Literal meaning - the result of pragmatic processes

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In my talk, I want to look at the use of the term literal meaning in the semantics and pragmatics literature. I will argue that what we intuitively take to be literal meaning is the result of a number of context-sensitive processes.

Traditionally, the term literal meaning was conceived of as a basic concept; it has been used to define other concepts, but the term itself has not received a clear-cut definition. Thus, one finds definitions for (formal) semantics as dealing with the literal meaning of words and sentences, where literal meaning is essentially assumed to be context-independent. However, as has been pointed out repeatedly, what we take to be the literal meaning (or the proposition) of a complex expression is not context-independent at all (Searle 1978, Ruhl 1987). Thus, it has been argued that it is utterances, rather than sentences, which express truth-evaluable propositions and that actually propositions are not context-independent (Recanati 2004).

Furthermore, there is an ongoing discussion about the relation of the concepts sentence meaning, what is said and minimal proposition, where the last term refers to the result of the application of a restricted number of pragmatic processes to the semantic form of an utterance (Carston 2002, Recanati 2004, Bach 2004). Interestingly, minimal propositions are circumscribed as being ‘actually and literally expressed’. However, experiments in psycholinguistics suggest that the level of meaning called minimal proposition does not play a role in the interpretation process (Bezuidenhout & Cutting 2002). And thus, literal meaning is dismissed as being a folk notion (Wilson & Sperber 2002) and not useful in the demarcation of semantics from pragmatics (Giora, 1999). However, that does not explain our intuitive belief that there is such a level of meaning.

What I want to suggest then, is that what we intuitively take to be the literal meaning of a complex expression is actually the result of unconscious cognitive (Ruhl 1987), or primary pragmatic (Recanati 2004), processes. A fundamental characteristic of these processes is that they take place subconsciously. As a consequence, we think of the literal meaning as context-independent, when, actually, it is not. This holds also for simple expressions, which have literal meaning as a result of a complex abstraction from their uses to a stereotype (Ruhl 1987).