

Lecture 2, winter term

Relevance Theory

as a post-Gricean theory

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0. A recap of Gricean theory of Conversational Implicature

- Grice's theory of conversational implicature aims to account for why people are able to further a conversation, even though they don't always speak their minds. For Grice, the answer is simple: **People are generally being co-operative** in that they are trying to make some contribution to the topic of conversation.
- He proposed the Co-operative Principle, which was fleshed out (详细说明) in **four maxims of conversation**.
 - Maxim of quality
 - Maxim of quantity
 - Maxim of relation
 - Maxim of manner
- **Conversationalists** are speaking **informatively** (quantity), **truthfully** (quality), **relevantly** (relation) and **appropriately** (manner). 交际双方所说的话要信息量充足、真实、相关、恰当

Last week

- **Politeness Theories** which have been proposed to complement Grice's Theory
 - “**politeness**” and “**face**” (面子)
- Approaches to politeness
 - Brown & Levinson (1987/2013) building on the notion ‘of face’
 - **Face, face-threatening acts**
 - **Politeness strategies** (which can be used to lessen face-threatening acts)
 - Leech (1983) focusing on ways of politeness
 - **Maxims of politeness** (which conversationalists are supposed to observe)
- Cultural differences in the use of politeness

Today

- Introduction: **Relevance Theory**, as a **post-Gricean** theory, is hugely influential in linguistics, cognitive science, etc.
- Sperber & Wilson's Principle of Relevance is explanatorily powerful in two aspects
 - **The Cognitive Principle of Relevance**
 - **The Communicative Principle of Relevance**
- **Explicature** (明说) and **implicature** (暗说)
 - A term coined by relevance theorists in contrast to 'implicature' coined by Grice

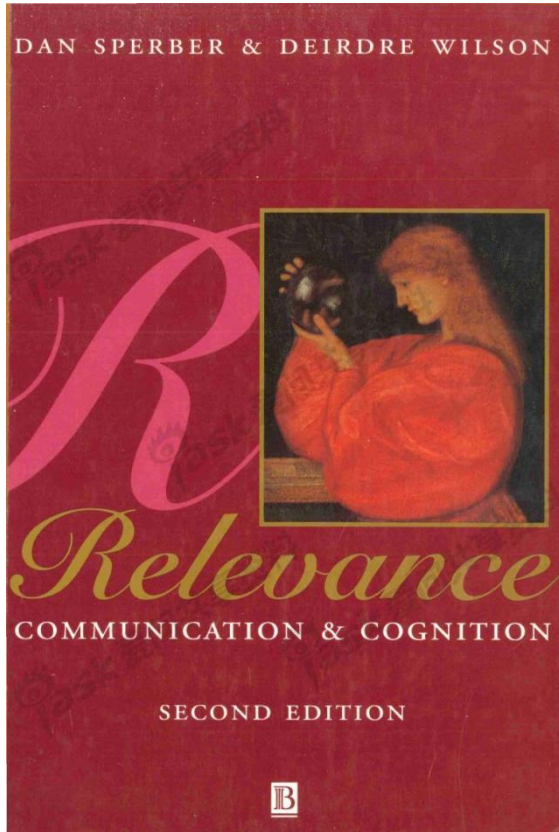
Can the Gricean theory be simplified? 格莱斯的理论能否简化?

- As we've discussed, there are some inadequacies in the Gricean theory, e.g. *the maxims of conversation seem somewhat cumbersome*. As we know, the best theory is always the simplest, e.g. Einstein's famous equation $E=MC^2$ (质能方程: 它描述了宇宙中质量与能量的等效关系)
- Which of the four maxims is possibly the most vital one?
 - ~~□ Maxim of quantity~~
 - ~~□ Maxim of quality~~
 - Maxim of relation
 - ~~□ Maxim of manner~~

1. Introduction

- A British linguist, Deirdre Wilson, and a French cognitive scientist, Dan Sperber, have accordingly proposed **Relevance Theory** (RT), which is a hugely popular theory not only in linguistics but also in cognitive science and artificial intelligence.
- The original, and still most thorough, presentation of the theory is in Sperber & Wilson's (1986/95) *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*.
 - Note that other good overviews can be found in Blakemore (1992) and Carston (2002).

A hugely popular book



Relevance Theory



Deirdre Wilson

&

Dan Sperber



have another idea!



Language is the mind's work . . . so it is primarily the work of inferences.

People are so reliant on inference(s), whether they are **encoding** or **decoding** messages.

1. Introduction

- In **Relevance Theory**, the four maxims of Grice's **Cooperative Principle** is replaced by a single principle, i.e. **relevance**, i.e. they are not necessary any more.
- What does '**relevance**' mean? What does 'cognition' mean?
 - **Relevance (关联)** is surely also a matter of **how closely things are related**.
 - For Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), we tend to find things **relevant to us** if they address our current concerns. **These are the things that are most accessible to us, and/or have particularly strong cognitive effects.** 关联是指事物之间联系的密切程度。我们倾向于寻找那些易于理解或接近的事物，这些事物通常拥有很强的认知效果。

1. Introduction

- According to the two proponents, **RT** is a *post*-Gricean theory, insofar as **it investigates how aspects of meaning are generated in context and in relation to the speaker's intentions.**
 - It is NOT strictly a '*neo*-Gricean' theory, since **it is NOT based on the notion of co-operation, NOR does it build on Grice's system of maxims of conversation.**
 - Note that the term '*neo*-Gricean' is most often used to describe the works of Laurence Horn, Stephen Levinson, etc.

1. Introduction

- As we know, good research is problem-oriented. RT aims to address **more fundamental questions about communication and the cognitive capacities** people must have in order to communicate with one another. Thus, whereas Grice (1975) apparently just assumes that **we have the ability to recognise the topic of conversation** (we need this to judge what constitutes saying too much or too little, for example), **RT addresses *HOW* we come to recognise such things as our hearers' purposes.**
- *Grice failed to make clear **HOW** we know such things or **HOW** we select appropriate information to bring them to bear on the process of communication. RT starts with such basic questions and builds a theory of pragmatics from there.*

2. The Principle of Relevance

- For relevance theorists, there are two factors that determine relevance: **strength of cognitive effects** (i.e. the speaker says something that *enables* the hearer to understand or identify it), but also **the effort required to access some information**. RT ultimately defines relevance in relative terms: *Relevance is higher when cognitive effects are higher, but it is lower when more processing effort is required*. It can be formulated as $R = E/C$.

关联度由**认知效果**（即听话人能够理解说话人提供的信息）和**认知努力**（或称“心力”，获取信息所需的认知加工）两方面因素决定。认知效果越强，关联度越大；而心力付出越大，关联度越小。对这一关系可做如下刻画：

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{(新信息和我们已知信息的关联度)} \\ \text{Relevance (of new information, fact, etc.)} \\ \text{与效果成正比, 与心力成反比} \end{array} = \frac{\text{E (number of contextual effects) 效果}}{\text{C (cost of effort in obtaining E) 心力}}$$

Which sounds more pleasant, BE or AE? 哪国的英语好听?

As advanced English learners, we have no trouble understanding what these guys are talking about. But how about those who don't know English well?



VS.



Opinions usually differ as to whether BE or AE sounds more pleasant. In the video clip, **every speaker airs his opinion, based on his own experience or knowledge.**

2. The Principle of Relevance

- RT is explanatorily very powerful. According to Carston (2002), **the Principle of Relevance** has two parts:
 - The Principle can be applied to account for **the cognitive phenomena** as well as **the communicative phenomena**.
 - Thus, RT can be construed as (the first) ***Cognitive Principle of Relevance*** and (the second) ***Communicative Principle of Relevance***.

2.1. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance

- S&W state this principle as follows:
 - Human cognition is geared (i.e. made or prepared) towards the maximization of relevance (that is, *to the achievement of as many (contextual) cognitive effects as possible for as little processing effort as possible*).
- The degree of relevance of a cognitive activity is governed by two facts: （认知效果：新旧知识或信息的融合）
 - **Cognitive effects:** the more of these there are, the greater the relevance of a particular piece of information or a particular fact. Cognitive effects are such things as *adding new information, strengthening old information*, etc. These are usually effects that follow from *the integration of new information with old information*.
 - **Processing effort:** the less effort it takes to access some information, the greater the relevance of that information (想想听一场讲座的情景(如何学习英语? Vs 如何研究物理): 若听起来很费劲, 认知效果就... ?)

2.2. *The Communicative Principle of Relevance*

- From a communicative point of view, this makes a lot of sense: it is only worth an addressee's time and effort to process some information if the ratio of rewards to effort is sufficiently high.
- In view of this, S&W state the second (Communicative) Principle of Relevance as follows:
 - Every act of ostensive (明示) communication (i.e. the intention of communicating some message is clearly demonstrative) automatically carries with it the utterer's belief in its optimal relevance (最佳关联).

2.2. *The Communicative Principle of Relevance*

- Every act of **ostensive** (明示) communication (i.e. *the intention of communicating some message is clearly demonstrative*) automatically carries with it the utterer's belief in its optimal relevance.

In other words, by *producing a linguistic utterance*, I signal to you that I intend to communicate some message. Given that, I am effectively demanding your attention and your willingness to process what I have to say, and in the meantime I also believe that no more easily processed utterance would give the same result, i.e. *what I say is optimally or most desirably relevant, say, to the topic, your interests*. E.g. *Monroe's response to the interviewer's embarrassing question*).

3. Application of RT

- As we know, **inference** (i.e. **pragmatic reasoning**) plays a crucial role in utterance interpretation. The traditional conception of its role is this: **a sentence compositionally expresses a propositional (or roughly the literal) meaning**, whereas **pragmatics may derive further meaning – implicatures**.
- **RT rejects this picture.** S&W argue that **relevance-based inference** is involved in **determining ‘basic propositional meaning’ as well as in the derivation of implicatures**. RT assumes that the same reasoning is involved in all of the following: (i) **disambiguation**, (ii) **the assignment of reference** [both (i) and (ii) are context-sensitive contributions to basic meaning that everyone recognises], (iii) **the enrichment of** often underspecified (i.e. incomplete) meaning that is encoded in linguistic forms, in order to create basic propositional meanings (i.e. roughly the literal meaning), and (iv) **the derivation of implicatures**.

3.1 Disambiguation (消歧)

- Natural language is full of potential ambiguities (e.g. **polysemy** and **synonymy** at the lexical as well as sentential level). But these are rarely noticed, because they are disambiguated by context. **The process of disambiguation is relevance-driven.** For example, each of the following two sentences contains (at least) one ambiguous word, but neither of them is difficult to interpret (examples from Cruse, 2004).

(1) *She has a **mole** on her left cheek.*

(2) *They managed to place a **mole** in the rival organization.*

- In (1), the presence of *cheek* in the later part of the sentence leads us to select the reading “small dark spot on the skin” for *mole*. In (2) the “small dark spot on the skin” reading of *mole* is ruled out as anomalous, and the reading “industrial spy” is selected instead of “furry animal”, as the former is more relevant to the sentential context. Both processes of disambiguation are relevance-based.

That is, we select the sense of a word *relevant* to the sentential context, thus achieving the appropriate (contextual) cognitive effects.

3.1 *Disambiguation*

What is a mole?



3.2. Assignment of reference (确定指称对象)

- A second important role of **inference** in utterance interpretation is **the identification of the referents of definite referring expressions**. Consider the following example:

(3) A: *I'll make the salad dressing.*

B: **The oil** is on the top shelf.

A: *I can't see it.*

No oil has been mentioned up to the point, so which oil is B talking about?

*Relevance requires us to **maximize contextual (cognitive) effects** and one way of doing this is to **integrate** an utterance **with** previous discourse.*

In (3) this can be done by retrieving our world knowledge to the effect that one of the ingredients of salad dressing is oil, so “the oil” should be understood as that used for salad dressing. This is known as **bridging effect** (桥接效果), i.e. *we notice a **gap** in the course of discourse interpretation and we fill it, based on inference.*

3.3. *Enrichment* (语用充实)

- An important part of the process of utterance interpretation is the recovery of the missing components of the expressed propositions by (**pragmatic**) **enrichment** (语用充实). This involves fleshing out a skeletal proposition (but not radically changing it). A straightforward case of enrichment can be shown in (4), a case of **recovering missing elements in an utterance**.

(4) A: *When you've finished the dishes will you post these letters?*
B: *I will.*

(what B really means is “I will post those letters when I’ve finished the dishes”.)

The process of **recovering what is missing** in B’s response (so that we can understand what B means) is **guided by** the **Principle of Relevance**, i.e. **connecting B’s utterance with A’s**.

3.4. Implicature

- Inference, as has been discussed in previous lectures, is of course responsible for implicatures. Consider (5) below:

(5) A: *Did Chris get invited to the conference?*

B: *His paper was too long.*

Implicature: Chris didn't get invited to the conference.

How does A figure out the implicature, the intended message?

It is **relevance-based**:

- (i) *If one's paper is too long for the conference, one will not be invited.*

This kind of inference is based on contextual information. **By uttering "his paper was too long", B expects the hearer (A) to obtain adequate contextual cognitive effects for a minimum cost in processing, because it is optimally relevant** (note that the length of a paper for a conference is usually limited to a couple of pages).

4. Explicature (明说) VS. Implicature (暗说)

- Given the above, Sperber & Wilson claim that **inference** is responsible not only for implicatures, but also for cases such as (3.1)-(3.3) which they call **explicatures** (明说) : The explicature of a sentence is *what is explicitly said* (though the sentence may be incomplete), as opposed to the **implicature**, i.e. *what is implicitly conveyed*.
- Note that the term '**explicature**' corresponds in many ways to Grice's '**what is said**', but it is defined differently. *The explicature of an utterance, as illustrated, is closely tied to what is explicitly encoded in the linguistic form uttered, but is not identical to it. An explicature must be logically complete* (i.e. 表达的意义很清晰; 即便形式上不完整, 根据上下文也很容易补全).

5. Consequences

- **Relevance Theory** grants context-dependent inference a much wider role: it is pervasive. It is **an inferential approach to meaning in language** (关联理论是研究意义的一种推理方法). As a consequence,
 - **RT does not recognise the distinction between conventional implicatures** (implicatures associated with the conventional meanings of specific words, e.g. 'but' 'even' etc.) **and conversational implicatures** (which are highly context-dependent).
 - **RT does not recognise a distinction between generalised and particularised implicatures.**

WHY? For relevance theorists, **the processes of figuring out these so-called different types of implicatures are similar or the same. In all the cases above, we are supposed to make inferences**, i.e. the principle of relevance always requires us to **maximise the contextual cognitive effects**.

References

- 陈新仁, 2021, 《新编语用学教程》, 外研社。
- Blakemore, D. 1992. *Understanding utterances: an introduction to pragmatics*. Blackwell.
- Carston, R. 2002. *Thoughts and utterances : the pragmatics of explicit communication*. Blackwell.
- Cruse, A. 2004. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Huang, Y. 2007. *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Sperber, D. & D. Wilson. 1986/1995. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell.

Student presentation on 4 Dec 2023

- **Requirements:**
- Choose ***one of the topics of pragmatics*** we've discussed, and tell *a story (better with videos, pictures) and give your own analysis/comments.*
- Time limit: **5** minutes' presentation plus **3** minutes' question time