ENGLISH GRAMMATICAL THEORY I

RELEVANCE THEORY
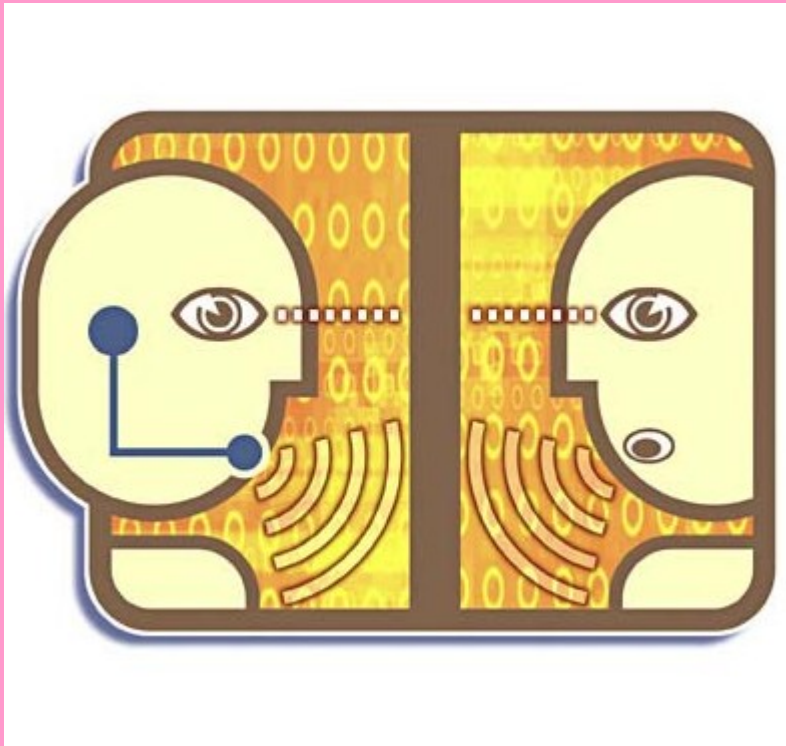
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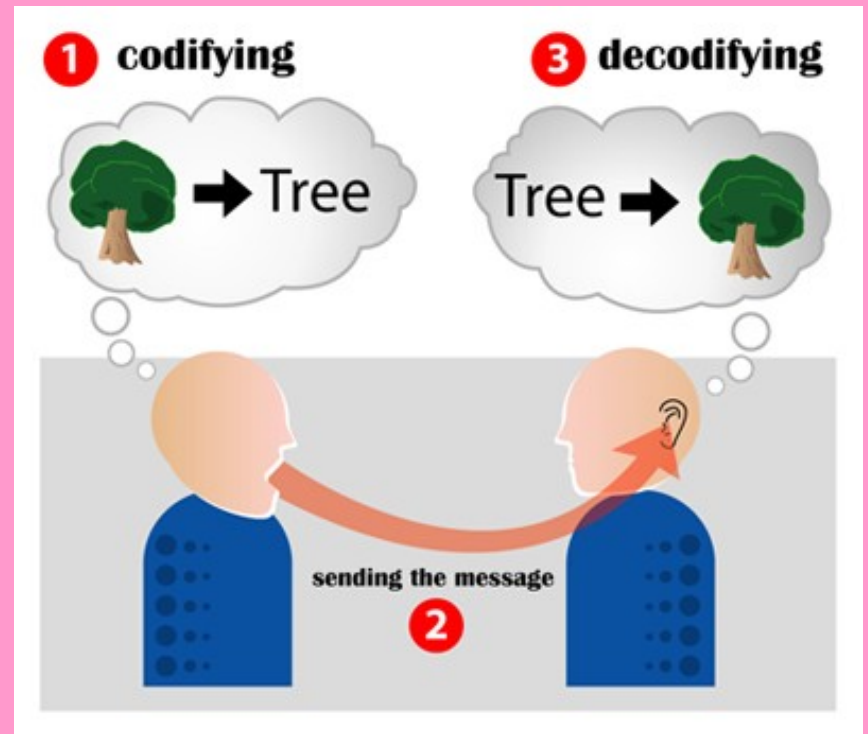**Flory Inglés**
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INTRODUCTION:
TWO BASIC PRINCIPLES

1) Cognitive Principle
   (Human Cognition)

2) Communicative Principle
   (What utterances create)

ORIGINS OF RELEVANCE THEORY

➤ Grice's claims about intentions:
 ✦ Expression
 ✦ Recognition

➤ Classical Code Model
 ✦ Coding
 ✦ Decoding

➤ Towards an Inferential Model…

UTTERANCE: What is it?

- DEFINITION:
  - *"A linguistic coded piece of evidence"* (Sperber & Wilson, 2002)

- Utterances automatically create expectations which gear the hearer.

RELEVANCE & COGNITION

- Relevance can be considered from two points of view:
  - Intuitively
  - In relevance-theoretic terms
- As a consequence:
  - The search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition
  - Utterances raising expectations of relevance are not so because they are expected to obey a Cooperative Principle and maxims of any communicative convention.

About INPUTS:

- Relevance of inputs is measured by <u>POSITIVE COGNITIVE EFFECTS</u>.
    - Intuitively, ANY input might be relevant.
    - In relevance-theoretic terms, IF and ONLY IF those inputs draw true conclusions.
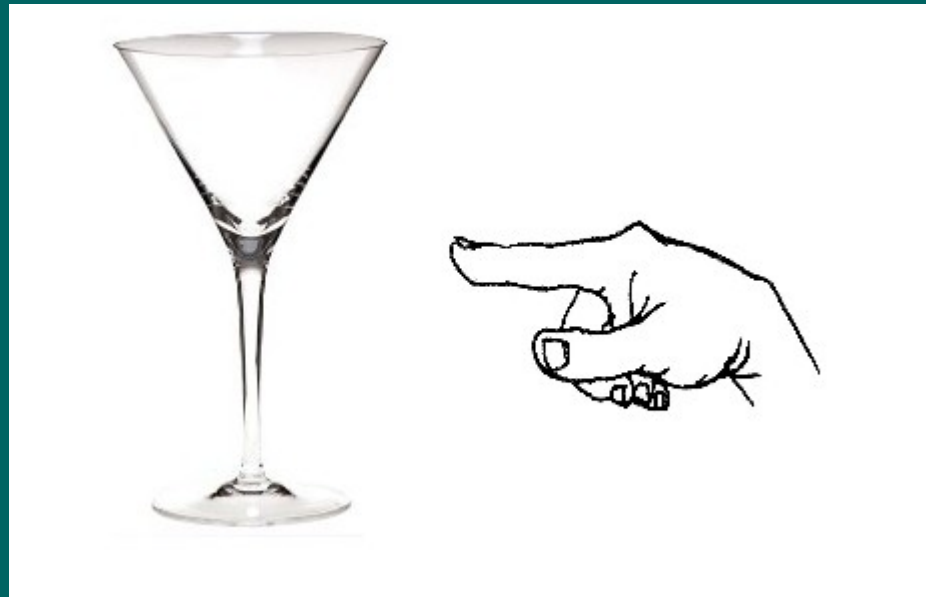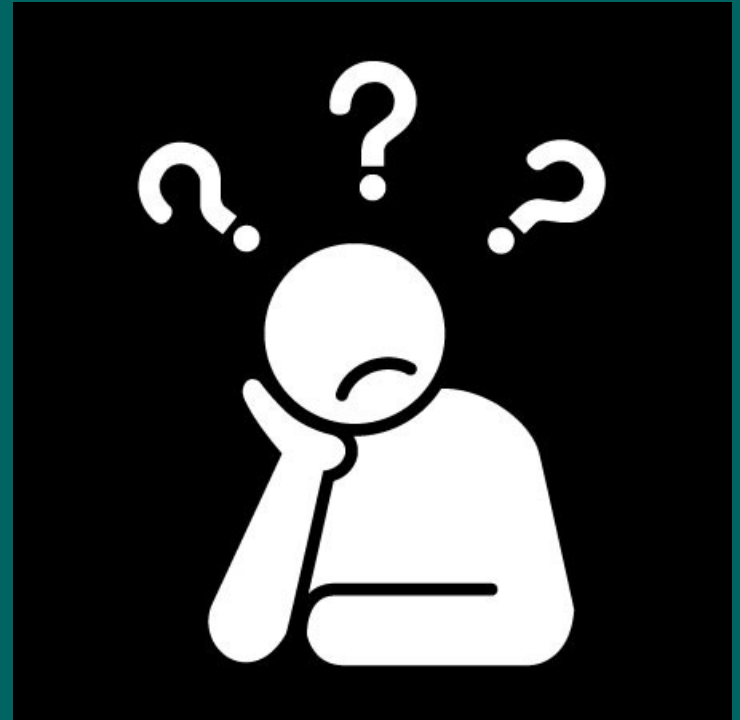
Cognitive Effects

- Contextual:
  - Source must be, altogether:
    - 1) the input itself
    - 2) the context
- Other types:
  - Revision of assumptions

The proportional relevance of inputs

- *a) "The greater the positive cognitive effects – the greater the relevance would be."*

- *b) "The greater the processing effort – the lower the relevance would be."*

Example:

- We are serving meat

- We are serving chicken

- Either we are serving chicken or $(7^2-3) \neq 46$
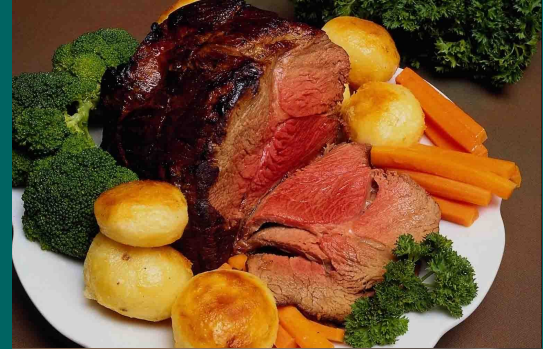
$$V_m = \frac{V_s}{\sqrt{\lambda}}$$

- APPROACHES TO THE PROCESSING OF HUMAN COGNITION:
  - COMPARATIVE vs. QUANTITATIVE
    - "from the inside"
    - "from the outside"

Cognitive Principle

- This principle states that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.
  - potentially relevant stimuli
  - retrieval mechanisms
  - inferential mechanisms

RELEVANCE & COMMUNICATION

- Universal tendencies

    - ON THE SIDE OF THE HEARER:
        - **TO CHOOSE THE MOST RELEVANT STIMULI**
    - ON THE SIDE OF THE SPEAKER:
        - **ATTRACT ATTENTION**
        - **PROMPT CONTEXTUAL ASSUMPTIONS**
        - **POINT US TOWARDS AN INTENDED CONCLUSION**

TYPES OF STIMULI

- THEY CAN ACT:
  - COVERTLY
  - OVERTLY
- According to Grice, inferential communication is a matter of getting someone to recognize our intentions.
- It involves:
  - **An informative intention**
  - **A communicative intention**
- **Thus, to achieve understanding, the informative intention must be recognized but not necessarily fulfilled**

Ostensive Stimulus

- According to the definition of Ostensive stimulus and the Cognitive Principle, the use of ostensive stimulus may create predictable and precise expectations of relevance not raised by any other stimuli

Communicative Principle

"Every ostensive stimulus conveys and creates a presumption of its own optimal relevance"

Optimal Relevance

- "Any ostensive stimulus is optimally relevant when:

    a) It is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort

    b) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences.

What if…

- … a communicator withholds relevant information?
  - This represents a problem for Grice's Maxim of Quantity.

- For instance, when we get a silence as an answer, this silence could be or not an ostensive stimulus:
  - If it is not we would take it as an indication that the addressee is unable or unwilling to answer.
  - If he is willing to answer one must conclude that he is unable.
  - If he is able to answer one must conclude that he is unwilling

Achievements

- Relevance Theory, through the Communicative Principle and the definition of Optimal Relevance, suggests a practical procedure for performing these subtasks and constructing a hypothesis about the speaker's meaning.
  - Follow a path of least effort
  - Complement it until the resulting interpretation meets your expectations of relevance

RELEVANCE & COMPREHENSION

- Non-verbal comprehension

- Verbal comprehension
  - Signalling, pointing, acting… vs. Saying
  - Verbal communication is less limited

Explicit Content

- Since Grice, pragmatists have been continually disregarding the explicit contents of utterances in favour of the recovery of _implicatures_

The Comprehension Procedure

- Relevance Theory, however, considers explicit content equally inferential, and equally ruled by the Communicative Principle.

- It states a series of sub-tasks in the process of comprehension:

  a) Construct hypotheses about EXPLICATURES (v. 'explicit content')

  b) Construct hypotheses about IMPLICATED PREMISES

  c) Construct hypotheses about IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS

How does this process work?

- It is not a sequential type of process.

- It is an all-at-once sort of mechanism.

- Hypotheses (of the three kinds) develop themselves against a background of EXPECTATIONS or ANTICIPATORY HYPOTHESES which might be revised during the very process.

EXAMPLE

- Peter: *Has John paid back the money he owes you?*
- Mary: *No. He forgot to go to the bank.*

Basic assumption: Mary's answer WILL BE optimally relevant.

Anticipatory hypothesis: Her answer will give him the information he is requesting

Hypothesis #1: ['bank' = financial institution] + ['He' = John]

Hypothesis #2: Forgetting to go to the bank could be a plausible cause for not repaying.

⟶ OUR IMPLICATED PREMISE

Hypothesis #3: John was unable to repay Mary BECAUSE he forgot to go to the bank.

⟶ OUR IMPLICATED CONCLUSION

In-depth analysis of the example

- Consider the explicature: "*No. He forgot (…)*"

  1. Precise expectation produced by the 'no' utterance. Without it, the implicated conclusion could have been another.

  2. Resolution of reference: [HE] is referring to John… Not to his father, for instance.

  3. Disambiguation: [BANK$_1$] as a financial institution, not as a river bank [BANK$_2$], nor as a flight manoeuvre in which aircraft tips laterally about its longitudinal axis [BANK$_6$]

In-depth analysis of the example (2)

- Communicative Principle accounts for Optimal Relevance.
  - Expectation is raised by Mary's ostensive behaviour.
- Construction of the first implicated premise.
  - Assumption that forgetting to go to the bank is a cause for not having money
- Complementation of the explicature, combined with the implicated premise, produces an **IMPLICATED CONCLUSION**
  - Which, in turn, satisfies the expectation of optimal relevance.

Explicature & Implicature

- Considering the example, the conclusion is that there exists a process of *"mutual parallel adjustment"* between both.

- But we have not paid complete attention to the actual creation of the explicature through a series of lexical-pragmatic processes.

LEXICAL NARROWING

- LEXICAL UNIT: [BANK]
  - Its denotation MUST be that of a specific type of financial institutions, one that deals with private individuals.
  - If we change its denotation, we may not reach the same conclusions.

- [JOHN]
- [GO TO THE BANK]

WANTED

JOHN HERBERT DILLINGER

On June 23, 1934, HOMER S. CUMMINGS, Attorney General of the United States, under the authority vested in him by an Act of Congress approved June 6, 1934, offered a reward of

$10,000.00

for the capture of John Herbert Dillinger or a reward of

$5,000.00

for information leading to the arrest of John Herbert Dillinger.

Conclusions on Lexical Narrowing

- Relevance Theory differs from classic approaches in that it does not describe lexical narrowing simply as a sort of conversational implicature.

- In other words, 'default interpretations' do not apply in this model.

- Lexical narrowing is also part of the unstoppable search for relevance.

AD HOC Lexical Narrowing

- Most of the times, our lexical items are constructed *ad hoc*, in the very situation.

- "*Bank*", in our example, could be referring to *"cash-dispenser".* This is an even NARROWER interpretation.

- Consider cases like*: Kleenex, Fairy* or *Post-it*. These are LOOSE USES of the lexicon.

LOOSE USES OF LANGUAGE

- They present a problem for Grice, and his maxim of truthfulness, together with tropes:
  - Metaphors
  - Hyperboles
  - Irony
- Daily metaphors and hyperboles pass undetected, but according to Grice, they should not.

Relevance-theoretic explanation

- Loose talk, metaphor and hyperbole ARE NOT violations of any maxim.

- They are *"alternative routes to achieving optimal relevance"*.

  - E.g. – *What do you think of this presentation?*
    - *It's putting me to sleep*

- Most literal interpretations are not even tested before looking for figurative interpretations

Strong & Weak Implicatures

- Strong implicatures are ESSENTIAL to recover the interpretation that best satisfies the expectation of relevance.
  - This is typical of Instruction Manuals, for instance.
- Weak implicatures help in the construction of a relevant interpretation, but it is not unique, because the utterance *suggests* a range of similar possible implicatures.
  - This is usually called Poetic Language

IRONY

- For Grice, it is an overt violation of the maxim of truthfulness.

- It is, then, parallel to metaphors and hyperboles.

- They differ in the implications they convey
  - Metaphors imply similes based on what was said
  - Hyperboles imply a weakening of what was said
  - Irony implies the opposite of what was said

Criticism on Grice's study of Irony

- Verbal irony is universal, spontaneous, untaught and unlearnt.

- How can we, then, rationally *mean to say* the opposite of what we *say with meanings?*

Alternative explanation

- Irony involves a special form of Interpretive use of language (as in reported speech)

  – ECHOIC USE: An utterance which achieves its relevance by expressing the speaker's <u>attitude</u> to words or views tacitly attributed to someone else

E.g.:   - *That was a fantastic party*

        - [happily] *Fantastic.*

        - [puzzled] *Fantastic??*

        - [irritated] *Fantastic!!*

- Therefore, irony involves the expression of a TACITLY DISSOCIATIVE ATTITUDE.

METAREPRESENTATION

- ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS:
  - Peter: *Will you pay the money by Tuesday?*
  - Mary: *I will pay it by then.*
- Higher-Level Explicatures:
  - Peter is asking Mary if she promises to pay by Tuesday.
- In other words, by asking, we do not make anything explicit. We do not say. We do the asking.

MIND READING

- Ability to attribute mental states to others in order to explain and predict their behaviour.

- *Example:*

  - *Let's imagine we as students, have a subject which is divided into two parts: tutorial and practical; we have to pass 2 tests, each one in different days and we cannot seat for the 2nd one unless we have passed the 1st first. We have made the 1st test but the marks are not published yet. Suddenly we see the teacher, we have a trivial conversation but at the end of it, he says: Well I will see you when making the next test.*

Regularity to the communicative domain

- **Only acts of ostensive communication create true presumptions of relevance**

  1) Naively Optimistic interpreter – Acceptance without considering plausibility.

  2) Cautious Optimistic - Capability to deal with mistakes but not deliberate deception.

  3) Sophisticated Understander – Capability to deal with mistakes and deliberate deception.

CONCLUSION: AN EXPERIMENTALLY TESTABLE THEORY

- Relevance theory is a cognitive psychological theory.
- The Cognitive Principle of Relevance
- The Communicative Principle of Relevance
- Relevance theory does not provide an absolute measure of mental effort or cognitive effect and does not assume such a measure is available to spontaneous workings of the mind.
- Cognitive resources can be allocated by comparing relevance of inputs.
- The main obstacle to experimental comparisons of relevance theory is that in general the testable consequences of other pragmatic theories have not been made explicit.