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## Explaining the Obvious: Privileged Hermeneutics and the Irony of Explicitly Literal Interpretation

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine why so many uses of the word *literal* (whether taken from everyday contemporary speech or the works of well-respected ancient writers) seem at odds with the word's theoretical definition and to explore the implications of this disparity for those who privilege a literal interpretation of Scripture. The examples will show that the meaning of *literal* was not altered at a particular point in time, nor is it altered on an ongoing basis by a small subset of particularly idiosyncratic individuals. Rather, the word is predisposed to behave strangely the moment it is used outside the context of meta-discussions about language itself. This is because a common assumption underlying most theories of literal meaning is that minimally competent interlocutors understand such meaning tacitly. Yet when we explicitly describe a given interpretation as literal (and then go on to explain what that interpretation is), this suggests it was not already tacit to begin with. Since a key component of why literal meaning is often privileged (and sometimes disparaged) is that it is thought to correspond to what minimally competent interlocutors understand tacitly, this means the actual interpretations one ends up privileging or disparaging tend to be divorced from one's supposed reasons for doing so. The result is that the pursuit of literal interpretation (whether of Scripture or any other text) tends to lead away from the very thing that one claims to seek.

Explaining the Obvious: Privileged Hermeneutics and the Irony of Explicitly Literal  
Interpretation

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Joshua Alkire

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Master of Arts



Assistant Provost for Graduate Programs


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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
II.	CHAPTER I: TACITLY LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND MINIMALLY COMPETENT INTERLOCUTORS.....	11
	“Neutral” Defined as Arbitrary Differentiation .....	11
	Literal Meaning as That Which Is Tacit to Minimally Competent Interlocutors .	17
	Applying the Litmus Test to Two Texts That Privilege Literal Interpretation of the Bible .....	24
	Conclusion .....	35
III.	CHAPTER II: EXPLICITLY LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND INCOMPETENT OR MAXIMALLY COMPETENT INTERLOCUTORS.....	37
	Grice’s Cooperative Principle and the Intensive and “Superfluous” Uses of <i>Literally</i> .....	38
	Disparaging Incompetent and Maximally Competent Interlocutors.....	46
	John Purvey’s Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible .....	57
	Conclusion .....	60
IV.	CONCLUSION.....	62
V.	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	65

## INTRODUCTION

Why do other people use the word *literal* so strangely? Many have asked this question in exasperation at one time or another, whether upon hearing an acquaintance utter, “It was so funny I literally laughed my head off,” or encountering an ancient writer who teaches that Christ “is literally the Light but metaphorically a stone.”<sup>1</sup> In my research, I have come across too many bizarre uses of *literal* to discount them as anomalous and have found that the closer I look at seemingly regular uses of the word, the stranger they reveal themselves to be. What is strange, I have decided, is that we use this word at all outside the context of meta-discussions about language itself. A prevailing theme within these meta-discussions is that literal meaning is tacit to typical language users, and there is usually no need to talk about what is already mutually understood. Yet talk about it we do: according to data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA),<sup>2</sup> the adverbial form *literally* is among the 5,000 most frequently used words in American English today, and the adjectival form *literal* sits comfortably within the top 10,000.<sup>3</sup> It seems we cannot help ourselves from talking about what we paradoxically assume goes without saying. In this thesis, I will argue that the interpretations we explicitly describe as literal outside meta-discussions about language tend to be precisely those that deviate from our own estimation of what is tacit to the

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1. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.28.35 (ACW 41:136).

2. Mark Davies, “The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): 560 million words, 1990–present,” 2008–, <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

3. Mark Davies, “Word Frequency Data,” <http://www.wordfrequency.info>.

minimally competent interlocutors we tend to highlight as exemplars of literal interpretation within these meta-discussions.

By “interlocutor,” I mean any person who takes part in the communication exchange at any point in time: the speaker or author and the original audience, as well as any later interpreters. By “minimally competent,” I mean an average, reasonably savvy, reasonably knowledgeable, fluent adult native speaker of a given language. This contrasts with both “maximally competent” interlocutors who display significantly greater than average cunning, expertise, or verbal ability for a given instance of communication and “incompetent” interlocutors who fall below whatever threshold is thought to define minimal competence for the task at hand. In our meta-discussions about language theory, literal meaning is typically portrayed as something that should be obvious to a typical minimally competent interlocutor. Yet outside our meta-discussions about language, whenever we explicitly indicate that particular interpretations are literal ones, they tend to be precisely those that are peripheral and non-obvious—the sort that only occur to interlocutors who are either incompetent or maximally competent. In the pages that follow, I will use the phrase “tacitly literal interpretation” to refer to meanings that represent the mutual unspoken understanding between minimally competent interlocutors and “explicitly literal interpretation” to refer to interpretations that have been specifically described as literal using the English word *literal* or *literally* or any foreign language cognate. In other words, tacitly literal interpretation is what we should describe as literal based on our meta-discussions about language, while explicitly literal interpretation is what we actually end up describing as literal. The reason I use the words “tacitly literal” and “explicitly literal” to make this distinction is to keep this great irony ever at the

forefront of our minds: we feel strangely compelled to make explicit what we allege is already tacit, to say what should theoretically go without saying.

Previous attempts to explain supposedly anomalous uses of *literal* have tended to boil down to one of two central claims: either the original meaning was altered at a particular point in time, or the more customary meaning is altered at all times by particularly idiosyncratic individuals. An example of the former argument is seen when lexicographers such as Jesse Sheidlower offer a history of different strains of usage, showing that *literally* was first used as an intensifier for true statements in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, was eventually used to emphasize both factually accurate statements and those that employ more poetic license, and is today used both as an intensive and as a term to distinguish between literal and non-literal meanings.<sup>4</sup> The latter argument is often seen in the work of scholars engaged in a focused analysis of a particular writer. For example, shortly before exploring what Augustine of Hippo might mean by his perplexing claim that “Christ is literally the Light but metaphorically a stone,”<sup>5</sup> K. E. Greene-McCreight warns her readers to “put aside any preconceived notions of what the terms ‘literal’ and ‘allegorical’ might mean, or Augustine may appear to be talking nonsense.”<sup>6</sup> The implication here is that Greene-McCreight can reasonably assume her potential readers will have the same (or at least similar) “preconceived notions” about what the word

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4. Jesse Sheidlower, “The Word We Love to Hate: Literally,” *Slate*, 1 Nov 2005, [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_good\\_word/2005/11/the\\_word\\_we\\_love\\_to\\_hate.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2005/11/the_word_we_love_to_hate.html).

5. Kathryn E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin, and Barth, Read the “Plain Sense” of Genesis 1–3*, *Issues in Systematic Theology* 5 (New York: Lang, 1999), 45. She posits that “there are (at least) two possible assumptions at play here. He may be saying that Christ is literally the Light because He names Himself thus but is metaphorically a stone because this prophecy is applied to Him by others. Or, Augustine may possibly be saying that Christ is literally Light since the second person of the Trinity, the Word, is active in creation (‘And God said, “Let there be light.”’), but Christ is metaphorically a stone since ‘stone’ is less of a controlling metaphor for the identity of the second person of the Trinity in the catholic faith.”

6. *Ibid.*, 40



*literal* means and will perceive Augustine's statements as idiosyncratic departures from this more generally agreed-upon customary meaning. In her analysis, Greene-McCreight makes a distinction between what she calls "hermeneutical theory" and "exegesis itself":

In order to gain a clearer understanding of what Augustine means by the "literal," "proper," or "historical" sense, we must turn to his exegesis itself. Apart from *De Doctrina Christiana*, if one were interested in his hermeneutical theory one would look for example at *On the Spirit and the Letter*, which was written in 412 during the same period of writing as *De Genesi ad litteram*. But our interest is in seeking hermeneutical assumptions as they become evident "at work" in interpretation itself. Therefore, we will need to look at instances of actual exegesis, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak.<sup>7</sup>

As befits a scholar engaged in a charitable close reading of ancient texts, Greene-McCreight assumes that Augustine's instances of actual exegesis will further illuminate, rather than undermine, his hermeneutical theory. However, I have come to expect quite the opposite: a speaker's instances of actual literal exegesis ("where the rubber meets the road") tend to contradict not just the audience's preconceived notions about what literal meaning is supposed to entail, but also the speaker's as well. This is not a criticism against Augustine or any individual in particular; it is a general tendency that manifests again and again wherever the word *literal* is used to describe specific examples of interpretation. The propensity for claiming one thing about literal meaning during meta-discussions about language and suggesting quite another when discussing actual instances of literal interpretation is not limited to only the most rationally deficient segments of contemporary society or to the most brilliant yet idiosyncratic interpreters of yore, but is instead the most likely outcome whenever we hazard to make explicit meanings that we allege to be already tacit. The meaning of *literal* was not corrupted at a particular point in history, but was always predisposed to behave strangely the moment we decided to use it

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7. *Ibid.*, 39.

outside the context of meta-discussions about language. I believe it is true what we say in these meta-discussions: that there exists a meaning tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. However, assuming one is addressing a minimally competent interlocutor, meanings that are truly tacit should not need to be made explicit. Thus, I am initially suspicious whenever someone claims that a particular interpretation of interest to them is also the one that should already be tacit to me.

In other contexts, we are more accustomed to a healthy dose of skepticism in this regard. For example, we are rightly suspicious when a talking head on the television reports that “everyone knows” a certain political candidate is going to win an election if we know the talking head strongly supports that candidate’s platform. We might think to ourselves that the candidate’s success might not be so inevitable as this spokesperson would have us believe. Rather, they might be trying to convince fair-weather supporters of the candidate to participate in making history while simultaneously suggesting to potential naysayers that voting against the candidate is a waste of time, so you might as well just stay home on Election Day. Similarly, it is inappropriate for a prosecutor to tell the jury “everyone knows” the defendant is guilty. Hearsay among members of the general populace unfamiliar with evidence presented in court is irrelevant to the case, and the courts work hard to insulate proceedings from the media and instruct jurors not to discuss the case with anyone else until a decision has been reached.

My hope is that the reader will come to apply this same level of initial skepticism to anyone who refers to a literal interpretation and then goes on to explain what that interpretation is. If someone claims that a certain passage of the Bible should be interpreted literally because God speaks plainly and is then content to give a knowing

smile, confident that there exists a shared, tacit understanding of the passage's plain meaning, then perhaps the literal meaning is indeed clearly obvious. If, however, one feels compelled to also expound the passage's literal meaning, this suggests the interpretation may not be quite so plain as one wants it to be. Similarly, if someone says, "My kid took me literally when I said to count higher," and is then content to pause and wait for a laugh, confident that the humorous incident has been effectively conveyed, this is good evidence that the child's interpretation jibes with the plain meaning of that command. But if one feels compelled to go on and explain, "She jumped on the couch, reached up her hands, and counted to ten again!"<sup>8</sup> then this suggests that the child's (mis)interpretation does not line up with the meaning plain to a typical adult language user. Indeed, the incident is humorous and noteworthy precisely because it deviates from the expectations of those telling and listening to the story. This is my central point: our meta-discussions about language theory tend to insist upon a link between plain meaning and literal meaning, but the specific interpretations we actually describe as literal tend to be precisely those that deviate from our own estimations of plain meaning.

This matters because the word *literal* is only rarely used as a neutral term to distinguish between equally legitimate interpretations. Rather, the invocation of this powerful word either privileges or disparages the interpretation it identifies. In English, the most common use of the word *literally* is as a generic intensifier: I literally laughed my head off, I'm literally starving, I'm literally head over heels in love, etc. As with other intensifiers such as *actually*, *really*, *truly*, and *totally*, the addition of *literally* is meant to emphasize that what one is saying is true. So truth is connected with literalness in our

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8. See Example 4 on page 51 of this thesis.

language, and in many other languages that also use cognates of *literally* as intensifiers.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, many continue to hold the Bible and specifically the literal meaning of the Bible sacred: a 2017 Gallup poll shows that nearly one in four Americans (24%) still prefer the statement, “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” over the option that it is “the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally,” (47%) or “an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man” (26%).<sup>10</sup> George Lakoff put it best in his essay, “The Meanings of Literal”:

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 [sic] sacred rock that forms the bulk of our language and thought.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, however, we are almost as likely to disparage literal meaning as to privilege it. Taking cues from the apostle Paul’s assessment that “the letter kills, but the

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9. Examples of the intensive usage in other languages are not difficult to find. A Dumas novel serialized from 1844–5 has a speaker exaggerating his account of war-torn Nimes by claiming he “literally [*littéralement* in the original French] waded in blood.” Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Modern Library Paperback Edition (New York: Random House, 2002), 582. Meanwhile, an 1880 novel by Dostoyevsky has one character leveling the following accusation against another: “You literally [*буквально* in the original Russian] soil everything you come into contact with.” Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2003), 64. There is some collective denial regarding this fact. English translations of works that use foreign language cognates of *literally* intensively sometimes omit the word, perhaps under the assumption that such usage represents improper English, even if it is proper in Russian or French. On the other side of the coin, I have asked friends who speak Russian and French if the equivalent of *literally* in those languages is ever used intensively, and have been assured that the phenomenon is confined to English alone.

10. Lydia Saad, “Record Few Americans Believe Bible Is Literal Word of God,” *Gallup*, 15 May 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/210704/record-few-americans-believe-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>. Gallup has been offering these same three answer choices to respondents since they began asking the question in 1976. While the number of Americans who privilege literal interpretation is still significant, it is steadily declining. As Saad notes in her report, the 2017 survey marked “the first time in Gallup’s four-decade trend that biblical literalism has not surpassed biblical skepticism.”

11. George Lakoff, “The Meanings of Literal,” *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 1 (1986), 292.

Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6), many Christians throughout history have prioritized “spiritual” interpretations over literal ones and reserved varying levels of disdain for what may be viewed as the necessary and lowest first step on the path toward true understanding. Origen had some of the harshest words to say about this necessary first step:

[A]t first glance, the letter is very bitter. It prescribes the circumcision of the flesh, it commands sacrifices and the other things that are designated as “the letter that kills” (2 Cor 3:6). Throw all this away, as you would the bitter rind of a nut. In the second place you will reach the protective covering of the shell in which moral teaching or the definition of self-control is described. These are, of course, necessary to protect what is contained inside, but doubtless they are to be cracked and removed.

[...]

But in the third place you will find hidden and concealed in the [law and the prophets] the meaning of the mysteries “of the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Col 2:3) by which the souls of the saints are nourished and fed, not only in this present life but also in the future. For this is the priestly fruit about which the promise is given to those “who hunger and thirst for justice,” that “they shall be satisfied” (Matt 5:6).<sup>12</sup>

According to Origen, literal meaning is “bitter” and should be thrown away. Even the moral sense, contained inside the literal, is to be “cracked and removed” to get to the hidden mysteries buried deeper within. There is an explicit hierarchy in Origen’s threefold system and (at the very least) an implicit hierarchy to the fourfold method of interpretation that held sway over Christian hermeneutics in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, where the literal sense was either viewed as the lowest rung or outermost layer one must traverse before attaining the worthier typological, moral, and anagogical understandings. Outside Christian hermeneutics, we see literal meaning disparaged in contemporary secular speech as children, non-native speakers, and people on the autism

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12. Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 9.7.3 (*Ancient Christian Texts* 4:42).

spectrum are mocked for their so-called literal-mindedness. In the same vein, literal or “word-for-word” translations of foreign language texts are often derided as stilted and awkward, while dynamic equivalency or “thought-for-thought” translations are praised.

These two traditions, privileging and disparaging, exist in tandem—the only unusual opinion about literal interpretation seems to be a neutral one. But whether we privilege or disparage literal interpretation, we tend to do so for the same reason—namely, because we presume literal understanding is tacitly understood by minimally competent interlocutors. For those who privilege literal meaning, this might be couched in positive terms such as *straightforward*, *plain*, and *clear*, and literal meaning is viewed as the universal language most suitable for effective communication. Meanwhile, those who disparage it might couch it in negative terms such as *superficial*, *trivial*, and *puerile*, and literal meaning is viewed as the lowest common denominator that should be transcended by those with the cognitive ability to do so. But if I am correct and the interpretations we explicitly describe as literal tend to diverge from even our own estimations about the meanings tacit to minimally competent interlocutors, then the actual interpretations we privilege or disparage are divorced from our supposed reasons for doing so.

To discover if a particular instance of explicitly literal interpretation is divorced from a given interlocutor’s supposed reasons for privileging or disparaging it, I will use the following three-part litmus test:

1. Does the use of *literal* in a given instance of explicitly literal interpretation either privilege or disparage the meaning it identifies, or is it merely used as a neutral term in order to make a helpful distinction?
2. If the designated literal meaning is either privileged or disparaged, is this because it is thought to be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors?

3. Is this meaning in fact tacit to minimally competent interlocutors?

Chapter 1 is divided into three sections that correspond to the three questions in this litmus test. In the first section, Ferdinand de Saussure's theory about the arbitrary nature of the sign and the negative nature of meaning-making in language will help us recognize the only circumstance in which a use of *literal* can be truly neutral: mere distinction. In the second section, we will look at various recurring themes in meta-discussions about language to show that literal meaning is typically portrayed as that which is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. In the third and final section, we bring everything together and apply all three questions in our litmus test to two texts that privilege literal interpretation: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. In order to show that the phenomenon of describing non-tacit meanings as literal is not confined only to those who privilege the literal interpretation of Scripture, Chapter 2 will examine various additional examples in contemporary usage. Our final example, however, is a strange use of *literal* from the same document that provides the word's earliest attestation in English: John Purvey's prologue to the Wycliffe Bible. Taken together, this evidence will lead us to conclude that describing as literal meanings which deviate from the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors is the norm, rather than the exception.

CHAPTER I  
TACITLY LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND MINIMALLY COMPETENT  
INTERLOCUTORS

The purpose of this chapter is to lay a foundation that will help us answer the first two questions in our three-part litmus test so that we can apply all three questions to two instances where the literal meaning of the Bible is privileged: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics and Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of literal meaning in his *Summa Theologica*. The first two sections correspond to the first two questions of our litmus test.

**“Neutral” Defined as Arbitrary Differentiation**

I had Saussure in mind as I crafted the first question of my three-part test, in which I equate a neutral use of *literal* with one that merely makes a helpful distinction:

1. Does the use of *literal* in a given instance of explicitly literal interpretation either privilege or disparage the meaning it identifies, or is it merely used as a neutral term in order to make a helpful distinction?

Wrapped up in this are two components of Saussure’s theory of signs: (1) the signs used in language are arbitrary, and (2) the value of signs is purely negative and differential, rather than positive.

By “arbitrary,” Saussure means that the signs used to describe concepts in a given language could be otherwise; there is no intrinsic quality linking a sign with its meaning. He offers the following example in his *Course in General Linguistics*: “The idea of ‘sister’ is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds *s-ö-r* which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other



sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages.”<sup>1</sup> Even with onomatopoeia and interjections (two categories of words that seem to have a natural connection with what they signify) Saussure shows that the words solidified by convention are arbitrary: in English, a dog says *bow-wow* and a person in pain shouts *ouch!*, but in French, a dog says *ouaoua*, and a person screams *aie!*<sup>2</sup>

By “negative” and “differential,” Saussure emphasizes that the meaning of words comes from their distinction from and opposition to one another rather than any inherent value. He offers an example of a non-linguistic sign to illustrate the point: “A coin nominally worth five francs may contain less than half its worth of silver. Its value will vary according to the amount stamped upon it and according to its use inside or outside a political boundary.”<sup>3</sup> The same concept can be seen with the various fonts and styles of handwriting in a given language: “The value of letters is purely negative and differential. The same person can write *t*, for instance, in different ways [...] The only requirement is that the sign for *t* not be confused in his script with the signs used for *l*, *d*, etc.”<sup>4</sup>

Saussure cautions that the word *arbitrary* “should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker [...] the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community.” But this warning is tempered somewhat by his example of handwriting. While it is true that the linguistic community will not accept handwriting that makes a *w* look like a *Q*

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1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959; repr., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 67–8.

2. *Ibid.*, 69.

3. *Ibid.*, 118.

4. *Ibid.*, 119–120.

(unless it is known that one is using a cipher), there is quite a bit of latitude for similarity between certain letters and numbers in a given typeface or written script: *l*, and *I*, *o* and *e*, *x* and *t*, *v* and *u*, *O* and *0*, *2* and *Z*, *5* and *S*, etc. Similarly, with pronunciation, there is sometimes latitude and sometimes not. As Saussure reflects:

Every language probably contains certain elements or groups which, for some reason, display *pronunciation tolerance*, while the pronunciation of the great majority remains quite inflexible. The French *r* sound may be pronounced using two or three consonants whose articulation is totally different. Indeed, such is the difference to the ear that they are the first thing one notices in an individual's way of speaking. However, all these highly divergent sounds are accepted—are 'legal'—with the same *value*. Yet the most insignificant deviation in the pronunciation of an *s* or a *d* would immediately appear as a ridiculous shortcoming in pronunciation or as the sign of a foreign accent, a direct and irreconcilable affront to our feeling for the language.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to this pronunciation tolerance for variations of the French *r*, I have found that there is a great degree of “interpretation tolerance” when it comes to words such as *literal* that we use to describe meaning itself. The same interpretation may sometimes be variously described as *literal*, *figurative*, *technical*, *metaphorical*, *physical*, *spiritual*, *actual*, etc. without necessarily facing backlash from the linguistic community. The important thing is to make distinctions between various interpretations that other interlocutors can easily grasp; the words used to make these distinctions are of secondary importance. Thus there is a surprisingly high tolerance even for describing as literal an interpretation that another interlocutor might describe as figurative. This tolerance is higher than for other adjectives. Although one might agree to disagree with a friend regarding whether a certain swath of paint is green or blue, one could never come to terms with someone who insists that a yellow object is actually purple. Yet when it comes

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5. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, eds. Simon Bouquet, Rudolf Engler, and Antoinette Weil, trans. Carol Sanders, Matthew Pires, and Peter Figueroa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47.

to the word *literal*, we are surprisingly tolerant not only with those who use it to describe a meaning that we might rather call “physical,” “historical,” or “technical” but even “figurative,” “allegorical,” or “metaphorical.” The difference, I think, is that we use these words to describe meaning itself and especially ambiguous meanings or polysemous texts: the act of differentiating between meanings entails the existence of various meanings. Thus we tend to utilize these words only when we are already venturing into uncharted territory, so their arbitrary and differential nature is more palpable than in other terms more cemented by convention. For the vast majority of potential utterances, there is no convention that predetermines barriers for literal and other kinds of meaning.

I will illustrate with a conversation that took place between my wife and me as we were driving parallel to the outer fence of a gated community. Wondering to myself if we would ever be wealthy enough to purchase a house in such an upscale neighborhood, I asked, “Do you think we’ll ever live ‘beyond the wall?’” As I said, “beyond the wall,” I moved my palm in a circle on an invisible plane parallel to the fence we were driving beside to indicate which wall I was referring to. Unfortunately, since she was sitting between my palm and this fence (which lay outside her window), I inadvertently mimed an invisible barrier between our seats with this gesture. I was surprised by the expression of hurt she gave me, and after better explaining what I meant, she sighed with relief and said, “I thought you were talking literally about a wall between us in our relationship.” There is no predetermined “literal” meaning of my idiosyncratic statement-gesture solidified by convention. Upon reflection, neither her interpretation nor my intended meaning seems to fit the bill of “literal” in any strict sense. Although I had hoped my gesture would guide her thoughts to the physical wall outside her window, I was not

asking if we might live in that particular neighborhood at some point in the future but rather if we might live in any house anywhere at least as nice as the ones we could see beyond the fence. And although the invisible wall I had accidentally mimed between us made the image of a relationship barrier unusually vivid in her mind, it was still just that: a mental image.

In using *literally*, she differentiated another possible interpretation of my combined statement-gesture in a non-judgmental way in order to clear up a misunderstanding. Her choice of words was arbitrary in a Saussurean sense because she could just as easily have said that she thought I was talking figuratively, socially, metaphorically, philosophically, etc. and the effect would have been the same: it merely prepared me to consider of an alternative meaning of *wall*. Thus, I would argue that her use of *literally* was neutral in this instance. If, however, it could be shown from context or subsequent conversation that there was a slight dig in her choice of words here, so that by describing her initial interpretation as literal she meant to imply, “And the way I took it is just the way any reasonable person would have taken it, you insensitive dolt!” then it would be clear that her use of *literally* was meant to privilege the interpretation it identified because it is what “any reasonable person” would understand tacitly. It would then be up to the marriage counselor to answer the third part of our litmus test and determine whether her interpretation jibes with the tacit understanding of a minimally competent interlocutor subjected to my insensitive and apparently ambiguous gestures.

It is not necessary for interlocutors to have a thorough understanding of Saussurean sign theory or be aware of the arbitrary and differential nature of their use of *literal* in order for us to judge the use neutral by this method. The quickest test is to

substitute the word *literal* or *literally* for *different* or *differently* and see if the same basic meaning is conveyed. The substitution itself will test for arbitrariness, and our choice of substitute will reveal whether mere differentiation is sufficient for the interlocutor's purposes or whether they are attributing additional value to the designation *literal*: either good or bad. With this test, we must allow for the fact that *different* and *differently* are less grammatically flexible than *literal* and *literally*. In cases where the substitution does not make grammatical sense, we should interpret it as a parenthetical instruction, “[Consider a different interpretation of the nearby message.]” Barring revelations during the counseling session, my wife's use of *literal* passes this test. She was essentially saying that she thought I was “talking [differently] about a wall between us in our relationship.” For explicitly literal interpretations that fail this test, we proceed to the second stage of our three-part questionnaire.

Before advancing, however, I would be remiss to rely so heavily upon Saussure, the father of what came to be known as structuralism, without at least mentioning Derrida, the father of deconstruction. Here I will not do justice to the complexity and nuance of Derrida's intentionally misspelled and notoriously indefinable neologism *différance*, but will rehash the oft-repeated observation that his invention plays on the French verb *différer*, which means both “to differ” and “to defer.” At the risk of oversimplification, I will say that Derrida's notion of *différance* adds to Saussure's point about negative differentiation in language an unrelenting emphasis on how meaning in language is always deferred in a never-ending, self-referential loop. The classic illustration of this deferral is looking up a word in a dictionary to learn its “meaning” and then having to look up the words comprising that definition and the definitions of those

definitions *ad nauseum* until the various rabbit holes eventually circle back on themselves, using only words whose meanings have already been deferred. The third part of my litmus test is a deconstructive move in that it holds those who use *literal* to privilege or disparage an interpretation accountable to their supposed reasons for doing so, but the test as a whole is quite limited in its capacity for devastation. Interlocutors who can be shown to neither privilege nor disparage an interpretation through their use of *literal* will not be destroyed, and I will have no comment on the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of language that does not include the term *literal*. But what I can offer is a simple method for taking certain claims about literal meaning to task and a description of general tendencies in our collective use of *literal* that—while they may not preclude one from pursuing literal interpretation—nevertheless serves as a warning that this pursuit may not lead one where one wants to go, if the predictable unspoken understanding of minimally competent interlocutors is what one seeks.

### **Literal Meaning as That Which Is Tacit to Minimally Competent Interlocutors**

If we determine that the use of *literal* in a given instance of explicitly literal interpretation does more than simply create a helpful distinction according to the criteria outlined above, we advance to the second part of our litmus test:

2. If the designated literal meaning is either privileged or disparaged, is this because it is thought to be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors?

The word *tacit* is not one you are likely to find in formal definitions of *literal*, yet if our quintessential claims about the nature of literal meaning are true, then the tacitness of literal meaning is a necessary corollary. Many of the positive terms we associate with literal meaning (*simple, plain, ordinary, normal, straightforward, obvious, etc.*) carry with them the notion that such meaning is readily apparent to minimally competent

interlocutors. The more disparaging words we associate with literal meaning (*superficial*, *trivial*, *puerile*, etc.) carry with them the notion that these incorrect or incomplete interpretations are tacit to both incompetent and minimally competent interlocutors alike—but whereas incompetent interlocutors are stuck with their incomplete or erroneous initial impressions, minimally competent interlocutors are able to perceive and then transcend them. According to some theories of language comprehension, this ability to transcend one’s initial tacit understanding is part of what makes a minimally competent interlocutor minimally competent.

One such theory of language is seen in the standard pragmatic model of metaphor comprehension, in which language users seek literal meaning by default, and enquire no further when literal meaning makes sense in context. Only when literal interpretation renders incomprehensible or absurd meanings do language users begin searching for alternative figurative interpretations. A corollary assumption to this model is that literal interpretation is automatic and involuntary for minimally competent interlocutors, while figurative interpretation is optional and requires additional processing time—quite possibly even additional knowledge or skill to be understood correctly. John Searle’s formulation is often cited<sup>6</sup> as representative of this view: “Where the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning.”<sup>7</sup>

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6. Sam Glucksberg, *Understanding Figurative Language: From Metaphors to Idioms* Oxford Psychology Series 36 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10; George Lakoff, “Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 205.

7. John R. Searle, “Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 103.

Although the standard pragmatic model and its resulting assumptions still hold sway over many of our folk theories of language today, it has been losing favor among scholars who study the psychology of linguistics in recent decades. Sam Glucksberg and his colleagues dispute the model for several reasons. First, studies have not demonstrated any additional processing time required to understand figurative as opposed to literal meanings. Under comparable conditions, apt metaphors are understood just as quickly as sensible literal statements.<sup>8</sup> Second, Glucksberg argues, fluent speakers process them just as automatically and involuntarily: “We can no more shut off our metaphor-understanding machinery than our literal-understanding machinery.”<sup>9</sup> Third, the standard pragmatic model does not explain how we interpret statements such as “No man is an island” that are literally true but uninteresting when interpreted literally.<sup>10</sup> Yet while Glucksberg critiques the standard pragmatic model, both he and the more traditional model affirm that minimally competent interlocutors understand literal meaning tacitly, even without using those particular terms. What Glucksberg emphasizes, however, is that metaphor comprehension is equally tacit, or (to use his words) “automatic.”

Glucksberg stresses that his use of the term *automatic* “does not mean that literal understanding is not effortful or does not require complex computation.”<sup>11</sup> Glucksberg is particularly insistent that any defensible theory of literal interpretation must go beyond the “minimalist literal” of word-for-word decoding:

An example from a recent *New York Times* headline makes clear the need to go beyond bare-bones literal meanings: *Price Soars for Eggs, Setting Off a Debate*

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8. Glucksberg, *Understanding Figurative Language*, 20.

9. *Ibid.*, 28.

10. *Ibid.*, 46.

11. *Ibid.*, 10.



*on a Clinic's Ethics*. The linguistic literal meaning is not at issue here. Each of the words and phrases in the heading is intended in its primary, literal sense. *Eggs* refers to eggs (but what kind?); *prices* refers to the cost of something (but at what level?); *clinic* refers to the medical sense of clinic (but what kind?); *ethics* refers to what people ordinarily think of as ethics and morals. It is not until one reads further that one learns that the eggs that are referred to are not the sort that one scrambles for breakfast but instead are human ova that, if fertilized and implanted in a womb, develop into human babies. The clinic is a fertility clinic, and the issue is whether or not young women should sell or “donate” their ova for artificial insemination and implantation in donee mothers. The egg providers can be viewed as “donors” if they receive some small remuneration for their time and trouble; they would be viewed as sellers if they were to receive a lot of money. The ethical issue is whether or not human ova should be sold for profit. The deceptively simple, literally intended headline turns out to require a wealth of biological, medical, social, cultural, theological, economic, and sociological knowledge to be understood as intended.<sup>12</sup>

Although Glucksberg argues that a wealth of complex linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge is required to correctly interpret this deceptively simple headline, he is adamant that “fluent speakers of a language do not have the option of refusing to understand.”<sup>13</sup> More importantly, this understanding comes quickly, naturally, and automatically because “contextually appropriate meaning is selectively accessed whenever the context makes absolutely clear which meaning of an ambiguous word is intended.”<sup>14</sup> Glucksberg maintains that this is true whether one intends something literally or metaphorically. Thus, literal interpretation is more complex (in terms of required knowledge and context) and metaphor interpretation simpler (in terms of required processing time) than the standard pragmatic model would have us believe. Given sufficient context, minimally competent interlocutors understand both metaphors and literal statements tacitly.

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12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. *Ibid.*, 21.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

We have just looked at two traditional claims about literal meaning along with Glucksberg's critique of them: (1) we interpret literally by default, only seeking figurative meaning when literal meaning is absurd, and (2) literal meaning can be paraphrased as "word-for-word" meaning; it stands on its own rather than being context dependent. Glucksberg disputes both claims, but in both cases, the tacitness of literal meaning is affirmed whether one follows the standard pragmatic model of metaphor comprehension or accepts Glucksberg's critique of that model. In the traditional view, ease of interpretation is one of the things that distinguishes literal meaning from metaphor, while according to Glucksberg, apt metaphors and literal meaning are equally tacit (or, to use his terms, automatic and involuntary), and context is required to correctly interpret either type.

The tensions between traditional and contemporary theories of literal interpretation can be seen in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* entry for just one of the many senses of *literal* it records.<sup>15</sup> There are three main parts to this particular definition. The first part, "designating the primary, original, or etymological sense of a word..." suggests a traditional word-for-word, context-independent theory of literal interpretation. The term "primary" suggests interpreting individual words in the way typical, minimally competent interlocutors would: according to their most common or basic meaning. The terms "original" and "etymological" suggest interpreting words as minimally competent interlocutors did when these words were first introduced into English. The second part of the definition, "...or the exact sense expressed by the actual wording of a phrase or passage..." would appeal to Glucksberg since it takes the surrounding context into account. This reminds us that literal interpretation sometimes

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<sup>15</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. "literal," <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109055>.

moves beyond the minimalist literal of word-for-word decoding but is still grounded in the “exact” and “actual” meaning that should be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. The third part, “. . . as distinguished from any extended sense, metaphorical meaning, or underlying significance” introduces some exclusionary criteria: literal meaning is that which is derived after considering some necessary amount of context, but perhaps not if that context suggests an interpretation that is considered antithetical to literal meaning. How do we know, at a glance, what is antithetical to literal meaning? The notion of tacitness is a common thread that weaves the disparate concepts of “underlying significance,” “extended sense,” and “metaphorical meaning” together. Tacit understandings are plain for all to see, unlike those that *lie underneath* the “surface” of the text. Tacit understandings are apparent from the beginning, unlike those that *extend beyond* initial impressions. And finally (if one subscribes to the standard pragmatic model), tacitly literal understandings are the first that an interpreter will consider, while metaphorical meanings will come later, if at all. Because metaphor, underlying significance, and extended meaning are considered anathema to tacit understanding (for those who do not share Glucksberg’s views), an interpretation that includes them may be judged non-literal even if it is the most contextually appropriate and readily understood interpretation.

If we were to read this entry from the *OED* through the lens of deconstruction, Derrida would want us to recognize that the prevalence of “or” is astonishing. If literal meaning defers to the “primary” *or* “original” *or* “etymological” sense of individual words *or* the wording of a phrase *or* passage, it would seem we might have leeway to describe as literal nearly any interpretation we choose. With regard to “primary”

meanings, Derrida would point out that different dictionaries list different senses as the first definition under a given headword and that some words have dozens or (in the case of *set*) well over a hundred distinct senses that vie for the position. And even if we could maintain a constantly updated electronic dictionary that objectively determined the most common “primary” meaning of words in contemporary usage through relentless data collection and analysis, would we be willing to defer literal meaning to changes in usage as different senses of words are born and rise to prominence? When it comes to the “original” meaning of a word, will we defer literal meaning to new discoveries of old manuscripts that bump the date of a word’s first attestation back a few centuries? And with regard to etymological meanings, are we willing to defer back to Proto-Indo-European, or do we stop at Old French or maybe Latin? And to set the record straight, if we are going to be taking context into account, are we looking at phrases or longer passages, what are the boundaries of these passages, and how are they determined?

For our current project, we will simply note that answers to these deconstructive questions are likely to solidify the link between literal meaning and minimally competent interlocutors. The average person has a reasonably good grasp of the primary meaning of words in their active vocabulary without the need for up-to-date analysis of compendiums of usage. Some words may have two or more senses that seem equally qualified as candidates for “primary” meaning, but words are not spoken in a vacuum, and the surrounding context usually makes clear to a normal language user which sense of polysemous words contributes to the literal meaning of the surrounding phrase, sentence, etc. The amount of context needed to determine literal meaning varies, but a typical language user knows intuitively when they have sufficient context to state with

confidence that they have understood the literal meaning. Echoing a certain Supreme Court Justice, we might say, “I cannot define literal meaning, but I still know it when I see it.”

We may indeed know literal meaning when we see it, but curiously what we see is not what we tend to say out loud. In this section, we have been examining evidence that tacitness is an underlying assumption of several common conceptualizations of literal meaning despite the term’s absence from most formal definitions of *literal*. We have looked at the standard pragmatic model of metaphor comprehension and Sam Glucksberg’s critique of that model, and we have examined prototypical definitions of *literal* exemplified by the *OED* and possible answers to a deconstructive reading of the contradictions in this definition. In each of these examples, we have seen that literal meaning, whatever else it may be, is tacitly understood by minimally competent interlocutors. One might expect, then, that the meanings we describe as literal would tend to coincide with what a typical language user understands tacitly. But as we will see in the examples that follow below and continue in Chapter 2, this is not usually the case. Explicitly literal interpretation (what we describe as literal) tends to diverge from tacitly literal interpretation (what we should describe as literal if we truly believed that minimally competent interlocutors are exemplars).

### **Applying the Litmus Test to Two Texts That Privilege Literal Interpretation of the Bible**

Recall from above that the *OED* lists possible exclusionary criteria that might keep the most contextually appropriate meaning of a message from being considered its literal meaning: “extended sense,” “metaphorical meaning,” and “underlying

significance.” We will now consider two fringe definitions of literal interpretation that do not allow for any of these exclusionary criteria, instead deferring doggedly to contextually appropriate meaning, whatever that may be. In both cases, literal meaning is equated with authorial intent, even when this overlaps with what we would otherwise consider figurative and, therefore, antithetical to literal meaning.

Our first text comes from Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. Near the beginning of his magnum opus, Aquinas claims, “[T]he literal sense is that which the author intends, and [...] the author of Holy Writ is God.”<sup>16</sup> Aquinas also specifies that if God, the author, intends it as such, then the Bible’s literal meaning can be what we might otherwise describe as metaphorical: “When Scripture speaks of God’s arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely operative power.”<sup>17</sup> Let us begin by asking the first question in our litmus test:

1. Does the use of *literal* in a given instance of explicitly literal interpretation either privilege or disparage the meaning it identifies, or is it merely used as a neutral term in order to make a helpful distinction?

Aquinas equates literal meaning with what God, as author, intends; clearly, he privileges literal meaning. While he does make a helpful distinction between two senses of God’s arm, this is far from a “mere” distinction. Aquinas would not be saying the same thing if we substituted *different* for *literal*: “the [different] sense is that which the author intends, and [...] [T]he author of Holy Writ is God.” Or, “When Scripture speaks of God’s arm, the [different] sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely operative power.” For Aquinas, it is vital that one not only see operative

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16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.1.10.

17. *Ibid.*

power as the correct interpretation of “God’s arm” but also as its literal interpretation.

Moving on to our second question:

2. If the designated literal meaning is either privileged or disparaged, is this because it is thought to be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors?

In this case our answer is a bit complicated because Aquinas privileges literal meaning for two reasons: (1) it is what God, the most maximally competent interlocutor possible, intends and (2) it is what God’s people, as minimally competent interlocutors, understand. The surrounding context makes it clear how important it is for Aquinas that his hermeneutic not only align with orthodox Christian teaching but also be perceived as easy to understand. It is not enough for God’s Word to be true; it must also be simple, for he is responding to the notion that “many different senses in one text produce confusion and deception and destroy all force of argument.”<sup>18</sup> Aquinas acknowledges that there are spiritual senses, but denies that this results in any confusion, “for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory.”<sup>19</sup> The implication is that even if the spiritual senses are harder to understand, they are founded on literal meaning, which is plain for all to see. Aquinas concludes with the bold claim that, even if the mysteries of the spiritual senses remain hidden to some people, “nothing of Holy Scripture perishes on account of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by the Scripture in its literal sense.”<sup>20</sup> For Aquinas, it is vital that spiritual truths, which may be harder to understand, be superfluous, inessential, and

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18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

dispensable. The sense that God intends must be the same as the sense most readily understood whenever God's people read God's Word. This brings us to our third question:

3. Is this meaning in fact tacit to minimally competent interlocutors?

On the one hand, yes, the meaning of "operative power" is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors when they read of "God's arm" in the Bible. As Glucksberg has shown, apt metaphors are understood just as readily as sensible literal statements, but Glucksberg would still call this a metaphor. Most likely, the reader can agree with Aquinas's distinction and his assessment of the correct meaning of "God's arm," but we are more likely to parse the distinction like the modern-day *Expositors Dictionary of Bible Words*: "It is the non-literal usage of ['arm'] that is most significant. In these passages, the senses of 'arm' are metaphorical, referring basically to the phenomena of power and strength on both the divine and human level."<sup>21</sup> Why does Aquinas not only insist that "God's arm" means "God's power," but also that this is the literal meaning of "God's arm," rather than its metaphorical meaning? This is not just backwards to our modern sensibilities; it is a reversal of Augustine's teaching on the matter as well:

Now to think of God as forming man from the slime of the earth with bodily hands is childish. Indeed, if Scripture had said such a thing, we should be compelled to believe that the writer had used a metaphor rather than that God is contained in the structure of members such as we know in our bodies.

For it is said, "Thy hand hath scattered the nations (Ps 44:2)," and, "Thou didst bring Thy people forth with a strong hand and outstretched arm (Ps 136:12)." But anyone in his right mind understands that the name of the bodily member has been used in these passages for the power and might of God.<sup>22</sup>

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21. *Expositor's Dictionary of Bible Words*, s.v. "arm," ed. Stephen D. Renn (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 58.

22. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 6.12.20 (ACW 1:192).



Aquinas's wording also suggests that even his contemporary audience would have imagined a bodily limb of flesh and bone when asked to describe the literal meaning of "God's arm," for there is no reason to write, "the literal sense is not that God has such a member..." unless you expect your audience to assume the literal sense is that God does indeed have such a member, while the metaphorical sense is that God is powerful. It would seem Aquinas draws his *o* like most others would draw an *e*. We can learn to decipher his handwriting and read him charitably with a few moments of familiarity because language still works so long as distinctions are still being made, but we must not confuse accepting Aquinas's distinction between operative power and a bodily member with accepting his reversal of which interpretation warrants the name *literal*. Aquinas's reversal may not be malicious. As Saussure reminds us, "It is precisely because the terms *a* and *b* as such are radically incapable of reaching the level of consciousness—one is always conscious of only the *a/b* difference—that each term is free to change."<sup>23</sup> But the effect of Aquinas's reversal is to collapse the distinction between what God means and what God's people understand tacitly. By illustrating his reversal with the relatively noncontroversial example of God's arm, Aquinas (perhaps unintentionally) masks the reality that he is deferring literal meaning—not to God's intent—but to his interpretation of God's intent, which he will then portray to his readers as if it were plain and obvious to them prior to reading his lengthy and persuasive arguments on various subjects.

In 1982, more than seven hundred years after Aquinas wrote his *Summa*, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) drafted the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics (CSBH), intended as a companion to their earlier Chicago

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23. Saussure, *Course*, 118.

Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI). In the CSBH, they affirm the literal interpretation of Scripture and define it as follows:

Article XV

*WE AFFIRM* the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.

*WE DENY* the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support.<sup>24</sup>

This brief quotation makes it easy to quickly answer the first two parts of our litmus test. With regard to the first part, literal interpretation is clearly privileged by the CSBH. It is affirmed as a “necessity,” and meaning unsupported by the literal sense is explicitly denied as illegitimate. With regard to the second part of our test, the fact that the word *normal* is presented as synonymous with *literal* suggests that literal meaning is perceived as being tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. However, the addition of the technical term *grammatical-historical* (which is also presented as synonymous), combined with the assertion that literal meaning “will take account of all figures of speech,” complicates matters. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* lists five aspects of a biblical passage’s context that grammatical-historical exegesis seeks to understand: biblical languages, types of literature, historical background, geographical conditions, and life setting.<sup>25</sup> All of this implies a method of analysis more accessible to Bible scholars, seminary graduates, and other maximally competent interlocutors than the

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24. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” 1982, in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 884–5.

25. F. F. Bruce and J. J. Scott, Jr., “Interpretation and the Bible,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 611–2.

minimally competent laity. Ideally, this type of expert analysis would arrive at “the meaning which the writer expressed,” and it would certainly strive to “take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.” It seems, then, that the technical term *grammatical-historical* is a more precise descriptor of what the statement actually seeks to affirm, and that *literal* is the odd term out.

Norman L. Geisler’s official ICBI-sanctioned commentary on the CSBH nearly admits as much: “To be sure the English word *literal* carries some problematic connotations with it. Hence the words *normal* and *grammatical-historical* are used to explain what is meant.”<sup>26</sup> Why, then, did those assembled insist on including the “problematic” word *literal* front and center in such a carefully worded and extensively revised document? I think because there is no other word that can blur the distinction between maximally and minimally competent interlocutors as effectively as *literal*. The framers employ the term *literal*, not in spite of its “problematic connotations,” but precisely because of them. The pliability of this term is what allows those who affirm biblical inerrancy to assert in a single breath that one must consult the Hebrew to properly understand a certain passage in the Old Testament, that another was not fully appreciated as a typology prefiguring Christ until many centuries later, and that, with good translations and the spiritual gift of Christian hindsight, all of this should be clear to a twentieth-century layperson. And it is very important to these co-signers that the

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26. Norman L. Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics Articles of Affirmation and Denial,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 898.

meaning of biblical passages (yes, they believe there is only one<sup>27</sup>) be capable of being understood tacitly by the simplest member of God’s family:

#### Article XXIII

*WE AFFIRM* the clarity of Scripture and specifically of its message about salvation from sin.

*WE DENY* that all passages of Scripture are equally clear or have equal bearing on the message of redemption.

#### Article XXIV

*WE AFFIRM* that a person is not dependent for understanding of Scripture on the expertise of biblical scholars.

*WE DENY* that a person should ignore the fruits of the technical study of Scripture by biblical scholars.<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding the caveats in each article’s denial, it is difficult to maintain that the meaning of Scripture is clear to those who lack training in the finer points of biblical exegesis while still affirming the grammatical-historical method as the surest strategy for correct interpretation. The CSBH manages this by recasting *literal* as a technical term that conflates the “normal” sense, the “grammatical-historical sense,” and “the meaning which the writer expressed” into one concept. Thus the “normal” meaning understood by an average modern-day reader is the same as what the author intended, which is the same as the meaning derived by biblical scholars, because all these interlocutors are at least minimally competent and share an unspoken understanding between them through the

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27. Article VII affirms “that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed,” and Article XVIII affirms “that the Bible’s own interpretation of itself is always correct, never deviating from, but rather elucidating, the single meaning of the inspired text. The single meaning of a prophet’s words includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding of those words by the prophet and necessarily involves the intention of God evidenced in the fulfillment of those words.”

28. CSBH, 886.

work of the Holy Spirit. The CSBH employs the term *literal*, not in spite of its “problematic connotations,” but precisely because of them.

Saussure writes that “any conceptual difference perceived by the mind seeks to find expression through a distinct signifier, and two ideas that are no longer distinct in the mind tend to merge into the same signifier.”<sup>29</sup> Both trends are at play here. Not only does the CSBH tend to merge the understandings of biblical scholars and laity (as we have just seen), it simultaneously seeks to distinguish between one type of biblical scholar and another. The term grammatical-historical is rare outside evangelical circles, and the preferred term for analysis that accounts for literary and historical context in more liberal scholarship is historical-critical. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* asserts that this method theoretically has similar goals to the preferred grammatical-historical method, but with the fatal flaw of rejecting, *a priori*, the possibility of the supernatural.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, scholars dedicated to the historical-critical method might say that the evangelical version has similar goals but bears the fatal flaw of assuming, *a priori*, that most passages of the Bible correspond to historical fact.<sup>31</sup>

Taking account “of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text,” many historical-critical scholars have concluded that Jonah is a genre-bending anomaly. Organized canonically as one of the minor prophets, the entire book contains only a single line of prophecy: “Forty days hence, and Nineveh shall be destroyed!” (3:4). Nevertheless, the terse announcement of doom results in overblown repentance on the part of the Assyrians (and their animals! [3:5-8]) rivaled in hyperbole only by Jonah’s

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29. Saussure, *Course*, 121.

30. Bruce and Scott, “Interpretation,” 614–5.

31. This is, indeed, affirmed in Article XIV of the CSBH.

original rebellion in fleeing to the westernmost edge of the known world when God had commanded him to go east (1:1-3). Ironically, the success of Jonah's preaching technically renders him a false prophet according to the litmus test outlined in Deut 18:22: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it." Nineveh itself is described with the implausibly large diameter of a three days' walk (3:4), (which is especially surprising given that the population supposedly maxes out somewhere around a hundred twenty thousand [4:11]), and Jonah's response to the loss of his shade is the melodramatic pronouncement that he should probably just go ahead and die (4:8). All of these peculiarities have led historical-critical scholars to suggest that the text itself does not present itself as history, but Geisler's commentary on the CSBH specifically rejects this possibility, arguing that Jesus's words in Matt 12:40-42 refer to Jonah as a historical person.<sup>32</sup> Article XXII represents the only place where the CSBH itself (as opposed to Geisler's commentary) singles out a particular interpretation of a specific passage:

#### Article XXII

WE AFFIRM that Genesis 1–11 is factual, as is the rest of the book.

WE DENY that the teachings of Genesis 1–11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.<sup>33</sup>

Geissler's commentary offers some interesting behind-the-scenes information about which science-driven reinterpretations are allowable under the wording of this

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32. Geisler, "Explaining Hermeneutics," 897.

33. CSBH, 886.

Article and which are not. The Article is meant to explicitly deny “theistic varieties” of “belief in macro-evolution,” but “the question of the age of the earth” is intentionally “left open.” For a person who denies that church councils have authority over plain-as-day Scripture, Geissler’s reasoning for this openness is interesting: “there is no unanimity among evangelicals.”<sup>34</sup> Here Derrida would have us catch a glimpse of where literal meaning is ultimately deferred: unanimity among evangelicals. Literal meaning is not that which is tacit to just any minimally competent interlocutor, nor to the consensus of all biblical scholars considered together, but only to a small community of maximally competent evangelical scholars who follow the grammatical-historical method, which somehow precludes belief in theistic macro-evolution but remains agnostic on whether the generations tabulated throughout the Bible should be calculated to support young earth creationism.

Here it will be worth comparing and contrasting the CSBH with Aquinas’s comments in the *Summa*. Like Aquinas, the framers of the CSBH would agree that the literal meaning of God’s arm is power since literal meaning is taken to be inclusive of figurative language in their model. Also like Aquinas, the CSBH ultimately equates literal meaning with God’s intent when considered in tandem with the earlier CSBI:

The theological reality of inspiration in the producing of Biblical documents corresponds to that of spoken prophecies: although the human writers’ personalities were expressed in what they wrote, the words were divinely constituted. Thus, what Scripture says, God says; its authority is His authority, for He is its ultimate Author, having given it through the minds and words of chosen and prepared men who in freedom and faithfulness “spoke from God as they were

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34. Geisler, “Explaining Hermeneutics,” 903.

carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21).” Holy Scripture must be acknowledged as the Word of God by virtue of its divine origin.<sup>35</sup>

On other matters, such as the CSBI’s denial in Article II “that Church creeds, councils, or declarations have authority greater than or equal to the authority of the Bible,”<sup>36</sup> the framers part ways with Aquinas. They may have done well, however, to heed Aquinas’s warning from the *Summa*, with which he introduced his discussion of the second day of creation:

In discussing questions of this kind two rules are to be observed, as Augustine teaches. The first is, to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering. The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular explanation, only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing.<sup>37</sup>

In their zeal for Augustine’s first rule, the framers of the CSBH may have neglected the second. Aquinas, meanwhile, warns against over-committing oneself and defers meaning to a possible future where previously held interpretations might have to be abandoned. If there comes a day when those who subscribe to the CSBH abandon a previously held interpretation, it will be interesting to see whether they will find expression through a new and distinct signifier, or recast literal meaning again in their own image.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have explored what is meant by the questions in our three-part litmus test and applied the test to two cases in which the literal meaning of Scripture is

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35. ICBI, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy: Exposition,” 1978, in R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary* (Oakland, CA: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980), 48.

36. CSBI: Articles of Affirmation and Denial, 43.

37. Aquinas, *ST* 1.68.1.



privileged. I believe these examples are timely in an age when 24% of Americans agree with the statement, “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” but it would be a mistake to assume that the phenomenon of describing as literal precisely those interpretations which diverge from the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors is limited only to those who privilege the literal interpretation of Scripture. As the examples in the following chapter will show, this tendency is woven into the very fabric of language itself. This suggests that most of us are predisposed to make explicitly literal interpretations that contradict the typical assumption that literal meaning is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors and that the slippery statements sometimes made by those who privilege the literal interpretation of Scripture may not be intentionally duplicitous.

CHAPTER II  
EXPLICITLY LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND INCOMPETENT OR  
MAXIMALLY COMPETENT INTERLOCUTORS

The purpose of this chapter is to show that our collective propensity for describing as literal precisely those interpretations that deviate from what is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors is not limited to those who privilege the literal meaning of Scripture for theological reasons. We will begin by looking at the intensive and superfluous uses of *literally* in light of Paul Grice's cooperative principle, which predicts that audiences try to interpret each word a speaker chooses to include as significant. Applied to situations where speakers use the word *literal* in their utterance to guide audience interpretation of their words, this leads us to the counterintuitive realization that we use the word only if we predict that the meaning we wish to convey would not otherwise be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. We will then shift our focus to situations where speakers use *literal* to describe other people's interpretations and find that we tend to use it only for those we deem either incompetent or maximally competent. At the end of the chapter, we will return to another text that privileges the literal meaning of Scripture and includes the earliest attestation of *literal* in English recorded by the *OED*. The strange usage in this text will demonstrate that the phenomenon we have been examining is not a corruption of a once unspoiled state, but has been the norm ever since this peculiar little word's introduction into our language.

### Grice's Cooperative Principle and the Intensive and "Superfluous" Uses of *Literally*

Paul Grice first outlined his concept of the cooperative principle in his essay, "Logic and Conversation." Although the maxims he puts forward in this essay sound like prescriptive advice, they are intended to describe general truths about how language works. As Grice explains:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation). But at each stage, some possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable.<sup>1</sup>

Grice goes on to describe four categories of maxims that, generally speaking, demarcate conversationally unsuitable moves. The two that are relevant to our current inquiry are Grice's maxim of quantity, which includes the submaxim, "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required,"<sup>2</sup> and his maxim of manner, which includes the submaxim, "Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)."<sup>3</sup> Grice writes that a possible consequence of flouting the maxim of quantity is that "hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular POINT in the provision of the excess information [emphasis original]."<sup>4</sup> It follows from this observation that speakers who do in fact have a particular point to make by including the word *literal* or *literally* in their utterance do not flout Grice's maxim. This leads us to a paradoxical conclusion. A

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1. H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," *Syntax and Semantics* 3 (1975), 45.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 46.

4. Ibid.

speaker who includes *literal* or *literally* (*l*) in their utterance follows Grice's cooperative principle if and only if the speaker believes that saying what they want to say (*x*) runs the risk of miscommunication, while including *literal* or *literally* along with what they want to say (*x + l*) lessens the risk of miscommunication. This means that, at least in the speaker's estimation, including *l* will guide the audience (presumably comprised of minimally competent interlocutors) to some interpretation other than the interpretation that would have come most naturally to them, had the speaker said *x* without *l*. Our judgments regarding whether the speaker was right to include *l* follow the same criteria: if we think a minimally competent interpreter was unlikely to understand the speaker's intended meaning upon hearing *x* without *l*, and if *x + l* seems to increase the chances of correct understanding (or if we can at least acknowledge that the speaker thought or hoped it would improve communication), then we tend to rule in favor of the speaker's choice to include *l*.

We can illustrate with two opposite reactions to a merely hungry person who says, "I'm literally starving": one objecting and the other accepting. If one objects to the usage, one might argue that it waters down the meaning of *literally* and makes it difficult or impossible for those who use the word correctly to communicate effectively. H. W. Fowler, in his early-20<sup>th</sup>-century *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, complained, "We have come to such a pass with this emphasize that where the truth would require us to insert with a strong expression, 'not literally, of course, but in a manner of speaking,' we do not hesitate to insert the very word we should be at pains to repudiate [...] such false coin makes honest traffic in words impossible."<sup>5</sup> According to this sentiment, if a

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5. Henry Watson Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 328.

situation arises where it is necessary to say, “I’m literally starving,” in order to convey actual life-threatening malnourishment, it will no longer be possible to do so. An unavoidable corollary to this line of thinking is the acknowledgement that, in cases where one deems it absolutely necessary to use the word *literally* (rather than merely helpful), one thinks the meaning of the word or phrase  $x$  is different from the meaning conveyed by  $x + l$ . If one believes it is necessary in a given context to say “I’m literally starving” in order to convey actual life-threatening malnourishment, then one also believes that the tacit meaning of “I’m starving”—taken in context and without the inclusion of  $l$ —would have been “I’m very hungry” in that particular instance.

Those who accept a merely hungry person’s complaint of literal starvation might point out that the intensive use dates back centuries,<sup>6</sup> appears in other languages besides English,<sup>7</sup> and has now become the most common use of *literally* in contemporary English.<sup>8</sup> Sheidlower, for example, defends the intensive use on the grounds that it is widespread “even in the works of the authors we are often told to emulate” and seems to have enjoyed more than a century of general acceptance prior to any modern objections.<sup>9</sup> If we are willing to accept the intensive usage as a fact of life, we will see that the speaker who deliberately says, “I’m literally starving” to communicate “I’m really hungry” does so because they think alternative statements (such as the slightly less

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6. Jesse Sheidlower, “The Word We Love to Hate: Literally,” *Slate*, 1 Nov 2005, [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_good\\_word/2005/11/the\\_word\\_we\\_love\\_to\\_hate.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2005/11/the_word_we_love_to_hate.html).

7. See footnote 9 from introduction.

8. This is why dictionaries marketed to second-language learners, which tend to organize entries according to frequency of use rather than earliest attestation, sometimes include the intensive use of *literally* as the primary definition under its headword. For example, although its editors include a disclaimer, “Some careful speakers of English think this use is incorrect,” the first thing the 5<sup>th</sup> edition Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s Dictionary has to say about *literally* is “You can use literally to emphasize a statement” (Bishopbriggs, Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2005), 840.

9. Sheidlower, “The Word We Love to Hate.”

hyperbolic “I’m starving,” without *literally*, or the accurate but bland “I’m really hungry”) will not convey the appropriate severity of gastronomic discomfort to the audience. Emphasis, then, is a sort of affirmative action the speaker employs to counteract the speaker’s expectation that the audience will not take the words seriously enough.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a more accepting response still reiterates that a speaker’s choice to make an interpretation explicitly literal by adding *l* coincides with a speaker’s prediction (whether accurate or false) that what they want to say would not otherwise be understood by minimally competent interlocutors.

Therefore both responses to the intensive usage show that speakers use the word *literally* in their utterances to guide audiences toward interpretations that the speaker deems non-tacit. The reverse is also true: when audiences encounter the word *literally*, they treat it as a cue to reinterpret their initial tacit understanding of what the speaker was trying to communicate. This is why seemingly superfluous uses of *literally* tend to bother us. The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary describes this use as synonymous with *simply* or *just* and offers the example, “Then you literally cut the sausage down the middle.”<sup>11</sup> *Literally, A Web Log*<sup>12</sup> developed a system of tagging some examples

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10. Prescriptive style guides have rightly pointed out that there seems to be no end to this arms race of hyperbole. Wynford Hicks, in *Quite Literally: Problem Words and How to Use Them*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 132–3 theorizes that the construction “quite literally” was originally used by those seeking to distinguish their use of *literally* from the intensive use before “quite literally” was itself co-opted as a super intensive. She then concludes with two examples of the abominable construction, “quite literally, in fact,” presumably spawned by those seeking to distinguish their meaning from the intensive use of “quite literally.” One notorious speech (“Senator Biden’s Remarks in Springfield, Ill,” 23 Aug 2008, transcript, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/23/us/politics/23text-biden.html>) by then-vice-presidential candidate Joe Biden included one instance of emphatic reduplication (“literally, literally”) and the even more insistent “literally, not figuratively, literally.” But regardless of how successful or ill-advised such attempts at emphasis may be, the fact remains that those who use *literally* as an intensive do so because they believe the construction  $x + l$  will help their audience come nearer to their intended meaning than  $x$  alone.

11. *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. “literally,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literally>.

“incorrect” and others “unnecessary” to distinguish between the two types of “abuse.” Several snippets from CNN news coverage of the 2008 Iowa caucuses were tagged as “unnecessary,” including John Edwards’s “Tomorrow morning, 37 million of our own people will wake up literally worried about feeding and clothing their own children,”<sup>13</sup> and Mike Huckabee’s “We also want to say thanks to our three children who are with us tonight [...] [o]ur older son John Mark, our son David, his wife Lauren, our daughter Sarah, who’s literally lived in Iowa for the past two and a half months.”<sup>14</sup>

When these “unnecessary” or superfluous uses are denounced, the argument is that, while the statement may be factually correct, *literally* should not be included unless the audience would be likely to misinterpret the statement if the adverb were not present. But it is likely that most of the examples that could be construed as superfluous are not intended as such by the speaker. Two readers of *Literally, A Web Log* came to Huckabee’s defense, each with a different theory regarding the possible intent behind his choice to include the word *literally* in the statement that his daughter had lived in Iowa for the past two and a half months. One reader suggested that that members of Huckabee’s family might have “changed their permanent residence, sold their old home and bought a new house or rented an apartment, changed the address on their drivers licenses, enrolled their children in new schools, and changed job locations.”<sup>15</sup> Another

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12. The stated purpose of this blog, which has since gone defunct, was “tracking the use and abuse of the word ‘literally.’”

13. John Edwards, speech to supporters at Iowa caucus, 3 Jan 2008, “Barack Obama and Mike Huckabee Win Big in Iowa,” transcript, CNN, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0801/03/se.03.html>.

14. Mike Huckabee, *Ibid.*

15. M Sinclair Stevens, comment 17 Jan 2008, on Fitz, “Literally the Future of Our Country,” *Literally, a Web Log*, 13 Jan 2008,

opined that perhaps Huckabee meant to emphasize that they had “stayed within the borders of the state, continuously, for the time period stated.”<sup>16</sup> The thrust of both explanations is that in order for Huckabee’s use to be correct, rather than superfluous, the inclusion of *literally* must be an attempt to guide the audience toward an interpretation of “lived in Iowa for two and a half months” that is different from what our most natural understanding of “lived in Iowa for two and a half months” would otherwise have been. Once again, we see that the speaker’s use of *l* is judged correct if and only if the explicitly literal interpretation the speaker is trying to highlight is different from the interpretation that—at least in the speaker’s estimation—would otherwise have been most tacit to the intended audience.

The result of our expectation that speakers will follow the cooperative principle is that, when we encounter *l* in their speech, we treat it as a clue to reevaluate the words they have just spoken, rather than as a nonsensical sign meaning “interpret my words just as you would have, had I not included this one.” This leads us into the strange position of accepting explicitly literal interpretations that employ word play, puns, and double entendres—things normally considered antithetical to literal meaning. Because these uses of *l* follow the cooperative principle, they are not criticized as often as the intensive and superfluous uses, despite their eccentricity. Consider the following one-liners, which each rely on the inclusion of *l* to help audiences catch the joke:

1. A ton of people is literally 12 to 15 people.<sup>17</sup>

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20080705220831/http://literally.barelyfitz.com/2008/01/13/literally-john-edwards-2008/#comments>.

16. Chris, comment 18 Jan 2008, Ibid.

17. CorfishPie, submission to /r/Showerthoughts (Reddit), 24 Jan 2014, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1w1ctp/a\\_ton\\_of\\_people\\_is\\_literally\\_12\\_to\\_15\\_people/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1w1ctp/a_ton_of_people_is_literally_12_to_15_people/).



2. Spacesuits are literally made to protect astronauts from nothing.<sup>18</sup>
3. Peter Dinklage is literally a white dwarf star.<sup>19</sup>
4. Childbirth is literally an emergency.<sup>20</sup>
5. We come from where we come from, literally.<sup>21</sup>

In the first example, *l* serves as a clue to interpret *ton* as a measure of weight rather than number, and the joke depends on the expectation that the audience would more naturally interpret *ton* as a measure of number when used to describe people and consider 12 to 15 too few (and oddly specific) to warrant the description. The second example recognizes that we would not normally consider *nothing* a danger we need to be protected from.<sup>22</sup> The third example refers to an Emmy award-winning actor of European ancestry, who was born with achondroplasia. Of course, the three-word phrase *white dwarf star* more commonly refers to a stable, relatively cold star that does not undergo nuclear fusion but avoids gravitational collapse into a black hole by the repulsion of electrons. Even when analyzed word-by-word, two out of the phrase's three components

18. cyberk25, submission to /r/Showerthoughts, 15 May 2014, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/25143m/spacesuits\\_are\\_literally\\_made\\_to\\_protect/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/25143m/spacesuits_are_literally_made_to_protect/).

19. sangbum60090, submission to /r/Showerthoughts, 16 Aug 2014, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/2dorul/peter\\_dinklage\\_is\\_literally\\_a\\_white\\_dwarf\\_star/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/2dorul/peter_dinklage_is_literally_a_white_dwarf_star/).

20. submission to /r/Showerthoughts, 2 Dec 2013, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1rxg9b/childbirth\\_is\\_literally\\_an\\_emergency/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1rxg9b/childbirth_is_literally_an_emergency/).

21. submission to /r/Showerthoughts, 22 Sep 2013, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1mwko0/we\\_come\\_from\\_where\\_we\\_come\\_from\\_literally/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/1mwko0/we_come_from_where_we_come_from_literally/).

22. A pseudo-scientific defense of the smart aleck's use of *l* here might point out that the vacuum of space is, technically speaking, closer to the absolute meaning of *nothing* than what we find in everyday speech (for example, we say "There is nothing on my plate," when there are still crumbs, the last bit of sauce, and the atmosphere above and around everything on Earth, or "I've done nothing today," when we have actually been breathing, metabolizing, letting our thoughts wander, and watching television). However, the meaning of *nothing* is always context dependent, and spacesuits protect astronauts from additional "things" besides the vacuum of space, such as solar radiation. Furthermore, even if we allow that the *nothing* of outer space is closer to the absolute meaning of *nothing* than the *nothing* of everyday speech, the point remains that the absolute meaning is not the most tacit meaning since the absolute meaning is so rarely employed.

have meanings closer to their core definitions when used to describe a celestial body rather than a human being: *white* and *star*. Yet in this example, including the word *literally* helps interpreters access tertiary definitions for two of the phrase's components and switch a general meaning of *dwarf* for a more specific one even though the general meaning of relative smallness would usually be the preferred meaning in the context of the full phrase.

In these first three examples, while including *l* certainly gives the audience a better chance of understanding the joke, it may not be absolutely necessary. The incongruity of describing a few people as a ton of people, of needing protection from nothing, and of using the term for a rather specific kind of astronomical phenomenon to describe a living person would perhaps offer enough of a clue that the words must be reevaluated to be properly understood. However, in the last two examples, there would be little reason to reevaluate the one-liner for a hidden meaning if *l* were not included. Because labor is considered a medical emergency, the audience might take the statement "Childbirth is an emergency," at face value if *l* were not included. The addition of *l* discourages, rather than encourages, taking the joke at face value and hints that the author intends a play on the word *emerge*.<sup>23</sup> As for our final example, the statement "We come from where we come from," sounds tautological without *l*. Tautology violates Grice's cooperative principle by flouting the maxim of relevance, which should be enough to make the audience seek a less straightforward meaning, but perhaps not enough to help interpreters catch on to the crude nature of the joke. Without *l*, "We come from where we

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23. It just so happens that the word *emergency* derives etymologically from the word *emerge*. If etymological meaning is an important component of one's mental definition of *literal*, an interpretation that heightens awareness of the "emergence" of an emergency may be considered more literal than the more natural interpretation of the sentence, "Childbirth is an emergency." However, awareness of this etymological connection is not a necessary prerequisite for understanding or even crafting the joke.

come from” could be interpreted as a blasé statement about the futility of trying to change a person’s background, similar to what the idiom “boys will be boys” says about a person’s nature. Adding *l* to the equation helps the reader understand that the first *come* in this one-liner refers to genetic origins, while the second refers to male ejaculation. In all five of these examples, the jokester includes *l* to guide their audience toward an interpretation of the one-liner that is quite different from the interpretation that would otherwise be tacitly understood by a minimally competent interlocutor.

### **Disparaging Incompetent and Maximally Competent Interlocutors**

In the previous section, we looked at various situations in which speakers include *l* in their utterance to guide audience interpretation. In each of these cases, we have seen that the speaker’s use and audience’s interpretation of *l* leads away from the meaning assumed to be tacit to minimally competent interlocutors. We now turn to situations where one uses *l*, not to guide audience interpretation of one’s own statement, but to describe the interpretations of others. Overwhelmingly, those we describe as literal-minded correspond to those we perceive as either incompetent or maximally competent.

A prime example of an incompetent interlocutor we describe as literal is found in the children’s book character Amelia Bedelia, created by Peggy Parrish. At first glance, it may seem Bedelia’s problem is that she always ascribes a single meaning to a single word: after all, she ices fish the same way she ices a cake,<sup>24</sup> and she catches a fish<sup>25</sup> the same way she catches a ball.<sup>26</sup> But what truly defines Bedelia’s literal-mindedness is that,

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24. Peggy Parrish, *Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995; repr., 1966), 19–21.

25. Parrish, *Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping* (New York: Greenwillow, 1985), 18–21.

26. Parrish, *Play Ball, Amelia Bedelia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1972), 42–44.

whatever meaning her employers intend and whatever meaning seems most natural to the reader in context, Bedelia interprets things a different way. She is apparently capable of understanding that the word *trim* can mean both “cut” and “decorate,” but when Mrs. Rogers asks her to, “trim the fat before you put the steak in the ice box,” Bedelia decorates the fat with ribbons and lace,<sup>27</sup> and when Mrs. Rogers instructs her to, “Trim the [Christmas] tree,” Bedelia prunes it with garden shears.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, she understands two possible meanings of the noun *camp*: one emphasizing location (a camp might be a particular place set aside for habitual camping, often containing permanent structures that are difficult to erect before nightfall), and another emphasizing function (a camp might be any place where one chooses to camp for the night). What makes Bedelia literal-minded is that, whichever sense of *camp* Mr. Rogers and the reader will understand from context, Bedelia will be thinking of the opposite one:

Amelia Bedelia looked all around.  
 “But where is the camp?” she asked.  
 “The camp is in the car,” said Mr. Rogers.  
 “In the car!” said Amelia Bedelia. “We’re going to camp in the car?”  
 “The things we need to make the camp are in the car,” said Mr. Rogers.  
 “Make the camp!” said Amelia Bedelia. “We have to make the camp?”  
 “Just forget it,” said Mr. Rogers.”<sup>29</sup>

The fun of reading the stories is that the reader knows Bedelia will misinterpret things on account of her literal-mindedness, but does not know how. When told to “check” the shirts that have been delivered by a laundry service, the reader might expect

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27. Parrish, *Amelia Bedelia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983; repr. 1963), [no page numbers in this edition].

28. Parrish, *Merry Christmas, Amelia Bedelia* (New York: Greenwillow, 1986), 36–37.

29. Parrish, *Camping* 9–11.

her to draw check marks on them (she ends up “checkering” them with red squares),<sup>30</sup> but one thing the reader knows for sure is that she will not simply count them to see if any are missing. Stories about maximally competent interlocutors such as genies are fun for the same reason: we know these entities will play with language, but we do not know exactly how. Their literal interpretations of wishes not only diverge from the meaning tacit to ill-fated protagonists; they are also beyond the ability of minimally competent readers to predict—even when the reader expects something devious. If the genie is presented with a request for a million bucks, the reader does not know if our naïve hero will end up with a million male deer, a million oxford shoes, or a horse that is impossible to ride, but the reader does know the genie will certainly not bestow one million USD (unless our wish-maker is the beneficiary to a loved one’s life insurance policy, or unless the cash appears instantaneously in the form of cascading pennies falling like hail upon the defenseless protagonist’s head). Relative to both hero and reader, then, genies are maximally competent interlocutors, able to outwit and surprise us. And just as with Amelia Bedelia, who continues to surprise us with new depths of dimwittedness, the further these characters venture from what is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors, the more literal they seem to us. When Antonio forfeits his loan in *The Merchant of Venice*, the human trickster Shylock demands from Antonio a pound of his own flesh according to a maliciously literal reading of their contract.<sup>31</sup> Yet Antonio is saved by

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30. Parrish, *Thank You, Amelia Bedelia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993; repr. 1964). 14–19.

31. Critics Sergio Costola and Michael Saenger manage to describe Shylock with a form of the word *literal* six times in a single paragraph in their essay “Shylock’s Venice and the Grammar of the Modern City” in *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance: Appropriation, Transformation, Opposition*, ed. Michelle Marrapondi (New York: Routledge, 2016), 151: “As many have noted, Shylock’s perverse spirituality is linked to, and dilated by, his perverse literalism. He pursues a very literal reading of the collateral of Antonio’s loan, desiring a pound of flesh, and this literal reading of their contract ties to Shylock’s literal understanding of vengeance, which seems to be based on the kind of retributive law

Portia, who outsmarts Shylock by “out-literalizing” him three times over. First, she argues that since Shylock’s contract only mentions flesh, he is legally bound to complete the impossible task of removing a pound from Antonio’s body without spilling a single drop of blood.<sup>32</sup> Second, he must remove neither more nor less than one pound exactly; the scale may not budge by even “the estimation of a hair.”<sup>33</sup> Third, when Shylock admits defeat and reluctantly accepts a prior offer of monetary compensation for Antonio’s defaulted loan, Portia reminds everyone that he has already refused this offer in open court, and declared himself that he will have nothing but the pound of flesh.<sup>34</sup>

Children are often considered to represent another prime example of literal-mindedness. An introductory linguistics textbook has this to say about their language development: “[O]ne child, knowing that *say* means ‘to utter’, said about a sign: ‘The sign wrote...’ rather than ‘The sign said...’ She had not yet learned the metaphorical meaning of *say*.”<sup>35</sup> This struck me as an odd way of putting it when I read the textbook as a student. While it is probably true this child did not know the metaphorical meaning of *say*, she invented a novel metaphorical meaning for *wrote* to compensate, so it is not as if metaphor comprehension as such were beyond this child’s capabilities. The standard expression and the child’s novel one both anthropomorphize the sign. No fluent speaker of English is likely to reinvent this child’s creative expression, and neither, perhaps, is

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outlined in Leviticus 24. Shylock is equally literal in his exegesis of Laban’s husbandry of sheep, which he reads as a precedent for usury. This literalism is litigious and exegetical, and it is also linguistic.”

32. 4.2.305-12

33. 4.2.324-32

34. 4.2.338-9

35. Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck, *Linguistics for Everyone*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 313

any other child. To be sure, all children misunderstand adult speech at one time or another and seem to have a harder time with metaphor, hyperbole, and sarcasm, but not all children misunderstand the same speech at the same time in the same way. What is more important to remember for our present investigation, however, is that the types of children's misunderstandings we attribute to literal-mindedness are, by definition, *misunderstandings*. Diverging from the tacit understanding of minimally competent adult interpreters is a necessary prerequisite for our decision to describe a child's (mis)understanding as a literal one, for when children take as literal a statement intended literally, this is seldom offered up as an example of their literal-mindedness. The examples that follow were all given as replies to the question, "[I]n what memorable ways have your kids answered you literally?" asked on an online forum.<sup>36</sup>

1. I took my three-year-old son to see Santa. After he asked for a Buzz Lightyear toy, Santa offered him a sticker. My son said, "No thank you, just Buzz Lightyear."<sup>37</sup>
2. My son and his friend were tracing each other's body outlines on the sidewalk with chalk. I marveled at their work, and then suggested they color in their faces. I watched my son coloring in his face—and then noticed that his friend had colored her actual face completely blue.<sup>38</sup>

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36. "My 4-year old son was so proud to count to 5. When I asked him to count backward, he started walking backward while counting to 5, "way to easy," he said. Reddit, in what memorable ways have your kids answered you literally?" submission to /r/AskReddit, 29 Nov 2012, [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/). Quotes include minor edits to spelling, formatting, punctuation and capitalization for the purpose of readability. I have not made any changes that would alter the meaning of the stories presented here.

37. Charlie1202, comment on "My 4-year old son," [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78rcot/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78rcot/).

38. Scrappy\_Larue, Ibid., [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78suw5/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78suw5/).

3. A doctor assessing my then six-year-old son asked him could he write the numbers one up to ten. He wrote the number one, drew an arrow upwards, and wrote the number ten above it.<sup>39</sup>
4. My parents asked me to count higher. I climbed on the couch and put my hands as high as possible and just counted to ten again. I was higher up; technically I was correct.<sup>40</sup>
5. When my daughter was a baby, I would read her the Shakespeare Treasury instead of baby books. When she was about three and a half, we stood behind a man in line at the supermarket. He was nervously looking back and nibbling on his fingernails. My daughter looks up in disgust and asks him, “Do you bite your thumb at me, Sir?”<sup>41</sup>
6. Me: I have to pee! Dad: Can you hold it? Me: But... but won't it drip through my fingers?<sup>42</sup>
7. I was trying to get my girlfriend's twenty-one-month-old daughter to eat her food. Me holding her spoon: “Aubrey's food.” Aubrey: “No no no no.” Shaking her head back and forth. Me taking a bite to show that it is good. Aubrey looking very satisfied: “Drew-Drew's food,” and it was settled and she would eat no more.<sup>43</sup>
8. One afternoon after daycare, my mom asked my little brother if he behaved that day. He said, “Well, I was a little have but not much have.”<sup>44</sup>
9. One year, for Christmas, my mom got my sister a diary, as she'd been pretty vocal about how all of her friends had one, and how much she wanted one. To my mom's dismay, however, she seemed to never use it, and even asked my mom to keep it safe when she didn't need it. My mom, being a good parent, never opened it to read what she had written inside. One day, my sister got a

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39. Carcul, Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78taku/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78taku/).

40. LegacyWorker, Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78r0ru/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78r0ru/)

41. lurks\_mcgee, Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78ux9x/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78ux9x/).

42. GreatTeacherAneesuka, Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78u3om/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78u3om/).

43. andrewsmith1986, Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78rxpg/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78rxpg/).

44. [username removed], Ibid.,

[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78s5dl/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78s5dl/).



particularly nasty bout of food poisoning, and kept asking my mom for her diary at odd times throughout the sickness. Finally, my mom asked her how she decided when she should write in her diary. “When I have diarrhea, of course.” My sister thought that diaries were for logging bouts of diarrhea.<sup>45</sup>

What is common to most of these examples is that the children’s understandings diverge from the meaning that would be normal or obvious to nearly anyone but the particular child in question. Presumably, none of the other children waiting in line to sit on Santa’s lap in Example 1 above interpreted the free sticker as a Christmas present, the acceptance of which precludes the granting of one’s Christmas wish. The father’s son in Example 2 understood him correctly even if the son’s friend did not. The children in Examples 3 and 4 both misunderstood an adult’s instructions about counting because the instructions included conventional metaphors related to vertical positioning, but each child arrived at a very different solution to this linguistic puzzle. In Example 5, a child’s unique upbringing and mindset leads her to misinterpret a stranger’s nervous nail biting as an insult. It is unlikely that anyone else could have made the same mistake—neither a child who grew up with more typical bedtime stories by Dr. Seuss, nor an adult familiar with Shakespeare’s work, nor even a resident of Elizabethan London transported forward in time. We describe as literal all deviations from an adult speaker’s intended meaning, whether these departures are a result of sincere misunderstanding (Example 6) or a willful twisting of language to serve one’s personal agenda (Example 7). As far as sincere misunderstandings are concerned, we can imagine some of the interpretive mistakes (Examples 2 and 6) being repeated by some (but not all, and perhaps not even most) other children, but others (Examples 8 and 9) are highly idiosyncratic. When children interpret

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45. kyleguillaume, *Ibid.*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my\\_4year\\_old\\_son\\_was\\_so\\_proud\\_to\\_count\\_to\\_5\\_when/c78u6mx/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/140fhd/my_4year_old_son_was_so_proud_to_count_to_5_when/c78u6mx/).

literally statements that minimally competent interpreters would also interpret literally, there is no reason to take notice of the child's interpretation or describe it as literal. But when children interpret a colloquialism differently than intended (Example 6), invent a novel colloquialism rather than adopting the standard one ("The sign wrote..."), or assume a pseudo-etymology unsupported by usage history (Examples 8 and 9), these (mis)understandings we describe as literal.

As with children, many individuals who fall somewhere on the autism spectrum are able to communicate successfully on a regular basis. When things go smoothly—when a person on the spectrum interprets an utterance just as any other minimally competent interlocutor would—this is never highlighted as an example of autistic literal-mindedness. But as with children, whenever a person on the spectrum interprets an utterance in an unexpected way, these lapses in successful communication are used as evidence to justify our claims that they are literal-minded. Even before looking at specific examples, we can reason that this is the case. If we did not find humor in the ways autism influences a person's way of seeing the world; if it did not cause behavioral and social challenges at school, work, and home; and if it did not lead to ways of thinking that tend to be different from one's caretakers, family, peers, friends, and authority figures, then there would be no reason to take notice of the phenomenon. When we describe an autistic person's (mis)understanding as literal, it is because it diverges from the tacit understanding of a minimally competent adult interlocutor. It may also diverge from the tacit understanding of a child who does not fall on the autism spectrum and even from that of another child or adult on the spectrum. Furthermore, the precise nature of these

divergences is often beyond our ability to anticipate, even when tasked with trying to predict how someone on the spectrum might see things.

There are three phenomena common among people on the spectrum that may seem to justify our description of such individuals as literal-minded: (1) a tendency to interpret rules and commands legalistically, (2) visual thinking, and (3) a rigid adherence to a “one word–one object” way of thinking. One might think that a teacher or caretaker who is aware of the first phenomenon could avoid mishaps with extremely careful word choice, but predicting which commands will result in confusion—and what form that confusion will take—proves exceedingly difficult. Consider the following story about Kevin, as presented by Mary Pittman:

Kevin [...] was following written instructions in a food technology lesson when he read, “Sprinkle flour on the worktop and roll the pastry.” Kevin proceeded to sprinkle flour on the worktop and then to put a knife along the edge of the worktop as if trying to damage it. When asked what he was doing he explained that he had to get the worktop up to roll his pastry.<sup>46</sup>

Who could have predicted Kevin’s unique response to what seems a fairly straightforward instruction? Other students did not read these instructions and briefly consider prying off the worktop with a knife before discounting the interpretation as needlessly destructive and therefore incorrect. Prying off the worktop is not a possible meaning that other interlocutors first comprehend and then rule out in this situation; it is an interpretation that would probably never occur to someone who is not on the autism spectrum and perhaps not to any individual except Kevin himself. Kevin’s misinterpretation here seems worthy of the descriptor *literal* precisely because of how

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46. Mary Pittman, *Helping Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to Learn* (London: Chapman, 2007), 15.

radically it departs from the meaning that would be tacit to another interpreter in the context of a food technology lesson.

The second phenomenon that suggests a connection between autism and literal-mindedness is visual thinking. Michael Barton provides us with a window into his own particular mental worldview with his book *It's Raining Cats and Dogs*. This book grew out of his personal notes and drawings, which he made to help him memorize the conventional meanings of expressions that confused him. His illustration for the eponymous idiom, “it’s raining cats and dogs,” shows what the reader expect: cats and dogs falling from the sky.<sup>47</sup> But Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg is adamant that this is not the image that pops into her own mind when she hears the phrase:

When I asked my non-autistic husband what he saw in his mind when he heard this expression, he said, “Nothing. I just experience it as a metaphor for heavy rain.” In contrast, when I hear the expression “It’s raining cats and dogs,” I literally see the word “cats” and the word “dogs” falling down like rain. I also see the literal rain—in fact, the words are falling with the rain and splashing into puddles—but I don’t see visual images of cats and dogs.<sup>48</sup>

Cohen-Rottenberg’s mental image of words splashing into puddles and Barton’s image of falling cats and dogs both result from the tendency of people on the spectrum to—from an outside perspective—over-visualize what they hear, but the visualizations themselves are strikingly different. This serves as an important reminder that while many people on the spectrum experience similar phenomena, these phenomena manifest in markedly different ways. Knowing that people on the spectrum think literally and visually is not enough to predict the specifics of how this will play out. Cohen-Rottenberg’s unique

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47. Michael Barton, *It's Raining Cats and Dogs: An Autism Spectrum Guide to the Confusing World of Idioms, Metaphors and Everyday Expressions* (London: Kingsley, 2012), 18.

48. Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg, “On Literal Thinking,” *Shift*, 7 August 11, <http://www.shiftjournal.com/2011/07/08/on-literal-thinking/>.

image in particular would be hard for anyone else to anticipate, and, contrary to Barton's experience, she reports that this delightful visual has never given her any trouble in interpreting the idiom.<sup>49</sup>

The third phenomenon used to justify our characterization of people on the autism spectrum as literal-minded is what Olga Bogdashina describes as “one word–one object.”<sup>50</sup> Bogdashina cites the following example from Liane Holliday Willey:

I vividly remember my teacher announcing, ‘Children, find your mats and take your nap.’ I refused. Again, the teacher called my parents...

‘Liane, why won’t you take your nap?’ my parents wondered of me...  
‘Because I don’t have a mat.’

‘You most certainly do have a mat. There it is in your cubby’, the teacher replied.

‘I don’t have a mat.’

‘You see what I mean... She is an obstinate child.’

‘Why do you say you don’t have a mat?’ the folks asked, not giving up on me.

‘That is not a mat. That is a rug,’ I honestly and accurately replied.

‘So it is,’ said my father. ‘Will you take a nap on your rug?’

‘If she tells me to,’ I said matter-of-factly.

‘Tell her to take a nap on her rug,’ my father said as my parents turned to take me home. I wasn’t trying to be difficult, I was trying to do the right thing. The trouble was, the teacher assumed I understood language like other children did. I did not.<sup>51</sup>

This example once again illustrates how knowing that people on the autism spectrum think differently is not sufficient for understanding how someone on the spectrum will think. Although the parents in this story knew that autism, rather than insolence, was the root of the problem, they could not fathom why their daughter was behaving the way she was until she said, “That is not a mat. That is a rug.” What we think of as literal in this

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49. Ibid.

50. Olga Bogdashina, *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?* (London: Kingsley, 2005), 54.

51. Liane Holliday Willey, *Pretending to Be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder)*, rev. ed. (London: Kingsley, 2015), 24–5.

example of explicitly literal interpretation, then, bears no resemblance to the tacitly literal meaning of the command, “Children, find your mats and take your nap,” which would be the simple, obvious, plain, or straightforward meaning to our idea of a minimally competent interlocutor.

Two themes are consistent in the various examples we have been examining in this section: (1) the more radically an interpretation differs from our estimation of the obvious, simple, or conventional meaning—the more outlandish, humorous, or off-the-wall it seems to us—the more likely we are to describe it as literal, and (2) many of these so-called literal meanings are beyond our ability to predict, even if we were tasked with anticipating how a literal-minded individual might interpret the word *diary* or the instruction to “Sprinkle flour on the worktop and roll the pastry.” Despite what we suggest during our meta-discussions about language, we are strangely compelled to describe as literal precisely those interpretations that lie beyond the tendencies and even capabilities of typical, minimally competent interlocutors. Paul Grice’s cooperative principle gives us a theoretical framework for understanding why this counterintuitive phenomenon is so widespread. Our final example will demonstrate just how far back it extends in the history of the English language.

### **John Purvey’s Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible**

Early on in my research, I made the decision to go through the first uses of *literal* recorded in *Early English Books Online (EEBO)* one by one, tagging each with a subjective label of “expected” or “unexpected.” I had hypothesized that many of these early examples would seem as strange to me as Augustine’s claim that Christ “is literally the Light but metaphorically a stone” and was initially disappointed by the apparent

consensus among early English writers. However, I soon discovered that the uses of *literal* I had labeled “expected” tended to simply insist on a distinction between literal and other kinds of meaning without providing much additional detail. For example, the earliest use of *literal* recorded in the *OED* comes from John Purvey’s prologue to the Wycliffite Old Testament, probably composed before 1397: “Holy scripture hath iv understandings; literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical.”<sup>52</sup>

As long as the difference between literal and other kinds of meaning is left to one’s imagination and specific applications are avoided, everything seems to be in order. Only when an author ventures into the nitty-gritty of literal interpretation does the illusion of broad consensus begin to dissipate. To be sure, an author may still dabble in illustrative examples and maintain the illusion. For instance, the *OED* actually cites a second example of Purvey’s use of *literal* from the prologue that seems to illustrate the first: “To the literal understanding it [i.e. Jerusalem] signifieth an earthly city [...] to allegory it signifieth holy church on earth [...] to moral understanding it signifieth a Christian soul [...] to anagogical it signifieth holy church reigning in bliss.”<sup>53</sup> But this fourfold interpretation of a single word divorced from context is not where the rubber meets the road. How does literal interpretation play out when a specific thinker interprets a whole verse or a complicated passage or the interrelation between multiple passages? In its effort to selectively curate representative examples, the *OED* glosses over Purvey’s more complex uses of *literal* in the prologue, such as his overview of Scripture’s supposed “double” literal sense:

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52. Quotation modernized for readability.

53. Quotation modernized for readability. The anagogical gloss, which the *OED* omits in its quotation, is retained here for the sake of completion.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> rule is of the spirit and the letter. This rule is commonly explained in this way: that the historical, or literal sense, and the mystical, or spiritual sense, are taken under the same letter. For this reason, the integrity of the story shall hold, and nevertheless it shall be referred to the spiritual understanding. This rule may be explained in another manner that it be related also to the literal sense, as other rules have been. About which thing it is to say that the same letter sometimes has a double literal sense. For instance, in the first book of Paralipomenon, the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter (1 Chr 17:13),<sup>54</sup> God says to Solomon, “I shall be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.” And this to the letter is understood of Solomon, in as much as he was the son of God by grace in youth. Therefore Nathan the prophet called his name Amiable to the Lord in the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Kings, the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter (2 Sam 12:25).<sup>55</sup> Also the previously quoted passage, “I shall be to him a father,” etc. is brought in by Paul, in the first chapter of Hebrews (Heb 1:5), as said to the letter of Christ himself. And this is revealed that Paul brings in to prove: that Christ is more than angels. But such proof may not be made by spiritual sense, as Augustine says against Vincent [the] Donatist.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the previously quoted passage was fulfilled to the letter in Solomon. Nevertheless perfectly: for he was the son of God only by grace. But it was fulfilled more perfectly in Christ that was the son of God by kind.

But nevertheless each statement is utterly literal. Nevertheless the second statement, which is of Christ, is spiritual and proves in some manner, in as much as Solomon was the figure of Christ.<sup>57</sup>

In this section, Purvey is paraphrasing the third of seven rules set forth by a 6<sup>th</sup>-century church father, Isidore of Seville.<sup>58</sup> To reconcile the rule “of the spirit and the letter” with Augustine’s claim that convincing arguments can only be made from the literal sense, Purvey inserts another paraphrase of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century French theologian

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54. Paralipomenon, meaning “things passed over,” is the name used for Chronicles in the Vulgate.

55. Purvey follows the Vulgate in naming 1 & 2 Samuel the first and second book of Kings so that 1 and 2 Kings become 3 and 4 Kings in turn.

56. *Letters of St. Augustine of Hippo* 93.8. “For what else is it than superlative impudence for one to interpret in his own favor any allegorical statements, unless he has also plain testimonies, by the light of which the obscure meaning of the former may be made manifest.” trans. J. G. Cunningham, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887), rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102093.htm>.

57. John Purvey, *The true cotype of a prolog*, 1550, EEBO <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15297.0001.001/1:4.14?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>. Text modernized for readability, EEBO.

58. *De Summo Bono* (also known as *Sententiae*) 1.20.



Nicholas of Lyra’s concept of a “double” literal sense without comment or embellishment, as if this represents his own views on the matter. If one wishes to hang on to the belief that there existed a time in the history of English when the word *literal* remained pure, unadulterated, and unambiguous prior to corruption by the ignorant masses, it seems to me one must subscribe to Nicholas of Lyra’s particular reading of 2 Sam 7:14 and Heb 1:5 and Purvey’s attempt to reconcile Isidore with Augustine: King Solomon and Jesus Christ are both utterly literal sons of God...but Christ even “more perfectly” so. If, however, this exposition is at odds with one’s understanding of what *literal* means, then one must conclude either that Purvey’s use is anomalous or that this word has been used strangely since its inception in English. I hope the various examples provided so far will be enough to convince the reader there are too many “anomalies” to reach the former conclusion.

### **Conclusion**

In the previous chapter, we established that literal meaning is typically conceptualized as that which minimally competent interlocutors understand tacitly. How surprising, then, to discover that the interpretations we explicitly describe as literal tend to be just the opposite—the sort that occur only to incompetent or maximally competent interlocutors. Whether we accept or reject the intensive use of *l*, we find that speakers use *l* only when they think it will guide the audience toward non-tacit interpretations. The absurdity of the superfluous use, along with Grice’s notion of the cooperative principle, helps us understand why *l* is rarely used by speakers to indicate tacit meaning, and sounds strange to us when it is. Furthermore, since puns, wordplay, and double entendres that rely on *l* to help audiences catch the joke do not violate Grice’s cooperative principle, we

do not balk when qualities normally considered anathema to literality are explicitly associated with *l*.

When we use *l* to describe the interpretations of others, rather than to guide audience interpretation of our own words, we find that the understanding of those we characterize as literal-minded is, by definition, misunderstanding, whether accidental (as in the case of children, people on the autism spectrum, and Amelia Bedelia) or intentional (as in the case of geniuses, or a child less than two years old who smiles and says “Drew-Drew’s food!”). These misunderstandings are not interpretations that minimally competent interlocutors can predict, evaluate, and then transcend. Rather, they are the sort that would occur only to an interlocutor who is either incompetent or maximally competent.

Most of the examples in this chapter were drawn from everyday use in order to demonstrate that our collective propensity for describing as literal precisely those interpretations that deviate from the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors is not limited to those who privilege the literal meaning of Scripture. However, we returned to another text that privileges the literal meaning of scripture for our final example to show that this phenomenon stretches as far back as it is widely dispersed.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have been exploring the disconnect between our meta-discussions about language (which suggest that literal meaning coincides with the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors) and the actual interpretations we end up describing as literal outside these meta-discussions (which tend to be precisely those that deviate from the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors). This matters because literal meaning's perceived coherence with what is tacit to minimally competent interlocutors is a significant reason why literal meaning is often privileged or disparaged. In Chapter 1, I developed a litmus test for determining if this disconnect between tacitly and explicitly literal interpretation undermines one's reasons for privileging or disparaging a given interpretation and applied it to two texts that privilege the literal interpretation of Scripture.

I chose to focus on these texts because 24% of Americans polled in 2017 agree that the Bible is best interpreted literally. Those who do not fall into this category might unfairly assume that those who privilege the literal meaning of Scripture are particularly susceptible to the disconnect between tacitly and explicitly literal interpretation due to their theological bias. I hope the more generalized evidence presented in Chapter 2 will dispel this notion and reveal a more widespread, longstanding, possibly inescapable phenomenon. I do not believe the interlocutors who privilege literal meaning and appear guilty of doublespeak when subjected to my litmus test or other deconstructive readings are being intentionally duplicitous. Saussure has shown how different systems of

differentiation, though arbitrary in their organization, can still communicate meaning and appear internally coherent.

I have no doubt that many of those who continue to insist on privileging literal interpretation, if they did acknowledge the reality of the disconnect I am trying to draw attention to, would see themselves as exceptions to the rule. Additional applications of the litmus test to other texts and additional examples of our collective propensity for describing as literal precisely those meanings that deviate from the tacit understanding of minimally competent interlocutors could be helpful in this regard.

The present investigation has only identified a phenomenon and analyzed a few representative examples found “in the wild.” Although it was well beyond the purview of this project, I would be excited to see what else could be learned in a controlled laboratory setting. How, for example, might people of different religious affiliations and varying levels of familiarity with a given passage of Scripture answer a question about its literal meaning? And how might the question itself, method of response, and testing environment influence the range of answers? Controlling for other factors, would participants answer the question “What is the literal meaning of the following passage?” differently from “Take the following passage literally”? How might answers differ among respondents who are asked to speak their responses versus writing them down versus typing them on a computer versus drawing a picture? And to what extent could researchers induce certain responses by, for example, having some participants submit descriptions of a “literal keyboard” from a computer while others use pen and paper while sitting at a piano bench under the pretense that the university’s practice rooms were a quiet and convenient place to conduct the study?

Comparisons between similar literal interpretations found in the wild fall short of the possibilities available in more controlled settings, and many questions remain unanswered.

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