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Billy Clark  
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PART I

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Overview

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# 1 A first outline

Topics: expectations and meanings; sentences, utterances and propositions;  
communication and cognition

## 1.1 Overview

The ideas introduced in this chapter are presented more fully in the remaining chapters of Part I before the more critical and exploratory discussion in Part II. The chapter begins with a very brief summary of the central ideas behind relevance theory. It then considers some issues about terminology before presenting a fuller introduction to the theory, looking at some of the key ideas involved in explaining communication from a relevance-theoretic point of view.

One of the key ideas assumed by relevance theory, and shared by most other approaches, is that we can make a fundamental distinction between coded and inferred communication. This distinction can then be exploited in making a distinction between linguistic semantics and pragmatics. This chapter considers some of the kinds of things which can be linguistically encoded (and which therefore fall within the scope of linguistic semantics) and some of the kinds of things which can be pragmatically inferred (and which therefore fall within the scope of pragmatics). We then take our first look at the theoretical ideas proposed by relevance theory to explain how we work out communicated meanings, in particular at the two Principles of Relevance, the presumption of optimal relevance and the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic which follows from these. Finally, we consider the nature of explanations of communication proposed within relevance theory.

The aim at this stage is to present the key ideas behind the theory quickly so that you have a general idea of how the theory works before moving on to develop a fuller understanding of the details in the rest of Part I and to explore the trickier issues discussed in Part II. To keep this initial overview brief, I have made a number of simplifying assumptions and ignored a number of issues which we will discuss more fully later. If you have questions about the details, or notice any possible inconsistencies here, make a note of them as you go. Two of the exercises in this chapter (Exercise 1.2 and Exercise 1.9) invite you to think a bit more fully about questions which have occurred to you while reading this chapter. Each subsequent chapter contains an exercise

which invites you to go back to this list and consider whether any of your initial questions have been answered at that stage.

Part I of the book is relatively uncritical. You should bear in mind, though, that many if not all of the assumptions made by relevance theorists have been questioned to varying degrees. In Part II, some of these debates will be explored more fully. For now, the focus is on explaining the various components of the theory and how they are used. The key notion in relevance theory is, of course, the notion of ‘relevance’ itself, which has a technical definition distinct from any of its everyday uses. This technical definition will be introduced and explained in Chapter 3. At this stage, the definition will not be explained fully as the aim is to begin with an understanding of the broad outline of the approach rather than to spell out the technical details.

**1.2 Expectations and meanings: a short summary**

This section presents a very brief summary of the essential idea behind relevance theory: that intentional communication gives rise to expectations which help us to decide what the communicator intends to convey. This is not the only thing which relevance theory claims, but it is a central part of the theory and I hope that beginning with this short introduction will make it easier to develop a fuller picture as you work through the rest of the book. The section begins by considering the idea that intentional communication creates expectations, briefly considers the kinds of meanings which these expectations help to explain, and then says a little about how the expectations help to give rise to the meanings.

**1.2.1 Creating expectations**

Pay no attention to this sentence. It is not relevant to you. Did you ignore either of the two sentences you have just read? I’m assuming that you didn’t. I can’t realistically expect readers of this book to follow an instruction not to pay attention to a sentence in this book. The existence of the book and the sentences within it provide evidence that I intended someone to read them. By typing these words onto my computer (as I am doing now) and agreeing to them being printed in a book which can be bought and read (as you are doing now), I have suggested that I think the words are relevant to the book’s potential readers (including you). Similarly, whenever someone speaks to you in a language you know (or that they assume you know), they communicate this assumption. In a talk on relevance theory which I attended, Dan Sperber, one of the founders of relevance theory, began by saying something very similar to his audience:

- (1) Pay no attention to this utterance. It has no relevance to you.

His aim then was the same as my aim here: to show that it is not reasonable to expect someone you are addressing in a language they know (and which they

assume that you know that they know) to take seriously the idea that you do not think the utterance you are producing is relevant to them. The act of communicating makes clear to the addressee that the communicator must think that what they are communicating is relevant to the addressee. The same point applies to nonverbal communication. If I approach you in the street, wave both hands at you and then point across the street, my behaviour makes clear to you that I think you will spot something worth noticing if you look across the street. Relevance theory can be understood as an elaboration of, and an attempt to account for, this intuition.

Whether language is involved or not, actions which make clear that someone intends to communicate something always create particular kinds of expectations in addressees. The general expectation can be roughly characterised as the assumption that there is an interpretation of the communicator’s behaviour which the addressee will find it worthwhile to recover. This generalisation is the central insight behind the relevance-theoretic account of intentional communication. Understanding the way that acts of communication create this expectation is seen as the key to understanding how we interpret each other’s utterances and also why we sometimes misunderstand each other. Notice, by the way, that I have not yet defined either the technical term ‘relevance’ or the kind of communication which gives rise to the expectation (we will see below that this is termed ‘ostensive-inferential communication’). I am hoping that the initial discussion will be fairly clear without providing full definitions at this stage. If not, or if you are unsure about the details at any stage, make a note and add it to the list of questions you are invited to make in responding to Exercise 1.2 below. Later exercises will ask you to check whether your understanding of specific points becomes clearer as you work through the book.

**1.2.2      How do we know what we mean?**

How do we know what other people mean when they communicate with us? Explaining this is one of the central aims of relevance theory. There are a number of different kinds of question to ask about how we understand each other, including how we account for cases where we fail to understand each other. We’ll begin to explore these in more detail, and to consider a fuller range of examples, in Section 1.4. Here, we’ll consider just three kinds of question which relevance theory aims to answer:

- a.            How do we manage to understand meanings which are not directly communicated?
- b.            How do we work out which propositions communicators are directly communicating?
- c.            Why do we sometimes misunderstand each other?

Here is a brief explanation of each question.

**a. How do we manage to understand meanings which are indirectly communicated?**

It is easy to find examples of indirect communication. Here is an example from an exchange which happened when I was in my local corner shop recently and about to pay for two pots of cream cheese. The assistant at the till said to me:

(2) They're three for two just now.

I had no problem in understanding that she meant I was entitled to a third pot of cream cheese at no additional cost. This is something she communicated indirectly. I was able to understand what she had said, realise that she meant me to derive an indirect meaning, and to derive that indirect meaning. One thing relevance theory aims to do is to provide an explanation of what is involved in deriving such indirect meanings.

**b. How do we work out which propositions communicators are directly communicating?**

We'll look more closely at how to define the distinction between 'direct' and 'indirect' communication below. For now, the key thing to notice is that in order to work out that I was entitled to a third pot of cheese, I first had to work out what proposition the shop assistant was directly communicating. This might seem obvious, but there are a number of things I needed to work out in order to see what this proposition might be. I needed to work out, for example, that *they* referred to pots of cream cheese of the brand and size I was about to buy which were on sale in the shop I was in at the time when I was buying them, and that saying that *they're three for two* meant that the cost of three of them would be the same as the cost of two of them. I also needed to realise that *just now* meant during a period of time which included all of the time in which I was in the shop buying the cream cheese. A rough characterisation of what she was directly communicating, with components which were not explicitly stated in square brackets, might be (3):

(3) [Pots of cream cheese of the type which you are about to buy] are [on sale in this shop under a special offer which means that if you buy] two [pots of that cream cheese which you are about to buy] [we will give you a third pot without charging you any more] [at the present time and for as long as the offer lasts]

This representation makes clear that I had to make a significant number of assumptions which go beyond what the shop assistant actually said in order to understand this everyday utterance.

**c. Why do we sometimes misunderstand each other?**

The interpretation I've just outlined seems a fairly natural and obvious one and I am sure most people would have understood the utterance in the same way. However, it is possible to imagine a situation where someone

might have misunderstood it. There are a number of ways in which communication might have gone wrong. Sometimes addressees don't notice that they're being addressed. If my attention was not focused fully on the shop assistant, I might not have heard her or I might have thought that she was talking to someone else. Perhaps less plausibly, I could have heard her and realised she was talking to me but still have misunderstood the utterance. This could happen because I don't know what *three for two* means or, even less plausibly, because I think she is telling me this for a different reason, e.g. to comment on the nature of special offers in some way. I might understand the main point she is trying to convey but misunderstand some parts of what she intended. I might, for example, think that she is making a negative comment about me because she thinks I'm silly not to have brought three pots of cheese to the counter, even if this is not what she intended.

There are a significant number of different ways in which things might go wrong when we communicate with each other. An adequate account will need to do as well at explaining misunderstandings as it does at explaining how we manage to understand each other when communication goes well. We will also expect an adequate theory to account for possibilities ranging from those where we are confident that communication has been successful to those where we are sure it has not and all of the grey areas in between.

1.2.3 Guiding interpretations

So how does the expectation raised by intentional communication help one person to understand what another person intended by their act of communication? The key idea within relevance theory is that addressees begin by assuming that the communicator has an interpretation in mind which justifies the expenditure of effort involved in arriving at it, i.e. which provides enough cognitive rewards for it to be worth expending the mental effort involved in reaching it. (As we'll see below, relevance theory explains this in terms of a technical definition of the term 'relevance'.) This could be understood as resting on assumptions about what it is rational for communicators to do and for addressees to expect. We might point out, for example, that it would seem less than rational for me to attract your attention and invite you to pay attention to something if I did not think it would be worth your while to do so. We will see below that a suitably developed understanding of this leads to fairly precise predictions about the particular interpretations addressees will arrive at. Before returning to my corner shop cream cheese, let's broaden the scope of our discussion by considering a fairly simple example of nonverbal communication.

Suppose you are standing in a chemist's shop and you begin to cough in a way that is hard for you to control. A stranger looks at you, makes eye contact, and then taps a box on the counter. What will you do? My guess is that you will look at the box to see what it contains. Suppose the box says

that it contains a cough medicine. You will no doubt assume that the stranger is recommending that you try this medicine and that it might relieve your cough. Why did you decide this? Because it would make sense of the stranger's actions if this was what she intended to communicate. Notice that it is your expectation about her behaviour which led you to notice the medicine. Where did this expectation come from? Let's assume we always make hypotheses about the behaviour of other people that we notice. It is hard to see how you could explain the stranger's behaviour as anything other than an attempt to communicate with you. This in turn gave rise to the expectation that there would be an interpretation of her behaviour which would justify the effort you would have to expend in order to understand it. Because you expected this, you put the required amount of effort into looking at the box and looking for a relevant interpretation. Notice that there is no necessary connection between tapping a box and communicating that it contains medicine that might fix a cough. You will have arrived at this interpretation because you put the effort in and assumed there would be a relevant interpretation. We have said nothing yet about how you arrive at this specific interpretation, but we will see below that this account shares with all relevance-theoretic explanations the assumption that interpretations are guided by the presumption that the communicator must have had an interpretation in mind which would justify the effort involved in paying attention to her behaviour.

Now, let's go back to the cream cheese example. How does this account for example (2) above? First, we assume that I recognise that the shop assistant is talking to me. By uttering (2) she makes me think that there is an interpretation of (2) which it will be worth my while to derive. For this to be the case, it must be an interpretation which she will have thought of as more worthwhile than alternative utterances which she might have produced, such as (4):

(4) Three pounds fifty-eight, please.

My job then is to work out what that interpretation might be. In this situation, it is not hard for me to come up with a reasonable interpretation. If I can buy three pots for the price of two, then a number of significant things follow from this, including:

- (5) a. I can have a third pot of cheese without paying any more for it.
- b. The shop assistant thinks I don't know about the special offer.
- c. The shop assistant is checking whether I want a third pot.
- d. If I do want a third pot, I can get it now.
- e. If I pick it up now before paying, I won't risk being suspected of shoplifting.

I can also see why the shop assistant will see this as more relevant than just asking me for payment for two pots of cheese, since it also suggests that she is being considerate which has positive implications for our social relationship.



This is the starting point for relevance-theoretic explanations of the interpretation of particular utterances. We will look at the rest of the story more closely below. Now what about our other two questions? The first was about how we work out such things as that *they* refers to pots of cheese for sale at the time of the utterance in the shop where the exchange is taking place. The answer to this question is very similar to the answer to the previous question. In fact, recognising the intended referent of *they* is required in order to arrive at the interpretation sketched above, so we might simply say that these are sub-tasks within the overall task of working out the intended interpretation of the utterance as a whole. This is indeed what relevance theory suggests. We will develop our understanding of how this goes in the rest of the book, looking at how the sub-tasks in comprehension take place and interact with each other in constructing interpretations.

Finally, what about the possibility of misunderstanding? Within relevance theory, this is explained in terms of a mismatch between the speaker’s estimate of the set of assumptions the hearer can and will access when hearing the utterance and what the hearer does in fact access, i.e. between the kinds of **contextual assumptions** which the speaker thinks the hearer will access and those the hearer actually does access. We will consider the nature of the process of accessing contextual assumptions more fully in Chapter 7. Assumptions which are probably required in order for me to understand the utterance include:

- (6) a. The shop assistant is talking to me.
- b. *They* refers to pots of cheese.
- c. The shop assistant is trying to be helpful.

If I miss (6a), I am not likely to think much about what proposition the shop assistant is expressing or to make the right assumptions about such things as the intended referent of *they*. If I miss (6b), I might not realise that this is relevant to my cream cheese purchase. If I miss (6c), I might go for a more critical interpretation than the shop assistant intended. And so on. We will develop a more detailed account of misunderstandings below. For now, one thing to notice is that an addressee who misunderstands an intended meaning and a successful interpreter will share the expectation that the communicator is aiming for an interpretation that justifies the effort involved in processing it.

Exercise 1.1 encourages you to think about the kinds of expectations created by communicators and how we understand each other.

**Exercise 1.1**

- The chapter discussed the impossibility of being taken seriously if you ask someone not to pay attention to something you express in a language they know. This follows because producing the utterance automatically creates the assumption that you have in mind to communicate something which you believe the addressee will be interested in. The example with the cough medicine showed that these expectations can arise in the same way for verbal

and nonverbal communication. Imagine you walk into a public space, say a coffee bar, where several people are sitting around. Consider:

- (a) other things you might do to make clear to one or more people in the room that you are attempting to communicate something to them
- (b) how you might behave in order to avoid the possibility that someone will think you are trying to communicate with them

Exercise 1.2 asks you to note questions you have at this stage about relevance theory in particular or about language and meaning in general.

**Exercise 1.2**

- The main aim of this book is to help you to understand relevance theory more fully. This means discussing a wide range of topics, many of which are quite complicated. I hope that you will be aware of your understanding developing as you read the book and that you will become more confident to discuss some of the general and specific arguments and issues as you work through the book. To help you to think about this, and to be aware of how you are developing your understanding, make a list now of questions you have about how relevance theory works or about linguistic meaning in general. Later exercises will ask you to return to this list, adding to it where new questions emerge and noting the extent to which existing questions have been answered as you work through the book. Make a list now in any format which you think is useful and keep it in an accessible place so you can refer to it, add to it and edit it as you work through the book. Don't wait to be prompted by exercises, though. Have a look at your list whenever you think it would be useful, or when you come across something in the book or elsewhere which you think is relevant to any of these questions. I don't expect to have answered all of your questions by the end of the book, but I do hope to have answered some, partially answered others, and suggested the lines along which answers could be developed to yet others. I would be very happy to receive feedback from readers, asking questions, commenting on the extent to which you think I have answered questions, or raising any other issues. There is a discussion section on the website ([www.cambridge.org/billyclark](http://www.cambridge.org/billyclark)) where questions can be posted and answered, and a link to send questions directly to me.

**1.3 Sentences, utterances and propositions**

As with any subject, there are a number of technical terms used in linguistic semantics and pragmatics that it is important to understand before looking at work in this area. This is particularly problematic for terms which have a slightly different meaning, or a variety of meanings, in everyday usage. An obvious example is the term **ambiguous**. In everyday language, this is used to refer to a range of cases where an expression has more than one meaning. In current linguistics, the term refers only to linguistic expressions which have more than one encoded sense (such as the word *ball*, which