Relevance and the interpretation of literary works*

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Abstract

There has been some discussion about how far relevance theory can help in analysing the interpretation of literary works. Starting from the assumption that literary works are not entirely *sui generis* but exploit at least some of the abilities used in other varieties of verbal communication, I show how the same theoretical machinery used in analysing the interpretation of ordinary utterances can shed light on the interpretation of literary texts, and touch briefly on two more general issues: how can fictional works be relevant, and how can illocutionary and perlocutionary effects be disentangled in the case of literary works?

Keywords: intentional fallacy, inferential comprehension, weak communication, metaphor

1 Introduction

Relevance theory's main contributions to the study of verbal communication may be summed up as follows:

(1) a. It has helped to distinguish two models of communication – a code model and an inferential model – and provided evidence that verbal communication always has an inferential element and is never achieved by coding alone
b. It has shown how inferential communication can be analysed in terms of a speaker's informative and communicative intentions
c. It has introduced a distinction between strong and weak communication, where the strength of communication depends on the manifest strength of the speaker's intention to convey a certain implication
d. It has put forward the empirical claim that inferential communication automatically triggers a relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic (backed by a definition of relevance and two principles of relevance) which helps to explain how spontaneous, intuitive inferences about a speaker's meaning are made.[1]

In developing this account, relevance theorists have focused on the type of intuitive inferences made in ordinary, face-to-face exchanges, but the theory has also been claimed to shed light on literary uses of metaphor, irony, stylistic and poetic effects, and on other aspects of literary interpretation.[2] To which some sceptics have responded that 'Anything that a relevance theorist can say about a literary text … can be, and most probably has been, said by conventional literary criticism' (Green 1997: 134). This raises the question of how far – if at all – relevance theory can help in analysing the interpretation of literary texts.

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[1] For discussion, see Sperber & Wilson (1995, 2008), Carston (2002), Wilson & Sperber (2004, in press a).

[2] See for instance Reboul (1992), Clark (1996, 2009), Furlong (1996), MacMahon (1996), Uchida (1998), Pilkington (2000), Kolaiti (2009), Blakemore (2010), Carston (2010), Sperber & Wilson (in press a).

In considering this question, I will start from the following working assumptions. First, the interpretation of literary works draws on the same basic cognitive and communicative abilities used in ordinary, face-to-face exchanges. Second, theoretical notions which apply to the interpretation of ordinary utterances – the notion of inferential communication itself, the distinction between explicit and implicit communication, strength of implications and implicatures, the analysis of metaphor and irony, stylistic and poetic effects, expressions of attitude, and so on – should carry over to the interpretation of literary texts. Third, the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance, the theoretical definitions of relevance and the relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic, which are central to relevance theory's account of ordinary cognition and communication, should also apply to the interpretation of literary texts. I assume, that is, that literary works are not entirely *sui generis*, but exploit at least some of the same abilities used in other varieties of verbal communication.

These working assumptions raise issues of two types. First, how far can they take us in analysing the interpretation of literary texts? and second, what (if anything) do they leave out? For instance, relevance theory is an explicitly cognitive account, on which a communicator is seen as intending to *inform* her audience of something, or, more generally, to alter their *cognitive environment*, or *possibilities of thinking*. But isn't there something vital missing from an account which treats literary communication in purely cognitive terms? What about images, emotions, sensations, aesthetic effects, and so on? Aren't they essential aspects of the interpretation of literary works, in a way they aren't essential to the interpretation of ordinary, face-to face exchanges? Moreover, even if we restrict ourselves to a purely cognitive account, how exactly can a work of fiction be relevant to an audience: what type of positive cognitive effects can it achieve? Doesn't the theoretical notion of relevance, which was designed to deal with everyday cognition and communication, have to be extended or modified in order to deal with literary texts, and if so, how should this be done? After looking briefly at how relevance theory might help in analysing the interpretation of literary works, I will touch on these broader issues towards the end.

2 Coding, inference, textual meaning and authorial meaning

In the middle of the last century, literary theorists were debating the relative importance of textual meaning and authorial intention in literary interpretation. For Monroe Beardsley and other critics of the Intentional Fallacy (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946/1954), the goal in literary interpretation was to discover a textual meaning which could be studied independently of the author's intentions:

> No-one can deny that there are many practical occasions on which our task is precisely to discover authorial meaning, or intention: what the speaker or writer had in mind and wanted us to understand. When there is a difficulty in reading a will or a love letter … our primary concern is with authorial meaning. If there is ambiguity or the possibility of misspeaking, we want to correct it. To do this, we may avail ourselves of such things as fuller explanations by the author himself … and information about his actions. … All this seems beyond dispute. But I hold that the case is different when we turn to literary interpretation. The proper task of the literary interpreter is to interpret textual meaning. (Beardsley 1970/1992: 33)

For critics of the Intentional Fallacy and advocates of the New Criticism (e.g. Cleanth Brooks 1947), it was a mistake to look beyond the text itself for evidence of the author's intentions.

According to E.D. Hirsch (1967), by contrast, any word sequence can be interpreted in indefinitely many ways, and textual meaning is hopelessly indeterminate unless the author's intentions are taken into account:

> unless one particular complex of meaning is willed (however 'rich' and 'various' it may be), there would be no distinction between what an author does mean by a word sequence and what he could mean by it. Determinacy of meaning requires an act of will. (Hirsch 1967/1992: 16).

For Hirsch, it was therefore legitimate to look beyond the text itself for evidence of the author's intentions.

This debate about the relative importance of textual meaning and authorial intentions in literary interpretation is reminiscent of debates in pragmatics and philosophy of language about the relative importance of convention and intention, or coding and inference, in verbal communication. In later work, Hirsch (1976) notes the parallels between his own position and those of Grice and Strawson on the role of intention and convention in speech acts:

> Speech act theory, in the form developed by Grice and Strawson, reasserts the linguistic priority of intention, and hence of mind. It asserts the indeterminacy, and hence partial independence, of meaning with respect to form and to convention. It follows that a guess about intention is in principle a permanent feature of interpretation which no methodological system could ever remove. (Hirsch 1976: 71)

Indeed, Hirsch seems to have been more radical than Strawson or Grice, who saw inferential intention-recognition as contributing mainly to the implicit side of communication, with explicit content being largely determined independently of the communicator's intentions, by a combination of linguistic meaning and context. Hirsch rejects the view that context can determine meaning independently of the author's intentions:

> It is sometimes said that 'meaning is determined by context', but this is a very loose way of speaking. It is true that the surrounding text or the situation in which a problematical word sequence is found tends to narrow the meaning probabilities for that particular word sequence: otherwise, interpretation would be hopeless. But this is certainly not to say that context determines verbal meaning. At best a context determines a guess of the interpreter (though his construction of the context may be wrong, and his guess correspondingly so). To speak of context as a determinant is to confuse an exigency of interpretation with an author's determining acts. (Hirsch 1967/1992: 16)

This emphasis on the centrality of an author's intentions to the interpretation of a literary work was quite unpopular at the time. Iseminger (1992) comments,

> What is the connection, if any, between the author's intentions in … writing a work of literature and the truth (acceptability, validity) of interpretive statements about it? For the twenty years immediately following World War II, most of those who thought about the matter, reflecting the practice of the then New Criticism and echoing Wimsatt and Beardsley's seminal paper 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946), would have answered without further ado, 'None whatsoever'. (Iseminger 1992: ix)

In the last thirty years, however, inferential approaches to pragmatics, and relevance theory in particular, have amply confirmed the importance of the communicator's intentions in all varieties of verbal communication, and at both explicit and implicit levels. Literary texts, like ordinary everyday utterances, are full of lexical and syntactic ambiguities, referential and lexical indeterminacies, unarticulated constituents, loose, hyperbolic or metaphorical uses of language, ironies, witticisms and indications of attitude. Both literary texts and ordinary utterances must be treated as pieces of evidence about the communicator's intentions, and interpreted in a context which is not fixed in advance but constructed as part of the interpretation process. Hence, literary interpretation, like the interpretation of ordinary, face-to-face exchanges, involves an essential element of mindreading, and the relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic ('Follow a path of least effort in looking for implications; test interpretations in order of accessibility, and stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied') should help to explain how audiences infer the communicator's informative and communicative intentions in both types of case.

3 Relevance theory and authorial intentions

It is perhaps worth emphasising that, as Pilkington et al. (1997: 141) point out, the relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic is not a discovery procedure designed to take a text or utterance as input and yield an interpretation in which all ambiguities or indeterminacies are resolved in the way the communicator intended. The starting point for inferential approaches to pragmatics is the demonstration that there is no such procedure: the communicator's informative and communicative intentions cannot be decoded, but only non-demonstratively inferred, so that comprehension necessarily takes place at a risk.

What relevance theory aims to do is not to produce better interpretations than actual hearers or readers do, but to explain how they arrive at the interpretations they do construct, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. The relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic is a central component of this account, but it does not work in isolation: it interacts with a wide range of other cognitive abilities, including the ability to decode the linguistic meaning of the sentence uttered, the ability to construct an appropriate set of contextual assumptions (based on information derived from memory or perception), and the ability to derive enough implications, at a low enough cost, to satisfy the audience's expectations of relevance. Changes in relevant aspects of these abilities will alter the accessibility of interpretive hypotheses, and hence the output of the comprehension heuristic and the intentions attributed to the communicator. Literary critics contribute immeasurably to our understanding of a literary work by shedding light on the linguistic and contextual resources available to the author, or drawing attention to aspects of the text that might otherwise go uninterpreted, and suggesting novel hypotheses about what the author's communicative and informative intentions might have been. If relevance theory were in the business of producing satisfactory interpretations rather than helping to explain how such interpretations are produced, there would be some justice in Keith Green's comment that 'Anything that a relevance theorist can say about a literary text … can be, and most probably has been, said by conventional literary criticism' (Green 1997: 134).

But the fact that someone is capable of producing a satisfactory interpretation – whether of an everyday utterance or a literary text – does not give him any privileged insight into how it is done (if it did, there would not be so many wildly divergent theories of language and communication). Much of the interpretation process goes on below the level of consciousness, and although we may find it easy to make intuitive inferences about the

communicator's informative and communicative intentions, we cannot discover by introspection how these inferences are made. It is this intuitive ability to infer a communicator's informative and communicative intentions that relevance theorists are trying to describe. The sorts of question they set out to answer include, for instance, 'What is communication?' 'How is communication achieved?' 'What makes an interpretation seem satisfactory to an individual?' 'What sorts of things can be communicated? 'How is disambiguation achieved?' 'How are referential and lexical indeterminacies resolved?' 'How are metaphorical and ironical uses of language understood?' 'What role do contexts play, and how are they constructed in the course of comprehension?' 'What distinguishes explicit from implicit communication?' 'What are implicatures?', 'What are stylistic and poetic effects?' 'How are emotions, impressions and attitudes conveyed?' and so on. To the extent that literary critics or theorists address these questions, either informally or by developing explicit theories, their answers tend to differ markedly from those proposed by relevance theory.

To take just one illustration, communication is generally seen as a yes-no matter: a thought is either communicated or it is not. Relevance theory offers a more nuanced account, on which the communicator's informative intention is not directly to affect the addressee's thoughts, but to modify his cognitive environment by making a certain set of assumptions manifest, or more manifest, to him.[3] On this approach, communication is not simply a yes-no matter, but a matter of degree. Suppose, for instance, that the communicator has in mind a specific implication on which the relevance of her utterance depends, and her intention that the addressee should derive it is strongly manifest: then this assumption is strongly implicated, or strongly communicated. At the other extreme, suppose that the communicator has in mind a vague range of possible implications with roughly similar import, any subset of which would contribute to the relevance of her utterance, so that for any particular implication from that range, her intention that the audience should derive it is rather weak: then these assumptions are weakly implicated, or weakly communicated. Between the two extremes lie a vast range of possibilities, with weak and strong communication combining to various degrees. As Sperber & Wilson (1995: 201) put it,

> … there is a continuum of cases, from implicatures which the hearer was specifically intended to recover to implicatures which were merely intended to be made manifest, and to further modifications of the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer that the speaker only intended in the sense that she intended her utterance to be relevant, and hence to have rich, and not entirely foreseeable, cognitive effects.

The notion of weak communication is particularly useful in analysing the vaguer aspects of literary interpretation. Here is Coleridge on the lasting effects of a successful poetic simile:

> Who has not a thousand times seen snow fall on water? Who has not watched it with a new feeling, from the time that he has read Burns' comparison of sensual pleasure
>
> To snow that falls upon a river
> A moment white – then gone for ever!
> (Coleridge 1817/1834: 56)

[3] An assumption is manifest to an individual if and only if he is capable of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true, or probably true. The more likely a manifest assumption is to be entertained (i.e. the more accessible it is to the individual), the more strongly manifest it will be (Sperber and Wilson 1995: chapter 1, section 8).

Although it is easy to grasp intuitively roughly what this simile conveys, different readers will arrive at rather different interpretations, and attempts to spell out any one of them in detail will destroy much of the effect. In relevance-theoretic terms, the passage might be analysed as conveying a few fairly strong implicatures (having to do, for instance, with the transience of sensual pleasure) and a wide array of weak implicatures, derived by bringing together encyclopaedic assumptions about sensual pleasure, on the one hand, and snow falling on water, on the other, from which different readers will choose different subsets. Instead of a single assumption or a determinate set of assumptions that the author definitely intended to convey, there is a wide range of implicatures which are more or less strongly communicated. The stronger the communication, the greater the author's responsibility for what is conveyed; the weaker the communication, the more the responsibility falls on the reader's side.

The notion of weak communication is also useful in analysing the interpretation of irony and other expressions of attitude.[4] Here is a depiction by Jane Austen of an exchange between a pretty, good-natured but profoundly silly woman and her husband, who is described as behaving towards her with 'studied indifference, insolence and discontent':

> 'Oh! my love!' cried Mrs Palmer to her husband, who just then entered the room. – 'You must help me persuade the Miss Dashwoods to go to town this winter.' Her love made no answer; and after slightly bowing to the ladies, began complaining of the weather.
>
> (Austen 1811/1969: 134

The author's ironical echo of Mrs Palmer's term of endearment to her husband might be analysed as conveying a wide range of stronger or weaker implicatures: for instance, that her use of the term was inappropriate and in some way worthy of mockery or criticism, that the relations between husband and wife fall short of the standards expected of lovers, that there is a lack of reciprocity or gulf in feeling between them, that this breakdown in relations must have some cause, that one or other of them may be more to blame for it, that it may be temporary or permanent, and so on. Here again there is no single assumption or determinate set of assumptions that the author definitely intended to convey, but a continuum of stronger or weaker implicatures for which the responsibility is shared between author and reader. The weaker the communication, the more the responsibility falls on the audience, to a point where weak implicatures shade off into unintended contextual implications derived solely on the audience's initiative.

It is worth pointing out that in recognising the author's informative and communicative intentions, readers must necessarily go beyond them and derive some contextual implications (or other cognitive effects) of their own. Sperber & Wilson (1981, 1982) distinguish utterance comprehension – recognition of the communicator's informative and communicative intentions – from the broader process of utterance interpretation, whose goal is to derive enough implications to satisfy the audience's expectations of relevance. Since the communicator's informative and communicative intentions are partly strong and partly weak, comprehension shades off imperceptibly into the broader interpretation process, and comprehension is not a well-defined domain. As Sperber & Wilson (1981: 283) put it, 'It is

[4] For a relevance-theoretic account of irony and comparison with other accounts, see Wilson & Sperber (in press b).

utterance interpretation, not utterance comprehension, that is the natural domain of a pragmatic theory'. More generally, according to Sperber & Wilson (1982: 78),

> … what our theory of relevance implies is that one of the speaker's intentions (and a crucial one) is that the hearer, by recognising the speaker's intentions, should be made capable of going beyond them and of establishing the relevance of the utterance for himself. This general intention of being relevant gives the crucial guide to recovery of the meaning, references and inferences (if any) intended by the speaker. A successful act of comprehension (which is what is aimed at by both speaker and hearer) is one which allows the hearer to go beyond comprehension proper.

To illustrate this point, consider the following exchange between new acquaintances chatting at a dinner party:

(2) a. *Bob:* Were you brought up in England?
b. *Sue:* I was brought up in Cornwall.

Sue's indirect answer to Bob's question strongly implicates that she was brought up in England, and encourages him to derive a further range of weak implicatures from the fact that her upbringing took place, more specifically, in Cornwall. However, at the same time, Sue may have no idea what contextual assumptions Bob will use in interpreting her reply (apart from the assumption that Cornwall is in England), or what conclusions he is expecting to draw. Yet it is these assumptions and expectations that led Bob to ask his question and will determine how he interprets her reply. In satisfying his expectations of relevance, he must therefore go beyond Sue's informative and communicative intentions and derive a range of further implications for which she is not responsible at all.

The fact that comprehension shades off imperceptibly into the broader interpretation process leaves the borderline between authorial intentions and unintended contextual implications somewhat open to debate. In a recent BBC radio interview, Philip Roth disowns an interpretation of his novel *The Plot Against America* (2004a) put forward by the *New York Times* critic Frank Rich:[5]

> *Philip Roth:* That book was helped by a column in the *New York Times* by Frank Rich. (This was at the time Bush became President.) He said what I was doing was writing a kind of allegory about the Bush administration. And those years felt so powerless in the face of what they were up to that the book caught on. I had no intention at all of writing an allegory of the Bush administration.
>
> *Mark Lawson:* Can you understand, though, the fact that many readers and critics read that allegory into it – does that have any validity, or are they wrong?
>
> *Philip Roth:* No, they're not wrong. It isn't the way that *I* read the book, but each person makes use of the book in his or her own way.
>
> (*Front Row* (BBC radio, June 2011))

[5] See Rich (2004) and the reply in Roth (2004b).

Roth makes it clear that he did not intend the allegorical interpretation, although he has no objection to the reader's constructing it on his own initiative. Can relevance theory shed any light on how a reader might recognise this without Roth's additional commentary, from evidence made available by the text? I would like to suggest that relevance theory does have some general implications for how the borderline between comprehension and interpretation might be recognised in this type of case, where the allegorical reading makes a dramatic difference to relevance, and must therefore fall clearly inside or outside the author's intentions. In relevance-theoretic terms, the issue is not whether, given the evidence from the text and general knowledge of Roth's political inclinations, he might plausibly have intended the allegorical interpretation; it is whether, given the evidence from the text, he manifestly intended to make mutually manifest to himself and his audience his intention to make the allegorical reading manifest. This is a much stronger requirement, and one way of showing that it has not been satisfied would be to argue that, on the basis of evidence made available by the text, Roth could reasonably have intended the book to satisfy the expectations of relevance of readers who did *not* interpret it as an allegory. In that case, there would be good reason to think that the allegorical interpretation did not fall within the scope of the author's communicative intentions, but was merely derived on the audience's initiative, as part of the broader interpretation process.[6]

4 The relevance of fiction

As illustrated above, literary texts, like ordinary utterances, are full of ambiguities or indeterminacies that have to be resolved. They contain ambiguous words like 'hot', or syntactic constructions like 'Visiting relatives can be a nuisance'; they contain pronouns like 'it' and proper names like 'Emma' which have to be interpreted. They contain utterances by characters, which may convey not only explicit content but also implicatures, carried by indirect answers to questions, metaphors, similes, ironies, expressions of attitude, and so on. They also contain depictions of events and actions, which carry implications or implicatures when combined with background information provided earlier in the text. All this presumably involves exactly the same principles or mechanisms as are used in the interpretation of ordinary utterances. One way of thinking about this is to say that a literary text creates 'internal' expectations of relevance in just the way that regular utterances do, and exploits the same relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic used in interpreting ordinary utterances.[7] (A particularly insightful analysis of how 'internal' expectations of relevance are created and exploited in literary works can be found in Uchida (1998).)

Returning to the literary examples discussed in section 3, both of these passages have 'internal' relevance in the context of the preceding text and create 'internal' expectations of relevance which guide the interpretation of subsequent text. For instance, the passage from Burns' poem 'Tam o' Shanter' is taken from a series of similes which all point towards the transience of sensual pleasures:

> But pleasures are like poppies spread,
> You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;

[6] In fact, Roth (2004a) goes into some detail about his intentions in writing the book and claims that it would be 'a mistake' to understand it as an allegory about the Bush administration.

[7] The distinction between 'internal' and 'external' relevance for literary texts was suggested by Dan Sperber at a workshop on literary interpretation in London many years ago.

Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white – then melts for ever
Or like the Borealis race,
That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm…
(Robert Burns, 'Tam o' Shanter' 1791/1994: 2)

Here, the interpretation of each simile will be affected by what has gone before and create expectations of relevance for what comes after, with the resulting interpretations being mutually adjusted with each other. Similarly, Jane Austen's description in *Sense and Sensibility* of an encounter between the Palmers will be interpreted in the light of their previous interactions and create 'internal' expectations of relevance which will be strengthened, enriched or adjusted in the light of later encounters.

However, the fact that both these passages are taken from works of fiction seems to raise a problem for relevance theory. According to relevance theory, for an act of communication to be relevant, it must carry warranted contextual implications (or other positive cognitive effects) in the context of the audience's real-life beliefs and assumptions about the world (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 260-266). But works of fiction are not put forward as true descriptions of the actual world, so how can they achieve any positive cognitive effects at all? While some fiction (e.g. genre novels, romantic or detective fiction) may be written largely to entertain, and have mostly the 'internal' type of relevance discussed above, literary works are generally seen as having more significance than this. So how can a literary work which is not presented as a true description of the actual world achieve 'external' relevance by carrying positive cognitive effects in the context of real-life beliefs and assumptions that the reader has independently of the text?

Sperber & Wilson (1987: 751) make some brief suggestions about how this might be done. They start from the assumption that an author may be simultaneously performing acts of communication on two different levels: a lower-level act of describing a fictional world, and a higher-level act of showing this world to the reader as an example of what is possible, or conceivable. The expectations of relevance raised by the lower-level act would be 'internal', while the higher-level act would communicate an 'external' presumption of relevance. The title of a work (*Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Great Expectations, Pilgrim's Progress, An American Tragedy,* etc.) may give some clue to the type of external relevance the author is aiming to achieve. In *Sense and Sensibility,* for instance, Mrs Palmer might be seen as an example of a person whose good looks and good nature cannot make up for her total lack of either sense or sensibility, and her interactions with the other characters may achieve some external relevance as a result.

Sperber & Wilson (1987: 751) suggest that literary works typically achieve external relevance by strengthening and reorganising existing assumptions and creating a sense of kinship with the author rather than giving rise to totally new implications. For instance, we are all aware that sensual pleasures are ephemeral, but the passage from Burns encourages us to develop a richer, more nuanced awareness and to treat this as at least partly shared with the author. Moreover, the connections we make in reading this passage may have more lasting effects on our cognitive environment by helping to set up new inferential routines, new

procedures for memory retrieval, as a result of which, as Coleridge suggests, we may never think of snow, or sensual pleasures, in the same way again.[8]

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have tried to illustrate some of the ways in which relevance theory can help in analysing the interpretation of literary works. Central to this account are the following assumptions:

(3) a. The communicator's informative intention is an intention to modify the audience's cognitive environment – that is, their possibilities of thinking – rather than directly affecting their thoughts
b. In recognising the communicator's informative and communicative intentions, the audience must necessarily go beyond them
c. Communication is not a *yes-no* matter but a matter of degree
d. In the case of weak communication much of the responsibility for constructing a satisfactory interpretation falls on the audience's side.

These assumptions make it possible to bring within the scope of a cognitive account of communication the range of diffuse, apparently non-propositional effects that Sperber & Wilson (1995: 59) describe as an *impression*. Here is their example:

> Mary and Peter are newly arrived at the seaside. She opens the window and sniffs appreciatively and ostensively. When Peter follows suit, there is no one particular good thing that comes to his attention: the air smells fresh, fresher than it did in town, it reminds him of their previous holidays, he can smell the sea, seaweed, ozone, fish; all sorts of pleasant things come to mind, and while, because her sniff was appreciative, he is reasonably safe in assuming that she must have intended him to notice at least some of them, he is unlikely to be able to pin down her intentions any further. (Sperber & Wilson (1995: 55))

They comment:

> If asked what she wanted to convey, one of the best answers Mary could give is that she wanted to share an impression with Peter. What is an impression? Is it a type of mental representation? Can it be reduced to propositions and propositional attitudes? What we are suggesting is that an impression might be better described as a noticeable change in one's cognitive environment, a change resulting from relatively small alterations in the manifestness of many assumptions, rather than from the fact that a single assumption or a few new assumptions have all of a sudden become very manifest. It is quite in line with common sense to think of an impression as the sort of thing that can be communicated … In the model of ostensive-inferential communication we are trying to develop, impressions fall squarely within the domain of things that can be communicated, and their very vagueness can be precisely described. (Sperber & Wilson 1995: 59)

[8] On the contribution of metaphorical uses of language to the setting up of inferential routines, see Vega Moreno (2007).

Of course, in writing their work, authors have not only communicative but also non-communicative goals, personal, social or aesthetic. They may be intending to achieve a variety of perlocutionary effects – boring or amusing readers, insulting, angering or shocking them – which, as Austin (1962) pointed out, are not part of what is communicated, but consequences of the act of communication. But I will end by touching briefly on two types of case where some of the emotional effects of a literary work might be seen as involving the communication of an impression, and thus fall partly within the scope of a cognitive account.

The first type of case directly parallels Mary's appreciative sniff in the example discussed above, in the sense that all or part of a literary work is used to set a certain tone or mood which the author intends to share with her audience. Jane Austen's ironical use of 'love' and her amused depictions of the interactions between her characters are cases in point, since readers are encouraged to look not only for a wide range of weak implicatures, but for implicatures which help to explain the author's amused or sceptical attitude, and thus contribute to creating the intended mood or tone. More poetic examples of the affective use of literary works are discussed in Pilkington (2002) and Sperber & Wilson (2008: 100-102).

The second type of case involves the assumption that the author of a literary work may be performing acts of communication on two different levels, so that a perlocutionary effect achieved at the lower level – say, by making the audience laugh or cry – may form part of the ostensive stimulus for the higher-level act, where it can contribute to the communication of an impression. In this way, some of the affective effects of literary works may be seen as making a genuine contribution to inferential communication.

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