

RELEVANCE THEORY AND CONTEXT SELECTION

A discussion of Sperber & Wilson's Comprehension Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to discuss a central feature of Sperber & Wilson's information processing model, namely: their account of context selection. I will argue that S&W's approach suffers a number of incongruencies and contradictions, resulting from their attempts to combine hearer-based processing strategies with the hearer's ability to identify speaker-based intentions. This paper concludes with a discussion of S&W's contributions to pragmatic theory in the light of Grice's earlier proposals.

1. Introduction

Grice's theory of Implicature (1975, 1978) is seen as an initial attempt within linguistic theory to logically define how interlocutors comprehend seemingly unrelated utterances in discourse. Since Grice's proposals, a focus of attention has been on inferencing procedures, thought to underlie hearers' ability to interpret and coordinate linguistic and non-linguistic information in the comprehension process. Sperber & Wilson's (S&W) Relevance Theory (1982, 1986) is a more recent account of human communication, grounded within a general view of cognition. Although S&W set out to model a cognitive system that would account for the information processing capacity of humans in general, their focus is specifically on verbal understanding and its dependence on 'relevant' contextual cues.

One of the most difficult problems for S&W's account to overcome is the matter of defining 'Relevance'. Relevance is fundamentally defined as being achieved when information processing derives maximal contextual effects for minimal processing effort. Such a definition must apply to the mind of the hearer. Consequently, this model is typically defined as being hearer-biased. However, S&W's proposed process of inferencing, based on that which is relevant to the hearer, may identify a potentially larger class of inferences than the specific one(s) the hearer is meant to derive. Hence, it may be argued that the principle of relevance over-generates and additional constraints must be identified. S&W have sought to provide this by specifying that "the principle of relevance applies only to the recognition of speaker intentions" (Wilson & Sperber 1986b:83). However, it will be my argument that this added criterion for relevance also fails to promote Relevance theory to descriptive adequacy.

In this paper, I will firstly present S&W's model in a schematized form. I will then present the following main points for discussion:

- (i) some criteria used to define 'relevance' are incompatible with other parameters suggested within S&W's approach;
- (ii) the divergences between Grice's theory and S&W's approach are smaller than they may at first appear, and
- (iii) Relevance theory comes little closer to accounting for the inferencing process that takes place during comprehension, than previous theories have achieved.

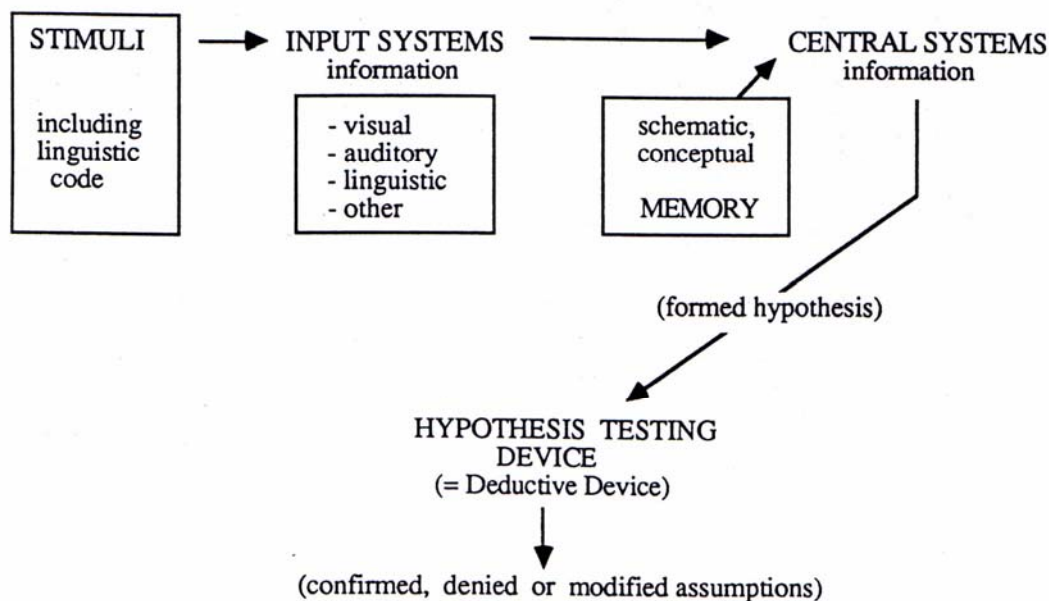
2. Sperber & Wilson's model

S&W have proposed a theory of non-demonstrative inferencing whereby hearers create assumptions based on the speaker's ostensive behaviour. Essentially, S&W's 1986 model

(see Fig. 1) involves a process of hypothesis formation and confirmation. Firstly, environmental stimuli - including the linguistic code - is processed in the Input systems. The Input systems involve deductive processes that bear a one-to one relation between the perceptual stimulus and its cognitive interpretation. These interpretations, or 'logical forms', are then sent to the Central systems where they combine with information in memory to form hypotheses. This is the hypothesis formation stage.

The then derived assumption will be sent to what Fodor (1983) calls the "Hypothesis Testing Device" (HTD). S&W call this the "Deductive Device", due to their conviction that the processing in this cognitive domain is strictly deductive in nature. At this stage the formed hypothesis is tested against a backdrop of prior assumptions about the world, which S&W believe will result in the hearer achieving his or her goal of gaining an optimal representation of the world (see S&W 1986:94-5).

FIGURE 1. S&W's Information Processing Model



Blakemore (1988:238) explains that people generally aim to bring about the greatest improvement to their overall representation of the world for the least cost in processing. S&W assume that this would be achieved by processing only information that is relevant; which, "other things being equal", will be greatest when premises derived from the combination of the proposition and the context, generate the greatest number of contextual effects for the least processing costs (Wilson & Sperber 1986a:250). The inferencing process would then proceed from the combination of old and new premises; and when the processing of new information gives rise to a multiplication effect, it is called 'relevant'. "The greater the multiplication effect, the greater the relevance" (S&W 1986:48).

It is thus a function of the mind, within this model, to transform 'lower level sensory representations into higher level conceptual representations' (S&W 1986:71-2), which are then capable of being processed in the HTD to either confirm, contradict or modify the strength of existing assumptions.

The range of possible contextual information to be drawn upon in the understanding process is delimited only by that which is deemed most relevant to pre-existing assumptions of the

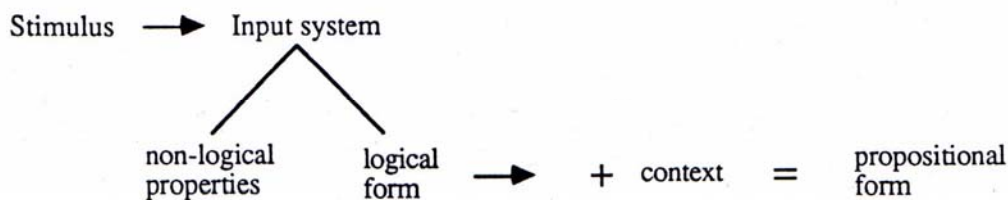
system-user or hearer, in order to achieve the system-user's goal of modifying and improving his/her overall representation of the world (S&W 1986:7 1).

Within S&W's approach, a great deal of emphasis is made on the nature of assumptions. S&W argue that assumptions have logical properties that make them amenable to processing in the Central systems. The types of processing referred to are the deductive processes of implication and contradiction. Although assumptions have logical properties, they may not be structurally complete. Such strings are consequently non-propositional. For example, those that involve free variables (i.e. referential and deictic items). Consider (1-3) below: the (semantically incomplete) utterance (1) entails (2) and contradicts (3).

- (1) She carried it in her hand.
- (2) She held something in her hand.
- (3) No-one ever carried anything. (S&W 1986:72)

These logical properties are the logical forms of conceptual representations, which are also described by Blakemore (1987: 141) as the "blueprints" for propositions. Effectively, the linguistic Input system is said to decode non-propositional forms into their logical forms, which hearers are expected to complete into fully propositional forms on the basis of relevant contextual information (see Fig. 2). One may assume that this would be accomplished on the basis of information derived from context, which is selected from other Input systems (perceptual or linguistic), and/or schematic information in memory.

FIGURE 2. The generation of Propositions



S&W's explanation of the origin of propositions falls in the wake of their criticism of Grice's approach (1975, 1978). S&W (1986:25) have argued that Grice's analysis is largely restricted to propositional meaning, and that it fails to account for the connection (or discrepancy) between speaker-meaning and the linguistic-meaning of sentences uttered.

In S&W's account (1986:257) assumptions undergo an initial obligatory parse for the context-free literal meaning. This is then processed by the Central system in order to find a context in which that proposition is viewed as most relevant. S&W claim that only fully propositional forms represent definite states of affairs that make them amenable to strictly logical operations; and non-propositional forms plus context can be generated into propositional forms that are semantically complete and thus capable of being deemed true or false. In effect, their approach entails: language + context = truth-conditional semantics.

A fundamental drawback to this account is that the logical form (or "blueprint" for a proposition) need not stand in a one-to-one relation with the semantic representation (or "output" of a grammar). Such a premise would render S&W's model descriptively inadequate as the proposition encoded in a sentence is not necessarily identical to the proposition intended by the utterance of it. Identification of the conveyed proposition may involve more than disambiguation of referents, deictic terms and ellipsis. (This will be considered further in section 4).

3. Problems of definition

The following subsections discuss a number of definitory problems that are the result of the vague and over-worked notion of relevance. These problems primarily stem from S&W's attempt to unify speaker-intentions with this fundamentally hearer-biased model of comprehension.

3.1 Context selection - defining Relevance

An important premise of S&W's model of communication is the argument that contexts for information processing are not a prerequisite, but a consequence of communication. S&W (1982:76) argue that the determination of contexts is done by the hearer, and is part of the comprehension process. This contrasts with earlier theories that presume that context is a 'given' and that propositions are processed against a predetermined contextual background. In S&W's account, the identification of the proposition itself clearly depends on the identification of a 'relevant' context, and vice versa. As is evident in Fig. 3, context selection occurs at several places in S&W's processing model - encompassing both environmental and cognitive contexts; and relevance must play a role in each of these three areas.

This model holds that context is chosen on the basis of being relevant to the derived assumption; and that assumption is derived on the basis of a relevant context. More specifically, if one will choose a context that will be relevant to one's existing representation of the world, then one must first access that context in memory, before one can access an appropriate context in the environment and in schematic memory, to form relevant hypotheses for subsequent processing in the HTD. Thus, this is somewhat circular in definition. In fact, circularity exists in the notion of 'relevance' itself, which is characterized as both "a property of assumptions in the mind; and as a property of those stimuli which provide premises for interpretation (S&W 1986:150). In total, it seems that S&W's account presupposes three types of 'relevance', listed below in Table 1, which coincide with the three areas of context.

FIGURE 3. The role of Context

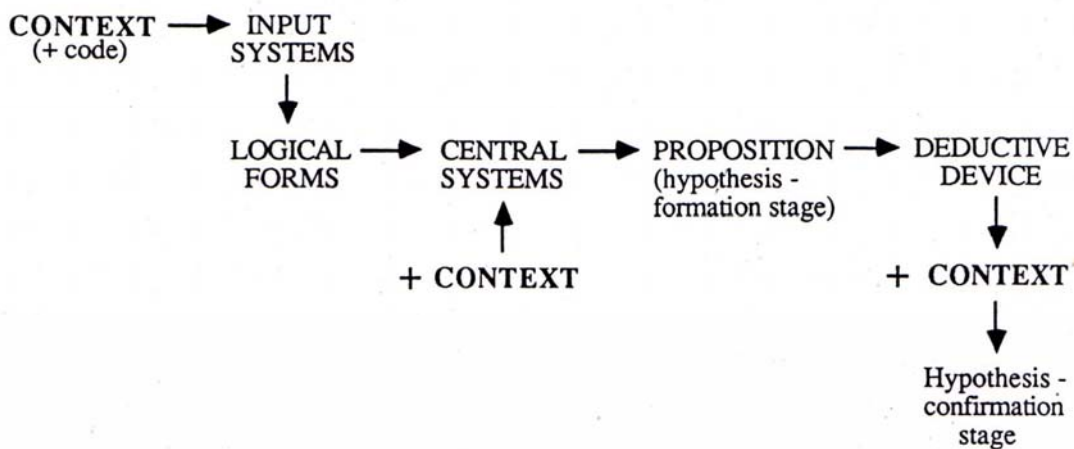


TABLE 1. Types of Relevance

- a. RELEVANCE is needed to select the optimal stimuli in the environment to be processed by the Input systems.
- b. RELEVANCE makes it possible for the system-user to select the most optimal cognitive context for that stimuli to formulate hypotheses in the Central systems (i.e. schematic memory link up).
- c. RELEVANCE determines which pre-existing assumptions will be chosen in the HTD to confirm or deny 'relevant' inferences or assumptions in memory.

In effect, S&W (1986: 142) postulate that assumptions are first processed, in the hope that they are relevant, and then the hearer will try to select a context which will justify that hope - "a context which will maximize relevance." From this quote it would seem that one must first generate a conclusion before finding the premises within the context to justify that conclusion. Not only does this requirement suggest that the flow of information processing runs counter to that indicated in the presented figures (1 & 3); but this would also make S&W's account guilty of the same criticism they have levelled at Grice: namely, such an account is not predictive, and it works 'ex post facto', if it can be shown to work at all.

3.2 Context selection - mutual cognitive environments

S&W (1986:13) define the inferential process as one which starts from a set of premises and results in a set of conclusions that follow logically, or are at least warranted by them. The role of context is to provide the set of premises used in the interpretation process. Thus a fundamental problem for pragmatic theory is to describe how the hearer finds the appropriate context in which to understand given utterances.

S&W argue that speakers who intend their utterances to be interpreted in a particular way are responsible for providing the hearer with a context that allows such an interpretation to be recovered. From this follows S&W's position that the speaker is responsible for those inferences drawn by the hearer. They claim that:

It is left to the speaker to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the hearer will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process. (S&W 1986:43)

... responsibility for success in communication is not shared but is solely up to the speaker. (Blakemore 1987:63)

S&W argue that speakers must supply hearers with a suitable context that will allow the intended interpretation to be recovered. Therefore, speakers are expected to be able to predict what 'suitable' context will be constructed by the hearer.

However, it is curious how speakers are thought to be capable of fulfilling this criterion, given that S&W have also argued that one cannot know, or believe to know, what another person knows. This view contrasts with the earlier, 'Mutual Knowledge' (MK) position (see Clark & Carlson 1982) which holds that speakers can allude to information as opposed to actually stating it, on the basis that both parties have access to the same corpus of knowledge. However, S&W have argued that problems in establishing mutual knowledge are so great that utterance interpretation may work without the benefit of it (S&W in Gibbs 1987:562).

Despite this objection, S&W accept that some concession must be made toward MK, as the communication process itself gives rise to shared information. They have then sought to cater for MK in the form of postulating the existence of 'Mutually Manifest Cognitive Environments' between speakers and hearers. The types of information that S&W cite as

being sources of contextual information are: linguistic & perceptual information, and information in memory. Notable is that S&W's sources for contextual information are greatly reminiscent of Clark & Carison's (1982) 'co-presence heuristics', which they similarly describe as providing grounds for mutual knowledge. See Table 2.

TABLE 2. **Clark & Carison's Co-presence heuristics
versus
S&W's criteria for Mutual Cognitive Environments**

CO-PRESENCE HEURISTICS		MUTUAL COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENTS
(i) physical co-presence	≅	perceptual mutual environment
(ii) linguistic co-presence	≅	linguistic mutual environment
(iii) community membership	≅	(schematic) information in memory

Despite this apparent overlap, S&W maintain that although information may be mutually manifest, this is quite separate from being mutually known, as one can make assumptions about that which is mutually manifest, but nothing can be assumed to be truly known or assumed (S&W 1986:40).

Nevertheless, the specification of mutually manifest environments has serious flaws. S&W claim (1986:39) that an individual's total cognitive environment is a function of the physical environment and his/her cognitive abilities. Therefore, as assumptions are cognitive constructs based on information from the input systems combined with information in memory, these cannot be 'mutually' manifest.

S&W (1986:17) also hold that the speaker is responsible for delimiting context selection by the hearer. They claim that the only way a speaker can ensure that the hearer will not misunderstand his or her message is to ensure that the context used by the hearer is identical to that of the speaker. However, unless the speaker is totally literal in his or her meaning, it is difficult to envisage how this can be reliably achieved, given that MK is untenable. Essentially, without MK the speaker theoretically has no means of knowing the exact nature of the encyclopaedic information the hearer will bring to bear in the interpretation process. Nor in fact what Input information will prove to be of optimal relevance to the hearer's existing representation of the world, as the hearer's belief-system cannot be 'mutually' known.

As a primary criterion for relevance is low processing costs, the better known concepts in encyclopaedic memory (in terms of quantity of knowledge due to particular interests) will be most accessible and more readily retrieved. Consequently, not only would the speaker be responsible for knowing what type of information the hearer has accessible for context selection, but also how detailed that knowledge would be. Also given that the salience of objects can vary from one individual to the next, it need not even follow that hearers will select from the physical environment that context which is in accordance with the speaker's intentions.

In fact, as speakers cannot know what types of information the hearer holds in memory, then those contexts chosen by the hearer for information processing must, at least in some cases, be completely out of the hands of the speaker. It is thus unclear how speakers can be held responsible for the hearer's choice of context for processing, without being said to 'know' (in some sense) the content of hearer assumptions.

However, it is not my argument that MK is impossible. It is arguably the case that speakers do 'know', or 'believe' that they know, some part of another person's knowledge. However, it is theoretically not possible to hold a speaker responsible for hearer derived inferences without some theoretical concession to MK.

3.3 Context selection - processor goals

Immediately apparent from the given illustrations of S&W's model (Figs 1 & 3), is that it is specifically a comprehension model and the user is necessarily the hearer. S&W claim (1986: 71) that the goal of the processor is to achieve a greater knowledge of the world. This claim, together with the postulated means of achieving relevance (i.e. processing costs versus conceptual gains) are inherently hearer-orientated goals of communication, that may not coincide with speaker-intentions.

It may be argued that a speaker's verbal plus non-verbal input to the hearer may represent to that hearer any number of possibly relevant contexts. In particular, as the process of non-demonstrative inferencing is defined as having free access to conceptual memory, the actual inferences drawn must be largely determined by that information the hearer holds in memory. Such information retrieval would be further constrained by two things: the organization of the individual's encyclopaedic memory (see Mandler 1979, 1982; Luchjenbroers 1989); as well as the mental activity in which the individual is engaged (Blakemore 1987:58).

However, the notion of relevance clearly needs further constraint. It appears that S&W have sought to offer such constraint in the form of postulating an additional hearer-goal in conversation; namely, to recover only speaker-intended interpretations: 'The principle of relevance..., applies only to the recognition of speaker intentions' (Wilson & Sperber 1986b:

83). In addition, S&W claim that the speaker-intended interpretation is the only interpretation worth the hearer's effort to recover. (Wilson & Sperber 1986b:67). Hence, S&W's approach involves two primary goals for the hearer:

- (i) to interpret input information in terms of that which is optimally relevant to him or her. Such information will then provide the hearer with an optimal representation of the world; and
- (ii) to interpret input information in terms of his or her recognition of speaker-intended interpretations.

It is my argument that the combination of these two goals for the hearer forms an unhappy marriage. In fact, this forms such a fundamental flaw that it has consequences for not only their account of context selection, but also for an understanding of the role of the initial linguistic code to ultimately derived assumptions.

3.4 S&W's model: Is it a highly codified one or not?

A possible consequence of viewing S&W's model (particularly as illustrated in Figures 1-3) is that one may be led to assume the contribution of linguistic input to the total information called upon in the interpretation processes is relatively minor (see also Sanders 1988). These presented diagrams suggest that the physical context in conjunction with the array of knowledge the hearer holds in encyclopaedic memory, in addition to the nature of the inferencing processes themselves, results in an extremely ego-centric system.

However, this observation is arguably true or false, depending on the perspective taken. This may be true if one were to maintain a hearer-biased perspective. Namely, if hearers choose contexts, based on that which is relevant to their pre-existing assumptions, then it would follow that the spoken code plays a lesser role in the formation of assumptions and inferences

than one may expect. Conversely, if hearers focus on speaker intended interpretations, then it would be false to undermine the importance of the linguistic input.

In effect, the converse position can also be argued; namely, that S&W's model is a highly codified one. Assumptions are described as consisting of conceptual entries that form a point of contact between the proposition and the schematic information (in memory) accessed for processing. Therefore, the output of the Input systems will trigger the appropriate context in schematic memory, by virtue of such entries. In this way, speakers can determine (to some extent) context selection by the hearer. Additionally, argued from this speaker-biased perspective, it becomes apparent that S&W's model is far more aligned with the linguistic code than one may expect of a pragmatic theory; and the importance of the linguistic code to ultimately drawn conclusions cannot be undermined.

Essentially, S&W's single system both enhances and undermines the initial importance of the linguistic code. Thus, S&W's model appears to provide a hearer-biased model that accounts for speaker intended meanings. However, this model suffers due to the unlikelihood that speaker-intended interpretations need also be of optimal relevance to the hearer's existing representation of the world.

3.5 Context selection - before or after the speech-event?

S&W's attempt to unify the notions of "identification of speaker-intentions" with "relevance to the hearer's prior cognitions" has further consequences; namely, with respect to their argument that context selection occurs after - as opposed to before - the communicative act.

It is feasible to assume that speakers, who are said to be responsible for hearer recognition of their intended inferences, have a specific context in mind. Consequently, if it is the task of the hearer to identify speaker-intended inferences, then it must follow that the hearer will utilize that same context. Thus, the context must be pre-determined, and not a consequence of the hearer's context selection (based on that which is relevant to him or her).

However, the notion of a pre-conceived, or "unique" context in which the hearer will process incoming information is arguably implausible. This would suggest such a strong form of MK that communication itself must seem unnecessary. In addition, McTear (1987:352) argues that "a pre-determined context would in principle have to make reference to such a vast amount of potentially relevant information that it would be psychologically implausible."

In contrast, if one were to accept that hearers select a context based on that which is relevant to them in particular, then it must be fair to claim that this would occur after the speaker's communicative act. Such processing could result in contexts "evolving" throughout discourse (i.e., lead to changed or altered topics). This would be a justifiable theoretical consequence as conversations typically do change topics, and consequently contexts for information processing, frequently throughout a stretch of discourse. However, the position that contexts are selected after the communicative act has led to serious questions of how it is that conversations begin (Gibbs 1987:582).

Although I have argued that identification of speaker intended meanings is not alignable with notions of hearer derived inferences, I do not argue that either one of these two parameters is wrong. It is not unfeasible to assume that hearers typically focus on speaker intended inferences. Hearers can identify those inferences (and consequently the appropriate contexts) intended by the speaker by virtue of a conversational demand that the speaker provide the hearer with (what s/he believes to be) an accessible context.

Conversely, it also is not unfeasible to assume that given an input that is of greater relevance to the hearer than focusing on speaker-intended interpretations, s/he may then pursue that

point in terms of that which is of optimal relevance to him or her; in which case the conversation may change topic and the contexts “evolve”. Additionally, in the former situation, **contexts** would be pre-determined; and in the latter, **context** selection would occur after the communicative act. See Table 3.

Although **I** have argued that the above hearer processing strategies fundamentally oppose each other, **I** do not wish to suggest that a hearer’s following strategy (a) can never also achieve a result compatible with (b). Instead **I** will argue that any model that works on the premise that this naturally occurs is extremely ambitious, if not completely false.

TABLE 3. Types of hearer strategies

- a. focus on speaker intended message(s)
= pre-determined context, intended by the speaker
- b. focus on information that is optimally relevant to Hearer
= (possible) rejection of speaker-intended topic and/or context for information processing, in favour of a topic/context that is more ‘relevant’ to Hearer’s prior cognitions; existing representation of the world
(= evolving context)

4. Sperber & Wilson versus Grice

Grice argued that the relation between the ‘sense’ and ‘force’ of an utterance is not arbitrary, but can be worked out “logically”. Fundamental to this claim is Grice’s assumption that in order to account for successful communication one must assume that interlocutors expect each other to interpret their utterances as if they are acting in a rational and cooperative manner (= the ‘Cooperative Principle’ (CP)). To this end, the following four ‘maxims’ (or guidelines) for conversation were postulated:

- quality - say what you (justifiably) believe to be true;
- quantity - be adequately informative (no more, no less);
- relevance - make your contributions relevant; and
- manner - be brief and unambiguous. (see Once 1975)

Grice’s approach to meaning was seen as an initial attempt to coordinate the linguistic form with non-linguistic assumptions. Grice argued that conversations typically involve seemingly unrelated responses which depend on inferences for cohesion; and it is this meaning-overlay that falls outside the truth-conditional content of sentences and hence also outside domain of semantic theory in general.

However, S&W have argued that Grice’s approach lacks sufficient definition as an account of verbal comprehension. While initially based on the premise that Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle and maxims are “far too vague” (S&W 1982:70), S&W proceed with the position that Grice’s four maxims could be subsumed under the one (the maxim of relevance) which would function as a single principle governing every aspect of comprehension.

Sadock (1986:87) points out that the aim of linguistic theory is to find just the right number of principles to explain all, but not more than those that occur in mental reasoning. He claims further that Once postulated too many principles, where S&W postulate too few. However, closer scrutiny has revealed that despite the apparent contrasts that have been presented by S&W and upheld by other theorists (e.g. Sadock 1986), S&W’s single Principle of Relevance varies very little from Grice’s earlier approach. See Table 4.

In particular, Wilson & Sperber (W&S) (1986b:77) point out that Grice’s “be brief” maxim (= maxim of manner) relates to processing effort, and is hence captured by their processing

criterion of “minimal effort”. In addition, W&S (1986b:81) argue that Relevance theory eliminates the need for a maxim of truthfulness (= Grice’s maxim of quality) on the basis that any such norm is superfluous. Once (1975:46) also suggested that this maxim could be

TABLE 4. **Gricean & S&W’s principles**

GRICE	S&W
- Cooperative Principle	- Relevance
- Quality (unnecessary due to CP)	- (unnecessary due to Relevance)
- Quantity	- maximal conceptual effects
- Manner	- minimal processing effort
- Relevance	- Cooperative Principle

subsumed under the CP itself, as it is so crucial that “other maxims only come into operation on the assumption that this maxim is satisfied.”

If one were to additionally assume that Grice’s third maxim (“be informative”) relates to contextual effects, then the startling similarity between the two approaches becomes very evident. As Relevance is defined as being achieved when processing costs are minimal and conceptual gains are maximal, then it seems that S&W’s second parameter for relevance closely resembles Grice’s maxim of quantity.

Finally, Grice’s Cooperative Principle encompasses the view that interlocutors behave as though participants are behaving rationally. Essentially,, Grice’s CP is based on the observation that interlocutors go to great lengths to decode apparently irrelevant utterances. In this sense interlocutors behave rationally and try to find ‘relevancy’, until it is clear that there is none. Consequently it may be argued that S&W’s Principle of Relevance (and thus also the remaining maxim “be relevant”) possibly captures this notion more fittingly. One would expect cooperative interlocutors to make their contributions relevant to discourse. It thus becomes clear what S&W meant by their claim that their approach shows how it is possible for discourse participants to obey Grice’s maxims.

However, it would be inappropriate to suggest that S&W’s Relevance theory were nothing more than a covert rehash of Grice’s theory. In fact, their position on a number of theoretical aspects vary significantly, and are described in Table 5.

TABLE 5. **Grice vs S&W**

GRICE	S&W
1. speaker-biased account	- hearer (processing) biased
2. pre-determined context	- context determination by Hearer
3. multiple maxims	- single principle (incl: cost / gain trade-off)
4. small role of code	- very codified account
5. vague on processing	- vague on “Relevance”

Although initially S&W have argued for a hearer-biased account where context selection is done by the hearer after the speech event, traces of the alternatives for both points 1 and 2 have been introduced into S&W’s account. The effect of such changes would create a processing model that does not occur in a vacuum of just the hearer, to satisfy only the hearer’s needs or desires.

Additionally, one could interpret S&W’s model as being a highly codified one. I suspect it is because of the high correlation between the code and the “logical form” or “blueprint” for the subsequent proposition, that S&W’s model has achieved relative success in accounting for

discourse connectives, deixis and anaphora resolution (see Blakemore 1987, 1988; Kempson 1986). I suspect that these items have a logical meaning which is added upon or altered by (pragmatic) circumstantial information; however, the array of possible meanings that such items can assume is limited in number. Consequently, such items are arguably more closely aligned with semantics in general than the type of phenomena described by Grice's conversational implicatures. Although S&W's model appears to accommodate such semi-logical! -semantic items, it is yet to become clear how it can equally accommodate propositions that bear no (apparent) relation to the expressed code. Consider (4):

- (4) Context: A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job, and his letter reads as follows:

'Dear Sir, Mr. X's taste in clothing is excellent and his attendance at tutorials has been regular.'
(see Grice 1975:52)

Implicature = Mr. X is not a suitable candidate.

Finally, the fifth point mentioned in Table 5 remains to be dealt with. It is yet to become clear how the criterion of "relevance" is to achieve descriptive adequacy, as it fails to show WHAT it is in the information presented for processing (whether verbal or propositional) that makes information 'relevant'. In fact, even the further specification of "focus on speaker- intended interpretations" fails to illustrate WHAT it is about the conveyed message that achieves 'relevance'.

Consequently, other descriptive parameters need be found to clarify relevance. I have suggested earlier (in section 3.2) that some account of MK or 'Belief Space' (Wilks & Bien 1983) is necessary to account for how speaker's can feasibly assume hearers to have certain knowledge that will form their context for processing input information. Additionally, some form of MK is needed to account for how hearer's can presume the context of speaker inferences. It may be found that some specification of topic maintenance, according to either discourse or syntactic criteria, will illuminate another means of how speakers and hearers delimit the array of possible contexts for information processing.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that the notion of relevance is vague, overworked and non-defining of the process of context selection or inferencing in general. In addition, S&W's further criterion of 'focus on speaker-intended interpretations' is similarly vague, and is inherently incompatible with notions of defining relevance in terms of improvements to the hearer's representation of the world. Consequently, other criteria must be found to account for some sense of mutual knowledge or belief space, in addition to postulating other discourse criteria to define limitations on context change and topic maintenance.

I have also argued that speakers presumably intend one objectively correct context that will provide some objectively correct premises, for the intended inference(s) to be drawn. I would also accept that speakers are responsible for giving hearers! addressees adequate cues for the recognition of their intended inferences. However, given the possibility that hearers can choose a context based on that which is relevant to them, I would dispute that speakers are responsible for those inferences actually drawn by the hearer, particularly in the light of S&W's argument that speakers cannot 'know' what knowledge is available to the hearer.

The argument that hearers choose contexts suggests the possibility of evolving contexts, which presumably result from hearers responding to other information than is intended by the speaker. Thus, in those cases where hearers respond to other stimuli than was intended by the

speaker, context-selection presumably would occur on the basis of that which is most relevant to the hearer, and would occur after the speech event.

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