RELEVANCE THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION IN PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.29105.45929

Abstract

There is a general assumption that what is relevant to one might be irrelevant to another. This is so because relevance is dependent on how the human mind selects and interprets transmitted stimuli. This paper provides a general insight into the relevance theory in pragmatics and its applications in language. The explication of the theory offered here is in accordance with the aim of pragmatic theory which is the explanation of how the hearer apprehends the intended interpretation of an utterance. Consequently, the paper asserts that interpretation is not decoded, rather it is inferred by a non-demonstrative inference process in which considerations of relevance play a central role. A description of relevance is given, while asserting that an utterance creates an expectation of relevance in the hearer, with the preferred interpretation being the one that best meets that expectation of relevance. The theory can be demonstrated by applying it to a wide range of examples and in this case language.
Keywords: Relevance Theory, Pragmatics, Language, *Interpretation*

Introduction

According to Allott (2013) "Relevance theory is a rather wide-ranging framework (or 'research programme' – see below or the study of cognition, devised primarily to provide an account of communication that is psychologically realistic and empirically plausible." In the first part of this paper, the conception of relevance theory is defined and explained as an inferential approach to pragmatics. Relevance theory is based on a definition of relevanceas a comparative feature (the more positive cognitive effects and the less processing effort, the more significant the utterance) and two principles of relevance: a cognitive principle which says that human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance and a communicative principle that asserts that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance. Going further, the paper

explains the motivation for these principles and shows their application to a range of pragmatic cases/questions. The last segment of the paper considers the applications of relevance theory approach to language.

The Concept of Relevance Theory

Relevance theory as a cognitive theory of communication is relatively new. It was first developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson but the conception of relevance theory is not entirely original to Sperber and Wilson. Its seeds are found in Paul Grice's work from whom Sperber and Wilson drew their inspiration. "Building on insights arising from their critique of Grice, Sperber and Wilson developed their suggestion that considerations of relevance guide the processes of utterance interpretation. The view that emerged follows Grice in seeing utterance interpretation as being about recognising the intentions of communicators but differs from his approach in several ways" (Clark 2013, p.77). In this sense, relevance theory is the development of Grice's insights but it is different from Grice's approach to pragmatics. As a theory, it was formulated only in the late 1970s and early 1980s as an alternate theory to Grice's cooperation-ruled explanation of human communication (Yus, 2016).

Relevance theory is built on the principle that the human communication process includes among others encoding, transfer, decoding of messages and more importantly also reference and context. Relevance theory assumes that human communication is intentional and creates an expectation that helps an audience or an addressee to decide what message the communicator wishes to put across. In relevance theory, it is further assumed that "The act of communicating makes clear to the addressee that the communicator must think that what they are communicating is relevant to the addressee. … Relevance theory can be understood as an elaboration of, and an attempt to account for, this intuition" (Clark 2013:4) Communication can be achieved through language or actions that point clearly to the audience or person that the communicator intends to communicate something he/she presumes relevant which triggers specific types of expectations in the addressee.

> The general expectation can be roughly characterised as the assumption that there is an interpretation of the communicator's behaviour which the addressee will find worthwhile to recover. This generalisation is the central insight behind the relevance-theoretic account of intentional communication. Understanding the way that acts of communication

create this expectation is seen as the key to understanding how we interpret each other's utterances and also why we sometimes misunderstand each other (Clark 2013, p. 6).

From the foregoing, we may say that relevance theory is concerned mainly with the manner we come to comprehend what others mean when they communicate with us. Thus, according to Sperber and Wilson (2004, p. 1);

Relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in detail one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice 1989: Essays 1-7, 14, 18; Retrospective Epilogue). In developing this claim, Grice laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model. According to the code model, a communicator encodes her intended message into a signal, which is decoded by the audience using an identical copy of the code. According to the inferential model, a communicator provides evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that verbal comprehension involves an element of decoding. However, the linguistic meaning recovered by decoding is just one of the inputs to a non-demonstrative inference process which yields an interpretation of the speaker's meaning.

In Grice's approach to Pragmatics, the role of context in communication and understanding was neglected. Relevance theory emphasizes the role of context in communication and understanding by raising such questions as: How is the right context chosen? How is it that from the several assumptions available at the time of utterance, an audience or addressees restrict themselves to the intended ones? To make sense of these Questions it is important to understand what is relevance? Relevance is a comparative property: the high positive cognitive effects and the less processing effort, the more relevant the utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1994, p. 145). Relevance is a characteristic of not only external stimuli (such as utterances) but also internal representations and thoughts, which can both be used as inputs for cognitive processing. Humans' mental behaviour is characterized by the pursuit of relevance, which is often oriented toward receiving the highest reward from the stimuli they process.This propensity to optimize relevance, when combined with another distinctly human cognitive endowment, the capacity to meta-represent one's own and other people's

thoughts and intentions, helps us to anticipate what knowledge will be relevant to other people and what interpretive measures will be involved in its processing, allowing us to manipulate other people's thoughts.

The idea of relevance may be demonstrated with an example. Let us assume that Ann and Eddy are planning to spend the next weekend in their village for it will be a long weekend because of the Workers' Day holiday. Midway through the week, Ann tells Eddy:

(a) It will rain throughout next weekend. Thus, life in the village will be boring. This is very relevant to Eddy. He promptly draws a few important conclusions, affecting his cognitive environment/context. Ann wants them to reconsider their plans and wants to let Eddy acknowledge her desires. Eddy consents or disagrees and decides to bring with him a pair of raincoats and an umbrella. Now, Ann desires to know Eddy's view on that issue and so on. Consequently, she says:

(b) It rained heavily last year beginning from 1 May 2020 and the weather was awful in the village.

This adds just one piece of new but unrelated information manifest to Eddy, and is thus scarcely relevant; and

(c) It is actual raining heavily right now and the weather is not favourable at the moment.

This too is not relevant because it does not tell Eddy anything new. He can see and affirm this situation for himself. Lastly, the sentence;

(d) On the weekend 53 weeks after 1 May2020 the rain will be heavy and the weather will be awful; contains the same information as (a) but requires more effort to process, and is thus less relevant under this definition.

Thus, to fully grasp the meaning of relevance, it is important to comprehend that things have a degree of relevance based on the kind and degree of effects they produce that we determine how relevant they are. The relevant things are the kind of things that have effects. They include; sound, sight, utterances, thoughts, memories and interpretations; and since they produce relevant stimuli that are technically refer to as cognitive effects.

> When is an input relevant? Intuitively, an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his

> knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression. In relevance-theoretic terms, an input is relevant to an individual when it's processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect. A positive cognitive effect is a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world – a true conclusion, for example. False conclusions are not worth having. They are cognitive effects, but not positive ones (Sperber & Wilson 2004, p. 12).

Cognitive effects may be described as an individual's adjustments to the manner he/she represents the world. Looking through the window and seeing the rain falling means Ann now knows that there is rain outside so she changeshow she represents the world. Relevance theory claims that the more cognitive effects a stimulus have, the more relevant it is. But looking outside and seeing a rain ofice creates more cognitive effects than seeing just rain so this is a more relevant stimulus.

However, relevance is not defined and understood only in terms of cognitive effects. According to Sperber and Wilson (as cited in Clark 2013, p. 104) the more mental effort involved in processing a stimulus the less relevant that stimulus is. Let further illustrate this with an example. Supposing Eddy asked;

(e) Is it raining? And Ann replied;

(f) Yes, it is.

This response is relevant because it confirms Eddy's assumption and accounts for a (positive) cognitive effect. Now imagine Ann replied instead to say:

(g) Yes, it is raining and it rained in the village on the first of May 2020.

If nothing follows from knowing whether it rained in the village on the 1st of May 2020, then (g) is less relevant than (f). This follows because (f) requires more processing effort but does not lead to any extra cognitive effects. Clark further explains:

> With this balancing between effects and effort in mind, Sperber and Wilson propose the following classificatory and comparative definitions of relevance: Relevance to an individual (classificatory definition): An assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and if it has some positive cognitive effect in one or more of the contexts accessible to him at the time. Relevance to an individual (comparative definition): Extent condition I: An

> assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.

> Extent condition 2: An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive effects is small. What this means is that the more positive cognitive effects a phenomenon has the more relevant it is and the more effort involved in achieving those effects the less relevant it is.

This is fairly a description of what we do when we try to understand each other and relevance theory seeks to explain this complex sequence or phenomena terms of what has been referred to as the principles of relevance which consist of two generalisations concerning human behaviour about cognition and communication.

The Two Principles of Relevance

First, the cognitive principle of relevance asserts that human cognition naturally tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance. The principle assumes that humans have an innate or ingrained capacity to optimize the relevance of incoming stimuli which has been attended by evolutionary pressure that has further resulted in cognitive systems that recognise potentially relevant stimuli and try to draw relevant conclusions (Clark 2013, p. 78). According to Sperber and Wilson (2004), "It is against this cognitive background that inferential communication takes place".

The second, communicative principle of relevance asserts that an utterance relates or conveys the information that is first, not only relevant but worth the effort of the hearer to process it. The second aspect of the communicative principle of relevance states that an utterance relates the information that is not only the most relevant but also compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences (Clark 2013, p. 78).

This principle may be merged to assert that each utterance relates or communicates a presumption of its optimal relevance. If Ann tells Eddy something, he has every right to expect that Ann wanted her utterance to be consistent with the communicative principle of relevance. As a result, if Alice tells Eddy something that does not seem to be worth his processing effort, such

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 8. No. 1. (2022)
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)
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as sentences (b) or (c) above, or something that appears to be less relevant than Ann might have stated it, such as (d), Eddy will naturally seek for an alternate interpretation. The commonest and easily accessible interpretation that is consistent with the communicative principle of relevance is the one Eddy accepts as the right one, and then he quits or stops processing.

The restriction or limitation that an utterance is only compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences accounts for suboptimal communication, such as when the communicator is unable to think of a better phrasing at the moment, as well as for stylistic and cultural preferences (e.g. politeness considerations), withholding information, and lying.

Application of Relevance Theory in Language

1. Grammar. The study of how grammatical attributes constrain the choice of a candidate interpretation is of interest to relevance theory. For example, James Fenton in his poem *A German Requiem states thus*, "How comforting it is, once or twice a year, to get together and forget the old times" (Fenton 1980) The choice of the verb "forget" instead of "remember" is odd in the context which it is used in the poem because it is unusual for people to gather to collectively forget, after all, the act of forgetting isnot normally a conscious activity, thus the grammatical attribute "forget" in this context may constrain a candidate's interpretation while the cognitive processing effort becomes high. In this way, the grammatical structure of utterances plays a crucial role in cognitive contextualization. Several aspects of grammar, such as connectives (often within a conceptual/procedural account), conditionals, modals and modality, adverbs and adverbials, mood(s), tense(s), the post, and so on, have been discussed from this perspective (Yus 2010, p. 654).

2. Humour: Humour is no longer a property of texts in a relevance-theoretic method; rather, we must describe the audience's cognitive processes in the representation of humorous texts. For example, A speaker says; (a) "when I finally get my PhD, (b) not even my husband is allowed to call me sweetheart. (c) It must be Dr. Mrs. Sweetheart.". The audience cognitive process begins in the (a) part of the sentenceand gets high in (b) because (b)creates a thought process of surprise which enables the humour in the (c) part of the sentence otherwise the relevance of the sentence is defeated. The idea that communicators can predict and exploit the mental states of others underpins this method of humour. Knowing that the hearer may choose the most relevant interpretation of the joke

(or a portion of it), the humorist will be able to create a text that will contribute to the choice of an accessible interpretation, which will then be negated at some stage. According to Yus (2003), the initial component of several jokes has various meanings, which are rated according to their accessibility. The listener is prompted to choose an implicit (i.e., appropriate) interpretation of this part of the joke. Suddenly, the listener discovers that the next section has a single covert interpretation, which is later discovered to be the right one (and the only one that provides a consistent interpretation of the entire text), and which amuses the listener (Yus 2010, p. 654).

3. Media discourses: Films, newspaper headlines, comics, Internet discourse, and advertisements have all been effectively interpreted using relevant theory. Advertising is possibly one of the theory's most widespread implementations. A relevance–theoretical approach can easily analyze the control over the amount of information produced, the predictability of consumers' responses, and the estimation of the effort needed to process information, all common features of advertising makers' strategies (see Tanaka, 1994 as cited by Yus 2010, p. 654).

4. Literature: Relevance Theory has been applied to literary discourse in a number of studies (Pilkington, 2000 is an example). Literacy must be analyzed as cognitive effects caused by textual stimuli, involving special mental processes that result in the slightly increased salience of a broad variety of assumptions through a relevance-driven cognitive exploration, according to a Relevance Theory approach (Pilkington, 2000: 189). For example:

S: Hi, Ray. How is your girlfriend feeling?

E: What do you mean, how is she feeling? Do you mean physical or mental?

S: I mean how is she feeling? What's the matter with you? (He looked peeved.)

E: Nothing. Just explain a little clearer what do you mean?

S: Skip it. How are your Med School applications coming?

E: What do you mean. How are they?

S: You know what I mean.

E: I really don't.

S: What's the matter with you? Are you sick?

(Wardhaugh 2010: 270)

From the conversation above it is clear that there is vagueness that must be filled by certain assumption which are not literarily expressed in the conversation but must be made by the reader. This is relevant for the process of comprehension. The " conversation proceeds on the assumption that a certain vagueness is normal, that ordinary talk does not require precision, and that many expressions that are used in conversation are not to be taken literally" (Wardhaugh 2010: 271).Since it is more difficult to make conclusions mutually manifest in literature, the reader bears a greater burden of responsibility for extracting the intended meaning of the text, as well as any feelings and emotions associated with its comprehension (Yus 2010, p. 654).

5. Politeness: This is a common social aspect of communication that does not seem to fit with relevance theory ofthe individual-centred approach. For example:

Peter: I was last here seven years ago

Restaurant owner: You were young then.

Peter: Younger. (Grundy 2008:143)

This example can be seen as a polite, modest and subtle, yet relevant manner of making correction. Several studies, however, have attempted to explain politeness in terms of relevance theory. For example, politeness has been defined in relevance theory as a verbal technique that is compatible or incompatible with context expectations about the present relationship between speaker and listener, resulting in a variety of relevance-oriented interpretive paths (Jary 1998 as Yus 2010, p.).

Conclusion

Sperber and Wilson suggest relevance theory as a coherent cognitive account of how the human mind selects a plausible interpretation of ostensibly transmitted stimuli. They are based on the idea that a biologically rooted quest for relevance helps humans in inferential enrichment of usually underdetermined coded texts and utterances, resulting in fully propositional interpretations. The application of relevance theory in language using copious examples ranging from grammar, literature, humour, media and advertisement shows that, the grammatical structures of utterances play important role in cognitive contextualization of a grammatical text. That the components of humour have various meanings which are connected to the accessible information communicated, of which the listener

chooses an implicit interpretation to be able to have humour. That to make relevance in media and advertisement, a control over the amount of information, prediction of consumer's response and the estimation of the effort needed to process information is needed. The application of relevance theory to literature shows that the reader bears the burden of responsibility for extracting the intended meaning of the text and its mood. The theory has been extended to a wide range of research fields and has provided insights into many controversies in pragmatics and cognitive science. Relevance theory will definitely continue to elicit fruitful academic discussions on how to explain human communication. On the other hand, Relevance Theory has been criticised for being too individualistic and ignoring the social elements of communication (Mey and Talbot, 1988). Second, one common criticism of Relevance Theory is that it is pure conjecture, predicting the mental procedures and interpretive measures that the human mind goes through in human communication without empirical proof. Obviously, we are dealing with a highly nuanced and mostly unknown topic of research, the human mind.

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