

Relevance Theory

Over the past twenty years, relevance theory has become a key area of study within semantics and pragmatics. In this comprehensive new textbook, Billy Clark introduces the key elements of the theory and how they interconnect. The book is divided into two parts, first providing an overview of the essential machinery of the theory, and second exploring how the original theory has been extended, applied and critically discussed. Clark offers a systematic framework for understanding the theory from the basics up, building a complete picture, and providing the basis for advanced research across a range of topics. With this book, students will understand the fundamentals of relevance theory, its origins in the work of Grice, the relationship it has to other approaches, and its place within recent developments and debates.

BILLY CLARK is a senior lecturer in English Language in the School of Media and Performing Arts at Middlesex University. He has considerable experience teaching relevance theory at undergraduate and postgraduate level and was editor of the 'Foundations of Linguistics' section for the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* edited by Keith Brown.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE TEXTBOOKS IN LINGUISTICS

General editors: P. AUSTIN, J. BRESNAN, B. COMRIE, S. CRAIN, W. DRESSLER,
C. EWEN, R. LASS, D. LIGHTFOOT, K. RICE, I. ROBERTS, S. ROMAINÉ,
N.V. SMITH.

Relevance Theory

In this series:

D. A. CRUSE *Lexical Semantics*
A. RADFORD *Transformational Grammar*
M. GARMAN *Psycholinguistics*
G. G. CORBETT *Gender*
H. J. GIEGERICH *English Phonology*
R. CANN *Formal Semantics*
J. LAVER *Principles of Phonetics*
F. R. PALMER *Grammatical Roles and Relations*
M. A. JONES *Foundations of French Syntax*
A. RADFORD *Syntactic Theory and the Structure of English: A Minimalist Approach*
R. D. VAN VALIN, JR, and R. J. LAPOLLA *Syntax: Structure, Meaning and Function*
A. DURANTI *Linguistic Anthropology*
A. CRUTTENDEN *Intonation* Second edition
J. K. CHAMBERS and P. TRUDGILL *Dialectology* Second edition
C. LYONS *Definiteness*
R. KAGER *Optimality Theory*
J. A. HOLM *An Introduction to Pidgins and Creoles*
G. G. CORBETT *Number*
C. J. EWEN and H. VAN DER HULST *The Phonological Structure of Words*
F. R. PALMER *Mood and Modality* Second edition
B. J. BLAKE *Case* Second edition
E. GUSSMAN *Phonology: Analysis and Theory*
M. YIP *Tone*
W. CROFT *Typology and Universals* Second edition
F. COULMAS *Writing Systems: An Introduction to their Linguistic Analysis*
P. J. HOPPER and E. C. TRAUOGOTT *Grammaticalization* Second edition
L. WHITE *Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar*
I. PLAG *Word-Formation in English*
W. CROFT and A. CRUSE *Cognitive Linguistics*
A. SIEWIERSKA *Person*
A. RADFORD *Minimalist Syntax: Exploring the Structure of English*
D. BÜRING *Binding Theory*
M. BUTT *Theories of Case*
N. HORNSTEIN, J. NUÑES and K. GROHMANN *Understanding Minimalism*
B. C. LUST *Child Language: Acquisition and Growth*
G. G. CORBETT *Agreement*
J. C. L. INGRAM *Neurolinguistics: An Introduction to Spoken Language Processing and its Disorders*
J. CLACKSON *Indo-European Linguistics: An Introduction*
M. ARIEL *Pragmatics and Grammar*
R. CANN, R. KEMPSON and E. GREGOROMICHELAKI *Semantics: An Introduction to Meaning in Language*
Y. MATRAS *Language Contact*
D. BIBER and S. CONRAD *Register, Genre and Style*
L. JEFFRIES and D. MCINTYRE *Stylistics*
R. HUDSON *An Introduction to Word Grammar*
M. L. MURPHY *Lexical Meaning*
J. M. MEISEL *First and Second Language Acquisition*
T. MCENERY and A. HARDIE *Corpus Linguistics: Method, Language and Practice*
J. SAKEL and D. L. EVERETT *Linguistic Fieldwork: A Student Guide*
A. SPENCER and A. LUÍS *Clitics: An Introduction*
G. CORBETT *Features*
A. MCMAHON and R. MCMAHON *Evolutionary Linguistics*
B. CLARK *Relevance Theory*

Earlier issues not listed are also available

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Relevance Theory

BILLY CLARK
Middlesex University



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521702416

© Billy Clark 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Bell and Bain Ltd

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Clark, Billy.
Relevance theory / Billy Clark.
p. cm. – (Cambridge textbooks in linguistics Relevance Theory)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-87820-3 (Hardback)
1. Relevance. 2. Semiotics. 3. Language and languages. I. Title.
P99.4.R44C57 2013
401'.43–dc23
2012036512

ISBN 978-0-521-87820-3 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-70241-6 Paperback

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.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

for Bessie and Bill

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> xii
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xviii
<i>Typographical conventions</i>	xix
Part I Overview	1
1 A first outline	3
1.1 Overview	3
1.2 Expectations and meanings: a short summary	4
1.3 Sentences, utterances and propositions	10
1.4 Communication and cognition: a fuller overview	12
1.5 Summary	41
1.6 Further reading	41
2 Origins and alternatives: Grice, relevance theory and modern pragmatics	43
2.1 Overview	43
2.2 Grice and meaning	44
2.3 Grice and pragmatics: a ‘theory of conversation’	47
2.4 Problems and possibilities: critiques of Grice	63
2.5 The development of relevance theory	77
2.6 Other directions: ‘post-Griceans’ and ‘neo-Griceans’	83
2.7 Summary	89
2.8 Further reading	89
3 Principles of Relevance	90
3.1 Overview	90
3.2 Relevance, cognition and communication	91
3.3 Defining relevance: effects	99
3.4 Defining relevance: effort	104
3.5 Maximising relevance: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance	106
3.6 Optimising relevance: the Communicative Principle of Relevance	108
3.7 Ostensive-inferential communication	112
3.8 A comprehension heuristic	119
3.9 Summary	121
3.10 Further reading	122

x	Contents	
4	Explaining inferences	123
4.1	Overview	123
4.2	Pragmatic processes: what we need to explain	124
4.3	Varieties of inference	125
4.4	Explaining inferences: principles, presumptions and mutual adjustment	142
4.5	Summary	155
4.6	Further reading	155
Part II	Details and developments	157
5	Explicature and implicature	159
5.1	Overview	159
5.2	Saying and implicating	159
5.3	The pragmatics of saying	167
5.4	Explicature and implicature	171
5.5	Alternative approaches	192
5.6	Summary	199
5.7	Further reading	199
6	Types of explicature	200
6.1	Overview	200
6.2	Utterances and propositions	200
6.3	Words, concepts and the world	207
6.4	Higher-level explicatures	208
6.5	Strength of explicatures	211
6.6	Summary	215
6.7	Further reading	215
7	Types of implicature	216
7.1	Overview	216
7.2	Implications and implicatures	217
7.3	Implicated premises and implicated conclusions	224
7.4	Deriving implicatures	228
7.5	Strength of implicatures	235
7.6	Summary	238
7.7	Further reading	239
8	Lexical pragmatics	240
8.1	Overview	240
8.2	Words and concepts	241
8.3	Words and inference	242
8.4	Inferring concepts: broadening and narrowing	244
8.5	‘Ad hoc’ concepts	249
8.6	Summary	252
8.7	Further reading	252

	Contents	xi
9 Figurative language: metaphor	253	
9.1 Overview	253	
9.2 Literal and non-literal language	254	
9.3 Descriptive and interpretive representations	258	
9.4 Grice’s account of metaphor	263	
9.5 Metaphor and weak implicatures	266	
9.6 Metaphor and ad hoc concepts	272	
9.7 Summary	279	
9.8 Further reading	279	
10 Figurative language: irony	280	
10.1 Overview	280	
10.2 Irony as echoic	280	
10.3 Grice’s ‘traditional’ approach	283	
10.4 Irony as pretence	286	
10.5 Data from other sources	292	
10.6 Summary	294	
10.7 Further reading	294	
11 Linguistic semantics	295	
11.1 Overview	295	
11.2 Semantics and pragmatics	296	
11.3 Representation, translation and interpretation	301	
11.4 From words to the world: two kinds of semantics	305	
11.5 Concepts and procedures: two kinds of meanings	308	
11.6 Summary	327	
11.7 Further reading	327	
12 Conclusion: applications and recent developments	328	
12.1 Overview	328	
12.2 Developing the theory	328	
12.3 Testing pragmatic theories: kinds of data	331	
12.4 Linguistic and pragmatic development, translation and evolution	340	
12.5 Pragmatics and the mind	345	
12.6 Words and beyond	351	
12.7 Competitors and challenges: other views	356	
12.8 What’s next?	360	
12.9 Summary	361	
12.10 Finding out more	362	
<i>Appendix: Key notions of relevance theory</i>	363	
<i>Notes to chapters</i>	367	
<i>Bibliography and other resources</i>	372	
<i>Index</i>	395	

Figures and tables

Figures	
2.1	Grice’s view of communication page 62
2.2	The semantics–pragmatics distinction according to Grice (1975) 65
2.3	The semantics–pragmatics distinction according to Wilson and Sperber (1981) 66
2.4	Simplified summary of the semantics–pragmatics distinction for relevance theory 79
3.1	A simplified representation of modular mental architecture (based on Fodor 1983) 92
3.2	The Müller-Lyer illusion (Müller-Lyer 1889) 93
4.1	Schematic outline of hypotheses formed in interpreting an utterance of <i>He forgot to go to the bank</i> (based on Wilson and Sperber 2004) 146
5.1	The semantics–pragmatics distinction according to Grice (1975) 168
5.2	The semantics–pragmatics distinction revised following discussion by Wilson and Sperber (1981) 169
5.3	Differences between Grice’s approach and relevance theory 188
9.1	Descriptive and interpretive representations (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 232) 261
11.1	The semantics–pragmatics distinction according to Grice (1975) 297
11.2	The semantics–pragmatics distinction according to Wilson and Sperber (1981) 298
11.3	The semantics–pragmatics distinction within relevance theory 299
11.4	The ‘triangle of meaning’ (Ogden and Richards 1923) 303
11.5	Words, concepts and the world (adapted from Ogden and Richards 1923) 304
11.6	Two kinds of semantics 306
11.7	Information conveyed by an utterance (Wilson and Sperber 1993) 318

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

	List of figures and tables	xiii
11.8	Conceptual and procedural meaning (adapted from Wilson and Sperber 1993)	318
12.1	Types of prosodic meaning (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1563)	355
12.2	Varieties of overt communication (Wilson and Wharton 2006: 1564)	355

Tables

2.1	Horn’s principles and Grice’s maxims	86
2.2	Levinson’s heuristics and Grice’s maxims (based on Levinson 2000: 35–8)	88

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87820-3 - Relevance Theory
Billy Clark
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

Aims

The main aim of this book is to provide an introduction to relevance theory. Relevance theory aims to describe and explain how humans understand the world and how we understand each other. In other words, it is a theory of both cognition and communication. In neither case, however, does the theory attempt to say all that there is to say about the phenomenon it aims to explain. On cognition, the theory makes a claim about how we allocate our cognitive resources in general but does not make specific claims about the majority of cognitive systems and processes. On communication, the theory makes a claim about how we use cognitive resources when we recognise that someone has openly produced an act of intentional communication, verbal or nonverbal, but it has less to say about covert or accidental forms of information transmission. In other words, relevance theory aims to tell part of the story of how we think and understand the world (cognition) and how we convey thoughts and understand each other (communication).

Relevance theory has been influential in a number of areas but it has arguably been most influential in the area of linguistic pragmatics, which aims to explain how we understand each other when we communicate in language. The book focuses mainly on linguistic communication but it also considers some cases of nonverbal communication, what the theory has to say about cognition more generally and the relationship between the accounts of cognition and of communication. While the explanation of communication presupposes assumptions about cognition, neither account fully depends on the other (one could be shown to be false while the other is broadly true, and vice versa). The book aims to explain the technical notion of ‘relevance’ assumed by the theory, the meaning of the claim that human cognition is ‘geared’ towards the maximisation of ‘relevance’, and the ways in which considerations of relevance guide the processes of human communication (for communicators and audiences).

Key features

I have written this book with more than one audience in mind. It should be useful for readers with no prior knowledge of linguistic pragmatics

or relevance theory, for readers who have done some work on these previously, and for more advanced researchers who are looking to develop their understanding of this theory in particular. In later chapters, fairly recent ideas are explained and critically discussed with a view to developing the debate in some areas.

I have tried to write in an accessible style and to keep things as simple as possible. Of course, the extent to which things can be kept simple depends partly on the nature of the topics being discussed and the book covers some fairly tricky topics. While the level of difficulty varies from chapter to chapter, the chapters build on each other to some extent. You should find that you can follow the argument overall if you work through the book in order and do not try to move on before you are fairly confident at each stage about your understanding of the discussion so far. Some parts of the book may be usable as stand-alone readings. The first section of the book (Chapters 1 to 4) could be used to introduce the main assumptions of relevance theory, its origins in previous work and its relationship to other approaches.

Organisation

The book is divided into two main Parts. Part I, consisting of the first four chapters, provides a relatively uncritical overview of the main parts of the theory, explaining what it aims to achieve and how it attempts to do this. As with any theory, all of the important assumptions of the theory are open to debate. At this stage, the focus is mainly on presenting the theory clearly. More critical discussion is reserved until Part II. Chapter 1 contains a brief summary of the main ideas behind the theory so that you can begin to develop a sense of what it is trying to achieve and how. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 flesh this out in distinct ways. Chapter 2 considers the origins of the theory, mainly in the work of Paul Grice, and its relationship to other post-Gricean work. Chapter 3 looks more closely at the definition of relevance and the two Principles of Relevance which constitute the main general claims made by the theory. Chapter 4 considers how they are used in explaining cognition and communication. By the end of Chapter 4, you will have been introduced to the essential machinery of the theory and you should be able to propose and test your own relevance-theoretic explanations of particular utterances and other communicative phenomena. You should also be ready to interrogate the ideas more closely and to look in more detail at specific components of the theory. Part II of the book helps you to do this in two ways. First, it explores particular theory-internal notions in more detail. Second, it considers ways in which the original theory has been extended, applied and critically discussed. Chapters in Part II of the book will help you to extend your understanding of the details of the theory and also to consider various kinds of critical discussion and responses to that criticism. Taken as a whole, the book presents a comprehensive overview of the main features of the

theory so that readers should understand the fundamentals, the relationship to other approaches, and a number of relevant developments and debates.

Each chapter discusses and illustrates the relevant ideas and contains a number of exercises which can be used to test your understanding. There are further exercises on the book’s website at: www.cambridge.org/billyclark. The exercises are designed to be suitable for classroom work and also for working through on your own. The website also contains suggested answers so that you can check whether you are on the right track. Of course, in many cases there is no one definitively correct answer so these often indicate the direction in which you might develop an answer rather than just stating what the answer should be. While the exercises can be saved until the end of the chapter, some of them are designed to be tackled at the point in the chapter where they appear. My own view is that all of the exercises will be most effective if you pause to work on them when they are introduced and then read on. You might, of course, prefer to read through a chapter first if you are in a hurry or if you believe that you already have a reasonable understanding of the topics being discussed.

Key notions in the theory are briefly explained in an Appendix at the end of the book. This can be used to check your understanding of these notions and it can also be read as a quick reminder of the key components of the theory. Technical terms are presented **in bold** at critical points in the text. There are a number of other typographical conventions adopted in the text, explained more fully on page xix. For ease of understanding, in examples with an unnamed speaker or communicator, the communicator will be referred to with a female pronoun and the addressee with a male pronoun. For consistency, when communicators are named, the communicator will usually be thought of as female and the addressee as male.

At the end of each chapter, there are brief suggestions for initial further reading on topics just covered. The resources section at the end of the book lists some key reading on relevance theory, including useful websites, and concludes with a fuller bibliography containing all of the sources mentioned in the book.

Acknowledgements

I am obviously in debt to Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson and all of the researchers in relevance theory and in pragmatics who have contributed to developing accounts of how we understand each other and the world. By far my greatest debt is to Deirdre Wilson, who has offered limitless advice, encouragement and intellectual inspiration throughout the time I have known her. I am also grateful to a large number of people who have discussed relevance theory with me over the years. I have had interesting formal and informal discussion in bars, cafés, classrooms, conferences, corridors, kitchens, libraries and street corners with a huge number of people (not all of them working in relevance theory). I would particularly like to thank Nick Allott, Diane Blakemore, Regina Blass, Richard Breheny, Noel Burton-Roberts, Robyn Carston, Annabel Cormack, Alan Durant, Nigel Fabb, Charles Forceville, Thorstein Fretheim, Anne Furlong, Lorna Gibb, Marjolein Groefsema, Liliane Haegeman, Jonathan Hope, Jill House, Elly Ifantidou, Reiko Itani, Corinne Iten, Mark Jary, Katarzyna Jaszczolt, Napoleon Katsos, David Keeble, Ruth Kempson, Patricia Kolaiti, Geoff Lindsey, Barbara MacMahon, Tomoko Matsui, Jacques Moeschler, Steve Nicolle, Eun-Ju Noh, Ira Noveck, Nicky Owtram, Anna Papafragou, Adrian Pilkington, Alyson Pitts, George Powell, Anne Reboul, Xose Rosales Sequeiros, Villy Rouchota, Kate Scott, Sylvia Shaw, Neil Smith, Hanna Stöver, Naoko Togame, Christoph Unger, Rosa Vega Moreno, Begoña Vicente, Tim Wharton, Beata Zacharska, Mai Zaki and Vlad Zegarac. I am, of course, grateful to students in many institutions who have helped me to understand the topics discussed here and how to explain them to others, and I am particularly grateful to students who studied meaning with me from 2010 to 2012 and who used and commented on early versions of some of the chapters here. Helen Barton, Liz Davey, Jill Lake and colleagues at Cambridge University Press have been patient, positive and a pleasure to work with throughout the time it took to produce the book. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the Department of English, Languages and Philosophy at Middlesex University, which granted me a period of leave in which to work on the book, and the British Library (and the people in it) for providing a friendly environment to work in. Finally, I'd like to thank Ohna, Apoa and Kiloh for all kinds of support and for putting up with the dysfunctional communicator who shared their living space while he worked on a book about how communication works (and sometimes doesn't).

Typographical conventions

There are a number of typographical conventions used during the book, some of which are standard conventions and some of which I have adopted just for this book. Here are the ones I think you may not already be aware of.

bold text	technical terms
<i>italics</i>	linguistic expressions / wordforms
{CURLY BRACKETS AND SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS}	concepts
SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS	concepts (i.e. brackets are sometimes omitted for simplicity)
{CURLY BRACKETS AND SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS}*	‘adjusted’, or ‘ad hoc’, concepts (see Chapter 8) (asterisk indicates adjustment)
{CURLY BRACKETS AND SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS}**	distinct ‘adjusted’, or ‘ad hoc’, concepts (an extra asterisk is added for each adjustment)
SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS*	‘adjusted’, or ‘ad hoc’, concepts with brackets omitted for simplicity
‘inverted commas’	interpretations
[_____] blank slots in square brackets with text beneath	representations of inferences to be made (with linguistically encoded guidance as to how to fill the slot shown beneath it)
[text in square brackets]	material which has been inferred in fleshing out semantic representations to derive explicatures

To sum up and partly illustrate this, linguistic forms are represented *in italics*, concepts in {CURLY BRACKETS AND SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS}, interpretations in ‘single quotation marks’. For example, we might say that the linguistic form (or word) *music* names the concept {MUSIC} and that someone who utters it in a specific context might mean to communicate that ‘listening to music is one of my hobbies’.