

UDC 811.111

doi.org/10.36906/2500-1795/24-2/09

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RELEVANCE THEORY AND IRONY

Abstract. The scientific article aims at elucidating Relevance theory, put forward by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986, within the context of cognitive science and linguistics. It focuses on cognitive and communicative principles, its difference from Grice's cooperative principle and its role in deciphering irony by means of echoic expressions. The theory of relevance is set forth through key aspects such as cognitive and communicative principles, contextual effects, processing efforts, and its role in decoding irony through echoic expressions. The objective of the scientific article is to provide a detailed analysis of Relevance theory, underscoring its advantages over Grice's cooperative principle and its applicability in deciphering irony. The article centers on displaying how relevance theory strikes the balance of contextual effects and processing efforts, making communication more predictable and comprehensible. In addition, it targets at displaying how echoic expressions allow for comprehending ironic utterances and shape relationships between conversationalists. Main provisions of the article:

1. Relevance is determined through the balance between contextual effects and processing efforts required to process information. A message is considered more relevant when it generates significant contextual effects with minimal processing efforts.

2. Unlike the Cooperative principle, which calls for high cooperation and adherence to all maxims (Quality, Quantity, Manner, Relation), relevance theory centers on attaining mutual understanding without the need for excessive details.

3. Irony is viewed as a form of **echoic utterance**, where the addresser echoes a thought or utterance with a critique or disapproving attitude. The addressee is required to identify the contrast between the literal meaning and the addresser's attitude, making the ironic message relevant through its layered interpretation. This approach allows for a profound comprehension of irony beyond merely implying the opposite meaning.

Key words: contextual effect; processing effort; the principle of optimal relevance; stimulus; irony.

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ТЕОРИЯ РЕЛЕВАНТНОСТИ И ИРОНИЯ

Аннотация. Научная статья направлена на разъяснение теории релевантности, выдвинутой Дэном Спербером и Дейдрей Уилсон в 1986 году, в контексте когнитивной науки и лингвистики. Она фокусируется на когнитивных и коммуникативных принципах, их отличии от принципа кооперации Г. Грайса и их роли в интерпретации иронии с помощью эхоических выражений. Теория релевантности изложена через ключевые аспекты, такие как когнитивные и коммуникативные принципы, контекстуальные эффекты, когнитивные усилия и их роль в расшифровке иронии с помощью эхоических выражений. Цель научной статьи – представить подробный анализ теории релевантности, подчеркивая ее преимущества перед принципом кооперации Г. Грайса и ее применимость в расшифровке иронии. Статья посвящена демонстрации того, как теория релевантности обеспечивает баланс между контекстуальными эффектами и когнитивными усилиями, делая коммуникацию более предсказуемой и понятной. Кроме того, она нацелена на демонстрацию того, как эхоические выражения позволяют понимать иронические высказывания и формировать отношения между собеседниками. Основные положения статьи:

1. Релевантность определяется через баланс между контекстуальными эффектами и когнитивными усилиями, необходимыми для обработки информации. Сообщение считается более релевантным, когда оно создает значительные контекстуальные эффекты с минимальными когнитивными усилиями.

2. В отличие от принципа кооперации Г. Грайса, который требует соблюдения всех максим (качество, количество, манера, отношение), теория релевантности сосредоточена на достижении взаимопонимания без необходимости в излишних подробностях.

3. Ирония рассматривается как форма эхоического высказывания, когда говорящий повторяет мысль или высказывание с критикой или неодобрительным отношением. Адресат должен определить контраст между буквальным значением и отношением адресанта, делая ироническое сообщение релевантным через его многоуровневую интерпретацию. Такой подход позволяет достичь глубокого понимания иронии, выходящего за рамки простого намека на противоположное значение.

Ключевые слова: контекстуальный эффект; когнитивные усилия; принцип оптимальной релевантности; стимул; ирония.

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Zakirova M.D. Relevance Theory and Irony // Нижневартовский филологический вестник. 2024. №2. С. 109-116. <https://doi.org/10.36906/2500-1795/24-2/09>

Zakirova, M.D. (2024). Relevance Theory and Irony. *Nizhnevartovsk Philological Bulletin*, (2), 109-116. <https://doi.org/10.36906/2500-1795/24-2/09>

Relevance theory was put forward by Sperber and Wilson in 1986. This cognitive theory was proposed owing to the dissatisfaction with Grice's cooperative principle. The major downside of the cooperative principle is that when an utterance for an implicated meaning is sought it brings about infinite freedom of interpretations due to the fact that there are no boundaries which are set on the implicature. The newly proposed theory merely draws on the maxim of relation. More specifically, the ostensive stimulus is considered to be relevant for it to be worth the addressee's effort to comprehend it as well as the ostensive stimulus is considered to be relevant with the interlocutor's abilities and preferences (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 270).

According to Sperber and Wilson, an utterance counts as relevant providing that it captures the addressee's attention and makes changes to the receiver's cognition (Sperber, Wilson, 1995:109). Initially, Relevance theory held that as long as an utterance called for little processing effort, an utterance was considered as relevant. Sperber and Wilson refined the relevance theory with a more precise definition. Relevance theory measures contextual effects against the processing efforts needed to attain the contextual effects and determines a balance between contextual effects and processing effort. This means that an assumption with remarkable contextual effects, but calling for minimal processing efforts is more relevant than one with minimal contextual effects or requiring substantial processing efforts. In conversation both the addressor and addressee carry responsibility, the addressor is required to encode the utterance so that it is relevant to the addressee, whereas the addressee is responsible for unravelling the implicature. As long as the addressee interprets an implicature in a way that the addressor did not intend to convey, the implicature does not comply with the principle of relevance. The presence of contextual effects is mandatory for relevance. Consequently, the degree of relevance hinges on the amount of processing efforts which is required in regard to the number of contextual effects or implications that can be drawn (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 270).

Contextual effects and processing efforts

The concept of contextual effect is fundamental to understanding what makes information relevant. In accordance with Relevance theory, a statement is considered as relevant on the condition that it produces contextual effects. The relevance of an assumption is determined by its capacity to produce contextual effects when integrated with an existing set of assumptions. These

effects incorporate generating new implications, strengthening existing beliefs or creating contradictions. Sperber and Wilson highlight that the concept of relevance is meaningful only when it generates such effects, and the more significant the contextual effects, the greater its relevance (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 118).

As an individual perceives a spoken or written discourse, they continuously process new information against a backdrop of their existing assumptions. Throughout the discourse, the addressee retrieves or formulates assumptions, which shift over time, creating a background of context for deciphering further information. Contextual effects occur when new information interacts with existing assumptions resulting in several possible outcomes: contextual implications, where new conclusions are drawn; contradictions, where prior assumptions are challenged; and strengthened, where pre-existing beliefs are reinforced. Consequently, comprehension of an utterance encompasses more than identifying the meaning of the words themselves; it also calls for understanding of how this new information aligns with the assumptions already present (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 118).

In Relevance theory put forward by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, the concept of processing effort plays a key role in how individuals assess the relevance of information during interaction. It refers to the mental energy or cognitive resources needed to comprehend, decode, and integrate new information into existing knowledge. When new information is introduced, it must be processed in the mind—decoded, analyzed, and integrated with the addressee's existing knowledge. This process can comprise making inferences, drawing implications, resolving ambiguities, or even retrieving relevant knowledge from memory. The concept of processing effort draws on the idea that cognitive resources are limited, and individuals strive to utilize them effectively. It plays an integral role in determining what information is worth focusing on and which needs ignoring (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

Processing effort is not merely an isolated concept, but also plays a part in comparative evaluation within Relevance theory. Information is not simply classified as relevant or irrelevant; its relevance is dependent on how much processing efforts it calls for and the benefits it provides. Therefore, when individuals are presented with multiple pieces of information, they normally select the one that provides the highest contextual effect with the least cognitive efforts (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

Cognitive and communicative principles of relevance

Cognitive principle of relevance holds that a human being's cognition gears towards maximizing relevance. The principle draws on the idea that a human being's cognition evolved so as to utilize cognitive resources, select and process the information which brings significant benefits and enables him/her to make an adequate deduction. The Relevance theory requires a balance of contextual effects and processing efforts (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

Contextual effect is normally activated when a new piece of information interacts with existing knowledge resulting in a beneficial result such as an answer to a question, confirmation of the assumption or correction of the previously wrong belief. The processing efforts are related to

contextual effects which are needed to process the information. The information becomes more relevant when it produces more contextual effects and requires minimum processing efforts to comprehend it. Thus, providing that two pieces of information lead to similar contextual effects, the one which requires the least amount of processing efforts to process the information is the most relevant (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

The inclination to seek out the relevant information occurs automatically, prompting an individual to focus on those stimuli, which will lead to the most viable inference. For instance, loud noise attracts attention especially if a human being's brain perceives it as highly important. This automatic choice allows an individual to navigate himself/herself in surrounding world, paying attention to what is paramount in his/her life (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

Communicative principle of relevance extends these ideas to a conversation implying that the addresser shares information which he/she finds relevant for the audience. In accordance with the theory of relevance, communication is an inferential process in which the interlocutors make utterances which induce the addressee to draw conclusion which lead him/her to the intended interpretation (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

When individuals interact, they do not aim at identifying the relevance of every utterance. Instead the addresser intuitively expects that what is uttered is relevant enough to deserve the addressee's attention. Communicative principle of relevance holds that communication is based on a mutual understanding that the conversationalists target at being relevant. This principle elucidates why communication is normally perceived to be logical and reasonable since both conversationalists understand implicitly that the uttered statement is worth processing effort that the receiver has to make. The addresser structures his/her utterances so that the addressee is capable of decoding the intended meaning with ease without activating unnecessary processing efforts. This anticipation allows the addressee to effectively decipher an utterance selecting those interpretations which provide the most cognitive effects with minimal processing efforts (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

The difference between the theory of relevance and Grice's cooperative principle.

Paul Grice states that a conversation draws on the Cooperative Principle and the maxims such as the Maxim of Quality, Quantity, Manner and Relation, whereas the Relevance theory is based on a single principle which holds that every speech act presupposes its own optimal relevance. This means that an utterance is supposed to be so relevant that it is worth the efforts to process it. What is more, the Cooperative Principle requires a high level of cooperation between the interlocutors. They have to share a mutual goal and direction, while the Relevance theory states that the only common objective is to "achieve understanding" so that the hearer comprehends the communicative intention. Next, the Cooperative Principle requires the addresser to adhere to all the maxims as opposed to the Relevance theory that only requires the message to be relevant enough to be interpreted. This does not necessarily include the provision of all the possible information. When it comes to the norms and general principles, the maxims are what the interlocutors are supposed to be aware of. They can either abide by or violate these norms to attain certain effects. As for the Relevance Theory, it is a general statement about interaction. The conversationalists do not need to

be aware of this principle. Communication always presupposes relevance which is not dependent on the interlocutor's knowledge. Lastly, the Cooperative Principle distinguishes what is explicitly uttered from what is implied. The Grice's principle does not elucidate an explicit communication since it is based on encoding and decoding of conventional signs. In contrast, the Relevance theory aims at setting forth the entire process of both explicit and implicit ostensive communication (Sperber, Wilson, 1995: 161-163).

Relevance theory and Irony

The concept of echoic utterances plays an integral role in comprehending the nature of irony and its link to other figurative tropes. Echoic utterances refer to an utterance that communicates an interpretation of another person's speech or thought, or even the addresser's own previous thoughts. The central idea lies in that these statements don't merely present a direct thought; instead, they reinterpret and reflect upon thoughts or utterances ascribed to others, adding an additional and deeper layer of interpretation (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 238).

The concept of irony through the lens of the echoic statement underscores the importance of the speaker's attitude in interpretation and achieving relevance of their utterance. When the addresser resorts to an echoic utterance, he/she does not simply repeat a prior statement or reflect upon a traditionally held belief, but rather the addresser adds his/her own perspective – whether skeptical, amused, or disapproving–towards that echoed idea. What makes the utterance particularly relevant is that the addresser highlights his/her own reaction or standpoint towards the prior thought, making it clear that the statement is not simply a report, but an evaluative reflection. In verbal irony, the expression of attitude is inherently implicit, meaning that the addresser's genuine feelings are conveyed by means of subtle clues such as tone of voice, context, and other non-verbal signals rather than directly expressed. The ironic utterance gains relevance providing that the addressee makes an inference of the addresser's genuine attitude by identifying a discrepancy between the literal content of the statement and the intended meaning (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 239).

In this context, irony can be viewed as a form of echoic statement. It incorporates not only referring or repeating to someone else's standpoint, but also expressing a certain attitude towards that idea—commonly disbelief, skepticism or criticism. This ironical utterance becomes relevant not because the addresser truly believes in the compliment, but because they expect the addressee to perceive the underlying attitude of sarcasm or mockery. Consequently, the receiver is required to comprehend the contrast between the echoed content and the addresser's actual stance (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 239).

The key feature of irony is the addresser's stance of rejection or dissociation from the echoed thought. Distance from or contradicting the echoed thought, the addresser signals that they do not align with the belief being referenced. By doing this, the addresser implies that the original addresser's standpoint was misguided or mistaken (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 239).

Interpreting the echoic utterance calls for the receiver to comprehend three key elements. First, the addressee is required to identify that the utterance is echoic, meaning that it refers back to a prior statement. Next, the addressee is supposed to recognize whose viewpoint is being echoed.

Lastly, the receiver is required to comprehend that the addresser's attitude is one of rejection or disagreement. Recognition of the aforementioned aspects enables the receiver to comprehend the full meaning of the ironic remark and the deeper layers of critique or disapproval it encompasses. This process induces the addressee to decipher the speaker's underlying perspective, adding complexity to communication. The complex nature of this interpretation process makes irony a nuanced, intricate and rich form of echoic utterance which is dependent on shared knowledge, context, and the ability to identify subtle cues of attitude (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 240).

The power of irony normally lies in leaving certain components implicit. Initially, the reader interprets an utterance as a direct assertion, which results in an illogical and absurd conclusion. Only upon a close examination, the reader reinterprets the utterance as an ironic echo. This process of reinterpretation which entails recognition of the echoic nature of the statement amplifies the effectiveness and engaging feature of irony. It gives rise to a "garden-path" effect, where the reader is briefly misled before gaining a deeper understanding (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 242).

Sperber and Wilson question the traditional definition of irony, which defines it simply as stating one thing, while implying the opposite meaning, and propose a more nuanced interpretation of irony as an echoic form of expression. The classical view of irony, including the Gricean principle, contends that irony incorporates making a statement that is obviously false and induces the addressee to make an inference of its opposite meaning. However, this approach has a significant limitation: it falls short of elucidating why someone implies the opposite of their intended message instead of stating it directly (Sperber, Willson 1995: 240).

On the contrary, the echoic perspective on irony proposes a framework that more effectively differentiates ironic utterances from merely misleading ones. According to this view, an ironic utterance encompasses not just asserting something contrary to reality, but referencing a previous utterance, attitude, or standpoint, frequently in a manner that mocks or questions that perspective. This element of ridicule along with an echoic quality is what renders an utterance genuinely ironic (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 241).

Furthermore, the echoic perspective elucidates that irony allows for a big diversity of attitudes and emotions, such as mockery, disdain, or playful teasing rather than being limited to a strict set of expressions. It underscores how the addresser resorts to echoic statement to communicate his/her stance towards a previous point of view—whether their own or someone else's—making the receiver aware of their viewpoint without stating it explicitly. This flexibility in expressing attitudes contributes to irony's effectiveness in comparison with a literal language; it enables the interlocutors to critique or emphasize the absurdity of a belief, while inducing the addressee to decipher the underlying meaning. This approach fosters a more profound interpretation of ironic utterances, reflecting the intricate nature of human interaction and implicit attitudes that can make irony a powerful tool for commentary (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 241).

Irony is a multifaceted phenomenon, that engages the addressee on different levels. When an individual recognizes it, they feel as a part of the 'in-group', which not only amuses, but also flatters their sense of belongingness. This identification of irony deepens the reader's engagement

with the text. Failing to decode the irony results in misreading and misinterpretation of the text. While recognizing irony fosters a sense of connection and solidarity, falling short of detecting it leads to the feeling of exclusion from the intended 'in-group'. Regardless of the risk, the enjoyment that irony brings guarantees that an individual or reader continues resorting to it. It can effectively strengthen interpersonal relations by fostering the feelings of intimacy and flattering an individual for recognizing it (Stockwell 2002).

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