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# Commentary on Cristian Santibáñez Yáñez's "Relevance, Argumentation and Presentational Devices"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cristian Santibáñez Yáñez's paper 'Relevance, Argumentation and Presentational devices' raises a number of interesting questions and adds a new perspective to the study of relevance in argumentation and rhetoric. The author uses the classical rhetorical concept of decorum (appropriateness), Grice's Cooperative principle (especially the relational category) and Sperber/Wilson's relevance theory to advance our understanding of the construction and interpretation of relevance in ordinary dialogues.

Santibáñez critizises Grice for focusing too much on the speaker in a dialogue thus neglecting the listener or recipient up to a point. He aims at correcting the resulting deficit by working towards a kind of *Listening act theory*:

> If we know that the speaker and the hearer can strategically maneuver relevance, the former hiding it, the latter not recognizing it, it could be of help to design the condition of preparation and satisfaction of the hearer, just to keep the protagonist in balance, at least theoretically.

As a central tool for the analysis of the speaker obligations and felicity conditions of appropriate listening he employs the rhetorical concept of *decorum*, referencing Cicero who points out that decorous behavior is an obligation for both the speaker and the listener.

Santibáñez further supports his ideas about audience relevance and strategic maneuvering by the listener with a precise analysis of three argumentative dialogue situations with some relevance problems at face value. He claims that due to decorous maneuvering by the recipient the problems at the level of "local relevance" can be healed at the deeper level of "second order relevance."

The paper makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of relevance and in its sum points towards very interesting areas for further study of the phenomenon. In this reply I would like to make a small contribution to the set of questions Santibáñez is working on in the form of a critical question, an informative question and an additional point of view.

## 2. APPROACHES TO GRICE

To start with the critical question or dissenting opinion I would like to revisit Santibáñez's interpretation of Grice. Santibáñez criticizes Grice for focusing too much on the speaker and too little on the listener:

> With *Be relevant*, the third maxim under the cooperative principle, Grice emphasized that the speaker should contribute appropriately to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction (Grice 1989, p. 28). Although according to Huang (2007, p. 27), Grice had in mind that the cooperative principle and its associated maxims are normally adhered to by both the speaker and the addressee in a conversational interaction, it is not very clear if Grice meant the hearer. It is more evident that the advice was *Be relevant speaker*! than *Be relevant hearer!*

It seems worthwhile to strengthen the perspective that is represented by the interpretation of Huang in this section by distinguishing between two interpretations of Grice that can frequently be found in recent literature and that seem to be responsible for a number of misunderstandings surrounding Grice.

The first group (which could be called the normative interpretation) seems to understand Grice's cooperative principle as some form of moral responsibility that an ideal orator should seek to approach. At face value Grice's wording of the cooperation principle, his reference to Kant and especially the frequent imperatives ("Do not say what you believe to be false.," "Be relevant.," "Be orderly." etc.) seem to support this interpretation. Following this interpretation Santibáñez's critique is right to the point because from this perspective Grice's entire paper focuses practically exclusively on the speaker.

The focus shifts considerably however if one follows the second group and employs what could be called a descriptive interpretation of Grice. Following this approach Grice does not give any form of ethical or moral advice to the speaker but merely explains how speakers should usually be understood. Grice writes:

> These analogies are relevant to what I regard as a fundamental question about the CP and its attendant maxims, namely, what the basis is for the assumption which we seem to make, and on which (I hope) it will appear that a great range of implicatures depend, *that talkers will in general (ceteris paribus and in the absence of indications to the contrary) proceed in the manner that these principles prescribe*. (Grice 1975, p. 47ff, my italics).

Far from describing how talkers *should* act here he merely describes how talkers usually *do* act. In other words his analysis of the Cooperative principle dominantly is a tool for the interpretation of speech rather than for the production of it. If this is the case (and the textual evidence seems to point towards this interpretation) then Grice focuses even more on the listener than on the speaker. Rather than paraphrasing Grice with either *Be relevant speaker!* or *Be relevant listener!* I would suggest saying *Understand the speaker to be relevant, listener!*

Accepting this critical question concerning Santibáñez's interpretation of Grice does not challenge his general project and approach but it might slightly reposition his work as a form of specification of Grice's concept of relevance rather than as an

independent approach to counter his deficits. The dominant questions of the listening conditions and manoeuvring space remain the same.

## 3. DEFINING RELEVANCE

My informative question to Santibáñez's approach concerns his concepts of "local relevance" versus "second order relevance." Both terms seem to play a central role in his analysis of the field of relevance and are used in an intuitively clear way. For a complete understanding of their distinctions and their purpose in an argumentative and rhetorical analysis one might wish for a precise definition of both terms. In this context a clarification of the relationship of these terms to some of the central approaches to relevance (interpretive/evaluative or the three dimensions of the pragma-dialectical analysis of relevance etc., comp. e.g. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, ch. I, 6 and 2004, ch. 4) might be fruitful for the reader. Such determined the distinction that Santibáñez works with might be very helpful tool in the analysis of everyday argumentative discourse examples with some form of relevance issue.

## 4. DECORUM AND ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Finally I would like to supply an additional point of view concerning the analysis of Santibáñez's examples. In analyzing those Santibáñez makes able use of the classical concept of decorum (propriety/decency). He explains the reactions of the listeners as a form of decorous behaviour which prevents the loss of the face of the conversational partner. While this perspective and the introduction of decorum to the interpretation is certainly helpful, his own wording as well as his starting points (Grice and Sperber/Wilson) immediately bring an alternative to mind that is considerably more developed in recent theory: The concept of politeness as developed by Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), Brown/Levinson (1987) and more recently Fraser (1990, 2001) and Watts (2003).

Lakoff's initial question is precisely the problem of perceived violations of Grice's Cooperation principle including the relational maxim. Following a lead from Grice who considers his lists of maxims incomplete and explicitly mentions "Be polite." as a potential additional maxim (Grice 1975, p. 47) she develops three politeness maxims (Formality, Deference and Camaraderie, Lakoff 1973, p. 298ff.) as tools for the analysis of apparent CP violations at what I understand Santibáñez would call the local relevance level.

Leech's similar but more radical modification of the Gricean starting points introduces a Politeness principle (PP) to supplement the Cooperation principle. Similar to Grice's CP Leech's PP contains a number of maxims, namely the tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim and sympathy maxim. (Leech 1983, p. 132).

Arguably the most influential politeness model by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson also makes reference to Grice's Cooperation principle and centers around the idea that conversation partners will (ceteris paribus) aim at minimizing so called face threatening acts (FTAs). In order to achieve this, speakers can choose between five levels

of politeness which include more or less danger to the preservation of the face of the antagonist.

While these classical models of politeness have been rightfully criticized for some of their claims (comp. Hoppmann 2008, p. 826ff.) including questions of intercultural validity and many details, their basic toolset can still be very helpful for the analysis of the examples Santibáñez provides. This is least evident at the first example (were the decorous behaviour is also rather hidden). Santibáñez states "The effort of clarifying shows, at the same time, an underlying decorous behaviour of the participants, because they try to "save the face" of the other by rescuing the relevant intention, content and explanation of the topic at issue." Thus Santibáñez explains the reaction of the dialogue participant to the problem at the local relevance level in the same terms that Brown/Levinson use. While this example is not easy to link to one of their five categories of polite behaviour contrasting them with Santibáñez analysis might be helpful for both sides: adding further details to the decorum-analysis and posing questions to Brown/Levinson's categories. Similarly Leech's maxims could be helpful to explain the relevance problem. The most useful maxim in the first example might be Leech's agreement maxim (Minimize disagreement between self and other / Maximize agreement between self and other). By "rescuing the relevant intention, content and explanation of the topic" the participants thus obey the politeness principle.

Examples two and three lend themselves even more evidently to an analysis from the politeness perspective. In both cases the antagonists refrain altogether from performing a face threatening act (Brown/Levinson's fifth and most extensive politeness level) in order to further the exchange as a whole. In Leech's vocabulary the second example might be an instance of the tact maxim (minimize cost to other / maximize benefit to other) or the generosity maxim (minimize benefit to self / maximize cost to self) and the third example might be explained with the help of the sympathy maxim (minimize antipathy between self and other / maximize sympathy between self and other). Once again his politeness principle could thus help to explain the problems at the level of local relevance.

Clearly the analysis of relevance issues with the help of the toolset developed by classical politeness research can not substitute other aspects of relevance but it might be a valuable addition to the perspective that is opened by Santibáñez's decorum approach. Both aspects, decorum and politeness, certainly have their limits in explaining a great many other phenomena that must be taken into consideration when analysis relevance problems.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Santibáñez's paper opens new and valuable perspectives to the important field of relevance in argumentation and rhetoric. By using the concept of decorum as a tool for the analysis and focusing more on the antagonist than the protagonist of a dialogue he adds interesting and helpful insights. A further development of the principles of the analysis might thus lead to a more systematic model of relevance in argumentative dialogues. If this approach can be developed into an equivalent of a "listening act theory" it might provide another very helpful tool for our understanding of relevance and argumentation.

# COMMENTARY ON CRISTIAN SANTIBÁÑEZ YÁÑEZ

Link to paper

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