

The use of relevance theory to figure out the implicit information in political speeches

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to interpret the political speeches of the U.S president Barak Obama through his visits to Jordan within the frame of relevance theory. It tries to show how relevance theory used to work out in details how people communicate through expression and recognition of intentions. It is an attempt to show how hearers decode speakers' meanings depending on code model. It has been suggested that the viewers' access to background beliefs and assumptions in order to form a context against which new incoming information can be processed is also essential in order to decode meaning. In addition, it tries to unfold that the interpretation depends on the viewer's ideology, as "relevance is always relevance to an individual" (Sperber & Wilson 1986) (as cited by Sanz).

Key Words: relevance theory, decoding , political speeches.

I. Introduction

Reviewing many studies, we can figure out that when we use language to communicate with others, we are not always clear enough. Sometimes people do not say what they want to convey directly. The audience need some evidence to decode others' speeches. From the perspective of relevance theory, utterance comprehension is studied as a computational process involving the interaction of several input-output systems such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Jacobsen, p.15). This is referred to as a *sentence meaning*. Such a logical form needs to be developed and enriched in a number of ways into a propositional form, also referred to as an *utterance's*

explicature. Moreover, for the propositional form to be relevant to the hearer, it is expected that it provides access to a contextual assumption from memory, referred to as an *implicated premise*, together with which it can be used to derive a contextual implication (cognitive effect), also referred to as an *implicated conclusion*, at a minimal cost. In combination, an utterance's *explicature*, *implicated premise* and *implicated conclusion* are assumed to make up a *speaker's meaning*. Wilson and Sperber (1986) say that relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out in details one of Grice's central claims: that an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions. In developing this claim, Grice (p.88,1989) laid the foundations for an inferential model of communication, an alternative to the classical code model. Relevance theorists share Grice's intuition that utterances raise expectations of relevance, but question several other aspects of his account, including the need for a Co-operative Principle and maxims, the focus on pragmatic processes which contribute to implicatures rather than to explicit, truth-conditional content, the role of deliberate maxim violation in utterance interpretation, and the treatment of figurative utterances as deviations from a maxim or convention of truthfulness. Pietarinen (p.15,n.d.) says that relevance theory claims to provide a logical and cognitive account of relevance. It attempts to capture the notion of relevance in communicative situations through contextual effects. The relevant factors or properties of an expression are those which intrude into the context of discourse. This is an argument from cognitive economy: the goal of communication is to maximise the relevance of the phenomena available to language users while minimizing the amount of mental or cognitive processing effort. The grounds for believing in cognitive economy are, in turn, evolutionary. Therefore, to enable the hearer to get the intended meaning of the speaker, indirect speech act has always been focusing on clarifying speakers' meanings (Stefanowitsch, p.6, n.d.). Relevance Theory (henceforth RT), is a cognitive pragmatic psychological theory of ostensive-inferential communication, at the core of which lies a definition of relevance and two principles, which guide hearers towards the speaker-intended interpretation: (1) according to the cognitive principle of relevance, human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance while according to the second, communicative principle of relevance (2): every ostensive stimulus communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber&Wilson, p.22,

1995) (cited by Syntyk ,p.23, n.d.) . Searle’s (p.65, 1969) says that any question must contain five conditions to be fully communicated:

Conditions for questioning

[Where S = speaker, H = hearer, P = the proposition expressed in the speech act]

- a. Preparatory 1: S does not know ‘the answer’, i.e. for a yes/no question, does not know whether P is true or false; for an elicitive or wh-question, does not know the missing information.
- b. Preparatory 2: It is not obvious to both S and H that H will provide the information at the time without being asked.
- c. Propositional: Any proposition or propositional function.
- d. Sincerity: S wants this information.
- e. Essential: The act counts as an attempt to elicit this information from H.

The last condition is so controversial to relevance theorists because any question act to be recognized as a question must be recognized as a request for information. This ,in turn, leads to the speech acts as distinguished by Sperber & Wilson (1995): institutional (social) acts, non-communicated acts, and communicated acts.

An example of the first type is *bidding two no trumps at bridge*, such as I bid two no trumps, in which case bidding two no trumps at bridge, such as I bid two no trumps, in either case they argue it is indeed required that the act both be communicated and identified as such in order to be performed. However, the problem is, they argue, that “the study of institutional acts, such as bidding, or declaring war, belongs to the study of institutions (...) not the study of verbal communication” (Sperber & Wilson, p. 98, 1995). Other examples of this type of speech acts are promising and thanking.

As an example of the second type, predicting, such as *The weather will be warmer tomorrow*, in either case they argue it is not required that the act be identified as such in order to be successfully performed. Other examples of speech acts belonging to this category, according to Sperber & Wilson (p.55, 1995) are: asserting, hypothesizing, suggesting, claiming, denying, entreating, demanding, warning and threatening.

Finally, as regards the third type, they mention *three types of generic speech act*, namely saying, telling and asking (Sperber & Wilson, p.57, 1995). Importantly, in Wilson & Sperber (p.27, 1988) and Wilson & Sperber (p.39, 1993), these generic speech acts are described as *an indicative mood indicator, an imperative mood indicator*

and *an interrogative word-order indicator*, respectively. To be precise, they are defined as procedural, explicit and non-truth-conditional semantic encodings that constrain the derivation of higher-level explicatures, and they may be signaled either by a sentence's syntactic form or its intonation. Sanz (p.46, n.d.) says that relevance theory is based on four main assumptions as proposed by Wilson (1994): (i) every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically (or visually, my emphasis) encoded; (ii) not all the interpretations occur to the viewer simultaneously ; (iii) viewers are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and (iv) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but a single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits that criterion, the viewer looks no further.

II. Methodology & Sample

The methodology used in this research is the relevance theory as proposed by Sperber & Wilson (P.98, 2002) which proposes three tasks in the comprehension process:

A) constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (EXPLICATURES) via (i) decoding, (ii) disambiguation, (iii) reference resolution, (iv) enrichment and (v) deriving implicatures.

b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES).

c) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS), conclusions deducible from the input and the context together, but from neither input nor context alone.

This methodology has been applied to 10 debates between the U.S president Barak Obama and the King of Jordan King Abdullah II. These debates took place in different position and on different issues.

III. Analysis

The analysis of the first debate between Barak Obam and king Abdullah was reported in November 4, 2013 and accompanied with a picture:

III.I. U.S. Mideast policy: keeping our friends closer



Word and image explicature: The visual part of the meeting must be decoded to make heading clearer. The way that King Abdullah stands with his facial expressions encode how much Jordan suffers due to the increasing number of Syrian refugees at the expense of the Jordan limited resources. Besides, they also imply King's concerns especially after hearing the words of Barak Obama entitling Jordan as "clearly non-democratic". Obama has also talked about those countries that do not provide human rights to their nations and taking Islam as a veil to cover their violations.

"Fifth, in its promotion of human rights policies, Washington should not only support religious freedom. Freedom from religion is the key. In most of the Middle East, this concept is absent. Often the first moves of the democratically elected regimes in the post-Arab Spring, including Egypt and Tunisia, has been the removal of the rights of secular citizens."

The way that President Obama stands and his hand movement, however, imply an assurance message to the King which is also reflected in the heading. This assurance also implies a hidden threat of not practicing hegemony against Jordanians. Furthermore, he has mentioned some examples of pro-democracy movements like Egypt and its promotion of human rights. He also mentioned Turkey as an example of a country standing against the freedom of its nation.

"Turkey's democratically elected government has also incrementally narrowed the rights of secular Turkish citizens. Washington has, however, done little to counter those changes — yet has been critical of countries like Azerbaijan that have banned the head scarf and other religious symbols in public schools."

Therefore, the viewer is guided through disambiguation and reference resolution to the forehead mentioned interpretation.

Implicated premises: Clearly if audience does not follow the news carefully and keeps reading the news thoroughly , it will not decode the intended contextual assumptions.

Implicated conclusions: Jordan should allow its nation to express their requests and not to practice the coercion against them.

III.II. Barak Obama visits Jordan amid red faces at King Abdullah’s comments on Friday on March 22, 2013.



Word and Image Explicatures: The visual part reveals how much King Abdullah is angry , but the position of the Jordan flag behind him reflects his fidelity to Jordan and its nation. The reason behind such red face is due to his off the cuff comments. During Obama’s visit, King Abdullah has made some indiscreet comments reflecting his opposition to Islamists and all the devout Muslims. He has described the ex-Egyptian president Mohammad Mursi as having *no-depth*, made fun of the Syrian president Bashar Assad for not knowing the meaning of *jet lag*, and postulated Muslim Brotherhood as a *masonic cult* and *wolves in sheep’s clothing*. The “masonic cult’ is a metaphor which combines the traits of the members of any organization with the traits of the members of brotherhood. This brotherhood, however, has a negative effect on the surrounding society. The latest is the connotation that brains are fossilized with in the Middle East. The other metaphor “wolves in sheep’s clothing” has a connotation that Muslim brotherhoods are cowardly, and they know nothing just manipulating the mind of people.

Abdullah attacked Egypt's president, Mohamed Morsi, as having "no depth", ridiculed Assad for not knowing the meaning of "jet lag" and described the Muslim Brotherhood as a "masonic cult" and "wolves in sheep's clothing".

As a result, viewers are guided through disambiguation and reference resolution to the interpretation that King Abdulla does not care for the other Arab countries and he is only concerned with Jordan especially among the escalating of the Syrian refugees, the limited assistance of the U.S.A, and the public demonstrations calling for reforms.

Implicated Premises: The intersemiosis between the verbal and the visual anchors the meaning, encouraging the viewer to deduce King's view of the leaders coming after the Arab Spring and his attitude towards them. It is also implied that size of vulnerabilities to economy is increasing.

Implicated Conclusion: Do not go on demonstration.

III.III. Obama vows to help Jordan take care of Syrian refugees on March22, 2013



Word and Image Explicature: The decoded meaning in this picture is that Jordan is following the U.S. The position of Barak on the right of King Abdullah has an implication that the U.S.A is the leader not only for Jordan but also for the whole region. Besides, using a strong word like "vow" to express U.S support for Jordan. However, he insisted on the role of the citizens in building the future. Obama, in return, has asked implicitly for Jordan's as well as Turkey's backing to topple Bashar Assad. He has named Turkey and Jordan as backers in a way of making a comparison between them since both of them went on peaceful demonstrations that were strained by the

security forces. His words also imply an obligation on Jordan and Turkey to support the U.S.A.

“We think our experience shows that when we lead, but we are also working with others, like the Jordanians, like the Turks, like other interested parties in the region, then the outcomes are better,”

“Obama hailed what he said was Abdullah’s commitment to “active citizenship, where citizens play a larger role in the future of this nation,”

Implicated Premises: This visit comes at a time when Jordan is in terrible need of the U.S support among these menaces of the surrounding unstable countries and the internal conflict. His visit, however, was not so assuring since it implies giving a kind of freedom for the opposition.

Implicated Conclusion: Do not oppress and practice hegemony over the citizens.

III.III. Obama delivers ‘message of support’ in Jordan visit



Word and Image Explicature: The visual part reveals the strong support of the U.S.A to Jordan which is obvious through the hand shaking. The happiness is also obvious through the facial expressions of King Abdullah and the crown prince. However, Obama’s facial expressions show the opposite due to the regional tension which practices a kind of pressure on America. The position of the airplane behind them

shows the rush that Obama is in. The word “AMERICA” on the airplane reflects the idea that Obama wants to decode that America is always strong in spite of all the unrest that the region goes through. This support, however, is accompanied with the condition of involving the nation in the political reform. Obama has said that the relation between economic progress and political reforms is compatible. He is implicitly obliging King Abdullah to let Jordanians participate in the political life. Obama has praised the King and entitled him with “invaluable ally”. Besides, he has pinpointed the historic relation between Jordan and Palestine. By doing so, he is asking the King to play an active role in the region by allowing the Palestinian refugees on the borders to enter Jordan and provide them with a shelter.

“Obama said that economic progress goes hand in hand with political reforms [...] Obama said that Jordan is an “invaluable ally” and a great friend of the US, pointing to the historic relations between the two countries”.

Implicated Premises: As mentioned previously, all the support to the King is conditioned with his help, in return, to the U.S.A. by affording stability for Israel. This help is translated through assisting the Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

Implicated Conclusion: Give freedom to the people and help the Palestinians.

III. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that relevance theory can be applied to political speeches to explain how political interpretations are produced. The visual parts show unexpected comparisons between the figures and the meanings they are endowed.

The analysis demonstrates that the interpretation of the political speeches depends on the viewer’s knowledge of the background beliefs and assumptions forming a context in which new incoming information is processed. This is the case in all the political speeches analyzed, where background knowledge is needed in order to decode the meanings transmitted. It has been shown, following Yus (p.87, 2003), that many attempts to produce an implicitly communicated interpretation rest upon assumptions of the viewer’s ability to recover contextual information, essential in the comprehension process of political speeches. In most cases, the information is weakly implicated and

requires a considerable cognitive effort on the part of the viewer. Sperber & Wilson's (p.65, 1986) key idea that "relevance is always relevance to an individual" is demonstrated to function in multimodal texts. Differences in interpretation among individual viewers will depend on how both text-internal and contextual items are understood. Taking into consideration at this stage that all the interpretations are mine.

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استخدام نظرية الصلة للكشف عن المعلومات الخفية في الخطابات السياسية

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الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث الى تحليل الخطابات السياسية للرئيس الامريكي باراك اوباما خلال زيارته الى الاردن ضمن نظرية الصلة ، كما انه يحاول عرض كيفية استخدام هذه النظرية لايضاح كيفية تواصل الناس من خلال التعبيرات الكلامية والادراك الضمني لنوايا المتحدث، ويعد البحث محاولة للكشف عن كيفية تحليل كلام المتحدث باستخدام نموذج الشفرة. خاصة انه بمعرفة المتلقي لخلفية الخطاب و الدوافع وراء القاءه قد تؤدي الى معرفة المعنى الحقيقي . بالاضافة الى ان البحث يسعى الى اثبات النتيجة التالية وهي ان كل خطاب يفسر من وجهة نظر المتلقي بالاعتماد على الايدولوجية الفرديه كما قال سبيربر و ولسون 1986 الذي ورد في بحث سناز.

الكلمات الاساسية: نظرية الصلة ، التحليل، الخطابات السياسية