It is a common contention that most literal terms are ambiguous and are only disambiguated in the context of a sentence. As a complement to this view, however, we also find the claim of the context independence of literal language at the sentential level. Only in a few cases is the literal sentence not a sufficiently rich context for disambiguating the terms comprising the sentence, and only in such cases will we need to address the extra-sentential context.

These views are generally believed to be a central part of our understanding of how literal language works. In this paper I will argue that considerations as to how metaphor works entail an equally important but opposite claim with respect to metaphor. The thesis I will defend is thus that metaphor exhibits rampant semantic ambiguity and that only by providing a sufficiently rich extrasentential context will we be fully able to give an unambiguous reading.

I am going to justify this claim in three steps. In the first part of this paper I will investigate the view that metaphor can be assigned a determinate metaphorical meaning. This view, I will argue, entails a dilemma for our conception of what metaphor is, and how it works. If we are to avoid this dilemma, we can go two ways. Either we may deny that metaphor can be ascribed a metaphorical meaning, as Donald Davidson proposes, or we may argue that metaphorical meaning is not determinate. The analysis of these two options will form the second and the final part of my analysis, and will lead to the view that metaphor exhibits rampant semantic ambiguity.

If metaphor can be ascribed a determinate metaphorical meaning, we must claim that for some given state of affairs it can be determined whether the metaphor applies or not. Timothy Binkley accepts the natural consequence and claims:

Yet rightly understood, metaphor proves itself capable of as simple and straightforward a truth as literal language (Binkley 1974, p. 137).
Indeed, why not view the conditions of applicability for a metaphor simply as the metaphorical truth-conditions for a metaphor? Consider for example the metaphor “John was caught with his pants down” in conjunction with the following states of affairs:

(1) A wife finds her husband John in their bed making love to a woman.
(2) John is caught while tampering with the accounts by the chief accountant.
(3) John is undressing for a medical consultation. The nurse enters the room by accident and finds John with his pants down.
(4) John finished his dressing in the morning before encountering anyone.

For these states of affairs Binkley, it seems, proposes the following sort of analysis. The situation described by (1) makes the metaphor, “John was caught with his pants down” literally and metaphorically true. The situation given by (2) will make the metaphor literally false, but metaphorically true. (3), rather, is a situation where the metaphor would be literally true, but metaphorically false. Finally (4) would make the utterance of “John was caught with his pants down” literally and metaphorically false.

This analysis, however, is far too simplified. Let us suppose the existence of a language called Binklish. It is a language very similar to English. In fact there is only one detectable difference between English and Binklish. In Binklish the proposition “John was caught with his pants down” is ambiguous between the literal sense signified in English by “John was caught with his pants down,” and the literal sense signified by the English proposition “John was exposed in an infelicitous act.” If we reconsider the four states of affairs described, it seems that where the English expression “John was caught with his pants down,” is literally and metaphorically true or false, the literal, but ambiguous, Binklish expression will be true or false in corresponding ways.

If this is so, it is indifferent whether or not a speaker would have competence in English or Binklish. Metaphor might therefore just as well be conceived as a simple sort of literal ambiguity. Metaphoricity in a strict sense evaporates.

If we are to maintain the thesis that metaphor can be assigned a determined metaphorical meaning and refute this result we are, hence, forced to show that English in fact is not reducible to Binklish.

There are two ways in which we might conceivably obtain such refutation. Either, the truth values we proposed for the Binklish expression are not correctly analyzed – it might, for instance, be claimed that the level of analysis