CONCLUSION

SOME DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH IN RELEVANCE-THEORETIC PRAGMATICS

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Over almost thirty years, relevance theorists have sought to answer many intriguing questions regarding human ostensive communication and have analysed an incredibly overwhelming number of linguistic and communicative phenomena with the psychologically-based apparatus of the framework put forward by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995). As a result, they have offered new insights into pragmatic properties of utterances, how the mind processes them and how humans understand them. The works gathered in this book attest to the impetus of research in this cognitive branch of pragmatics and the vigour wherewith researchers have sought to better explain communication and, more specifically, how specific elements of linguistic systems and types of utterances and their characteristics are exploited by the pragmatic module so as to arrive at the speaker's informative intention. Some of these works, in addition, show how relevance theory can be combined with or applied to other linguistic disciplines in order to look for more complete and encompassing answers to diverse problems.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, applications of relevance theory include those to fields such as translation, stylistics and literary communication, pragmatic development and first or second language acquisition, or media communication, to name but a few. In his recent manual on relevance theory, Clark (2013) also reviews developments in areas like pragmatics and the mind, modularity and mental architecture, mind-reading, metarepresentation and theory of mind, phatic communication or politeness, although these do not obviously exhaust the potentialities of the theory. The fields to which some of the works in this book apply relevance theory comprise morphology, syntax, linguistic description, translation, argumentation, pragmatic development and second language acquisition. However, in spite of the vast and impressive amount of research done thus far, there still lies

ahead a wide unexplored terrain where relevance theory may make many valuable contributions and offer new and enriching accounts.

This final chapter is intended to suggest some directions that future research could follow. In doing so, it also points out where relevance theory could collaborate with other disciplines. Evidently, there are many other areas where researchers could make valuable contributions, as pointed out by Yus Ramos (1998), Wilson (2005) or Clark (2013) himself. In connection with the contents of the preceding chapters, the topics for future research suggested here will be include issues about procedural meaning, discourse, (im)politeness and epistemic vigilance.

1. Procedural meaning

A series of papers in this volume address issues related to procedural meaning, which is an area that still deserves much attention. Clark (2013: 323) comments that, in spite of the many notable contributions made, "[…] there is still considerable work to do in developing our understanding of the nature of procedural meaning and our methodology in developing accounts of particular kinds of procedural meaning". He even lists a number of issues relevance theorists could look into, the first of which has to do with the different kinds of procedural meaning.

Extant work has shown that one type of procedural meaning is that encoded by personal pronouns (Blakemore 1992; Wilson and Sperber 1993), which aids in the recovery of referents. The chapter by Schröder has shown that Toposa incorporates a pronoun that helps identify the referent and makes an attributive expression achieve referential status. This means that relevance theory can cooperate with linguistic disciplines like morphology, syntax or linguistic description with a view to better accounting for how elements in different languages work and contribute to communication. Thus, formal descriptions of those languages could certainly benefit from the insights relevance theory offers regarding procedural meaning.

Another type of procedural meaning is that encoded by discourse markers, which guides the inferential module in the computations it must perform and the inferences it may draw (Blakemore 1987, 2002; Wilson and Sperber 1993). Still, another type of procedural meaning is that encoded by prosody or interjections (Wharton 2003, 2009; Wilson and Wharton 2006), which constrains the construction of higher-level explicatures connected with the attitude the speaker has towards the propositional content. The chapter by Fretheim has shown that the procedural meaning encoded by certain intonation patterns may also interact with that encoded by other expressions and such interaction may have different outcomes. In turn, Junween and Chonghyuck have shown in their chapter that the procedural meaning of intonation may similarly interact with the semantic content of a particle.

In this respect, it would be illuminating to investigate the kinds of interactions that might exist between procedural expressions and other linguistic elements and the outcomes of those interactions. For example, it might be interesting to analyse if the presence of certain discourse markers or some intonational patterns may contribute to the activation of higher-order frames that condition the interpretation of (stretches of) discourse as, for instance, phatic, transactional, explanatory, argumentative, etc. Likewise, such analyses could take into consideration the role of paralanguage, as described by Wharton (2009), or additional contextual elements (images, music, etc.). This will certainly foster our understanding of multimodal communication.

Expressives have also been analysed from a relevance-theoretic angle as procedural elements (Wharton 2003, 2009, forthcoming; Blakemore 2011). Although most efforts have been dedicated to intonation and interjections, it would also be insightful to unravel the role of other expressions that could be said to be used to express emotions or feelings. Consider the following examples:

(1) Give me that damned gun!
(2) Did you see the bloody knife?

In these sentences, the participle 'damned' and the adjective 'bloody' immediately preceding the head nouns 'gun' and 'knife' do not convey a property attributable to those nouns. Rather, they seem to be the vehicle whereby the speaker expresses some emotion towards those nouns. Although such participle and adjective could somehow constrain the construction of the higher-level explicatures of the utterances where they appear, the speaker could not be said to be projecting an emotion or feeling towards the whole proposition, but towards a fragment thereof –namely, each noun. Future research should examine in depth the contribution of linguistic elements like these to communication and comprehension. Probably, since such elements express an emotion or feeling towards a constituent of a proposition, the extant relevance-theoretic distinction between lower- and higher-level explicature should be revised in order to accommodate a type of attitudinal description that only affects a fragment or constituent of the proposition expressed and not the whole of it.

Expressives like these are often words transferred from grammatical categories whose elements typically encode conceptual content. However, when used as expressives, those elements would acquire procedural meaning. It would be interesting to account for the processes that enable those elements to be used thus. Explanations for this would require an understanding of some lexical pragmatic processes and could be informed by existing accounts of some lexical phenomena frequent in children's language (Wałaszewska 2011).

Another issue pertaining procedural meaning which still needs further consideration is, according to Clark (2013: 323), how procedural meaning changes.

Linguistic elements encoding procedures could be said to lose their procedural nature and motivate language change across time. A language like English, for instance, had a pronominal system that differentiated forms for the singular and plural of the third person in a previous evolutionary stage like Old English: 'he' (masculine singular), 'heo' (feminine singular), hit (neuter singular) and 'hie' (masculine, feminine and neuter plural). The pronunciation of the masculine and feminine singular forms and that of the plural became very similar across time, and that similarity might have caused a certain confusion among language users, who would have had problems to identify the referent of the grammatical subject. By that period, verbal inflections for the third person singular and plural were also being lost, which also increased comprehension problems.

Old English was also geographically in contact with a genetically related language: Old Norse, which had its own pronominal form for the third person plural. The phonological similarity between the singular masculine and feminine forms of the Old English third person singular pronouns and the form for the plural pronoun might have resulted in those pronouns having their procedural meaning lost and that procedural meaning being absorbed or subsumed by the Old Norse third person plural personal pronoun (Padilla Cruz 2003). Thus, English incorporated a foreign element in order to retain the procedural meaning that other elements were losing, which enabled language users to avoid mistakes and comprehension problems. A similar argument has been put forward for the loss of verbal inflections in the evolution from Old English to Modern English (Padilla Cruz 2005).

Explanations of similar evolutionary phenomena suggest a promising and fruitful interaction between relevance theory and historical linguistics, so researchers could probably reinterpret already accounted phenomena from the cognitive perspective provided by relevance theory in order to gain a more complete understanding of the pragmatic factors underlying language change and evolution. This might turn out particularly enriching, since historical linguistics has been a field with a traditional formal orientation.

A third intriguing issue concerning procedural meaning is how it is acquired (Clark 2013: 323). This undoubtedly suggests that experimental research should be carried out so as to trace the emergence and development of procedural elements in infants. Such research would certainly shed light on the age of acquisition of procedural elements by children, the order of acquisition of those elements or which of them pose more difficulties.

Finally, the constraints and reasons for carrying out procedural analyses is the last issue Clark (2013: 323) lists. The chapter by Grisot et al. has shown that these analyses may have an impact on our understanding of verbal morphology and may have applications for computer-assisted translation tools. A challenge that research should cope with is continuing with the development of such tools for languages whose morphology makes subtle distinctions or is liable to diverse interpretations.

2.   Discourse issues

The chapters by Yus Ramos and Raeber have significant implications for studying discourse in its manifold manifestations. In line with Yus Ramos's chapter, future research needs to unravel, describe and classify the diverse contextual sources individuals rely on when constructing specific interpretations of discourse –i.e., as phatic, transactional, humorous, confrontational, argumentative, etc. Similarly, it would be interesting to delimit, as Raeber does in his chapter, criteria based on relevance-theoretic notions which make it possible to differentiate between similar sentence/utterance types. In doing so, analysts could look into their implicit contents, the role of metarepresentation or the presence of procedural elements that trigger a particular interpretation or bias the hearer to it.

Nonetheless, research should not stop at sentence level, and relevance theory must interact with disciplines such as discourse and conversation analysis. One of the criticisms often levelled against relevance theory alludes to the fact that analyses are frequently limited to the boundaries of single, isolated, often decontextualized, sentences. However, the theory has already had applications to and implications for the analysis of various types of discourse, like advertising, argumentation or interviews (e.g., Taillard 2000; Maruenda Bataller 2002; Ifantidou 2009). A case in point is humorous discourse, particularly puns and jokes. In this area researchers have studied how, by means of certain discourse stretches, humorists cause the audience to activate specific mental structures and manage to bias them to an initial, though inadequate, interpretation. Understanding of some jokes and puns then requires reconsideration of that initial interpretation and detecting alternative interpretative routes through, for example, differing disambiguation, assignment of reference or implicatures (e.g., Yus Ramos 2003, 2008; Solska 2012a, 2012b).

But practitioners in relevance-theoretic pragmatics must make more efforts to consider discourse not only in its manifold manifestations, but also in the various media where it appears, among which is technology-mediated communication (e.g., Herring 1996; Thurlow et al. 2004; Campbell and Park 2008; Georgakopoulou 2011). In a world where new technologies have definitely acquired a prominent role and significantly contribute to reshaping relationships, collaboration between relevance-theoretic pragmatics and discourse studies cannot overlook modes of communication mediated not only by computer, but also by instant text messaging tools.

The groundbreaking work by Yus Ramos (2001, 2011) on *cyberpragmatics* –a coinage due to this author– has fueled work on different phenomena, characteristics and peculiarities of forms of communication characterized by asynchronicity and non-physical co-presence. One of them is, for example, the role of emoticons as constrainers on inferences determining attitudinal descriptions (Yus Ramos 2014). The relevance-theoretic framework could likewise have much to say about, for instance, the contextual effects interlocutors might derive, in the form of weak or strong implicatures, when they interact through such modes of communication and resort to innovative acronyms or formulae by means of which they seek to create and maintain communities of practice that tie individuals together (White 2014). Additionally, it would be insightful to delve into the impact of features like asynchronicity or lack of physical presence, typically characteristic of interaction through instant messaging tools and applications, on understanding, processing effort and the types of inferences users must make.

Regarding understanding, experimental research should unravel the most frequent types of misunderstandings arising from interaction through such tools and applications and to what extent they differ from or are similar to those occurring in face-to-face communication, where interlocutors often make mistakes when assigning reference, disambiguating sentences, constructing lower- and higher-level explicatures or arriving at implicit contents (Yus Ramos 1999a, 1999b). Research could even focus on how interlocutors overcome interpretative mistakes and if, in doing so, they overtly negotiate meaning or resort to a specific cognitive strategy like *cautious optimism* (Sperber 1994). Since communication technologies make up a rapidly evolving and potentially troublesome area, practitioners should be ready to account for new communicative behaviours, realities and innovations, from which new insights could certainly be drawn. Those insights might ultimately lead to further theoretical adjustments or developments.

3. Issues on (im)politeness

A great concern for discourse and its crucial role in successful and socially satisfactory communication has already been shown by several pragmatists analysing (im)politeness phenomena (e.g., Arundale 2006; Locher 2006; Haugh 2007). Those following the stake of the so-called *second* or *postmodernist* wave of politeness theory have taken steps towards developing discursive approaches to such phenomena. Evidently, those approaches should not ignore Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) model, as well as the developments in the understanding of the origins of (im)politeness made by some of their followers (e.g. Escandell Vidal 1996, 2004; Jary 1998, 2013; Mazzarella 2015). Thus, a better understanding will be gained of how speakers guide hearers to a correct understanding of their intentions –among

which the intention to be polite– the problems the latter might have in recognizing speakers' intentions and how and why meaning negotiation is needed, above all in so a sensible sphere like social interaction, where human relationships may significantly be affected, as Piskorska has argued in her chapter, by a perlocutionary effect such as assessment of other individuals' actions.

Evaluations of linguistic acts and behaviour in general may obviously condition the beliefs about other individuals which hearers forge, and those beliefs may in turn subsequently affect the processing of discourse. Relevance theory could also interact with the branch of philosophy known as *social epistemology* (e.g., Haddock et al. 2010; Goldman and Whitcomb 2011) with a view to better understanding the origin and nature of the beliefs and attitudes individuals hold about other social agents. Such interaction could lead to work on erroneous judgements of the behaviour of individuals whose intention is definitely not to be unduly impolite. This would involve delving into the ontology and causes of unmotivated or unexpected impoliteness (e.g., Kienpointner 1997; Culpeper et al. 2003; Bousfield and Locher 2008).

As for its ontology, impoliteness could be accounted for on the basis of a notion like that of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007), which refers to a type of wronging individuals do after unfair appraisals of other individuals. Since there are different types of such injustice –*testimonial* and *hermeneutical* (Fricker 2006)– and interpretation seems to play a fundamental role on them, it would be revealing to investigate if impoliteness fits in any of them. As for its causes, the relevance-driven tendency to interpret and make sense of input in exchange of the least cognitive expenditure possible might be affected by factors such as unexpectedness of behaviour, previous beliefs entertained about other people, prejudices held against them, reputational cues, diverse social or cultural norms, emotional reactions or certain moral commitments, to name but a few (Origgi 2013). It would be illuminating to analyse the impact of each of these factors on processing, and hence, on evaluations of behaviour as (im)polite.

Unwarranted evaluations of other people and their actions as impolite might also be motivated by epistemic vigilance (Mascaro and Sperber 2009; Sperber et al. 2010) not performing its functions in the most effective way (Sperber 2013). Vigilance mechanisms may also be thought to target the interpretative hypotheses that hearers construct. Accordingly, evaluations of behaviour as impolite might arise as a result of epistemic vigilance not alerting individuals to inaccurate conclusions (Padilla Cruz 2014). In this area, it would be interesting to look into the influence of *confirmation bias* (Nickerson 1998) on hearers' inferential processes when they assess other individuals' behaviours. An in-depth analysis of the influence of all these factors will certainly yield a more encompassing appraisal of the cognitive underpinnings of a perlocutionary effect with enormous social repercussions. This will contribute to a more profound understanding of how the human mind reacts

when facing certain ostensive behaviours, which is most needed to complement existing descriptive, sociological perspectives.

4.   Epistemic vigilance, understanding and believing

Although speakers often guide hearers to intended meaning and this, if needed, may be conversationally or discoursively negotiated, hearers ultimately have to decide whether to believe speakers or take with a pinch of salt what they say. Relevance theorists have recently started to explore the role of vigilance mechanisms in decisions concerning whether to trust interlocutors and the testimony they dispense, as well as the interpretative hypotheses hearers construct. Another group of chapters in this volume touches upon issues related to epistemic vigilance.

Oswald has claimed that detecting fallacies in arguments requires the efficient operation of vigilance mechanisms and that the success of some arguments may be contingent on communicators overcoming their filters. In turn, following work by Wilson (2012), Unger has shown that speakers can also assist hearers in those decisions by means of a series of expressions wherewith speakers indicate their epistemic stance towards the information provided. Analyses of other expressions along these lines would also be illuminating and could probably yield interesting conclusions leading to reconsider traditionally held assumptions. Candidates for such analyses could be, for example, some participles like 'alleged' or 'suspected', which frequently appear in sentences like those below –typically appearing in news headlines– and seem to indicate the speaker's degree of commitment with the truthfulness of the propositional content communicated and available evidence:

(3) Brother of alleged Holly Bobo killer arrested for disposing of evidence. (www.mydailynews.com 19/09/2014)
(4) Boy   suspected   kidnapper   dead   after   Colorado   hostage   standoff. (www.reuters.com 5/08/2014)

The role of epistemic vigilance mechanisms has also been considered in relation to misunderstanding (Padilla Cruz 2013a) and humour (Padilla Cruz 2012). Regarding misunderstanding, epistemic vigilance has been argued to trigger a shift to cautious optimism (Sperber 1994) when it detects that the speaker, though benevolent and not deceitful, is not a fully competent communicator or when the hearer himself doubts whether the comprehension module has processed linguistic input appropriately. In the case of humour, epistemic vigilance has been claimed to enact a shift to an even more sophisticated processing strategy, known as *sophisticated understanding* (Sperber 1994), when it detects the communicator's playful or 'deceitful' intention. Indeed, humorists contrive texts amenable to various

interpretations –all of which are compatible with the information linguistically encoded– but bias the audience to an initial one. Upon suspecting that another interpretation is possible, epistemic vigilance must enact sophisticated understanding so that the audience reach an alternative interpretation and discard the one initially reached. This argument has recently been extended to the case of puns (Padilla Cruz 2015), even if in puns two (or more) interpretations may be activated simultaneously and the audience may have serious difficulties to opt for one of them. Likewise, it would be illuminating to consider if correct understanding of phenomena like irony or idiomatic language requires the intervention of vigilance.

5.   Vigilance in (interlanguage) pragmatic development

The role of vigilance mechanisms in interlanguage pragmatic development has also awaken a certain interest recently (Padilla Cruz 2013b; Ifantidou 2014, this volume). Evidence resulting from a series of comprehension tasks reveals, on the one hand, that just in the same way that instruction should concentrate on making L2 learners competent speakers who must know when, where, why and with whom they may use certain communicative strategies or how they should formulate their messages, instruction should also put the spotlight on L2 learners' vigilance abilities. Even if, as other components of communicative competence, these abilities are incorporated into L2 pragmatics, they might need some fine-tuning to peculiarities of the L2. Indeed, frequent misunderstanding and comprehension problems at both the explicit and implicit level of communication prove that fine-tuning is necessary. On the other hand, evidence from reading comprehension tasks shows that the development of learners' pragmatic competence needs a parallel development of their vigilance abilities as a precondition to have critical attitudes towards informants' epistemic states such as acceptance, doubt or rejection of the information communicated (Ifantidou, this volume).

A fuller picture of the role and fine-tuning of epistemic vigilance in interlanguage pragmatic development needs a more complete understanding of issues such as the stage at which L2 learners start exercising vigilance or transfer it from their L1 pragmatics, the type of vigilance –weak, moderate or strong (Michaelian 2013)– they normally exercise, whether they are able to shift from one type of vigilance to another and under what conditions, the problems learners may have to exercise vigilance effectively or how pedagogical intervention may foster their vigilant attitudes. In addition, it would be insightful to investigate if L2 learners exercise vigilance towards communicators who are not (perceived to be) fully competent in a *lingua franca* or make unintended mistakes due to their expressive abilities and how they overcome those mistakes. Obviously, issues like these could also be investigated in relation to L1 acquisition and development.

Another direction research could take is exploring the role and development of vigilance in learners' comprehension of specific types of discourse like irony or humour. Regarding irony, extant research has shown that comprehension of irony by children requires the progressive development of theory of mind abilities and the ages at which they seem to be able to successfully understand ironical attitudes (e.g., Wilson 2013). If L2 learners were initially unable to satisfactorily arrive at ironical interpretations, it would be illuminating to investigate if their reaching an expected ironical interpretation depends on their exercising vigilance and the stage(s) at which the stop having problems with irony. Concerning humour, research could elucidate whether L2 learners can realise how humorists exploit pragmatic ambivalence at the explicit and implicit level of communication in order to bias the audience and whether learners' vigilance mechanisms are efficient enough to detect unintended or inadequate interpretations. This will in turn unveil which of the many different 'maneuvers' humorists make when devising jokes and other examples of humorous discourse pose more difficulties for learners or, in other words, the interpretative problems learners may have when processing diverse types of jokes or manifestations of humour (Yus Ramos 2008).

6.   Too soon to conclude

In spite of the constant criticism and its many detractors, the model put forward by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) almost thirty years ago has asserted itself as a major strand in current pragmatic theory. Indeed, its robust foundations in linguistics, psychology and cognitive science, as well as its subsequent refinements in order to incorporate developments and insights coming from those fields, have enabled it to offer illuminating and more complete answers to several problems pertaining linguistic systems and ostensive communication.

The preceding sections have mainly aimed at pointing out some of the many potential avenues for future research in relevance-theoretic pragmatics. Many other topics and issues that have recently received or are now receiving due attention and consideration from relevance theorists –e.g., figures of speech like hyperbole, metaphor, simile or metonymy (Wilson and Carston 2006; Carston and Wearing 2012), *ad hoc* concept formation and lexical pragmatics in general (Wilson and Carston 2007; Carston 2012), to name but some– may also open up further paths worth exploring. Owing to obvious constraints, they cannot but be left aside from this final chapter. In spite of its limitations, this volume, which intends to celebrate a more than happy anniversary, also expects to spark off and fuel research in this vibrant area of pragmatics. The future will say if it finally achieves this goal.

Quite undeniably, relevance theory is currently a most valuable, useful and helpful tool for research, whose validity to satisfactorily accont for a wide array of

communicative pheonmena is proved by the numerous contributions that relevance theorists have made over these thirty years. Other theories will follow and review or question relevance theory, but the theory, as well as the research inspired by Sperber and Wilson's ideas, will certainly remain as an obligatory reference in pragmatics and linguistics in general.

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