# Communication, Information, and Relevance*

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ABSTRACT

Relevance theory has been developed as a general model for explaining the cognitive mechanisms underlying human verbal communication. As all theories, Relevance has been built up on several initial hypotheses. In this paper, it will be argued that if Relevance theory intends to be a theory of linguistic performance, what is one of the most characteristic hypotheses of Relevance theory, i.e., the *'communicative hypothesis'*, should be weakened because of the existence of noncommunicative uses of language. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to work out the consequences that a weakened communicative hypothesis would have on the *'principle of relevance'*, and on pragmatic theories in general. In this paper, then, it will be maintained that the 'principle of relevance' cannot be the only principle governing human linguistic performance, at least if its formulation is not changed.

## 1. The 'communicative hypothesis' and the 'principle of relevance'

It is very usual to think of language as a tool to convey one person's ideas to other human beings. That is, all of us have the capacity to communicate *intentionally* ideas to anyone who shares our language. Moreover, it is easy to show that human beings cannot acquire a specific language unless we have been immersed in communicative situations.

From these, very simple observations, it may be concluded that to communicate something is the *usual* goal of language use, and that communication is an *important* pillar of language. These conclusions constitute what will be dubbed *'the weak communicative hypothesis'*. In some sense, the weak communicative hypothesis is commonsensical. Let us,

however, introduce some technical terminology, so that this hypothesis may be stated as follows:

> *The weak communicative hypothesis (first version)*
> Usually, the speaker uses the language because he or she has the intention to communicate a set of assumptions {I}.

The set of assumptions {I} referred to in (1) stands for the huge set of beliefs held, in this case, by the speaker.[1] In Sperber and Wilson's words, "by *assumptions*, we mean thoughts treated by the individual as representations of the actual world" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 2).

This hypothesis may be strengthened in order that , it may be claimed, *all* uses of language are communicative, and that communication is the *only* pillar of language. Let us refer to this last hypothesis as '*the strong communicative hypothesis*', which may be defined as follows:

> *The strong communicative hypothesis (first version)*
> When the speaker uses the language, he or she always has the intention of communicating a set of assumptions {I}.

A brief history of this hypothesis is drawn in Sánchez de Zavala (1990). Sánchez de Zavala pointed out that speech act theory, Grice's theory of conversation, and the 'new Prague School' adopt this hypothesis in a more or less explicit way. Moreover, discourse representation theory (DRT), and similar theories like Heim's File Change Semantics and semantics based on dynamic logic, embrace the strong communicative hypothesis too.

As most pragmatic theories do, Relevance theory holds the strong communicative hypothesis. Verbal communication, according to Relevance theory, consists of making clear a set of speaker's intentions.[2] That is, an utterance automatically reflects two different speakers' intentions: the intention to convey a piece of information, which is called the '*informative intention*' and the intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention, which is the '*communicative intention*' proper.

Then, when a speaker utters a sentence, he puts forward his intention to modify the cognitive environment of the audience. In Sperber and Wilson words, "[a]s speakers, we intend our hearers to recognise our intention to inform them of some state of affairs" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 23).

Now, Relevance theory goes one step further by making a claim on the cognitive structure of human beings. According to Relevance theory, we all, due to the psychological mechanisms we are endowed with, process information efficiently. This means that the processing system makes a balance between the *effects* that the process produces and the *efforts* that making the process cost.

In verbal communication, when the benefits of the effects that a sentence produces in a context[3] makes the efforts worthwhile, the information processed is relevant.[4] Now,

Relevance theory claims, the utterance of a sentence is an act of ostension, and as such, it comes with a guarantee of relevance. This is, then, the principle of relevance:

> *Principle of relevance*
> Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.
> (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 158)

In turn, the presumption of optimal relevance is defined as follows:

> *Presumption of optimal relevance*
> The set of assumptions {*I*} which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.
>
> The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate {*I*}.
> (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 158)

The *principle of relevance* predicts that the speaker is trying to convey as much information as possible because only then is the audience able to process the speaker's utterances. Obviously, communication can fail. This may happen when the information conveyed is still known to the audience, or when the speaker wrongly calculates the addressee's mental state.[5] But, Sperber and Wilson claim, the speaker is still trying to be relevant. In fact, "[the principle of relevance] is not something that they [people] obey or might disobey; it is an exceptionless generalisation about human communicative behaviour" (Wilson & Sperber, 1988: 140)

Now, it is clear that the principle of relevance depends on the strong communicative hypothesis. Moreover, by Sperber and Wilson's definition of communication, it follows that an utterance has to be as informative as possible in the context where it has been uttered.[6] Therefore, thanks to the principle of relevance, the addressee may recover the speaker's meaning of an utterance.

However, it will be argued in this paper that the strong communicative hypothesis not only is not commonsensical,[7] but is incomplete (if it is intended to cover all types of linguistic performance).[8] That is, the main aim of this paper is to show that the step from the weak to the strong communicative hypothesis is not licit, at least if the term *'communication'* is to maintain some theoretical interest. This will be shown in section 2, where some examples of noncommunicative uses of language will be offered.

The second main aim of this paper is to uncover the consequences that giving up the strong communicative hypothesis has for Relevance theory, and on pragmatic theories in general. Then, section 3 is devoted to the analysis of the role that the principles postulated by different pragmatic theories play in the explanation of linguistic performance.

   Finally, some conclusions concerning the nature of pragmatic theories will be drawn in section 4. Now, the communicative and informative import of different language uses has to be discussed.


## 2. Are there noncommunicative or non informative uses of language?

It is sufficient to pay some attention to everyday life to recognise that even when we rest in silence, we are talking to ourselves. This inner speech accompanies us regularly. It is, then, quite evident, that inner speech is not *communicating* anything. It may be objected, however, that when using inner speech, we are acting as if we were communicating facts to ourselves. Certainly, it is possible to imagine such a duplicity in our minds. But, the applicability of the basic insights of Relevance theory to this new situation is troublesome. In fact, it should be assumed that we have to keep our own attention, that we have to convey relevant information to ourselves, etc. In sum, the proposals of Relevance theory cannot adequately be adapted to inner speech.

   A second case of non-communicative use of language is when the speaker addresses no one. That is, soliloquy is a frequent human linguistic activity, even though it is not communicative in any clear sense.[9] It is very possible, for example, to speak aloud when we are alone just because the situation we are in makes us feel fear or happiness or it triggers any other emotion.

   Similarly, all cases of linguistically 'letting off steam' can hardly be taken as communicative even though, in this case, an audience may be present. One case at hand is when we feel guilty for some harmful situation, and, finally, we 'explode' and begin to speak. The words uttered in these situations are, probably, not directed to the audience, if there is one, and many none the less, are intended to convey as much information as possible.

   In other cases, it is usual to speak to pets or things even though the speaker knows that they will not understand our words. Again, the informative content of the words uttered does not play the central role of linguistic performance. In some sense, it may be said that in all these examples, the *linguistic activity* is more important than the *informative content*.

   This is, in fact, what happens in an example mentioned by Sperber and Wilson themselves. It is the case of filibusterers (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 159). When filibusterers speak, they do not primarily intend to convey information, even though in fact they do. On the contrary, they just intend to 'lose time' for delaying their trials. Then, Sperber and Wilson say: "All the usual features of verbal communication are present and even salient, but for one: *there is no attempt at optimal relevance.*" (my emphasis) (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 159).

   Sperber and Wilson take the case of filibusterers as *rare*. But here, it is being shown that this is not as isolated a case as they pretend it to be. If this is true, it is not possible to ignore all these cases. At this point, however, it may be argued that all the cases offered in this

section are, after all, cases of communication, even though they are not *genuine* cases of communication.

Communication, in Sperber and Wilson's sense, is an intentional change of the cognitive environment of the audience. Certainly, any sentence contains an informational content, even filibusterers'. But, from this fact it does not follow that the speaker who utters a sentence *always* intends to convey its informative content. Then, two types of communication may be distinguished:

> *Genuine communication*
>> In genuine communication, the speaker has primarily the intention to make manifest to the addressee a set of assumptions {I}.

> *Non-genuine communication*
>> In non-genuine communication, the speaker makes manifest to the addressee a. set of assumptions {I}, but his or her primary intention is not to do it, or s/he has not any communicative intention at all.[10]

Note that non-genuine types of communication are different from communicative uses of language in which the speaker tries to hide information. When the speaker's aim is to hide information, it may be said that she acts *as if* she were trying to be relevant. On the contrary, in the non-genuine cases of communication, the speaker is not trying to be relevant at all.

According to (6), then, all the examples posed up to this point in this section may be understood as non-genuine cases of communication. Now, the weak and the strong communicative hypotheses may be re-stated as follows:

> *The weak communicative hypothesis (second version)*
>> All uses of language are communicative, even though they constitute a genuine or a non-genuine case of communication.

> *The strong communicative hypothesis (second version)*
>> All uses of language are cases of genuine communication.

This second version of the strong communicative hypothesis is clearly false. Therefore, any theory of linguistic performance should adopt the weak communicative hypothesis as defined in (7).

To sum up, in this section it has been shown that there are uses of language which are cases of non-genuine communication, and that these cases are less rare than it may be thought. Therefore, the strong communicative hypothesis has to be rejected.

Now, as has been said, the principle of relevance seems to imply the strong communicative hypothesis. In the next section, then, whether the principle of relevance can be adapted to the weak communicative hypothesis, as defined in (7) has to be analysed.

## 3. Is the 'principle of relevance' applicable to non-genuine communicative uses of language?

The main conclusion of the last section was that language use cannot be reduced to genuine verbal communication. The immediate consequence is that if a theory able to cover *all* verbal communication is looked for, Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance has to be somehow changed.

At first glance, two possibilities arise. First, Relevance theory may be kept to explain genuine communicative uses of language. This means that an independent theory for the non-genuine communicative uses of language should be developed. In this case, there would be two different theories of linguistic performance: a theory for acts of ostensive communication and a theory for non-genuine communication activities. Whereas the former theory could be established using the parameters of Relevance theory, the latter should be built up with new and completely different tools.

From a purely theoretical point of view, however, having a unified theory of linguistic performance is preferable.[11]

Alternatively, the principle of relevance may be weakened to enable the principle to explain all cases of communication. How can this move be made? There are two places where the principle of relevance makes a universal or extreme claim. The first one is when the principle says that "*every* act of ostensive communication" indicates its own optimal relevance.[12] The second one lies in the concept of '*optimal* relevance' itself.

Therefore, there are two ways of weakening the principle of relevance. The first could be stated as follows:

> *Weakened principle of Relevance (I)*
> Every act of communication (either genuine or non-genuine) conveys a set of assumptions {I}. If communication is genuine, it communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.

However, (9) is just the first possibility analysed at the beginning of this section. That is, (9), if correct, is a principle for genuine communication; non-genuine communication rests unexplained. This means that a new, different principle should be proposed for the cases in which the presumption of optimal relevance fails. In other words, (9) means that the (weakened) principle of relevance is not the only principle governing language use.

There is still an alternative. The concept of 'optimal relevance' has, in this case, to be weakened. Then, the principle of relevance would be stated as follows:

> *Weakened principle of relevance (II)*
> Every act of ostensive communication conveys the presumption of its own relevance.

Unfortunately, a principle like (10) cannot work. The problem is that once the idea of 'optimality' has disappeared, there is no way of deriving the actual interpretation that the speaker has intended to convey to the audience. Remember that the principle of relevance is supposed to fill the gap between the linguistic meaning and the speaker's meaning. In Relevance theory, it is assumed that the addressee is able to grasp the most relevant interpretation of an utterance, and, in fact, the addressee will assume that the most relevant interpretation coincides with the speaker's meaning of the utterance just because the utterance communicates the presumption of its *optimal* relevance.

To sum up, the principle of relevance is not applicable to non-genuine communicative uses of language. Therefore, there are two possible types of theories of linguistic activity. First, a theory that defines more than one principle governing linguistic activity. Second, a theory that postulates only one principle, a principle able to embrace both genuine and non-genuine communicative uses of language.

## 4. Conclusions

Relevance theory adopts the 'strong communicative hypothesis', which states that all uses of language are communicative. This assumption, plus a set of claims about human cognition, leads to the definition of the 'principle of relevance'. That is, all utterances carry a guarantee of optimal relevance so that the contextual effects produced by an utterance make its processing worthwhile.

The main aim of this paper has been to argue for the existence of different uses of language that cannot be inserted in this picture. In particular, some non-communicative uses of language such as inner speech, soliloquy and the cases of talking to pets or things have been pointed out. In all these cases, there is no audience, and these uses of language can hardly be considered as communicative. Obviously, in these cases, the speaker does not need to gain the audience's attention, and so, he does not have to be relevant.

There are other cases in which, even though there is an audience, it is not possible to say that the speaker has to convey *relevant* information. Something like this occurs with filibusterers, who speak constantly regardless of what they are saying. Contrary to Sperber and Wilson, the filibusterers' case cannot be taken as an isolated, exotic case. On the contrary, it may be extended to cases where people use language for aesthetic pleasure or just for fun.

All these cases militate against the strong communicative hypothesis. So, it has been claimed here, only the weak communicative hypothesis is valid. But this means that, contrary to Sperber and Wilson's claim, the principle of relevance cannot be the only principle governing language use. Nevertheless, what other principles governing language use look like should be the topic of future investigations.

**Notes**

1. It follows from Sperber and Wilson's comments that the set of assumptions {I} is stored in propositional format. This point has profound consequences for the inferential model that underlies the interpretation process. However, this topic will not be discussed here.

2. Moreover, Sperber and Wilson claim that communication is an inferential process. The inferential model of communication raises a lot of thorny questions. For instance, 'the mutual knowledge problem', the nature of the inferential device that works out conclusions, etc. All these problems lie, however, outside the scope of this paper.

3. An utterance produces effects only when it is merged with a context. In fact, the interpretation task makes use of two different sets of assumptions: (a) the sentence uttered, and (b) a subset of the assumptions contained in the addressee's encyclopaedic knowledge. The selection of this subset is crucial for the final interpretation of an utterance. As it will be shown later, this selection is done by 'the principle of relevance'.

4. The measurement of relevance is one of the most debatable topics in Relevance theory. But this question lies beyond this paper.

5. For example, a person may say *'Your brother has gone'* to an addressee who already knows this information. Nonetheless, the speaker has tried to be relevant. A different case results when the speaker says *'Mary Louise has gone to the zoo'* to somebody who does not know who Mary Louise is. The utterance is not relevant to the addressee because the speaker has wrongly believed that the addressee knew who Mary Louise was.

6. There is a slightly different understanding of the principle of relevance in Sperber and Wilson (1988). Even though the quote just mentioned is quite conclusive, Wilson and Sperber (1988:141) also argue that: "However, speakers have their own legitimate aims, and as a result may choose to offer some other information which is less than maximally relevant. Even so, to be worth the hearer's attention, this information must yield at least adequate effects, and the speaker manifestly intends the hearer to assume that this is so".

7. Certainly, very naive conceptions of language adopt the strong communicative hypothesis. Saint Agustin, as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* reports, thought of language as a system where sounds stood for things so that those sounds could express the speaker's desires. However, if more complex cases of language use are examined, the alleged communicative purpose of every utterance should be questioned.

8. It is worth stressing that the strong communicative hypothesis is a universal claim. As such, it cannot be verified, but falsified. This is why, in this paper, possible counter-examples to the strong communicative hypothesis will be discussed.

9. In particular, this is a frequent situation in childhood, as children's egocentric (or self-directed) speech shows.

10. The latter is the case , for example, when the speaker conveys information through nonverbal channels, like unconscious gestures of hands or head.

11. This methodological point does not close the doors to this first possibility. In fact, linguistic performance is such a complex activity that it is plausible for a theory to be forced to postulate more than one principle.

12. In fact, Sperber and Wilson's concept of 'ostensive communication' implies the communicator's communicative intention, leaving aside the cases mentioned in this paper. Therefore, a new way of weakening the principle of relevance is to revise their concept of ostensive communication.

## Works cited

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