M01.1 Introduction

Literal meaning is a property of linguistic expressions. Roughly speaking, the literal meaning of a complex sequence of words is determined by its grammatical properties and the meanings that are conventionally assigned to those words. The literal meaning of a statement should be distinguished from its conversational implicature - the information that is implicitly conveyed in a particular conversational context, distinct from the literal meaning of the statement.

For example, suppose we ask Lily whether she wants to go to the cinema and she replies, "I am very tired." Naturally we would infer that Lily does not want to go to the cinema. But this is not part of the literal meaning of what is said. Rather, the information that she does not want to go is conveyed in an implicit manner. Similarly, suppose we hear Lala says, "Po likes books". We might perhaps take Lala to be saying that Po likes to read. But this is only the conversational implicature, and not part of the literal meaning of what is being said. It might turn out that Po hates reading and she likes books only because she regards them as good investment. But even if this is the case, Lala's assertion is still true.

One important point illustrated by this example is that when we want to find out whether a statement is true, it is its literal meaning that we should consider, and not its conversational implicature. This is particularly important in the legal context. The content of a contract is typically given by the literal meaning of the terms of the contract, and if there is a dispute about the contract ultimately it is normally settled by looking at the literal meaning of the terms, and not by what one or the other party thinks was implied implicitly.

M01.2 Exercises

Q1. Consider the following reference letter written for a student. Go through each of the sentence and explain why it is not part of its literal meaning that the student is a good student or a hardworking one.
Edward's abilities must be seen to be believed. The amount of material he knows will surprise you. It would be very hard to find someone as capable as he is. He has left a deep impression on all the teachers in the department. You will be fortunate if you can get him to work for you.

Q2. When we want to distinguish between the literal meaning of two statements, one method is to think of situations where one statement is true, and the other one is false, or to think of the different implications that they might have. Apply this method to each of these pairs of sentences.
(a) I shall try to come.
(b) I shall come.
(a) This is the oldest building on campus.
(b) This is one of the oldest buildings on campus.
(a) Amy convinced Betty to go to the party.
(b) Amy encouraged Betty to go to the party.
(a) Superman will die very soon.

Source URL: http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/meaning/literal.php
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/phil102/
Attributed to: Jonathan Chan
(b) Superman might die very soon.
(a) It can be proved to be true.
(b) It cannot be proved to be false.
(a) Honesty is Tim's biggest virtue.
(b) Loyalty is Tim's biggest virtue.

Q3. Consider these two clauses which might appear as part of a rental agreement. How would you explain their differences in literal meaning? Try your best to answer this question before continuing.
1. You may terminate the contract after 12 months by giving 2 months notice.
2. After 12 months, you can give 2 months notice and terminate the contract.

[ answer ]

The second statement says that notice to terminate the contract can be given only after 12 months. So in effect the minimum duration of the contract is 14 months. This is different with the first statement, which says that the contract can be terminated after 12 months, provided that 2 months notice has been given. There is no requirement that the notice has to be given only after 12 months, so the minimum duration of the contract is 12 months, provided that notice is given after 10 months (or earlier in common practice). This is something to watch out for when you sign a rental contract in the future!