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The theory developed by Sperber and Wilson aims to outline the cognitive processes underlying the production and interpretation of utterances within the framework of the principle of relevance, which is defined by the assumption that speakers make their best effort to be as relevant as possible in relation to the context.

Their model is strongly influenced by Grice's maxim of relevance, but it offers a very distinct perspective. While the cooperative principle relies on a commitment to collaboration and is closely tied to social behavior, Sperber and Wilson's framework directly connects language with the fundamental characteristics of mental processes. Specifically, they propose that human cognition is naturally oriented towards relevance and therefore centered on what they call 'cognitive principle of relevance'. This principle is stated as follows: "human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance". In other words, our cognitive system has evolved to actively seek out as many cognitive effects as possible, enabling us to optimize the extraction of information from observations and interactions. As a result, we are prone to identify and elaborate only what is contextually relevant.

This general principle also applies to communication, indicating that we naturally expect the information being conveyed to be relevant; not because of a social agreement, but rather as a reflection of how our cognitive system functions. Sperber and Wilson refer to this circumstance as the 'communicative principle of relevance', which they articulate as follows: "every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance". An ostensive stimulus refers to any stimulus that attracts an audience attention, indicating the intention to communicate; it can take various forms, ranging from a gesture to an action to an utterance: it is just a way to signal a communicative intention.

Before delving into further details and exploring how this principle specifically applies to linguistic communication, I believe it's necessary to clarify what we exactly mean with "relevance" and what "optimal relevance" is.

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Intuitively, we all have a basic understanding of what it means for something to be relevant; however, it is crucial to explore this concept further as it is at the core of the theory we are examining. In order for an utterance to be considered relevant, it must establish a connection with the context and produce a cognitive effect: the more cognitive effects it generates, the more it is relevant. Relevance theory assumes three types of effects: the inference of new information, the contradiction of existing assumptions, and finally the reinforcement of existing assumptions.

1) The first type of cognitive effect is generated by contextual implications, which add to the listener's existing knowledge.

2) The second type is produced by utterances that contradict an existing assumption. Let's briefly comment this possibility by considering the following exchange.

*A: There is a Linguistics lecture every Friday*

*B: I received an email from the professor; he says he is in Rome.*

If A had assumed that there was a lecture today, as it is the case every Friday, B's comment would likely cause them to abandon that assumption. As a result, B's remark becomes cognitively significant and, thus, relevant.

3) Finally, what is communicated can have a cognitive effect by strengthening an existing assumption. Let's consider a scenario similar to the previous one: A expresses their intention to attend the class, to what B responds:

*B: I have just saw the professor entering the class.*

In that particular context, B's utterance produces a cognitive effect and, therefore, is relevant. The reason for its relevance is not that it presents new information, but rather that it confirms what previously was only a conjecture or belief – the occurrence of the lecture.

In conclusion, the relevance of an utterance is not absolute but rather expressed in relation to a specific context, and it's defined in terms of a positive cognitive effect, which consists in a valuable difference in an individual's representation of the world. In other terms, an input is considered relevant if it brings about a positive cognitive effect.

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We previously mentioned the concept of optimal relevance; we are now going to discuss what this notion precisely describes. According to the communicative principle of relevance, the interpretation of an utterance is aimed at maximizing its relevance, in line with the natural inclination of our cognitive system. However, this pursuit of relevance is not boundless: if there were no constraints, we would be caught in an endless cycle of interpretation, constantly searching for more cognitive effects. Instead, the production and interpretation of utterances are subject to the condition of optimal relevance, which sets a threshold for the suitable level of relevance, ensuring a balanced and focused communication process.

Optimal relevance is determined by the combination of two factors.

1) First of all, the listener assumes that the communication is sufficiently relevant to be worth processing; in other words, they believe that the effort required to interpret an utterance is proportional to the cognitive effects it contributes.

2) Secondly, the listener also assumes that the utterance is the most relevant the speaker was able or willing to produce. This means that when creating an utterance, the speaker is expected to aim for a level of relevance that requires an appropriate cognitive effort.

Summarizing these observations, we can conclude that optimal relevance balances the effort invested in constructing an utterance and its effectiveness in achieving relevance.

It is important to note that the significance of this principle does not imply that communication is always optimally relevant, but rather that we operate under the assumption that it is. Additionally, it is essential to understand that optimal relevance is not determined by an abstract formula or even the content of an utterance itself; instead, how it is achieved is influenced by the context and the individuals involved: what may be optimally relevant for a specific listener in one context may not hold the same relevance for another listener in a different context. These differences arise from the varying effort required to process an utterance, which ultimately depends on the common ground shared between the interlocutors and what can be inferred from the context.

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How can the communicative principle of relevance effectively help us in understanding and explaining how listeners comprehend utterances?

According to the principle of relevance, every utterance is presumed to have optimal relevance. As a result, listeners anticipate that their cognitive effort in comprehending the utterance will be worthwhile and won't require disproportionate mental processing. This assumption impacts how we approach communication and influences the way we interpret it; specifically, it suggests that listeners can follow the path of least effort to retrieve the intended meaning. In practical terms, this enables the listeners to minimize cognitive effort by testing different interpretative hypotheses in order of accessibility, starting with the simplest and most straightforward interpretation, and gradually exploring more complex interpretations as needed.

The process stops when a listener reaches an interpretation that generates sufficient cognitive effects, satisfying the expected level of relevance. At this point, they can assume they have retrieved the intended meaning communicated by the speaker. This decision is justified by the assumption that if the speaker had intended a different meaning that required more effort to understand, they would have chosen a more informative and relevant utterance for that specific meaning.

In summary, when evaluating cognitive effects, we halt our analysis once the expectation of relevance is satisfied. The intended meaning corresponds to the first interpretation that satisfies the condition of optimal relevance, rather than being the most relevant interpretation possible.

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An example may be useful in better understanding the interpretative process. Consider the utterance "George has a big cat". Given that the phrase "big cat" is ambiguous in English, how would you interpret the utterance? And why?

The first interpretation that a person is likely to arrive at is that George has a large domestic cat – maybe a fat one. However, the utterance is also compatible with George having a pet tiger, as the phrase "big cat" could refer to wild felines; this alternative interpretation might even seem more relevant, because it can generate a greater cognitive effect. Nevertheless, taking into account the principle of relevance, we can dismiss the second interpretation, because if the speaker had intended to convey the meaning of George having a tiger, they would have used a more specific utterance like "George has a tiger", to avoid placing a disproportionate cognitive burden on the listener. Therefore, the listener is justified in stopping their reasoning once they have reached the first relevant interpretation: George has a cat, and that cat is big.

The principle of optimal relevance also applies to the speaker. They could have expressed the same meaning by saying, for example, "George has a big domestic feline". However, the cognitive effort required to produce and process this utterance would not be justified by a proportional increase in positive cognitive effect, thus failing at achieving optimal relevance. Including such a level of detail is unnecessary, because the speaker knows that the listener can easily identify the correct referent given the context.

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There is one final issue we need to address to complete the representation of Sperber and Wilson's theory and differentiate it from Grice's model.

Grice distinguished between "what is said," which represents the explicit meaning, and what is implicated, which includes additional meanings conveyed without being explicitly stated; however, he focused exclusively on the latter aspect. In contrast, Sperber and Wilson acknowledge the importance of pragmatic processes in understanding also what is explicitly communicated and, as a consequence, considering the context is deemed necessary to assign even a basic level of interpretation to an utterance.

The reason why pragmatic considerations are essential to understand utterances stems from the fact that language is inherently ambiguous, and without pragmatic awareness it is impossible to resolve the meaning of many words and accurately identify the correct reference. Moreover, even after reference assignment and disambiguation, further enrichment may be necessary to access the explicit meaning of an utterance.

Let's examine the sentence, *It will take some time to repair your watch*. If we solely rely on decoding and reference assignment, the interpretation we reach is a statement of the obvious, which lacks any meaningful relevance and therefore is not worth communicating – it is self-evident that repairing a watch requires a certain amount of time. A listener will generally understand that the repair will take a significant amount of time, to the extent that it is worth mentioning it; this information is included in what the speaker explicitly communicates, and yet this understanding requires an inference that goes beyond what is encoded in the sentence.

To account for these necessary steps in interpretation, Sperber and Wilson introduced the concept of explicature. An explicature refers to what is explicitly said in an utterance, including its semantic content along with contextual information that primarily enable disambiguation and reference assignment. About this definition, it is important to note that explicatures pertain solely to "what is said", the explicit meaning of an utterance, and doesn't encompass any implicatures. Nevertheless, establishing an explicature relies on the pragmatic principle of relevance, which allows for the identification of the most relevant reference, and is context-dependent, meaning that the explicature of a sentence can vary across different contexts.

Let's consider an utterance that exemplifies the dependence on context: *Refuse to admit them*. What does this utterance say? Without any contextual cues, it is impossible to provide even a basic interpretation. Now, consider the utterance as a response to *What should I do if I make mistakes?* or *What should I do with people without a ticket?* These questions provide a context for the utterance, creating two different explicatures and demonstrating how the comprehension of explicit and literal meanings requires the incorporation of both semantic and pragmatic elements.

In summary, an explicature refers to the meaning derived from the process of developing the incomplete linguistic semantic form of an utterance. It represents the explicit meaning that is obtained by analyzing the linguistic elements of the utterance and considering relevant contextual information.