

INTRODUCTION

New developments in relevance theory

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In 1986, Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* made a breakthrough in pragmatic research, shifting the spotlight from issues pertaining to discourse production and conversational interaction to cognitive phenomena underlying human communication. In their seminal 1986 book, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson sought to offer a comprehensive account of the inferential processes involved in utterance comprehension and how inferences are routinely made by the human mind in order to reach optimally relevant interpretations. Grounded on Gricean pragmatics, but yet reacting against it, relevance theory was soon applied to an enormous variety of linguistic phenomena, which include discourse/pragmatic markers, distinct types of adverbials and particles, and verbal mood, tense and aspect, to name but a few. It also contributed to a better understanding of the role of reformulations or phatic communication, how irony, figurative language and literary texts achieve their effects, how argumentation or media discourse fulfil their functions, or how humour originates. Moreover, relevance theory helped unravel the intricacies of phenomena like non-verbal communication, (im)politeness, misunderstanding, pragmatic development or language pathologies. As a result, it was soon welcomed as a necessary asset in fields as diverse as translation studies, historical linguistics and historical pragmatics, interlanguage or second language pragmatics, or instructional pragmatics.

In 2022, this Special Issue of *Pragmatics & Cognition* comes as a reminder that the foundations of the model still hold strong, while the intervening years have seen a number of reconceptualizations and interesting developments within the theory. Deirdre Wilson made these developments possible through her sparkling intellectual inspiration flowing from her published works and personal encounters in a cascade of ideas put forth in conference presentations, seminars, informal discussions, emails, talking and engaging with enthusiasm in forms of open communication. It is impossible to enumerate all the topics that Deirdre Wilson has addressed in her individual or co-authored works, but the most prominent areas of her interest include the conceptual-procedural distinction, lexical pragmatics, metarepresentations, irony and parody, interpretation of literary texts, metonymy or weak cognitive effects, also referred to as non-propositional effects.

This Special Issue aims to acknowledge certain aspects of the most insightful and current work by Deirdre Wilson, as well as to pay a tribute of gratitude for her contribution to relevance-theoretic pragmatics, her constant inspiration and support. It gathers nine papers whose topics revolve around some of the issues addressed by Deirdre Wilson. Thus, this Special Issue also seeks to showcase the current perspectives and research trends within relevance-theoretic pragmatics.

The idea that some linguistic devices should be seen as encoding procedures, or computational instructions of the form “process clause X as a premise for clause Y” or “search for a masculine referent”, rather than concepts such as ‘cat’, ‘tired’ or ‘sleep’, was originally put forth by Diane Blakemore (1987). Questions soon arose about the applicability of the conceptual-procedural distinction to communicative phenomena, as well as about the actual impact of procedural elements on processing. Procedures have been shown to play a key role in reference assignment and resolution (e.g., Wilson & Sperber 1993), the comprehension of vocal features like prosody or interjections, and non-verbal ones like gestuality or facial expressions (e.g., Wharton 2003, 2009; Wilson & Wharton 2006), grammatical morphemes (e.g., Escandell-Vidal & Leonetti 2011), or argumentative and manipulative discourse (Maillat & Oswald 2009; Oswald 2016). Indeed, procedural items are “systematically linked to states of language users”, unlike expressions “systematically linked to concepts, which are constituents of a language of thought” (Wilson 2011: 10; see also Wilson 2016).

The interplay of conceptual and procedural input in utterance comprehension is explored by two of the papers in this issue. The paper by Louis de Saussure offers insights into the cognitive benefits yielded by temporal and aspectual markers. These are argued to help resolve mismatches between various procedural and conceptual elements in verb phrases. In turn, the paper by Manuel Padilla Cruz addresses expressive expletives, which have often been claimed to either express the speaker’s attitude towards the whole utterance where they occur or just towards the referent of the noun next to which they are placed. Considering such expletives as procedural elements, the author suggests that they may enact and contribute to lexical pragmatic processes, which would explain why they could be taken to voice the speaker’s attitude towards a lexical referent.

The recognition of inferential processes operating on individual concepts, rather than on whole propositions, is another key development in relevance theory (e.g., Wilson 2003; Wilson and Carston 2007). Quite undeniably, it paved the way for an innovative account of metaphors and related figures of speech. Moreover, metaphors have been contended to give rise to a wide array of non-propositional effects (e.g., Wilson & Carston 2019), as well as processes going well beyond inference. Relying on the postulates of the relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics, Kate Scott analyses how internet memes communicate

meaning in the domain of multimodal communication. She argues that memes can convey thoughts entertained by social media users, although memes do not represent or illustrate these thoughts at the literal level. In turn, Elly Ifantidou and Anna Piata observe that metaphors are processed by not entirely conceptual mechanisms. By reviewing empirical evidence, the authors claim that images and emotions help set up ‘mental shortcuts’, with implications for the relevance-theoretic account of utterance interpretation. Finally, a radical standpoint on non-propositional effects is adopted by Tim Wharton. The author makes a case for a systematic inclusion of affective effects in the cognitive pragmatic account of communication.

Insights into the nature of non-propositional effects, albeit from the angle of translation, are also offered by Ryoko Sasamoto. On the grounds of perceptual resemblance between sounds and their representations in English and Japanese, the author explores the verbal realization of onomatopoeic expressions, as well as their communicative import. Weak propositional and non-propositional effects may jointly result from the intentional exploitation of various phenomena. One of them is ambivalence, as discussed by Agnieszka Piskorska, who also draws on the relevance-theoretic account of lexical pragmatic processes. Others are ideologically loaded messages, in which speakers may not necessarily wish to overtly endorse the discriminatory views that they tacitly convey, as Stavros Assimakopoulos argues.

The collection is concluded with Jacques Moeschler’s contribution. He discusses the notion of truth lying at the heart of most philosophical-linguistic enquiries and investigates its convergent points with the notion of relevance. This relation is of great significance for cognitive pragmatics.

All in all, the papers included in this Special Issue reflect on topics currently addressed within relevance-theoretic pragmatics and outline the ever expanding array of phenomena to which this framework can be fruitfully applied. As with the impressive amount of prior work in the framework, this collection of articles would not have been possible without the encouragement and bright inspiring vision of Deirdre Wilson. May this Special Issue serve as a token of scholarly indebtedness and immense gratitude for her contribution to shaking the pillars of contemporary pragmatics as we know it.

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