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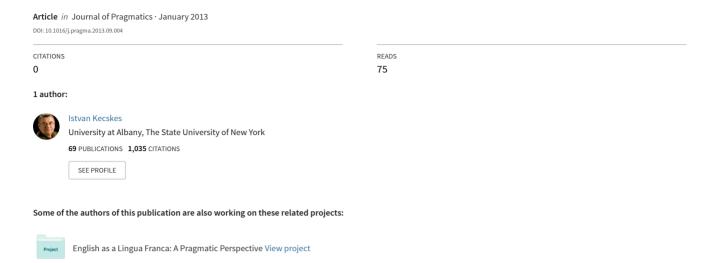
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Discussion note

A response to the paper "Metaphor interpretation and motivation in relevance theory" by Huaxin Huang and Xiaolong Yang

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"Metaphor interpretation and motivation in relevance theory" by Huaxin Huang and Xiaolong Yang was submitted to the *Journal of Pragmatics* as a discussion article. The authors use a critique of the socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes, 2008, 2010a,b, 2012, 2013) as a forum to discuss their view of metaphor interpretation in the relevance theoretical framework, which partly relies on Tendahl and Gibbs (2008). The paper appears to have been written with the purpose of presenting the authors' views of metaphor interpretation rather than focusing on the criticism of the main tenets of the socio-cognitive approach (SCA). There are two problems with the authors' approach. First, they misinterpreted not only the claims of the socio-cognitive approach but also some of the main tenets of the relevance theory. Second, in most cases it is not quite clear what exactly Huang and Yang do not agree with in the socio-cognitive approach and how that is relevant to metaphor interpretation. It is necessary to underline that the papers on the socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes, 2008, 2010a) that Huang and Yang based their criticism on do not discuss metaphors in any way.

Huang and Yang organized their arguments around three points: hearer-centeredness of relevance theory, intersubjectivity and motivation. In my response I will keep this order.

1. How hearer-centered is the relevance theory?

Huang and Yang question the claim of the socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes, 2008, 2010a, 2012) according to which the relevance theory is hearer-centered, arguing that "...the relevance theory is a full-fledged theory taking into consideration the roles of both speaker and hearer in communication (Huang and Yang 2013)". First of all, no one has claimed that RT is not a full-fledged theory, and that it does not take into account the role of both speaker and hearer. There is no pragmatics theory that can ignore either side. The question is in what degree and way a theory focuses and discusses these two inseparable sides of communication. Saul (2002) said that the main difference between the neo-Gricean theory and relevance theory lies in 'whose meaning' they model. She argued that while the neo-Griceans follow the original perspective and consider utterance meaning, including implicature, to be the speaker's intended meaning, relevance theorists discuss intentional communication from the perspective of the addressee's reconstruction of the speaker's assumptions.

It would be difficult to deny that the primary focus of the relevance theory is utterance interpretation. Smith and Wilson (1992:8) claimed that "the role of pragmatic theory is to explain how the hearer recognizes the intended interpretation of an utterance". A tutorial on RT by Wilson and Sperber (2002:45–46) begins as follows: "Relevance theory is an inferential approach to pragmatics...". and continues like this "According to the inferential model, a communicator provides

evidence of her intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided''. Wilson and Sperber make it very clear that ''the goal of inferential pragmatics is to explain how the hearer infers the speaker's meaning''. According to them ''. . .relevance theory claims that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise enough, and predictable enough, to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning''. These are clear goals and claims made by the developers of the theory.

The central claim of RT is that an utterance raises certain specific and predictable expectations of relevance. These expectations guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning (Wilson and Sperber, 2004:607). Speaker's utterance is crucial in this frame as evidence of speaker's meaning. *Why exactly speaker's intention was put into those forms is not of primary interest in RT, which presupposes that speaker production is always recipient design through relevance.* However, this issue is not so simple because there are factors other than just recipient design that govern speaker production. Huang and Yang are wrong when they argue that ''speaker will use the most relevant words to manifest her/his intention''. In the SCA word selection is motivated by factors other than just recipient design.

According to the socio-cognitive approach recipient design is paired with salience in language production (including word selection), and intention recognition is paired with salience in language comprehension. The interplay of conscious and subconscious is represented in recipient design and salience in production and in intention recognition and salience in comprehension. Recipient design is the result of Gricean cooperation while salience is the driving force behind interlocutor's egocentrism. Communication is affected by the interplay of these seemingly antagonistic factors. People are both cooperative and egocentric in the communicative process in varying degrees. Individual prior experience results in salience which leads to egocentrism that drives attention. Intention is a cooperation-directed practice that is governed by relevance which (partly) depends on actual situational experience. This is how the social and the individual are intertwined in the socio-cognitive approach.

Huang and Yang argued as follows: ''. . ..metaphor interpretation belongs to the higher-level explicature, which is also a propositional attitude towards the content speaker is saying. The higher-level explicature manifests speaker's individual communicative intention. It belongs to the subjective domain or field, and it turns into the shared communicative intention under the principle of being relevant. Shared communicative intention belongs to the intersubjective domain or field. Hearer infers the implicature of metaphors via the shared intention''. There is no doubt about the fact that higher-level explicature is supposed to manifest speaker's individual communicative intention. The question is: from whose perspective? Carston (2004) answered this question very clearly. According to her, the derivation of an explicature may require 'free' enrichment, that is, the incorporation of conceptual material *that is wholly pragmatically inferred*, on the basis of considerations of rational communicative behavior. So the crucial thing here is that the conceptual material is ''*wholly pragmatically inferred*'' by the hearer rather than pragmatically implied by the speaker. In SCA, this enrichment of the uttered sentence is not ''free'' but the result of the speaker's private and subjective treatment of the utterance (pragmatically implied) in an actual situational context (Kecskes, 2012). How the hearer will infer this speaker-subjectivized commitment is another issue. What matters is what the audience is required by the speaker to believe, not what the audience does actually believe. The speaker's intentions do not depend on what anyone else presumes. ''To mean or imply something is to have certain intentions (Davis, 1998:122)''.

The interest of RT is in what is relevant for the hearer out of what the speaker said, presupposing that the speaker cared about her/his utterance being relevant to the hearer. So what Huang and Yang refer to as ''shared communicative intention under the principle of being relevant'' is something assumed to be shared from the hearer's perspective. Relevance theory is about individual cognition. What is relevant for the individual (hearer)? When this question is asked, the speaker is usually out of the picture.

2. Intersubjectivity

Scheff et al. (2006) define intersubjectivity as ''the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals''. Based on this definition the SCA argues that intersubjectivity is mostly about partially shared divergences of meaning. The problem with Huang and Yang is that they think that intersubjectivity always refers to ''shared communicative intention'' which is quite an idealistic view. They declare twice in their paper that ''. . ..intention fixed the content of the utterance'' (pages 4 and 5). This is not exactly so. The content of an utterance is not fully fixed even for the speaker. There is an intuitive possibility of a distinction between what a speaker says and what s/he actually implicates. Here we should point out one of the main features of human communication. There is almost never a complete match between what the speaker actually means and what the hearer actually infers. Still, we manage to communicate. How? Because people can generally understand each other without taking hold of the same proposition as long as the content of utterance is the same or similar for both sides. In fact, communication is not about communicating one particular proposition but about communicating an intention, making a point.

None of the articles on the socio-cognitive approach said that RT lacks intersubjectivity. It is just a wrong assumption of Huang and Yang, which is based on the argument of SCA according to which RT is hearer-centered. From that Huang and

Yang concluded that "Focusing on one participant also means the lack of intersubjectivity". RT certainly does have some intersubjectivity. Every single pragmatic theory has some. The issue is what the nature of this intersubjectivity is. Huang and Yang talk about shared relevance. The question is whether relevance can be shared the way Huang and Yang describe. The problem is that although RT is a very individual-based theory, the way relevance is understood in that framework is more social than individual. It presupposes that what is relevant for the speaker can fully be inferred by the hearer. So basically relevance is something that should be understood socially rather than individually. (This is why SCA argues that more attention is paid in RT to social elements than individual elements.) RT assumes that there is an agreement between speaker and hearer in what is relevance. This is not exactly so. In the SCA relevance is motivated not only by recipient design but also by salience. We can say that the speaker tries to encode the most relevant information for the hearer and the hearer tries to interpret it as relevant information. However, when actual communication occurs the speaker puts his/her relevant intention into words that are relevant for him/her rather than for the hearer (see examples below). And conversely what appears to be relevant for the hearer may not be relevant the same way or extent for the speaker. The hearer only thinks that something is relevant for her/him the same way as is for the speaker. Keysar and Henly (2002) argued that speakers usually underestimate the ambiguity and overestimate the effectiveness of their utterances. Language processing is anchored in the assumption that what is salient or accessible or relevant to oneself will also be accessible and relevant to one's interlocutors (Giora, 2003; Barr and Keysar, 2005; Colston and Katz, 2005). Interlocutors process everything through their prior experience, they rely on what is on their mind no matter whether they function as a speaker or hearer.

Salience that may motivate relevance is based on prior individual experience. Barr and Keysar (2005) claimed that speakers and hearers commonly ignore their mutual knowledge when they produce and understand language. Their behavior is called 'egocentric' because it is rooted in the speakers' or hearers' own knowledge instead of in their mutual knowledge. The following conversation demonstrates how individual salience may lead to misunderstanding.

(1) Allen and Sherry (in the sitcom *Two and a Half Men*) are sitting in a restaurant. Allen's right eye is covered with a bandage so he does not see Sherry very well.

Allen: -You know, Sherry, I would really like to see more of you.
Sherry: - *Maybe we should wait and see how the night goes.*
Allen: - Oh, no. I mean I have only got one good eye. Can we change places?
Sherry: - Sure.

The conversation demonstrates that Sherry completely misunderstood Allan's utterance "... I would really like to see more of you". This may be due to the fact that she relied exclusively on linguistic salience (content of utterance) and ignored perceptual salience (their sitting positions and Allen's bandage) in processing the utterance. Some studies referred to the fact that inherent linguistic salience seems to override perceptual salience in most cases. Osgood and Bock's study (1977) also showed that the effects of inherent salience consistently trumped those that would need to gain salience from speaker motivation. Lupyan and Spivey (2010) also came to a somewhat similar conclusion when they argued that language dynamically modulates visual processing.

How completely Huang and Yang misunderstood the socio-cognitive approach is demonstrated by the way they argue for distinguishing between individual communicative intention and shared communicative intention (p. 5). They claimed the following: "Unlike the types of intention (prior and emergent intention) proposed by Kecskes (2010a,b), we distinguish individual communicative intention from shared communicative intention". Well, this is exactly what "prior intention" and "emergent intention" is all about. Furthermore, according to SCA "emergent intention" is dynamic, and ever-changing in the course of communication. Here is what Haugh and Jaszczolt (2012:107–108) said about emergent intention of Kecskes (2010a,b).

"In more closely tracing intentions in conversational interaction it becomes apparent that intentions can be characterized as being "emergent", as both the speaker and the hearer jointly co-construct understandings of what is meant (Gibbs, 1999:38, 2001; Haugh, 2009; Kecskes, 2010a,b:60–61). Kecskes (2010a,b), for instance, argues that John's initial intention to give Peter a chance to talk about his trip is not realized in the excerpt below.

(23)
John: Want to talk about your trip?
Peter: I don't know. If you have questions...
John: OK, but you should tell me...
Peter: Wait, you want to hear about Irene?

John: Well, what about her?
Peter: She is fine. She has…well…put on some weight, though. (Kecskes, 2010a,b:60).

Kecskes suggests that John's original intention is sidelined by Peter talking about Irene, perhaps because he thinks John might want to know about her (being his former girlfriend). He argues that ''it was the conversational flow that led to this point, at which there appears a kind of emergent, co-constructed intention'' (Kecskes, 2010a,b:61, original emphasis)''.

For Huang and Yang the relationship between individual communicative intention and shared communicative intention is sequential: ''Under the relevance-theoretic analysis of metaphors, recognition of intention has two steps. The first step is to produce an individual communicative intention of metaphors; the second step is to turn the individual communicative intention into the shared communicative intention under the principle of being relevant''. This means that every individual intention is turned into shared communicative intention when the utterance is produced. This is not quite so, as the conversation above demonstrated. Emergent intention is much more than just turning individual intention into shared intention. Emergent intention is what interlocutors co-construct.

3. Motivation

In my paper (Kecskes, 2010a) I argued that relevance theorists focus on developing a cognitive psychological model of utterance interpretation, which does not address the question of how and why the speaker, given what he wants to communicate, utters what he utters. Huang and Yang connects this issue of what motivates people (to say something in a particular way) with the use metaphors. If I understand them correctly they basically say that what motivates both production and interpretation is relevance. They argued that ''from the speaker's perspective, s/he would show an intention that s/he believes what s/he says is the optimal relevant to the present situation and the capabilities for human comprehension. From the hearer's perspective, s/he would recognize the intention and make inference under the guidance of relevance (p. 9)'' There is no doubt about the fact that relevance constrains the content of utterance. In this respect it is goal oriented. However, about how an utterance is formulated, why exactly those expressions are selected and not others, relevance theory has not much to say. Within relevance theory, speakers are not constrained to say what is strictly speaking true, because in many situations speaking loosely is the best way to achieve optimal relevance. So there is no constraint in RT for word selection although Huang and Yang claims that there is: ''Speaker will use the most relevant words to manifest her/his intention''. (p. 2, see more at pp. 8 and 10).

In the SCA relevance is a social issue tied to actual situational context while salience is dependent upon individual cognition, individual prior experience. Relevance constrains content and salience affects how content is formulated. Relevance and salience may sometimes reinforce each other and at other times conflict with each other.

When does this conflict occur? How can we demonstrate the role of salience in word selection? According to current pragmatic theories, in order to succeed in recipient design, speakers must correctly express intended illocutionary acts by using appropriate words, and make their attempt in an adequate context. Speakers relate propositional contents to the world (actual situational context; audience) with the intention of establishing a correspondence between words and things from a certain direction of fit. However, while fitting words into actual situational contexts speakers are driven not only by the intent that the hearer recognize what is meant as intended by the speaker (social), but also by salience that affects production subconsciously (egocentrism). Occasionally wording matches intention but does not fit (or inappropriate in) actual situational context. The following conversation from the movie ''Angel Eyes'' demonstrates how salience can affect the process of word selection.

(2) Situation: A policewoman in uniform is driving the car, and the man sitting beside her is starring at her.

PW: - What..?
M: - I was trying to picture you without your clothes on.
PW: - Excuse me?
M: - Oh no, I did not mean like that. I am trying to picture your without your uniform.
PW: - Okaay?
M: - I mean, on your day off, you know, in regular clothes.

The man makes three attempts to find the appropriate words to describe why he was looking at the policewoman the way he did. There is a strong effect of perceptual salience on the selection of words. As a result the man has difficulties finding

the acceptable words. The selection process is dominated by salience rather than any recipient design, it is more subconscious than conscious. Words expressing his real feelings override conscious planning. Here there is hardly any distinction between what the speaker says and what he actually means. In fact, this is what causes trouble. In communication, salience (motivated by prior experience), or what is on our mind (Giora, 2003), which operates subconsciously and automatically, may affect word selection and utterance formation. So on the one hand we have the speaker with an intention to tell the woman why he was looking at her the way he did, and on the other hand there is subconscious salience that affects how he formulates his intention.

In sum, Huang and Yang do not seem to have achieved their goals. Their critique of the socio-cognitive approach is not fully fleshed out. Sometimes it is hard to see what their real problem is with the claims of the theory. As far as their main goal is concerned they also fell short of arguments for their approach to metaphors. It would have been more advantageous for the authors to focus on either the critique of SCA or the presentation of their ideas on metaphors.

Note

Huang and Yang used Kecskes (2010a) as reference. Another version of the paper was published as Kecskes (2010b).

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