Perspectives in Argumentation and Communication:
A relevance-theoretic approach[1]

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Abstract

The present paper presents an overview of the theories of relevance (Sperber&Wilson 1985, 1995, 1998, 2002; Wilson & Sperber 2002) with a particular focus on argumentation and human communication. An in-depth analysis of the human communication plays a critical role in accounting for the theory of relevance. Standing in opposition to the traditional model whereby the communication is accomplished by the transmission of an intended message from a sending party to the receiver through a channel, which, in turn, is decoded and some type of signal or feedback is sent back, the Relevance theorists argue that what distinguishes an input from others is its relevance to the receiver since every utterance creates in the addressee an expectation of relevance. Yus (2006) also relates Relevance Theory to human communication since it is established within a broader cognitive framework, which, in turn, makes humans tend to maximize the relevance of the utterance. This paper will contribute to a better understanding of RT as a general linguistic principle organizing the goal-oriented use of language in communication. Any form of communication can hardly be achieved without contributing factors such as relevance, coherence, semantic interconnectedness and intertextuality. In this regard, we will attempt to study the role of relevance in pragmatics, semantics and communication. We end by taking into account the relevance-theoretic model for achieving a successful communication.

Keywords: theory of relevance, argumentation, communication, coherence, pragmatics

Introduction

A common trait across various linguistic approaches is that linguists and literary scholars are interested in looking at meaning at high level of human communication e.g. Johnson (2002:5) calls "discourse" as the actual stretches of connected text or transcript and providing descriptions of the structure of paragraphs, stories and conversation.

Like in all other linguistic theories, Relevance Theory sees human communication as an active cooperation between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed and shared to reciprocally attend to actors' communicative intentions. Sperber and Wilson (2002) claims that meaning is a central problem of various pragmatic theories in dealing with the use of language i.e., the sentence/speaker meaning. It is, therefore, the role of the theory of relevance to bridge the gap between the two meanings.

The central claim of the Relevance Theory, therefore, is grounded to explore one of the Grice's main

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assumptions that is of a vital importance in human communication (oral as well as written communication), the expression and concession of intention in which the actors are engaged. Their interactions may differ on the one hand; yet, all participants must share a set of common intentionality and activity that are relevant for the communication to be successful, on the other (Grice 1956, 1969, 1982, 1989; & Bara 2010).

The theory is equally centred on the following cognitive approach: humans are directed to maximize the cognitive effect with minimal effort possible. In that:

i.   Humans must pay attention to and focus on the most relevant information available;

ii.   A successful communication needs attention by both parties as well as the relevance of the shared information; and

iii.   The transmitted information between the parties ensures that a degree of relevance is guaranteed.

Based on the above assumptions, Sperber and Wilson (1995:vii) argue that the Relevance Theory plays a critical role in analyzing human communication, and demonstrates how it can be the one and only tool in explaining the cooperation of linguistic meaning and contextual factors. Such kind of relevance-driven pragmatic inferential mechanism is what makes the theory to be considered as "theory of mind".

Sperber and Wilson views sentence meaning primarily as a mechanism of hypothesis formation and confirmation driven by the theory of relevance. This approach, therefore, suggests that every act of ostensive communication signals its own optimal relevance (Rouchota and Jucker 1998).

Since the main focus of the relevance-theoretic approach is largely devoted to explore human language in relation to its roles in communication, the present paper will therefore discuss the general assumption of relevance theory on communication.

Relevance-theoretic assumptions to communication

Human beings use language whether in written or spoken form to communicate their thoughts, ideas, and feelings about themselves and the world (Hockett 1977). Sperber and Wilson (1995:1) explain that such process of communication involves two information- processing mechanisms. The former mechanism aims to adapt and customize the human environment consisting of purely physical factors while the latter constructs representation similar to the one already found in the inventory of the former. This postulation is justified by the situation in which the speaker in oral communication modifies the physical environment of the hearer. Some assumptions are to be manifest by both parties, which, in turn, enables receiver to have similar thoughts with the sender.

As communication cannot be restricted to what people intend to communicate, people communicate more than they intend (Mey and Talbot 1988). The Relevance Theory in this sense takes a different approach towards communication and characterizes it as a different type of social process than code model that sees communication as social because it is a form of interaction, but the abilities it presupposes in communication are signal-oriented rather other oriented.

To account the relevance theory as more psychological rather than sociological, Sperber and Wilson (1995:5) propose human verbal communication based two information-processing sub-devices that involve a memory which constitutes the 'source' on the one side and 'destination' on the other as shown in figure 1.
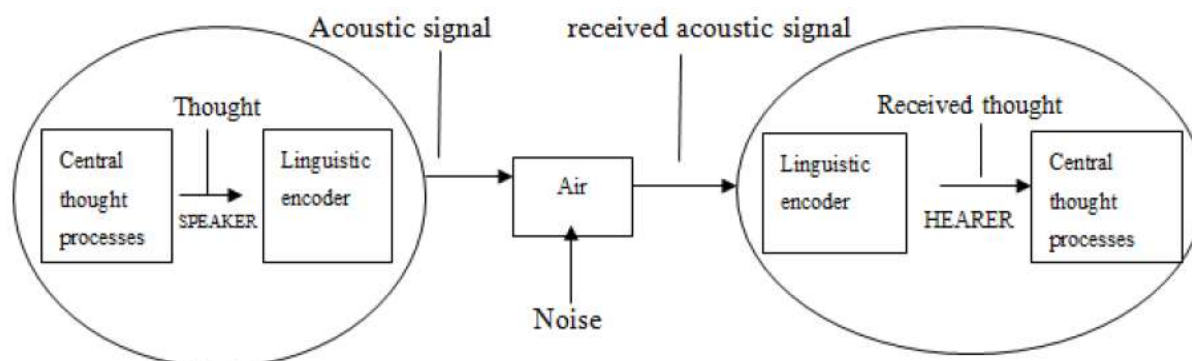
Figure 1 (adopted from Sperber and Wilson [1995:5])

In the figure 1, both source and target are the main thought mechanisms. The linguistic encoding and decoding processes are linguistic skills while the thought is represented by a message. The channel is the air through which the acoustic signal is transmitted. This suggests two assumptions: (a) any language is a set of codes; and (b) this set of codes associates thoughts to sounds. The above-mentioned relevance theoretic assumptions are also supported by the semiotic points of view.

The wealth research of Relevance Theory has inspired not only researchers in psychology but also in linguistics and philosophy and other related fields in redefining distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning and explicit and implicit communication both oral or written texts.

Relevance Theory and Grice's approach to meaning and communication

As Relevance Theory is grounded to explicitly work in details the Grice's approach to meaning, the theory as pointed out in the introductory part of the paper is to bridge the gap between sentence and speaker's meaning in which the Gricean assumption towards the phenomenon has been the main focus of many controversies and interpretations (Strawson, 1971; Bennett, 1976).

Grice (1957) postulates the analysis of what it is for an individual S to mean something by an utterance x (where 'utterance' is to be understood as referring not just to linguistic utterances but to any form of communicative behavior as captured in (1) below:

1. '[S] meant something by x is roughly equivalent to '[S] intended the utterance of x produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention'.   (Grice 1971:58)

The Grice's assumption above was reformulated by various scholars, notable among them is Strawson (1971) that separates out the three sub-intentions involved in Gricean assumption in (1). To mean something by x, Strawson (1971:155) illustrates that S must intend the following:

2. a. S's utterance of x to produce a certain response r in a certain audience A;

   b. A to recognize S's intention (a);

   c. A's recognition of S's intention (a) to function as at least part of A's reason for A's response r.

The above analysis proves that the Grice's postulation in (1) is a point of departure for theory of meaning, trying to go from the analysis of speaker's meaning towards such a traditional semantic concerns as the sentence

meaning and word meaning in what Sperber and Wilson (1997) dub as 'relevance'. Typical examples are drawn from instances where recognition of intention in cognition due to its relevance in material time may lead to its fulfillment (Sperber and Wilson, 1997).

Having discussed the instances of various utterances and their forms of possible interpretations, the Relevance Theory, as mentioned earlier, attempts to revisit Grice's assumption about utterance that is centered on the formulation that the sentence/speaker's meaning distinction might be one of the most significant instances signaling the explicit/implicit distinction.

Argumentative Estate

Ajdukiewicz's programme of pragmatic logic and the methodology of science (1974) combines pragmatic and normative insights into the nature of language and reasoning (e.g. Koszowy 2010). This program depends on the view that general rules of scientific research should be based upon the actual practice of scholars systematizing the set of methodological standards of how knowledge is generated/gained.

The dialogical (and pragmatic) motivation for Jaskowski's discussive logic (1948; 1949) lies in his interest in the study of arguments, "not in the formal logical sense of drawing conclusions from premises, but in the ordinary sense of discussions and in particular of disagreements" (Griffin 2013: 4). In this respect, as some scholars state (Budzynska et al 2014: 10), Jaskowski's approach is clearly in line with contemporary attempts to combine the formal and informal features of argumentation.

The studies in the Polish School of Argumentation primarily deal with the argumentative force comprising the logical force of validity, the rhetorical force of persuasiveness, and the pragmatic force of communicative intentions. The research of the School is also focused on the assessment of argumentation and argumentative effect.

From the perspective of pragmatics, members of the Polish School are interested in applying the elements of Speech Act Theory when considering the illocutionary context (Malinowski 2003; Witek 2013) and the elements of Relevance Theory when investigating the aims and effects of persuasive dialogues (Budzynska and Debowska 2010; Debowska-Kozlowska 2014).

Conclusion

What Hrushovski (1982), Minsky (1975), Schmidt (1977), Stoddard (1990) and others are saying is that until a text theory is able to account for the dynamic synergistic aspects of text, it is not a comprehensive, explanatory theory. However, we can succeed neither in defining the problem space nor be able to provide its adequate solution by continuing to construct one-sided hypotheses and claiming more explanatory power for them than is warranted. It's just for this reason, i.e., to avoid restrictedness of the research, before formulating an adequate theory, we need an understanding of the nature of the problem space "communication" which, in turn, will include discovering the characteristics of linguo-pragmatic components which are obligatory for all texts, the intercomplementary nature of those components and how they contribute to different functional styles. To do this, we must change our strategies and adjust our working assumptions. It is essential because we should also understand the relationship between the text itself (as a language-internal unit) and the

complex social environment (as a language-exterior factor) of which it is a part. It has become increasingly obvious to researchers testing Transformational Theory (e.g., Hankamer and Sag 1976; Reinhart 1980) that we can in no way consider texts independent of the producer, processor, and environment in/by which they are created, received and interpreted. Using intuitively only "input-based proofs" simply breaks down when such proofs (i.e., data) are placed in appropriate contexts (Hrushovski 1982).

To improve our perspective and change the existing state, we cannot simply consider utterance as it relates to the speaker as producer, the utterance as product, or the receiver as processor; what we need most in this case is to study the interactiveness of all these factors in order to understand the notion "utterance" holistically.

The focus of this research is on the role of inference-based relevance (in close connection with the other components of text organization) in different functional styles of language. For a number of reasons, the present theories of and trends in relevance fail to include the different types of the approach. This is because (a) the genre holds a weak position within the hierarchical domain, and (b) its subgenres are apparently in power struggle. There is also a tendency to pay attention to the factors by otherwise recognized linguists, or the trend-based opinions (e.g. of only semantic or pragmatic approach in isolation) that have claimed to be final in their interpretations. This, in turn, leaves little room for more comprehensive and capacious works in the research of this notion.

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