

Relevance Theory : A Brief Introduction¹

1. Background

Relevance Theory (RT) is a *pragmatic* theory, one which provides a description of human communication which is based on the realities of actual communication situations.² It takes into account the tendency towards efficiency in communication, which leads us to rely heavily on a shared communication environment and means that the text of our communication does not in itself contain all of the meaning of the communication. Meaning, instead, must be inferred by understanding the text within the appropriate context. RT is also a *cognitive* theory, in that it locates the process of understanding communication within the realm of human cognition, and describes the context which affects understanding as an internal, cognitive structure. In this section we will outline the background to RT and define some of the key terms used. Since one of the most frequent and pertinent criticisms of the theory is the complex terminology it uses it will be as well to clarify these from the start.

The impetus for Relevance Theory stems from the inadequacy of the code model to explain human communication. In the code model a sender encodes a thought in a linguistic message which is transmitted by some medium to a receiver, who decodes the message to produce a replication of the original thought.³ Sperber and Wilson agree that encoding and decoding take place in communication but hold that these processes are inadequate to explain how communication works, unless supplemented by, or subordinated to, a process of implication and inference:

...[T]he linguistic meaning of an uttered sentence falls short of encoding what the speaker means: it merely helps the audience infer what she means. The output of decoding is correctly treated by the audience as a piece of evidence about the communicator's intentions. In other words, a coding-decoding process is subservient to a Gricean inferential process.⁴

RT is grounded on the inferential theory of H.P. Grice, who proposed a "principle of co-operation in conversation": "Make your conversation contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."⁵ This he filled out with nine maxims setting guidelines for quantity, quality, relevance and manner of a conversational contribution. The importance of Grice's work is not that the various maxims provide rules or codes for successful communication but that they describe how communication creates the conditions for its own success. "Grice put

¹ Adapted from S.W. Pattemore, *Souls under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation*, UBS Monograph Series, 9. New York: UBS, 2003. Pp 16-24

² The primary text is D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1995). A useful introduction with which to supplement this brief paragraph is found in E.-A. Gutt, *Relevance Theory: A Guide to Successful Communication in Translation* (Dallas: SIL, 1992)

³ See the diagram in C.E. Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), p. 5, and their discussion of communication theory, pp. 95-113, using speech comprehension as a frequent example. A modified version of the diagram is presented by Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, pp. 4-5. For the remainder of this chapter, the latter work will be referred to simply as *Relevance*.

⁴ *Relevance*, p. 27. Note the convention of assuming a female speaker/author and male listener/reader.

⁵ H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation" in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 26. The quote is from a reprint of his 1975 paper, "Logic and Conversation".

forward an idea of fundamental importance: that the very act of communicating creates expectations which it then exploits...”⁶

Successful communication depends on a context of shared information. But what is the nature of this shared information? Sperber and Wilson reject as impractical the idea that we consciously know not only the scope of our own knowledge but also how much we share with the person to whom we are communicating. Instead they focus on the rather looser concept of *manifestness* and use it to forge a more useful and rigorous definition of context, which in RT is called a *cognitive environment*.⁷ Something is *manifest* to me if I can form a mental representation of it and accept that representation as true or probably true. I may not actually be thinking about it but I am capable of doing so. Facts can be more or less manifest, depending on my situation and my mental abilities. My *cognitive environment* is the sum total of all facts which are manifest to me.

Two or more people can share a cognitive environment. A *mutual cognitive environment* then is the set of facts which are *mutually manifest*.⁸ This does not imply that they *make* the same assumptions but that they *can* do so. Both speaker and listener are capable of representing these facts and are aware that the other is capable of representing them. There is no guarantee they will make a symmetrical choice of context and code to use in a communication situation. This asymmetry is inherent in communication, and allows the possibility that communication may fail. Sperber and Wilson describe the process of communication thus:

It is left to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process. The responsibility for avoiding misunderstandings also lies with the speaker, so that all the hearer has to do is go ahead and use whatever code and contextual information come most readily to hand.⁹

Communication is seen as the attempt to change the cognitive environment of another person, and thus to enlarge the scope of what is mutually manifest to both communicator and audience. When I receive a communication I process it within a certain context and derive from it *contextual implications*, assumptions which result from the interaction of the new information with my already existing assumptions.¹⁰ Clearly no audience can explore and classify all possible contextual implications of a given utterance. There must be a selecting and limiting process. Information which is totally new, with no connection to the audience's existing cognitive environment, will have no *contextual* implications.¹¹ Neither will old information. It is information that is new but has connections with the existing environment which will have the greatest *contextual effects*. These may include negating, strengthening, extending or enriching our existing assumptions. Such information is *relevant* information in Sperber and Wilson's terminology.

Before defining “relevance” more precisely we need to specify more closely what sort of communication we are considering. A large black cloud in the sky communicates to me that it is likely to rain soon. But the cloud had no intention of communicating with me.

⁶ *Relevance*, p. 37.

⁷ See *Relevance*, p. 39.

⁸ *Relevance*, p. 42.

⁹ *Relevance*, p. 43.

¹⁰ See *Relevance*, pp. 107-108.

¹¹ It may have its own logical implications.

While some human communication is like this, most is ***ostensive communication***. When we communicate, we not only convey information, but we convey our intention to communicate. Our communication is self-conscious. This is not only true of structured propositional communication, but also of much weaker or non-verbal communication as well. Thus Sperber and Wilson define two levels of intention: “*Informative intention*: to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}.... *Communicative intention*: to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention.”¹² These ideas combine to give the following definition:

Ostensive-inferential communication : the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I}.¹³

2. The Principles of Relevance

If the idea of relevance is to explain why we pick one interpretation of a given communication and not another, then it must be defined in a quantifiable way. Different contextual effects and implications have to be able to be judged more or less relevant. This does not require an absolute scale of relevance, but a comparative one, based on the two factors of contextual effects and processing effort. Thus Sperber and Wilson assert that an assumption is *more relevant* in a particular context if it produces greater contextual effects. It is also more relevant when the effort required to process it is small.¹⁴

These two conditions illustrate the fundamental insight of Relevance Theory—that human communication takes place in a balancing act between processing effort and contextual effect. Communication works because the audience makes the assumption that the communicator intends to communicate and intends to be relevant. The audience does not need to determine in advance the context within which to process a communication. Sperber and Wilson suggest that the choice of an appropriate context is ongoing through the communication process and governed by the search for relevance:

...there is nothing in the nature of a context, or of comprehension, which excludes the possibility that context formation is open to choices and revisions throughout the comprehension process.

The immediately given context of an utterance ...is only an initial context which can be extended in different directions:

- (1) short term memory of previous parts of the conversation (indicated by anaphoric pronouns)
- (2) encyclopaedic entries
- (3) environmental factors (indicated by deictic pronouns)

These factors determine not a single context but a range of possible contexts. What determines the selection of a particular context ...is...the search for relevance.¹⁵

¹² *Relevance*, pp. 58, 61.

¹³ *Relevance*, p. 61. Quentin Skinner had already stated a similar position with regard to the process of understanding historical texts: “...to understand a text must be to understand both the intention to be understood, and the intention that this intention should be understood, which the text as an intended act of communication must at least have embodied.” See Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 63. This paper was originally published in *History and Theory* 8 (1969), pp. 3-53.

¹⁴ *Relevance*, p. 125.

¹⁵ *Relevance*, pp. 137-41.

Thus in understanding a communication, the audience does not take a particular context as given and proceed to assess the relevance of the communication. Instead relevance is taken as given and a context selected to justify that assumption.

This leads Sperber and Wilson to enunciate what they called “the presumption of optimal relevance”, which, as modified in the second edition of *Relevance*, states:

Presumption of optimal relevance (revised)

- (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee’s effort to process it.
- (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator’s abilities and preferences.¹⁶

An audience understands a communication by bringing to it the most accessible elements of the mutual cognitive environment and deciding on the meaning that produces the best contextual effects for the least processing effort. The communicator, knowing this, produces the stimulus which will lead the receptor to his intended meaning. This explanation is summarized by two principles of relevance.¹⁷ The “First (or Cognitive) Principle” is the fundamental claim: “Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.” The “Second (or Communicative) Principle” encapsulates the nature of ostensive communication: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.”

3. Developments and Implications

Sperber and Wilson proceed from this platform to explain many subtle features of human communication which depend on the hearer inferring the author’s intended meaning, including a wide range of imagery, poetic language and the structuring of the text of a communication. In order to do this they distinguish between the explicit and implicit assumptions conveyed by an utterance. Explicit assumptions (*explicatures*) are only those that are a development of the logical form encoded in the utterance, the text of the utterance itself. All others are implicit (*implicatures*).

The search for relevance by a trade-off between contextual effects and processing effort can explain the way in which stylistic features of an utterance affect the meaning. Sperber and Wilson examine such features as word order and placement of focal stress, backgrounding and foregrounding, and structural features such as topic-comment, given-new and focus-presupposition distinctions. They conclude:

Given that utterances have constituent structure, internal order and focal stress, and given that they are processed over time, the most cost-efficient way of exploiting these structural features will give rise to a variety of pragmatic effects. There is a natural linkage between linguistic structure and pragmatic interpretation, and no need for any special pragmatic conventions or interpretation rules: the speaker merely adapts her utterance to the way the hearer is going to process it anyhow, given the existing structural and temporal constraints.¹⁸

¹⁶ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 2nd edn, p. 270. Compare the original statement in *Relevance*, p. 158. The modified statement allows that the actual relevance may not be the absolute maximum, but may be influenced by the speaker’s aims, priorities and abilities.

¹⁷ *Relevance*, 2nd edn, pp. 260-61. In the first edition, *Relevance*, p. 158, there was only one principle, the second of these. The first was an underlying assumption. The change is “expository and not substantive” (p. 271). By the “principle of relevance” I normally intend the second.

¹⁸ *Relevance*, p. 217.

In a development very significant for our interpretation of text including the Bible, Sperber and Wilson assert that there is no sharp division between strong implications of an utterance which are clearly intended by the speaker and weak implications for which the hearer “takes the entire responsibility”.

Clearly the weaker the implicatures the less confidence the hearer can have that the particular premises or conclusions he supplies will reflect the speaker’s thoughts and this is where the indeterminacy lies. However, people may entertain different thoughts and come to have different beliefs on the basis of the same cognitive environment. The aim of communication in general is to increase the mutuality of cognitive environments rather than guarantee an impossible duplication of thoughts.¹⁹

This sliding scale of implicatures with corresponding movement of responsibility from speaker to hearer is interestingly illustrated by the spectrum of contemporary hermeneutic strategies. But it should be noted that it is only in the limiting cases that the hearer assumes full responsibility. Weak implicatures are significantly exploited by the communicator to achieve, amongst other things, a wide range of poetic effects. This too is a reflection of the principle of relevance, as a speaker can often achieve a large degree of relevance “through a wide array of weak implicatures”.²⁰

Although the theory was largely developed in relation to immediate verbal communication, the authors clearly saw its implications for an understanding of the way in which written texts are produced and understood.²¹ A number of writers have applied the theory to the understanding of discourse structure. Fundamental to this direction of development is the work of Diane Blakemore, who argued that neither the coherence of utterances, nor attention to topic, is an adequate basis for explaining the organization of discourse.²² The fact that RT takes into account extra-linguistic factors in constructing contexts, and the fact that the analysis (and the content of contexts) is based not on utterances themselves but on the propositions they represent, recommend RT as the theoretical basis required. Relevance, rather than coherence, explains the way discourse is organized. Furthermore, the contexts within which relevance is found by the hearer are related but constantly evolving:

...within a planned discourse there is a continuity of context, that is, information made accessible by the interpretation of the first utterance is used in establishing the relevance of the second...and so on...In this way discourse provides the hearer with a continually changing background against which new propositions are processed.²³

We will look later at the way these ideas on the importance of relevance for discourse analysis are developed in some detail by Blass, with illustrative material from a West African language.²⁴

¹⁹ *Relevance*, pp. 199-200.

²⁰ *Relevance*, p. 222.

²¹ See *Relevance*, pp. 61, 75, 168. For a more detailed treatment of the way in which RT relates to the interpretation of literary texts see Pattemore, “The People of God”, Chapter 2.

²² D. Blakemore, “Organisation of Discourse” in Newmeyer (ed.), *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey*, vol. 4, *Language: The Socio-Cultural Context*, p. 234.

²³ Blakemore, “Organisation”, p. 241. See also D. Blakemore, *Semantic Constraints on Relevance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); D. Blakemore, “‘So’ as a Constraint on Relevance” in Kempson (ed.), *Mental Representations*, pp. 183-96.

²⁴ R. Blass, *Relevance Relations in Discourse: A Study with Special Reference to Sissala* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 7-42. See section 1.9, pp. 43-49, when we consider the implications of RT for discourse analysis.

To sum up, Relevance Theory suggests that when we hear or read an act of deliberate (ostensive) communication, we assume that the communicator not only intended us to understand the communication, but shaped it to be optimally relevant. We interpret it within the context of ideas already present in our minds which, when we add the new information, will yield a flow of good results for acceptably low processing effort. Central to this is the understanding that the context which shapes our understanding of a communication is a context in our minds, a cognitive construction. Our physical and social environment, the history and geography of the world, our life history and the history of our relationship with the communicator all affect the way we understand a communication, but they do so by affecting our minds.