

EDITORIAL: RELEVANCE THEORY AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

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Abstract

This editorial to the special issue of RiL dedicated to relevance theory and problems of intercultural communication addresses the general requirements that a theory of communication must meet to be applicable to the analysis of intercultural communication. Then it discusses criticism levelled against Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness on the grounds that these theories were not universal enough to be applied to all data. Finally, it offers some remarks on the applicability of relevance theory to intercultural pragmatics.

Keywords: relevance theory, intercultural communication, Grice, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

1. Introduction

The five papers included in this special issue employ the analytic tools of relevance theory to deal with topics related to intercultural communication in various ways. The first two papers focus on comprehension phenomena: Manuel Padilla Cruz's contribution "Interlocutors-related and hearer-specific causes of misunderstanding: Processing strategy, confirmation bias and weak vigilance" offers a comprehensive study of misunderstandings, discussing its various possible causes and mechanisms, and listing intercultural factors among them, whereas Mai Zaki's paper "The pragmatics of Arabic religious posts on Facebook: a relevance-theoretic account" analyses Facebook posts uploaded by Muslim users. The next three papers undertake translation problems (which are inherently and invariably intercultural): Izabela Szymańska addresses the effects of employing various translation strategies and techniques to render dialectal variation occurring within a novel ("The treatment of geographical dialect in literary translation from the perspective of relevance theory", Monica Vasileanu reflects upon translation strategy adopted in the English version of an 18th-century treatise by the Romanian scholar Demetrius Cantemir ("What was a relevant translation in the 18th century?") and Edyta Żrałka deals with a case of deliberate manipulation in translation across a political border in the communist

era (“Principles of Newspeak in Polish translations of British and American press articles under communist rule”).

The question that I would like to address in this editorial concerns the strong points and potential challenges relevance theory could face when applied to intercultural pragmatics. To this end, I shall first refer to the critical discussions that revolved around Grice’s (1989a[1975]) theory of conversation and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, challenging their claims to universality on the grounds that some data coming from non-European languages and cultures do not conform to the patterns offered by these models. My sole aim in revisiting the polemics on Grice and Brown/Levinson is to use it as illustration of the general question of what kind of argument it takes to allege that a pragmatic theory is of limited scope: on the one hand, it is natural for such theories to gain empirical validity from the observation of real data, but on the other, data coming from other linguistic and cultural settings may potentially undermine their foundations. In the final part of the paper I shall turn to the question of the intercultural potential of RT, linking it with the cognitive basis of the theory.

2. A challenge to cooperativeness as a necessary condition for communicating conversational implicatures

When putting forward his ground-breaking theory of implicature, H.P. Grice (1989a[1975]) did not state explicitly that the mechanism he offered for explaining inferential communication, i.e. the Cooperative Principle and the four categories of maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner) were to be applicable across languages and cultures. His standpoint can be however inferred from the following legitimisation for the Cooperative Principle:

...observance of the Cooperative Principle and the maxims is reasonable (rational) [...]: anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication (such as giving and receiving information, influencing and being influenced by others) must be expected to have an interest, given suitable circumstances, in participation in talk exchanges that will be profitable only on the assumption that they are conducted in general accordance with the Cooperative Principle and the maxims. (Grice 1989a: 29-30)

By making an appeal to reasonable or rational behaviour, this fragment lends support to the view that Grice did have a claim to universality for his model. Also in other parts of his essays he invoked every-day experience of non-verbal transactions between human beings to further corroborate the idea that most human exchanges have rational basis and are characterised by cooperativeness, even if understood weakly as mutually accepted direction. It has to be noted though that Grice’s postulate is not about the universality of cooperativeness per se, but about cooperativeness being a principle underlying the occurrence of all

conversational implicatures. It is thus admitted that the speaker "... may opt out from the operation both of the maxim and of the Cooperative Principle, he may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires" (1989a: 30), in which case no implicatures will be communicated. To challenge Grice's theory it would be therefore necessary to demonstrate that either no implicatures arise despite presumed cooperativeness (and context favouring them), or that implicatures do arise despite speakers being overtly uncooperative.

A challenge of this kind came from Elinor Ochs Keenan's (1976) examination of conversational practices of the Malagasy people, who apparently fail to observe one of the Quantity Maxims by which the speaker is expected to provide information required by an interlocutor. As reported by Ochs Keenan, Malagasy speakers standardly answer questions in a way that in a Western society would implicate lack of knowledge (e.g. "Where is your mother?" "At home or in the market"), despite being able to provide a precise answer. In a similar way, they avoid using referring expressions that would immediately and uniquely identify the referent and choose to refer e.g. to one's sister as "a girl" instead (cf. Ochs Keenan 1976: 73). Again, this corresponds to the well-known example "X is meeting a woman this evening" discussed by Grice (1989a: 37), where a generalised conversational implicature arises due to the use of the indefinite article "a". As explained by Ochs Keenan, the conversational conduct of Malagasy speakers is not motivated by their wish to violate or opt out of a conversational maxim, but it is dictated by general norms holding in this society, such as the norm to avoid *tsiny*, i.e. guilt for explicit naming a culprit (Ochs Keenan 1976: 70), or a norm that prescribes avoidance of antagonising ancestral spirits.

Despite demonstrating that the Quantity maxims are constrained by general social and religious rules in the Malagasy society and therefore do not give rise to implicatures in contexts in which they would do so in Western cultures, Ochs Keenan does not attempt to undermine the validity of the Gricean model. As she rightly points out, the Maxims may be likewise constrained in the Western world, where speakers also withhold some information for cultural, moral or politeness reasons (which Grice 1989a himself had also predicted). Concluding her paper, Keenan in fact proposes that Grice's framework can be used in cross-cultural studies for comparing how particular maxims are employed (or bypassed) by various groups in various settings.

Another challenge against Grice's model came from Sperber and Wilson's (1995: 273-275) analysis of situations in which implicatures are communicated by manifestly uncooperative speakers. Interestingly, although the dialogue illustrating Sperber and Wilson's argument was supposedly carried out by two British speakers planning a trip to France, it is in some respects similar to the Malagasy examples discussed by Ochs Keenan, as it involves a speaker choosing to withhold sensitive information to herself (albeit for personal, not societal reasons). For the sake of balance, let us note that a Gricean pragmatist

could possibly reply to this criticism by saying that cooperativeness does not involve a speaker's obligation to reveal everything she knows and that the very act of participating in a conversation is cooperative enough (cf. also Grice 1989, strand 6).

It would be beyond the scope and objective of this paper to weigh all the arguments in this polemic. What is relevant for our current topic is the fact that a pragmatic model whose claims to empirical validity and universality were at least partly based on observations of what is considered reasonable and rational in the Western world (vis. Grice's examples of verbal exchanges and actions), turned out to be vulnerable to challenges when cross-cultural (or alternative) data were brought forth. Even if these new facts did not undermine the foundations of the model, they indicated that the maxims or perhaps the cooperative principle need to be calibrated to culture-specific or situation specific requirements, thereby making them relative rather than universal.

3. A challenge to the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) based their theory of politeness on the concept of face, introduced into social studies by Goffman (1967). They developed a descriptive model distinguishing a number of linguistic strategies oriented towards the positive or negative face of the addressee. Major criticism levelled against Brown and Levinson's theory (for detailed discussion see e.g. Trosborg 1994; Goldsmith 2006) centred on the notion of face: although it was acknowledged to be subject to cultural specification, it could still be considered not universal enough to be applicable to all cultures.

Most challenges against Brown and Levinson's (henceforth: B&L) model were raised by researchers dealing with Asian cultures, e.g. Ide (1989) or Matsumoto (1988), according to whom this account fails to recognize the role of formal linguistic devices, such as honorifics, in languages in which they play a crucial role. In Japanese, for instance, the speaker has to identify his/her place with respect to other individuals and behave accordingly, both verbally and non-verbally. In this culture, politeness then consists in observing conventions rather than choosing a strategy (this distinction is sometimes referred to as that between "discernment" and "volition"[Ide 1989]). Let us consider an example for illustration:

- (1) Kyoo wa doyoobi da.
 today TOPIC Saturday COPULA-PLAIN
 Today is Saturday.

- (2) Kyoo wa doyoobi desu.
today TOPIC Saturday COPULA-POLITE
Today is Saturday. (Matsumoto, 1988: 415)

The difference between (1) and (2) lies in the use of a different copula – plain in (1) and marked for politeness in (2). A speaker of Japanese would choose (1) or (2) depending on the formality of the situation and relation to an interlocutor. Much as for a Western speaker a failure to apply a polite register when required would be seen as a face-threatening act, for a Japanese speaker uttering (1) does not seem to pose a threat to the hearer's face. Consequently, using (2) instead of (1) cannot be seen as a redress strategy. According to Matsumoto (1988) then, the linguistically coded character of Japanese politeness renders its analysis in terms of face-threatening and face-saving acts inadequate. In this way, B&L's reliance on the notion of face stemming from their Western bias undermines the universality of their theory.

The last word in this discussion did not come from critics of B&L, but from their defendants, as counterarguments to Ide and Matsumoto's objections were given by e.g. Fukada and Asato (2004), who claim that if the vertical and hierarchical structure of Japanese society is taken into account, B&L's theory holds. Once again then, the consideration of cross-linguistic data have inspired questions about the universality of a pragmatic theory, suggesting the need to calibrate the postulated principles to specific linguistic and/or cultural conditions.

To maintain analogy to the previous section, in which critical points raised by relevance theorists were reported, let me mention that B&L's theory was also challenged from a relevance-theoretic perspective (cf. Escandell-Vidal 1996, 1998, 2004; Jary 1998). The main objection formulated in these papers was that contrary to B&L's postulate, in most situations politeness may not be communicated, let alone implicated. Speakers who choose to express themselves adequately to their social position vis-a-vis other interlocutors may not wish to communicate the assumption that they are being polite, as such an assumption may be not be part of their informative intention (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 29). This objection, though put forward on other than intercultural grounds, also undermines the universality of the B&L model by pointing out that it applies only to some cases of politeness, i.e. those in which it is overtly intended to be communicated by the speaker¹.

¹ Nowadays, the distinction between communicated and non-communicated politeness is generally recognized in politeness studies, at least partially following the work by Escandell-Vidal and Jary.

4. RT as a model of communication based on cognitive psychology

Unlike the Gricean paradigm or B&L's theory of politeness, RT does not presuppose any culture-dependent notion (such as cooperativeness or face) to explain how speaker's meaning is communicated. This theory was developed as the first comprehensive model of pragmatics that made parallel claims about communication and cognition, the latter being normally considered universal. Hence, the communicative principle of relevance, given in (2) below, postulated to govern utterance comprehension is firmly grounded in the more general cognitive principle of relevance (1) describing how human being make sense of all stimuli surrounding them:

- (1) Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.
- (2) Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 260)

where relevance for an individual is understood as obtaining cognitive benefits, such as increments in, or reorganisation of knowledge, at justifiable processing cost.

For Sperber and Wilson, the cognitive principle of relevance has evolutionary basis. They view cognition as a biological function, and particular cognitive mechanisms as adaptations, which have evolved subject to the Darwinian natural selection and other evolutionary forces. Such forces produced pressure towards cost-benefit optimization, favouring mechanism variants "that performed better at the time than other variants that were around" (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 262), which could involve a qualitative or quantitative advantages. In this way, cognitive mechanisms have become specialized for making the most of the resources available for carrying out various tasks, i.e. for optimizing relevance. Although these mechanism vary greatly with respect to the kind of inputs they take and tasks they perform, it is claimed that the pursuit for optimal relevance is a single universal principle that underscores the operation of all the cognitive mechanisms.

The mechanism responsible for inferential communication is just one of them. At the same time, it has its own distinct characteristics, as the existence of a separate communicative principle of relevance indicates. What is special about the inferential communication mechanism, known as the comprehension module, is that it processes stimuli that are intentionally used by communicators, and therefore they can be presumed (and not merely expected) to bring about some cognitive benefits. Still, the fact that such benefits are presumed does not mean that they are guaranteed – the comprehension mechanism relies on a heuristic rather than a fail-safe algorithm. Relevance theory is thus concerned with describing the universal principle governing comprehension together with risk inherently associated with it, the risk being dependent on individual-related

or cultural factors (cf. also Padilla Cruz, this volume) or on the operation of other mental systems.

As has been emphasized, the two principles of relevance do not draw on any observations of how human beings behave or interact with one another in a specific sociocultural setting. This is not to say that every human being will interpret an utterance or another stimulus in the same way, or that cultural background does not affect the way relevance is established. On the contrary, specific cultural assumptions brought to the interpretation process may have a vital influence on its outcome. When Maria is asked if she knows anything about Pedro, a new colleague employed in her company, and replies “He had pork chops for lunch”, her utterance will give rise to different cognitive effects depending on who her interlocutors are: for vegetarians, the utterance might be relevant in virtue of the implication “Pedro is not a vegetarian”, for Muslims it might be relevant in virtue of the implication “Pedro is not a Muslim”, for individuals who do not find anything special about eating pork, the only relevant implication might be that all Maria knows about Pedro is what she observed in the canteen during lunchtime, i.e. she does not know anything interesting about his character or past (to keep this example simple for illustrative purposes, the implications discussed are those that hearers have arrived at largely on their own responsibility).

How about situations in which speakers employ specific linguistic formulas to carry out culturally sanctioned speech acts, such as “I pronounce you man and wife” or “One notrump”? Relevance theory naturally recognizes the fact that some forms of communication require institutional frames to be effectively performed and treats these frames as external to the study of communication proper: describing institutional communicative acts, claim Sperber and Wilson (1995: chapter 4.10), is a task that belongs to the study of the institutions involved (or, one could add, to the study of society in general).

The picture sketched above of the division of labour between universal and specific factors employed in the theoretical apparatus of RT (or situated beyond it) indicates that data from intercultural communication should not pose a threat to this account. This is so since the variety of cultural norms or linguistic conventions is accommodated in the model as the variety of inputs to the operation of the comprehension module, resulting in a predicted variety of communication practice around the globe. As pointed out by Wilson (2015), to challenge RT on intercultural grounds, it would be necessary to demonstrate that either the Cognitive or Communicative Principle of Relevance (or both) are not universal, e.g. by proving that some groups of humans attend to stimuli that are new but irrelevant or that they process utterances seeking literally true and not optimally relevant interpretations. As of today, no indications to this effect have been found. On the contrary, empirical studies have confirmed the universality of both principles: Van der Henst, Sperber and Politzer (2002) demonstrate that when faced with standard reasoning tasks, such as determinate and indeterminate relational problems, subjects derive conclusions backed by considerations of

relevance rather than by purely logical rules, i.e. they seek answers which are relevant and not merely true (and irrelevant); other studies on reasoning tasks reported by Van der Henst and Sperber (2004) provide further evidence for that; and the study by Van der Henst, Carles and Sperber (2002) offers evidence supporting empirical validity of the communicative principle of relevance on the speech production side.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper RT has been depicted as a pragmatic theory that sets realistic objectives for the account of communication it proposes, delimiting its scope to inferential processes occurring in the human mind. These processes are driven by search for relevance, i.e. optimization of the cognitive effects obtained against processing cost incurred. Although routes to achieving optimal relevance for the same utterance may vary across contexts and speakers, and indeed be influenced by systematic cultural factors, the Communicative Principle of Relevance is believed to be universal.

This standpoint leaves open the possibility of using the relevance-theoretic apparatus jointly with any set of institutionalized or culturally conditioned rules of communication, such as, for instance, the social and moral norms governing the conduct of Malagasy speakers, Facebook etiquette or conventions on writing emails by students to university staff. At the same time, unlike pragmatic approaches that seek their legitimization in conforming to observable patterns of behaviour, the relevance-theoretic approach is free from limitations that social constructs, inevitably reflected in such patterns, could impose.

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