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Text, Context and the Theory of Relevance

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Abstract

A boy is cheering up his friend who is upset. He asks, “*Would you like to have some coffee?*” The friend answers, “*I don’t know.*” In response, the boy buys two coffees.

The conversation shows how an utterance under-determines thoughts as what is uttered is small as compared to the gamut of thoughts generated in the speaker’s mind. The friend’s answer might sound distant and irrelevant at the surface level, but expresses his true state of mind. The boy comprehends the thoughts in the rightful way and acts to the satisfaction of his friend. The desired conversational goal is achieved as interlocutors understood the relevance of the discourse in a shared socio-cultural background.

The article researches the communicative principle of relevance.

Introduction

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s **Theory of Relevance** takes departure from Gricean Principle of Cooperation to support the idea that to understand an utterance is to prove its relevance. In a given socio-cultural background, a speaker’s **communicative intent** is transmitted to the hearer and the hearer infers the speaker’s intention by combining the utterance with its **context-mediated information**. The interpreter of the conversation decides the relevance of the speaker’s utterance based on their shared socio-cultural background. Sperber and Wilson call it the **cognitive environment** which plays a vital role in understanding the connection between utterances thus reducing the level of ambiguity of the speech situation. The **context** or the cognitive environment becomes the missing link in interpreting and proving the relevance of a piece of conversational **implicature**. The article explores on the communicative principle of the Theory of Relevance. Literary examples have been taken from Arvind Adiga’s Man Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger*.

Understanding Relevance

The primary aim of human conversation is to communicate. This not only includes speaking and being spoken to but also to reach out to the layers meanings intended in the utterances. If analyzed in the light of the Gricean Principle of Cooperation, interlocutors observe, flout or violate the maxims of cooperation while intending to or interpreting one another. On the contrary, according to Sperber and Wilson, the principle of Relevance ‘applies without exceptions, so that it is not a question of communicators following, violating or flouting the principle.’ (Cutting, 2002:41)

It is innate to humans to work towards proving maximum relevance of speech in any given speech situation. Sperber and Wilson (1995) reduced all maxims to the maxim of relation since they believed relevance to be a natural feature of all exchanges.

To understand the communicative principle of relevance, some fundamental concepts of Pragmatics such as implicature, explicature, text *or* the Context Mediated Information and context *or* the Cognitive Environment ought to be revisited.

Implicature

According to Paul Grice, implicature is meaning versus speaker meaning or what said as compared to what is intended.

Implicature is all about the conversational meaning which is understood beyond the conventional meaning of an utterance.

Eg: *If I were you, I would have visited a doctor at the earliest.*

Implicature: A polite suggestion has been made by the speaker where he wants the hearer to understand the urgency of seeing a doctor.

Explicature

Sperber and Wilson shifted their focus to the notion of explicature unlike delimiting only to the concept of implicature. An explicature serves to complete the linguistically given incomplete logical forms of the sentence by selecting a particular interpretation depending on context.

An explicature helps the interpreter judge the utterance in context and derive the real intent of the speaker in the given surroundings. By facilitating a context based implicature, an explicature reduces the level of ambiguity in the utterance.

Eg: *"It was a beautiful movie," he said, when I asked my friend about how he spent his day.*

Explicature: The friend had enjoyed the day by watching a movie and was happy.

Text

In Pragmatic terms text is understood as any piece of a language unit with a definable communicative function. Sperber and Wilson call it the **context mediated information** as the speaker's utterance or the text is best interpreted when it is judged in a relevant situation.

As text alone cannot suffice for the communicative function of language, it becomes essential to bring in the concept of context to the foreground.

Context

In technical terms, the communicative surroundings where language takes place is referred to as the context. Sperber and Wilson call it the **Cognitive Environment** as the interlocutors involved in a conversation decide the relevance of the utterances based on their shared socio-cultural background and knowledge of the world.

The Communicative Principle of Relevance

The Theory of Relevance is established when the interpreter decides the relevance of an utterance judging it collectively from its explicature, the context mediated information or the text and the cognitive environment or the context.

It is fascinating to see how the Theory of Relevance works in the select fictional discourses.

Example 1

‘Sir, there has been a trouble.’ ...

‘What kind of trouble?’

There was a silence, then he said, ‘I was taking the girls home, when we hit a boy on a bicycle. He’s dead, sir.’

‘Call the police at once,’ I said.

‘But sir – I am at fault, I hit him sir.’

‘That’s exactly why you will call the police.’

(The White Tiger, 2008:306)

The conversation took place between Balram and one of his cab drivers. Protagonist Balram who has become an entrepreneur of a car rental service was seen pacifying one of his employees. A cycle rider had been run over by the cab driver. As he informed Balram about it, Balram reacted in a rather unexpected manner. Despite the cab driver being at fault, Balram insisted on calling the police. He was resolute as the cab driver protested. In this piece of discourse, it can be seen that Balram flouted the Relation as well as the Manner maxims. Balram flouted the maxim of Relation as he did not give a straight answer. He did not observe the maxim of Manner as he chose to be secretive about his future plan of action. However, at a deeper level, Balram’s response is relevant to the context as he judged the situation from its explicature that the damage had been done and there was no escape from the scenario but to handle it with tact. He understood the severity of the matter from the driver’s narrative and this context mediated information enabled him to decide his future course of action. The relevance of his speech outdid the impulsiveness of the cab driver.

Example 2

Two nights ago – after he finished his milk, I asked him ‘Don’t you ever think of your mother?’

Not a word.

‘Your father?’

He smiled at me and then he said, ‘Give me another glass of milk, won’t you, uncle?’

I got up. He added, ‘And a glass of ice cream too.’

‘Ice cream is for Sundays, Dharam, I said.

‘No, it’s for today.’

And he smiled at me.

(The White Tiger, 2008:315)

Another conversation from the same novel reveals how an utterance under-determines thoughts. Dharam, Balram’s nephew was his only surviving relative and also his confidante. Dharam knew how his uncle had murdered and robbed his master Mr. Ashok in the past. Dharam had been with him since the days when Balram used to be Mr. Ashok’s driver to the day when Balram had started a new life in the city of Bangalore. Once in an easy talk, Balram asked Dharam if he ever missed his parents. In an indifferent response, Dharam asked Balram for another glass of milk and an ice-cream. The explicature derived from the conversation indicates Dharam’s smart judgment of the situation as well as his uncle’s compulsion to obey him. At a surface level he did flout the maxim of Relation as his reply sounded too far-fetched but in a shared cognitive environment, the text exchanged between the two interlocutors did explain the relevance of the

utterance. It was a Dharam's tact of reassuring his strong hold on his uncle there by securing his own future.

Conclusion

Evolving from the Gricean Principle of Cooperation, Sperber and Wilson's **Theory of Relevance** supports the idea that it is not a question of communicators following, violating or flouting the maxims of cooperation but the relevance of an utterance depends largely on its logical linguistic form and the context mediated information that is derived from it within a set cognitive environment. The present paper is an attempt at analyzing fictional discourses in the light of the Theory of Relevance. The present study also facilitates the scope of exploring the Relevance Theory in other genres of literature.

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