Discussion note

Metaphor interpretation and motivation in relevance theory

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Abstract

Relevance theory has long been taken as a theory focusing on hearer's recognition of intention and her/his inference of speaker's implicatures based on explicatures. Recently, Kecskes (2010) takes a new Socio-cognitive Approach (SCA) to pragmatics based on his critique of relevance theory. In this paper, we argue that his critique is flawed on several points. First, the hearer-centered notion of relevance is not completely correct. Rather, relevance theory does not ignore speaker's role in the course of communication. We analyze the process of metaphor interpretation to show that relevance theory is a full-fledged theory taking into consideration the roles of both speaker and hearer in communication. Second, the motivation problem is not totally ignored by relevance theory, either. We argue that there have been three pressures to motivate metaphor interpretation as well as communication, namely, the pressure of being relevant, the pressure of embodiment and the pressure of context, which constitute the three primary motivations for metaphor interpretation. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Kecskes (2010) takes a new Socio-cognitive Approach (SCA) to pragmatics based on his critique of relevance theory. In his paper, Kecskes claims that relevance theory does not fully respect speaker's role in communication and ignores the motivation problem of communication. In our view, relevance theory fully takes the roles of both speaker and hearer into consideration, and provides a full-fledged view on the production and the interpretation of metaphors, as well as communication in general. This paper takes issue with some of the points presented in Kecskes (2010), with a particular focus on the motivation behind metaphors. According to Wilson and Sperber (2004), explicature has two layers: one is the higher-level explicature, and the other the basic-level explicature. We argue that metaphor interpretation also belongs to the higher-level explicature, which is also a propositional attitude toward the content speaker is saying. The higher-level explicature manifests speaker's individual communicative intention. It belongs to the subjective domain or field, and it turns into the shared communicative intention under the principle of being relevant. Shared communicative intention belongs to the intersubjective domain or field. Hearer infers the implicature of metaphors via the shared intention. Another issue this paper will address is the motivation of metaphors. We argue that the pressure of embodiment, the pressure of context and the pressure of being relevant work in parallel to motivate metaphor production and interpretation. The three pressures can be given different levels of explanation. The pressure of being relevant is the personal level explanation, and the pressure of embodiment and the pressure of context are the sub-personal level explanation, respectively.

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The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces relevance theory and its views on metaphor interpretation. Section 3 discusses speaker's role and intersubjectivity in metaphor understanding in relevance theory. Section 4 presents the motivation of metaphor interpretation. Section 5 summaries the major findings of the paper.

2. Relevance theory and metaphor

Grice (1975) proposes the notion of implicature and divides the meaning of utterance into two parts: 'what is said' and 'what is implicated': 'what is said' is equal to semantic/sentence meaning, whereas 'what is implicated' is equal to speaker's meaning. The basis of Gricean theory lies in the recognition of speaker's intentions. Based on this basic assumption, Grice develops an inferential model of communication to replace the classical code model. Sperber and Wilson (1995) develop a relevance-theoretic account of utterance understanding. Relevance theory, according to Wilson and Sperber (2004), is based on another of Grice's central claims: utterances automatically create expectations which guide hearer toward speaker's meaning. The recognition of speaker's intentions remains as an important concern of relevance theory, while the production of speaker's intentions is also another important concern of relevance theory. Wilson and Sperber (2004) claim that the aim of relevance theory is to explain in cognitively realistic terms what these expectations of relevance amount to, and how they might contribute to an empirically plausible account of comprehension. In this spirit, Sperber and Wilson (1995:260) formulate two principles: the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance. With regard to the cognitive principle of relevance, they state that ''human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.'' With regard to the communicative principle of relevance, they state that ''every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.''

Roughly speaking, an input yielding a cognitive effect is taken as being relevant to an individual. The cognitive effects include strengthening, creating, revising or abandoning of available assumptions combined with in-hand context assumptions. And cognitive effects depend heavily on speaker's contribution. For example, consider the following exchange between two university professors:

(1)   Peter: ''Can we trust John to do as we tell him and defend the interests of the Linguistics department in
        the University Council?''
        Mary: ''John is a soldier!'' (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:319)

How can we understand Mary's utterance? The existing assumptions of soldier proposed by speaker will help us to have a basic understanding of the proposition, John is a solider! However, this utterance takes place in a special context relevant to the topic about whether or not we can trust John to do something. In this context, speaker uses the word 'soldier' to convey her/his intention and restrict hearer to interpret the meaning of this sentence. As a consequence, hearer could yield such a cognitive effect that we can trust John to defend the interests of Linguistics department. In relevance theory, being relevant is not a quantitative matter but a comparative matter, viz., a matter of degree. Speaker will use the most relevant words to manifest her/his intention.

Wilson and Sperber (2004) also claim that communication is an ostensive-inferential communication, which is manifested as two intentions: the informative intention and the communicative intention. Both are speaker-centered intentions. The informative intention is to inform the audience of something. The communicative intention is to inform the audience of one's informative intention. In order to attract audiences' attention, speakers should use an ostensive stimulus. According to the communicative principle of relevance introduced by Sperber and Wilson (1995), every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. The notion of optimal relevance is essential to the relevance-theoretic pragmatics. The optimal relevance guarantees that an ostensive stimulus is relevant to be worth hearer's processing effort and the stimulus should not go against speaker's own interests and preferences in producing an utterance.

In contrast with the Gricean division between 'what is said' and 'what is implicated', relevance theory makes a distinction between explicature and implicature. Relevance theory emphasizes the inferential nature of both explicature and implicature. And comprehension is an on-line process. According to relevance theory, the explicature results from mutual adjustment with context and cognitive effects through the process of disambiguation, reference assignment, etc. Basically there have been two types of explicature: higher-level explicature and basic-level explicature. Higher-level explicature is connected with metarepresentation representing one's attitudes in echoic interpretation. This distinction can be reflected in the use of figurative languages such as irony, hyperbole and metaphor. Wilson and Sperber (2004) point out that verbal irony involves the expression of a tacitly dissociative attitude – wry, sceptical, bitter or mocking – to an attributed utterance or thought, while understanding metaphors does not need such a proposition. Wilson and Carston (2006) argue that relevance theory treats metaphor interpretation, like utterance interpretation in general, as guided by expectations of relevance. They claim that the understanding of metaphors is merely part of a continuum that includes hyperbole, approximation and other local pragmatic phenomena that arise at the level of the word or the phrase.