

Discussion note

# Précis by Capone in response to Zhang and Zhang<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper I respond to some provocative remarks by [Zhang and Zhang \(2017\)](#) and I argue that their claim that there is no compatibility between Default semantics and Relevance theory is exaggerated. In [Capone \(2011a,b\)](#), I provided a synthetic approach which did not presuppose that we necessarily slavishly adhere to all details of Jaszczolt's or Relevance Theory. In that paper, I tried to make sense of the idea of modularity of mind. However, those ideas could also be integrated into a theory of neural networks. In this paper, I point out, however briefly, that it makes sense to connect the generalizations offered by Default Semantics with the role played by Broca's area in cognition (here I follow [Pennisi and Falzone's \(2016\)](#) ideas) (see also [Capone, 2017](#)).

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I am grateful to [Zhang and Zhang \(2017\)](#) for drawing attention to a paper of mine written some time ago ([Capone, 2011a](#)), in which I reflected on considerations voiced by the theory of Default Semantics (notably expressed by [Jaszczolt, 1999, 2016](#), and updated in 2016) and Relevance Theory, in the hope to derive some constructive, synthetic and possibly useful considerations. Normally, through others we learn something new and we should listen carefully to what they say, although here I got the impression that the reply to my paper was not written in a constructive spirit and, at most, afforded me a chance to clarify matters that were left less explicit. Nevertheless, this is an opportunity to reflect further on the semantics/pragmatics debate and also to give some thought to the kind of issues which I raised (albeit rather briefly and sketchily) in [Capone \(2017\)](#) about modularization. This is perhaps one of the most important topics in pragmatics and theory of mind, and one which I broached in [Capone \(2011b\)](#). This is perhaps one of the topics for future investigation and it is not by chance that this topic came up when I read books by Jaszczolt and now it is coming up again in a reply to a paper of mine which was (largely) about Jaszczolt's Default Semantics.

In [Capone \(2011a\)](#), I tried to reflect (rather synthetically, I should say) on possible connections between inferential strategies, as developed within a theory of communication called 'Relevance Theory' and a theory of semantic defaults (basically intended as standardized inferences in the sense of [Bach, 1998](#)). Although [Capone \(2011a\)](#) is a rather complex article aiming to extend [Jaszczolt's \(1999, 2005\)](#) theory by incorporating, discussing and adapting important intuitions found in [Dascal \(2003\)](#) (see also [Zielinska, 2016](#)), by keeping the discussion short one may say that the aim of that paper can be captured in the excerpt below:

We wonder if the cognitive defaults are reducible to more general principles. Now, this question is clearly a question about the link between Default Semantics and Relevance Theory. While a cognitive default may work as an

<sup>☆</sup> I would like to give thanks to Kasia Jaszczolt for many useful and most insightful discussions during the First International Conference in Pragmatics and Philosophy (Palermo May 2016). Many thanks to Nino Bucca, Ninni Pennisi, and Alessandra Falzone for their stimulating discussions. This paper is a reply and, therefore, it suffers from many of the defects of the paper it replies to. I assume it would have been more constructive, instead, to engage in a discussion of modularity vs. modularization. I assume the importance of Default Semantics is to have pointed towards the crucial role of modularization in building up a theory of mind-reading. Another interesting point could have been a discussion of the innateness of pragmatic principles. Could they just be a priori principles without being innate? Could modularization be an alternative to innateness? Part of this discussion can be found in [Capone \(2016\)](#), while part of the discussion is still open (to debate) and probably deserves being addressed in a separate paper.

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instruction to interpret a certain fragment of language use in a certain way, it is possible that behind it there is a cognitive principle of basic rationality. This I will not deny, albeit I will insist that cognitive defaults are short-circuited inferences, in which the mind is not busy calculating inferences on the basis of general principles of rationality. We can, however, note important connections. Each of such defaults may arise due to the need of avoiding ambiguities and obscurities which would impede not only language processing, but also language acquisition. Since the mind works by promoting contextual effects while keeping efforts as low as possible, and since without such cognitive defaults language acquisition would be impeded or retarded, the mind recruits Sperber and Wilson's Principle of Relevance for the purpose of creating cognitive defaults which, if implemented as simple instructions, are even more frugal and faster than the application of the Principle of Relevance each time a certain input occurs. We may see the cognitive defaults as specializations of the application of the Principle of Relevance. (Capone, 2011a:1746).

The details of that paper, especially the data taken from Dascal (2003) which I would have thought would have deserved notice, have escaped the attention of Zhang and Zhang (2017), who, by writing a reply to that paper, concentrated on some objections. This is a noticeable omission and one I would like to point out in the hope that readers may focus on those data and my analysis of them, which need not be totally insignificant. In this paper, however, I propose to address the details of Zhang and Zhang's (2017) objections (as, after all their paper is nothing but a battery of objections with no significant positive part).

As Zhang and Zhang say, Relevance theory and Default Semantics appear to be antithetical frameworks and possibly "rival theories". The adjective 'rival' used by Zhang and Zhang – in addition to the provocative intentions underlying its usage – seems too strong and even misguided, perhaps, to me; for one thing, no theories (about certain common phenomena) can be rival, if they aim at the truth, and the truth can be established (at least in theory, but, generally, also in practice) through a positive dialectics. Certainly, they can be different – and, not surprisingly, Zhang and Zhang are correct about this, but this was a fact which I did not obtusely ignore or wanted to ignore. Nor should Zhang and Zhang be credited for saying what is obvious (or what should be obvious). It is possible that there is a sense of rivalry by relevance theorists with respect to Jaszczolt's ideas, possibly because she represents, on some accounts at least, the future (and not the past), and because there is a meta-theoretical quality to her research which, if not in detail, offers to guide us along the right paths in the attempt to construct the pragmatic theory of the future. I should not reiterate, here, considerations I expressed in my very positive review of Jaszczolt (2016) in Capone (2016), except for the more limited purpose of specifying that I believe that the great merit of Jaszczolt's views is to have meditated on the abstract formats which pragmatic theories should take. In this sense, Jaszczolt's views represent modernity. (It is not surprising that part of theorizing should be devoted to theories about theories and should address general (rather than specific) theoretical problems).

A remark by Zhang and Zhang that seems to me to be at least problematic is that, in order to escape Grice's circle (a theoretical problem arising in the apparent circularity due to the fact that implicatures take input from what is said and what is said takes input from pragmatics (see Capone, 2003, 2006, 2009 on Grice's circle and uncancellable explicatures)), "Relevance Theory places no theoretical weight on the distinction between generalized conversational implicatures and particularized conversational implicatures". The move of not making such a distinction is completely without effects with respect to the resolution of Grice's circle. In fact, as I made clear in my proposal in Capone (2003)<sup>1</sup> and (2006) on the topic (see Haugh, 2013 for a reply), the circle arises both through generalized and particularized explicatures (the discussion in those papers, in fact, focused on particularized explicatures). In any case, Zhang and Zhang seem to admit that Relevance theorists accept that there are things like generalized implicatures and that both types of inference are involved in explicatures. Still, it is a mystery to me how it comes that such an admission should be able to resolve Grice's circle, given that Levinson (2000) acknowledges this circularity problem and it is clear that Levinson also accepts that there are generalized and particularized implicatures (though his emphasis on generalized implicatures is heavier).<sup>2</sup> One précis

<sup>1</sup> I did not stress enough the importance of Capone (2003) which is the first paper published in an international journal to say that explicatures are not cancellable, even prior to Burton-Roberts' (2005) review of Carston's book.

<sup>2</sup> I am trying to figure out why my opponents think that Grice's circle is resolved (or does not arise) by eliminating the distinction between generalized and particularized implicatures (or explicatures). It is interesting that they do not bother to offer an explanation of their conviction that the circle disappears if we eliminate this terminological distinction. Perhaps they think that particularized implicatures should take input from generalized implicatures and it is this that creates the circle. But even assuming that there are only particularized implicatures, one may well be committed to the view that certain particularized implicatures take input from certain other particularized implicatures (as this is guaranteed by the fact that, however we segment or circumscribe the context, there is always a larger context that could potentially be taken into account, which would require certain particularized implicatures to take input from other particularized implicatures). (The alternative is that there are only generalized implicatures, but this is really contrary to the spirit of Relevance Theory, as my opponents seem to accept at some point which I then specifically discuss in this paper; if anything, a theory of only particularized implicatures perhaps is feasible but I do not see how a theory of merely generalized implicatures should be feasible (of course contextual sensitivity can be built into the theory by resorting to the notion of cancellability but this might be a serious theoretical problem when one notices that at least in practice many implicatures and certainly explicatures, in general, are not cancellable).)

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