

Is there a Fish in this cognitive environment? Relevance theory, interpretive communities and the Bible.

Introduction

Stanley Fish's series of lectures entitled "Is there a text in this class?" have gained iconic status, due both to the lively wit and clarity of presentation of the author and to the significance of the questions he addresses.¹ The lectures are in part a response to criticism, by Meyer Abrams and E.D.Hirsch, of the apparent destabilization of the meaning of texts in the critical methodology of Fish, Derrida and Bloom. Abrams charged these "Newreaders" with holding the contradictory position of wishing to apply their own interpretive strategy to other people's texts, but insisting on normal logical interpretation of their own. According to the opponents of the "Newreaders", the move to privilege the reader leads to radical pessimism about the possibility of understanding human communication, and they seek to defend a single, determinate, author-defined meaning. Fish's response is nuanced and operates on a number of levels, moving from direct spoken communication to the interpretation of communally owned texts. His position is well summed up by his statement that "understanding is always possible, but not from the outside."² This implies, firstly, that context is determinative for communication. Even face-to-face communication is ambiguous and understanding is dependent on speaker and hearer participating in a common context of ideas which allow the text of the communication to find its interpretation. Secondly, written texts in particular have multiple meanings, dependent on the conventions and interests of the communities which interact with them. The range of possible meanings is limited. It is neither uniquely defined in advance, nor infinitely variable, but multivalent and dependant on the authority of the interpretive communities, each with their norms and conventions and expectations, that address it.

An interest in the interpretation of human communication is central to the task of biblical scholars as well as literary critics. But linguists working in the field of pragmatics have much to offer both communities, as they are specifically interested in the way language is actually used in particular contexts.³ Perhaps the most comprehensive

¹ S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 303-371. The iconicity of this work is seen by the way in which subsequent authors, myself included, parody the title in order to interact with his ideas, e.g. K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Apollos: Leicester, 1998); J. O'Neil, "Is There a Class in This Text?", *Strumenti Critici: Rivista Quadrimestrale di Cultura e Critica Letteraria* 5 (1990), pp. 221-33; K. Wilson, "Let's Hope There Is a Text in the Class: Stanley Fish and the Profession of English", *Modern Language Studies* 16 (1986), pp. 206-212. Fish himself appears by name in the title of at least 35 articles in the MLA database.

² Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 303.

³ Pragmatics was defined by Charles W. Morris in 1938 as "the relations between signs and interpreters", or later in 1946 as "that branch of semiotics which studies the origin, the uses and the effects of signs". See C.W. Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 6, 365. Modern linguistic accounts of pragmatics begin here but the precise definition is problematical. See the long discussion in S.C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), pp. 1-35. My use of the term assumes such working concepts as "language in use", or "language in context" (see Levinson, *Pragmatics*,

theoretical framework to emerge in pragmatics is Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (RT).⁴ Human communication, argue Sperber and Wilson, is geared towards efficiency, or the optimisation of relevance. When the conditions of ostensive communication (that is, self-conscious, deliberate communication) are met, the receiver interprets the communication in the way that yields good results for an acceptable amount of processing effort. Central to the way in which this optimally relevant interpretation is reached is the idea of context as a negotiable cognitive construct. In this essay I attempt to bring RT alongside Fish's arguments, to discover both convergences and divergences, and to suggest the applicability of these ideas to the interpretation of biblical texts.⁵

Fish's argument is structured around, several anecdotes, real and imagined. Two of the real anecdotes will be the focus of my interest. First I will examine the interchange which gave the title to the series of lectures, a face-to-face verbal encounter between a professor and a student. Secondly I will consider the events which gave rise to the title of the second lecture: "How to recognize a poem when you see one." In this incident we move from verbal to written communication and the issue of the interpretation of written texts. Using Relevance Theory to examine what took place in each of these incidents, we will ask whether Fish has adequately explained the facts in his proposal that meaning is not inherent in the text but is brought to it by the interpretive community. We will show that RT supports the strategic importance of context for interpretation, and the inherent asymmetry of any communicative act. But it does on the other hand provide a theoretical basis for the possibility of accessing the author's intended meaning within the context in which he or she communicated, and thus for according this meaning priority over meanings brought to the text by other interpretive communities.

Relevance Theory

Defenders of a "single determinate authorial meaning" usually assume some variety of a code or conduit model of communication in which by a process of coding and decoding the recipient can produce a replica of the original thought.⁶ This model is

p. 32). Levinson clearly distinguishes this linguistic sense from philosophical pragmatism (p. 1). A finer, but no less critical, distinction is implied by Thiselton's critique of what he calls "socio-pragmatic hermeneutics". See, for example, A. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 6-7).

⁴ D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1st edn. 1986; 2nd edn, 1995). This theory has been described as having "the makings of a radical new theory of communication, the first since Aristotle's" by A. Fowler, "A New Theory of Communication", *London Review of Books* 11 (March 1989), pp. 16-17. Just how wide-ranging are the ramifications of RT can be seen by a glance at the website <http://www.ua.es/personal/francisco.yus/rt.html>

⁵ This essay dabbles in the shallows of the application of Relevance Theory to literary interpretation and applies to Fish's approach some insights developed in other directions in my Ph.D. thesis: "The People of God in the Apocalypse: A Relevance-Theoretic Study", (Unpublished PhD thesis, Dunedin: University of Otago, 2000). A much more ambitious voyage into these perilous waters is to be found in I. MacKenzie, *Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). MacKenzie provides a very substantial challenge to the deconstructionist theories of Paul de Man, arguing that the pragmatics of Relevance Theory accounts for the phenomena of literature in a way that is not only more satisfying, but is also truer to the experience of real language use.

⁶ Since C.E. Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), especially pp. 5, 95-113. A modified version of their diagram is

unable to explain the importance of inference, whereby what is communicated is something other than what is encoded in the message.

RT acknowledges that encoding and decoding take place in communication, but hold that these processes are 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.⁷

The importance of Grice's work is not that his maxims provide rules or codes for successful communication but that they describe how communication creates the conditions for its own success.⁸ "Grice put forward an idea of fundamental importance: that the very act of communicating creates expectations which it then exploits..."⁹

Successful communication depends on shared information and RT defines this in terms of a *mutual cognitive environment*: a shared set of assumptions which participants in an act of communication are *capable* of making.¹⁰ This concept cannot guarantee that communicator and audience *will make* a symmetrical choice of context and code to use in a communication situation. But Sperber and Wilson agree with literary critics that this asymmetry is inherent in communication.¹¹ Communication is then the attempt to change the cognitive environment of another person, and to enlarge the scope of what is mutually manifest to both communicator and audience. No audience can explore and classify all possible contextual implications of an utterance.¹² RT explains the selecting and limiting process by means of "the presumption of optimal relevance":

- (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.¹³

presented by Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, pp. 4-5. The latter work will hereafter be referred to simply as *Relevance*. Page references apply to both first and second editions, except for the Postface to the second edition (1995), pp. 255-79. References to this will be noted explicitly.

⁷ *Relevance*, p. 27. Note the convention of assuming a female speaker/author and male listener/reader.

⁸ 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".

⁹ *Relevance*, p. 37.

¹⁰ *Relevance*, p. 39-42.

¹¹ *Relevance*, p. 43.

¹² A contextual implication is a conclusion derived from a combination of existing assumptions and new information. It is formed by the interpretation of new propositions within a particular context. See *Relevance*, pp. 107-108.

¹³ 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.

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. The receiver brings to the text the most accessible elements of the mutual cognitive environment and decides on the meaning that produces adequate contextual effects for acceptable 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.¹⁴ 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.”

With regard to implicatures, those assumptions that cannot be derived only from the surface form of the text but require inferential processing and contextual information, Sperber and Wilson make the hermeneutically significant assertion that there is no sharp division between strong implicatures of an utterance which are clearly intended by the speaker and weak implicatures 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.¹⁵

This sliding scale of implicatures with corresponding movement of responsibility from speaker to hearer is precisely illustrated by the spectrum of hermeneutic strategies we are considering. Determinists like Abrams and Hirsch accept the explicatures and perhaps strong implicatures. Fish and his colleagues focus on the responsibility of the hearer (or reader).¹⁶ But in RT 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.¹⁷ Considerable work has been done in developing an approach to poetic language based on RT.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Relevance*, 2nd edn, pp. 260-61.

¹⁵ *Relevance*, pp. 199-200.

¹⁶ Note that both explicatures (assumptions derived from the surface form of the text) and implicatures (assumptions which require inferential processing) are context-dependent in their interpretation.

¹⁷ *Relevance*, p. 222.

¹⁸ For developments in the RT treatment of irony see D. Wilson and D. Sperber, “On Verbal Irony”, *Lingua* 87 (1992), pp. 53-76, and contributions to the “Symposium on irony” included in R. Carston and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications* (PBNS, 37; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), pp. 239-95.

“Is there a text in this class?” – Reconstructing the context

As a first step towards a relevance-theoretic understanding of the communication between professor and student in Fish’s anecdote, let us consider a reconstruction of the incident in the Appendix.¹⁹

The teacher assumes the student’s first question to be optimally relevant. It requires both decoding and inferential processing, mutually interactive processes which involve:

(1) Disambiguation of

Noun phrases: “a text” (a specific book, a book specified by syllabus, or an abstract concept?)

“this class” (a room, a group of students or an institutional structure for learning?)

Verb phrase: “Is there” (“Does there exist?” Or “Is there specified?” Or “Do you believe in?”)

Preposition: “in” (located in, or among, or for the purpose of)

(2) Reference assignment of the deictic demonstrative phrase “this class”.

There is a mutual cognitive environment, shared by teacher and student, a set of ideas which each can call to mind and knows the other can call to mind, including concepts such as the nature of the academic institution, the enrolment of the student in the course of study, the relationship of student to teacher and the expectations for clarifications on the first day of class. It is relatively easy to see that within this context, the interpretation which returns the best cognitive effects for the least processing effort is “Is there a set text-book specified for reading for those participating in this course of study?”²⁰ The teacher’s response (line 2) shows that this is precisely how he understood it. It would have been possible for the teacher to recall that Stanley Fish taught courses at the same institution which had to do with the nature of texts and that the question might be informed by this, but that would represent an excess of processing effort which appears unjustified. So far RT agrees with Fish’s analysis and indeed provides a theoretical basis for his intuitive deductions. There is neither a single determinative meaning for the question, nor an infinite range of meanings, but a limited number although RT would offer more than the two “literal” meanings Fish suggests.²¹ The “institutional nesting” which Fish proposes is precisely due to the fact that the context of general academic requirements for courses is more easily accessible and more relevant than the context of Fish’s literary critical views.

But with the student’s response (line 3), Fish’s analysis starts to deconstruct. Fish argues that it is impossible to assign an absolute priority to either of the two meanings he considers, irrespective of context.²² But he goes on to suggest that the meaning construed

¹⁹ See Fish, *Is there a text*, pp. 305, 313, 371.

²⁰ Although the use of “in” rather than “for” is a little unusual and might be a trigger to suggest either that the student is less than precise in her grammar, or that she intends something other than the most readily reached meaning.

²¹ See Fish, *Is there a text*, pp. 306-308.

²² Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 308.

by the teacher is “more normal” than the alternative and more likely to be understood by “a random population.” This assertion is only valid if we are concerned with an abstract, context-free decoding of a set of words. The utterance in question occurred in a particular space-time location and in this specific context, it is possible to say that the meaning inferred by the teacher was the most *relevant* meaning to the teacher. But it was not the student’s intended meaning. Her response begins, “No, no. I mean...” and clearly she is not saying “Bad luck, you picked the wrong one of two equally possible meanings” (as in a guessing game), but “You have misunderstood me.” In RT terms, there has been a failure of relevance, and the student goes on to attempt a correction. This correction, and its sequels later in the exchange, are historical space-time consequences. The speaker’s intention was in fact determinative for meaning in this context and the teacher’s deduction, though easily explicable, was simply wrong.

The student rephrases her question (line 3) in a sentence whose meaning is again not transparent, and which would be almost unintelligible to someone outside the specific context of literary critical ideas. But she does disambiguate certain elements of her original statement. Thus “do we believe?” selects for “is there?” the meaning of literary critical beliefs, while “poems and things” selects for “text” the abstract meaning.²³ This prompts the teacher to enlarge his cognitive environment to include not simply generalised academic course conditions, but the specific concerns of contemporary literary critical debate. However, his reported thoughts (line 4) reflect not a generalised inference about the academic context of the question, but a specific inference about the influence of Stanley Fish (rather than, say, Derrida or de Man). This is no doubt due to the readily available supposition that Fish occupies a room “three doors down” and therefore has most likely been a prior influence on the student’s understanding.²⁴ There is a Fish in this cognitive environment! The most relevant interpretation of line 3 is thus not simply “Do you believe in hermeneutic indeterminacy?” but “Do you agree with, and expect us to work with, the literary theory of Stanley Fish?” This more specific interpretation requires a little extra processing effort but immediately returns a surplus of cognitive effects, arising from the history of his interaction with Fish and with students of Fish. The tone of both the thought and the audible statement of the teacher suggest a history of lively debate or disagreement. The teacher does not simply answer the question, but implicitly draws swords with Fish.

Once again, Fish has himself traced this process in a way which in its general outline receives support from RT. His explanation of the process is less convincing, however. He rejects any idea of according precedence in interpretation to either the construal of sense or the identification of context.²⁵ RT agrees with him in deprivileging sense construal, but suggests that *optimal relevance* is assumed for the utterance and a context sought which gives the best cognitive effects (construal of sense) for the least processing effort. Thus context does have a precedence over interpretation.

²³ *Contra* Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 311-12.

²⁴ See Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 312.

²⁵ Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 313.

Fish concludes his chapter with a summary statement, which forms a useful backdrop against which to summarize the subtle relationship of RT to his theory:

We see then that (1) communication does occur, despite the absence of an independent and context-free system of meanings, that (2) those who participate in this communication do so confidently rather than provisionally (they are not relativists), and that (3) while their confidence has its source in a set of beliefs, those beliefs are not individual-specific or idiosyncratic but communal and conventional (they are not solipsists).²⁶

There is little here with which RT does not agree. The first point underlines the reality of context-based ostensive communication; the second expresses the principle of relevance, while the third describes the nature of the mutual cognitive environment. RT agrees with Fish that there is no single determinative meaning to an utterance, and that meaning is not therefore unconstrained, but rather limited to alternatives provided by shared assumptions. But this does not imply that there is no privileged interpretation, corresponding to a privileged set of conventions and assumptions. Indeed RT suggests that there is such a privileged interpretation, that is the one optimally relevant in the original communication situation. This is the one which leaves traces of its history.²⁷ Indeed, the way in which history constrains interpretation is evident in some of Fish's later illustrations. A non-ironic interpretation of Jane Austen's attitude to Mr. Collins, or an "Eskimo" interpretation of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily", could only be postulated on the basis of a hypothetical discovery of actual correspondence.²⁸ RT, like Speech Act Theory, sees communication as linguistic action, with the consequences and responsibilities (for both author and audience) inherent in actions.

With respect to biblical texts, RT thus provides a rationale both for the study of the original "meaning-in-context" and for an understanding of the history of interpretation.

How to recognize a poem – the assumption of ostensive communication

With Fish's second historical anecdote, in which a class of students produces literary interpretations of a list of authors' names, we move one step away from immediate face-to-face communication and towards the interpretation of written texts. Sperber and Wilson developed RT largely with reference to short utterances of spoken language, in face-to-face contexts, and their spontaneous interpretation. Its application to written texts involves a leap in scale, medium and communication situation and raises questions of the validity of relevance in this new environment. The authors of the theory saw no difficulty with making this leap:

We assume... that the lengthy and highly self-conscious processes of textual interpretation that religious or literary scholars engage in are governed just as much by the principle of relevance as is spontaneous utterance comprehension.²⁹

²⁶ Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 321.

²⁷ Ricoeur's concept of the "trace" of the past, whether archaeological or archival, is discussed in K. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (CUP: Cambridge, 1990), p. 100-103.

²⁸ Fish, *Is there a text*, pp. 345-47.

²⁹ *Relevance*, p. 75. See also p. 61

Neither the change in scale nor the change in medium are particularly troublesome.³⁰ It is the change to a communication situation that is non-immediate and non-reciprocal which presents the greatest challenge to the relevance of relevance. It has been suggested that literary texts are in some way different from other modes of communication, such that relevance no longer applies or is no longer a useful concept in interpreting them.³¹ In particular it is alleged that RT tends to indulge the “intentional fallacy”.³² In response to these criticisms there are at least three valid lines of approach. First, intentionality is a presumption made before interpreting any communication and is consistently used in the “trivial” pursuit of comprehension, by disambiguation, reference assignment (for example, of pronouns), and grammatical parsing, before a more self-conscious interpretation process begins.³³ Secondly there is the problem (or perhaps impossibility) of defining literary text as a genre.³⁴ How do so-called literary texts signal in non-semantic and non-pragmatic ways that they are literary texts and so require different strategies of interpretation from ordinary texts? Thirdly, literary effects have indeed been satisfactorily accounted for in RT terms.³⁵

It may be argued that RT is inapplicable to literary texts because of the impossibility of establishing a mutual cognitive environment. The only thing mutually manifest between the author of a text and its readers is the text itself, with the possible addition of obvious intertextual references. But, depending on one’s definition of intertextuality, this is either not true, or it is not a limitation. If by intertextual references we mean references to other written documents, then it must be obvious that any author who offers a text to an audience, however unknown to her personally that audience may be, must of necessity depend also on that audience sharing with her in a commonality of non-written linguistic, academic, social, geographical, biological and anthropological conventions and assumptions. And if intertextuality is given the wider sense of

³⁰ The change to text as medium implies that the text itself becomes the most accessible context (or concentric set of contexts) within which the search for relevance takes place.

³¹ A vigorous debate on this subject took place on the Relevance internet mailing list in late 1999. Unfortunately contributions were not archived before 2000. A similar debate is reflected in K. Green, “Butterflies, Wheels and the Search for Literary Relevance”, *Language and Literature* 6 (1997), pp. 133-38; A. Pilkington, B. MacMahon and B. Clark, “Looking for an Argument: A Response to Green”, *Language and Literature* 6 (1997), pp. 139-48.

³² Following W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” in W.K. Wimsatt (ed.), *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), pp. 3-18. Note the remark on p. 3: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”

³³ See, in particular, R.W. Gibbs, *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

³⁴ Following T. Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), esp. pp. 1-12.

³⁵ For example by Sperber and Wilson, B. Clark, “Stylistic Analysis and Relevance Theory”, *Language and Literature* 5 (1996), pp. 163-78; A. Furlong, “Relevance Theory and Literary Interpretation”, (Unpublished PhD thesis, London: University College London, 1996); MacKenzie, *Paradigms*; A. Pilkington, *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000); J.P. Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); S. Uchida, “Text and Relevance” in Carston and Uchida (eds.), *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications*, pp. 161-78.

“participation in the discursive space of a culture”, then all of those assumptions form the domain of intertextuality for the text.³⁶ In either case what is mutually manifest is precisely a mutual cognitive environment, as defined by RT. And ostensive communication is a distinct possibility here.³⁷

Returning to our anecdote, Fish’s contention is that what began life as a rather prosaic list of authors becomes a poem in his students act of so reading it. It is not that there are inherent properties in it that make it a poem or an assignment, or simply a list, but rather that the conventions of the interpretive community invest the text with pre-determined properties. It is the community which makes the poem (or the assignment). But this is to ignore one very important feature of the incident. Before the students begin their work of interpreting the text of some supposedly unknown author there has been an overt act of ostensive communication:

Fish: This is a poem of the kind you have been studying. Interpret it.³⁸

The students did not begin with the discovery of a text (like an archaeologist discovering an inscription), they began with an assertion by Fish which identified the text as a religious poem and thus activated a cognitive environment which for them contained a large number of interpretive tools and resources, including the encyclopaedic information from Fish’s earlier lectures. Furthermore, Fish explicitly invited or instructed them to interpret it. Their ingenious interpretations were thus not an act of discovery or of imposition but firstly an act of faith (in Fish) and secondly an act of obedience (to Fish and his previously taught methodology). Once again, there is a Fish in the cognitive environment, muddying the waters.

From an RT perspective, the students start with Fish’s statement and instruction. Because he clearly had a communicative intent, they assume him to be communicating relevantly and, especially in this case where professorial authority is prominent, relevance entails truth.³⁹ The most relevant interpretation of his statement is thus that “seventeenth century religious poem” is an accurate characterisation of the text on the blackboard. The students interpretation was “Here is what we think Fish would agree is the meaning of a text which Fish has told us is a religious poem.” It was not their interpretation but his declaration that made it a poem. Once again Fish has ignored the author – in this case himself. He is in fact the author of both the assignment and the poem.

³⁶ See J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 103.

³⁷ “The addressees of an act of ostensive communication are the individuals whose cognitive environment the communicator is trying to modify...they may be individuals falling under a certain description, as when we address the present paragraph to all individuals who have read the book so far and found it relevant to them. In broadcast communication, a stimulus can even be addressed to whoever finds it relevant. The communicator is then communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is willing to entertain it” *Relevance*, p. 158.

³⁸ See Fish, *Is there a text*, p. 323.

³⁹ Relevance is here seen to encompass Grice’s maxim of quality.

Amusing as the incident may be, it says little about literary interpretation, except perhaps that norms constrain interpretation. And with this no relevance theorist or biblical scholar would disagree. But the fact that an assignment or a list must also be interpreted as such is beside the point. The text arose in a specific context. In that context, Fish wrote a list of authors' names, designating this list as an assignment. In exactly the same way that the second class understood the list as a poem, the first class had already understood this list as an assignment not simply because it was on the blackboard, but because of Fish's ostensive communication within the context of the class. Its *interpretation* as an assignment would have been constrained by the numerous conventions of academia, as outlined by Fish. But it was precisely and definitely not a poem and the exercise that made it a poem said nothing about the text but only something about Fish. The very conditions of ostensive communication constrain the interpretation.

Relevance Theory, literary texts and the absence of the author

The anecdote of the poem is, of course, only half-way towards the context of normal literary interpretation, and of biblical interpretation, due to the author's physical and intellectual presence. The requirement under RT to treat texts as examples of ostensive communication in a mutual cognitive environment is sometimes seen to conflict with the dominant paradigm of contemporary literary criticism, namely that the author's context and intentions are inaccessible and unnecessary to interpretation. Ricoeur's "threefold semantic autonomy" of the text suggests that a text is cut off from its author's intentions and from its original context, and is no longer able to refer ostensively.⁴⁰ Fowler, however, points out the significance of RT's inferential understanding of communication for the problem of interpreting texts whose author is absent:

True, old assumptions may be forgotten or unobvious. But while domains of assumption have changed in numerous ways, they have not changed beyond recognition. It is not in principle a hopeless task to learn enough to make sound inferences from the assumptions formerly taken to be optimally relevant.⁴¹

We have already shown how ostensive communication from an absent author is possible, but two further points in favour of RT must be made, both of which are particularly pertinent to biblical interpretation.

First, RT does treat a text as a record of a genuine communication event. And in this regard, Gibbs has pointed out that the attribution of intentions is a normal part of the human understanding process: "We ordinarily attribute intentions to other people and animals in a wide variety of everyday interactions."⁴² He goes on to argue that the same

⁴⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 30; P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), p. 145. See also Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative*, p. 109, note 7.

⁴¹ Fowler, "A New Theory", p. 17. See the longer quote in the handout.

⁴² Gibbs, *Intentions*, p. 5.

applies to the interpretation of texts, as well as utterances or even artworks.⁴³ There is no reason why the author's intentions should be either totally unrecoverable or irrelevant.

Secondly, we should note that RT does not guarantee the recovery of the author's intended meaning. The one assumption which must be correctly conveyed for communication to take place is the Communicative Intention, which establishes the conditions for ostensive communication.⁴⁴ Thereafter the form of the communication (e.g. the text itself) suggests a double responsibility for meaning. Thus, on the one hand, the communicator must "make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process."⁴⁵ But on the other hand, "Fulfilment of the communicator's informative intentions is in the hands of the audience and this is itself mutually manifest."⁴⁶ Central to both directions of interest is the mutual cognitive environment of communicator and audience. Thus the original audience of a biblical text is entitled to use the text within the mutual cognitive environment to determine the author's informative intentions. But when later audiences use their own cognitive environments, unconnected to the author, there is no guarantee that they will recover the author's intended meaning.

Three different communication situations can be envisaged for literary texts, like the Bible: the original situation in which the author transmitted her writings to a particular audience (which may or may not be explicitly defined),⁴⁷ the situation of subsequent ordinary readers of the text, cut off from the original context, and the situation of the scholar studying either of the previous two situations.⁴⁸ The problem in each case is to establish whether there is a mutual cognitive environment within which the search for relevance can be seen to guide both author and audience.

In the original situation there can be little doubt of the existence of a large number of shared cognitive contexts, beginning from the text itself and widening to include the life situations of the audience and author (some, though not all, aspects of these will be mutually manifest), and an array of other texts (oral and written) to which the author can assume the audience has access. Relevance is most certainly an operating principle in the author's construction of the text and in the audience's interpretation of it. This situation is most clearly applicable in, for example, Paul's letters with their close dependence on a mutually manifest set of contextual assumptions.

⁴³ Gibbs, *Intentions*, p. 15. Refer to handout for quote. See also his extensive treatment of literary interpretation, pp. 234-72.

⁴⁴ See p. 19 above.

⁴⁵ *Relevance*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ *Relevance*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ This is clearly an oversimplification, as there may be several, possibly nested, communication situations reflected by the production of, say, a gospel, e.g. oral tradition, gospel writing and canonical placement.

⁴⁸ The first situation may be termed *synchronic*, as it assumes that writing and reading take place within a limited time span. The second and third situations may therefore be termed *diachronic*. I am leaving out of consideration here the role of the Holy Spirit as representing a continuing authorial presence. See my *Souls under the altar*, pp. 38-45, for an attempt to include this perspective.

By virtue of committing a text to writing an author implicitly offers it to a wider and less clearly defined audience, or indeed to “anyone who finds it relevant”. And indeed some biblical texts, such as gospels or general epistles, appear to begin at this level. But there may still be a considerable degree of shared cognitive environment. Once again it begins with the text itself but this context can be widened (contra Ricoeur). The author will assume her wider audience shares assumptions derived from membership in particular linguistic, cultural, or national communities. These may be quite specific, as in the case of faith communities, or academic communities, where other texts, ideas, traditions and practices may well be assumed. Ostensive reference within such contexts is possible though deixis may at times be problematic.⁴⁹ The more removed the audience, the smaller is the extent of the mutual cognitive environment. This will not diminish the importance of the search for relevance in the audience’s interpretation of the text, but it will mean a progressive loss in confidence that the derived meaning in any way represents the author’s intentions.⁵⁰ Naive interpretations of the Bible say more about the readers’ cognitive environment than about the meaning of the text. But so do “interested” interpretations.

The scholar or critic is a special case of the “subsequent ordinary reader”. So similar considerations of shared context apply. Scholars are more self-conscious in their search for meaning, but are nonetheless guided both directly and indirectly by the principle of relevance.⁵¹ Indirectly, the assumption that the communication to original or subsequent ordinary readers operated by the principle of relevance re-affirms the fundamental importance of historical-critical research, in order to discover the nature of the mutual cognitive environments within which the communication and its interpretations (both initial and subsequent) took place.⁵² Directly, relevance influences the work of scholars and critics even if they are unaware of it, because their conclusions will be those that, in their opinion, best explain the data available, i.e. are optimally relevant to them. But even more directly, to “use Relevance Theory” in the interpretation

⁴⁹ *Deixis* is a characteristically pragmatic concept, which Levinson, *Pragmatics*, p. 54 defines in the following way: “The term is borrowed from the Greek word for pointing or indicating, and has as prototypical exemplars the use of demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs like *now* and *here*, and a variety of other grammatical features tied directly to the circumstances of utterance.... Essentially deixis concerns the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the **context of utterance** or **speech event**.” (Emphasis his.)

⁵⁰ The *limiting* case (rather than the normal) is when the audience’s interests dominate, subvert, or eliminate the author’s. This has been described by Furlong, “Literary Interpretation”, pp. 194-99, as “eisegetical interpretation” and is similar to the “socio-pragmatic hermeneutics” extensively critiqued by Thiselton. (See, eg. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, pp. 393-405, and 545-50.)

⁵¹ This is true even though the author can have had no intention to communicate to later scholars, nor to subject her communication to their scrutiny. G.B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 2, comments of the biblical authors: “They never dreamt that what they wrote would, centuries later, be subjected to the microscopic scrutiny of modern biblical scholarship, providing in every unusual phrase and every unexpressed assumption matter for a doctoral dissertation.”

⁵² This interest which RT both exemplifies and explains was anticipated by 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: “The essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance.”

of texts is to bring to conscious focus a factor which is operative whether or not the interpreter is aware of it. It involves examining how the text might have achieved optimal relevance, interacting with the reader's cognitive environment(s) to produce good cognitive effects. It will involve careful analysis of the output of historical-critical research to determine which cognitive environments may have been more accessible than others, yielding good cognitive effects without gratuitous processing effort. Thus by investigating the "readers' meaning", and with the assumption that the author is aiming for optimal relevance with respect to his intended meaning, the scholar is provided with the best possible clues to the author's informative intentions.

Conclusions

Relevance Theory has an interesting dialectic relationship with the critical theory of Stanley Fish. On the one hand it undergirds some of his arguments with a plausible cognitive explanation, especially with respect to the importance of context for meaning and interpretation. But on the other hand it calls into question his unwillingness to give priority to the author's meaning, or the meaning optimally relevant in the original context. Relevance Theory provides a principled way of understanding the process of interpretation and the fact that it is context- and convention- dependent. But being a pragmatic theory, it also locates the text within a communication event which assumes an author and hence an "author-ity" about the meaning of the text. This is not to say that misunderstanding does not take place, whether in face-to-face or absent situations. Nor does it mean that the audience (or the reader) will necessarily arrive at the author's intended meaning. It is always possible that there will be a failure to obtain optimal relevance. And it is always possible for the reader's context to lead them to a different meaning. But in pragmatic theory a speaker "uses" an utterance to perform a "speech act", which, like non-verbal acts, entails responsibilities and consequences.⁵³ There is nothing in texts which prevents this also being the case. The author may be removed, but it is nevertheless a "text act" and as all acts brings with it responsibilities and consequences. The very anecdote which Fish uses as his starting point contains an author and should lead him to assign a role and responsibility to the author of written texts as well as to their readers.

Whether in the study of literature in general, or the study of biblical texts, Relevance Theory provides a *via media* between the determinists and the relativists. By accounting for the pragmatics of real communication it successfully explains the power of interpretive communities while acknowledging the historical and hermeneutic priority of the original communication act. With respect to texts as old as the Bible, RT acknowledges, indeed it quantifies, the difficulty involved in a modern audience arriving at the author's intended meaning, and yet it does not write off this search as either impossible or unimportant. It takes seriously and accounts for the history of interpretation, and both explains and undergirds the interpretive strategies of contemporary communities who read the text within their own environment.

⁵³ This implication of Speech Act theory, namely that a text, as a speech act, implies someone (an author) who is responsible for it, and similarly imposes responsibilities on its readers, is developed with respect to biblical texts by N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

References

- Caird, G.B., *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).
- Carston, R., and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications* (PBNS, 37; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998).
- Clark, B., "Stylistic Analysis and Relevance Theory", *Language and Literature* 5 (1996), pp. 163-78.
- Culler, J., *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
- Fish, S., *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- Fowler, A., "A New Theory of Communication", *London Review of Books* 11 (1989), pp. 16-17.
- Furlong, A., "Relevance Theory and Literary Interpretation", (Unpublished PhD thesis, London: University College London, 1996).
- Gibbs, R.W., *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).
- Green, K., "Butterflies, Wheels and the Search for Literary Relevance", *Language and Literature* 6 (1997), pp. 133-38.
- Grice, H.P., "Logic and Conversation" in H.P. Grice (ed.), *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989)
- Levinson, S.C., *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).
- MacKenzie, I., *Paradigms of Reading: Relevance Theory and Deconstruction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- Morris, C.W., *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).
- Pilkington, A., *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).
- Pilkington, A., B. MacMahon, and B. Clark, "Looking for an Argument: A Response to Green", *Language and Literature* 6 (1997), pp. 139-48.
- Ricoeur, P., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981).
- _____, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).
- Rumrich, J.P., *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).
- Shannon, C.E., and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).
- Skinner, Q., "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" in J. Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 29-67.

- Sperber, D., and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1995).
- Thiselton, A., *New Horizons in Hermeneutics. The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
- Todorov, T., *Genres in Discourse*, Translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).
- Uchida, S., "Text and Relevance" in R. Carston and S. Uchida (eds.), *Relevance Theory: Applications and Implications* (PBNS, 37; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), pp. 161-78
- Vanhoozer, K., *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (CUP: Cambridge, 1990).
- _____, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Apollos: Leicester, 1998).
- Wilson, D., and D. Sperber, "On Verbal Irony", *Lingua* 87 (1992), pp. 53-76.
- Wimsatt, W.K., and M.C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in W.K. Wimsatt (ed.), *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), pp. 3-18.
- Wolterstorff, N., *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).