

Relevance Theory: Explaining Some Key Terms

Relevance Theory is a pragmatic, cognitive explanation of the way human communication works. It is based on a number of observations. Firstly, human communication is not simply code-like. Although it does use a system of coding, the results of the coding-decoding process are subjected to interpretation based on the extensive use of inference. Thus, the text of a message interacts with its context to prompt the audience towards the meaning communicated. This process of searching for meaning is driven by the desire to find the communication *relevant*. Simply put, RT suggests that we are programmed to understand messages by interpreting them in contexts that provide the best or most likely set of useful ideas. These contexts are sets of ideas that we already hold to be true or probably true, The sum of such ideas is our **cognitive environment** and two participants in a dialogue assume each other shares a **mutual cognitive environment**. An idea or a communication is more **relevant** if it has lots of useful implications (called **cognitive effects** or **contextual effects**) for the listener, which may provide new information, strengthen or modify information the listener already has, or negate such existing information. The communication is also more relevant if it requires less mental effort to process (**processing effort**.) A text, or communication is said to be **optimally relevant** when it is worth the listener's effort to process it, and it is the most relevant text that could have been generated consistent with the speakers abilities and preferences. When we receive an intentional message, we assume that there are good ideas that we can access for an acceptable amount of thinking.

These ideas may appear common-sense or trivial on the surface, but carefully applied they can provide considerable help in our study of the way human communication works, whether mediated by ancient biblical texts, or new translated texts.

One of the key outcomes of this theory for the way we understand texts is that the old distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* information is considerably refined. Usually *explicit* information is considered to be all that is actually stated by the text of a communication, while anything which has to be either assumed or deduced from this is *implicit*. RT instead uses the idea of *implicature* and *explicatures*. **Explicatures** are derived from the actual form of the text, but they include ideas which result from assigning appropriate reference to pronouns, general terms and deictic particles, resolving the ambiguity of ambiguous terms, and enriching the ideas in the text from the listeners previously stored memory. Thus they include many ideas which used be described as *implicit information*, but under certain strict conditions: they must be able to be derived by logical processing from the text itself.

Implicatures by contrast, can only be derived by processing the text *in a particular context*. They result from the interaction of text and context, not from either individually. Some implicatures may be strong, and are almost certainly part of what the speaker wants to communicate. But many implicatures are weak and there is no firm boundary between the strong implicatures and those weak ones which do not form part of the communicator's intentions.