

Understanding 'Between the Lines'



AGNIESZKA PISKORSKA

Institute of English Studies

University of Warsaw

a.piskorska@uw.edu.pl

Dr. Agnieszka Piskorska is an assistant professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw. Her interests include theories of communication and translation, in relation to cognition and also the psychology of emotions.

What we say often conveys far more than just literal meaning of the words said. One of the riddles of communication, therefore, is how we actually work out what a speaker meant

It is generally well known that communication in any natural language, such as Polish or English, is not a fail-safe mechanism, since apart from what we say explicitly we also convey certain messages between the lines. Take, for instance, a conversation between Peter and Mary: he asks if she would like to watch *To Rome with Love* again and she replies "*I love Roberto Begnini.*" His question is, in fact, an offer; her reply, in fact, expresses consent. Questions such as Peter's standardly play the role of a suggestion or offer, so understanding it is not really a matter of "reading between the lines" but rather of knowing the convention. On the other hand, the right understanding of Mary's reply relies on background knowledge, such as the fact that the actor Roberto Benigni plays a part in *To Rome with Love*.

The question to be asked at this point is what else, apart from mutually accessible background knowledge, is necessary for successful understanding to be achieved? It might seem that as long as Peter remembers that Begnini plays a part in the film, it will inevitably occur to him that what Mary is communicating is that she wants to watch it again. Let us however notice that this interpretation is not the only possible one, and is thus not inevitable: Peter could, after all, infer that rather than re-watching a film with Begnini in a supporting role,

Mary means that she would like to see one in which her favorite actor stars in a leading role. And so, given that there are other potentially viable ways of understanding, we have to conclude that the process of interpretation must be governed by some general principles, guiding the addressee towards selecting the particular meaning the speaker actually intends from among various possibilities that are compatible with the shared background knowledge.

In other words: "yes"

One attempt at capturing these general principles is known as Relevance Theory. It posits such a universal mechanism governing utterance interpretation, called the Principle of Relevance: paraphrased in non-technical terms, it states that when processing information, humans try to maximize cognitive benefits while at the same time keep processing effort down. Note that "benefits" and "effort" are here understood as parameters inherently characterizing the operation of the human mind, and have nothing to do with what people consciously think of as beneficial or effortful. A "benefit" so understood might be an increase in factual knowledge, or the erasure of false information from one's mental representation of the world. "Effort," on the other hand, is mostly associated with accessing the contextual knowledge that is used in processing information. The easier it is to retrieve such context from memory, the lesser the effort. As communicators, we do not need to be consciously aware of the Principle of Relevance to follow it. In fact, we cannot really choose not to follow it, since it inherently governs the operation of the human mind in processing any piece of information communicated.

Getting back to Peter and Mary: we can now explain why he takes her reply to mean that she will watch the film again. The most easily accessible context for Peter to understand Mary's utterance "*I love Roberto Begnini*" is the one provided by the question he himself had asked, namely the idea of watching *To Rome with Love*. When Mary mentions Begnini, the



information that he plays in that film becomes foregrounded in Peter's mind, thereby becoming easily accessible, too. Evidently, the effort required to follow this line of interpretation is small, whereas the benefits are considerable: Peter has his question answered and offer accepted. The alternative interpretation mentioned above – that Mary wants to see another film, one starring Begnini – would require much more effort of Peter, who would have to bring to mind films that he may have heard of but that are not on top of his mind at that moment. The cognitive benefits brought about by this interpretation would likewise be small: Peter would not learn anything specific about Mary's wishes.

Relevance Theory explains why instead of producing a short and straightforward answer we very often prefer to imply our intentions. While such an implicit reply seemingly demands greater processing effort on the part of the hearer, at the same time it gives rise to even greater cognitive benefits. In our example, not only does Mary accept Peter's offer but she also explains her motivation behind wanting to watch the same film again, namely her admiration for the Italian actor.

Happy in Warsaw - so to speak?

So, does the Principle of Relevance govern utterance interpretation only on the level of implied meaning? This would be true if we could prove that the more straightforward elements of the message are communicated

precisely by means of linguistic devices, i.e. words, grammar, and intonation. But as is pointed out in Relevance Theory, it is rarely the case. Typically, there is no one-to-one correspondence between concepts appearing in human thoughts and the words we use to try to represent them. The former are much richer and more detailed than the meaning of words. Consider the following example: Having received the news that his research paper has been accepted for publication, Peter says "I'm happy." Here, the happiness Peter is experiencing is of a specific kind: he feels satisfied because he has done a good job. Peter would certainly feel happy in a different way if he, say, won a million dollars, or received the news that he would become a father. He could, however, use the same word "*happy*" to express each of the different kinds of happiness, from which it can be concluded that the meaning of the adjective "*happy*" is very general and on each occasion of use it is saturated with different specific content, ranging from "overjoyed" to "satisfied." What is communicated, and what is supposed to be understood, is the saturated concept representing as much as possible an actual thought of the communicator, and not the mere dictionary meaning of a word. Similar underspecification of meaning can be attested in numerous verbs, e.g. "*to cook*", which can mean anything from heating convenience food to preparing a lemon soufflé for a hundred people. Adjectives are no different in this respect: "*John is tall*" may mean that

The Principle of Relevance maintains that when processing information, we try to maximize cognitive benefits while at the same time keep processing effort down

Relevance Theory on verbal communication

he is tall for a basketball player, or that he is tall for a 10-year-old boy.

In other situations, a word may encode a concept precisely, but the communicator uses the word loosely. Imagine that Peter informs a newly met Japanese colleague that he lives in Warsaw. Even though the proper name "Warsaw" appears to have well-defined rather than vague meaning, it is not what Peter's thought is about. As a matter of fact, Peter lives one kilometre away from the city limits of Warsaw, in a little town whose name is not widely known or significant. We would not say, though, that Peter misinformed his Japanese colleague. On the contrary, by saying "Warsaw" he in fact meant "Warsaw, loosely speaking,"

Given the great underdeterminacy of word meaning and the fallibility of the Principle of Relevance, there are numerous potential sources of communication failure

enabling the Japanese visitor to grasp an idea about his lifestyle, which includes cultural events typical of a capital city and traffic jams, too. Similar cases of loosening are observed when we say that a piece of a pizza is triangular (when one edge is rounded), that there is no traffic at night (more exactly there is little traffic), or that something takes five minutes (when we do not expect absolute precision).

It follows that whenever the addressee of a message represents in his mind the ideas that the speaker wanted to communicate, this is not achieved by merely decoding the meaning of words, because words are very frequently either more vague or more precise than the concepts figuring in our mental world. Such fine-tuning of the meaning of words to match the content of the speaker's actual thoughts is another mental task governed by the Principle of Relevance, which, as was mentioned above, guides the addressee in selecting a context and interpretive path so that the benefits are great and the processing effort is small.

In fact, the functioning of the Principle of Relevance is not confined to the kinds of cases we have discussed here: fine-tuning the meaning of words or conveying implications. We must keep in mind that not all communication serves the purpose of sharing information. Communicators may display all sorts of atti-

tudes to their utterances, including mockery and jocularly. For instance, when a button came off Alice's brand new coat, she groaned: "Oops, now I guess I'll have to get myself a new coat". By this she intended to mock her own disappointingly weak sewing skills, and her interlocutor Tony was expected to recognize her jocular intention and draw benefits of both cognitive nature (implications about Alice being useless at stitching up buttons) and affective nature (being amused and developing a sense of solidarity with Alice).

Indeed, the ways in which emotions and cognition interact in the perspective of communication are a topic which the present author finds particularly intriguing. It is certainly true that cognitive appraisal of communicated information can give rise to an emotional response, but what is more, emotions as such can actually be the intended content of communication. Besides, the aim of a conversation may not only be to convey one's emotional states, but also to establish that the participants share similar attitudes to certain phenomena and opinions.

When he doesn't call back

From the considerations presented above it follows that understanding one another's intentions in communication goes far beyond just understanding the conventional meaning of words and knowing grammatical rules. The kind of communication outlined here, based on a finite set of linguistic means and employing a relevance-driven interpretation mechanism, is much more efficient than an alternative mode of communication based on precise encoding of every element of human thoughts. But there is a price to pay, too: due to the great degree of underdeterminacy of word meaning and the fallibility of the Principle of Relevance (which is, after all, a human cognitive mechanism), there are numerous potential sources of communication failure. Take Alice again: she may still be wondering whether Tony stopped calling her because he was put off by (what he understood as) her wasteful and reckless attitude. ■

Further reading:

- Sperber D., Wilson D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wałaszewska E., Piskorska A. (eds.) (2012). *Relevance Theory: More than understanding*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: CSP
- Piskorska A. (ed.) (2012). *Relevance Studies in Poland. Essays on language and communication*. Warsaw: UW