Relevance theory and language change

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Abstract

This paper considers how ideas developed within relevance theory can be applied in accounting for language change. It briefly surveys previous relevance-theoretic work on language change and suggests that studies of procedural meaning, lexical pragmatics and metarepresentation can each play an important role in accounting for semantic change. It identifies a number of areas for further research which could help to develop understanding of both relevance theory and language change and suggests that one important line of further research would be to explore connections between work in relevance theory and approaches which adopt terms and ideas from the theory without adopting the relevance-theoretic framework overall.
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1. Introduction

This paper is mainly motivated by the assumption that ideas from relevance theory could be more extensively and more usefully applied in work on language change. A second motivation, not developed here, is the thought that it would be useful to explore more fully possible connections between relevance-theoretic and other approaches to language and communication in general and to language change in particular.

While a significant number of approaches see a key role for pragmatics in accounting for semantic change (for discussion, see Traugott, 2012), there has been little work in this area from the perspective of relevance theory. Traugott (2012:550) cites only four examples: Groefsema (1995), Koch (2004), Nicolle (1998b), and Papafragou (2000). While a small number of other works discuss change from a more or less relevance-theoretic point of view (see, for example, Breul, 2007; De Mulder, 2008; LaPolla, 2003, 2015; Nicolle and Clark, 1998; Padilla Cruz, 2003, 2005; Ruíz Moneva, 1997; Schulte, 2003; Žegarac, 1998), and discussion of change often arises naturally when considering the meanings of particular expressions, Traugott is right to suggest that very little work focuses on change directly or mainly from a relevance-theoretic perspective. The extensive online relevance theory bibliography managed by Francisco Yus (http://personal.ua.es/francisco.yus/rt.html) has no heading for work on language change and lists very few sources which focus on change.

This paper discusses some of the ways in which ideas from relevance theory can play a role in accounts of change. Section 2 briefly discusses examples of relevance-theoretic work in this area, indicating some ways in which these differ from work in other (mainly neo-Gricean) approaches. Section 3 suggests that three ideas from relevance theory can play a key role in accounts of change: the distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning, work on lexical pragmatics,

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and the notion of metarepresentation. The conceptual-procedural distinction, developed mainly in the work of Blakemore (1987, 2002, 2007), has already been applied in work on language change by relevance theorists and, with some modifications, by others (e.g. Hansen, 2008, 2012; Traugott and Dasher, 2002). Partly in the light of recent suggestions about procedural meaning (particularly as discussed by Wilson, 2011), this section suggests new ways of thinking about three key points made in Nicolle's influential (1998b) paper. One possibility discussed here is a move closer to the assumption made by Traugott and others (e.g. Traugott and Dasher, 2002; Traugott and Trousdale, 2013) that the development of encoded procedural meaning ('proceduralisation') is gradual rather than instant. This question depends to some extent, of course, on whether the discussion is focusing on change for an individual (which Nicolle claims in instantaneous) or for a community (which Nicolle claims is gradual). Relevance-theoretic work on lexical pragmatics (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1998; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Carston, 2007) has been applied very little if at all (I am aware only of passing mentions) in accounts of language change. This work also has important implications for studies of language change, suggesting a particular perspective on the view that change is constant and that regularisation and conventionalisation (rather than the 'initiation' of change) are key things to focus on in accounts of change. The section also considers the role which metarepresentation plays in language change. While this follows partly from its key role in the relevance-theoretic notion of ostensive-inferential communication, metarepresentation also plays a specific role in the development of some new meanings. Section 4 indicates some directions for future research and concludes that there is scope for a much broader range of work on language change from a relevance-theoretic perspective.

2. Previous relevance-theoretic work

This section briefly describes some previous relevance-theoretic work on change. It begins by considering two areas of focus in non-relevance-theoretic approaches and considers what relevance-theoretic assumptions suggest about them.

2.1. 'Bridging contexts' and stages of conventionalisation

Traugott (2012) identifies a range of work which explores the role pragmatics can play in accounts of language change. This includes studies of 'bridging contexts' (Diewald, 2002; Evans and Wilkins, 2000; Enfield, 2003; Heine, 2002), Horn's (1984, 1989) and Levinson's (1995, 2000) application of their respective neo-Gricean principles in considering conventionalisation, and Traugott and Dasher's (2002) Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (based to some extent on Horn's and Levinson's work). The Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change is based on the assumption that certain inferences are 'invited' by utterances in certain contexts and that this can lead to conventionalisation. One well-known example (discussed by Traugott and Dasher (2002:36–38) is the development of a conditional sense for the expression *as long as* from earlier spatial and temporal senses.

Bridging contexts are ones where an utterance can be understood by listeners as having either an innovative meaning or an earlier one. The innovative meaning may be 'preferred' in many contexts but is still cancellable and not yet conventionalised. Bridging contexts occur when an expression gives rise to the same or a similar pragmatic implicature often enough that the content of that implicature becomes regularly associated with the expression. Eventually, it may become hard to 'cancel' the implicature and so it is no longer clear that the implicature (or its activation) is not part of the encoded meaning. At this stage, the original encoded meaning might persist or it might, more or less quickly, cease to be associated with the expression, at which point the new meaning is conventionalised. Traugott (2012:550–551) mentions as an example the English word *since*, which developed from *sith* (as discussed by Geis and Zwicky, 1971). This word originally had a temporal sense ('late' or 'after') and later developed a causal sense alongside the temporal sense. This contrasts with *after* which, as Traugott and König (1991) point out, 'though associated with causal implicatures in relevant contexts, has never become semantically polysemous' (Traugott, 2012:551).[1]

While the notion of bridging contexts in this sense is consistent with relevance-theoretic assumptions, there is, of course, room to debate exactly how the process unfolds, and there has been some discussion of this. Nicolle (2011:403–405) argues that bridging contexts are not an inevitable or necessary feature of grammaticalisation. Groefsema (1992), while not focusing on questions of language change explicitly, discusses the notion of a 'short-circuited implicature' as suggested by Morgan (1978; see also Searle, 1975; Bach and Harnish, 1979), and points out some problems with this notion, before developing an alternative semantic and pragmatic account of *can* and its use in expressions such as *can you pass the salt?* Building on Groefsema's discussion, Žegarac (1998) considers problems with the notion of a 'short-circuited implicature' and suggests an alternative explanation for the development of standardised and conventionalised meanings. He suggests that expressions may become associated not with implicatures but with contextual assumptions.

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[1] Of course, *after* does have more than one sense in contemporary varieties of English. Traugott is suggesting only that it has not developed a causal sense like the one which has developed for *since*.