Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses 11 (1998): 157-169

Is Relevance Theory Asocial?

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the view that Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory is intrinsically asocial. To this effect, it is firstly shown how Relevance Theory provides a more satisfactory explanation of the 'politeness' of imperative sentences than Brown & Levinson's treatment. Secondly' supposed examples of the theory's inability to explain socially motivated instances of language use presented by O'Neill are examined and shown to be well within its explanatory power. Finally, a more general argument is presented. Recent insights from evolutionary psychology are drawn on in order to demonstrate how Sperber & Wilson's account of the way humans interpret utterances is able to accommodate a social dimension.

1. Introduction

Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) is asocial. Or so some authors (Mey and Talbot, 1988; O'Neill, 1988-89; Talbot, 1993) would have us believe. There are two ways this assertion can be taken. One might take it as a criticism of Sperber & Wilson's book *Relevance*, in which scant attention is paid to issues of sociolinguistic nature. Alternatively, one might take it to mean that the theory itself can neither accommodate nor shed light on such issues. On the first reading, the assertion is irrefutable; on the second, however, there is much that can be said, some of which I want to say in this paper.

The distaste the authors referred to above have for RT stems from what they see as its "cognitivist" or "propositional" nature (O'Neill, 1988-89:243) and what they claim to be its characterisation of humans as "information processors" (Talbot, 1993:3525). Now humans certainly are information processors, among other things, and viewing them as such does

- a relevance theorist would argue - shed light on how they communicate. But this is not to deny that they are also social beings (though the claim that they are social beings does, as far as I can see, entail the claim that they are also information processors). Thus rather than simply dismissing RT, the sociolinguistically oriented critic should ask whether the RT view of humans as efficient information processors - and the detail in which Sperber & Wilson expand on and defend this view - can assist in the search for answers to what have traditionally been thought of as sociolinguistic problems.

In an attempt to at least start trying to answer this question, I argue (in Jary, 1998) that RT offers a far richer and more finely grained picture of linguistic politeness and polite verbal behaviour than the competing Gricean norm-based account proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987, henceforth B&L). I show how viewing communication in RT terms - i.e. as the result of ostensive acts designed to modify the mutual cognitive environment of the communicators - allows us to distinguish those cases where politeness is communicated from those where so-called polite behaviour is motivated by other aims - aims which become clear once the RT view of communication is accepted. On this view, polite behaviour is motivated by the desire not to forego longer term aims, such as the maintenance or raising of status within a group, simply to fulfil the short term aim of communication. The strategic use of polite forms/strategies is then seen as an exploitation of expectations resulting from this primary motivation. I must therefore disagree with O'Neill's claim that:

> This 'propositional' view of relevance ignores, and in consequence has difficulty in accounting for, the kinds of phenomenon [sic] highlighted by more sociolinguistically oriented linguistic theory - for example, the use of language in maintaining and strengthening social relations and in the exercise of power, and the social constraints on language use that come under the misleading label of 'politeness' (1988-89:243).

In this paper I offer further evidence against this position by looking more closely at B&L's characterisation of the use of imperative sentences as examples of bald on-record politeness. I then discuss four cases which O'Neill proposes as evidence against RT's ability to account for or illuminate certain types of language use. The observations I make and the arguments I present in these two sections provide the basis for some more general comments about the ability of RT to accommodate a social dimension.

2. The politeness of imperatives

For B&L (1987:95), imperatives are "clear examples of bald-on-record usage"; that is, the use of imperatives is a case of communication without any attempt to satisfy the hearer's face, though, B&L stress, this may only be apparent and in some cases the speaker may minimise face-threats by implication if he performs a seemingly face-threatening act baldly on-record. Moreover, according to B&L, imperatives are often used to supply metaphoric urgency to a request.

These claims, which will be discussed more fully below, are forced on B&L by their adherence to a speech act based view of communication which sees linguistic forms as specified for the performance of certain speech acts (see B&L 1987: 10 where they express regrets at having relied so heavily on this theoretical approach). On this view, imperatives are specified for performing directive speech acts, and such acts are intrinsically face-threatening on the B&L approach because they challenge the hearers negative face, i.e. his want that his actions be unimpeded by others.

Contrast this with the RT account of imperatives put forward by Wilson & Sperber (1988a & b) and developed by Clark (1991, 1993a & b). Here, the imperative is not specified for performing any particular act other than that of describing a state of affairs which although non-actual is both potential and desirable. It is potential in that it is compatible with all the speaker's assumptions about the actual world, while to whom this state of affairs is desirable is left unspecified by the semantics of imperative sentences and determined pragmatically by the combination of contextual features and considerations of relevance. This allows Wilson & Sperber to divide uses of the imperative into two types: those where the state of affairs is desirable to the speaker, such as orders and pleas; and those where it is desirable to the hearer, such as permission and advice. In doing so, they are able to account for a wide range of imperative usage while maintaining a unitary semantics.

In this section, I want to re-examine B&L's analysis of imperatives from a relevance-theoretic perspective. In particular, I want to demonstrate how the RT account of imperatives outlined above can better explain the range of situations in which imperatives are appropriately employed.

B&L argue that bald-on-record strategies will be employed either because face is ignored or irrelevant and hence there is no need to minimise face-threat; or because "by doing the FTA baldly on record, S minimizes face threats by implication" (1987:95). The first of these is illustrated with cases in which maximum efficiency is paramount and to use an alternative form would decrease the urgency conveyed, as exemplified by (1) and (2):

(1) Help! [B&L's (1)]
(2) Watch out! [B&L's (2)]
(1987:96)

That (1) and (2) convey a sense of urgency is not in doubt; the question is whether this is a result the use of an imperative sentence or of other considerations such as the fact that they are shouted, or that certain encyclopaedic information is made accessible by the lexical items used (e.g. 'people shout "Help" when in danger'). The latter seems the most likely case for other imperatives do not necessarily convey any sense of urgency. Consider (3), for example, which might be found on a packaging box:

(3) Open other end.

But if urgency is not automatically conveyed by imperatives, this makes it difficult to agree with B&L that the following are examples of speaking "*as if* maximum efficiency were very important [to provide] metaphorical urgency for emphasis" (1987:96, original emphasis).

Conversational attention-getters:
(4) Listen, I've got an idea. [B&L's (7)]
(5) Hear me out:... [B&L's (8)]

Begging:
(6) Give money. [B&L's (11)]

Formulaic entreaties:
(7) Forgive me. [B&L's (12)]
(8) Excuse me. [B&L's (12)]
(9) Accept my thanks. [B&L's (13)]

Metaphorical entreaties:
(10) Send me a postcard. [B&L's (15)]
(11) Don't forget us! [B&L's (16)]
(1987:96-7)

As B&L themselves note (1987:96, fn. 29), claiming that these are metaphorical uses of the imperative opens up the possibility of any counter-example to their model being described as such. Their response is to await a sophisticated theory of metaphor which they can incorporate into their model to account for these cases. However, on the RT account outlined here, there is no need to posit metaphoric use in the first place, for it is easily able to explain (4) to (11). In all cases, the speaker, by uttering the imperative sentence, makes mutually manifest her belief that the state of affairs described by the imperative sentence is both potential and desirable, and contextual factors and considerations of relevance guide the hearer to an interpretation in which the state of affairs is desirable to the speaker. However, in communicating her desire in this way she necessarily makes mutually manifest her belief that her desire is relevant to her hearer,[1] for this premise must be supplied if the hearer is to arrive at the intended interpretation. This is because every ostensive act communicates the presumption that the communicator believes her message is relevant to the addressee. Desirable-to-the-speaker instances of utterances of imperative sentences therefore make mutually manifest (a) the speaker's assumption that a certain state of affairs is desirable to her; (b) her belief that this information regarding her desires is relevant to her audience. It is this, I want to argue, that is the key to understanding the circumstances under which it is appropriate to employ an imperative in an attempt to get someone to perform a certain act. That is, it is appropriate to employ an imperative with a 'desirable-to-the-speaker' interpretation only if the speaker's desire is relevant to her hearer. Thus the conversational attention-getters (4) and (5) are appropriate among peers only if the conversational contribution that follows is a pertinent one, for this justifies the speaker's belief that her desire to be heard is relevant to her audience. In the case of begging (6), the speaker's desire that the hearer give him money is assumed to be relevant to the hearer, for if it is not then the hearer is, by implication, a cold-hearted individual who has no concern for the suffering of his fellow humans. The formulaic entreaties illustrated by (7) and (8) all perform acts which threaten the speaker's face: a request for forgiveness; an apology; and an expression of gratitude. These must all follow some prior act, either by the speaker to the detriment of the hearer (forgiveness and apology) or by the hearer in the speaker's favour. The speaker's belief that her desire that *p* is relevant to her hearer is thus justified by the fact that these desires are all in his favour as they either redress face-damage or acknowledge generosity. Lastly, metaphorical entreaties make manifest the speaker's desire that the hearer perform an act which she would only sincerely ask him to perform if she felt affection for him.[2] Thus again, her desire that *p* is relevant to him.

Of course, another situation where a speaker's desires are relevant to her hearer is when she has a power advantage over him. Indeed, it is this association with power that has probably earned the imperative its reputation as an impolite form. Scollon & Scollon (1983) note how, in broad terms, the strategies of verbal communication used by a superior in an asymmetrical power relationship are also those favoured by participants who emphasise solidarity, rather than deference, in symmetrical power relationships. Indeed, they re-label B&L's positive and negative politeness 'solidarity' and 'deference' politeness respectively, and include bald-on-record use as a feature of solidarity politeness (though perhaps 'softened' by the use of in-group identity markers). To see why imperatives are appropriate in such settings, recall that to direct one's verbal behaviour at reinforcing the hearer's positive face is to address his "perennial desire that his wants [...] should be thought of as desirable" (B&L, 1987:101). Thus a solidarity politeness system is one in which the desires of one participant are extremely relevant to others and, on the present account, it is therefore no surprise that imperative use is a feature of such a system: utterances of imperative sentences are the optimum way of making one's desires concerning one's hearer's actions manifest to him.

Wilson & Sperber's account also sheds light on B&L's second group of imperative usage: cases where face concerns are not overridden by other factors - as B&L claim for the previously discussed group of examples - but where doing the FTA is itself polite. B&L list three broad areas where one would expect to find such usage:

> (i) welcomings (or post-greetings), where S insist that H may impose on his negative face; (ii) farewells, where S insists that H may transgress on his positive face by taking his leave; (iii) offers, where S insists that H may impose on S's negative face. (1987:99)

The idea here is that in such cases "it is reasonable for S to assume that H will be especially preoccupied with H's potential infringements of S's preserve". In such a case, it is argued, the speaker can do the FTA with impunity, for in doing so she "alleviate[s] H's anxieties by pre-emptively inviting H to impinge on S's negative face" (B&L, 1987:99). The claim is, then, that contextual features can make a potential FTA non-face threatening. That is, imperatives, as clear examples of bald on record usage, are acceptable in cases where the act is in the hearer's favour, thus making no face redress necessary.

This analysis poses fewer problems than B&L's earlier claim that imperatives are often used metaphorically. However, the RT account is still able to deal with such cases elegantly. What the scenarios presented by B&L have in common is that the speaker can be reasonably certain that the hearer finds a certain state of affairs desirable. Perhaps he has just knocked on her door, prompting her to utter (12):

(12) Come in.

Here, the knock on the door makes it mutually manifest that it is desirable to the person outside the room (i.e. the knocker) that he enter the room. The speaker's utterance of (12) in response to this knock makes it mutually manifest that this is also her desire and achieves relevance in this way. Notice how the appropriacy of the use of the imperative form is still determined by the fact that the speaker believes that her desire that *p* is relevant to her hearer.[3] Thus this single consideration is able to explain the politeness of utterances of imperatives across the whole range of cases discussed by B&L. Moreover, it is able to do so without positing the 'metaphoric' use of a sentence type and without having to divide uses of the imperative into cases where the face-threatening potential is ignored and cases where the act is in the hearer's favour.

What this analysis shows is that RT has no difficulty in accounting for "the social constraints on language use that come under the misleading label of 'politeness'" (O'Neill, 1988-89:243). Rather, it is able to show how factors such as considerations of the power relation between individuals or the mutually manifest assumptions that characterise the type of social group they belong to are brought to bear on the interpretation process, and in doing so it demonstrates the theory's potential to greatly improve our understanding of how sociocultural factors interplay with the choice of linguistic form and pragmatic strategy to produce appropriate language use.

3. O'Neill's counter-examples

In his paper, O'Neill (1988-89) presents four classes of language use that he sees as beyond the ability of RT to account for. I want to take a close look at each of these in this section, mainly because they betray a misunderstanding of the theory that appears to be common to those who criticise RT for its lack of a social dimension. Those who accuse RT of being "propositional", such as O'Neill, seem to take the theory to be claiming that communication consists in the production reception and storage of propositions in the form of assumptions and the linguistic forms that represent them. But this is simply not the case. Sperber & Wilson stress throughout *Relevance* that linguistic communication is a form of ostensive-inferential communication in which the communicator produces an ostensive stimulus which, in combination with considerations of relevance, guides the addressee in the inferential processes of determining the communicator's intended message. It is therefore essential to any meaningful appreciation of the theory that utterances of linguistic forms are seen not simply as representations of the speaker's message, but rather as stimuli designed to guide inference. As such, utterances of sentences with the same propositional form can be used by the same speaker to communicate different things at different times, either to the same audience or to a different audience. This is crucial to the following response to O'Neill's counter-examples.

The four classes of counter-example that O'Neill (1988-89:257) presents are as follows:

(A) The maintenance of social relations: The essential point here is that the proposition expressed by an utterance might already be "manifest to both speaker and hearer". The example O'Neill gives is of one friend saying to another:

(13) You've shaved your beard off.

(B) The strengthening of social relations: Such as when well known information is repeated, such as (14) between to individuals.

(14) I love you.

(C) The use of language to exercise power.

(D) Conversation with a cathartic function: O'Neill gives the example of two examinees who, after the examination, "engage in a conversation that consists of the repetition in several different ways of the same basic message - that the examination is finished" (1988-89:257).

For O'Neill, the point about these cases is that - on his reading of RT - the utterances neither "strengthen nor weaken [existing assumptions], nor imply new information" (1988-89:257), although they "are relevant to the needs or purposes of those engaged in the conversation: to maintain or strengthen social relations, to exercise power, to realise cathartic release and so on." (1988-89:258). Clearly O'Neill is right in this last remark. What I want to show is that RT is able to explain how they achieve this type of relevance and hence that these cases in no way invalidate RT.

Concerning (A), it first needs to be pointed out that while the fact that the hearer of (13) has shaved his beard off is manifest to both speaker and hearer, the speaker's utterance of (13) achieves relevance both by strengthening any assumption they have that this is *mutually* manifest and by informing the hearer that she has noticed that he has changed his appearance in this way. This second way of achieving relevance is the key to understanding how such exchanges contribute to the maintenance of social relations. As the use of the word *maintenance* implies, social relations need relational work if they are to be sustained. In RT terms, this is to say that assumptions regarding one individual's relationship with another need regular confirmation. Exchanges such as (13) help provide this confirmation by indicating that certain aspects of the hearer's behaviour and appearance are relevant to the speaker. In this case, the hearer's face is literally the topic of the exchange, but at an interpersonal level his positive face - on B&L's terms - is also being addressed (cf. Escandell-Vidal, 1996:642-643).

RT would predict that the amount attention paid to maintaining social relations by attending to face wants is dependent on the strength of the assumptions concerning the relationship in question: the stronger the assumptions, the less work the relationship should need to maintain it. Indeed, Wolfson's 'bulge effect' does seem to support this prediction (Wolfson, 1988, 1989 a & b). Wolfson's analysis of data drawn from ethnographic studies reveals that the proportion of a speaker's verbal behaviour that can be put down to considerations of politeness varies according to the degree of intimacy between the speaker and the hearer in the following way: it is lowest between those who are either close intimates or socially very distant, while it is highest among those who fall between these two points on the scale. In RT terms, the effort to make manifest assumptions which confirm the nature of the relationship is not necessary between intimates because these assumptions are strong and require little further strengthening. Between socially very distant interlocutors there are no such assumptions and similarly no strengthening is required. Between interactants who fall between these two stools, though, the assumptions will be relatively fragile: easily contradicted by only slight evidence. Thus speakers in such interactions find it worth their while to take special care in their choice of linguistic stimuli to avoid making manifest assumptions which contradict these. Moreover, those with whom the speaker is on this type of terms - neither intimate nor distant - are likely to have a strong influence on her standing in the groups to which they belong (being, say, workmates) and it is consequently worth her while to expend greater effort in ensuring that her behaviour is not misconstrued than she would with strangers, who are likely to have little or no effect on her status in this way.

But not only must speakers try hard to avoid providing evidence to contradict assumptions concerning their relationship with the hearer, they must also make efforts to reinforce these. Thus O'Neill's second supposed counter-example to RT: the strengthening of social relations, as exemplified by (14). Now, love is the basis of the most highly valued human relations and assumptions concerning such a fundamental emotion have wide-ranging implications and hence merit repeated processing. Consider how an utterance of (14) would achieve relevance as a request for forgiveness, as evidence that the speaker was being truthful, or as an explanation for a generous deed. Likewise O'Neill's fourth case: the cathartic function of language. Here, on RT terms, the examinees repeat the fact that the exam is over because the implications of this are so numerous and diverse that re-processing of this information is justified: the upper limit on cognitive effects takes a long time to reach.

O'Neill's third case - the use of language to exercise power - has already been touched in the previous section on imperatives. There, situations in which it is appropriate to use the imperative with desirable-to-the-speaker interpretations are shown to be characterised by the mutually manifest assumption that the speaker's desires are relevant to the hearer; and cases where the speaker has a power advantage over the hearer are prime examples of this.

Notice, moreover, that it may be just this assumption which the speaker wishes to make (more) manifest to the hearer. By using an imperative in such a way that the only feasible interpretation requires supplying the assumption that the speaker believes that she has a power advantage over the hearer, the speaker can communicate this assumption. One can easily envisage a case where a teacher who has hitherto tried using so-called polite forms to quell an unruly class switches to the use of the imperative mood to remind her pupils of her power advantage over them.

Thus the cases O'Neill presents as examples of the intrinsic asocialness of RT are in fact no such thing. Rather, the theory is able to explain these in a straightforward manner. This is further evidence of RT's ability to shed light on socially motivated instances of language use. In the section that follows, I put forward a more general argument to this effect.

4. On RT's social dimension

In the previous two sections I have shown how on the one hand RT is able to provide an insight into what might be considered a sociolinguistic question (the appropriate use of imperatives) and on the other how cases presented as examples of the asocialness of the theory are quite within the scope of its explanatory power. In this section, my approach is different as I want to present a far more general argument against the view that RT is intrinsically asocial.

At the root of RT is the claim that humans pay attention to stimuli likely to be relevant to them. A stimulus is relevant to the extent that for any given improvement in the individual's representation of the world, the effort involved in achieving this is low: the lower the effort, the greater the relevance. In order to make predictions concerning which type of stimuli will be relevant, then, it is necessary first to make some assumptions about the design of the cognitive system in question. For what purposes, we must ask, was the system designed? Or, put another way, what were the evolutionary pressures that drove the selection of that system?

In the case of human cognition, one answer to this question is suggested by Humphrey (1976). The fact that humans live in highly complex social environments can tell us a great deal about the design of their cognitive systems, he argues. Indeed, his insight is that the ability required to form and maintain alliances, to keep track of one's relative status and that of others, to calculate the likely effect of one's actions on the way others think of you and their likely responses to your actions presupposes a cognitive system not only of great computational power but also tailor-made for the job. More recently, similar claims have been made by researchers working in the field of evolutionary psychology, a notable example being the work of Tooby & Cosmides, who focus particularly on the implications for cognitive design of the need for co-operation while at the same time avoiding exploitation by free-loaders (see for example Tooby & Cosmides, 1992 and Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).

If it is accepted that a proper function[4] of human cognition is to provide an adequate representation of the individual's social environment then, on RT terms, it follows that stimuli which make manifest assumptions relating to this aspect of her cognitive environment will be highly relevant as the assumptions they give rise to will be easy to process, this being what the cognitive system - or, rather, a significant part of it[5] - has been designed for. The question that follows is clearly: what type of stimuli serve to feed the human cognitive system's hunger for information regarding the social world? Symbols of status abound and it would be hard to deny that we readily attend to these. But there is another class of stimuli which must be considered in this light.

By performing an ostensive act, an individual invites her audience to infer her intentions. That is, she invites her audience to attribute to her a mental state. She does this by modifying her and her audience's mutual cognitive environment in such a way as to make her intentions mutually manifest. The audience, for its part, employs mutually manifest assumptions as premises in inferring her intention. These are assumptions already mutually manifest before the ostensive act and those made mutually (more) manifest by the act. As the earlier section on imperatives showed, some of these assumptions will relate to the nature of the relationship between the communicator and her audience. Recall that it was shown how the assumption of a power differential or assumptions of solidarity were necessary to interpret certain utterances of imperative sentences. Thus ostensive acts, especially acts of linguistic communication, are a prime source of information about one's social environment. Consideration of the assumptions the speaker assumes mutually manifest reveals a great deal about her estimation of the social distance, both horizontal and vertical, between her and the hearer.

Speakers, of course, know this and take it into account when formulating their utterances. A speaker has to try to make manifest no assumptions incompatible with mutually manifest assumptions about her relationship with the hearer when choosing her stimulus. She can, of course, try to convince the hearer that the esteem in which she holds him is in fact higher than he had assumed mutually manifest; and she can intend to make it mutually manifest that it is in fact lower than he had assumed. The permutations are complex and discussed in detail in Jary (1998). The crucial point here is that the fact that any indication as to the hearer's status in the speaker's representation of the social environment will be highly relevant to the hearer due to the relative ease with which they can be processed, and this gives an important social dimension both to the speaker's choice of linguistic form and the hearer's interpretation of this. In particular, the hearer will easily be distracted from the speaker's informative intention if an assumption he is forced to supply in order to arrive at this contradicts assumptions relating to his social status he had thought mutually manifest. In such a case, the speaker's stimulus is relevant, but not (only) for the reasons she had intended.

In sum, the argument presented here goes as follows:

(a)Human cognition is, in part, designed to keep track of the individual's social environment. This means that the processing of stimuli likely to improve the individual's representation of her social environment will require a relatively low degree of effort and thus these stimuli will generally be relevant to that individual.

(b) The interpretation of linguistic stimuli can depend on employing mutually manifest assumptions relating to the relationship between the speaker and the hearer as premises in this deductive process. Given (a), linguistic stimuli are thus a source of information regarding the hearer's status in the speaker's representation of their mutual social environment. Moreover, any evidence of a mismatch between the hearer's representation of this environment and the speaker's is likely to prove relevant to the hearer.

(c) Speaker's take (b) into account when formulating their utterances (and hearers expect them to). This reveals a hitherto somewhat occluded social dimension to the RT account of utterance interpretation.

Clearly, the notion of metarepresentation is central both to ostensive-inferential communication and to the ability to function in a complex social environment (see Sperber, 1996: 147). Communication, on the RT view, involves the representation by the communicators of each others' representations of the world. Similarly, success in a social group of human complexity also presupposes the ability to represent representations attributed to other social actors. Indeed, it is interesting to note how individuals whose ability to attribute mental states to others is impaired, such as sufferers of autism, demonstrate both social and communicative deficits (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

An appreciation of the role played by metarepresentation also helps explain how, despite Talbot's (1993) protestation to the contrary, the claim that differences in individuals' cognitive environments stem from differences in their physical environments and cognitive capacities (Sperber & Wilson. 1995:39) in no way precludes a social dimension to those cognitive environments. Physical stimuli serve as not only as input to the process of representing the physical world but also to the process of constructing a representation of the social world. Human behaviour - verbal or otherwise - produces modifications in the physical environment which serve as input to those parts of human cognition dedicated to monitoring both the social landscape and the individual's relative position in it.

5. Concluding remarks

My claim is not that RT can tell the whole story without giving further consideration to sociocultural matters. Indeed, one criticism of RT which I have not addressed is that it overemphasises the creative element of human behaviour at the expense of the conventional (Mey & Talbot, 1988:747). The lack of attention paid to this issue should not be taken to imply that I do not take it seriously. Conventions surely play a role in the interpretation of utterances and I consider it a challenge for any theory of linguistic communication to explain, in a psychologically plausible way, how creativity and convention interact in this process.[6] Nevertheless, the arguments presented in this paper demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsically asocial about RT. Indeed, any attempt to explain behaviour by reference to the social environment implies certain information processing abilities. RT seeks to provide an explicit account of these abilities and is therefore of great potential value to an adequate understanding of humans as social beings.

Notes

1. More accurately (but also more awkwardly), she makes manifest her belief that a stimulus which makes manifest her desires is relevant to her hearer by virtue of the fact that it makes these desires manifest. Relevance, as a posting by Gloria Origgi to the Relevance e-mail list (10 April 1996) drummed into me, is a feature of stimuli, not of beliefs/desires. Thus saying, as I do in this paper, that a desire/belief or some information is relevant to a hearer is short-hand for saying that a certain linguistic stimulus is relevant to that hearer because it makes manifest to him a certain desire/belief or some information.

2. This also accounts for Brown & Levinson's "sympathetic advice or warnings" and "cliché farewell formulae" (1987:98).

3. And is correct in believing so. Were she incorrect, then her choice of the imperative form would be inappropriate.

4. See Milikan (1993: Chapter 1) for a historical/causal account of the notion of proper function.

5. In saying that a significant part of the human cognitive system has adapted to perform social functions I side step the question of whether this constitutes a mental faculty of the type proposed by Jackendoff (1992, Chapter 4) or whether it is the result of a number of more specific cognitive domains working in concert, as is suggested by Cosmides and Tooby (1994:98).

6. A potential source of enlightenment is Sperber's work on the epidemiology of representations, in which sociocultural phenomena such as convention are analysed in terms of the individual representations that constitute them, in a manner analogous to the role played by pathology in the study of epidemics (Sperber, 1996).

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