When Relevance saves

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Abstract
In this paper I wish to address one or two problems related to the treatment of natural language connectives within the framework of Relevance theory. In particular, I will address the problem of the constrainability of the theory while I will only just raise the problem of globality. I take the view that while Relevance theory may well provide an initial first order treatment of connectives it is incapable of accounting for the most interesting aspects of their meanings and functions on grounds of the maxim of Relevance alone as this would posit no independent constraints beyond the competence of the individual speaker.

1. Introduction: The problem posed by natural language connectives

A well known and most intriguing problem in the area of the philosophy of language and, more recently, in pragmatics is the discrepancy between natural language connectives and their logical counterparts. While in logic *p & q* is true if both *p* and *q* are true, irrespective of their order (*q & p*), this is not so in natural language. Moreover, depending on the type of clauses *and* (and other connectives, too) conjoins, various non-logical aspects of meaning are generated, such as locality (1a), consequence (1b), temporality (1c), and so on:

(1a) John was in the kitchen and was cooking dinner.
(1b) John tripped over and broke a leg.
(1c) John came home and had dinner.

Grice (1967, 1975) claimed that these further non-logical aspects of meaning are non-linguistically encoded (that is, they are not part of the conventional meaning of *and*), but are rather implicated. In rejecting the view that these aspects of meaning are linguistically encoded, Grice was in effect 'rescuing' logical semantics, a program that can be called minimalist, as against the maximalist approach that would endorse the ambiguity thesis (see Posner, 1980).

The implicatures generated by connectives are computed on the basis of a number of maxims deriving from the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1967, 1975). However, the maxims posited by Grice were much too general and unconstrained to effectively account for the variability of implicatures (see Koutoupis-Kitis 1982, Kitis forthcoming[a], [b]).

2. The Relevance account

Sperber and Wilson (1986) (henceforth S&W) proposed Relevance theory as providing the only maxim, that of Relevance, needed to tackle all such problems. In processing (1b), for example, the hearer will search for an interpretation that is consistent with the principle of Relevance. In other words, the extra effort needed for processing the conjunction of the two propositions will be compensated for by the relevant assumption of why he broke a leg, that is, by deriving the relevant premises of consequence between p and q.

In particular, Blakemore (1987), working within the Relevance theory framework (S&W, 1986), gave an account of natural language conjunction "in terms of constraints on the inferential computations the hearer performs in order to establish the impact of that proposition—or, in other words, its relevance." (18). This account was based on the assumption that "not all linguistic meaning can be defined solely in terms of input to the processes that deliver propositional representations of the world. Some linguistic meaning actually provides an instruction as to the way in which the proposition recovered is to be processed for relevance." (ibid.: 18).

In other words, Blakemore says that the meaning of connectives is not representational like that of lexical items such as *husband* and *wife* but procedural or instructional. Discourse connectives tell us how to treat the conceptual representations of the utterances. This is why she calls them 'semantic constraints'. They constrain, so to speak, the interpretation of the utterances. And as linguistic constraints, they constrain the context of the utterances, too. This process of constraining utterances is to be understood in terms of relating them to the discourse.

Summing up, we can say that she suggests the following ways in which discourse connectives constrain information conveyed by an utterance and made relevant:

   a. They allow the derivation of a contextual implication (e.g., *so,therefore, too*).
   b. They strengthen an existing assumption, by providing better evidence for it (e.g., *after all, moreover, furthermore*)
   c. They may contradict an existing assumption (e.g., *however, still, nevertheless, but*)
   d. They may specify the role of the utterance in the discourse (e.g., *anyway, incidentally, by the way, finally*).

                                                              (adapted from Fraser)

3. My proposal (1982)

A very similar account, though in retrospect I would say that it was an anterior hybrid between a Blakemorean and a Schiffrinean account, was

proposed in Koutoupis-Kitis (1982), long before the advent of Relevance theory or the discourse-analytic perspective for connectives introduced by Schiffrin (1987). Indeed, after criticising in depth the most prevalent accounts of connectives, such as R.Lakoff (1971), G. Lakoff (1971), van Dijk (1977) and Dascal and Katriel (1977), I offered an account primarily of *but* within an interactional framework.[1] Instead of Relevance, which incidentally I suggested that should be the sole supermaxim as its role was pivotal in language use (see also Kitis forthcoming[a]), I proposed that we view clauses introduced by connectives in terms of the main directionality of the discourse. I think this concept is a close conceptual approximation of what later S&W (1986) called Relevance, though I did not elaborate it in any sense. However, as my approach was more attuned to a discourse-analytic perspective, directionality was a rather more global and comprehensive notion. I wrote:

> It seems that not only the configuration of the clausal constructions within the utterance, but also the configuration of the utterances within a piece of discourse, is determined by the purpose of the utterance in relation to the goals of the conversation....The configuration of our clauses and utterances will then reflect the significance we assign to our moves represented in these clauses or utterances. (94)

But, in particular, which was analysed paradigmatically, was characterised as a kind of "orientating signal", a close approximation to Blakemore's (1987) notion of procedural meaning. I write:

> It [*but*] can characterise the nature of the next move in the light of what has preceded. (96)

And further down, I write that *but* is a metalinguistic device and its function is to characterise inter-clausal relations. From all this it seems pretty obvious that I should find no faults with a Relevance-theoretic account of connectives.

4. My (current) problem

As is well known many questions have been raised in relation to Relevance theory in general and, more particularly, with respect to a Relevance-theoretic treatment of connectives, despite the cult that it inaugurated.[2] However, as I claim at length with reference to certain uses of connectives

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[1] Much later it was pointed out to me that my account was very similar to Ducrot's account; however, it was arrived at independently.

[2] One must not disregard that there has been prolific research on the area of connectives within the framework of Relevance. See, for example, Jucker and Ziv, 1998.

in Kitis (forthcoming[b]), a most recalcitrant problem that one will encounter in a Relevance-theoretic approach is that of constrainability as posed in the following question:[3]

Question: If connectives constrain the interpretation of our utterances what is it that can constrain the use of those connectives? Is it just the speaker?

Blakemore, in more than one place, stresses the speaker's potential for guaranteeing optimal relevance or what I might call the speaker's unconstrained omnipotence; for example, she writes:

> Nevertheless it does seem to be the case that by producing an utterance of a particular form a speaker may give a guarantee not just that the information she is offering is relevant, but that it is relevant in a specific context—or, in other words, that it is relevant in a particular way. (76)

Let's take one particular connective, *so,* and examine what Blakemore identifies as its function in discourse. This connective signals that the following segment/proposition is to be interpreted as a conclusion, which follows from the prior discourse. Blakemore (1987: 85) offers the following example:

(2)   A: You take the first turning on the left.
      B: So I don't go past the hospital.

She writes:

> B's utterance is relevant as confirmation of (or as a request for confirmation of) the relevance of A's utterance. That is, she is confirming that the proposition her utterance expresses is indeed a contextual implication of A's utterance. (85)

Or, in some other cases, *so* may be used to draw attention to an implication of a previous utterance for all sorts of reasons:

(3)   A: Tom's car isn't here.
      B: So he decided not to come after all.

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[3]It is worth noting, however, that in Kitis (1982) I proposed Relevance as the supermaxim under whose scope all other maxims should fall and as the only maxim that is initially implicated in the derivation of particularised conversational implicatures. Moreover, in anticipation of Sperber and Wilson (1986), I claimed that much of what was then considered to be conversational implicatures were just contextual assumptions. (Cf. Kitis forthcoming[a]).

Indeed, Blakemore mentions some more cases of *so*, too: *So*, she writes, may preface an afterthought or a repair:

> In some cases it seems that a speaker will present a proposition as a conclusion simply in order to specify the relevance of a previously presented proposition, or, in other words, simply to meet the need created by the hearer's apparent inability to establish the relevance of the previous remark.

And she concludes:

> More importantly, in such cases the fact that the speaker has presented a proposition Q in a sequence P. *So* Q need not indicate anything more than a belief that the hearer wants a specification of the relevance of P. (90)

In other cases, however, Q may not be expected to be derived by the hearer on the basis of P on her own initiative and Q, in such cases cannot be afterthoughts.

Whether *So q* indicates a belief that the hearer wants a specification of the relevance of P or whether it brings about an underlying inferential connection of a generalised character (ibid.: 88), it is quite obvious that Blakemore's account of *so* as it stands, totally unconstrained by any canonisation or generalisation of background knowledge and inferential processes, cannot explain its function in the following cartoon text:

> Two young guys conversing:
> A: I don't believe this! Grandpa declared all his income to the Inland Revenue this year!
> B: So he's still brain-damaged from the stroke!
> A: Yeah, life sucks!
>
> Cartoon text 1 (Metropoulos)

In this text, laughter is generated by the subversion of our background knowledge and inferential processes that is effected by *so*. *So* functions as a rhetorical operator to switch round our canonised, generalised stereotypic knowledge schemata and inferences thereof. It appears, therefore, that *so* quite often operates, not *in vacuo*, but on the fertile soil of our schematised and 'universally' shared beliefs and knowledge. The joke owes its existence to the conjunction of both linguistic factors and social knowledge, the former skilfully operating on the latter to effectively subvert it. Laughter is generated by this coercion effected by the use of the operator *so* on our canonised schemata. This coercion seeks to totally subvert our schemata in terms of their polarity (+ and -).

Despite the rather wide range of possible explanations of the function of *so*, Blakemore's (or a relevance-theoretic) account does not capture the

particular use of *so* that the cartoon text witness; neither can a Relevance-theoretic account explain the generation of laughter.

This flaw or inability of a relevance-theoretic treatment to account for such intriguing, but not uncommon, uses of connectives is not particular to *so* only, but, as we can see, spills over all connectives. A prime example would be the case of *and*, a connective whose function would be explained, according to Blakemore, in terms of compensating for the extra effort required by processing the conjunction (rather than each proposition separately) of the two propositions.

However, let's have a look at this advertisement:

**Pythagoras' Theorem
contains 24 words.**

Archimedes' Principle, 67.

The Ten Commandments, 179.

**The American Declaration
of Independence, 300.**

***And* recent legislation in
Europe concerning when
and where you can smoke,
24,942.**

Phillip Morris Europe S.A.

(The Economist, my emphasis)

Blakemore (1989: 24) explains conjoined utterances as follows:

> To say that the relevance of a proposition depends on the interpretation of another is to say that each is consistent with the Principle of Relevance individually. In contrast, a speaker who presents a conjoined proposition, say, of the form *P and Q,* must have grounds for thinking that it has relevance over and above the relevance of its conjuncts taken individually. This is not to say that each conjunct may not have its own individual relevance. The point is that a hearer of a conjoined utterance receives no guarantee that each of the conjuncts is relevant. She can only assume that it is the conjoined proposition that is consistent with the Principle of Relevance.

While this quotation seems to emphasise a reasonably grounded explanation of conjunction, it does not provide an account of the impact of the above advertisement which is owed almost exclusively to the use of *and*. Moreover, since the desired impact of the advert is quite clearly that of a strong contrast between the previous propositions and the last *and*-conjoined one, it is reasonable to expect that the paradigmatically contrastive connective would be used—*but*, which is the contrastive connective *par excellence*. Instead, *and* figures prominently in this ad effectively enhancing and multiplying the targeted impact. This is achieved partly by ridiculing the conjunction of the propositions, an impact, which could not be achieved by *but*, the contrastive connective *par excellence*. A Relevance-theoretic account will not go any further than what Blakemore has offered, thus failing to distinguish between and account for uses of the connective *and*, such as (4) and (5):

(4a) John went to college and Steve found a job.
(4b) Joe got pregnant and they got married.
(4c) John slipped and broke a leg.
(5a) She is married and she sleeps around.
(5b) Her husband is in hospital and she hangs around with friends.

Moreover, while we have encyclopaedic schemata to buttress all examples of (4) - we have a schema for needing to be married when you have children, or for injuring ourselves when slipping - we do not have a ready encyclopaedic schema (for being married and sleeping around, or for wives hanging around with friends while their husbands are in hospital) to buttress the examples in (5). As Wilson and Sperber (1993) write, the criterion of consistency together with the principle of relevance will guide the hearer to derive adequate effects *for the minimum justifiable effort*. In default of a stereotypic encyclopaedic schema subsuming the conjunction of the conjoined propositions under its scope, the question that is raised is to what extent both principles of consistency and relevance are satisfied. Further, since the principle of expending the minimum justifiable effort both on the speaker's and the hearer's part has to be observed, one would expect the choice of the connective *but*, the contrastive connective *par excellence*, in cases where the speaker wishes to register a strong contrast between the two propositions.

I now wish to examine what a Relevance-theoretic account would have to say about the multi-faceted function of the so-called temporal connective *when*. S&W consider concepts, such as when, which are considered non-logical, as determining logical implications (87). It seems reasonable to accept a relevance theoretic account for *when*-clauses, and indeed this account will suffice in cases of temporal or even relative *when*-clauses. But how is Relevance Theory to cope with contrastive or even causal uses of

when-clauses? It seems quite clear to me that Relevance Theory may provide an initial first-order analysis of data, but the question of the meaning and function of connectives is not exhausted thereby. In other words, what is a principled way of distinguishing between purely temporal uses of *when* and rhetorical uses of this conjunction? This conjunction, just like *and*, is used as a rhetorical operator to enhance the attitudinal meaning of the construction. It usually combines with either rhetorical questions or negated propositions in a rhetorical construction. How can Relevance cope with such meaning differentials? If *when* is considered to encode conceptual meaning, it will have to be assigned a diversity of meaning specifications ranging from temporality to causality to hypotheticality to contrastingness (both in English and in Greek with *otan*, its translational equivalent). If it is assigned procedural meaning then the propositions it conjoins will have to be truth-conditionally independent of its function. But then the occurrence of this connective functions as an operator that can even suspend assignment of truth evaluation to the propositions it conjoins. Examples in (6) witness this · diversity in meaning and function:

(6a) A further distinction between names and descriptions is drawn by Russell when he notes that a name cannot occur significantly etc.

(6b) This apparent paradox is promptly resolved when one considers that in an asymmetrical situation one of the participants actually wants to mislead the other.

(6c) They may appear to seek information when in fact the information is already known..., or they may appear merely to seek confirmation when in fact they seek information.

(6d) Τέσσερα άτομα σκοτώθηκαν όταν χτυπήθηκαν από κομμάτια αεροπλάνου που κατέπεσε...

(6e) Και δέ ÷Üóéï ÷ñüïïõ üôái ï ÷ñüïõο ιάο âßíáé ôüöï ðïÿöôÝïïô;

(6f) Ποιον πάτε να πείσετε, όταν βλέπουμε και σήμερα να μην έχουν συμπληρωθεί οκτώ θέσεις νηπιαγωγών στο νομό Σερρών;

(6g) Όταν εμπλέκεται η μεγαλύτερη εταιρία, όταν επεμβαίνει το υπουργείο, όταν υπάρχει όντως κοίτασμα, δεν ξέρω για ποιο λόγο δεν ήταν δημοσιεύσιμα.

(6h) Φανταστείτε πόσο προνομιακή είναι η αξία της ξένης εταιρίας όταν η ίδια κάνει την εξόρυξη!

All this flings me back to the same question that I raised a very long time ago with regard to Grice's theory: this question concerns the issue of the constrainability of our theories. While the examples I discussed are from the domain of connectivity, this issue is not limited to connectives but rather concerns both Grice's Implicature theory and S&W's Relevance theory as the unacceptability of the following examples witness:

(7) (Notice on house gate:)
     Beware of the lion.
(8a) I climbed up the tree and pressed the bell.
(8b) I went up the stairs and picked the fruit.[4]

As I argued elsewhere, I would propose the consistent postulation of structured schemata or frames acting as constraints in accessing Relevance in S&W's or Blakemore's sense. These knowledge schemata cannot be relegated to hearer's processing potential for relevance on the grounds of those connectives alone irrespective of their **availability**. For if this were the case, then one would not detect speaker's attempts at subverting those schemata, thereby creating funny or 'unexpected' situations (advertisement, cartoon). Neither could one explain the powerful use of *and* we singled out, nor why *and* is more powerful, and therefore preferred in this use, than *but* or *although*. Equating this conceptual dynamics of connectives with their function identified in Kitis (1982) as 'orientating signals', or as developed by Schiffrin (1987) as discourse markers, or with Blakemore's procedural meaning, is to jettison a great deal of conceptual generality in favour of methodological simplicity and elegance. The structuration and development of a typology of consistent and predictable models for such frames and schemata is hardly a task for a linguist. However, this is no excuse for not acknowledging their role as systematic and powerful constraints in language production and interpretation.

Another problem that arises and has been hardly treated within a Relevance framework is the issue of Globality: Relevance has been shown to operate locally.[5] However, it has long been shown (Kitis, 1982, Schiffrin, 1987) that connectives can operate at a global level, too. And one cannot account uniformly for cases of connectives such as some of the ones examined here and (i) in the following conversational segment:

(9) Janet: Guess why I'm calling.
     Larry: *I*: know cuz I didn't do my math.
     Janet: Well - u - how w'd *I* know. I wasn't et th' *school* today.
     Larry: *Oh:*
     Janet: Right?
     Larry: Right.
(i) Janet: hhh But I *am* calling about math.
     Larry: I *knew* it:
                         (real data, drawn from Koutoupis-Kitis, 1982)

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[4]For discussion see Kitis (1987a,b)
[5]For criticism on this issue see Kitis (forthcoming[a]).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I presented some problems that a theory of Relevance will find rather difficult to tackle. These problems have been demonstrated with reference to connectives, which happen to attract my interest in particular. The major problem is the issue of unaccountability of the systematicity of background knowledge that both speakers and hearers bring to bear on both language production and comprehension. In Relevance theory mention is definitely being made of the role played by background knowledge. However, beyond a cursory invocation left at the disposal of both speaker and hearer of encyclopaedic knowledge schemata, little has been said about the powerful constraints that these schemata place on language use. I think that it is imperative that we appeal to typologies of systematic knowledge schemata that will provide constraints on language use. That such typologies are hardly the linguist's task is no reason for glossing over their potential for systematic constrainability.[6]

The issue of Globality pertaining to some uses of connectives also, in my view, poses a serious problem for Relevance theory. This problem will probably force an orientation towards a multi-level account of connectives corresponding to their multi-layered function in real conversational data (Schiffrin, 1987).

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[6]In fairness to Relevance advocates, one must note the paucity of systematic knowledge in this respect (acknowledged by Wilson in personal communication).

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