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.
Meaning and Relevance

Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber
Meaning and Relevance
Deirdre Wilson, Dan Sperber

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.
Contents

List of figures page vii
List of tables viii
Preface ix
Acknowledgements xiii

1 Introduction: pragmatics 1
DAN SPERBER AND DEIRDRE WILSON

Part I Relevance and Meaning 29
2 The mapping between the mental and the public lexicon 31
DAN SPERBER AND DEIRDRE WILSON
3 Truthfulness and relevance 47
DEIRDRE WILSON AND DAN SPERBER
4 Rhetoric and relevance 84
DAN SPERBER AND DEIRDRE WILSON
5 A deflationary account of metaphors 97
DAN SPERBER AND DEIRDRE WILSON
6 Explaining irony 123
DEIRDRE WILSON AND DAN SPERBER

Part II Explicit and Implicit Communication 147
7 Linguistic form and relevance 149
DEIRDRE WILSON AND DAN SPERBER
8 Pragmatics and time 169
DEIRDRE WILSON AND DAN SPERBER
9 Recent approaches to bridging: truth, coherence, relevance 187
DEIRDRE WILSON AND TOMOKO MATSUI
Contents

10 Mood and the analysis of non-declarative sentences 210
   Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber

11 Metarepresentation in linguistic communication 230
   Deirdre Wilson

Part III  Cross-Disciplinary Themes 259

12 Pragmatics, modularity and mindreading 261
   Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson

13 Testing the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance 279
   Jean-Baptiste van der Henst and Dan Sperber

14 The why and how of experimental pragmatics: the case of
   ‘scalar inferences’ 307
   Ira Noveck and Dan Sperber

15 A pragmatic perspective on the evolution of language 331
   Dan Sperber and Gloria Origgi

Notes 339
References 350
Index 373
Figures

Figure 7.1 Types of information conveyed by an utterance

Figure 13.1 A typical four-card task

Figure 13.2 The four possible conditions of the machine experiment (Sperber, Cara and Girotto 1995)

Figure 13.3 Percentage of 6 and E (incorrect) and 6 and A (correct) responses in the four conditions of the machine problem

Figure 13.4 Percentage of rounders in the three rounding experiments (Van der Henst, Carles and Sperber 2002).
## Tables

| Table 3.1 | Interpretation of Lisa’s utterance, ‘I have eaten’ | page 68 |
| Table 3.2 | Interpretation of Sue’s utterance, ‘I must run to the bank’ | 72 |
| Table 3.3 | Interpretation of Mary’s utterance, ‘Holland is flat’ | 73 |
| Table 3.4 | Interpretation of Mary’s utterance, ‘Holland is a picnic’ | 75 |
| Table 5.1 | Interpretation of Mary’s utterance, ‘Archie is a magician’ | 112 |
| Table 5.2 | Interpretation of Mary’s utterance, ‘My chiropractor is a magician’ | 113 |
| Table 13.1 | Percentage of conclusion types for Problems 1 and 2 | 290 |
| Table 13.2 | Percentage of conclusion types for Problems 5 and 6 | 292 |
| Table 13.3 | Percentage of conclusion types for Problems 7 and 8 | 293 |
| Table 13.4 | Percentage of the main selection patterns in the true and false cholera-rule selection task | 299 |
| Table 14.1 | Contrasting predictions of GCI Theory and relevance theory about the speed of interpretation of scalar terms (when an enriched construal is not contextually primed) | 317 |
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.
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.
Acknowledgements

We have benefited enormously from the encouragement and comments of others over the years. We would like to thank Diane Blakemore, Robyn Carston, Pierre Jacob, Ruth Kempson, François Recanati and Neil Smith for constant help and inspiration from the very beginnings of the theory. We are also grateful to our co-authors Tomoko Matsui, Ira Noveck, Glória Origgi and Jean-Baptiste Van der Henst for their valuable contributions and insights, and for kindly allowing us to reprint four papers jointly written with them. Others who have helped in more ways than we can fully acknowledge include Aoife Ahern, Nicholas Allott, Helen Santos Alves, Nicholas Asher, Jay Atlas, Anne Bezuidenhout, Regina Blass, Richard Breheny, Noel Burton-Roberts, Herman Cappelen, Susan Carey, Peter Carruthers, Coralie Chevallier, Billy Clark, Herb Clark, Annabel Cormack, Gergő Csibra, Greg Currie, Jonathan Dancy, Martin Davies, Steven Davis, Dan Dennett, Jean-Louis Dessalles, Bill Downes, Alan Durant, Vicky Escandell-Vidal, Nigel Fabb, Ingrid Lossius Falkum, Thorstein Fretheim, Uta Frith, Chris Frith, Anne Furlong, Gyuri Gergely, Ray Gibbs, Sam Glucksberg, Marjolein Groefsema, Steven Gross, José Luis Gujarrro, Jeanette Gundel, Ernst-August Gutt, Sam Gutenplan, Alison Hall, Francesca Happé, He Ziran, Isao Higashimori, Larry Horn, Richard Horsey, Elly Ifantidou, Kunihiko Imai, Corinne Iten, Mark Jary, Maria Jodlowsiec, Istvan Kecskes, Marta Kisielewska-Krystiuk, Eliza Kitis, Georg Kjoll, Patricia Kolaiti, Ernie Lepore, Stephen Levinson, Eric Lormand, Ewa Mioduszewska, Mo Aiping, Jacques Moeschler, Stephen Neale, Yuji Nishiyama, Eun-ju Noh, Milena Nuti, Nicky Owtram, Manuel Padilla Cruz, Anna Papafragou, Adrian Pilkington, Agnieszka Piskorska, Guy Politzer, Anna Pollard, George Powell, Geoff Pullum, Ran Yongping, Anne Rebull, Willy Rouchoata, Paul Rubio Fernandez, Louis de Saussure, Kate Scott, Thom Scott-Phillips, Barry Smith, Rob Stainton, Jason Stanley, Marie Taillard, Michiko Takeuchi, C.C.W. Taylor, Seiji Uchida, Christoph Unger, Rosa Vega Moreno, Begoña Vicente, Ewa Walaszewska, Daniel Wedgwood, Tim Wharton, Yan Jiang, Francisco Yus Ramos, Vlad Zegarac and Theodore Zeldin.

Deirdre Wilson would like to thank students and colleagues at University College London and the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature at the University of Oslo for friendship and support over the years. Dan Sperber would like to thank
the members of the Institut Jean Nicod and in particular his students in the Groupe Nash and the members of the departments of philosophy and cognitive science at the Central European University, Budapest. We are also grateful to members of the relevance e-mail list, the UCL Pragmatics reading group and relevance groups in China, Japan, Norway, Poland, Spain and Switzerland.