

Editorial for special issue of Journal of Pragmatics

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**Title:**

***Relevance Theory: New Horizons***

**Guest editors: Tim Wharton, Caroline Jagoe**

**Foreword by Tim Wharton, Caroline Jagoe and Deirdre Wilson**

### **Highlights**

- The influence of relevance theory continues to spread to other disciplines
- Researchers draw on other disciplines and domains of study to inform relevance theory
- The boundaries of the theory are continually being expanded and redefined.

### **Abstract**

This editorial provides an overview of some of the new horizons that are visible from the pragmatic framework of relevance theory. While its roots lie firmly in linguistic pragmatics, the influence of relevance theory has spread – indeed, continues to spread – to a range of disciplines, some of which might be said to lie beyond its original domain. As well as contributing to cognitive sciences such as developmental and evolutionary psychology and the emergent domain of experimental pragmatics – relevance theory was, after all, originally conceived as a model of communication *and* cognition – a growing number of researchers is bringing a relevance-theoretic perspective to work in; literary and artistic studies; anthropology, cross-cultural studies and the social sciences; and disciplines as diverse as affective science, internet-mediated discourse and clinical practice.

### **Keywords**

Inferential communication; Ostension; Non-propositional effects; Pragmatics; Relevance theory,

## **1. Background**

In November 2019, a small group of academics, accompanied by an even smaller group of PhD students, met in the seaside city of Brighton, UK, for an event organised by Tim Wharton of the University of Brighton and Caroline Jagoe of Trinity College, Dublin. The event was supported by the University of Brighton School of Humanities Research Development Fund and the *Beyond Meaning* research network (comprising Wharton, Elly

Ifantidou of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and Louis de Saussure of the University of Neuchatel). While the event was light-heartedly entitled 'Relevance-by-the-Sea', its aims were serious: to discuss ways in which relevance theorists are currently looking out from their discipline and to articulate and encourage new directions through which relevance theoretic research might inform and be informed by work in other areas: to seek out new horizons.

The study of pragmatics occupies an interesting position, straddling – as it does – the borders of a numerous subject areas. In some ways this is only to be expected. The processes of utterance interpretation and communication, which pragmatics aims to describe and explain, are fundamental to most human endeavours. But it does not follow from this that pragmatics is invariably outward-facing. It is an observation rather than a criticism of academics generally that they (we) tend to walk through the same doors into the same buildings with the same departmental labels. This is true both literally and metaphorically. We believe, however, that those working in relevance-theoretic pragmatics are uniquely positioned to look outwards to other disciplines rather than only inwards at our own. There are two reasons for this, one theoretical and one largely historical.

Theoretically speaking, people working in broadly Gricean pragmatics tend to construe the domain of communication or utterance meaning rather narrowly. Grice saw utterance interpretation as a largely inferential matter, and it is generally presumed that the output of the inference process is a single determinate proposition (or a small set of such propositions): in Gricean terminology, the speaker 'means<sub>NN</sub> that *p*'. Although it is also recognised that communication gives rise to a variety of 'non-propositional' effects, these are seen as falling outside the scope of pragmatics. As Stephen Levinson (2000: 13) puts it: 'Meaning<sub>NN</sub> (or something of the sort) draws an outer boundary on the communicational effects that a theory of communication is responsible for.'

However, a good deal of what a speaker communicates seems to fall on the 'non-propositional' side: for instance, it is hard to see how the content of moods, emotions and impressions can be reduced to a single determinate proposition (or a small set of such propositions). Many of the interesting explanatory questions concerning the communication of 'non-propositional' effects remain unformulated, and in order to make progress, genuinely interdisciplinary research is needed. Relevance theory's long-standing concern with the vaguer aspects of communication (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995; Wharton, 2009) is an advantage here.

Historically, the 'cognitive' or 'naturalist' turn of the 60s, which so transformed the study of pragmatics (and indeed led to the development of relevance theory), has been slow to affect work in the rest of the arts, humanities and social sciences: there are huge advances to be made. There is no clearer example of this than in the realm of poetics and literary theory. In 1992, David Trotter remarked:

Literary theorists have hardly paid any attention at all to Relevance Theory. This seems to me a mistake. Relevance Theory is not only the most elegant version of pragmatics currently available, but the most uncompromising in its view that inference cannot be assimilated to a code model of communication. It asks questions which literary criticism has never been able to ask, let alone answer. (Trotter, 1992: 11)

Alastair Fowler was of the same view:

[I]f the theory of communication sketched in *Relevance* is as significant as I take it to be ... contemporary methods of criticism all need to be thought through afresh. (Fowler, 1989: 17)

While progress has been slow, two recent volumes which aim to combine the concerns of both literary scholars and relevance theorists (Kolaiti, 2019; Cave and Wilson, 2018) – and see also the work of Adrian Pilkington (2000) – have begun to realise the potential that Trotter and other early reviewers of *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* saw in the possible application of a cognitive theory of pragmatics to literary theory. We hope this collection will encourage similar interactions across pragmatics and other disciplines.

## 2. New horizons

The new horizons explored by the papers in this collection fall, broadly speaking, under two themes

- (1) An *inter*disciplinary theme, within which the goal is (i) to apply relevance theory to new domains, in an attempt to inform research in the disciplines traditionally associated with those domains, and/or (ii) to draw on other disciplines and domains of study to inform relevance theory. It is also worth noting that four of the authors who have contributed to the papers in this special issue are not relevance-theorists, nor indeed are they linguists.
- (2) An *intra*disciplinary theme, within which researchers adopt a theory-internal perspective with the goal of redefining and expanding the boundaries of the theory itself

We recognise, of course, that these two groups are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, a paper that draws on other disciplines might do so with the specific aim of expanding the boundaries of relevance theory; on the other, expanding the boundaries of relevance theory may have a range of implications for interdisciplinary work. Nonetheless, we hope the themes represent a useful way of grouping together papers which cover a range of quite disparate topics. There are five papers grouped under the first theme, and six grouped under the second.

## 3. This special issue

### 3.1 Interdisciplinary theme

Using relevance theory to investigate recorded conversations involving people with communication differences in communication abilities – in the context of aphasia and

autism respectively – Jagoe and Wharton, and Williams, apply relevance theory to two relatively under-explored domains, each of which is ripe for pragmatic analysis. In *Meaning non-verbally: communication in people with aphasia*, Jagoe and Wharton (2021) consider how far relevance theoretic research into the meaning of non-verbal behaviours might be able to shed new light on clinical research into the communicative strategies of people with post-stroke aphasia. People with aphasia tend to rely a great deal on non-verbal behaviours (gesture, for example) and the authors use the relevance theory *bi-dimensional continuum* in which meaning and showing are plotted against determinate/indeterminate intended import (Sperber and Wilson, 2015) to demonstrate the complexity of non-verbal communication in dyads where one partner has moderate to severe aphasia.

In *Theory of autistic mind: a proposed relevance theoretic account of autistic pragmatic 'impairment'*, Williams (2021) explores the implications of recent studies which suggest that people with autism are not solely responsible for failures in understanding between themselves and non-autistic people. Contrary to the prevailing view that such failures are linked to impaired theory of mind abilities in people with autism, and are consequences of a single, impaired cognitive system, they may be seen as resulting from a failure among multiple agents to achieve a consensus. Williams uses the relevance theory notion of *mutual manifestness* as the basis of an alternative explanation for some of the pragmatic difficulties observed in cross autistic-to-non-autistic communication.

In her paper *The development of non-literal uses of language: Sense conventions and pragmatic competence?* Falkum (2022) looks out towards experimental psychology. She uses relevance theory to explain why children, before they reach a sophisticated level of figurative language ability, enter a stage characterised by a decrease in their production of figurative language and a tendency towards literal interpretation. This presents something of a conundrum, since it happens *after* an earlier phase in which the same children exhibit relatively creative linguistic behaviour. Falkum's study demonstrates how relevance theory is able to go beyond mere description and provide a theoretical explanation which is both consistent with the empirical data and offers a coherent account of a developmental trajectory.

Rohan and Sasamoto's (2021) paper – *Looking into the eyes of onomatopoeia: a relevance-based eye-tracking study of digital manga* – adopts techniques from experimental psychology like Falkum. However, rather than applying relevance theory in a new domain, it draws on work from a different discipline to shed light on one facet of utterance interpretation: the reading behaviours and translation strategies at work in the interpretation of onomatopoeic creative titling and captioning. Rohan and Sasamoto use state-of-the-art eye-tracking software and the findings of that aspect of their study, along with post-task interviews, demonstrate how the particular type of onomatopoeia used can influence a reader's engagement with the comic page and the recovery of sound effects.

Wharton, Bonard, Dukes, Sander and Oswald's (2021) *Relevance and emotion* considers the interpretation of affect – currently, a very 'live' issue in relevance theory – and considers whether relevance theory can learn from one highly popular framework within affective science, appraisal theory. Interestingly, a central claim of appraisal theory is that for an emotional state to occur, the object or event that elicits the state needs to be *relevant* to the person in whom that state is elicited. This paper asks how the notion of relevance as it is used in affective science might be incorporated into a relevance theory account and, indeed, help us to accommodate the affective dimension within pragmatics. It should be

added that in ongoing work, these researchers are looking into ways relevance theory might inform work in affective science.

### 3.2 Intradisciplinary theme

In *On the triggers of lexical adjustment: procedural elements enacting ad hoc concept construction*, Manuel Padilla Cruz (2022) explores the extent to which morphological components such as diminutive or augmentative morphemes, expressive expletives and evidential participles might be analysed as linguistically mandating lexical pragmatic processes. He proposes that since these expressions lack an identifiable conceptual semantics, they trigger pragmatic processes through procedural encoding. This raises interesting questions about the nature of mutual parallel adjustment of encoded content and the role of procedural meaning within it.

The study of metaphor goes back to the very beginnings of the study of language itself. In her paper *Non-propositional effects in verbal communication: the case of metaphor*, Ifantidou (2021) analyses the role of mental images, themselves contingent on memories and associations, in the interpretation of metaphor. Using data from a study with speakers of English as a second language, she demonstrates that a full and complete account of the intended import of metaphorical utterances should investigate the communication of memorable effects which are the result of mental imagery, as well as cognition. In doing this, Ifantidou's paper adds to a burgeoning literature which sees metaphorical interpretation as involving both perception and cognition.

Scott's (2021) paper *Favourites, likes and retweets: relevance and ostensive communication online* addresses a domain of communication that was unthinkable even twenty years ago, let alone in ancient times. All posts on social media networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have, built into them by default, a functionality that allows them to be shared or rebroadcast. Scott argues that both sharing and rebroadcasting qualify as ostensive acts of communication and proposes an account using two relevance-theoretic notions: the saying-showing continuum and the distinction between descriptive and interpretive use.

Both Assimakopoulos's and Bonard's papers concern *ostension*, a notion that is central to the account of communication and cognition offered by relevance theory. In *The communicative nature of human language*, Assimakopoulos (2022) explores the possibility that whether or not they are embedded in a speaker's ostensive behaviour, *all* linguistic stimuli are treated by our cognitive system as ostensive by default. Assimakopoulos proposes that this opens up the possibility of applying the relevance-theoretic framework to cases which do not currently satisfy the conditions required for ostensive communication. Bonard (2022) is also interested in this possibility. In *Relevance theory beyond ostensive communication* he develops what he calls an 'extended' version of relevance theory which can deal with the interpretation of non-ostensive behaviours (such as laughing or sighing) the meanings of which are underdetermined by the coded element they contain. Whether such cases actually qualify as acts of communication, Bonard argues, is an open question. But whether they do or not, relevance theory, he goes on to suggest, has the theoretical means and flexibility to analyse them.

Finally, and still on the topic of ostension, Park and Clark (2022) develop an account of the cognitive processes used in the production of ostensive acts. In *A relevance-guided*

*production heuristic* they assume that just like comprehension, production is constrained by a dedicated heuristic. The paper asks what this heuristic might look like. What triggers it? What regulates the degree of effort involved in production? How do communicators monitor and then adjust their ostensive acts (as in the case of verbal self-correction)? The paper concludes by suggesting that yet further heuristics might be involved in the production and comprehension of utterances.

#### **4. Conclusion**

All in all, this special issue has two main aims. The first, of course, is to illustrate the wealth and breadth of current relevance theoretic research and future directions it may take. A recent 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of this journal asked 'Pragmatics: Quo Vadis?' (Haugh and Terkourafi 2019): we hope the contents of this special issue will contribute in some small way to the debate stimulated by that volume. The second is to inform, encourage and – we hope – inspire others. You may be a researcher who works in a different pragmatic framework, or perhaps even an entirely different discipline, but it is hoped that the papers included here will help you appreciate not only the fascinating work that is currently going on in one part of the pragmatic community, but also help you appreciate the huge potential that pragmatics as a discipline has.

#### **Contributions to this Special Issue**

Jago, C., Wharton, T. Meaning non-verbally: The neglected corners of the bi-dimensional continuum communication in people with aphasia

J. Pragmatics 178, June 2021, 21-30 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.02.027>

Williams, G. Theory of autistic mind: A renewed relevance theoretic perspective on so-called autistic pragmatic 'impairment'

J. Pragmatics 180, July 2021, 121-130 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.04.032>

Falkum, I. The development of non-literal uses of language: Sense conventions and pragmatic competence

J. Pragmatics 188, January 2022, 97-107 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.12.002>

Rohan, O., Sasamoto, R. O'Brien, S. Onomatopoeia: A relevance-based eye-tracking study of digital manga

J. Pragmatics 186, December 2021, 60-72 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.09.018>

Wharton, T., Bonard, C. Dukes, D., Sander, D. Oswald, S. David Sander, Steve Oswald  
Relevance and emotion

J. Pragmatics 181, August 2021, 259-269 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.06.001>

Padilla Cruz, M. Is free enrichment always free? Revisiting ad hoc-concept construction

J. Pragmatics 187, January 2022, 130-143 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.11.006>

Ifantidou, E. Non-propositional effects in verbal communication: The case of metaphor  
J. Pragmatics 181, August 2021, 6-16 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.05.009>

Scott, K. The pragmatics of rebroadcasting content on Twitter: How is retweeting relevant?  
J. Pragmatics 184, October 2021, 52-60 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.07.022>

Assimakopoulos, S. Ostension and the communicative language of natural language.  
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Bonard, C. Beyond ostension: Introducing the expressive principle of relevance  
J. Pragmatics 187, January 2022, 13-23 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.10.024>

Park, K. H., Clark, B. A relevance-focused production heuristic.  
J. Pragmatics 187, January 2022, 176-185 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.11.007>

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*Journal of Pragmatics* 145: 31–38.

**Guest editors:**

**Tim Wharton** is Principal Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Brighton. His research explores how 'natural', non-linguistic behaviours – tone of voice, facial expressions, gesture – interact with the linguistic properties of utterances. His main theses are outlined in his 2009 book, *Pragmatics and Non-Verbal Communication* (CUP) which charts a point of contact between pragmatics, philosophy, cognitive science and psychology, and provides the analytical basis to answer the questions he poses. Current projects include a monograph with Louis de Saussure entitled *Pragmatics and Emotion* and he recently won an EU-funded Marie Curie project with Patricia Kolaiti called 'Literature as Cognitive Object'.

**Caroline Jagoe** is Assistant Professor at Trinity College, Dublin. She has worked as a speech and language therapist and a researcher in the fields of neurorehabilitation as well as in acute, community and forensic psychiatry. Clinical pragmatics is a particular focus of her work and she situates herself as a Relevance Theorist, working on applications to conversational data involving people with schizophrenia, aphasia, and those who use alternative and augmentative communication. She has a particular interest in optimising communication access for those with communication disabilities and has been involved in projects in countries as diverse as Ireland, South Africa and Iraq.

**Guest foreword author:**

**Deirdre Wilson** is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at UCL. Her main research interests are in communication and theoretical pragmatics: her long-standing collaboration with Dan Sperber (*Relevance: Communication and Cognition; Meaning and Relevance*) has led to publications on a wide variety of pragmatic topics, from disambiguation and reference resolution to rhetoric, style and the interpretation of literary works. Her novel *Slave of the Passions* was shortlisted for two prizes, and she is working (very slowly) on a second.