

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.22

Study Material

What is Relevance Theory?

- Relevance theory emerged in 1980's in the collaborative work of Wilson and Sperber. Some of its elements can be traced back to the words of Grice.
- A framework for the study of human cognition proposed primarily in order to provide a psychologically realistic account of communication.
- Theory proposes that conversational implicature is understood by hearers simply by selecting the relevant features of context and recognizing whatever speakers say as relevant to the conversation.
- Seen as a pragmatic theory because of its focus on the use of language in communication.
- Specifically on the relationship between meaning and context.
- An attempt to work out in detail one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions.
- It is also cognitive theory, in that it is concerned with the relationship between language and mind.
- seeks to describe the cognitive process that speakers and hearers go through when they produce and interpret language.
- The core of the theory is the communicative principle of relevance.
- Every person engaged in communication has the concept of relevance in his mind.
- When hearers and readers make sense of a text, they interpret the connections between utterances as meaningful, making inferences by drawing on their own background knowledge of the world (Cutting, 2010: 41).
- The purpose of communication is not to 'duplicate thoughts' but to 'enlarge mutual cognitive environments' (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 193)
- The degree of relevance is governed by 'contextual effects' and 'processing effort' (Cutting, 2010: 41). (End)

Principles of Relevance Theory

- Wilson and Sperber classified Relevance theory into two main principles.
- **1. Cognitive Principle**
- Any external stimulus or internal representation which provides an input to cognitive processes may be relevant to an individual at some time.
- Utterances raise expectations of relevance, not because speakers are expected to obey a cooperative Principle and maxims, but because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition.
- Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).
- When is an input relevant?
- an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him.
- when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a positive cognitive effect.
- A positive cognitive effect is a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world: a true conclusion. For example, False conclusions do have cognitive effects but not positive ones (Sperber and Wilson 1995).
- The most important type of cognitive effect is a contextual implication, a conclusion deducible from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone.
- Other types of cognitive effect include the strengthening, revision, or abandonment of available assumptions.
- **2. Communicative Principle of Relevance**
- An attempt to work out one of Grice's central claims that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions.
- We keep on producing stimuluses which gain other peoples attention and thus lay ground for communication.
- The tendency to maximize relevance makes it possible to predict and manipulate the mental states of others.
- Knowing your tendency to pick out the most relevant inputs.

- Example: I may leave my empty glass in your line of vision intending you to notice and conclude that I might like another drink.
- Ostensive inferential communication - reasons that will shortly become apparent
- Understanding an utterance is a matter of inferring the speaker's:
- A. Informative intentions
- B. communicative intentions. (End)

Explicatures and Implicatures

- According to relevance theorists, the “explicature,” or “explicit content”, of an utterance of a sentence is a “development” of the sentence’s “logical form”.
- An implicature is something that is built from what the speaker says in uttering the sentence.
- These conceptions sound similar enough, so how do they differ?
- Explicatures and implicatures (i.e. implicit premises and conclusions) are arrived at by a process of mutual parallel adjustment, with hypotheses about both being considered in order of accessibility.
- Apparently both explicature and implicature sound similar, but these both are different from each other.
- Explicature, in simple terms, is directly conveyed content - “orally and graphologically form of an utterance.
- On the other hand, implicature is something which is implied in an utterance.
- It could mean that a speaker means one thing and conveys something else in addition. It is a hidden concept.

Explicature

- What is said directly in an utterance or a sentence.
- The literal meaning.
- Example: Ali is a vegetarian

Implicature

- What is implied in an utterance or a sentence.
- Could be literal or associative both.
- Example: We should prepare vegetarian food

(Google Images)

Conceptual and Procedural Meaning

- The conceptual–procedural distinction was introduced into relevance theory by Diane Blakemore (1987) to account for differences between regular ‘content’ words (such as dog, red, think or know, on the one hand) and discourse connectives (such as but, so, also, and after all, on the other).
 - The vast majority of lexical items have conceptual meaning, including common nouns (‘chair’, ‘water’, etc.), verbs (‘consider’, ‘leap’, etc.), adjectives (e.g. ‘red’, ‘slow’, etc.), adverbs (‘sadly’, ‘quickly’, etc.), and prepositions (‘behind’, ‘under’, etc.).
 - That is to say, these items encode concepts.
 - If a lexical item has conceptual meaning, this meaning can potentially contribute to the truth-conditional content of an utterance containing that lexical item.
 - ‘Content’ words are the constituents of a conceptual representation system or ‘language of thought’ (Fodor, 1975, 1998; Sperber & Wilson, 1995)
 - This contributes to the proposition expressed by an utterance and make a difference to the conditions under which it is true.
 - In contrast, It is widely accepted that discourse connectives make no difference to the truth conditions of utterances, and cannot, therefore, be seen as encoding concepts (Bach, 1999; Potts, 2005)
 - Relevance theorists have claimed that words such as ‘but’, ‘however’, and inferential ‘so’ encode procedures. These items indicate something about the context in which the are to be processed.
 - They guide the hearer towards intended contextual effects, and hence reduce the overall effort required to process the discourse.
 - Two ways to distinguish between conceptual and procedural meaning (Wilson and Sperber, 1993: 16):
 - (a) Conceptual meaning is available to consciousness, whereas procedurally encoded information is not.
 - (b) Conceptual meaning is compositional, whereas procedurally encoded information is not.
- (End)

Accessibility and Limitations of Relevance Theory

- The degree of relevance is related to Contextual effects and processing effort.
- Contextual effects include such things as adding new information, strengthening or contradicting an existing assumption, or weakening old information.
- The more contextual effects, the greater the relevance of a fact.
- A new fact unconnected to anything already known is not worth processing, whereas a new fact taken with something already known is worth processing.
- As far as the processing effort is concerned, the theory says that the less effort it takes to recover a fact, the greater the relevance.
- The speaker assumes which facts are accessible for the hearer and speaks in such a way that the hearer can make the correct inferences without too much effort.
- The context for the interpretation of an utterance is chosen by the hearer, and the speaker assumes that the facts are relatively accessible for the hearer.
- The hearer interprets what is said by finding an accessible context that produces 'the maximum amount of new information with the minimum amount of processing effort' (Trask 1999: 58).
- Limitations of Relevance Theory
- It says nothing about interaction.
- does not include cultural or social dimensions, such as age, gender, status and nationality.
- An objection that one may have to Sperber and Wilson's model, as with Grice's Cooperative Principle model, is that different cultures, countries and communities have their own ways of observing and expressing maxims. (End)