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Texts and types of meaning

In their 1986 book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson put forward a radical view of communication which saw all kinds of communication in terms of the concept of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The theory put forward in this work, known as relevance theory (hereinafter RT), was later developed to cover a large number of examples of different forms of communication. According to the theory, it in fact applies to all kinds of communication, but in practice little work has been done within the framework of the theory on written texts. What I shall be concerned with in this paper is the application of the theory to such texts. More particularly, I am going to examine a claim made by Wilson and Sperber in a later paper that there are four different kinds of meaning and try to extend these four types of meaning to give them a specifically textual dimension (Wilson and Sperber 1993).

These four types revolve around two different parameters: conceptual/procedural on the one hand and truth-conditional/non-truth-conditional on the other. Putting these two together it is easy to see that we therefore have 4 different types of meaning. The first, conceptual and truth-conditional, is the basic type of meaning shared by the vast majority of content words. These encode concepts which go make to make up the proposition expressed by the utterance and thus contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance. The second type, conceptual and non-truth-conditional, refers to various illocutionary force indicators, sentence adverbials etc which, although they encode concepts, do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance, but to a higher level explicature. Speech acts like this are seen as higher level explicatures in RT.

These then are the two types of conceptual meaning. The other two types are types of procedural or non-conceptual meaning. What do we mean by this? It is argued by Diane Blakemore that discourse connectives like 'after all' should not be seen as encoding concepts and thus that they are not conceptual (Blakemore 1987). They also do not contribute to the truth conditions of utterances and so are non-truth-conditional, thus giving the third type, i.e. procedural and non-truth-conditional. The function of such words is in Blakemore's terms to act as "semantic constraints on relevance", in other words to guide the hearer towards the expected contextual effects of an utterance. Thus the use of a word like 'so' indicates to the hearer how he should interpret the proposition, rather than being part of the proposition itself.

The fourth category is that of procedural and truth-conditional. At first sight it would seem rather difficult to imagine how these two types could go together. Wilson and Sperber, however, argue that personal pronouns illustrate this type, in that they are not conceptual, since only by determining the referent is specific content given to the expression. They are truth-conditional in that they contribute to the truth conditions of the proposition. Like discourse connectives, pronouns constrain the hypothesis space that must be searched by the hearer to arrive at the intended interpretation. But the latter constrain the search for the explicature, since by assigning the reference the hearer is led to produce the full propositional form.

Having given you the basic conception of these four different kinds of meaning, as expressed by Wilson and Sperber, what I would like to do now is to try and extend the

concept to the level of the text. You will have noticed that the original four types of meaning were at the level of the words, which then went together to express explicatures and implicatures, in RT terms. As I am interested in the application of RT to texts, I thought it would be interesting to see if the same sort of conception could be applied to this higher level and examine what sort of implications this might have for an RT theory of discourse analysis.

Just as the basic concept with which the original theory was concerned was the word, which went together to make up implicatures/explicatures, I am concerned at the basic level with the sentence, since it is sentences that go together to make up texts. If we look then at the sentence where the original theory was concerned with the word level we find that the basic type, corresponding to normal content words, would be the normal sentences of a text. In addition to the intuitive parallel we can see that sentences can be clearly seen to be both conceptual and truth-conditional. They obviously encode concepts and they express a proposition of which we can say that it is truth-conditional. However, it must be noted that if we are working at the level of the text it is not enough to say that sentences are conceptual and truth-conditional at the sentence proposition level. This would be no more than is true of words.

If we raise our attention to the level of the text as a whole, we can see that just as words can be said to go together to make up propositions sentences can go together to constitute macropropositions. Many discourse analysts have used this concept, the most well-known description being that of van Dijk and Kintsch, but my argument is compatible with a number of different formulations of the concept (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). These macropropositions at the textual level are clearly just as truth-conditional as any lower level propositions in that they can be declared to be true or false in the same way. These macropropositions can apply at different textual levels, i.e. paragraph, section of the text or whole text, but the same arguments apply at any of these levels.

Similarly, if words encode concepts so too do sentences. And the concepts in these sentences go together to make up the macropropositions of different levels of the text. The parallels with the original argument are clear and it seems safe to say that sentences of a text are both conceptual and truth-conditional.

The second type, you will remember, was also conceptual, but differed from the first in that it was not truth-conditional. By this it was meant that words of this type do not contribute to the truth conditions of the proposition expressed but instead operate at a higher level, what in RT terms is called a higher level explicature. For example, if Mike says "Frankly, John is mad", then he is expressing a basic proposition that 'John is mad', however 'mad' might be interpreted. But he is also expressing another concept, indicated by the word "frankly". This does not contribute at all to the truth conditions of whether or not John is in fact mad, but expresses another additional explicature at a higher level, i.e. 'Mike is stating frankly', or something similar.

Notice, then, that the second explicature operates at a different, higher level and does not as a result contribute to the truth conditions of the level below. To find a parallel in texts, therefore, we need to find a part of the text which, although part of the text in the same way that a sentence adverbial is part of a sentence, does not contribute to the truth conditions of the text as such. Instead it should stand outside the text and refer to the rest of the text as a whole in the same way that an adverbial like "frankly" refers to the rest of the sentence it is in. This might seem like a tall order at first sight. In fact, though, it is not so difficult as it seems. Some texts, although not all, do contain such a part. Thus if we take a text of the type I am working on, popular science texts, practically at random, "Cornering a Killer", we find that it contains a picture and diagram. (Nash 1994). This is just the type of thing we are concerned with. They are part of the text, since the beginning and end of the text are marked by two little blocks, in the style of Time and they fall within these boundaries. However the rest of the text can be read and understood without paying any attention to the picture or diagram. They do not contribute at all to the propositions expressed at any level in the rest of the text but rather constitute a higher level. Similarly they in no way contribute to the truth conditions of the text of which they are a part. In themselves too a picture or diagram cannot be

said to be true or false and thus this type is obviously non-truth conditional. Instead they work at a higher level to show how the text as a whole is to be interpreted. They help the reader to fit the text into a wider whole.

Nevertheless pictures and diagrams are clearly conceptual. They do not actually encode a concept at the word level in that they are non-linguistic, but they are certainly conceptual in that they generate concepts in the mind of the reader. These concepts will then go together to make propositions. Notice, however, that such propositions would not be part of the text in that they would be idiosyncratic and dependent on the individual reader. They thus differ from the propositions of type 1, which are clearly directly drawn from the text. Type 2 then seems to be made up of parts of the text which relate to the whole of the rest of the text and place the text as a whole into a wider framework. Not all texts contain pictures and diagrams, i.e. type 2, but this is to be expected. In a similar way, not all sentences contain type 2 meanings either. We should not, therefore, expect all texts to contain pictures or diagrams.

The final two types have in common the fact that neither of them are conceptual, but the opposite type, procedural. As mentioned above, the basis of this type at the sentence level is the type of discourse connective discussed by Blakemore, which has no conceptual meaning as such, but merely serves to constrain the hearer's search for the implicature (Blakemore 1987). The text level equivalent of such discourse connectives is not hard to find. The type of discourse connective discussed by Blakemore as having the property described is those such as 'so' or 'moreover', which lead the hearer to access a particular type of rhetorical connection between propositions. At textual level this type of connection goes by various names, either functional or rhetorical, and different discourse analysts, e.g. Meyer and Rice, Mann and Thompson, have listed several types of rhetorical connections (Meyer and Rice 1982; Mann and Thompson 1988). Nevertheless the principle is clear that here we are concerned with the rhetorical relationships or the types of rhetorical connection between different parts of the text. If we take the approach of Mann and Thompson (Rhetorical Structure Theory or RST), they establish that different sections of the text have a particular rhetorical relationship between them, e.g. that of concession, solution etc. Without going into the details of their approach it may be stated that the type of rhetorical relationship described is obviously procedural in type. Two different sections of texts may be linked in a problem-solution relation but this does not mean that there is any sort of conceptual meaning of problem in the section of text labelled as such. The relation 'problem' does not lie in any words or sentences of the text as such but in the relation of a section of text to another section. In RST the relations are hierarchical so that levels of text from the highest to the lowest relate together in a hierarchical structure covering the whole text.

One objection that may be raised at this stage is that up till now each type has had a clear textual exponent, whereas this type seems to be divorced from any direct linguistic expression. First of all, there seems to be no principled reason why there necessarily must be a direct linguistic expression of such relations. Mann and Thompson specifically point out that there may be a specific marker of the relation, but that this is not necessarily the case. Nevertheless, a direct parallel to the original type would mean that there would be some aspect of the text that would indicate this level. As indicated, there may indeed be such a marker, but we would not want to restrict it to the type mentioned by Blakemore, since these are a small subclass of connectors which do not contribute to the truth conditions of the proposition. Thus 'so' would be non-truth-conditional but 'because of that' would be truth-conditional and not of this type. Taking the argument to the textual level, however, this distinction need not concern us, since none of these connectors would be part of the macropropositions of the text, but they would all be likely to reflect the rhetorical relationships between the macropropositions.

Another type of exponent, though, is a direct indication of this level. This is the type of indication we have, most clearly, in academic scientific papers, where section headings like 'Procedure' or 'Discussion' gave a clear signal of the type of rhetorical relation there is between the section of the text with such a heading and the text as a whole. Here we have at its most explicit the type of textual meaning we are discussing.

But it would be too severe to restrict this type of meaning purely to texts where such a relation is overtly signalled. Thus this text has a first section whose relation to the rest of the text is one of 'background', where I introduce the ideas of Wilson and Sperber's original paper as background to the exposition of my extension of their ideas. This section is not labelled as 'introduction' or 'background' but nevertheless functions as such.

Such relations, it would seem, are procedural, in that they do not encode concepts which become part of the macropropositions of the text. Rather they are similar to the type of discourse connectors described by Blakemore in that they function to indicate to the reader how he is to interpret the relationship between the different macropropositions of the text. Similarly, they are non-truth-conditional in that they are not constitutive of these macropropositions.

The final type, procedural and truth-conditional, is the most problematic. In my defence, though, it must be pointed out that the original formulation is somewhat of a problem for Wilson and Sperber also. In 'Relevance' Sperber and Wilson indicate that the sentence "She carried it in her hand" is non-propositional in that it must first be enriched by completing the reference of "it" and "her" before it can be considered fully propositional and thus capable of being described as true or false (Sperber and Wilson 1986 72-73). However, in their later paper they describe personal pronouns as being truth-conditional (Wilson and Sperber 1993 20). They are truth-conditional in that they contribute to the truth conditions of the propositions they help to constitute. On the other hand they are procedural, because, as we have just seen, they do not directly describe a concept. What they do is guide the hearer's search for the intended referent, thus acting to constrain the inferential phase of comprehension in the same way as discourse connectors. Pronouns, however, constrain the search for the explicature.

Given these difficulties, what could we consider as an analogue at textual level? At the textual level the analogue that when filled out produces a textual macroproposition is the headline or title. Normally such a headline is not a full macroproposition. Thus in the text mentioned earlier it is the phrase "Cornering a Killer", which needs to be filled out by completing the missing elements to produce a full proposition referring to the whole text (Nash 1994). Thus headlines are truth-conditional in the same sense as pronouns in that they contribute to the constitution of a fully truth-conditional proposition.

This is not so problematic, but are such headlines procedural? To help us answer this question, it must be borne in mind that the function of the procedural type is to constrain the search for inferences on the part of the hearer, to reduce the hypothesis space that must be searched by the hearer. In the case of the pronoun it is a constraint on the possible explicature. Pronouns guide the hearer to a referent which enables the hearer to construct the explicature. Headlines guide the search for the macroproposition that governs the whole text. In this sense they also guide the search for the explicature, in this case a higher level explicature at the level of the text.

It might be argued that headlines are surely conceptual in that they clearly encode concepts. Certainly, they encode concepts at the word level. However, we are concerned here with the higher textual level, at which level headlines are not conceptual. By this I mean that at sentence level the idea of conceptual would imply full propositions, since conceptual representation is defined as having the logical properties of entering into entailment and contradiction relations. At sentence level this would constitute a full proposition. Headlines as they stand are not full propositions.

But the clinching argument for procedural status is the defining characteristic of guiding the interpretation of the hearer rather than constituting a proposition as such. It seems clear that they do this. Again, it might be objected that not all headlines are such: some are in fact full propositions. Those that are would indeed not be of this type, but would be of type 1. But this is not a problem in that again there is a parallel here with pronouns. Not all sentences have pronouns; those that have nouns and are otherwise fully explicit would be type 1 also. So we would not expect in theory all headlines necessarily to be type 4 - this is something which is allowed for in the theory, not a necessary characteristic, just as pronouns are a possibility not a mandatory part of any sentence.

It has been argued then that corresponding to the word level types of meaning identified by Wilson and Sperber there are corresponding types of meaning at the textual level. The remarks in this paper on this score are still to some extent speculative but it would seem likely that such a powerful phenomenon would find expression at other linguistic levels. The suggestions put forward are a first step towards suggesting how these four types of meaning might be expressed at the textual level.

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