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The Challenges of Explicit and Implicit Communication

A Relevance-Theoretic Approach

11

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Introduction

The present research falls within the field of pragmatic studies. Despite various attempts at delineating the scope of pragmatics adequately, the dispute as to what pragmatic investigations embrace and what kind of division of labour there should be across such linguistic disciplines as grammar, semantics and pragmatics has been going on for decades now (cf. Ariel 2010, 2012; Bianchi 2004; Carston 2008; Horn 2006; Jaszczolt 2012, among others). It is not my intention to contribute to this dispute, as my aims are entirely different and much more modest. For the present purposes, a rather broad definition of pragmatics is adopted. It is treated as a study of general principles underlying the production and comprehension of utterances, that is, coded or non-coded signals intentionally used to convey meaning.

My major goal is to show how to account for various aspects of utterance interpretation within Relevance Theory, one of the leading pragmatic models of the present time. So this research is confined to verbal communication. There are three major focal points in the present study that have to do with: (a) how Relevance Theory accounts for explicature generation, (b) how it explains the implicit layer of communication, and (c) how the model rises to the challenge of elucidating the immense complexity and the extraordinary efficiency of human communication.

An in-depth investigation into the nature of explicatures, as envisaged in the relevance-theoretic framework, and certain doubts and controversies surrounding the so-called free enrichment mechanism, brought me to explore the nature of the processes involved. Fully endorsing the semantic underdeterminacy thesis, relevance theorists assume that bridging the gap between the decoded logical form and the speaker-intended meaning is accomplished via inferencing. Apart from such linguistically mandated pragmatic processes as saturation of contextual variables, resolution of ambiguities, reconstruction of the ellipted material, etc., Relevance Theory admits the process of free enrichment, which is not linguistically sanctioned. According to Carston (2004a: 819), free enrichment is “the incorporation of conceptual material that is wholly pragmatically inferred, on the basis of considerations of rational communicative behavior.” Undeniably, getting the occasion-specific meaning may call for zeroing in on the precise content which is not linguistically licensed in any sense. However, if the process responsible for this adds conceptual elements to the representation, it appears suspicious. In the first place, if such a process is in operation, there may be different ways in which “gaps” in the decoded logical form can be filled in with supplementary

concepts, so, in effect, potentially different explicatures will surface for exactly the same utterance with manifestly the same speaker-intended specific meaning. This is a problem for the theory. Besides, this type of conceptual enhancement of the decoded logical form is cognitively strenuous and creates an unnecessary cognitive burden for the interpreter. In an attempt to overcome these problems a new mechanism is put forward here. The contextual cognitive fix procedure, postulated as part of the relevance-oriented comprehension heuristic, appears to avoid these complications and makes explicature recovery more efficient and more appealing in my estimation. My aim in this book is to argue for this slight amendment to the model and suggest that Relevance Theory can benefit from replacing the controversial free enrichment procedure with the contextual cognitive fix mechanism.

At the level of implicit import, the most interesting and innovative idea in the relevance-theoretic framework is that of weak communication. This notion is original and unique to Relevance Theory and offers interesting insights into what happens when the communicator's goal is not so much to convey a determinate, explicit, well-defined and relatively precise meaning, but rather to affect the recipient's thought processes, as a result of which the latter will arrive at a complex and rich interpretation, not necessarily fully endorsed by the communicator's intention. Indeterminate intentions and impreciseness of the communicated content have their appeal, as will be shown in this book.

I have always been attracted by the challenge of the fundamental pragmatic question how human beings can communicate ever so efficiently. This is not a trivial query, considering the remote and putative nature of background information that needs to be brought to bear in the interpretation process, taking into account different degrees of familiarity (or complete unfamiliarity) of the interlocutors, thinking about idiosyncrasies in the linguistic competence of the speaker and the hearer, to mention just the most obvious factors that affect communication and prove insurmountable (at least as yet) for robots. Relevance Theory does suggest an answer to this question, but it somehow passes unnoticed. In asking and answering this Master Question (Neale forthcoming) I hope to bring to light the relevance-theoretic stance on the problem and demonstrate how it confronts the challenge.

The book has the following structure. In chapter 1, the relevance-theoretic model, its theoretical underpinnings and tenets are introduced. Basic conceptual apparatus of Relevance Theory is presented with a view to laying the foundation for the later discussion. In particular, The Cognitive and Communicative Principles of Relevance with the satellite notions are defined and briefly discussed. The cognitive bias of the theory is emphasized and its affinity with the modular view of the human mind is brought to the fore. Intentionality as approached in relevance-

theoretic terms is highlighted and the inferential nature of comprehension processes is underscored. Because of its aim and subject matter, this introductory part amounts to a survey of the theoretical skeleton of the model. This chapter then is a useful synopsis for the reader familiar with the theory and a worthwhile read for those who may not be fully acquainted with the framework.

Chapter 2 focuses on the relevance-theoretic account of explicit meaning. The notion of explicature developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/96; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) is broader than the notion of what is said as conceived by Grice (1967/89). Relevance Theory views the process of explicature recovery as heavily inferential, with various types of semantic underdeterminacies getting resolved through inference, and the result is a fully-fledged proposition. Free enrichment, taken by many relevance theorists to be responsible for settling underdeterminacies, is critically approached in this chapter. In an attempt to eliminate some of its inadequacies, as hinted at above, the contextual cognitive fix mechanism is introduced. It is also argued that the relevance-driven search for the speaker-intended meaning may on certain occasions yield only a proposition schema and not necessarily a full proposition. Consequently, shallow interpretations at the level of explicature may frequently result – an effect predicted by the contextual cognitive fix construal postulated here.

The implicit layer of communication is the subject matter of chapter 3. Some vital concepts are discussed first, with the major focus on weak communication and poetic effects. To illustrate how the poetic effect is created, some examples of aphorisms are analysed. The main claim is that the role of poetic effects is to initiate the recipient on a certain interpretation path and he is encouraged to explore the meaning further on his own.

In chapter 4, the so-called miracle of communication problem is addressed from the perspective of Relevance Theory. The conception of the comprehension module with the in-built relevance-guided comprehension heuristic which ensures fast, frugal and automatic interpretation of ostensive stimuli is presented. It fits in with the massive modularity mental architecture, as is argued, and provides a plausible solution to the complexity vis-à-vis the efficiency of communication problem.

A summary of the major points raised in the study and suggestions for further research are presented in conclusion.