

A Relevance Theoretic Account of Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction

Ilker Ozelik

PhD Researcher, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Science and Letters, Suleyman Demirel University, 32100, Isparta, Turkey

***Corresponding author**

Ilker Ozelik

Article History

Received: 29.11.2017

Accepted: 06.12.2017

Published: 30.12.2017

DOI:

10.21276/sjahss.2017.5.12.29



Abstract: This paper concerned with the “basics” of “Relevance Theory”, attempts to examine the applicability of relevance theoretic approach in terms of semantic and pragmatic relations. The paper focuses on the complex relations between the “Relevance Theory” and dialogue-based interaction in language. Restoring “Relevance Theory” in discourse analysis is currently a widely used research paradigm which, in turn, gives rise to a strong new interest in relativity in all disciplines. The paper also attempts to differentiate between semantics and pragmatics of the two strands of cognitive processing employed in the understanding of utterances and sentences. These fall under two types: decoding and inference. In the first part of this article we examine the central conceptual properties of the “Relevance Theory”. In the second part, we illustrate the rationale and potential of the “Relevance Theory” in terms of semantics and pragmatics by empirically testing its capacity as well as adequacy to varying communication needs. Finally, third part draws attention to the perspective of the problem.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, communication.

INTRODUCTION

The format of this paper does not allow us to create a fully developed theory that can incorporate all the different functional styles in terms of the “behaviour” of relevance in them. Instead, we aim to present a study focusing on how relevance contributes to text organization in the contexts of Speech Acts theories (a) introduced by different theorists, and (b) in identifying socio-pragmatic functions of relevance.

To demonstrate how and why so many theories have had problems in creating a comprehensive theory we will begin by providing an overview of the most important and influential theories of relevance we will work through some concerns (of semantic and pragmatic values) regarding general text organization theory, before establishing the position and place/potential of relevancy in relation to the other text creating factors.

Relevance Theory, the study of human communication from a cognitive approach, was originally developed by Sperber and Wilson [1]. But it was the seventies and early eighties that the first serious discussions and analyses of the theory emerged as a cognition-based alternative to Grice’s cooperative principle in communication [2]. Among recent studies on Relevance Theory (RT in furtherance), their work is undoubtedly one of the most prominent ones. The focus of the study has largely been devoted to the description of Relevance Theory (RT in furtherance).

To demonstrate how and why so many theories have had problems in creating a comprehensive theory this paper will work through some concerns (of

semantic and pragmatic values) regarding general text organization theory, before establishing the position and place/potential of relevancy in relation to the other text creating factors. To make the procedure easier and more reasonable, we will also consider the problem in its historical evolution, the importance of which will be especially visible and acute in identifying the exact prominence of the relevance within the complexity of text organization and functioning.

Yus [3] argues that human beings have an intuitive ability to use for the maximization of the relevance for the mental processes and dynamic inputs e.g., linguistic and non-linguistic elements of communication. Following in Sperber and Wilson’s footsteps, Yus also claims that relevance does not only occur within the domain of external linguistic stimuli (e.g. sentences), but also within mental processes and thoughts, all of which may become inputs for cognition, which, in turn, enables human beings gear the maximization of relevance by through cognitive processes. In a large longitudinal study, Sperber and Wilson [4] investigates the incidence of cognitive effects in relevance. The study reports that human beings have developed their cognition in a way that

their psychological, biological, and artificial mechanisms and cognitive processes are always in favour of choosing the most relevant stimuli. This, in turn, enables the activation of likely relevant factors and criterion and processing of these in the most dynamic way.

Many researchers have attempted at defining meaning from the perspective of human communication. Johnson [5] calls discourse as the main elements of a text relevant to each another. We need to recognize the entities of any linguistic type, the linguistic elements of social behaviour. Fairclough [6] calls these orders of discourse [7, 8]. Bearing a close resemblance to other linguistic approaches, the relevance-theoretic model argues that communication is a dynamic cooperative effort between two or more parties, which, enables those parties exchange ideas and share communicative intentions. Meaning lies at the heart of current pragmatic approaches and theories. And meaning can be classified into two types: sentence meaning and speaker's meaning. The relevance-theoretic approach, therefore, aims to minimize the difference between the meanings provided by the speaker and sentence. One of the main concerns of the Relevance Theory is therefore grounded to analyze one of Grice's Speech Acts Theory (through verbal and non-verbal communication forms). This is often called as the understanding of intention in which the communication parties interact. The way they engage might be different, however, for any communication to be a success all actors engaged in it must share a set of common intentions and activity [9-12].

The Relevance Theory presents a broad view of cognitive processes with a special focus on information-processing approach. The theory suggests that any cognitive process aims to create the greatest cognitive effect for the least effort in human cognition. By doing so, a) human beings need to pay attention what seems most relevant to them; b) communication requires communicant's attention; and c) any exchanged information is endowed with a degree of relevance (i.e., strong or weak).

As explained previously, Sperber and Wilson [13] argue the Relevance Theory to be of critical importance in understanding communication, and demonstrate the way it is sufficient to provide the exchange of linguistic entities and contextual factors. This type of pragmatic process and mechanism driven by relevance is a contributing factor for the theory to be called as ToM, theory of mind. In their examination of the approach, Sperber and Wilson argue that understanding utterances is primarily a process of hypothesis formation and confirmation driven by the communicative conventions of the Relevance Theory. In accord with these conventions, every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance [15]. At the heart of this

approach lies the examination of human language in connection with the way it is considered a critical factor for communication. It is, therefore, the intention of the rest of this paper to present an overview of relevance theory in terms of semantics/pragmatics distinction.

The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction in terms of Relevance Theory

Both semantics and pragmatics have developed their own methods for analyzing meaning. The former focuses on the analysis of word meanings and their relation, while the latter analyzes context in terms of its contribution to the meaning. The intention of the rest of this paper is to work out the semantic/pragmatic distinction of the two types of cognitive-linguistic processing model in understanding sentences. It can be divided into two types: decoding and inference. Various conflicting formulations and claims have been proposed over the past six decades, and it still remains one of the most widely investigated fields in the philosophical investigation of language. This distinction has become a critical issue in both linguistic and philosophy. A number of studies have examined the suggested distinction [15-23].

Semantics deals with the relation of signs to ... objects which they may or do denote. Pragmatics concerns the relation of signs to their interpreters [24]. Donnellan [25] claims that an utterance having a definite description subject could either express a general or a singular proposition Carston [18] argues that relevance-theoretic account adopts a version of such a "semantic undeterminacy" model, according to which natural language sentences standardly break down ciphering categorical propositions, which, in turn, enables the pragmatic process (relevance-theoretic approach) to be a part of the cognitive capacity (also known as ToM, Theory of Mind). What is more, it also claims that any encoded sentence meaning need be schematic. Bach claims that main rationale for proposing a semantics/pragmatics distinction is to present a pattern for explaining the forms. What a speaker transfers can hardly be a success in being figured out within the cognitive and linguistic domain of the sentence uttered. The table below [12] shows another reason, among others, in terms of modelling a semantics-pragmatics distinction to shed light on a number of other typologies:

type vs. token
sentence vs. utterance
meaning vs. use
context-invariant vs. context-sensitive meaning
linguistic vs. speaker's meaning
literal vs. nonliteral use
saying vs. implying
content vs. force

What we know about inferential pragmatics is mainly based on studies by Grice that works out the

systematization of conversational maxims which has been a main focus of both linguistics and philosophy. One of the most significant knowledge in today's pragmatics is largely based on his examination of conversational implicatures of an utterance. In accord with the Russellian approach, he argues that "what is said" plays a vital role in pairing of sentences. One major theoretical issue that has dominated the field for many years concerns the distinguishing "what our words say" from "what we in uttering them imply [9].

In a similar vein to Russelian tradition, he investigates the different uses of conversational implicatures mainly observed in syntactic and semantic levels of communication; namely to uphold Russell's quantificational account at the level of what is said.

In an attempt to provide an exhaustive exploration of the communication processes, Kecskes [18] calls for the need for a dialectical model of pragmatics that combines the perspective of both the speaker and hearer, because the existing pragmatic theories, both those that have grown out of Grice's theory, such as the various neo-Gricean approaches and the approach proposed by Relevance Theory are all hearer-centered; they base themselves on the Gricean modular view that divides the interpretation process to two stages: "what is said" and "what is implicated". Although Gricean theory, with its cooperative principle and maxims was supposed to embrace conversation as a whole, basically, its further development has remained hearer-centered, with less emphasis on and interest in the speaker's position—a rather paradoxical turn, as Grice himself always emphasized speaker's meaning. Even so, the Gricean divide of truth-conditional semantics and pragmatics has led to an impoverished speaker's meaning, without regard for the pragmatic features of speaker's meaning.

CONCLUSION

The study of semantics/pragmatics distinction can distinguish between what is said and what is understood within the framework of the context. This paper has dealt with the issue of semantics/pragmatics distinction, and tried to present an overview of meaning in semantics and pragmatics.

The interrelationships of the two assumptions (i.e., "what is said" and "what is implied" as a notion within the domain of language use) are more than conventional or encoded linguistic meanings. And it is the sole responsibility of the context to determine this. Accordingly, two main strands fall under this: (a) "what is said" as belonging to the semantic level, and (b) disambiguation and reference signalling as within pragmatic processes. These include plausibility, informative appropriateness and/or relativity, and it is therefore agreed upon by a number of scholars that pragmatics is a vital factor in identifying the truth-conditional and non-truth conditional meanings in

sentences. Grice, in developing the first strand, makes his "what is said" a speech-act equivalent of the linguistic entity, which, in turn, enables formalists assign truth and non-truth conditions to it. The second strand, however, draws a semantics/(non-)truth-conditions distinction in a more systematic way. The present study confirms previous findings and suggests what is called as "semantic undeterminacy, a main focus of relevance-theoretic approach, or namely as "pragmatic view" [26].

REFERENCES

1. Sperber D, Wilson D. *Precis of relevance: Communication and cognition*. Behavioral and brain sciences. 1987 Dec;10(4):697-710.
2. Sperber D, Cara F, Girotto V. Relevance theory explains the selection task. *Cognition*. 1995 Oct 31;57(1):31-95.
3. Brown K. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 14-Volume Set. Elsevier Science; 2005.
4. Sperber D, Wilson D. Pragmatics, modularity and mind-reading. *Mind & Language*. 2002 Jan 1;17(1-2):3-23.
5. Beech N, Johnson P. Discourses of disrupted identities in the practice of strategic change: The mayor, the street-fighter and the insider-out. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. 2005 Feb 1;18(1):31-47.
6. Fairclough, N. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*, Psychology Press, 2003
7. Chouliaraki L, Fairclough N. *Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh University Press; 1999.
8. Fairclough N. *Discourse and text: Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis*. *Discourse & Society*. 1992 Apr;3(2):193-217.
9. Grice HP. Reply to Richards. *Philosophical grounds of rationality: Intentions, categories, ends*. 1986:45-106.
10. Grice HP, White AR. *Symposium: The causal theory of perception*. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes. 1961 Jan 1;35:121-68.
11. Grice HP. *Logic and conversation*' in p. cole and j. morgan (eds.) *syntax and semantics volume 3: Speech acts*.
12. Bach K. *The semantics-pragmatics distinction: What it is and why it matters*. In *Pragmatik 1997* (pp. 33-50). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
13. Sperber D, Wilson D. *Postface" to the second edition of Relevance*, Relevance.1995.
14. Rouchota V, Jucker AH, editors. *Current issues in relevance theory*. John Benjamins Publishing; 1998 Jun 15.
15. Szabó Z, Lorincz A. *Real and complex independent subspace analysis by generalized variance*. arXiv preprint math/0610438. 2006 Oct 13.

16. Levinson SC. Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature. MIT press; 2000.
17. Perry J. Reference and reflexivity. Stanford: CSLI; 2001 Jan.
18. Carston R. Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication. John Wiley & Sons; 2008 Apr 15.
19. Borg E. Minimal semantics. Oxford University Press; 2004.
20. Recanati F. Literal meaning. Cambridge University Press; 2004.
21. Cappelen H, Lepore E. Insensitive Semantics: a Defence of Semantic Minimalism and Speech Pluralism.2005.
22. Predelli S. Contexts: Meaning, truth, and the use of language.
23. Bianchi C. The semantics/pragmatics distinction.2004.
24. Morris CW. Writings on the general theory of signs. Walter de Gruyter; 1971.
25. Donnellan KS. Reference and definite descriptions. The philosophical review. 1966 Jul 1;75(3):281-304.
26. Hale B, Wright C, Miller A, editors. A Companion to the Philosophy of Language. John Wiley & Sons; 2017 Feb 15.