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## Assessing relevance

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### Abstract

This paper advances an approach to relevance grounded on patterns of material inference called argumentation schemes, which can account for the reconstruction and the evaluation of relevance relations. In order to account for relevance in different types of dialogical contexts, pursuing also non-cognitive goals, and measuring the scalar strength of relevance, communicative acts are conceived as dialogue moves, whose coherence with the previous ones or the context is represented as the conclusion of steps of material inferences. Such inferences are described using argumentation schemes and are evaluated by considering (1) their defeasibility, and (2) the acceptability of the implicit premises on which they are based. The assessment of both the relevance of an utterance and the strength thereof depends on the evaluation of three interrelated factors: (1) number of inferential steps required; (2) the types of argumentation schemes involved; and (3) the implicit premises required.

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### 1. Introduction

Relevance is crucial issue in many disciplines, including philosophy of language and pragmatics (Blakemore, 2002; Carston, 2004; Giora, 1985, 1997; Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Wilson and Sperber, 2004), linguistics and Artificial Intelligence (Hobbs, 1979; Lascarides and Asher, 1993), discourse analysis (Taboada, 2009), and argumentation theory (Macagno and Walton, 2017; Walton, 2003). The distinct pragmatic approaches to relevance developed in the last decades have provided fundamental insights into this concept, representing it in terms of inferences, ratio between cognitive effects and processing effort, or coherence with a discourse topic or communicative purpose. However, for the purposes of analyzing discourse and assessing dialogical or argumentation skills in different contexts (see for instance educational dialogue, Erduran, 2008; Macagno, 2016; Macagno et al., 2015; Nussbaum and Edwards, 2011; Rapanta et al., 2013), relevance needs to be reconstructed and assessed based on some objective, quasi-logical criteria that can be translated into a coding scheme, and can be suited to capturing different communicative goals.

The purpose of this paper is to propose an argumentative approach to relevance based on common patterns of material inferences (Hitchcock, 2017, Chapter 9; Stump, 1989) called argumentation schemes. This perspective can be framed as a development of a normative pragmatics, commitment-based model of communication, in which the focus is placed on how to attribute and justify the right commitment to the person making the claim (Brandom, 1994, pp. 96–97; Hitchcock, 2017, p. 112; Tindale, 2015, p. 120). Like in normative pragmatics, utterances are described in terms of

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commitments, broadly conceived of as dialogical responsibilities (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–162), modifications of the social or dialogical status of the speakers based on the evidence produced (what is said) (Macagno and Walton, 2017). An utterance can be represented in terms of the inferences it licenses, which in turn can be analyzed and assessed based on the possible patterns of material inferences formalized as argumentation schemes (Walton et al., 2008). On this perspective, relevance will be represented and assessed by reconstructing the inferences bridging two utterances in terms of micro-arguments, which can be evaluated considering their defeasibility conditions and the acceptability of the implicit premises on which they are grounded.

After illustrating the background of the concept of relevance and the defining characteristics thereof (Section 2), the most important approaches will be presented and discussed (Sections 3 and 4). In Sections 5 and 6, the argumentative approach to relevance will be presented, showing how it can predict relevance and irrelevance in cases of utterances pursuing non-cognitive communicative goals (Section 5), and how it can represent a relevance relation as a micro-argument or a chain of micro-arguments, characterized by specific material inference relations and defeasibility conditions (Section 6). The last section (Section 7) will be devoted to the concept of inferential distance, which measures the strength of relevance by factoring three interrelated dimensions, i.e. the number of inferential steps, the types of argumentation scheme used, and the acceptability of the implicit premises involved.

## 2. Relevance as dialogical appropriateness

The modern concept of relevance used and developed in pragmatics can be traced back to Grice's maxim of relation. Grice first underscored the crucial importance of relevance for the analysis of discourse and conversation, and more importantly for reconstructing the speaker's meaning. According to Grice, participants to a conversation share a common communicative purpose, a common goal characterizing their verbal interaction (Grice, 1975, p. 45):

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.

Grice formulated the notion of relevance in terms of relation (maxim of relation), which defines as appropriateness to the conversational needs (Grice, 1975, p. 47):

Relation. I expect a partner's contribution to be appropriate to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction. If I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book or even an oven cloth (though this might be an appropriate contribution at a later stage).

The “appropriateness to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction” leads to the problem of accounting for what “appropriateness” and “needs” (which arise from each state of the transaction) mean. Grice left the notion of relevance “entirely undefined” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 36). However, he provided some examples to show what this maxim amounts to. The first example concerns the relationship between a proposition expressed by a sentence and the topic addressed by the other conjoined sentences:

### Case 1 – Not to prison yet

Suppose that A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who is now working in a bank. A asks B how C is getting on in his job, and B replies, Oh quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet (Grice, 1975, p. 43).

The last conjunct in B's reply does not apparently pursue the speaker's goal of supporting a comment on C's happy working life, providing information in line with the first conjunct. Instead of highlighting possible reasons of C's satisfaction (such as a positive working environment, achievements, etc.), B claims that he hasn't been to prison yet, which can hardly contribute to the expected purpose of his reply. According to Grice, the last conjunct of B's reply can be considered as irrelevant, if, and only if, A cannot derive the authorized inference (implicature) (Clark, 1977, p. 244; Rickheit et al., 1985, pp. 7–8) that C is potentially dishonest (Grice, 1975, p. 50). The second case concerns the relationship between two utterances, and more precisely the relation of a reply to the previous move (an implicit request):

### Case 2 – The garage

A is standing by an obviously immobilized car and is approached by B; the following exchange takes place:

A: I am out of petrol.

B: There is a garage round the corner (Grice, 1975, p. 51).

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