

Wilson, Deirdre

Nicholas Allott
 University of Oslo
 nicholas.allott@gmail.com
 Word Count: 2542
 Reference Word Count: 422

This is a postprint (author's final draft, after refereeing). The paper was published as:

Allott, N. (2014). Wilson, Deirdre and Relevance Theory. In C. A. Chapelle, K. Aijmer, M. Gonzales-Lloret, L. Ortega, L. Plakans & B. Wolter (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics: Online Version*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Please send any comments or questions you have to: nicholas.allott@gmail.com

Deirdre Wilson (born 1941) is one of the key figures in the history of pragmatics since its emergence as a distinct field of research in the 1970s. She is professor of linguistics (now emerita) at the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences at University College London, and, since 2007, a Research Director of the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature at the University of Oslo. With Dan Sperber she is the co-founder of relevance theory, a theory of cognition and communication that is one of the leading programmes of research in linguistic pragmatics and related areas. She has worked on many topics in pragmatics and philosophy of language and mind, with Sperber, with other co-authors, and separately, including bridging, epistemic vigilance, Grice's theory of conversation, inference, irony, literary interpretation and poetic effects, loose talk, metaphor, mind-reading/Theory of Mind, modularity of mind, mutual knowledge, non-declarative sentences, presuppositions, rhetoric, the role of prosody in pragmatics, the semantics-pragmatics distinction, and word meanings and lexical pragmatics.

Wilson's first degree was in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, followed by a BPhil in Philosophy and a year as a Lecturer in Philosophy in Oxford. Her early work in linguistics, including her PhD thesis, supervised by Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was on semantic and pragmatic presuppositions, and was influenced not only by Chomsky but also by the philosopher Paul Grice, whose lectures on 'Logic and Conversation' are generally seen as laying the foundations of modern pragmatics. Most of her research has involved relevance theory: developing it with Dan Sperber; using it as a framework for the study of communication; and revising and extending the theory. Several of the many students she has supervised have become leading researchers in linguistics, psychology or philosophy, including Diane Blakemore, Richard Breheny, Robyn Carston, Billy Clark, Ernst-August Gutt, Elly Ifantidou, Anna Papafragou, Stephen Neale, Tomoko Matsui and Tim Wharton.

Wilson has published more than fifty papers, and five books: a monograph and a collection of papers written with Dan Sperber (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wilson & Sperber, 2012b) a monograph with Neil Smith (Smith & Wilson, 1979); a monograph (Wilson, 1975) based on her PhD thesis; and a novel, *Slave of the Passions*.

In what follows, the essentials of relevance theory are explained, and two important strands of Wilson's work are described: her theory of irony, developed with Dan Sperber, and her research with Sperber and with Robyn Carston and others on lexical pragmatics. Readers should also consult the entry on Dan Sperber in this volume for further coverage of their joint work.

[A] Relevance theory

Relevance theory is an attempt to provide a psychologically realistic account of cognition and communication. It postulates that human cognition tends to allocate attention and processing resources so as to achieve the greatest cognitive effect for the least effort, that is, to maximise relevance, where relevance is defined as a positive function of cognitive effects and a negative function of processing effort. This is the Cognitive Principle of Relevance.

A specific consequence of this general tendency is described in the Communicative Principle of Relevance. When a speaker makes an utterance, she takes up some of the hearer's attention, so she communicates a (fallible) assurance that the utterance will be worth processing: that it will provide at least enough cognitive effects to repay the effort expended, that is, it will be at least relevant enough to be worth the hearer's attention. In fact, Sperber and Wilson argue that hearers can expect speakers to go beyond this minimal level of relevance whenever they can see a way of doing so without going against their own interests or preferences, since this makes their utterances more likely to be understood. They call this the *presumption of optimal relevance*. The Communicative Principle of Relevance is that each utterance communicates such a presumption.

The fact that utterances raise expectations of relevance, they argue, justifies hearers in applying a particular strategy in comprehension, the *relevance theoretic comprehension procedure* (or *heuristic*): to search for an interpretation by following a least effort path – i.e. to generate and assess interpretations starting with the one that is most accessible – and to accept the first interpretation that satisfies their expectations of relevance. The justification for the least effort path is that if the interpretation lies off it, then the hearer has been put to effort that he might have been spared, so the utterance, on that interpretation, will be less relevant than the speaker could have made it. Similarly, the hearer is entitled to accept the first interpretation he arrives at that satisfies his expectations of relevance, because searching for another would require more effort and the utterance, on that interpretation, would again be less relevant than the speaker could have made it.

Relevance theory is inspired to a considerable degree by Paul Grice's work on conversation and meaning, although it offers a very different account of communication from his. Many of the differences are due to relevance theory's commitment to psychological realism, with a corresponding shift away from Grice's concern with conceptual analysis. For example, Grice's well-known definition of speaker (or 'non-natural') meaning in terms of three nested intentions is the inspiration for relevance theory's claim that there are two speaker intentions central to communication, the informative intention and the communicative intention.

The informative intention:

The intention to inform an audience of something.

The communicative intention:

The intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention. (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 611. Cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1986, pp. 46–64.)

Actions made with both types of intention are ostensive stimuli: utterances that speakers make with the open aim of imparting information. According to relevance theory, these are a psychological natural class defined by the informative and communicative intentions, and humans have a cognitive capacity which is dedicated to their interpretation. This is an empirical claim (in contrast with Grice's definition of the concept of meaning).

A second key postulate of relevance theory, that ostensive communication is essentially inferential, is also inspired by Grice. He pointed out that speakers can and often do convey much more than they explicitly say: they can also intentionally imply, or *implicate*. Relevance theory takes this insight further, proposing that both what the speaker intends to imply and the proposition(s) that she intends to express must be inferred. Linguistic decoding is part of the input to this process when what is

uttered is a linguistic phrase, but it is not essential to the process, since the same inferential ability is used in interpreting non-linguistic gestures.

From Chomsky's work on grammar, relevance theory adopts the criterion that a good theory of a human cognitive ability should be explicit in the sense that it should explain rather than presuppose our abilities (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 94). Sperber and Wilson also take psychological tractability of the processes postulated to be crucial since their theory of utterance interpretation is an account at the level of performance rather than competence.

Other central claims that cannot be covered here due to limited space include three distinctions original to relevance theory:

- i) the distinction between two types of meaning that words may encode: conceptual and procedural (Blakemore, 1987; Wilson & Sperber, 1993; Wilson, 2011).
- ii) the distinction between strong and weak communication, and the related claim that communication is aimed at increasing the manifestness of information to the hearer (rather than at getting the hearer to know it, or to mentally entertain it) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, pp. 39–46, 59–60, 196–200; Sperber & Wilson, 2008, §§7–8).
- iii) the distinction between descriptive and interpretive use (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 224ff.), which is the foundation of Wilson and Sperber's analysis of verbal irony (discussed below) and interrogatives (Wilson & Sperber, 1993).

[A] Verbal irony

Sperber and Wilson's theory of verbal irony has been under development from the late 1970s, but has not changed in its essentials since the presentation in *Relevance* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, pp. 237–243), which makes small but significant changes to the original proposal (Sperber & Wilson, 1981). Other publications by Wilson on irony include (Wilson & Sperber, 1992; Sperber & Wilson, 1998a; Wilson, 2006; Wilson, 2009; Wilson & Sperber, 2012a; Wilson, 2013).

In verbal irony, a speaker typically says something that she does not endorse herself. In the classical analysis of rhetoric going back to Aristotle – and in dictionaries to this day – verbal irony is defined as “the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite” (Merriam Webster). In his seminal work on conversation, the philosopher Paul Grice also adopted this definition, but with misgivings, since he knew of apparent counterexamples such as (1), which falls flat if uttered pointing at a car with a broken window.

- (1) Look, that car has all its windows intact. (Grice, 1967/1989, p. 53)

It is also problematic for the classical definition that a speaker can say something ironically that she herself takes to be true, as in (2) and (3):

- (2) It seems to be raining. [uttered in a downpour] (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, p. 302)
 (3) Our friends are always there when they need us. (Martin's example, discussed at Wilson, 2000, p. 434.)

Clearly there is more to irony than expressing something by saying words that normally mean the opposite. Sperber and Wilson's theory is that in verbal irony the speaker says something that she

tacitly attributes to someone else and to which she tacitly expresses a negative (“dissociative”) attitude. In effect a speaker of an ironic utterance conveys something like *someone (or some group of people) said (or might say, or thought, or might think) something that resembles this, and it is ridiculous*.

This account can explain why (2) and (3) work as irony and (1) does not. The utterance in (2) is comically inadequate (although true); the speaker is making fun of the kind of person who would be so imperceptive as to react that way to a downpour. The utterance in (3) alludes to the well-known proverb “Our friends are always there when we need them” while asserting something quite different. Typical utterances of the sentence in (1) do not function as irony because that is not the kind of thing that anyone is likely to have said or to be thinking. Sperber and Wilson’s theory predicts that if the utterance can be understood as an echo then it will no longer fall flat, and that is correct. It can be uttered as an ironic comment in response to someone who has said that the neighbourhood is quiet and safe, with no car crime, because then it makes fun of a thought that can be (somewhat hyperbolically) attributed to that previous speaker.

Sperber and Wilson’s theory also explains why there is such great risk of misunderstanding ironic utterances. The hearer has to infer, without explicit linguistic cues, both that the speaker is putting forward someone else’s utterance or thought rather than her own and that she has a dissociative attitude towards it. This work has made verbal irony one of the central topics in linguistic pragmatics, and revolutionised its study: its main contention, that irony involves metarepresentation of an utterance or thought, is widely accepted, even by the ‘allusional pretence’ theory, its most prominent rival (Wilson, 2009, p. 205ff.).

[A] Words, concepts and truth

Since the late 1990s, Wilson (working with Robyn Carston and others as well as with Dan Sperber) has set out a theory of lexical pragmatics according to which i) words are rarely used to express their literal meanings, but ii) express a sense that is occasion-specific; and therefore iii) the concept expressed by use of a word on a particular occasion must be inferred from the context. In addition, iv) this basic mechanism covers cases that are described as literal use, loose use, hyperbole and metaphor, and these form a continuum.

Sperber and Wilson (1998b) argue that we have many more concepts than we have words. For example, there are many different senses that can be expressed by the word ‘open’, and while the linguistic context provides clues, it does not determine the sense expressed. Consider (4) and (5):

(4) Open the washing machine.

(5) Open the bottle.

The stereotypical way to open a washing machine is to open the door, but (4) might be uttered to ask an engineer to take the casing off or to order that it be blown open with explosives. There are several stereotypical ways to open a bottle, depending on how it is sealed, including removing the cork, unscrewing the top, and popping the cap, but these do not exhaust the ways of opening a bottle: one might utter (5) to ask someone to saw the bottom off the bottle, for example. Since the speaker’s intended sense is not determined by the object taken by ‘open’, it has to be inferred pragmatically, i.e. taking context and world-knowledge into account.

All of the senses of ‘open’ mentioned above are literal ones, but Sperber and Wilson argue that the same inferential adjustment of the concept expressed is operative in understanding loose use, hyperbole and metaphor, as in (6), (7) and (8):

- (6) The play starts at seven o'clock.
- (7) Teddy hasn't eaten since this morning and he's starving.
- (8) You're the salt in my stew.

A speaker of the sentence in (6) is unlikely to be expressing the proposition that the play starts at seven o'clock to the nearest second. What is expressed is something looser: that the play starts at seven or shortly afterwards. Similarly, what is expressed by the use of 'starving' in an utterance of (7) is a weaker sense, STARVING*, than the literal one, STARVING, with a correspondingly broader extension covering entities that are merely very hungry as well as those that are dying from lack of food. In the last case, (8) the phrase 'salt in my stew' receives an occasion-specific sense which is very broad indeed: roughly *an entity that is essential*. According to the theory, as well as cases of broadening like these, there are also cases where the concept expressed is stronger than the literal meaning of the word, and the extension narrowed, as when 'drink' is used to mean ALCOHOLIC DRINK (Wilson & Carston, 2007, p. 230).

Wilson and her co-authors argue that the same inferential procedure governs examples of all these types. The use of a word activates information in the hearer's mind that is stored at the corresponding mental address, and this information is drawn on to construct a hypothesis about the concept that the speaker intended to express. This is part of the overall relevance-guided interpretation procedure. According to this account, there is no presumption of literalness (*contra* Searle): the most accessible interpretation will be evaluated first for relevance, and that will not in general be the literal sense. Psycholinguistic evidence strongly supports this view. Wilson and Sperber (2002) have further argued that mainstream philosophical accounts of loose use are inadequate, in particular in wrongly assuming that there is a norm or maxim of truthfulness. Instead, according to Wilson and Sperber, "[w]hatever genuine facts such a convention or maxim was supposed to explain are better explained by assuming that communication is governed by a principle of relevance." (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 583).

SEE ALSO:

Conversational Implicature
 Pragmatic Inference
 Pragmatics and Cognition
 Pragmatics and/of Irony
 Pragmatics versus Semantics
 Sperber, Dan

References

- Blakemore, D. (1987). *Semantic Constraints on Relevance*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Grice, H. P. (1967/1989). Logic and conversation: William James lectures. In *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989) (pp. 1–143). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Smith, N. V. & Wilson, D. (1979). *Modern Linguistics : The Results of Chomsky's Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1981). Irony and the use-mention distinction. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Radical Pragmatics* (pp. 295–318). New York: Academic Press.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2nd ed. 1995). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1998a). Irony and relevance: A reply to Seto, Hamamoto and Yamanashi. In R. Carston & S. Uchida (Eds.), *Relevance Theory: Applications And Implications* (pp. 283–293). Amsterdam: J. Benjamins.

- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1998b). The mapping between the mental and the public lexicon. In P. Carruthers & J. Boucher (Eds.), *Language and Thought: Interdisciplinary Themes*, (pp. 184–200). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (2008). A deflationary account of metaphors. In R. W. Gibbs (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 84–108). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, D. (1975). *Presuppositions and Non-Truth-Conditional Semantics*. London: Academic Press.
- Wilson, D. (2000). Metarepresentation in linguistic communication. In D. Sperber (Ed.), *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (pp. 411–448). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, D. (2006). The pragmatics of verbal irony: Echo or pretence? *Lingua*, 116(10), 1722–1743.
- Wilson, D. (2009). Irony and metarepresentation. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 21, 183–226.
- Wilson, D. (2011). The conceptual-procedural distinction: Past, present and future. In V. Escandell-Vidal, M. Leonetti & A. Ahern (Eds.), *Procedural Meaning: Problems and Perspectives* (pp. 5–31). Bingley: Emerald.
- Wilson, D. (2013) Irony comprehension: A developmental perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics* 59: 40–56.
- Wilson, D. & Carston, R. (2007). A unitary approach to lexical pragmatics: Relevance, inference and ad hoc concepts. In N. Burton-Roberts (Ed.), *Pragmatics*, (pp. 230–259). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (1992). On verbal irony. *Lingua*, 87(1/2), 53–76.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (1993). Linguistic form and relevance. *Lingua*, 90(1), 1–25.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2002). Truthfulness and relevance. *Mind*, 111(443), 583–632.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2004). Relevance theory. In L. R. Horn & G. L. Ward (Eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 607–632). Malden, Mass: Blackwell.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2012a). Explaining irony. In *Meaning and Relevance* (pp. 123–145). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, D. & Sperber, D. (2012b). *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Suggested Readings

- Allott, N. (2013). Relevance theory. In A. Capone, F. Lo Piparo & M. Carapezza (Eds.), *Perspectives on Linguistic Pragmatics* (pp. 57–98). Cham/Heidelberg/New York/Dordrecht/London: Springer.
- Carston, R. & Powell, G. (2006). Relevance theory: New directions and developments. In E. LePore & B. C. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Language* (pp. 341–360). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, B. (2011). Recent developments in relevance theory. In D. Archer & P. Grundy (Eds.), *The Pragmatics Reader* (pp. 129–137). Oxford: Routledge.
- Clark, B. (2013). *Relevance Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, D. (1995). How do we communicate? In J. Brockman & K. Matson (Eds.), *How Things Are: A Science Toolkit to the Mind* (pp. 191–199). New York: W. Morrow.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (2005). Pragmatics. In F. Jackson & M. Smith (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy* (pp. 468–501). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, D. (2009). Relevance theory. In L. Cummings (Ed.), *The Pragmatics Encyclopedia* (pp. 393–399). London: Routledge.