

Concepts and Context In Relevance-Theoretic Pragmatics

New Developments

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1. Introduction

Overall, this special issue is to be situated within relevance-theoretic pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004, 2012), the cognitive framework that seeks to explain why, out of the various interpretations of an utterance which are compatible with what is encoded in its linguistic form, the hearer ends up selecting but just one of them and thinking that it is the interpretation that the speaker intends to communicate. However, in addition to showcasing some of relevance theorists' current concerns, recent research, and latest developments, this special issue chiefly aims to celebrate the most valuable contribution to this framework and its subsequent evolution made by one of its proponents and founding scholars: Professor Deirdre Wilson. During her most fruitful and illuminating career, she has been an active member of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA) and has been well known for her interest in a variety of pragmatics-related topics, which include procedural meaning, lexical pragmatics, figurative language, literary communication, non-propositional effects or metarepresentational abilities, to name but some.

Prof. Wilson's daring work has undoubtedly widened and deepened our understanding of these phenomena. To many practitioners in relevance-theoretic pragmatics, as well as IPrA members and pragmatists in general, her work has also remained a true and constant source of inspiration, fostered reconsiderations and refinements of previous accounts, and opened and stimulated new avenues for research in various underexplored areas. Therefore, this special issue wishes to pay a most deserved tribute of acknowledgement and gratitude to a key figure in pragmatics by gathering a collection of eight papers in her honour. These revolve around two areas that have constantly intrigued Prof. Wilson: concepts and the lexical pragmatic processes enabling their specification (Wilson 2004), and the role of contextual information in

comprehension.

2. Relevance, Meaning, and Understanding

Ever since it was put forth, relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) originated as a reaction against the widely endorsed Chomskyan generativist programme, according to which the lexicon and syntax greatly determine the meaning of utterances which hearers arrive at. It was also opposed to the code model of communication, which posited that knowledge of linguistic and cultural codes was sufficient for mutual understanding. Additionally, although relevance theory is significantly indebted to the work of philosopher H. Paul Grice (1975) in that it acknowledges the crucial role of inferential processes in utterance interpretation, relevance theory also seriously challenged the Gricean pragmatic model based on the Cooperative Principle and the maxims. In contradistinction to Grice's postulates grounded in human rationality, Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) proposed the communicative principle of relevance as an underlying mechanism responsible for the interpretative hypotheses that hearers formulate with a view to grasping the meaning that speakers intend to convey.

This notion of relevance – the true cornerstone of the theory – is in turn characterised on the basis of two factors: cognitive effects, or the benefits that the mind gains from relating the information contributed by an utterance to other information that is manifest to the hearer or he already knows, and cognitive effort, or the investment of energy and time. Accordingly, an interpretative hypothesis is optimally relevant if the balance between the cognitive benefits that it yields and the processing effort that it requires is reasonable and satisfactory. If a particular interpretative hypothesis is thus considered, the hearer will likely think that it is the interpretation that the speaker intends and expects him to arrive at.

The communicative principle of relevance heavily relies on the assumption that the human mind has evolved in such a manner that it constantly seeks to make the most of the resources that it invests in the countless and varied tasks that it performs, an assumption that Sperber and Wilson (1995) captured in the so-called cognitive principle of relevance. Unlike cognition in general, communication is guided by the speaker and hearer's goals and intentions. Hence, the communicative principle of relevance can be seen as a more specific instantiation of the cognitive principle.

In addition to the characterisation of relevance and these two principles, perhaps one of the most important contributions of relevance theory has been a description of the tasks that the mind is supposed to perform when constructing interpretative hypotheses. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), decoding the linguistic input results in some sort of logical form, or a structured and minimally parsed chunk of conceptual representations, which is not yet

fully propositional. For it to become fully propositional, it needs to be developed and enriched by means of a number of parallel inferential tasks. All these tasks make up the process known as mutual parallel adjustment of explicit and implicit content, and are performed following a heuristics that entitles the mind to follow a path of minimum effort and stop when its expectations of relevance are satisfied (Carston 2002a; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004).

One of such tasks is disambiguation of the senses of the lexical items that appear in the logical form, as well as of the possible readings that they may have depending on how they are arranged or combined. Other tasks are linguistically mandated; in other words, they are triggered by some linguistic material in the logical form (Carston 2000; Jary 2016). These tasks include reference assignment, delimitation of the time and duration of the actions denoted by verbs, and establishment of relations between the various events and states of affairs represented in the utterance. The output of these tasks may be determined by the procedures encoded by elements like personal pronouns and deictics, verbal tense and aspect, and discourse or pragmatic markers (Blakemore 1987, 1992, 2002; de Saussure 2012, 2022; Grisot, Catoni and Moeschler 2016; Hall 2007; Jucker 1993; Moeschler 2016; Scott 2011, 2013, 2016; Wilson 2012; Wilson and Sperber 1993).

In contrast, other inferential tasks are not designated by any elements in the input, but automatically carried out as a requisite to obtain an optimally relevant interpretation. These tasks include suppliance of unarticulated constituents, like the place where an action happens or the instrument wherewith it is made, and what is known in relevance-theoretic pragmatics as lexical pragmatic processes, or, to put it differently, the context-sensitive adjustment of the denotation of the concepts that are activated in the logical form by words like nouns, adjectives, verbs or adverbs (Carston 1997, 2013; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2004; Wilson and Carston 2006, 2007). Accomplishment of these tasks is indispensable in order to obtain the necessary propositional form, which in relevance-theoretic pragmatics is referred to as the lower-level explicature of an utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

3. Results & Discussion

Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) accepted the view of concepts contended by Fodor (1983), namely, that these are atomic, monolithic mental entities in mentalese, which gather varied information under three entries:

- a. The logical entry, which includes information about the defining properties of what a concept denotes.
- b. The lexical entry, which subsumes information concerning the natural language word used to refer to what a concept alludes to, as well as its pronunciation and spelling.
- c. The encyclopaedic entry, which groups highly personal,

idiosyncratic information regarding examples of what a concept refers to and/or individual experiences with the denotatum of a concept.

Moreover, following the seminal work by Barsalou (1983), Sperber and Wilson (1998) and some other relevance theorists – most notably, Robyn Carston – put forth that concepts are not static, immutable mental entities, but need to be contextually finetuned or modulated upon entering inferential processes in order to capture what speakers refer to on specific occasions (Carston 1997, 2000, 2002a, 2013; Hall 2011, 2017; Wilson 2004; Wilson and Carston 2006, 2007). Guided by expectations of optimal relevance, such a modulation is achieved by means of two operations:

i. Narrowing or strengthening of the denotation of a concept, which involves upgrading some item of information in the encyclopaedic entry of the concept to the status of logical or defining characteristic, albeit momentarily. For instance, the adjective ‘tired’ may be narrowed in different ways, depending on whether it denotes physical or mental exhaustion.

ii. Broadening or loosening of the conceptual denotation, which involves deleting some information from the logical entry of a concept. For instance, the adjective ‘empty’ may be broadened to denote a property of containing little liquid rather than no liquid at all.

The result of these operations is what is known in relevance-theoretic pragmatics as an ad hoc concept. This is an occasion-specific conceptual representation, perhaps a one-off mental entity with a short life in an individual’s cognitive system, which the mind needs to create with a view to grasping what the speaker means. Although these two lexical pragmatic processes were initially regarded as independent and exempt from linguistic mandate, relevance theorists subsequently admitted that both of them may co-occur, as when a figure of speech like metaphor needs to be interpreted, and be triggered by the procedures encoded by content words themselves or other linguistic elements (Carston 2016; Padilla Cruz 2020, 2022a, 2022b; Wilson 2011a, 2011b, 2016).

Five of the papers in this special issue are concerned with lexical pragmatic processes. The first two of them tackle lexical pragmatic processes in general, as well as the role of procedural meaning in these processes.

The first paper in this group endeavours to resolve an apparent paradox associated with the notion of ad hoc concept. In “Ad hoc concepts and the relevance heuristics: A false paradox?” Benoît Leclercq raises a series of issues pertaining to the nature of concepts and ad hoc concepts, as well as the difference(s) between them, and wonders why hearers do not first test the interpretative adequacy of encoded concepts rather than automatically constructing occasion-specific conceptual entities. This dilemma would be solved, in Leclercq’s view, if an alternative non-atomic view of concepts was adopted.

The second paper, “Paralanguage and ad hoc concepts,” by Manuel Padilla Cruz, examines the impact of paralanguage on ad hoc concept construction. Relying on recent research evincing the influence upon this pragmatic process of a variety of morphological, lexical and phrasal items accompanying certain open-class words, and stylistic resources, the paper considers that paralanguage may also indicate that occasion-specific conceptual representations are needed and even steer the output of the processes yielding them. In addition to suggesting that the resulting finetuned concepts could include non-propositional information connected with the speaker’s psychological states, Padilla Cruz also suggests that only a series of vocalic and kinesic features would ostensibly mark the need for ad hoc concepts.

Lexical pragmatic processes lie at the root of the relevance-theoretic analyses of metaphor (Carston 2002b, 2010, 2012; Sperber and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2011b; Wilson and Carston 2006, 2007), figures of speech like simile or hyperbole (Carston and Wearing 2011; Falkum 2019), some phenomena in children’s speech (Wałaszewska 2011) or insults and offensive epithets (Padilla Cruz 2019), to name but some. This is the reason why the three following papers in this issue, which are also based on the relevance-theoretic approach to concepts, expand on lexical pragmatic processes and delve into their role in the comprehension of specific verbal and non-verbal stimuli.

Firstly, “Non-literal uses of proper names in XYZ constructions: A relevance theory perspective,” by Ewa Wałaszewska, seeks to account for the non-literal uses of proper names in terms of lexical modulation or ad hoc concept formation. The paper analyses a series of examples and reveals that some XYZ constructions involve metaphorical uses of a proper name, whereas others involve category extension, two varieties of loose use between which there is no clear cut-off point. However, Wałaszewska argues that the relevance-theoretic postulates about concepts need revisiting, as those activated by proper names, unlike other lexical items, only provide access to two informational entries.

The second paper argues that the mechanisms underlying metaphor and irony comprehension are also pertinent to understanding elements that pervade digital communication: emojis and reaction GIFs. Relying on the relevance-theoretic showing-saying continuum and the notion of perceptual resemblance, in “Perceptual resemblance and communication of emotion in the digital context. A case of emoji and reaction GIFs,” Ryoko Sasamoto treats these two phenomena as cases of non-verbal communication revealing a communicator’s emotional state. This is possible thanks to the perceptual resemblance between what these phenomena represent and the communicator’s emotions. However, Sasamoto also differentiates them: while emojis provide some conceptual blueprint upon which the representation of the communicator’s emotional state can be constructed, reaction GIFs involve an echoic use of language that

enables the communicator to convey their emotions.

The third paper dealing with ad hoc concepts is Maria Jodłowiec's contribution entitled "Deceptive clickbaits in a relevance-theoretic lens: What makes them similar to punchlines." It explores the nature of clickbaiting as a form of deceptive communication. Jodłowiec argues that authors of manipulative clickbaits create an information gap in the reader and, exploiting the natural linguistic underdeterminacy of verbal stimuli, steer the reader's interpretive processes in such way as to arouse their curiosity in the content of the article. This is somewhat similar to manipulating the hearer's interpretive steps in jokes, where the 'deceit' is however built into the scenario of joke telling.

4. Context In Relevance-Theoretic Pragmatics

The modification of the conceptual representations activated during mutual parallel adjustment is made on the basis of co-occurring linguistic material, paralanguage, nonverbal stimuli, and, most importantly, manifest contextual information. Another ground-breaking contribution of relevance theory was the view of context as the set of the states of affairs that an individual can virtually represent mentally. To Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), context is not determined before inferential processing by preceding discourse or the setting where communication takes place. Rather, context is made up by a subset of all the information that an individual can potentially represent at a particular moment. Its expansions or restrictions in terms of amount and content of information depend on the individual's expectations of optimal relevance.

Contextual information also is essential in another set of inferential tasks that are accomplished as hypotheses about the intended meaning are formulated: creating some sort of representation of the action that the speaker is thought to perform by means of her words and of her psychological state and affective attitude, which in relevance-theoretic pragmatics is known as the higher-level explicature of an utterance. Additionally, available contextual information is indispensable when formulating hypotheses about the intended implicit contents, or the implicatures of an utterance. The second group of papers in this special issue turns attention to the role of this information in processing.

In the first paper in this group, "Metarepresentational phenomena in Japanese and English: Implications for comparative linguistics," Seiji Uchida contrasts metarepresentational phenomena in these two languages. As opposed to other comparative studies focusing on differences in lexical items, syntactic structures, expressions or collocations, to name but some, this work centres on higher-level explicatures. The author demonstrates that the contextual information that is necessary for creating a representation of a performed speech act tends to be linguistically realised in Japanese, whereas such an information

does not need to be thus realised in English.

In turn, the second paper in this group discusses the issue of the accessibility of contextual information. "On the strength and accessibility of contextual assumptions: Two possible applications," by Didier Maillat, revises the claim that the use of contextual information in inferential processes is determined by their accessibility and strength. In relevance-theoretic pragmatics, the former notion is understood as an inclusion relation between context sets, whereas the second one is taken to amount to the speaker's confidence in some assumption or belief. However, Maillat argues that the accessibility and strength of contextual information may greatly depend on factors like commitment and emotions.

The third paper in this group is "Has Madam read Wilson (2016)? A procedural account of the T/V forms in Polish," by Agnieszka Piskorska. It proposes an account of these forms in terms of procedures targeting the social cognition module and prompting hearers to identify the forms in question as (in)congruent with social norms. By exploiting certain features of the T/V forms in various contexts, Piskorska argues, speakers may turn them into tools for expressing subtle non-propositional effects related to interlocutors' social status, whether real or imputed.

5. Conclusion

The variety of the topics addressed by the papers in this issue and the scope of the analyses that they undertake will certainly be of interest to practitioners in relevance theory and the broader pragmatic community worldwide. In fact, these eight papers do not solely apply relevance-theoretic notions in order to gain a better understanding of certain communicative phenomena, but also test some theoretical postulates, thus yielding manifold implications for the future development of the relevance-theoretic framework itself and for revisiting certain claims that have so far been made in pragmatics. In addition to helping readers gain complementary, enriching, and cutting-edge insights into the scrutinised topics and phenomena, the papers gathered here will surely spark off and illuminate further research. That will no doubt be the best tribute that can be paid to a most renowned, distinguished, acclaimed, and celebrated scholar, who has undeniably shaken the pillars of contemporary pragmatics and left an indelible imprint in the discipline as a result of her endeavour to unravel how human beings communicate and, most importantly, understand utterances and larger stretches of discourse.

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