

Literal Meaning

According to the dominant position among philosophers of language today, we can legitimately ascribe determinate contents (such as truth-conditions) to natural language *sentences*, independently of what the speaker actually means. This view contrasts with that held by ordinary language philosophers fifty years ago: according to them, *speech acts*, not sentences, are the primary bearers of content. François Recanati argues for the relevance of this controversy to the current debate about semantics and pragmatics. Is ‘what is said’ (as opposed to merely implied) determined by linguistic conventions, or is it an aspect of ‘speaker’s meaning’? Do we need pragmatics to fix truth-conditions? What is ‘literal meaning’? To what extent is semantic composition a creative process? How pervasive is context-sensitivity? Recanati provides an original and insightful defence of ‘Contextualism’, and offers an informed survey of the spectrum of positions held by linguists and philosophers working at the semantics/pragmatics interface.

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Acknowledgments

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The second major step was taken when Professor Kunihiro Imai, of Gakushuin University, invited me to present my views on the semantics/pragmatics interface during a special workshop which took place in Tokyo on 30 September 2001. For that workshop I prepared a long talk which, I soon realized, could easily be expanded into a book. A couple of years earlier I had contracted with Cambridge University Press for a book on literal meaning. (The original title was 'Context and Content', but Robert Stalnaker published a collection of papers under that title in 1999, so I had to find something else.) I decided to use the Tokyo presentation as the nucleus for that book. I am grateful to Professor Imai for the invitation, and for the discussions which took place during the workshop. I also benefited from insightful comments by Yuji Nishiyama, Haruhiko Yamaguchi and Seiji Uchida.

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