

*Metametaphorical Issues**

By George Lakoff

The Meanings of Literal

A circuit judge yesterday declared a couple the legal biological parents of an unborn child being carried for them by a surrogate mother...it was the nation's first legal opinion on determining the parentage of a child conceived from the egg and sperm of a couple but carried by and born to a surrogate mother.

-San Francisco Chronicle, March 15, 1986

In a simpler world the question "Who's your mother?" has a simple answer. It is your female parent, the person who supplied the egg from which you were conceived, who carried and gave birth to you, who raised you, and who was married to your father. The word "mother" is defined relative to an idealized and oversimplified model of the world in which all of those criteria converge to pick out a single person. But in a world in which there is in vitro fertilization in surrogate mothers, adoption by lesbian couples, as well as other vagaries of modern life, the criteria that are commonly assumed to come together to define "mother" may diverge radically. In such cases, there is no completely satisfactory way to choose: both the woman who gives birth and the woman who supplies the egg have some claim to the title, as, of course, does the woman who raises the child. Any decision the courts make in defining motherhood in nonstandard cases is bound to conflict with our idealized model in which all the classical criteria for motherhood converge. We want the criteria to converge, and it makes us uneasy when they don't.

Within the field of semantics, the concept of "literal meaning" has a status akin to that of motherhood. I mean that in two senses: first, it is sacred; and second, it too is characterized in terms of an oversimplified world in which a cluster of conditions is supposed to converge.

The sacred status of literal meaning is no secret. The literal is typically viewed as the main concern of the study of semantics; all else is taken as secondary and peripheral. It is the literal that is assumed to give us our fundamental grip on meaningfulness, on factuality, on straight talk, and on reason. The nonliteral is seen from this perspective as dispensable -- a matter of indirectness, exaggeration, embellishment, interpretation, metaphor. The literal, in the classical story, is the indispensable sacred rock that forms the bulk of our language and thought.

What is less well known is that "literal meaning", like "mother", has been defined in terms of an idealized and oversimplified model of language and thought, one which is defined by a cluster of convergent conditions. When one speaks of *literal language* it is normally assumed that we mean ALL of the following four senses of *literal*:

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Literal-1, or Conventional Literality:

Ordinary conventional language -- contrasting with poetic language, exaggeration, approximation, embellishment, excessive politeness, indirectness, etc.

Literal-2, or Subject-Matter Literality:

Language conventionally used to talk about some domain of subject matter.

Literal-3, or Nonmetaphorical Literality:

Directly meaningful language -- not language that is understood, even partly, in terms of something else.

Literal-4, or Truth-conditional Literality:

Language capable of 'fitting the world', that is, of referring to objectively existing objects or of being objectively true or false.

There are, of course, still other senses of *literal*, as any good dictionary will tell you, but there four are the ones that are relevant to theoretical discussions of metaphor.

It is usually assumed, both in linguistic semantics and in philosophical logic, that all four of these senses converge. In particular, the following assumptions are made:

A. Literal-1 = Literal-3.

Ordinary conventional language is directly meaningful, and therefore not metaphorical.

B. Literal-1 = Literal-4.

All ordinary conventional language is capable of referring to objective reality, or of being objectively true or false.

C. Literal-2 = Literal-4.

There is one and only one objectively correct way to understand every subject matter. Thus the conventional language used to speak of a subject matter is capable of being true or false.

If one makes the assumptions given in A, B, and C, then the four senses of *literal* converge.

Assumptions A, B, and C are part of an idealized and grossly oversimplified theory of language. I will argue shortly that all three assumptions are false. It will follow that the four senses of *literal* given above do not converge, and must be distinguished in any adequate theory of language.

But before we proceed, I should point out that the failure of the four senses of *literal* to converge will inevitably and repeatedly cause an uneasiness at best and, at worst, a confusion. Our ordinary, oversimplified, and monolithic understanding of "literal" has almost as great a hold on us as our ordinary, oversimplified, and monolithic understanding of "mother." Our ideal, oversimplified models have a formidable hold on us. Just as "mother" evokes an oversimplified model of motherhood, so "literal" evokes an oversimplified theory of language. This theory is part of our folk conception of what language is like, that is, part of what makes up our common sense. Merely to ask whether the four senses of *literal* converge is to question our ordinary common sense views of

language.

This leaves us with a practical problem:

- It is usually assumed that the term *literal* can be used unproblematically to contrast with the term *metaphorical*. But it is only Literal-3 that contrasts with *metaphorical*. Literal-1, -2, and -4 are all consistent with *metaphorical*, if A, B, and C are not assumed.
- The traditional meaning of the term *literal* is DEFINED with respect to a theory of language in which A, B, and C are all taken for granted.
- Thus, the very use of the traditional sense of the word *literal* accepts A, B, and C as hidden premises.

Johnson and I discovered that A, B, and C are false. But it is difficult to discuss our findings using the word *literal* in its ordinary sense, since that very use of the word presupposes the opposite of what we discovered.

It would be useful if we had four separate English words for each of these four senses of *literal*. But we have only one word. All we can do in such a situation is point out the problem, be careful to distinguish these four senses of *literal*, and suggest a possible use of *literal* as a technical term. I will suggest below that *literal*, in any technical discussion, be restricted to the meaning of Literal-3, the sense of being directly meaningful, without the intervention of any mechanism of indirect understanding such as metaphor or metonymy. But because of possible confusions, it is good policy to avoid the word *literal* as much as possible in discussions of metaphor.

I have tried to follow certain rules of thumb to avoid confusions: In place of Literal-1, I usually use *conventional language* or *everyday language*. In place of Literal-3, I speak of *directly meaningful language* or *nonmetaphorical language*. I have not found any way to replace Literal-2 and Literal-4 without circumlocution. I speak of Literal-2 as *the language conventionally used to speak about a subject matter*. Literal-4 is even tougher, since it presupposes a certain philosophical theory that I do not believe in, namely, that objective reality comes divided up in a certain way and meaningful language fits it directly. In speaking of Literal-4, I try to spell out the presupposed philosophical assumptions and speak of language that, given those assumptions, is supposed to be able to *fit objective reality or be objectively true or false*.

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It is a great shame that Mark Johnson and I did not have the foresight to make the above four-way distinction when we wrote *Metaphors We Live By*. It would have saved a great deal of confusion. I think that confusion can be laid to rest by seeing what our theory says about each of the four senses of *literal*.

Briefly, we claim that metaphor is conceptual in nature, and that a metaphor is a structural mapping from one domain of subject matter (the source domain) to another (the target domain). Metaphors are primarily ways of thinking about something, and as such they can be conventional or novel. Metaphorical language arises when a word for something in the source domain is also used for the corresponding element of the target domain. When a metaphor is conventional, the language that expresses that metaphor cannot be Literal-3, since Literal-3 is defined as being directly meaningful and not metaphorical. It would however, since

it is conventional be literal-1. Let us consider some examples.

Example 1

We have a conventional way of understanding death via a metaphor in which LIFE IS BEING LOCATED HERE, while DEATH IS GOING TO A LOCATION AWAY FROM HERE. This way of conceptualizing death gives rise to many conventional linguistics expressions: *He's gone. He's still with us. He's left us. He's passed away.* And many more. A word like *leave* has its primary sense in the spatial domain, and its metaphorical sense in the life-and-death domain. Let us consider the expression *He's left us* as it is used to speak of death.

On our account, *He's left us* is metaphorical, since it makes use of a metaphorical understanding of death as going away. But since this is a conventional way of talking about death, the expression is literal-1. Here literal-1 does not equal literal-3, and principle A is false. Moreover, since the expression is a conventional way of talking about the subject matter of death, it is literal-2. Since it is metaphorical, making use of the death-as-going-away metaphor, it is not literal-3. And, given its metaphorical meaning as *He's dead*, the expression can be true or false, and therefore it is literal-4. Given that the four senses of *literal* mean such different things, it is no surprise that a sentence can be literal in one sense and nonliteral in another.

Example 2

Gentner and Gentner (1982) observe that we have two common metaphorical ways of understanding and reasoning about electricity: a fluid flow and as crowd movement. Given that electricity is not something that we can directly observe, our intuitive understanding of it is indirect. That is, we comprehend it in terms of something else -- fluids or crowds of individuals. Consider sentences like:

-A resistor will dam the flow of electricity.

-A resistor is a narrow gate that will only let a certain number of electrons get through at once, and when there is a whole crowd of electrons they get backed up at the gate.

These are normal conventional ways of thinking about electricity and talking about electricity. Since they are conventional, they are literal-1. But they are also metaphorical, since they involve understanding electricity as something else. In fact there are two different metaphors here -- the fluid metaphor and the crowd metaphor. Again, literal-1 does not equal literal-3. But these sentences are both normal conventional ways of talking about a subject matter. So they are both literal-2. But since we have no objective way to know what electricity "really is", they are not literal-4. In fact, fluid metaphor and the crowd metaphor have inconsistent ontologies. Both metaphors could not both be objectively true, since fluids are continuous and crowds are individuated. Since the sentences are both literal-2, both they could not both be literal-4, literal-2 does not equal literal-4. Thus principle C is false. Moreover, since both sentences are conventional ways of speaking about electricity, they are both literal-1. Since they are not both literal-4, literal-1 does not equal literal-4. Thus principle B is false.

As long as these four senses of *literal* are clearly defined, indexed with numerals, and kept separate, there is no difficulty. It is perfectly consistent for a metaphorical expression to be a conventional way of talking about a given subject matter, and thus to be either true or false. This is, of course, in contradiction to principles A, B, and C above, according to which such cases should not be able to exist.

It should be clear now why it is not a very good idea to use the word *literal* in discussions of metaphor, or if one does, to limit it clearly to literal-3. Only literal-3 contrasts with *metaphorical*. Ironically, the purpose of using the word *literal* in discussions of metaphor is usually to provide a word to contrast with *metaphorical*. Given the possibilities for confusion, one could hardly make a worse terminological choice. Yet, by tradition, one is *expected* in discussions of metaphor to use the term *literal* to contrast with *metaphorical*. In the traditional theory of metaphor, this caused no problem, since the traditional theory assumed principles A, B, and C, and hence ruled out the possibility that there might be conventional metaphor. But now that we know that there is a rich system of conventional metaphor, it is probably wise to either make *literal* a technical term, meaning literal-3, or preferably, to drop it altogether.

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I wish that Johnson and I had had the foresight to discuss all this seven years ago, when we wrote our book. It might have saved the kind of confusion that appears in Earl Mac Cormac's new book, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (MIT Press, 1986). Mac Cormac assumes that the word *literal* must be used in a literal-metaphorical contrast. "My task here is to define the literal as different from the metaphorical" (p. 73) Thus, he is assuming that *literal* at least means literal-3. He then continues "I define the literal as the use of ordinary language to express concrete objects and events." (p. 73) In this sentence, he assumes that literal-1 = literal-4. What he has done is to conflate literal-1, literal-3, and literal-4 into a single term *literal*. In doing so, he has implicitly assumed the truth of principles A and B above. By making such a definition, he has made an important theoretical assumption -- an assumption that has as a consequence that conventional metaphor cannot exist. Sure enough, Mac Cormac then goes on to argue that Johnson and I were mistaken when we argued that conventional metaphor not only exists, but is rampant. His conclusion follows from his definition, which makes hidden assumptions A and B and conflates three of the four senses of *literal*.

As one might expect, the confusions mount from here. Having assumed a definition of *literal* that not only rules out the possibility of our results, but makes the very statement of our results nonsensical, Mac Cormac then argues that what we say doesn't make any sense. On the whole, Mac Cormac's views, both his negative views of our work and his own theory, rest on his traditional use of the term *literal*. Because Mac Cormac does not recognize that *literal* is a cluster concept, he conflates the four senses of *literal* and thereby adopts an implicit and false theory of language that cannot make sense of the linguistic data.

The traditional use of the term *literal* is not theory-neutral. It is a very heavily theory-laden term, and the theory it is based on appears to be false. It is not a word to be used with impunity in discussions of metaphor. Thus, you cannot sensibly ask "Is literal language distinct from metaphorical language?" without

specifying which sense of *literal* you mean. If you mean literal-3, the answer is yes; if you mean literal-1, the answer is no. When you ask a question using a word whose meaning involves a complex cluster of senses and assumptions, you cannot always expect simple, direct answers.

Science has made it more complicated to use the word *mother*. It has also made it more complicated to use the word *literal*.

References

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