What is the Literal Meaning of a Sentence?*

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Abstract

In this paper, Katz and Searle's controversy over literal meaning will be discussed in the light of relevance theory. Although their notions are drastically different, these notions have their places in utterance interpretation processes and there is no point in deciding whose notion is right. Katz's notion can be characterised as a relevance notion logical form which is an output of the hearer's knowledge of grammar, while Searle's, propositional form, which is a contextually enriched logical form. I will introduce a relevance notion literal interpretation which can not only be contrasted with figurative use, but also with non-figurative loose use (e.g. *France is hexagonal*).

Key words: Literal Meaning, Relevance Theory, Utterance Interpretation.

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1. Introduction

Literalness is often talked about in much of the literature. For example, Searle (1968) identifies *literal* sentence meaning with the linguistic propositional meaning of a sentence, as opposed to intended speaker meaning which is iden-

tified with what the speaker says in uttering this sentence.[1] Searle (1975) states that what the speaker *literally* says is sentence meaning while what the speaker actually communicates is speaker's utterance meaning. Further, Grice (1975) makes a distinction between an utterance's *literal* meaning and the meaning which is actually communicated by the speaker.[2]

So it seems that literal meaning cuts across sentence and utterance meaning, as here we have *literal* sentence meaning as in Searle (1968) and *literal* utterance meaning as in Grice (1975). Both of these literal meanings are important in pragmatics as they fall in the explicit content of communication which is contrasted with the implicit content. Undoubtedly people perceive the explicit/implicit distinction: e.g. the point in an indirect answer to a question lies with the implicit content rather than the explicit content of the utterance. Then, an attempt to explicate the term literal meaning is in fact an attempt to explicate the explicit content of an utterance, the level which is required for a serious pragmatic theory.

In this paper, we will investigate what the literal meaning of a sentence is, as well as whether the speaker is saying the sentence literally or not. The investigation is necessary as the existing understandings of literal meaning are various. We will mainly focus on Katz and Searle's controversy over the literal meaning of a sentence as their notions of literal meaning have their functions in utterance interpretation processes explicated in the light of relevance theory, which is a pragmatic theory of utterance interpretation.

2. Katz and Searle's controversy over the literal meaning of a sentence

Katz (1977) put forward the notion of *the meaning in azero or null context*, and argued that this is the literal meaning of a sentence. According to Katz (1977), the literal meaning of a sentence is determined by the meanings of its component words and its structure.

Searle (1978), however, cast doubt on the very notion of meaning in the zero context, i.e. the grammatically determined literal meaning of a sentence. Searle (1978: 208) criticizes the received opinion that the literal meaning of a sen-

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1. The propositional meaning of a sentence is a meaning which designates what a sentence says about the world. The same sentence can express different propositional meanings on different occasions. For example, *he is hungry* can on one occasion describes the state of affairs that John Smith is hungry at the time of uttering the sentence, and on another, that the male lion in the cage is hungry at the time of uttering the sentence. On the contrary, different sentences can express one and the same propositional meaning. For example, the sentence *It's Wednesday today* uttered on a Wednesday expresses the same propositional meaning as *It will be Wednesday tomorrow* uttered on a Tuesday.

2. It is interesting to note that the distinction between an utterance's literal meaning and the speaker's intended meaning is the one that most people consider to be the semantics/pragmatics distinction. For example, if someone says *Can you pass me the salt?*, the utterance's literal meaning is that the speaker is inquiring about the hearer's ability to pass the salt. But what the utterance really does is to ask the hearer to pass the salt, of course.

tence is the meaning that it has in the zero context by presenting the following argument.

Even if the speaker of (1) means exactly and literally that the cat is on the mat, its truth-conditions[3] will vary with the contexts of its literal utterance, despite the claim that the literal meaning of (1) is context free.[4]

(1)   *The cat is on the mat.* (Searle 1978: 210)

Searle's argument goes as follows. Suppose that the cat which is on the mat is floating in outer space where there is no up-down orientation and we sometimes see the cat and mat upside-down or obliquely. In this situation, can we still say (1)? Or rather, is (1) true? Intuitively we believe that (1) should be uttered when the cat is above the mat, i.e., where the two objects are within the earth's gravitational field. Now if we take the literal meaning as the context-free meaning of (1), then the assumption that there is an up-and-down orientation must be specified in the sentence-meaning of (1). However, this is most unlikely because the appearance of the world i.e., the existence of up-down orientation is part of our world knowledge rather than part of the meaning of the word *on*.

Then, the assumption that there is an up-down orientation, must be specified in the context in which (1) is uttered and the truth-value of (1) is tested against this background. Hence, Searle (1978: 214) argues that even for a large

3. The truth-conditions of a sentence are the conditions which the world must meet for the sentence to be true. Knowing the meaning of a sentence is knowing how the world has to be for that sentence to be true, i.e., knowing the truth-conditions of a sentence. For example, the hearer will know the truth-conditions of (i) when the logical form encoded is completed into a fully propositional form via reference assignment (who the word *she* refers to in the world), disambiguation (which senses of *mean* is intended), etc.
    (i) *She was mean.*
        The fully propositional form might be something like (ii) on one occasion, or something like (iii) on another.
    (ii) *Mary Smith was mean (as not being generous) at t.*
    (iii) *Mary Brown was mean (as being discreditable in her behaviour) at t.*
        (t = some identifiable time span)
        In order for (ii) and (iii) to be true, the world has to meet the following truth-conditions (iia-b) and (iiia-b) respectively and knowing the meaning of the sentence (i) is knowing (ia-b) on one occasion, and (iia-b) on another.
    (i) a Mary Smith existed at t.
        b Mary Smith was not generous at t. etc.
    (ii) a Mary Brown existed at t.
        b Mary Brown was discreditable in her behaviour. etc.
4. Searle (1978: 219) gives another example to argue against Katz's context-free literal meaning. An arithmetical sentence such as *three plus four equals seven* is often considered as a true statement independent of any context. Even here, certain assumptions seem to be made in order to apply the literal meaning of the sentence, as demonstrated in the following Wittgenstein's example:
    A = 3, B = 4, but A + B = 5 A B

class of unambiguous sentences such as (1), the notion of *literal meaning* has application only relative to a set of background assumptions. Searle (1978: 214) further argues that due to various background assumptions the truth-conditions of the sentence will vary, and a sentence might not have determinate truth-conditions if some background assumptions are absent.

So what Searle is arguing against is the view that the literal meaning of a sentence is entirely determined by the meanings of its parts and their syntactic combination in the sentence. In order to support his argument, Searle (1980) gives further examples (2)a-e:

(2) a. *Bill cut the grass.*
    b. *The barber cut Tom's hair.*
    c. *Sally cut the cake.*
    d. *I just cut my skin.*
    e. *The tailor cut the cloth.*

Suppose that the word *cut* in (2)a-e is used literally, i.e., non-metaphorically, and non-ironically. Although the same word *cut* is used in each sentence, the sort of thing that constitutes cutting the grass is quite different from e.g. the sort of thing that constitutes cutting a cake. The word *cut* in *cutting the grass* usually means *mowing* and in *cutting a cake, slicing.*

So if Bill is told to cut the grass and he slices the grass with a knife, or if Sally is told to cut a cake and she uses a lawn-mower, this is not what the speaker meant by her literal and serious utterance of the sentences (2a) and (2c). Here our background assumptions, or our world knowledge concerning *cutting the grass* and *cutting a cake* partly determine the meanings of the sentences (2a) and (2c). And Katz's idea that context-free sentence meaning alone determines the literal meaning of a sentence, does not hold.

Now some might argue that the word *cut*, like the word *bank* is, in fact, ambiguous and the context-free meaning of e.g. (2a). determines several discrete sets of truth-conditions from which the truth-conditions are contextually or pragmatically chosen. However, as (3) shows, the word *cut* has a common semantic content roughly involving the notion of a physical separation by means of the pressure of some more or less sharp instrument:

(3) *General Electric has just announced the development of a new cutting machine that can cut grass, hair, cakes, skin and cloth.* (Searle 1980: 222)

The word *bank* meaning *financial institution* and *side of a river*, on the other hand, does not have such a common semantic content. So we cannot claim that the word *cut* is several ways ambiguous.

So the differences in the meaning of the word *cut* in (2a-e) have to be attributed to our background assumptions i.e., contextual information, and the truth-conditions of each sentence are determined not only by the combination of words and syntax of the sentence, but by contextual assumptions. That

is, the determination of the literal meaning of a sentence necessarily involves contextual information.

Let us consider the following example:

(4) A: *I'm bigger than you.*   (5) A: bigger (A,B)
    B: *I'm bigger than you.*   B: bigger (B,A)

(Olson & Hildyard 1983: 49)

Olson & Hildyard (1983: 49) in their paper *Writing and Literal Meaning* argue that (4A-B) uttered by two children are not synonymous in terms of their literal meanings as represented in (5A-B) where the references A and B are assigned to *I* and *you*. Now, Katz's notion of context-free literal meaning would have to consider (4A-B) as being synonymous because without contextual information (5A-B) cannot be recovered, i.e., the assignment of reference cannot be done out of the context.

Naturally, in the ordinary sense of literal meaning we consider (4A-B) to mean different things literally. And hence, we might want to follow Searle's view of literal meaning since otherwise we have to see the argument between the two boys being of redundant nature.

Does this, however, mean that we want to completely abandon the context-free literal meaning, the notion claimed by Katz? The answer is no. Let us now consider the following:

(6) A: *Did your treatment for stammering work?*
    B: *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper.*

(Sperber & Wilson 1986: 178)

The utterance (6B) is relevant as an answer to A's question. That is, (6B) gives rise to an implicature that the treatment seems to have worked. However, (6B) does not have the sentence meaning that the treatment seems to have worked.

Now in Searle's sense of literal meaning, (6B) has to have an application against some contextual background in order for its truth-conditional content to be recovered. It is true that (6B) is processed automatically by the hearer's knowledge of grammar and the hearer might access his background assumptions concerning pickled peppers. However, these background contextual assumptions are not used to determine the truth-conditional content of the utterance i.e., what Searle claims, the literal meaning. This is because the semantic content of (6B) is not communicated to the hearer and for example no referent can be assigned to Peter Piper.

Here we do not want to say that the literal meaning of (6B) is the implicature that the treatment seems to have worked, nor do we want to say that the literal meaning of (6B) is that Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper. This is because, as was mentioned, the utterance is chosen not for its semantic content but for its phonological properties. That is, the speaker does not

communicate its semantic content and in fact she could have produced any other tongue twister in order to communicate the same message.

However, we cannot deny that (6B) has some semantic content although it does not constitute part of the message communicated. Now Searle's notion of literal meaning cannot capture the semantic content of (6B). However, Katz's notion of context-free meaning can explain the semantic content of (6B) because (6B) is a grammatically correct English sentence, and following Fodor (1983), grammar would automatically process the utterance, deriving a context-free grammatically determined meaning.

Now what underlies the different conceptions of Katz and Searle is two different notions of semantic competence. Katz's semantic competence is conceived of as a component of linguistic competence, i.e. grammar, like syntactic competence, and is autonomous from other mental capacities. Searle's semantic competence, on the other hand, seems to be conceived of as knowledge of truth-conditions. Knowing the meaning of a sentence is knowing how the world has to be for that sentence to be true.

These are very different notions of semantics, but a psychologically adequate theory of utterance interpretation will give a place to both of these concepts. I would now like to give a relevance-based account of how Searle and Katz's notions of literal meaning have their places in utterance interpretation processes.

3. Katz and Searle's notions of literal meaning and relevance theory

In relevance theory Katz's notion of grammatically determined context-free meaning and Searle's notion of contextually enriched truth-conditional meaning are manifested as *logical form* and *propositional form* respectively. The latter is a semantically complete logical form and is capable of being true or false, whereas the former is an incomplete logical form which our grammar decodes an utterance into. This incomplete logical form can then be completed into a propositional form on the basis of contextual information.

A logical form, whether truth-evaluable or not, is technically a well formed formula which can undergo logical processing, and therefore play an important role in cognition. Grammar decodes a natural language sentence into an incomplete logical form, and this is comparable to Katz's notion. Here, we use the term *logical form* to mean *incomplete logical form* which is then contextually enriched into a complete logical form.[5] *Complete logical form* is a truth-conditional propositional form and this is comparable to Searle's notion.

5.   This is based on Fodor's modular approach to human cognition. By modular, he means that the mind has a variety of specialized systems individuated by virtue of their computational properties. Fodor calls these special-purpose systems *input systems*, which process visual, auditory, linguistic, and other perceptual information. The output of these input systems is fed into the central systems which integrate the input information with background information stored in memory, performing inferences on it, and coming to con-

For example, grammar decodes (4A-B) into a logical form, something like that the speaker is bigger than the hearer, which does not distinguish (4A) from (4B). The hearer, then, using contextual information, pragmatically enriches the logical form into truth-evaluable propositional form representations such as (5A-B). Thus, at the level of propositional form, (4A) and (4B) cannot be said to be synonymous.

In (6B), on the other hand, the grammar decodes the utterance into an incomplete logical form. And as we mentioned, there is no use of background assumptions here to establish who Peter Piper is. The semantic content of (6B) is not to be pragmatically enriched into a propositional form because it is not an intended meaning communicated to the hearer. However, the utterance (6B), as we mentioned, has semantic content and this can be captured as *logical form* in relevance theory.

Now Searle's and Katz's notions have their places in utterance interpretation processes. That is, our grammar decodes an utterance into a logical form, Katz's notion, which is then enriched into a propositional form, Searle's notion. There is no dispute to be resolved here; both concepts have a role to play in a full theory of utterance interpretation, and whether one or the other, or neither of these concepts is called literal meaning, is a matter of no interest.

The notion of literal meaning is usually employed as a contrast with figurative meaning. So, for example, the meaning of *John is very clever* can be taken to be the literal ascription of cleverness to John, or something quite different if it is taken as ironical. But it is not *sentences*, linguistic objects, which are loose (to be discussed later) or metaphorical, or hyperbolical or ironic, or figurative in any other way. It is the use of these sentences as *utterances*, as communication.

Thus the notion of the literal meaning of *a sentence* does not enter into any distinction with any other variety of a meaning that a sentence can have. If the concept of the literal meaning of *a sentence* makes any sense at all, it is simply as the meaning of a sentence and so it is Katz's notion - linguistic meaning. Searle's notion pertains to *utterance* meaning, not sentence as he is considering sentences in use.

In relevance theory, we do not talk about *the literal meaning of a sentence* but the notion *literal interpretation* has its place. This notion is important, not because it can be contrasted with *figurative use*, but because it can be contrasted with *loose use of language*, which prevails in our use of language. In this theory, *literalness* is not the norm of language use as is often assumed (e.g. Grice's Maxim of Quality), but rather a limited case of language use. Now we are going to introduce a relevance notion of *literal interpretation* which is a necessary notion in utterance interpretation.

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clusions about the world. Now *logical form* is the output of the linguistic input system i.e., grammar, and this is fed into the central systems in which inferences are performed on it, completing it into *propositional form* with background information.

4. Literal interpretation in relevance theory

In relevance theory, *literalness* is defined in terms of the relationship between the thought of the speaker and her utterance. When its propositional form shares identical logical and contextual implications with the propositional form of the speaker's thought, the utterance is considered to be a *literal* interpretation of the speaker's thought.

Here the term *interpretation* is used to mean that the propositional form is not used to represent states of affairs in the world, but it is used to represent other propositional forms. And the relation between the two propositional forms is not one of truth, but one of resemblance.

For example, in the following metaphor (7) and an irony (8), the propositional forms that Mary is an angel, and that Tokyo is a beautiful town are not part of the speaker's thoughts, i.e., the speaker does not believe them to be true.

> (7) (metaphor) *Mary is an angel.*

> (8) (irony) *Tokyo is a beautiful town.*

Here implicatures such as Mary is a very kind person, and as Tokyo is an ugly town, are part of the speaker's thought, but the explicitly expressed propositional forms are not. So we can say that these utterances are not a case of *literal* interpretation of the speaker's thought.

However, as was mentioned, the notion of literal interpretation can be contrasted not only with figurative utterances, but also with what Sperber & Wilson (1986) call *loose talk*. Examples (9)-(10) are cases of *loose talk*.

> (9) *It will take an hour by train.*

> (10) *I live 20 miles west of Tokyo.*

Suppose that the speaker knows that it will take 57 minutes by train and that she lives 19 miles west of Tokyo. But she utters (9)-(10) to give the hearer an idea of distance in order for him to get to the speaker's place in time. Here the exact number is not relevant and it is quite clear to the hearer that the speaker is not claiming that it will take exactly an hour, or that the speaker lives exactly 20 miles west of Tokyo. These utterances are not figurative utterances and traditionally considered to be literal utterances. However, (9) and (10) are, strictly speaking, false statements and intended to be understood as less than literal: i.e., certain logical implications that follow from the propositions expressed will not be part of what is communicated.

The notion of literal interpretation makes sense as here we can talk about a more or less literal interpretation of (9)-(10). The speaker does not believe the truth of the propositional forms given by (9)-(10), i.e., the propositional forms are not part of the speaker's thought. However, their propositional forms share

with the speaker's thought many implications such as the speaker's house is not near and the hearer has to allow a good time to get there in time. So the propositional forms of the utterances do not share all implications, but they do share many implications.

Sperber & Wilson (1986) call all the utterances (7)-(10) cases of *loose talk* which is a less than strictly literal interpretation. Now facing non-figurative loose talk examples such as (9)-(10), we are forced to cast doubt on the traditional view that the speaker is following the norm of literalness, i.e., the maxim of truthfulness. What the speaker is aiming at is in fact not *literal truth*, but *optimal relevance* as advocated by Sperber & Wilson (1986).

Lastly, the notion of literal interpretation has its theoretical role since this is an extreme case and is contrasted with another extreme case in which the propositional form of an utterance and the speaker's thought share no logical and contextual implications. We believe that these extreme cases are very rare in human communication, however, utterance interpretation lies between these two extremes. That is, the propositional form of an utterance shares some but not all of the logical and contextual implications of the speaker's thought.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, Katz's notion of literal meaning was contrasted with Searle's; the former can be characterized as context-free grammatically determined meaning while the latter, as contextually enriched propositional meaning of a sentence. We have said that these two notions are in fact attributed to two different conceptions of semantic competence: Katz's semantic competence is a component of linguistic competence, i.e., a part of grammatical knowledge, and is autonomous from other cognitive capacities; Searle's, on the other hand, is knowledge of truth-conditions.

Katz's and Searle's notions of literal meaning are captured in terms of *logical form* and *propositional form* respectively in relevance theory, and have their places in utterance interpretation processes. That is, the hearer's knowledge of grammar decodes an utterance into *a logical form*, Katz's notion, which is then contextually enriched into *a propositional form*, Searle's notion.

In this paper, we have also argued that the notion of *literal meaning* of a sentence itself does not enter into any distinction with any other variety of a meaning such as metaphor, irony, etc. that a sentence can have. Instead, we have argued that it is a relevance-based notion of *literal interpretation* that can make the distinction. That is, this notion can not only be contrasted with figurative use (e.g. (7) and (8)) but also with non-figurative loose use of language (e.g. (9) and (10)).

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