

## Meaning and Relevance

When people speak, their words never fully encode what they mean, and the context is always compatible with a variety of interpretations. How can comprehension ever be achieved? Wilson and Sperber argue that comprehension is a process of inference guided by precise expectations of relevance. What are the relations between the linguistically encoded meanings studied in semantics and the thoughts that humans are capable of entertaining and conveying? How should we analyse literal meaning, approximations, metaphors and ironies? Is the ability to understand speakers' meanings rooted in a more general human ability to understand other minds? How do these abilities interact in evolution and in cognitive development? *Meaning and Relevance* sets out to answer these and other questions, enriching and updating relevance theory and exploring its implications for linguistics, philosophy, cognitive science and literary studies.

DEIRDRE WILSON is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at University College London, and Research Professor at the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature at the University of Oslo.

DAN SPERBER is Emeritus 'Directeur de Recherche' at the Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS, Paris, and part-time university professor in the Departments of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at the Central European University, Budapest.

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Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber



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## Preface

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When Mary speaks to Peter, she has in mind a certain meaning that she intends to convey: say, that the plumber she just called is on his way. To convey this meaning, she utters certain words: say, ‘He will arrive in a minute’. What is the relation between Mary’s *intended meaning* and the *linguistic meaning* of her utterance? A simple (indeed simplistic) view is that for every intended meaning there is a sentence with an identical linguistic meaning, so that conveying a meaning is just a matter of encoding it into a matching verbal form, which the hearer decodes back into the corresponding linguistic meaning. But this is not what happens, at least in practice. There are always components of a speaker’s meaning which her words do not encode: for instance, the English word ‘he’ does not specifically refer to the plumber Mary is talking about. Indeed, we would argue that the idea that for most, if not all, possible meanings that a speaker might intend to convey, there is a sentence in a natural language which has that exact meaning as its linguistic meaning is quite implausible.

An apparently more realistic view is that the speaker typically produces an utterance which encodes some, but not all, of her meaning. Certain components of her meaning – in Mary’s utterance the referent of ‘he’ or the place where ‘he’ will arrive, for instance – are not encoded, and have to be inferred by the hearer; so while it might seem that a speaker’s meaning should in principle be fully encodable, attempts to achieve such a full encoding in practice leave an unencoded, and perhaps unencodable, residue.

We have argued for a long time that this widely accepted view is still too simple, and that utterances do not encode the speaker’s meaning – not even some of it. The function of the linguistic meaning of an utterance is not to encode the speaker’s meaning, but to provide *evidence* of her meaning. For instance, when Mary says that the plumber will arrive in ‘a minute’, the linguistic meaning of the phrase ‘a minute’ is not part of her intended meaning: she uses this expression not to encode her meaning, but merely to indicate to Peter that she means an amount of time as trivial in the circumstances as a minute would be. In more standard approaches, this use of language would be treated as a case of hyperbole and analysed, along with metaphor and irony, as a departure from the normal practice of using the linguistic meanings of words to encode the speaker’s intended



meaning. We have argued that hyperbole, metaphor and irony are normal uses of language, which involve no special device or procedure.

If we are right, then the goal of pragmatics – the study of utterance comprehension in context – is to investigate an inferential *process* which takes as input the production of an utterance by a speaker, together with contextual information, and yields as output an interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning. Since we believe that inferential processes are best approached from the perspective of cognitive psychology, using tools provided by that framework, we have put forward hypotheses about the basic cognitive dispositions and mechanisms recruited in utterance interpretation, and have helped to promote the development of experimental pragmatics (see Noveck and Sperber 2004). However, pragmatics can not only benefit from cognitive psychology, but can contribute to it in worthwhile ways. Pragmatic processes are of special interest among higher cognitive processes because their inputs and outputs are highly structured and complex, yet, thanks to the development of linguistics, and semantics in particular, we are in a position to give rich and precise descriptions of at least the linguistic components of these inputs.

Indeed, the formalisation of semantics is so far advanced that it is tempting to try and treat pragmatics as an extension of formal semantics, giving rise to similar problems, to be tackled using similar methods. However, the price for this is quite high. In our view, it can only be achieved by abandoning (or at least backgrounding) the cognitive psychology framework, and idealising away the most fundamental aspect of pragmatics – the joint inferential processing of an utterance and an open-ended context (reminding us rather of the way methodological rigour was achieved in behaviourist psychology by idealising away the mental). To repeat: pragmatics is first and foremost about a process, and not about a set of abstract formal relationships between linguistic meaning, context and intended meaning. Moreover, the context used in utterance comprehension is vast and open-ended. Understanding how a context of this type can be exploited and co-ordinated across interlocutors is a crucial problem for pragmatics, which is bypassed when the context is idealised into a small closed set of items. While we are open to the possibility that some apparently pragmatic problems have semantic solutions, we believe that Paul Grice, the founder of modern pragmatics, was right to argue that many semantic problems have more parsimonious pragmatic solutions. In any case, if (as we claim) linguistic meanings are used not to encode the speaker's meaning but merely to provide evidence of it, then the relation between semantics and pragmatics will have to be rethought, and in a more systematic and constructive way than the current series of border skirmishes and sorties.

In our 1986 book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, we described in some detail a cognitive approach to pragmatics, relevance theory, which this book revisits, updates and expands. Since then, work on relevance theory has

become a collective endeavour, with more than thirty books – here we will just mention the most deservedly influential of them, Robyn Carston's *Thoughts and Utterances* (2002) – and hundreds of articles in linguistics, psychology, philosophy and literary studies. The theory has been widely debated, with occasional misunderstandings and caricatures, but also highly relevant comments, for which we are grateful.

Apart from a Postface to the 1995 second edition of *Relevance* which revised and clarified some of our basic assumptions, we ourselves have contributed to the development of the theory through a series of articles written together, singly or with other collaborators. We have selected for this volume what we see as our most useful contributions to the updating, revision and exploration of the consequences of the theory for various areas of research.

After an introductory chapter outlining the main tenets of theory and setting it within a broader philosophical and linguistic context, the book falls into three main parts. Part I, 'Relevance and Meaning', is concerned with the relation between coding and inference in communication and the nature of the inference processes involved. Its central themes are the capacity of humans to entertain and communicate concepts which are not the encoded meaning of any public word, and the inadequacy of the traditional distinction between literal and figurative meaning. We defend the view that there is a continuum of cases between literal, loose and metaphorical uses of language, and that the interpretation of metaphorical uses involves no special principles or mechanisms beyond those required for the interpretation of ordinary 'literal' utterances. We end this part with a new chapter on the relevance-theoretic account of irony and its relation to some alternative accounts.

Relevance theorists were among the earliest defenders of the so-called 'linguistic underdeterminacy' thesis (the claim that pragmatic processes contribute much more to the explicit side of communication than was traditionally assumed), and Part II, 'Explicit and Implicit Communication', explores some of the arguments for this approach. We start by surveying the various ways in which information can be conveyed by an utterance, and then look in more detail at the temporal and causal connotations sometimes carried by conjoined utterances, at approaches to the analysis of 'bridging' reference, the semantics and pragmatics of non-declarative utterances, and the contribution of metarepresentational processes to the interpretation of utterances in general, and to explicit content in particular.

Part III, 'Cross-Disciplinary Themes', considers some of the broader implications of the theory. We present arguments for a modular approach to comprehension, report some experiments designed to test the main tenets of the theory, and reassess current treatments of so-called 'scalar implicatures' in both theoretical and experimental terms. The book ends with a discussion of the implications of relevance theory for the evolution of language.

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Several chapters in this volume briefly re-introduce the basic ideas of relevance theory, leading to some overlap in content. Since the original versions of these chapters are often discussed elsewhere, we felt that removing these short summaries would detract from coherence; we therefore decided to retain the summaries, but in a smaller font, giving access to the full article while at the same time indicating to readers familiar with the theory that they can be passed over more quickly. For the same reason, we have kept the content as close as possible to the original versions, merely correcting obvious mistakes, updating references to forthcoming work and making minor stylistic revisions to improve readability.

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