

RELEVANCE THEORY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Relevance theory (RT) is best known for its account of verbal communication and comprehension, but it also sets out a general picture of the principles driving the human cognitive system as a whole and this plays a crucial role in underpinning the particular claims made about communication and the pragmatic theory that follows from them.

The various post-Gricean accounts of the principles and processes that mediate the gap between sentence meaning and speaker meaning can be divided broadly into three classes based on their orientation: linguistic, philosophical and cognitive-scientific. Linguistically-oriented theories tend to focus on those pragmatic processes which are the least context-sensitive and most code-like, reflecting default or general patterns of language use (Levinson 2000; Horn 1984, 2004). Philosophically-oriented accounts tend to follow Grice closely in maintaining his system of conversational norms and providing rational reconstructions of the ‘conversational logic’ that delivers speakers’ implicated meaning (Neale 1993, chapter 3; Recanati 2001, 2004). Given its cognitive-scientific orientation, relevance theory pragmatics is concerned with the on-line processes of utterance interpretation and the nature of the mental system(s) responsible for them (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995a, Wilson and Sperber 2004). So it is responsive to research in evolutionary psychology on the nature of human cognitive architecture, empirical work on children’s communicative development and experimental measures of adults’ on-line comprehension, investigations into the relation between pragmatic competence and theory of mind (the ability to attribute intentions and beliefs to others), and clinical studies of people with impaired communicative capacities. For a survey of the ways in which Relevance Theory engages with these issues, see Wilson and Sperber (2004), Wilson (2005).

Given the philosophical nature of this volume of papers, I will focus less in this article on the cognitive theorising and experimental work that has built up around relevance theory than on those issues which have brought it into direct contact with debates in the philosophy of language. These include the meaning and function of singular terms (names, indexicals, demonstratives) and definite descriptions, the apparent occasion-sensitivity of word meaning

and the extent to which pragmatics may affect the truth-conditional content of an utterance. These are all issues that bear on the distinction between the meaning provided by the linguistic system and the meaning that arises through the pragmatics of human communicative interaction. Broadly speaking, philosophers of language fall into two camps: *semantic minimalists*, who maintain that natural language sentences provide a propositional content that is essentially pragmatics-free, and *semantic contextualists*, who insist that it is only utterances (or speech acts) that express propositional contents and these are irremediably context-sensitive. Although RT is usually classified as a contextualist theory, it will be suggested that, on the basis of its cognitive underpinnings and its emphasis on minds in communication, it occupies a distinct position, which I call ‘pragmaticism’. These philosophically-oriented issues are taken up in section 3, but first, in section 2, I lay out the main tenets of the theory.

2. RELEVANCE THEORY – PRINCIPLES AND PROCESSES

2.1 Relevance theory and cognition

According to the RT framework, human cognitive systems quite generally are geared towards achieving as many improvements to their representational contents and to their organisation as possible, while ensuring that the cost to their energy resources is kept as low as reasonably possible. At the centre of the theory is a technically defined notion of *relevance*, where relevance is a potential property of any input to any perceptual or cognitive process. An input may deliver a variety of different types of *cognitive effects* to the system; it may, for instance, combine inferentially with existing assumptions to yield new conclusions (known as *contextual implications*), it may provide evidence that strengthens existing beliefs, it may contradict and eliminate already held information, or it may rearrange the way information is stored. Such effects may or may not be beneficial to an individual, that is, they may increase or decrease the accuracy of the cognitive system’s information about the world and may make useful information easier or harder to access. An input is relevant to a cognitive system only if it benefits that system, that is, only if it has *positive* cognitive effects. The other crucial factor affecting the degree of relevance of an input (whether an external stimulus or an internal mental representation) is the *processing effort* it consumes: deriving effects from any given input requires a mobilisation of cognitive resources, including attention, memory and various processing algorithms and heuristics. Thus, the relevance of any input is a trade-off between the positive cognitive effects it yields and the processing

effort it requires: the greater the ratio of effects to effort the greater the relevance of the input. The basic claim of the framework is that human cognition is oriented towards maximising relevance (known as the *Cognitive Principle of Relevance*). The evolutionary idea underlying this is that, as a result of constant selection pressure towards increasing cognitive efficiency, humans have evolved procedures to pick out potentially relevant inputs and to process them in the most cost-effective way (Sperber and Wilson 1995b).

RT has developed in tandem with two important and closely connected ideas in cognitive science: (1) that the mind is modular, and (2) that many mental processes are performed by fast and frugal heuristics. Arguments from evolutionary psychology suggest that the mind is massively modular, in the sense that a great many distinct dedicated procedures and processes have evolved to solve specific cognitive problems (Cosmides and Tooby 1994; Sperber 2002). And it seems that, in solving a wide variety of everyday problems, we employ rather simple, albeit ecologically rational, heuristics rather than foolproof algorithms or explicit reasoning processes (Gigerenzer et al. 1999). These mechanisms making up the mind's 'adaptive toolbox' are 'fast and frugal' in that they carry out limited computations and consult just a small salient subset of all the available information, rather than working through myriad possibilities and comparing candidate solutions. A process of this sort can only achieve a high degree of accuracy in a particular domain to whose regularities it is specifically tailored or adapted.

The relevance-theoretic approach to communication situates pragmatics within this sort of cognitive framework, that is, one which consists of largely domain-specific capacities, each with the function of solving a specific pressing problem in human mental life and employing quick, relatively cheap computations to do so (Sperber and Wilson 2002; Allott 2008). The human pragmatic capacity is such a dedicated system: its specific domain is ostensive stimuli (verbal utterances and other acts of ostensive communication) and the comprehension procedure it employs is a fast and frugal heuristic. This idea is elaborated in the next section.

2.2 Relevance theory and linguistic communication

The starting point for a pragmatic theory is the question of how hearers are able to bridge the gap between the linguistic meaning encoded in an utterance and the speaker's intended meaning. The most obvious manifestations of this gap are non-literal uses of language such as metaphor and irony, and cases where, as well as the proposition she explicitly expresses, the

speaker communicates an additional proposition known as a conversational implicature, exemplified by speaker Y's utterance in (1).

(1) X: We need your written report now.

Y: I've been very busy recently.

Implicating: I haven't written the report yet.

There is also a range of pragmatic tasks involved in determining the proposition explicitly expressed, including disambiguation, assignment of referents to indexicals and filling in missing constituents, as in (2), and various other enrichments or adjustments of encoded content, as indicated in the examples in (3) (where the particular proposition expressed given here is, of course, just one of indefinitely many possibilities):

(2) He has taken enough from her.

Expressing: Jim has endured enough abusive treatment from Mary.

(3) a. I've eaten.

Expressing: I've eaten dinner tonight.

b. Your knee will take time to heal.

Expressing: Your knee will take a substantial amount of time to heal.

c. The water is boiling.

Expressing: The water is very hot [not necessarily strictly at boiling point].

While the proposition expressed by (3a) contains constituents of content that don't appear in the sentence uttered, (3b) involves a narrowing down of 'take time' and (3c) a loosening of the concept encoded by 'boiling'.

How, then, is an addressee able to infer the intended meaning from the encoded linguistic meaning which is just a schematic guide or set of clues? According to RT, the answer lies with a special property of overtly communicative acts, which is that they raise certain expectations of relevance in their addressees, that is, expectations about the cognitive effects they will yield and the mental effort they will cost. Quite generally, an utterance comes with a presumption of its own *optimal relevance*; that is, there is an implicit guarantee that the utterance is the most relevant one the speaker could have produced, given her competence and her own current goals, and that it is at least relevant enough to be worth processing. This is known as the *Communicative Principle of Relevance* and it follows from

the Cognitive Principle of Relevance in conjunction with the overtness of the intention that accompanies an utterance: the speaker openly requests effort (attention) from her addressee who is thereby entitled to expect a certain quality of information requiring no gratuitous expenditure of effort. That utterances carry this presumption licenses a particular comprehension procedure, which, in successful communication, reduces the number of possible interpretations to one:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

- a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, lexical adjustments, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

This procedure (a fast and frugal heuristic) is automatically applied in the on-line processing of verbal utterances: taking the schematic decoded linguistic meaning as input, processes of pragmatic completion and enrichment at the explicit level occur in parallel with the derivation of the implications of the utterance. Central to the working of the procedure is a subprocess of *mutual adjustment* of explicit content and contextual implications, a process guided and constrained by expectations of relevance. Here is a brief example involving the adjustment of explicit content in response to expected implications and where the outcome is a narrowing down of a lexically encoded meaning:

- (4) Bill: I'm doing the 10km circuit run this afternoon. Would you like to come?
Sue: No thanks, I'm *resting* today.

The verb 'rest' encodes a rather general concept, REST, which covers any degree of inactivity (physical or mental), from sleeping, to staying awake but not moving much, to performing a range of not very strenuous tasks (with many more possibilities in between). Suppose now that Sue is quite an athletic person, who exercises regularly, then her use of 'rest' here is plausibly understood as expressing a concept REST*, which entails a much lower degree of physical activity than she undertakes on her training days but is still quite compatible with her pottering about the garden or walking to the shops. A hearer using the relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic would narrow the encoded concept REST just as far as is required to satisfy his expectation of relevance (e.g. by explaining why Sue is refusing his invitation), and

no further. This particular narrowing would cost Bill little effort, given his knowledge of Sue's exercise habits, and provide him with a range of contextual implications (e.g. she won't come with me today because she is RESTING*, she may come another day when she isn't RESTING*, etc.). In different circumstances – for instance, in response to the question 'Would you like to walk to the corner shop with me?' – REST would have to be narrowed much further, resulting in a distinct concept REST**.

An interesting RT claim in this context is that metaphoric and hyperbolic uses of words involve a kind of concept broadening ('loose use'), so fall within this general process of lexical meaning adjustment, which contributes to explicitly communicated content. For instance, an utterance of the sentence in (5) could be taken literally, or as an approximation (if, say, the run referred to was a little less than 26 miles), or as hyperbolic (if it was obviously much less than the length of a marathon), or as metaphorical for a long, arduous, exhausting experience, whether physical or mental. The idea is that there is a continuum of degrees (and kinds) of concept broadening, with metaphorical use being the most radical case.

(5) It was a *marathon*.

For detailed exemplification of the RT-based account of lexical adjustment, resulting in concept broadening, or narrowing, or a combination of the two, see Carston 2002, Wilson and Sperber 2002, Wilson and Carston 2007.

It is a basic assumption of RT pragmatics that the meaning encoded in the linguistic expression type uttered inevitably underdetermines the content that speakers communicate, not only their implicatures, but also the propositional content they communicate explicitly (the explicature of their utterance). It is claimed that this is not simply a matter of effort-saving convenience on the part of speakers who could employ fully explicit (eternal) sentences if they so chose, but rather it is an intrinsic property of public language systems and no amount of effort to be more explicit by employing ever longer and more complex sentences will achieve full explicitness (Carston 2002 chapter 1; 2009). Since an act of ostensive communication, verbal or non-verbal, pre-empts the addressee's attention and triggers inferential processes geared toward finding an optimally relevant interpretation of the act, much of the speaker's intended meaning can be communicated without being encoded. Assuming that language evolved in the crucible of an inferential pragmatic system already employed in pre-verbal communication, the function of linguistically-encoded meaning is to

channel the inferential mechanism in particular directions and to provide just that content that cannot be recovered by inference alone (Sperber 2000; Origgi and Sperber 2000).

In the next section, implications of this view of the language/pragmatics relation are considered for some central semantic issues within current philosophy of language.

3. RELEVANCE THEORY AND ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

3.1 Reference and definite descriptions

Virtually everyone agrees on the inherently context-sensitive nature of indexical and demonstrative expressions and, therefore, on the fact that understanding utterances containing them requires a process of pragmatic saturation. However, there is much less agreement on the role of pragmatics in grasping the content of definite descriptions and proper names in use. According to recent work in Relevance Theory, although they are not linguistically marked as context-sensitive and so as requiring pragmatic saturation, their linguistically-encoded meaning does not determine their reference and pragmatics plays an essential role (see, in particular, Powell 2001, 2003, 2010).

As is well-known, the key question on definite descriptions over the last fifty years has been how to analyse what Donnellan (1966) calls the referential-attributive distinction, that is, the fact that a definite description ‘the F’ may be used either to talk about a particular identifiable individual or to talk about *whatever/whoever* happens to be uniquely F. As regards proper names, there are broadly three positions: those who consider names to be the natural language equivalent of logical individual constants, those who take them to be descriptive, that is, to contribute properties to truth conditions, and those who see them as closely related to indexicals.

How best to treat the referential-attributive distinction has proved a contentious issue within the philosophy of language. On the one hand, the truth conditions of an utterance of a definite description sentence appear to alter according to whether the description is used referentially or attributively. On the other hand, there seem to be good reasons to believe that definite descriptions are not linguistically ambiguous: although the description ‘the mayor of this town’ may be used either referentially or attributively, it does not seem to be ambiguous in the way that words like ‘bank’ or ‘match’ are. But these two observations are hard to reconcile on standard philosophical assumptions: if (leaving aside indexical expressions) you identify the meaning of an expression with the contribution that expression makes to truth conditions, then it follows directly that an expression which is capable of making two

different kinds of contribution to truth conditions has two different meanings and so is ambiguous.

However, Relevance Theory offers a natural way to reconcile these data since it draws a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the linguistically encoded meaning of a particular expression and, on the other hand, the contribution that expression makes to truth-conditional content on an occasion of use. Given this distinction, the fact that a particular expression may make two (or more) distinct kinds of contribution to truth-conditional content is not evidence for its ambiguity at the level of linguistically-encoded meaning. According to the relevance-theoretic account, definite descriptions are linguistically univocal, as Donnellan himself maintained, but are truth-conditionally ambiguous (Bezuidenhout 1997; Powell 2001). The gap between the encoded meaning of a definite description and what that description contributes to the propositional content of a particular utterance is bridged by relevance-guided pragmatic inference.

There has been less work from a relevance-theoretic perspective on proper names than on definite descriptions, but Powell (1998, 2003, 2010) has addressed questions about proper names as part of a general relevance-theoretic analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of singular expressions. According to his analysis, all such expressions are profoundly context-sensitive: whether they make referential or descriptive contributions to truth conditions is not a matter of the encoded meanings of these expressions, but is rather a matter of broad context and pragmatic principles. Powell analyses the encoded meanings of singular expressions (including here definite descriptions) not in terms of their contribution to truth conditions, but rather in terms of their contribution to a hearer's mental representations. All these expressions, on this view, are marked as *individual concept communicators* by virtue of their linguistically encoded meaning. That is to say, their encoded meaning indicates that what they contribute to explicature is a concept which is taken to be satisfied by a unique individual, but they are neutral with regard to whether this concept should be *de re* (referential) or descriptive (attributive) – this has to be determined pragmatically. Which constraints a particular singular expression places on the concepts which may serve as its interpretation varies according to the type of singular expression. In the case of a proper name 'N', the constraint on interpretation is simply that the individual concept should be of a bearer of 'N'. Which concept that is on a particular occasion of use will be determined by pragmatic inference constrained by the criterion of optimal relevance. A definite description 'the F', on the other hand, encodes a more complex condition: it constrains interpretation to an individual concept of a unique F in a salient context. Again, which is the salient context and which the intended individual

concept (and whether it is referential or descriptive) on any given occasion is determined pragmatically.

On this account of singular terms, the encoded linguistic meaning provides a set of indications concerning the conceptual content to be recovered but, on all occasions of use, some pragmatic inference is required for the full determination of that content. For a detailed account of how, following the relevance-based comprehension strategy, either the referential (*de re*) or the attributive (descriptive) interpretation is recovered, see Powell (2001).

3.2 ‘Free’ pragmatic processes and unarticulated constituents

Ascertaining the proposition that a speaker explicitly communicates (the explicature) is a matter for pragmatics. A controversial claim in this context is that there are ‘free’ pragmatic processes that can affect this level of content, where ‘free’ is understood as not required or directed by any element of the linguistic expression used; see Recanati (1993: 243) for a clear distinction between linguistically-controlled ‘saturation’ processes and linguistically-free pragmatic enrichment processes.

There are, arguably, two kinds of ‘free’ enrichment process. The first of these is the modulation or adjustment of lexically-encoded meanings, as exemplified above in (4) and (5). The second, and more contentious, is the pragmatic recovery of components of content which are not linguistically indicated in any way (and so are known as ‘unarticulated constituents’ of utterance content). The following are some cases for which relevance-theorists have claimed that the bracketed constituent, a component of the explicature of a particular utterance of the sentence, is not represented in the linguistic form:

- (6) a. It is raining. {in Oslo}
 b. I have eaten. {supper}
 c. Jill reported Jack for misconduct and he was fired. {as a result}

It seems that, in comprehending an utterance of (6a), we would very often, if not always, take there to be a specific place at which the raining is occurring; this would often be the location of the speaker of the utterance, but need not be. Similarly, for many utterances of (6b), an object of eating is recovered and, for (6c), a cause-consequence relation is taken to hold between the two events described in the conjuncts. According to the view that these are linguistically unarticulated constituents of the propositions expressed by speakers of these

utterances, their recovery by addressees is entirely pragmatically motivated, that is, they are inferred as part of the process of finding an optimally relevant interpretation.

This kind of ‘strong’ pragmatic effect on the proposition explicitly expressed by an utterance is resisted by semanticists such as Stanley (2000, 2005), King and Stanley (2005) and Martí (2006). They see this propositional content as the semantics (the truth-conditional content) of the sentence, relative to a context of utterance, and insist that, as such, all its constituents must be provided for in the linguistic logical form (LF) of the sentence. Pragmatics can only have ‘weak’ effects at this level of content, that is, its role is just to supply context-specific values to indexical elements in the logical form (the saturation process). As well as overt, phonologically realised, indexical elements such as pronouns and demonstratives, a sentence may contain various covert indexicals which, although not phonologically manifest, constitute elements of syntactic structure. So, on this view, the sentences in (6a) and (6b) contain such elements; for instance, (6a) includes an unpronounced adjunct of location, <at L>, which indicates that a value is to be pragmatically supplied in just the same way as it is to an occurrence of the overt demonstratives ‘here’ or ‘there’. Stanley (2000) finds support for the presence of this covert location indexical from the fact that, like an overt pronoun, it can enter into binding relations, as in ‘Every time John lights a cigarette, it rains’, on the interpretation where the location of each event of raining is bound to the location of each event of John’s lighting a cigarette. In the case of (6c), on the other hand, no plausible case can be made for a covert indexical and it is accepted that the cause-consequence relation is a strong pragmatic effect (the result of a ‘free’ pragmatic process). On that basis, it is treated as an instance of conversational implicature, hence as falling outside the truth-conditional content of the utterance (King and Stanley 2005), contrary to widespread intuitions.

In a critical response to this ‘indexicalist’ semantic account, relevance-theorists have pointed out that there is no principled limit to the number of covert elements that such a theory would have to posit (Wilson and Sperber 2002). An utterance of (6b), for instance, might express a proposition with a range of constituents corresponding to what is eaten, the time, place, manner of eating, and so on. On Stanley’s analysis, each of these would have to correspond to a variable or indexical in the linguistic logical form, a theoretical prediction which Wilson and Sperber take to be a *reductio* of his position. Furthermore, as Carston (2002) points out, although all of these hidden indexical elements would have to be present at LF, there would be many occasions of utterance of these sentences on which some of these elements would receive no value. Consider an utterance of (6b) ‘I’ve eaten’ in response to the

question ‘Would you like some dinner?’. While what was eaten and the time of eating might well be relevant (that the speaker has eaten a full meal and the eating took place in the recent past), the place and manner of eating would surely not be and would not receive a contextual value. However, this seems to be quite different from the way that overt indexicals work:

(7) She put the book on the table.

If the addressee of an utterance of the sentence in (7) is unable to assign a value (a referent) to ‘she’, he has not fully understood the speaker’s intended content and something has gone wrong with the communicative exchange. So it seems that Stanley’s hidden indexicals are not, after all, simply covert counterparts of the overt indexicals that we are familiar with, but entities of some other, unknown sort. The suspicion, from the pragmaticist side, is that they are an artefact of the semantic theorising and don’t actually exist.

Some within the semanticist camp have taken this objection seriously and looked for a remedy consonant with the position that any pragmatic processes affecting this level of propositional content are linguistically controlled. Thus, Martí (2006) has argued that the problem can be overcome by taking the covert indexical elements to be optional, so that, if and when they do occur, they must be pragmatically saturated, as is the case for their overt counterparts. Thus ‘it is raining’ has two underlying logical forms, one with a covert location indexical, one without. Clearly, this move entails a considerable increase in linguistic structural ambiguity. For instance, the surface sentence form in (6b) ‘I have eaten’ would have a variety of underlying logical forms, each with an array of covert indexicals, differing in number and type (including one with none), indicating possible contextual completions. In the case of a sentence that has four possible covert indexicals for different constituents, the optionality position results in sixteen logical forms to cover the range of cases. Thus, the shift from obligatory to optional linguistic structure comes at a high computational cost. While the semanticist acknowledges this point, she finds it preferable to positing a ‘mysterious and computationally intractable’ process of free pragmatic enrichment (Martí 2006: 151).

However, according to Carston (2010), a counter-intuitive proliferation of linguistic ambiguity is not the only problematic outcome of making covert indexicals optional. When we spell out the implications of the optionality move for the on-line processes of comprehension, it seems that the logical forms with their varying numbers of covert indexicals are redundant. The semanticists’ requirement is that indexical saturation, rather than a free pragmatic process, is responsible for any unpronounced constituents that occur in

the explication of utterances of sentences like (6a) and (6b). So a logically prior task, on any given occasion of utterance, is disambiguation of the surface phonological form, so that one among the range of logical forms with their varying configurations of indexicals is selected as the intended one. But, according to Carston, this disambiguation process relies on the recovery of relevant contextual information (e.g. the specific location of raining or the object of eating) which is identical to the constituents of content which would be supplied directly by a free pragmatic process as part of the inferential construction of an optimally relevant interpretation. If this is right, a wholly pragmatically-driven process of inferring a constituent of content pre-empts any process of indexical saturation and renders superfluous the logical forms containing covert indexicals.

For further relevance-theoretic arguments against hidden indexicals (whether obligatory or optional) and a response to allegations that free pragmatic enrichment is insufficiently constrained, see Hall (2008a, 2008b, 2009).

3.3 Relevance theory and the minimalism/contextualism debate

The linguistic meaning of the sentence a speaker utters is decoded and processed bit by bit in on-line comprehension, but thinking hypothetically of it as a whole, what it amounts to, on the RT view, is a template or schema for constructing the proposition the speaker explicitly communicates. It is seldom, if ever, fully propositional (truth-conditional) and has no reason to be so, since the propositional content which is communicatively intended by the speaker is inevitably recovered by pragmatic inference. A number of philosophers of language concur with this view of what is delivered by ‘semantic’ interpretation (characterized by its formal, algorithmic, context-free character). For instance, Recanati (2001) thinks of linguistic meaning as providing semantic schemata or propositional functions, and Bach (1994, 2006) talks of ‘propositional radicals’. Both of them maintain that pragmatic processes (including ‘free’ enrichment) make an essential contribution to retrieving the communicatively intended propositional content. Thus, on all of these accounts, there is a fairly obvious sense in which the encoded linguistic meaning is ‘minimal’: it underdetermines the proposition explicitly communicated and is standardly less than fully propositional itself.

However, those philosophers of language who advocate a *minimal semantics* for natural language sentences see themselves as being in direct opposition to relevance-theorists and to ‘contextualist’ philosophers such as Recanati and Bach. The most prominent current minimalists are Borg (2004, 2007) and Cappelen and Lepore (2005) and their primary

concern appears to be to establish that uttered tokens of natural language sentences ‘semantically express’ a proposition (a truth-conditional content) which is essentially context-invariant and pragmatics-free. While Cappelen and Lepore allow for a limited degree of context-relativity, restricted to the small class of overt indexicals and demonstratives, Borg (2004) argues that even these receive a semantic value without recourse to pragmatics or broad context. What is meant here by ‘minimalism’, then, is *propositional* minimalism. It is a stance that follows from the longstanding assumption that what a semantics for any representational system must deliver is truth-conditional content (hence propositions or states of affairs). However, it is difficult to see why we should accept this assumption, or why the minimalists are so attached to it, since they agree with relevance-theorists that this ‘semantically expressed’ proposition is seldom, if ever, the proposition explicitly communicated by an utterance. They accept that communicated propositions (both explicatures and implicatures) are pragmatic entities, derived by non-demonstrative inferential processes geared toward recovering an interpretation that meets expectations of rational communicative behaviour, whether Gricean maxims or the presumption of optimal relevance (see, in particular, Borg (2004: 110). It seems clear, then, that while what is communicated (by a declarative sentence) must be propositional (must embody statements or claims about the world, which an addressee may or may not take on as part of his own belief system), what is merely semantically expressed or encoded need not be. (For more detailed RT-oriented discussion of Cappelen and Lepore’s ‘insensitive’ semantics and of Borg’s semantic minimalism, see Carston (2008a) and (2008b), respectively.)

The two central tenets of contextualist semantics are: (a) that it is not sentences but utterances (or speech acts) that have truth-conditional content, and (b) that virtually every word in the language is context-sensitive. See, for instance, Searle (1978, 1980), Recanati (1993, 2004) and Travis (1985, 1997). Unsurprisingly, then, Relevance Theory is usually placed squarely within the contextualist camp - by minimalists and contextualists alike.

However, it’s not clear that this is the best way to characterise Relevance Theory nor that this distinction between *semantic* theories is central to what RT is about. It is first and foremost a theory of communication and interpretation, and its advocacy of free pragmatic processes (meaning modulation and unarticulated constituents) is entirely motivated by the aim of providing an account of how it is that hearers can recover speakers’ intended contents, given that these diverge in a range of ways from the meaning encoded in the linguistic expressions employed. What contextualists take to be the semantics (the truth-conditional content) of an utterance is, for relevance theorists, the speaker’s explicature, that is, the

proposition she explicitly communicates. Since thoughts have truth-conditional content, it follows that any *communicated thought* has truth conditions, whether it is explicitly or implicitly communicated (an explicature or an implicature). So, on this account, which posits a non-propositional linguistic semantics and, via pragmatics, a set of communicated propositions, there appears to be no reason to think of the explicature of an utterance as its semantics.

RT agrees with contextualist philosophers that the meaning a word contributes to an explicature varies from occasion to occasion. Virtually any expression can be used by a speaker and understood by a hearer to express a meaning that is different from its linguistic expression-type meaning. For instance, a speaker can use the word ‘butterfly’ to communicate a concept whose denotation includes human beings who have certain properties, or the word ‘bachelor’ to communicate a concept whose denotation includes some married men and excludes some unmarried men. But this is a rather different phenomenon, involving a different property of the words concerned, from the context-sensitivity of indexicals and demonstratives, which arguably do not encode a concept to start with but rather a variable with certain indications about the kind of value that variable should receive. Cappelen and Lepore (2005) have some quite effective tests for distinguishing this latter class of linguistic expressions from the rest and it comes as no surprise that there are such discriminatory tests: there are strong pre-theoretic intuitions that indexicals are special and quite different from words like ‘butterfly’ or ‘bachelor’.

Rather than taking the contextualist stance that virtually all words are context-sensitive, RT makes a distinction between inherent context-sensitivity, on the one hand, (and agrees that it is confined to pretty much the cases that Cappelen and Lepore cite and which pass their various tests), and what could be called ‘*pragmatic susceptibility*’, on the other hand. What this means is that virtually every (open class) word can be used and understood to express meaning that departs in certain ways from the meaning that it encodes (its expression-type meaning) and this is because of the human pragmatic interpretive ability (which includes an acute sensitivity to relevant contextual factors). Linguistic expressions are tools with certain inherent properties (phonological, syntactic and semantic) that we, as normally functioning adult humans, can employ very flexibly for our communicative purposes by virtue of certain characteristics of our psychological makeup (specifically, our ‘theory of mind’ capacities, and, in particular, our attunement to each other’s communicative intentions and our expectations of each other as rational speakers and hearers). Thus, while there is a limited degree of context-sensitivity built into linguistic systems, pragmatic

susceptibility is a pervasive feature of language as employed by us in ostensive communication. This is one respect in which relevance theory is better described as being 'radically pragmaticist' rather than 'radically contextualist': it is us, the users of language, that are sensitive to context, and, as rational communicating/interpreting agents, we are able, by exploiting this sensitivity in each other, to make linguistic expressions do a lot more than simply express their standing linguistic meaning.

With regard to their views on the role of context, there is another way in which contextualist and pragmaticist orientations differ. In his pioneering work on conversational logic, Grice set out an inferential schema for deriving conversational implicatures which employed a large component of theory-of-mind type reasoning. However, he did not carry this over to the pragmatic processes required for the full identification of what a speaker has said (explicitly communicated) but spoke here of 'context as a criterion'. It seems that he thought of disambiguation and indexical reference assignment as a matter of contextual best fit, rather than as involving conversational maxims or processes of reasoning geared to the recovery of what the speaker intended (Grice 1989: 25, 222). In this regard, certain current contextualists, despite being strong advocates of free pragmatic processes of enrichment and modulation in recovering what a speaker has said, remain essentially Gricean. For instance, while Recanati (2004) construes the 'secondary' pragmatic processes of conversational implicature derivation as maxim-guided, reflective reasoning, which deploys premises concerning speakers' mental states (beliefs and intentions), he takes a different stance on the 'primary' pragmatic processes that contribute to the recovery of explicature. He sees these as a function of an automatic, dumb (non-inferential) cognitive mechanism responsive to differential degrees of activation of candidate interpretations, such that the most highly activated one wins out. It is context (both linguistic and extra-linguistic) that does the work here and contextual coherence that provides the criterion of correctness. As he puts it, 'the interpretation which eventually emerges ... results from a blind, mechanical process, involving no reflection on the interpreter's part. The dynamics of accessibility does everything and no 'inference' is required. In particular, there is no need to consider the speaker's beliefs and intentions' (Recanati 2004: 32).

According to relevance theory, on the other hand, the whole utterance interpretation process is a matter of (non-demonstrative) inference, and taking account of the speaker's competence (including her epistemic states) and preferences (her desires, intentions, interests) may be required for carrying out any of the pragmatic tasks involved (including lexical concept adjustments, disambiguation, fixing of indexical reference). Along with the

propositions communicated (explicatures, implicatures), the context for the interpretation falls under the speaker's communicative intention and the hearer selects it (in the form of a set of conceptual representations) as part of his search for an interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance.

Summing up, the pragmaticism of relevance theory has the following characteristics which distinguish it from contextualism: (a) it is primarily a theory of communication and interpretation rather than a semantic theory and, although explicatures have truth-conditional content (as do implicatures, thoughts and propositional entities quite generally), there is no useful sense in which they are the semantic content of anything (a sentence, a sentence token in a context, an utterance); (b) while only a few words in the language are inherently context-sensitive, the vast majority of words are susceptible to the pragmatics of the speaker-hearer interaction such that they can be used to communicate an indefinite range of different concepts; (c) it is not context acting on language that is somehow doing the work of determining explicature content, but, just as for implicatures, it is the exercise of specific human mind-reading capacities dedicated to achieving the feat of ostensive communication and comprehension.

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