase and its truest meaning.

The examples in (20), from Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1776), are fairly typical in this respect. The words *literal* and *literally* are used descriptively here, but the description itself is inherently rhetorical.

(20) a. In the country, even in large towns, people have a knowledge of each other, and distress never rises to that extreme height it sometimes does in a metropolis. There is no such thing in the country as persons, **in the literal sense** of the word, starved to death, or dying with cold from the want of a lodging. Yet such cases, and others equally as miserable, happen in London. (Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man,* 1792)

b. What is called a republic is not any particular form of government. It is wholly characteristical of the purport, matter or object for which government ought to be instituted, and on which it is to be employed, *Res Publica*, the public affairs, or the public good; or, **literally** translated, the public thing. It is a word of a good original, referring to what ought to be the character and business of government; and in this sense it is naturally opposed to the word monarchy, which has a base original signification. It means arbitrary power in an individual person; in the exercise of which, himself, and not the res-publica, is the object. (Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man,* 1792)

Paine mentions the literal sense of the word *starved* in (20a), and the literal translation of the Latin *res publica,* in (20b). In both cases, the description serves a basically persuasive purpose, in (20a) emphasizing the extremities of distress among miserable Londoners, and in (20b) highlighting in the details of an etymology what Paine took to be the essence of a "republic". These examples, and others like them, show that the expressive and discursive functions so prominent in contemporary uses of the word *literally* have in fact always been implicit in its more classical uses. Unless one is a linguist or a lexicographer, the act of referring to a literal meaning is never and never has been rhetorically innocent.

5. A Return to Common Sense

While some notion of literal meaning would appear to be almost a matter of logical necessity, the concept is itself figuratively and imaginatively constituted. The word *literal* goes back to the classical Latin stem *littera* 'letter' (the Roman equivalent of Greek *gramma*). The origins of the word are plainly figurative, running through a chain of metaphors and metonymies that link letters to meanings, meanings to ideas, and ideas to essences. These links are themselves grounded in our everyday, embodied experiences of communication in general, and of reading and writing in particular. Although graphic symbols (letters) and conceptual contents (meanings) are very different sorts of things, they come together in our consciousness whenever we read, interpret or imagine an alphabetic text. That they do so encourages us to think of meanings as things contained in the words themselves, and by extension, in the letters which represent those words. This, in any event, appears to be the natural consequence of establishing the arbitrary conventions of alphabetic writing as a tool of communication and cultural transmission: 'literal meaning' and the alphabet itself begin to look like natural facts of life.

So why do we use the word *literal* to talk about meaning, and what are we talking about when we do?

We may choose to reject any or all of the folk models which surround 'literal meaning', but we cannot ignore the way these models work in people's everyday reasoning. The examples in (21), drawn from the lexis/nexis database, underscore just how important the nature of 'literal meaning' can be in people's lives.

21. a. If you believe in a **literal,** inspired Bible, then you believe that God hates sin and loves sinners. (Roanoke Times & World News, June 26, 2002, p. A13)
    b. The Supreme Court's new ruling requires a "real world" analysis of whether **literally** applying statutes and regulations would generate ridiculous results. (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, Nov. 26, 2003, p. 1)

While not all theories of meaning explicitly refer to a level of *literal meaning*, it is at least arguable that they all must ultimately have recourse to some equivalent notion—that there exists a type of semantic object which is the input to any interpretive process. And since there are different sorts of interpretive processes (indirection, implicature, allegory, etc.), there must surely be, as Ariel suggests, different kinds of literal meanings to go with them. But signification must start somewhere, and 'literal meaning' is where common sense says it starts: it is the original meaning, the one from which all further interpretations are derived, the one based directly on the form itself, or, as Lakoff might say, the one which is directly embodied.

Common sense demands that everything (including, as is now believed, the universe itself) must start somewhere. Literal meaning, in this sense, is the Ur-Sinn: the prime mover of signification. And since common sense demands it, it is unlikely to go away. If we as a community of scholars are to live with this concept, or even if, as Marianne Moore suggests, as poets we are to be "literalists of the imagination," then we must be honest about what literal meaning is, and what it is not. By presenting 'meaning' as a thing—as a kind of countable, relational object—the word *literal* and the concept it denotes focus attention on a "meaning" as the product of a communicative event. But by reifying 'meaning', by making it a count noun rather than a verb, the notion of 'literal meaning' disguises the intersubjective and inherently open-ended nature of signification. Signification is a process, not a thing, and the process of communication depends as much, or much more, on the communicants' experience of a shared meaning as it does on the particular linguistic constructions they use to coordinate that experience.

And even if the whole idea were nothing but an illusion practiced on us by centuries of misguided philosophers misled by a peculiar Standard Average European, it provides a durable vision of the metaphysical relation between language, thought, and reality. 'Literal meaning' as such, *das Ding an sich,* might not really exist. Still, our collective belief in nonexistent things of this sort seems to be what makes communication possible in the first place. It's a thought, anyway.

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