

What sort of a thing is Relevance Theory?

Why are we interested in Relevance Theory (RT)? What sort of thing is it and what does it do? Why is it important?

What does it mean to be “relevant”? Can relevance be measured so as to discriminate between things which are more or less relevant? Relevant to whom? By defining relevance precisely and locating its field of influence in the cognitive processes of the human mind, RT provides a framework both for an explanation of the process of understanding human utterances and for measuring, or at least comparing, the relevance of a particular concept in a particular context.

Here are three important facts about RT

1. **RT is a theory of communication.** It is not a theory of translation – though it has strong implications for translation.
2. **RT is a pragmatic theory.** It deals with the way real communication works in real contexts. In particular it is interested in *ostensive communication* – acts of communication which communicate the fact that they intend to communicate. Under RT, then, texts are treated as the records of acts of ostensive communication.
3. **RT is a cognitive theory.** It focuses on what takes place in the minds of the communication partners. This does not mean that actions or emotions are unimportant, but it does imply that the prime movers behind these are mental states. In particular context – including co-text, intertext, and the context of situation – only influences communication to the extent that it influences the cognitive state of the communication partners. Hence the use of the term *mutual cognitive environment* for the set of assumptions that sender and receiver share and know they share. Communication aims to increase the scope of the mutual cognitive environment by allowing the receiver to derive *cognitive effects* from the interaction of the text of the communication with his/her existing cognitive environment.

When we consider the primary communication situation (where biblical authors communicated with biblical audiences) RT validates the importance of historical-critical research, but also provides a criterion for how much context is necessary for interpretation. When we consider the secondary communication situation (where translators pass on the meaning of biblical text to new audiences) RT implies that “translation” of meaning must involve more than providing an “equivalent” text. It must extend to providing readily accessible contexts.

The use of RT is not necessary for the understanding of biblical text in the same sense that an understanding of the laws of gravity is not necessary to live successfully in a gravitational field. Gravity operates regardless of one’s cognitive attitude towards it. But an awareness of the way in which gravity works is important in the descriptive, explanatory and predictive aspects of the work of the scientist and the engineer. Similarly, we communicate on the basis of relevance theory whether we are aware of doing so or not. Even if we have never heard of it, or disbelieve it! The originators of the theory put it like this:

The principle of relevance...is not something that people have to know, let alone learn, in order to communicate effectively; it is not something that they obey or might disobey: it is an exceptionless generalisation about human communicative behaviour.

D. Wilson and D. Sperber, "Representation and Relevance" in R. Kempson (ed.), *Mental Representations: The Interface Between Language and Reality* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), p. 140

But, just as with the theory of gravity, an awareness of RT offers descriptive, explanatory and predictive insight into what guides the search for meaning, and the communication of that meaning in new contexts.