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(INTER?)SUBJECTIVITY OF EXPLICIT CONTENT IN RELEVANCE THEORY

Abstract

Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber – Wilson 1986 [1995], Wilson – Sperber 2004) postulates the existence of explicit content in utterance meaning, called explicature. The explicitness of explicatures might be expected to consist, among other properties, in their inter-subjectivity. However, the RT theoretical assumptions and tools crucial to explicature construction and identification all seem to be individual-relative and, as such, subjective. If so, the explicitness of explicature needs further elaboration.

1. Introduction

Among many questions Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber – Wilson 1986 [1995], Wilson – Sperber 2004) faces, there is this: to what extent, if at all, is RT explicit content potentially inter-subjective in terms of the theory's own assumptions¹?

The assumptions underlying explicit content construction (Carston 2004, 2009) are the relevance of an input to an individual, optimal relevance, relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure with its operational steps of decoding and logical form development comprising disambiguation, reference resolution and free pragmatic enrichment/adjustment including ad-hoc concept construction. None of these theoretical constructs leaves room for necessarily inter-subjective stable “portion” of explicit content.

Similarly, the availability principle, taken to be the discriminatory criterion of explicit content identification, is subjective in its nature. The underdeterminacy thesis² pointing to the inherent underdeterminacy of

communication also requires subjective bridging of the omnipresent gaps between what is meant to be conveyed and what is actually evidenced as such. The assumptions and resulting example analyses indicate the individual-relative view of communication in Relevance Theory. The question remains, then, in what sense can explicit content (explicature) be explicit without being inter-subjective?

2. Explicit content in Relevance Theory³

Speaker's meaning, that is the thought communicated by a speaker, is explicit if it is the explicature of the speaker's utterance.

An assumption communicated by an utterance U is explicit (hence, is an explicature) if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by U, where explicitness is a matter of degree [...]. Any assumption communicated, but not explicitly so, is implicitly communicated. It is an implicature. (Sperber – Wilson 1986[1995: 82])

Carston and Hall (2011: 8) say that “[...] the explicit content of an utterance is taken to be that content which ordinary speaker – hearer intuitions would identify as having been said or asserted by the speaker.”

Attempts to draw a demarcation line between the explicit and the implicit in RT have been made since the publication of *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (Sperber – Wilson 1986[1995]) (Carston 2002b, 2004, 2009, Carston – Hall 2011, Mioduszezewska 2002). They must be deemed inconclusive since only the availability principle (Carston – Hall 2011: 14, Recanati 1993) is assumed to have withstood critical evaluation, remaining the only criterion of explicature identification, apart from its operational definition, according to which explicature is the result of logical form development in the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure.⁴

In the examples below,⁵ the versions of B's utterance in square brackets are approximations to its explicature as possibly recovered by A in each case.

Example I

Context: Two acquaintances (A and B) are talking about John.

A: *What does John do for a living?*

B: *He is a butcher.*

[John earns money working as a butcher]

Example II

Context: Two acquaintances (A and B) are talking about John's professional skills.

A: *Is John a good surgeon?*

B: *He is a butcher.*

[John is a bad surgeon]

Example III

Context: Two acquaintances (A and B) are talking about John.

A: *What kind of person is John?*

B: *He is a butcher.*

[John's personality is somehow related to the concept BUTCHER⁶]

What makes A recover the explicit content of B's utterance is A's search for relevance as predicted by the two principles of relevance: "Cognitive Principle of Relevance: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 610) and "Communicative Principle of Relevance: Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 612).

Relevance and optimal relevance which A expects to find and looks for are defined as:

Relevance of an input to an individual: a. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects⁷ achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. b. Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time. (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 609)

Presumption of optimal relevance: a. The ostensive stimulus 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. (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 612)

The two principles of relevance and its two definitions explain why the same string of words (*He is a butcher*) may have different interpretations, depending on the context activated by A. According to the availability principle, A may claim the interpretations to be explicitly communicated by B in each case. Relevance Theory shows not only why we may construct different explicatures of the same string of words in different situations but it also describes the way in which explicatures are constructed in the process of utterance comprehension. The construction follows the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure with all its subtasks.

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure: a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects. Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolution, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned). (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 613)

Subtasks in the overall comprehension process: a. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes. b. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual

assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES). c. Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS). (Wilson – Sperber 2004: 615)

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure is claimed by relevance theorists (Wilson – Sperber 2004) to reflect the human pragmatic comprehension capacity, constituting a dedicated sub-module (of the general mind reading module) of our cognitive system, comprising the processes of adjustment or modulation of lexically encoded meaning.

In the utterance comprehension process, as one of its subtasks, we construct hypotheses about explicit content, that is, the explicature of the utterance, via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes such as ad-hoc concept construction. Decoding and pragmatic enrichment processes, as understood in RT, have a bearing on the inter-subjective or subjective nature of explicit content of utterances.

The automatic decoding process results in logical form construction, comprising semantically/linguistically encoded meaning (Carston 2009, 2010). Logical forms are structured sets of atomic concepts, potentially undergoing individual-relative pragmatic adjustment (Carston 2010).

In RT, concepts are “enduring elementary mental structures, capable of playing different discriminatory or inferential roles on different occasions in an individual’s mental life.” (Sperber – Wilson 1998 [2012: 33]) They may be lexicalized atomic concepts, atomic concepts not encoded in our linguistic system and some innate concepts (Carston 2010: 14). Concepts may be shared by interlocutors but they may also be individual-relative and, potentially, non-communicable. They are “arrived at through mutual pragmatic adjustment of explicatures and contextual implications.” (Carston 2010: 10)

Words may encode full-fledged (atomic) concepts, pro-concepts or procedural meaning. In the case of open-class items there is a simple mapping from lexical form to mental atomic concepts (Carston 2010: 8, 9). Words do not have to encode the same concept for all successful users. Words are used to convey not only the concepts they encode but also indefinitely many other related concepts to which they may point in a given context (Sperber – Wilson 1998 [2012: 43]).

In the process of free pragmatic enrichment, ad-hoc concepts (marked with *) can be constructed or retrieved (Carston 2002b, 2010). They are “pragmatically derived, generally ineffable, non-lexicalized [...] rough indication to aid readers in understanding what we have in mind in particular cases.” (Carston 2010: 13)

In the case of examples I-III, the structure of the decoded logical form of the string of words *He is a butcher* is the same. The differences among the three explicature approximations

- (1) [John earns money working as a butcher]
- (2) [John is a bad surgeon]
- (3) [John's personality is somehow related to the concept BUTCHER]

follow from the differences in the concept BUTCHER in each case.

In example I, guided by his search for relevance, A accesses a mental atomic concept BUTCHER via simple mapping from the lexical form of the open-class item *butcher*. The accessed concept (close to the literal, dictionary reading of the word) may undergo individual-relative pragmatic adjustment, depending on A's BUTCHER related assumptions and experience. If the recovered/constructed explicature of B's utterance meets A's expectations of relevance, he accepts it and stops processing.

In example II, the same kind of processing will not secure the expected relevance of B's utterance. Consequently, the word *butcher* in II cannot map onto BUTCHER of I. The word *butcher* in II leads A to construct an ad-hoc concept BUTCHER*, which is arrived at through mutual pragmatic adjustment of potential explicature and contextual implications. In this case the word *butcher* is a pointer to aid A in understanding what B has in mind and lead A to construct an ad-hoc concept BUTCHER*, that is a pragmatically derived, generally ineffable, non-lexicalized concept. The ad-hoc concept BUTCHER* allows A to construct explicature (2), which meets his expectations of relevance and makes him stop processing. A similar situation occurs in III, where A has to construct another ad-hoc concept BUTCHER**, leading to the relevant explicature (3), which meets A's expectations of relevance.⁸

In RT, explicit content (explicature) has been tacitly taken to be, at least to some extent, inter-subjective across speaker-hearer (Carston 2010, Sperber – Wilson 1998[2012]). Yet, it seems that the assumptions of the theory do not require its inter-subjectivity at any level of the description.⁹

3. Subjectivity of explicit content in Relevance Theory

If any inter-subjectivity of explicature was to be present in RT understanding of the notion, it should surface in the criteria of its identification (the availability principle), in its operational definition, according to which explicature is the result of logical form development of the relevant utterance, in the process of its construction including motivation for the

construction, its driving force, its actual operational steps of which decoding and pragmatic enrichment are crucial¹⁰ or in the overall process of forming hypotheses about its ultimate content.

The explicit content identification criterion, that is the availability principle, leaves the decision about the explicit or implicit nature of the communicated meaning to the intuitions of interlocutors. Nothing in the availability principle formulation or interpretation requires speaker – hearer intuitions to be shared, that is to be inter-subjective. What B may consider asserted in (2), A may think to be implicated, suggested or hinted upon. Intuitions are individual-relative, thus subjective and not open to scrutiny or discussion unless verbalized.

By the operational definition of explicature, it is an assumption communicated by an utterance which is a development of logical form encoded by this utterance. Here, the inter-subjectivity of the resulting form depends on the degree to which a logical form encoded by an utterance is itself inter-subjective and what the development of logical form consists in.

The process of explicature construction is motivated and triggered by the two principles of relevance and guided by the search for relevance. Relevance, as its definition states, is relative to an individual. It is a balance between positive cognitive effects an individual gains and the effort he expends in the process. There is no constraint within the theory requiring or predicting shareability¹¹ of cognitive effects between two or more individuals processing the same utterance.

For example, in II, A's explicature of B's utterance *He is a butcher* will be (2) against what A assumes makes a good surgeon but C's possible explicature of the same expression could be [John is a good surgeon], if C's view of good surgeons is that they should be like butchers – tough, decisive and insensitive. In example III, different hearers would probably get different explicatures via constructing their respective *ad-hoc* concepts related (or not) to BUTCHER, depending on their encyclopedic entries for the concept accessed via the word *butcher* and other contextual premises activated on hearing the utterance. Similarly, the relevance of B's utterance to himself does not have to be the same (or even similar in some cases) as A's relevance of this utterance.¹² In fact, nothing in the definition of relevance requires its shareability between interlocutors, each of whom looks for the relevance of an input only to himself.

The greatest expectations of inter-subjectivity in communication are probably tied up with the decoding process. Decoding, contrary to inference, should be a process of retrieving conventionalized language meaning from an utterance.

In Relevance Theory, the automatic decoding process results in logical form construction. Logical forms, that is structured sets of atomic concepts,

should contain inter-subjective, semantically/linguistically encoded meaning. It would be the case if RT secured the shareability/publicity of at least those atomic concepts which are encoded by lexical items (public lexicon). This, however, is not the case. Even in the simplest situations of direct word/concept mappings (between open-class items and lexicalized mental concepts), as possibly in I between the word *butcher* and the concept BUTCHER, from which the word gets its meaning, inter-subjectivity is not necessary; the accessed atomic concept may potentially undergo individual-relative pragmatic enrichment. In I, for A *butcher* may map onto BUTCHER – with the denotation of people butchering animals, and for B *butcher* may map onto BUTCHER, the denotation of which will be people selling meat. Such straightforward cases, which turn out to lack full inter-subjectivity anyway, are rare. Lexicalized atomic concepts are a minority if compared with atomic concepts not encoded in our language system. Inter-subjectivity of the latter may be only accidental if interlocutors happen to have their mental concepts grounded in common experience, rather than fully idiosyncratic and non-communicable. In either case, concepts are (individually) accessed via words serving as pointers to them and their ultimate understanding is arrived at through mutual pragmatic adjustment of various premises.

Since words do not have to encode the same concept for all users and they are used to convey not only the concepts they encode but also indefinitely many other related concepts, we cannot expect inter-subjectivity at the level of decoding.

Neither can we expect it in the pragmatic enrichment process of ad-hoc concept construction. They are always pragmatically derived, not lexicalized, often ineffable and ranging from those that have a firm presence in the hearer's cognitive system to those that are entirely ad hoc and pre-conceptual in status (Carston 2010: 15). All those cases may be exemplified by various interpretations of *butcher* in example III. In the case of *ad-hoc* concepts the question of inter-subjectivity does not even arise – they are strictly subjective.

All the factors discussed so far play their role in constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content of an utterance. Such hypothesis formation is an online, non-sequential process, during which the interpreter has access to all contextual premises, provided his search for relevance makes him activate them. The premises are individual-relative and hence subjective as well (individual life experience, memory stock etc.) but Relevance Theory provides a tool for securing some inter-subjectivity of some of them. The tool is the concept of mutual cognitive environment. Mutual cognitive environment is “any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it.” (Sperber – Wilson 1986 [1995: 41]) where “A cognitive environment of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to them.” (Sperber – Wilson (1986[1995: 39]) and “A fact is

manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true.” (Sperber – Wilson 1986[1995: 39])

It follows that facts forming interlocutors’ mutual cognitive environment are inter-subjectively accessible to them in this environment. It does not follow, however, that the relevant mental representations will be actually accessed, as this depends on individual-relative search for relevance of the participants in the communicative process. So, although mutual cognitive environment allows for some inter-subjectivity in utterance comprehension by singling out some common implicated premises, it does not enforce it.

In fact, none of relevance-theoretic constructs crucial for the process of explicit content construction leaves room for the necessarily inter-subjective, stable “portion” of explicit meaning. It seems that the explicitness of explicit content of utterance meaning needs further elaboration in Relevance Theory even if, or especially if, its inter-subjectivity is not to be expected.

4. Conclusions

Explicature (explicit meaning) construction, identification and interpretation in Relevance Theory seem to be individual-relative and, as such, subjective. The nature of explicitness without inter-subjectivity, other than when understood as a technical construct of the theory, seems to need further explication. On the other hand, in order to acknowledge and accept the requirement of explicit content’s inter-subjectivity across speaker – hearers, a lot more would have to be said in Relevance Theory about the semantically/linguistically encoded meaning and the nature of lexicalized mental concepts pragmatic adjustment.

NOTES

¹ RT is a cognitive theory (Wilson – Sperber 2004). As such it deals with mental representations, which by definition are individual-relative and thus subjective. So, the question about explicit content’s inter-subjectivity may seem to be wrongly posed. However, RT claims that there exists explicit part of communication, namely explicatures. In what other than purely technical way can this explicit content be explicit without being inter-subjective?

² According to the underdeterminacy thesis (Carston 2002a, 2009, 2010: 4) “the meaning encoded in the linguistic expression type that a speaker utters inevitably underdetermines the content that the communicator [conveys] not only her implicatures but also propositional content she communicates explicitly (‘explicature’)”. What can be communicated goes well beyond what can be encoded and effability of thoughts/mental states is a matter of degree.

³ Explicit content is limited in the discussion to the explicit content in verbal (ostensive-inferential) communication for the sake of clarity of exposition. The claims apply to non-verbal conventionalized ostensive stimuli equally well.

⁴ The availability principle has it that “in deciding whether the pragmatically determined aspect of utterance meaning is part of what is said, we should always try to preserve our pre-theoretic intuitions on the matter.” (Carston – Hall 2011: 14) Other criteria such as minimal complete proposition, linguistic directionality principle, functional independence principle, scope of logical operators test have been shown to be inadequate (see, among others, Mioduszewska 2002) and accepted as such by relevance theorists (Carston – Hall 2011).

⁵ Various examples of category extension/narrowing/change analysis, including the “butcher” case, reappear in numerous Relevance Theory papers (Carston 2010, Sperber – Wilson 1998[2012]).

⁶ Capitals are used to mark concepts.

⁷ Positive cognitive effects are contextual implications, that is new assumptions resulting from connecting new and old information, and/or weakening, abandonment or strengthening of old assumptions (Wilson – Sperber 2004, Sperber – Wilson 1986[1995]).

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the differences among the three types of cases, see Mioduszewska (In press).

⁹ Examples of utterance interpretation, focusing on the nature of concepts and ranging from using the “unambiguous” verb *dance* to communicate any of the indefinite range of related concepts. (*Let’s dance*: children dancing spontaneously, ballet dancers, walking rhythmically, spending life together) (Carston 2010), through interpreting *tired* in Peter: *Do you want to go to the cinema?* Mary: *I am tired*. as “tired enough not to want to go to the cinema” via contextual construction as a by-product of the relevance-guided comprehension process (Sperber – Wilson 1998[2012]) to complete denotational dissolution of SHARK, BUTCHER etc. in *He is a shark*. and strictly contextualist interpretation of *open* confirm the view that none of RT theoretical constructs leaves room for necessarily inter-subjective stable “portion” of explicit content.

¹⁰ Disambiguation and reference resolution, though vital for utterance comprehension and deserving thorough and extensive studies, which they have been receiving, would not change the line of reasoning about inter-subjectivity of explicit content in RT presented here.

¹¹ The concept of manifestness and mutual cognitive environment will be discussed later in the paper.

¹² RT does assume that we want to ascribe intentions to our interlocutors (with relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure being part of our mind reading capacity) but in doing so, it does not secure any shareability or publicity of lexically encoded meaning, which itself undergoes the process of subjective pragmatic adjustment.

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