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Kristin Börjesson

THE SEMANTICS- PRAGMATICS CONTROVERSY

LANGUAGE, CONTEXT & COGNITION

Kristin Börjesson

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Edited by
Anita Steube

Editorial Board

Kai Alter, Ulrike Demske, Ewald Langt,
Rosemarie Lühr, Thomas Pechmann and
Richard Wiese

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Standard Notions of *Literal Meaning* and *Non-literal Meaning* and Their Problems

One of the major issues in investigating the relation of language and meaning is the question of how to characterise and draw the line between what traditionally are called *semantics* and *pragmatics*. In describing what they take to be the characteristics of one or the other system, linguists often make use of the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning*. For example, Lyons (1987) lists a number of propositions used in the differentiation of *semantics* from *pragmatics*, amongst which is the following: ‘...that semantics deals with literal, and pragmatics with non-literal, meaning...’ (ibid., p. 157). Similarly, Cole (1981, p. xi) states that *semantics* ‘...is involved in the determination of conventional (or literal) meaning...’, whereas pragmatics is concerned with ‘...the determination of nonconventional (or nonliteral) meaning...’ and Kadmon (2001, p. 3) writes ‘...I think that roughly, semantics only covers “literal meaning.” Pragmatics has to do with language use, and with “going beyond the literal meaning.”’. More recently, Recanatì (2004, p. 3) summarised (and criticised) the standard view on the division of labour between *semantics* and *pragmatics*, starting as follows. ‘Semantics deals with the literal meaning of words and sentences as determined by the rules of the language, while pragmatics deals with what the users of the language mean by their utterances of words and sentences’.

For such a characterisation of *semantics* and *pragmatics* to be useful, one has to know how the kinds of meaning the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* refer to are characterised. This is problematic in so far as one usually does not find such characterisations in the literature. Generally, it rather seems that the two terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* are treated as denoting basic kinds of meaning that are intuitively clear and as such need no further description.

The pair of terms *literal meaning/non-literal meaning* actually is only one of quite a number of dichotomies used in the characterisation of *semantics* and *pragmatics*. Thus, the two systems are often characterised in terms of the differentiation between *conventional* vs. *non-conventional meaning*, as, e.g. in the quote from Cole (1981) given above. See also again Lyons (1987), who lists the proposition ‘...that semantics has to do with conventional, and pragmatics with the non-conventional, aspects of meaning...’ (ibid., p. 157). Another important pair of terms traditionally used is *context-independent* vs. *context-dependent meaning*. Thus, Lyons (1987, p. 157) states ‘...that semantics deals with context-independent, and pragmatics with context-dependent, meaning’. More specifi-

cally, Katz (1977) introduces the notion of the ‘anonymous letter situation’ to characterise the kind of meaning captured by *semantics* in contrast to *pragmatics*.

[I] draw the theoretical line between semantic interpretation and pragmatic interpretation by taking the semantic component to properly represent only those aspects of the meaning of the sentence that an ideal speaker-hearer of the language would know in an anonymous letter situation, ... [where there is] no clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its context of utterance. (Ibid., p. 14)

In addition, *semantics* is also characterised as dealing with those aspects of meaning that expressions *have*, independent of their *use*. In contrast, *pragmatics* is understood as dealing with those aspects of meaning that are determined by the actual *use* of language. Thus, compare again Lyons (1987) who mentions the idea that ‘...semantics has to do with meaning, and pragmatics with use...’ (ibid., p. 157). Accordingly, one finds uses of the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* which pick up on this view of the difference between *semantic* and *pragmatic* meaning. For instance, Bach (2001a) writes

Words do not *have* nonliteral meanings [...], but they can be *used* in nonliteral ways. [...] In familiar cases, such as metaphor and metonymy, particular expressions are used nonliterally. [...] But there is a different phenomenon which I call “sentence nonliterality,” [...] Here a whole sentence is used nonliterally, without any of its constituent expressions being so used. (Ibid., p. 249, my emphasis)

Thus, whereas *literal meaning* is a feature that expressions are said to *have*, the *non-literal meaning* of an expression results from the particular *use* of that expression.

To summarise the standard understanding of *semantics* and *pragmatics*: whereas the former is characterised as dealing with *literal*, *conventional* and *context-independent meaning*, the latter deals with *non-literal*, *non-conventional* and *context-dependent meaning*. Using the dichotomies in this characterisation suggests that there is a correspondence between *literal*, *conventional* and *context-independent meaning*, on the one hand, and *non-literal*, *non-conventional* and *context-dependent meaning* on the other.¹ In other words, the fact that the two terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* are used amongst others in a dichotomous characterisation of *semantics* and *pragmatics* suggests that these other terms also may be used in characterising *literal meaning* and *non-literal mean-*

¹ From the quotes given above, this is especially apparent in Cole’s, who uses the terms *literal* and *non-literal* as synonymous to *conventional* and *non-conventional*, respectively.

ing as such. In fact, this implicit assumption has led to what might be called the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* which are summarised in what follows.

Literal meaning, on the one hand, is assumed to be conventionalised, that is, it does not take any special interpretation effort to arrive at it. The *literal meaning* of simple expressions is listed in their lexical entries; the *literal meaning* of complex expressions is the result of a principled combination of the *literal meanings* of their parts. Thus, both the *literal meaning* of simple as well as complex expressions is characterised by the fact that it is *context-independent*. *Non-literal meaning*, on the other hand, is assumed to be *non-conventionalised*, thus, it does take a special interpretation effort to arrive at it. Intuitively, it is considered as deviating from some more basic (literal) meaning in a fairly special way. Moreover, in contrast to *literal meaning*, *non-literal meaning* crucially is taken to be *context-dependent*. Overall, the term *non-literal meaning* is used to differentiate from *literal meaning* a kind of meaning that is derived from the latter and, in a sense, has a secondary status. Therefore, it is traditionally assumed that in terms of the enfolding of the interpretation process, the *literal meaning* of an expression is processed first, whereas any potential *non-literal meanings* are processed afterwards and only if the literal interpretation does not fit the given context.

However, as the extensive debate concerning the proper demarcation of *semantics* from *pragmatics* – especially of the last 15 years (cp. Carston 1999, Turner 1999, Dölling 2001, Bianchi 2004, Borg 2004b, Cappelen and Lepore 2005, Horn 2006, Dölling and Zybatow 2007, Carston 2009, Frisson 2009, Recanati 2010, Borg 2012, Carston and Hall 2012, etc.) – shows: not only is it unclear whether the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* actually are useful in the characterisation of distinctive kinds of meaning aspects, what is even more problematic is the fact that they are based on an understanding of *semantics* and *pragmatics* that has come under increasing criticism.

In particular, the question of whether *semantics* should be taken to be differentiated from *pragmatics* by the property of *context-(in)dependence* of meaning has been – and still is – heavily discussed. This has become a pressing question since, in addition to the assumption that it deals with *context-independent* meaning, *semantics* has also traditionally been characterised as determining the proposition expressed by a sentence. However – and this is implicit already in Grice (1975, 1989)’s characterisation of the two levels of meaning *what is said* and *what is meant* – it can be argued that *semantics* alone actually does not determine the proposition expressed by a sentence. Thus, although Grice characterised the level of *what is said* as ‘...closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) [the speaker] has uttered’ (Grice 1989, p. 25), he also recognised that for a sentence to express a determinate proposition at all, indexicals have to get fixed

and ambiguities and references resolved. Grice himself did not explicitly call the processes that lead to such specifications of meaning either *semantic* or *pragmatic*. However, in the discussion of the two levels of meaning that followed, some authors have claimed that *what is said* – or at least a level of meaning very similar to it – actually is the *semantic content* of an utterance (and as such is determined by a *semantics* component that does allow the consideration of contextual information after all), whereas others have argued that it is a level of meaning that has already gone beyond the purely semantically determined content (thus keeping to the traditional view of *semantics* as independent of contextual information).²

Be that as it may (for now), the important point to note is that – considering that traditionally *semantics* is in fact characterised by both the properties of dealing with *context-independent* meaning as well as determining the propositions expressed by sentences and considering that the characterisation of *literal meaning* derives from that of *semantics* – maybe it actually is the latter mentioned property of *semantics* that the term *literal meaning* should be taken to relate to. In other words, maybe it is not the *context-independent* meaning that is *literal*, but rather the proposition expressed by a sentence. If the latter is the case, then *literal meaning* would in fact not be *context-independent*. Actually, Korta and Perry (2008) claim that '[w]hat is said has been widely identified with the literal content of the utterance...' and looking at the quotations below, where the term *literal* is indeed used to refer to a *context-dependent* level of meaning (roughly: Grice's *what is said*), this claim is corroborated. So, for instance, Carston (2007, p. 21) speaks of the '...literal meaning of [a speaker's] utterance'. Similarly, Recanati (1995, p. 2) refers to '...the literal interpretation of an utterance (the proposition literally expressed by that utterance)...' and Sag (1981, p. 274-5) speaks of the '...propositional content of an utterance (i.e., its literal meaning)...'. It should be noted that although these authors reject the standard characterisation of *semantics* and *pragmatics* and they use the term *literal meaning* in a non-standard understanding, they only do the latter implicitly. That is, these authors do not explicitly say anything new concerning the properties that characterise *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning*, respectively. In fact, Bierwisch (1979, 1983, 1997) is the only exception here in that he explicitly uses the term *literal meaning* with respect to a *context-dependent* level of meaning he calls *utterance meaning*, which

2 In fact a third possibility has been proposed, namely that *semantics* DOES indeed have both the properties of dealing with *context-independent* meaning only and for sentences determining the propositions expressed by them. However, the thus determined level of meaning is taken to be distinct from Grice's level of *what is said*. For a detailed discussion of the various different approaches to the *semantics/pragmatics* distinction, see chapter 3.

is quite similar to Grice's *what is said*. Thus, he says of an expression's *utterance meaning* that it may or may not correspond to the *literal meaning* this expression has in that particular utterance context. However, he does not give any details as to how this particular type of meaning is determined or differentiated from others.

Generally, what the quotations given so far show is that the term *literal meaning* is not only used with respect to a *context-independent* level of meaning. Rather, and as Bezuidenhout and Cutting (2002, p. 435) note, '[t]he phrases "literal meaning" or "literal interpretation" have been used to cover both the literal meaning of a sentence and what is said by the utterance of a sentence in a context'. In other words, the term *literal* is used to refer to quite different types of meaning levels. In fact, the pair of terms *literal* and *non-literal* is even used in the characterisation of so-called *indirect speech acts* – usually taken to belong to the pragmatically determined level of meaning *what is meant* – which have been analysed as being associated with two illocutionary forces, where one is the primary and at the same time *non-literal* and *indirect* speech act and the other is the secondary and at the same time *literal* and *direct* speech act. The *literal* speech act is the illocutionary force taken to be conventionally associated with the particular sentence-type used for the expression of some particular speech act, whereas the *non-literal* speech act is the act actually intended by the speaker.

Thus, it seems the two terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* are (mostly) used based only on intuitions we have concerning the nature of the relation between particular types of meaning aspects rather than on an identification of determinate and contrasting sets of properties those types of meaning aspects can be shown to exhibit. This becomes apparent when looking in more detail at the properties used in the standard characterisations of the two terms and the phenomena intended to be picked out by them, where it turns out that the phenomena do not all show the properties suggested by the standard characterisation. Thus, there is an argument to be made that *literal meaning* should not be viewed as *context-independent* (as we already saw), always *conventional* and always *primary* in interpretation. Similarly for *non-literal meaning*, one does not necessarily have to assume that it is always *non-conventional* and *secondary* in interpretation.³

What complicates matters even further is the fact that the notions traditionally used in the standard characterisations of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* – and of *semantics* and *pragmatics*, of course – such as (non)-conventionality and *context-(in)dependence*, actually are problematic themselves. Thus, the use

³ See chapter 2 for detailed arguments supporting such a view.

of the pair of terms *conventional* vs. *non-conventional* as exemplified above suggests that *conventionality* is an all-or-nothing property. However, as is suggested by the results of various experiments investigating the nature of the interpretation process on the one hand (cf. Giora 1997, 1999, Gibbs 2002), as well as by theoretical considerations within the field of historical semantics on the other (cf. Busse 1991), this view is an oversimplification of the facts. Similarly – and as mentioned above already – not all approaches that are characterised as essentially *semantic* by their proponents necessarily share the view that what *semantics* deals with is *context-independent meaning* only (cf. Sag 1981, Borg 2004b, Cap-pelen and Lepore 2005). Having said that, it should be noted that there is no single concept of what constitutes a context, but rather several. Thus, even if different authors claim that *semantics* is *context-dependent* after all, actually they may not agree on which processes exactly are involved in determining *semantic meaning* or on the kind of contextual information that plays a role in that determination. Generally, it is questionable whether the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* can be characterised and differentiated in terms of the dichotomies traditionally used. The same concern holds for the characterisations of *semantics* and *pragmatics* from which – as we saw – that of the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* derives.

Yet another problem is that with only the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* to rely on, it is no trivial question to ask how these two meaning aspects are related to other kinds of meaning aspects identified in the individual approaches, such as e.g., *explicit/implicit* meaning aspects of an utterance due to *free enrichment*, so-called *ad-hoc concepts* or *conversational implicatures*. According to the standard characterisation, they should all be cases of *non-literal meaning* as all of them are *context-dependent*. However, it can be argued that this is stretching the notion of *non-literal meaning* a bit too far, especially as it involves the grouping together of meaning aspects which otherwise are very different in nature.⁴

To summarise the main points made so far: although there exist some standard characterisations of the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning*, they are not always used in accord with these characterisations, indicating that the latter are not appropriate. Moreover, although there exist alternative approaches to the standard differentiation of *semantics* from *pragmatics*, these approaches largely remain silent about whether – and if so, how – the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* should be revised. In fact, as in the traditional literature, if the terms *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* are used, this

⁴ See chapters 3 and 4 for further details.

is done under the assumption that it is clear what they refer to and how they can be differentiated from other types of meaning aspects. However, as already mentioned above, this is not at all clear. The only notable exception here is Bierwisch, who clearly assumes of *literal meaning* that it is *context-dependent* but does not explain why he makes that assumption. Moreover, although Bierwisch characterises *literal meaning* as a particular type of *utterance meaning*, he does not say anything either as to how this particular type of meaning is determined. Thus, the present book actually ties up to Bierwisch's assumption concerning the nature of *literal meaning* but goes further in that it gives reasons for why this assumption is reasonable to make and explicitly asks how *literal meaning* is determined and how it is differentiated from *non-literal meaning*, on the one hand, as well as other types of meaning aspects on the other. More generally, it shows in detail why the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* are inadequate.

1.2 Aim of the Book

The problems sketched in the last section led me to the formulation of the three questions below, which I aim to answer in the present book.

1. What is it that makes the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* inadequate and thus in need of revision?
2. What exactly are the properties that characterise and differentiate *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* and how are these particular types of meaning related to other types of meaning identified in the *semantics/pragmatics* literature (e.g., *conversational implicature*, *implicit meaning aspects*)?
3. By which criteria should *semantics* and *pragmatics* be characterised and differentiated, if not by the dichotomies traditionally used and under the assumption that the two systems are involved in the determination of (at least) three distinct meaning levels in interpretation?

To answer the first question, I will look at the individual properties standardly assumed to be exhibited by *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* and show that they cannot all simultaneously hold. More specifically, I will give arguments that actually both *literal meaning* as well as *non-literal meaning* are *context-dependent* and that they are not differentiated by *conventionality* of meaning. I will further argue that the two terms – as well as the dichotomies mentioned above in general – cannot be used in the characterisation of *semantics* and *pragmatics*.

In order to answer the second question – but also as a preliminary for answering the third – I will review and compare different, currently prominent ap-

proaches to utterance interpretation as well as consider empirical data on various relevant phenomena. The focus will be on the identification of the levels of meaning assumed in the individual approaches and how these are characterised, as well as on the respective characterisations of the particular types of meaning aspects and interpretation processes identified. Based on the discussion of the different approaches to utterance interpretation and the various aspects of meaning as well as on a defence of the appropriateness of differentiating two *context-dependent* levels of meaning, I will finally formulate my answer to the third question.

Generally, the primary aim of this work is not so much to offer a 'new' model of utterance interpretation that integrates semantics and pragmatics. Rather, I have compared existent theories of utterance interpretation as to the basic notions they make use of and how these relate to semantics or pragmatics.

1.3 Plan of the book

The book is structured as follows. In chapter 2, I will argue against the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning*. In particular, I will argue against the traditional characterisation of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning*, according to which the former is taken to be *context-independent* and the latter *non-conventional*. Having established that *literal meaning* does not necessarily have to be taken to be *context-independent* and as such *semantic* in nature, I will discuss the consequences this view has for the nature of *lexical meaning*. After reviewing a number of different types of approaches to *lexical meaning*, I will argue for a view that assumes a high degree of *underspecification* of *lexical meaning*. Generally, in the discussions in chapter 1, I will consider both theoretical viewpoints as well as empirical data. In particular, one section is dedicated to empirical studies on aspects of the *semantics* component, namely that *lexical meaning* is characterised by *underspecification* and that, generally, *semantic* processes of meaning construction should be differentiated from *pragmatically* based plausibility checks. In the last part of chapter 1, I will try to answer the question of why the standard notions of *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* came to be assumed in the first place. Here, the idea of stereotypical interpretations of linguistic expressions presented 'out of context' will be considered.

Having argued against the standard notions in chapter 2, and more specifically, having argued for viewing *literal meaning*, similarly to *non-literal meaning* as essentially *context-dependent* as well, chapter 3 is dedicated to looking in detail at the first *context-dependent* level of meaning called *what is said* by Grice, to see how this has been characterised subsequently and to identify the process-

es potentially involved in determining *literal meaning* at this level of meaning. I will start with Grice's differentiation of four different types of meaning and relate them to the two levels of meaning Grice introduced: *what is said* and *what is meant*. Following that, I will present Bierwisch's threefold differentiation of levels of meaning, based on the different knowledge systems made use of in their determination. In the second part of chapter 3, I will discuss a range of approaches that give alternative characterisations for Grice's level of *what is said*. The overall aim is to identify the different processes at work in determining *what is said*, how these processes are characterised and which types of meaning aspects can be found at this level of meaning (apart from potentially *literal* or *non-literal meaning*). At the same time, the various approaches discussed also all offer slightly different views on the nature of the *semantics* and *pragmatics* components and how they interact in the process of utterance interpretation. While the greater part of chapter 3 is taken up by theoretical considerations, towards the end of that chapter a few empirical results will also be discussed.

Chapter 4, then, is concerned, on the one hand, with phenomena traditionally assumed to arise at Grice's level of meaning *what is meant*, and, on the other hand, with the more basic question of whether a differentiation of two context-dependent levels of meaning *what is said* and *what is meant* actually is necessary/possible. Thus, in the first part of chapter 4, alternative approaches to the phenomena of *metaphor*, *irony*, (primarily *generalised*) *conversational implicature* and (primarily *indirect*) *speech acts* will be reviewed as well as empirical results considered that test the predictions following from the individual approaches. Here, the aim is to establish, on the one hand, how these different meaning aspects are determined and, on the other hand, which of the phenomena actually can be usefully considered as *non-literal*. More generally, the question is addressed at which level of meaning (i.e. *what is said* or *what is meant*) the individual phenomena should be taken to arise. In the second part of chapter 4, various arguments will be presented for and against differentiating the two levels *what is said* and *what is meant* from one another. I hope to make clear that such a differentiation is useful and necessary, although it might be difficult to decide on the criteria to be used in this differentiation.

Chapter 5, finally, turns back to the basic question that chapter 2 ends with, namely how *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* actually should be characterised if one wants to capture the various uses the two terms are put to. I will start out with two alternative characterisations of what *literal meaning* and *non-literal meaning* should be taken to be, before presenting my own characterisation, based on the discussion in the preceding chapters. As a preliminary for my characterisation, I will review the various processes identified in the preceding chapters as involved in the overall interpretation of utterances. The main consequence