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Chris Cummins-Patricia Amaral-Napoleon Katsos,  
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## Interview

# Rachel Giora<sup>\*</sup>

*Edited by Francesca Ervas<sup>†</sup>*  
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Rachel Giora is Professor of Linguistics at Tel Aviv University. Her work has been devoted to exploring the ways salient meanings of words shape how we think and speak. Giora analyzes meaning salience in both figurative and literal language. The main question around this general topic is the way in which, while words have multiple meanings, some meanings are more accessible than others. Given the notion of graded saliency, access of information stored in the mental lexicon is therefore ordered: more salient meanings are accessed before less salient meanings. Degree of salience is determined by factors such as frequency of use, experiential familiarity, conventionality, prototypicality, etc. Giora argues that both literal and non-literal meanings that are salient are cognitively prominent salient meanings and therefore they play a very important role in the comprehension and production of language. Her work focuses on the psycholinguistics of figurative language (irony, jokes, and metaphor), context effects, optimal innovations and aesthetic pleasure, discourse negation, context and degree of salience. One of her most popular books is “On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language”, published by Oxford University Press in 2003.

1. In *On our mind* (Giora, 2003), you analyzed a variety of figurative language cases, such as metaphors, idioms, and jokes, paying attention also to the role of context. To what extent does context influence figurative language comprehension? Are there contexts which favor non-literal interpretation?

No theory dismisses the role of contextual information in utterance interpretation. The debate, however, revolves around the timing of its effects:

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Are context effects initial, relevant to early comprehension processes, or are they late, affecting only the products of early processing? On one view - the direct access and constraint-satisfaction models - if contextual information is strongly supportive, comprehenders can immediately and directly derive the appropriate interpretation (e.g., Campbell & Katz, 2012; Colston, 2000; Gibbs, 1986, 1994, 2002; Pexman, Ferretti & Katz, 2000; Katz & Pexman, 1997; Utsumi, 2000). On another, contextual information has no effect on initial processing. Instead, an obligatory literal stage is involved initially, even when contextually inappropriate (e.g., Grice, 1975; Searle, 1979). On the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2003; Giora, et al. 2007), even a strong context cannot block salient meanings, and hence salience-based interpretations – interpretations based on the salient meanings of the utterance component - regardless of (non)literality.

But what is a strong context? Or, put in your words, is there a specific kind of context that favors non-literal interpretation? First, as you have said, there is no just one kind of non-literal language. It's not just the difference between metaphors, sarcastic ironies, proverbs, jokes, etc. that matters. According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, the psychologically relevant distinction relates to degree of salience, regardless of degree of (non)literality. Given that salient (coded and prominent) meanings, whether literal or non-literal, will always be activated initially, regardless of contextual information, the question as to what context favors which interpretation is relevant only to meanings and interpretations low on salience. It is no wonder then that research focusing on contextual effects has dealt primarily with nonconventional expressions and utterances. Sarcasm or verbal irony has attracted most of the attention.

The question as to whether there is a specific type of context that invites a sarcastic interpretation has been treated by proponents of the direct access view and the constraints-satisfaction model. According to Katz and his colleagues, a context rich in sarcastic cues should facilitate sarcasm initially. Among these cues are speaker's occupations, failed expectation, pragmatic insincerity, negative tension, presence of a victim, to name a few. While none of them is necessary, a context employing multiple such cues will favor a sarcastic interpretation (Campbell & Katz, 2012). According to Gibbs (2002), it is a protagonist's failed expectation that induces an expectation for a sarcastic utterance and consequently - a sarcastic interpretation.

In a number of studies we tested the prediction that a context rich in multiple cues will facilitate sarcastic interpretation immediately and directly.

For instance, in Giora, Fein, Kaufman, Eisenberg, and Erez (2009) we showed that context involving a frustrated expectation on the part of a protagonist did not induce an expectation for a sarcastic utterance; nor did it facilitate sarcasm interpretation compared to a context featuring a realized expectation. Instead, the sarcastic utterances in both types of contexts took longer to process compared to a context featuring no expectation, in which the appropriate interpretation was salience-based.

But even when contexts were, in effect, *shown* to induce an expectation for a sarcastic utterance, sarcastic interpretation was not facilitated immediately. For instance, in Giora et al. (2007, Experiment 1), dialogic contexts were shown to induce an expectation for a sarcastic irony by involving a sarcastic speaker who uttered a sarcastic utterance twice: once in dialogue mid position and once in dialogue final position. Results replicated previous findings. Although a contextual expectation for a sarcastic utterance was induced, processing the anticipated sarcastic utterances was slowed down compared to their salience-based counterparts. Reinforcing such dialogues with explicit marking (*mockingly*) did not affect the patterns of results (Giora, Yeari & Fein, 2012).

Similarly, when contextual expectation was manipulated by repeatedly and exclusively exposing participants to contexts ending in a sarcastic utterance, results were not affected: only salience-based interpretations were facilitated, regardless of contextual misfit and length of processing time allowed (750, 1000 ms). In Giora, Yeari, and Fein (2012), this experimental design was strengthened by providing participants with the information that the experimenters were after sarcasm interpretation. Regardless, patterns of results remained constant (see also Giora 2011). Multiple cues, whether implicit or explicit, did not improve understanding of non-salient sarcastic interpretations. Instead, only salience-based (often literal) interpretations were activated initially, as predicted by the Graded Salience Hypothesis. Context, then, is ineffective in blocking access of salient meanings and hence salience-based interpretations early on.

2. In some of your papers, not only salience and context but also (indirect) negation plays a fundamental role in explaining irony. Recently you have also focused on explicit negation with regard to sarcastic irony. Would you elaborate on the differences between the two types of negation?

Whereas familiar verbal ironies have a coded sarcastic *meaning*, studying unfamiliar verbal irony in terms of indirect negation deals with affirmative utterances whose sarcastic *interpretation* is non-coded, but context dependent, and thus needs to be constructed. (On different processing of familiar and unfamiliar sarcastic ironies, see Filik, Leuthold, Wallington, & Page, 2012; Giora & Fein, 1999a). As a result, even in the presence of highly supportive contexts, processing unfamiliar ironies is taxing, compared to their salience-based (often) literal interpretation (as discussed above). Indeed, there is plenty of evidence demonstrating that unfamiliar utterances intended sarcastically are slower to interpret appropriately compared to deriving their salience-based albeit inappropriate interpretation. This evidence has been accumulated by means of a variety of methodologies, both behavioral (Akimoto, Miyazawa, & Muramoto, 2012 with regard to intentional irony; Colston & Gibbs, 2002; Filik et al. 2012; Filik & Moxey, 2010; Gibbs, 1986; Giora, Fein, Laadan et al., 2007; Ivanko & Pexman, 2003, Exp. 3; Pexman, Ferretti & Katz, 2000), including brain damage (Giora, Zaidel, Soroker, Batori, & Kashner, 2000), as well as automatic (Eviatar & Just, 2006; Filik et al., 2012; for a summary see Giora, 1995, 2003).

In contrast, explicit negation induces sarcasm by default, independently of contextual information. It allows comprehenders to activate sarcastic interpretations of unfamiliar utterances directly, without having to go through their salience-based (literal) interpretations first, which slows down derivation of affirmative sarcasm. As shown by our recent studies, some novel negative utterances of the form “X s/he is not” (*supportive she is not*), “X is not her/his forte” (*punctuality is not her forte*), or “X is not her/his strong point” (*Thoroughness is not her strong point*), involving no internal incongruity, were interpreted sarcastically and rated as more sarcastic than their affirmative counterparts, when presented in isolation. When embedded in strongly supportive contexts, their non-salient sarcastically biased interpretation was faster to activate than their salience-based literally biased interpretation (Giora, Drucker, Fein, & Mendelson 2012; Giora, Livnat, Fein, Barnea, Zeiman, & Berger in press; see also Giora, Fein, Ganzi, Alkessly Levi, & Sabah, 2005; on negation as inducing default metaphorical interpretations, see Giora, Fein, Metuki, & Stern, 2010).

These results are attributed to the role of negation as a low-salience marker, highlighting meanings and interpretations low on salience by rejecting them

(Giora, Fein, Metuki et al., 2010; Givoni, Giora, & Bergerbest, in press). No contemporary processing model, not least the Graded Salience Hypothesis, can account for the priority of non-salient interpretations over salience-based alternatives.

3. The Graded Salience Hypothesis you proposed explicitly avoids abstract distinctions such as the literal/non-literal divide, and replaces them with more fruitful concepts, such as salience, which is more fine-grained and experimentally verifiable. You have further discarded the distinction between literal and non-literal language with respect to aesthetic effects. Can degree of salience also account for pleasurability?

The literal and non-literal distinction is not entirely insignificant. However, it cannot explain a number of findings which fail to distinguish literal from non-literal language. For instance, it cannot account for the ease of processing of familiar metaphors which is comparable to that of their salient or salience-based, often literal interpretations (Giora & Fein, 1999b). Nor can it account for the ease of processing of familiar ironies which is comparable to that of their salience-based interpretations (Filik et al., 2012; Giora & Fein, 1999a). In addition it cannot explain the slower reading times of salience-based literal interpretations of highly familiar metaphors. Compared to their coded non-literal meanings, which are high on salience, the literal interpretations of such highly conventionalized metaphors are lower on salience and hence slower to construct (Giora, Fein, Kronrod, Elnatan, Shual, & Zur, 2004).

In addition, it can neither account for aesthetic effects induced by optimal innovations which might be both literal and non-literal. According to Giora et al. (2004), an optimal innovation is an expression which is novel (*pinkwashing; curl up and dye*) but which also gives rise to a familiar meaning of a familiar expression (*whitewashing; curl up and die*), so that the similarities and dissimilarities between them may be considered. Although optimal innovations take longer to process compared to the familiar expressions they activate, they are rated as more aesthetic. In fact, they are rated more pleasing not just compared to these highly familiar expressions which they deautomatize, but also more pleasing than highly novel, or slightly altered counterparts, regardless of degree of (non)literality. What can account for these results, then, is not the literal non-literal distinction but degree of salience (see also

Giora, Fein, Kotler, & Shuval, in press; Shuval & Giora, 2009). The literal/non-literal distinction (or even continuum, see Coulson & Van Petten, 2002) is not general enough to account for these findings.

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