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### **THE GURU EFFECT AND SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING**

#### **Introduction**

Dan Sperber has introduced the notions of three comprehension strategies<sup>1</sup> and of what he has called the guru effect<sup>2</sup>. My aim is to show how the strategies influence the effect. It turns out that the third strategy, namely that of sophisticated understanding, does not allow reader/hearer to treat the guru effect in terms of implicatures.

#### **The Guru Effect**

On reading that

(1) “Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being” (Jean Paul Sartre)  
the reader may become thoughtful, stunned, awed or indifferent depending on the context (who is the reader, what is his social background, why he is reading the text, who he is going to talk about it with, etc.). What he eventually gets from the text depends on the relevance that he ascribes to it. Since “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of rele-

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<sup>1</sup> D. Sperber, *Understanding verbal understanding*, in: *What is intelligence?*, ed. J. Khalfa, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 179–198. In the paper, internet version of the article is used.

<sup>2</sup> D. Sperber, *The guru effect*, forthcoming, 2006.

vance” (Cognitive Principle of Relevance<sup>3</sup>) and “every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Communicative Principle of Relevance<sup>4</sup>), deciding to read the text the reader assumes that it is relevant to him, i.e. that it will bring enough cognitive effects to outweigh the cognitive effort necessary to understand and interpret the stimulus. In the case of obscure verbal stimuli it sometimes happens that the obscurity prevents understanding (at least for some recipients) and yet the reader/hearer finds the text/utterance not only relevant but also possibly profound.

In Grice’s<sup>5</sup> terms, intentional obscurity was to result in particularized conversational implicatures via flouting the maxim of manner. The implicatures were to be recovered by the hearer, thus enabling him to arrive at the speaker’s intended meaning. In the case of (1), the obscurity is not used to evoke specific implicatures. It probably is not used as a device to achieve any specific communicative effect. It rather is an inherent feature of the text. As such it requires additional cognitive effort on the part of the reader in the course of interpretation. The cognitive effects that compensate for it are not obvious. Why is it then that even readers who do not grasp the content behind the obscurity find it worth their while to process obscure texts of authorities? Sperber<sup>6</sup> explains the phenomenon by the guru effect.

When people whom we do not consider important express their thoughts in a vague, opaque way, we often do not take the trouble to interpret their verbal stimuli because necessary effort would be too great for too small a cognitive effect. When, on the other hand, authorities do the same, we trust that what we are presented with is relevant and, consequently, we are ready to put much more effort into processing what we expect would bring us much more cognitive effect. If we assume that the text/utterance content, even if not understood, is hyper-relevant, we grant it confirmation bias<sup>7</sup> and accept it. This is explained by our prior appreciation of an au-

<sup>3</sup> D. Wilson, D. Sperber, *Relevance Theory*, in: *Handbook of Pragmatics*, eds G. Ward, L. Horn, Blackwell, Oxford 2004, p. 7. In the paper, internet version of the article is used.

<sup>4</sup> D. Wilson, D. Sperber, *Relevance Theory...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> P.H. Grice, *Study in the Way of Words*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1989.

<sup>6</sup> D. Sperber, *The guru effect...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> If you interpret a verbal stimulus with initial confidence (for example because it comes from an authority), you approach new pronouncements of the same source, seeking confirmation of your initial confidence. The vaguer the evidence of the new pronouncement the easier it is for you to find such confirmation.

thor, that is accepting him as authority. We then expect a positive interpretation of difficult passages, often believing that the author wanted to convey a thought which is too deep for plain and simple expression. Such (often tacit) reasoning has an external reason — the source of the stimulus is considered trustworthy and reliable. Accepting such external reflected beliefs<sup>8</sup> rests on trustworthiness of their sources<sup>9</sup>.

In consequence, obscurity need not be held against an author. The trusting reader/hearer may believe that it is the limits of his own understanding that make him feel the text to be obscure. Such favorable interpretation is based on the prior authority of the text author. “If I then use this interpretation to value up this authority and then this enhanced authority to interpret even more favorably the next obscure text from the same source a string of obscure texts [...] might cause me to grant near-absolute authority to a source just because I don’t understand it.”<sup>10</sup> A similar process may be traced in the collective recognition of authorities<sup>11</sup>. Such collective recognition consists in public vouching for the value of the authority’s texts. The amount of attention and cognitive effort involved in such process becomes in itself an indication of the authority’s texts importance. Cases of individual appreciation add up and result in even greater admiration. This is the guru effect. It brings very concrete benefits to the participants in such reputation construction. If in your cognitive environment there is an important authority figure and you support it, this is a proof of your own intelligence and of your as if becoming part of this authority. If you do not give your support or withdraw it, it points to your own intellectual inade-

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Obscure statements are open to positive interpretation by hearer/reader biased by the prior authority granted to their source.

<sup>8</sup> Beliefs that we have may be intuitive (coming from perception, memory, mood-sensing) or reflective. The latter are held together with their reasons which must be mentally represented. The reasons may be internal (i.e. coming from the content of the belief) or external (i.e. coming from the reliability of the source of the belief). See D. Sperber, “Intuitive and reflective beliefs”, in: *Mind and Language*, 1997, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 67–83.

<sup>9</sup> Our trust comes from the reputation of the authority. We may initially accept a person’s trustworthiness on her reputation, i.e. basing it on an external reason, and then update our trust on the basis of the person’s behavior and pronouncements as experienced by us directly, i.e. basing on internal reasons.

<sup>10</sup> D. Sperber, *The guru effect...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> D. Sperber, *Explaining culture: A naturalist approach*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996.

quacies. Supporting an authority figure brings also a social benefit to the supporter — the feeling of belonging and of getting recognition. On the other hand, not participating in the collective recognition of authorities “leads to being marginalized and intellectually stale”<sup>12</sup>.

### Sophisticated Understanding

In inferential model of communication<sup>13</sup> to communicate means to recover speaker’s communicative and informative intentions by a process of inference. Within Relevance theory the process is said to follow the Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Procedure:

“(a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects. Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. (b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.”<sup>14</sup>

The procedure allows us to recover speaker’s communicative and informative intentions. “An intention is a mental representation of a desired state of affairs.”<sup>15</sup> The speaker desires a state of affairs in which some information (informative intention) becomes represented in the hearer’s mind as a result of the speaker’s utterance. To fulfill an informative intention by making it known is to communicate. An intention to communicate (communicative intention) is the intention to make an informative intention known. When someone is known to have a communicative intention, further intentions become inferable.

In recovering the speaker’s informative and communicative intentions, the hearer may adopt one of the three strategies: naïve optimism, cautious optimism and sophisticated understanding. In naïve optimism, the hearer assumes that the speaker is benevolent and competent and his utterance comes with guarantee of relevance, being presented in the easiest and best way to get the meaning across. Following the relevance-theoretic compre-

<sup>12</sup> D. Sperber, *The guru effect* “...”, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> P.H. Grice, *Study in the Way*..., *op. cit.*; D. Sperber, D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (Second edition), Blackwell, Oxford 1995.

<sup>14</sup> D. Wilson, D. Sperber, *Relevance Theory*..., *op. cit.*, p. 9. In the paper, internet version of the article is used, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> D. Sperber, *The guru effect*..., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

hension procedure, the first accessed relevant enough interpretation is confirmed as the intended one. If at a party Carol says to John

(2) It's late

John gets from it: Carol intends me to believe that it is time to go home where "it is time to go home" is the informative intention and "Carol intends me to believe" is the communicative intention. In nad've optimism approach the hearer goes uncritically where the linguistic sense of the utterance takes him. If the interpretation is found relevant, it is accepted as intended by the speaker. The nad've optimism interpretation strategy will yield adequate comprehension whenever the speaker is indeed benevolent and competent enough to realize what is relevant and salient for the audience at the time.

In cautious optimism strategy the hearer assumes that the speaker is benevolent but not necessarily competent enough to realize what is relevant and salient for the hearer. If at a party Carol says to John

(2) It's late

and John is preoccupied with a possible delay in a delivery he's waiting for, he has to realize that Carol cannot mean that it is a delivery that is late because she doesn't know about it. So he must reject the first relevant interpretation that comes to his mind and ask himself: Could Carol have expected the interpretation about the delivery to occur to me, and would she have seen it as relevant enough to me?

Since in both cases the answer is 'no', John cannot stop at the first relevant enough interpretation that comes to mind but at the first interpretation the speaker might have thought would be relevant to the hearer. So, cautious optimism based interpretation consists in attributing to the speaker an interpretation that the speaker might have thought would be relevant enough and most easily accessed, and not what happens to be the most accessible relevant interpretation to the hearer. The hearer assumes that the speaker might have misjudged what would be most accessible and relevant to the hearer, for the speaker, though benevolent, is not necessarily competent and consequently may not know what is on the hearer's mind or may fail to convey relevant information for lack of adequate linguistic means.

There are cases when speakers lack not only competence but also benevolence. If Carol thought that the party would be great fun and had pre-arranged with the baby-sitter to stay longer than usual, without telling John about it, and if at the party, which turned out to be boring, Carol says

(2) It's late

hoping that John would react on the assumption that the baby-sitter's time is up, Carol is not benevolent. If John doesn't realize that, he understands

her utterance as “it’s time to go home” and she has succeeded in maneuvering him into leaving the party. If, however, John knows about the special arrangement with the baby-sitter and still believes that Carol is benevolent, he has no way to understand her utterance. She cannot intend him to believe something she knows to be false. When you take benevolence for granted you cannot recognize bad faith or lies. Still, competent hearers do realize that speakers may pursue their own ends. So in sophisticated understanding the hearer assumes the speaker to be neither benevolent nor competent. Instead the hearer assumes the speaker to intend to SEEM benevolent and competent. Following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, the hearer should stop his search for relevance not at the first relevant interpretation that comes to mind or at the first interpretation that the speaker might have thought would be relevant to the hearer. The hearer should stop at the first interpretation that the speaker might have thought would SEEM relevant to the hearer. The speaker’s informative intention may fail as the hearer does not accept the intended interpretation is true. But the communicative intention will have succeeded. The hearer has correctly retrieved the intended interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Among people who know and are benevolent to one another cautious or even naïve optimism serve as “default” interpretation strategies.

### The Guru Effect and Sophisticated Understanding

Let us once more consider

(1) “Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being” (Jean Paul Sartre).

The reader may approach the passage via any of the three comprehension strategies. In naïve optimism based interpretation, the reader assumes that the writer is benevolent and competent. Since the reader has decided to read the text, he assumes that it will be relevant to him. The first accessed relevant enough interpretation is accepted as the one intended by the writer. If, because of the obscurity of the passage the reader cannot find

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<sup>16</sup> John would correctly understand that Carol intended him to believe that it was time to go home because of the baby sitter. However, he would not believe what she intended him to believe.

a relevant interpretation, he will probably give up his search for relevance when the effort becomes too great but the blame for not finding it is on him — since the writer is assumed to be competent and benevolent, not finding a relevant interpretation must result from the reader's incompetence. To avoid this unpleasant conclusion, the reader may resort to the guru effect for rescue.

In cautious optimism based interpretation, the reader assumes that the writer is benevolent but not necessarily competent. Since the reader has decided to read the text, he assumes that it will be relevant to him. However, the first accessed relevant enough interpretation is not accepted as the one intended by the writer. It needs some double checking to find out whether the accessed interpretation could be the one that the writer might have thought would be relevant to the reader. Such double checking may require extending the reader's cognitive environment, i.e. broadening his knowledge about the writer and his ideas. If, because of the obscurity of the passage, the reader cannot find a relevant interpretation, the "fault" does not have to be his — since the writer is assumed to be incompetent, not finding a relevant interpretation may result either from the reader's incompetence or from the writer's inability to express his ideas clearly. Accepting the first solution, the reader may resort to the guru effect for rescue. On the other hand, accepting the second explanation the reader feels free to reject the obscurity of the passage and its guru effect potential is a matter of the reader's choice.

From sophisticated understanding strategy perspective, the reader assumes the writer to be neither benevolent nor competent. The reader assumes the writer to intend to SEEM benevolent and competent. In his interpretation of the passage the reader should stop looking for its relevance at the first interpretation that the writer might have thought would SEEM relevant to the reader. The reader may disregard the content of the passage if he does not accept it as true, accepting, however, the communicative intention, namely that the writer wants to convey something profound. Then, without even bothering with interpreting the informative intention, the reader would let the communicative intention lead him to the guru effect. However, the assumption that the writer is not benevolent would not allow the reader to ascribe profundity to the passage, and if he decides to join in the collective recognition of authority, it will be for reasons other than communicative. Thus sophisticated understanding strategy may place the guru effect outside inferential verbal communication field of interest.



## Conclusions

The guru effect, which in fact belongs to sociological and psychological rather than linguistic phenomena, may be shown to belong just there by analyzing it according to the three strategies of utterance/text interpretation. The third strategy, that of sophisticated understanding relegates the effect from the domain of conversational implicatures.

## THE GURU EFFECT AND SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING

### *Summary*

Dan Sperber has introduced the notions of three comprehension strategies and of what he has called the guru effect. The paper's aim is to show how the strategies influence the effect. The first two parts are purely expository. Part one is an explanation of what the guru effect is. Part two is a description of the three comprehension strategies. Both parts are based on Sperber's two papers "Understanding verbal understanding" (1994) and "The guru effect" (2006). Part three I analyze a passage that may give rise to the guru effect, according to the three comprehension strategies. It turns out that the third strategy, namely that of sophisticated understanding, does not allow the reader/hearer to treat the guru effect in terms of implicatures, that is as part of inferentially communicated content.

**Key words:** pragmatics, communication, inferences, implicature, relevance theory, P. Grice's theory of conversation, guru effect, utterance interpretation, comprehension.

## EFEKT GURU A WYRAFINOWANA INTERPRETACJA WYPOWIEDZI

### *Streszczenie*

Dan Sperber w swoich artykułach z lat 1994 i 2006 wprowadził pojęcia trzech strategii interpretacji wypowiedzi i pojęcie efektu guru. Moim celem jest pokazanie jak przyjęcie w interpretacji wypowiedzi poszczególnych strategii wpływa na efekt guru. Pierwsze dwie części artykułu mają wyjaśnić znaczenie używanych pojęć: w części pierwszej pojęcia efektu guru, a w drugiej trzech strategii interpretacji wypowiedzi. Obie części oparte są na dwóch publikacjach Dana



Sperbera: „Understanding verbal understanding” (1994) i „The guru effect” (2006). W części trzeciej przedstawiam analizę fragmentu tekstu, który potencjalnie może wywołać efekt guru, według trzech strategii interpretacji wypowiedzi/tekstu. Okazuje się, że najbardziej zaawansowana strategia wyrafinowanej interpretacji nie pozwala na rozumienie efektu guru w kategoriach implikatury konwersacyjnej, lecz wymaga analizy tego efektu w terminach innych niż komunikacji inferencyjnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pragmatyka, komunikacja, inferencje, implikatury, teoria relewancji, teoria rozmowy P. Grice’a, efekt guru, interpretacja wypowiedzi, rozumienie.

